Kir's family hadn't seen him in years, his younger sister had never actually met him at all. Assuming him dead had been safer for everyone all around, and breaking what could be called a comforting illusion seldom went well.

Kir himself hadn't seen his family in decades, and had consciously avoided thinking about them for years. Assuming them lost to him forever had been safer for everyone all around, and hoping for something else only made it easier to be hurt.

But they all agreed that this was going to be hard.
“Does pacing while you read reports help you think?” Jaina asked dryly, watching Kir do just that out of the corner of her eye. The majority of her attention was focused on the accounting books she was checking over. Ensuring accuracy each moon made the annual tallying near Midwinter much less stressful – given, so did the whole matter not being solely her responsibility, but there was no reason to procrastinate.

“If it’s distracting I can stop,” Kir said, pausing mid-circuit to look at her, “But I’ve been sitting most of the day.”

“So has Bellamy,” she pointed out, the Enforcer only humming acknowledgement while he turned the page. Etrius and Seras had spent weeks debating which text had the most engaging and informative narrative on the history and traditions of the Order, resulting in three books being pressed on the Enforcer when he arrived. Kir had evidently given him an overview, but their focus had never really been on the Order itself during those chats.

“Anur doesn’t sit still,” Kir pointed out, nodding towards his Enforcer who was sitting with one leg slung over the arm of his chair and his head tilted back over the other so he was nearly upside down. He’d been like that for at least half a mark – undoubtedly he’d be twisting into some other absurd pose without looking away from his book soon enough.

“Fair,” she acknowledged, smiling faintly as she watched Kir continue his pacing.

It had nearly been a year since Solaris’ Ascent, since her brother had returned to Sunhame and taken the gold-edged burden of Incendiary from her shoulders, and on a daily basis she still startled at the plain black-on-red trim of her robes, feeling that rush of relief all over again. Jaina had never wanted to be Incendiary, had never wanted more than a comfortable spot in the priesthood, perhaps a student or two of her own one day, enough status to voice concerns if she wanted.

But there hadn’t been anyone else willing or able to become Incendiary, and their Order would not have survived without a Head. Not with Lastern in power and ever-hungry for more. Her investiture had been a desperate move, and the whole of their Order had known it. It had given her leeway within the Order, a credit beyond her abilities with flames, for taking that burden, but the Firestarters hadn’t been the only ones to spot that and her first years had been spent proving again and again that for all her lack of ambition, she was no less vicious or capable.

Yes, Solaris’ Ascent had worked out very well for her.

What had once been a corner bedroom near the back of the Hall had long ago been converted into a secure office for the Incendiary. Kir and Bellamy had taken to hauling work with them to the kitchen or the courtyard, but despite the wonderful early autumn weather they were working inside today – mostly so Kir and she could discuss details without worry for eavesdroppers. They could take the
busywork outside tomorrow.

“Jaina, would Tristan and Valerik be able to work together long enough to check on the Ruvan-Hardorn border-zone? The mercenary company is due to arrive within a moon and they’re closest,” Kir asked, Jaina frowning as she thought about it.

Sitting back she met his gaze thoughtfully before saying, “Those two should be able to work together for a few weeks. But make sure Colbern has no chance at all of running into them – and have the route end with Tristan heading towards Lumira for a check-in with her Hardornens. They get along fairly well and it will delay his return to Sunhame. Valerik’s first days back in town are always rougher.”

“So many feuds,” Bellamy grumbled as he sat up and twisted so his chin was hooked over the back of the chair. It was a good thing they used sturdy and non-decorative furniture here, she could practically hear her old dorm-master’s scolding for ruining perfectly good chairs by not sitting them as they were meant to be sat in.

“Oh you’re one to talk,” Kir scoffed, casting his Enforcer a fond glance as he set the current report aside and went for the next packet of papers, “Loshern still can’t meet your eyes without flinching.”

“I think having one priest twitch - “

“The one you stabbed quit,” Kir interrupted, “But his friends still flinch – Rodri says Etrius tracks them down to practice intimidating stares sometimes.”

“Having one priest and three students flinch - “

“Ulrich twitches when you’re brought up,” Jaina offered, chuckling at the nonplussed look the two men sent her before elaborating, “Apparently Seras mentioned something about how you reminded him of himself.”

“Ah – not the guard captain, the exorcist. So that’s three students and two exorcists so far,” Kir summarized mockingly, “What was that you bemoaned? So many feuds?”

“Ulrich isn’t a feud! He’s just misinterpreting something Seras said – Seras actually said that?” Bellamy directed the last to her, a wary look on his face, “When? And in what context?”

“I have no idea,” Jaina admitted, “The summoner and I crossed paths and he asked after Kir, when I mentioned you he twitched and upon asking why, he gave that answer. I rather thought he and Seras were friends though, or at least amicable colleagues.”

“They probably are,” Kir pointed out, pulling a letter with a broken seal out of the packet with a bemused expression. She didn’t blame him, why go to the effort to reseal a letter in another envelope, rather than just seal the letter again with fresh wax? For that matter, why send an already opened letter?

“You don’t need to want a person duplicated to be friends with them,” Kir continued, shooting a sly glance Bellamy’s way as he said, “Two of Anur would be a spice-cake fueled disaster.”

“Rude!” the Enforcer laughed, Jaina chuckling with them and basking in the fact that she wasn’t alone.

It was only because she was watching the Enforcer try and come up with some retort rather than continuing to check the books’ arithmetic that she caught the start of Kir’s panic. Bellamy’s laughter cut off and he was already setting his book aside when she heard Kir’s sharp inhale, and by the time
she was on her feet Bellamy had already caught him when Kir’s knees gave out and guided him to a seat.

Witch, a corner of her mind hissed.

Talented, she forced herself to correct. It was rare, the pair were good at keeping their eerie synchronization within understandable, normal bounds but there were moments when every hair on her neck stood on end and decades of training crowed at finding another witch to cleanse.

There was a reason Bellamy had been accused of being a Demon Rider, Jaina had known that for moons. An adult lay-person showing signs of controlled witch-powers? Colbern had pulled her aside with murmured questions right before Midsummer and she wouldn’t be surprised if some other Firestarters were sitting on questions of witch-powers and child-smuggling and just how long this pair had known Solaris was coming.

On questions of just how much longer it would take for them to be trusted with that knowledge.

“Easy,” the Enforcer was murmuring, kneeling by Kir’s side, their foreheads pressed together, “Easy Kir, breathe with me – there. That’s it.”

“I’m not dead,” Kir said blankly.

“…That is true,” Bellamy replied cautiously, “That’s – very true. And I’m glad it’s true. Is this – is this a surprise?”

“No, no not for – not for me,” Kir’s eyes shut and his knuckles turned white around the letter and Jaina swore under her breath, walking over to take a seat on the low table and leaning to rest her hand over Kir’s. None of the Firestarters had received double-sealed letters, but she had heard of a few adult priests getting such missives.

It so seldom ended happily.

“Jaina?” Bellamy asked lowly, sliding his hand down to grip Kir’s arm when her brother sat back, staring at the ceiling. “You know what this is?"

“A guess,” Jaina said, grimacing as she glanced between them. “Your family?”

“They want to know how I died,” Kir said flatly, chuckling abruptly and meeting her eyes, “What should I write, Jaina? So sorry to disappoint, still breathing? Busy killing blood mages, no time for a reunion? Wait a few years, Ancar will try his hardest – “

“Kir,” Anur’s voice cut through the growing hysteria and Kir bowed his head, breathing harshly.

“You’re not dying anytime soon,” Jaina said sternly, “You’re not allowed to die until I’m not the one stuck with your job afterwards – so at least ten years. Understood?"

“Where’d ten years come from?” Bellamy asked, tone light and she rolled her eyes, allowing the brief distraction when she replied, “I don’t think Rodri will be ready for the job before that.”

“Not if he keeps blowing up buckets of pistachios,” Kir said dryly, rolling his own eyes at Anur’s triumphant glance her direction, “Really, brother? No – I know, I don’t – I don’t seek it. I just… Sunlord, what do I say?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Bellamy pointed out, “You’re the one who taught me to write reasonable letters to my family, remember? You’re just lucky I’ve learned something or I’d be
suggesting a note saying ‘not dead, busy killing blood mages, Kir Dinesh, Incendiary’.”

“It does get all the necessary information out there,” Jaina pointed out, only to hastily continue at their thoughtful looks, “I’m not actually suggesting that!”

They sat in silence for a few moments, Kir’s head bowed and expression blank and Bellamy just watching him worriedly. Jaina looked between them a few times before squeezing Kir’s hand and saying, “I’ll go get some tea, shall I?”

Once the door was shut behind her, she could hear the faint murmur of conversation but none of the words. Kir and she had practically grown up together, but this wasn’t something she could be much help with. Between her younger brother and her sisters’ brood her family had three burned children on the records.

They wouldn’t want to see one of their killers.

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“I don’t know what to do,” Kir said quietly, the click of the door shutting behind Jaina deafening in the silence that had fallen.

“That’s okay,” Anur assured him, a chair dragging itself across the room to let him sit without losing his grip on Kir’s arm. “You don’t have to know. Hells, you don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to.”

“I – I think,” Kir bit down on his automatic denial, his automatic response that of course he had to do something, he had to send something back because –

They’d named her after him.

“Kir, what is it?” Anur murmured, watching him worriedly, “They asked after your death – it’s been twenty years. That’s not unusual.”

“They know,” Kir said, choking on the next words and he couldn’t – he couldn’t say it, he had known, had always known that his family knew there were two options for him, two paths and while he’d never consciously thought about it – he had known which path they’d prefer he take. Then this Kiara Dinesh had written, captain in her own right and how fiercely she must have fought for that.

Even in a family known for women who captained, known for women who heard the superstitions of females on board merchant ships and cackled, it would have been hard.

How long had it taken, for her to be seen as more than his replacement?

:Kir, brother. Let me help you, please,: Anur said, hands wrapping around his and Kir shuddered, leaning forward to let their foreheads rest against each other and he tried to form words.

:The way I was taken – they would know the only way I could survive would be as a Firestarter. There would be no other path in the priesthood I could take,: Kir finally managed, something easier in thinking the words, rather than having to get them past his choked up throat.

:And they ask after your death – Kir. It’s been – they might not remember that, not consciously. Or if they do they might not – it’s different now. It’s only been different for a short while, but it’s different and you being alive may have simply not occurred to them.:

:They also may not have thought through how you could have survived,: Aelius pointed out gently, :They may very well have assumed you dead the moment you were taken, rather than risk thinking
of you living in Sunhame, in a priesthood they feared. Losing a child is traumatic, they could very well have simply – not thought about it:

:And if they do – if they do prefer to think you dead than acknowledge you as a Firestarter, that’s their loss,: Anur said fiercely, voice strident, :Their loss! You’re my brother and if they won’t take you as you are you still have me. And Aelius. And Solaris, and Mara, she’d never reject you – actually if this goes bad we can’t tell Mara, she’ll blackmail Markov into dealing with them and I don’t : :

“No,” Kir said, aghast as he pulled back because he could see that happening, “We are not setting Markov on anyone.”

“I completely agree,” Anur said, innocent tone not fooling Kir because he had heard the gleeful speculation in that last mental rambling. If Kir decided to reach out he would have to work very hard to make sure Anur never got enough information to find his family – not until he knew how they’d respond.

But who would claim a Firestarter as kin?

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“Me,” Anur said simply.

Kir blinked and Anur gave a small smile, “You said that out loud, actually. No broadcasting required. I would claim you as kin, Kir. I have. My whole family has, including Markov, which I never thought would happen. I’d claim Jaina – and Rodri, he’s adorable. I’d probably claim all of you – as cousins at least. Maybe second cousins, Seras is pretty terrifying. Solaris has claimed you as brother, you know Rodri adores you – Kir. Being a Firestarter, being a priest, is a social obstacle, true. It’s not a deal-breaker.”

Kir stared, running through the list of names in his mind, the list of those who yes, he would agree considered him kin and it – it wasn’t nonexistent. It wasn’t empty.

He would think about this letter from a sister he had never met, he decided, looking up when Jaina walked in with tea and Rodri peering around her worriedly and unable, unwilling, to suppress his smile. He had loved his blood-family, they had been his world when he had been taken and memories of them had been his anchor while he found ground to stand on.

He did not need them any longer.

So he would write back – how, he had no idea, but Anur’s joking suggestion was not half-bad. He would write back, and see what came of it.

But he’d always have one brother.

Anur was not going to read the letter Kir had received without being invited. He wasn’t. It was sitting on the desk in their room, just sitting there. Open. He could see handwriting. But Kir hadn’t said he could read it. He wasn’t going to. Not even the name at the end. Or the salutations. It was too short to see much anyway he’d have to get closer –

“Anur?”

He yelped, and flailed, and ended up on the ground because he’d been overcompensating for his desire to lean in and get a closer look by leaning the other way and then Kir had startled him and he’d fallen off the bed. Staring up at Kir’s amused face he scowled, “I wasn’t doing anything!”
“You sound about as believable as Rodri when he said the scorch marks and shattered windows in the kitchen weren’t his fault,” Kir said dryly. “But everything appears intact, so that at least is promising.”

“To be fair, I didn’t know pistachios were flammable either – much less explosive when in a confined space,” Anur pointed out, accepting Kir’s hand getting to his feet.

“Why would you ever try to set pistachios on fire? Why were the pistachios in a large clay jar and not on a tray or in a basket? Why would you ever try to burn something inside an enclosed jar?” Kir rattled off the list of questions Rodri apparently was supposed to have thought of, rather than thinking something along the lines of roasted almonds are delicious, maybe roasted pistachios are too.

To be fair, roasted pistachios were delicious.

To be equally fair, nothing was roasted by setting it on fire inside a sealed jar.

“He could have thought it would be funny if someone opened a sealed jar of pistachios only to find they were pre-roasted?” Anur suggested, grinning at Kir’s disbelieving look. It didn’t make much sense, no, but he’d done stranger things for stranger reasons.

He’d decided to become an Enforcer in a nation where legally he was less than human because his fellow Heralds made him uncomfortable while they were temporarily sharing a base with him. He was going to be answering equally incredulous questions by this time next year.

He coughed slightly when Kir handed him the letter, glancing at it quickly before meeting Kir’s gaze and saying, “You don’t need to let me read this.”

“It’s very short,” Kir said wryly, sitting down and Anur settled next to him. “And I don’t know how to respond.”

“Again, I think you’re asking the wrong person, but I’ll do my best,” Anur said doubtfully, and immediately set to reading this letter that had so disturbed Kir.

It truly was short.

To Whom it May Concern,

We of the Dinesh family are writing in regards to our kinsman, Kir Dinesh, taken from home some twenty-three years ago in service to the Sunlord. We would appreciate an accounting of his demise, and desire only the truth of his death, seeking no compensation.

By my hand,

Kiara Dinesh, Captain of the Sundancer

:Do you think they named her after Kir?: Aelius asked, sounding intrigued, :I wonder if there are customs behind that…:

:There are, and they undoubtedly did.: Kir replied directly, Anur jumping and Aelius broadcasting shocked surprise. The Firestarter just smirked at Anur, continuing, :You were broadcasting.:

:I most certainly was not!: Aelius insisted, :I know you don’t care for mindspeech, I wouldn’t broadcast if I didn’t intentionally want you to hear what I was saying.:
Kir’s brow furrowed and Anur echoed the expression, wondering what could have changed because he and Aelius had private conversations all the time – they both only dragged Kir in when there was a direct reason for him to hear the conversation or if he had initiated the mental contact. Hells, they’d had some of those in the last few days and Kir had given no indication of hearing them.

Kir carefully moved so their shoulders weren’t pressed against each other, so there was no contact between them at all, and said aloud, “Try again.”

:Physical contact would explain why he didn’t hear our conversations earlier, but that doesn’t account for everything.: Aelius mused, Anur watching Kir’s face carefully while he responded.

:I think he’s stopped unconsciously blocking it.: Anur offered, :With Cora – he’s better. A lot better, now. He didn’t even twitch when she spoke to him – and he replied, and he called for Kari himself…:

:Self-sabotage?: Aelius hummed thoughtfully, :I can see that very easily. Well. Seems we’ll have to work on our shielding then.: 

:Ugh.: 

“Anything?” he said aloud, Kir shaking his head, clearly worried.

“Well Aelius and I have a theory,” he continued, scooting over so they were braced against each other again. “You were all right with Cora – and you finally learned proper mental shielding. Can I state, yet again, that it’s a blessed miracle you made it to adulthood sane without knowing how to properly shield yourself from mindspeech?”

“It was close, some days,” Kir admitted, some tension easing, “A reasonable explanation. But you don’t need mindspeech to use shielding?”

“No, any Talents would find them useful, it’s a practice of mental discipline more than anything,” Anur shrugged, “People with mindspeech or empathy need it to function, but even without it, students with pure fetching or firestarting would be put in classes for it. It’s important.”

“Good. Because I want to teach Rodri – I think it might help explain that buzz. It’d be much better for him to find it without – external factors,” Kir winced and Anur made a mental note to chase down that story too. Between that one, the story of Phyrrus, just how Kir got snatched into the priesthood and just why and how Kir got drunk enough to nearly melt down Axeli’s forge that one time, Anur was going to have plenty of overly-imaginative nightmare fuel.

Fantastic. Just what he needed.

Shaking his head, he decided instead to focus on the question Aelius had started this whole mess with, saying, “So they probably named her after you then? What are the customs?”

“Depends on the region,” Kir said hesitantly, brow furrowing in thought this time, gaze going distant, “I don’t – really remember. I was the youngest, never saw a naming but – I think the lake people – my grandmother’s, my father’s side, they named children as a tribute to something or someone, a way of honoring them but my mother’s – I think they’d only pass on a name if the original person was dead.”

“Ah.” Anur winced, staring at the letter in his hand again. Very bland, very controlled – but we desire only the truth – it was hopeful. The idea that they wanted details, wanted to know how and when it had happened, not just that it had.
Asking about details to cheering when the answer is Kir’s alive was something of a leap, but he’d seen larger ones. He’d give them the benefit of the doubt.

“I have no idea what you could write beyond my half-joking suggestion,” he admitted, meeting Kir’s gaze with a wry smile. “Though I guess signing as Incendiary might leave room for misinterpretation – it’s probably not a particularly well known title outside the priesthood itself.”

“No, I’d have to sign as First Order Firestarter for clarity,” Kir agreed, taking the letter from Anur’s hand and staring at it. “Probably also include that I’m usually with the Sunsguard, but visit Sunhame regularly – in case they want to write again.”

“Being able to contact you directly would be a good thing,” Anur nodded, watching Kir head for his desk and get settled to write a reply, “I don’t know that you’d need to include anything else – or even if you should. Not without knowing...”

“Without knowing how they’ll respond?” Kir finished dryly, laughing softly at Anur’s wince even as he set ink to paper, “Brother, I could hardly expect them to react well, you know that. You talked me down today – writing a pages long letter wouldn’t be worth the effort if they just discarded the whole thing in disgust. It’s worth being aware of.”

Anur couldn’t say anything to that, so simply watched Kir write his letter – a few sentences, perhaps a touch longer than the letter he had received. Probably more informative than the first letters he had sent to his own family at first though; Kir had always been better at written communication. His postscripts had taught him the letter-writing formula far better than any scoldings from his family or half-hearted etiquette lessons in the Circle, and been appreciated by his family besides. Which raised a fair point –

“Can I add a post-script?”

“It would hardly be fair of me to forbid it. Perhaps your postscript will be more informative than my letter – that would be a fair change from the norm. Here, I’ll sign as Incendiary, that will give you something to be informative about.”

“My letters have gotten plenty better!”

To the Dinesh Family,

I cannot offer details on my own demise, as none but the Sunlord know when that will occur. My primary duties place me as chaplain in the guard, but I hold the office of Incendiary under Her Eminence, Solaris and am in Sunhame relatively often. Letters addressed to me in that manner will reach me, should you wish to continue correspondence.

Vkandis bless and guide,

Kir Dinesh, Incendiary, Chaplain of the 62nd

To the Dinesh Family,

Kir is my sworn brother, and I will have no supposed misunderstandings twisting his heart. Incendiary is one of the formal titles for the Head of the Firestarting Order, only able to be held by a First Order Firestarter. He tells me that his taking to the priesthood made his fate as Firestarter self-evident, but I will not leave that to chance.

Any hurt you inflict on him will be made knowingly.
Vkandis bless and guide,

Anur Bellamy, Lieutenant-Enforcer

Chapter End Notes

Just saying - I did consider not posting this until June 30th, just because I saw people counting on the June deadline I set myself and snickered at the idea. But I'm not that cruel :)

Had some fun writing this (minus summary, that was hard), have ideas and scenes from this story written out but linking them together is, of course, the long part. I'm hoping, Hoping for monthly updates at least, but I'm also working a lot this summer, so no promises.

Let the theories... BEGIN! *cackles*
Kin of Ari

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

:\textit{They are positively tip-toeing around you.}: Aelius said, amused. Kir sent back a purely mental scoff but didn’t disagree, Anur managing to keep a passably bland expression on his face despite his mind radiating amusement. They were working in the courtyard on some of the paperwork that had piled up in their absence while also being available for questions from anyone who had them, but mostly the acolytes and Rodri.

This was the first time in moons every Firestarter in residence dropped by the courtyard while they were there, drawing him into some brief conversation before making excuses and disappearing. Jaina had been the most frequent one, coming up to speak to them no less than three times this morning, none on matters that were anything more than idle curiosity.

Colbern had approached and managed to ask something vaguely approaching a delicate question about how Kir was feeling. It had looked painful and Anur had barely managed to stifle his laughs when the man walked away.

:\textit{I know we say Seras and Markov meeting wouldn’t be the best idea, but I think Colbern and Markov might be more of a problem.}: Kir said in lieu of responding to Aelius comment.

:\textit{They’d either get along really well or murder each other.}: Anur agreed, :\textit{Let’s not risk it. I’m just impressed Solaris managed to find people left in the priesthood Markov doesn’t threaten with evisceration as a matter of course.}:  

:\textit{Point. Well – I can’t do paperwork any longer. What do you say we put this away and hunt down Rodri? I’d like to see if I can teach him that grounding trick to trigger the hum, it would hopefully allow him to detect flammability.}: Kir offered, Anur immediately starting to stack and sort his own papers and pulling Kir’s in with them as needed. It was just as well he’d established that Anur spoke for him in all things on their first stay in Sunhame, it made dealing with these things much faster even if he still did have to provide the necessary seals and signatures.

:\textit{Should I call Kari in?:}  

:\textit{...Probably not the worst idea.}:  

Two marks later, Kir was trying not to laugh while Rodri stared at what had been a nicely blooming rose-bush, aghast. Anur admired his brother’s restraint, he wasn’t even bothering to try and stop laughing.

“And here I thought the rose gardens were safe,” Solaris said dryly.

If Rodri went any paler, he’d worry about the teen passing out. Anur managed to sit up straight, offering a half-bow of greeting before snickering again. Kir finally laughed, Solaris and he exchanging bows before he rested a hand on Rodri’s shoulder, the teen bowing hastily. Solaris stopped him before he could genuflect.

“No, no, I interrupted your studies, Initiate Rodri, though I think the gardeners will thank me,” she finished, exchanging blessing gestures with him.

“They’re planning to redo this garden come winter, I asked for an area where they wouldn’t mind
bushes randomly catching on fire,” Kir assured her, Rodri immediately looking relieved.

“You didn’t tell me that!” he said, looking up at Kir with a faint frown.

“Because your face was hilarious!” Anur crowed and just laughed harder at Rodri’s flabbergasted expression. Kir’s lips twitched into a smile but somehow he managed to regain a bland expression by the time Rodri looked to him again.

That left him to deal with Rodri’s disgruntled glare, and it was probably a good thing Rodri was well aware of his lack of precision with flames, or he’d be worried for his hair. Kir hadn’t made good on that threat in a while, but he definitely still made it. It gave him something of an excuse for keeping his hair longer than the usual Karsite fashion, though among priests it wasn’t quite so uncommon.

“Working on anything in particular?” Solaris asked, directing the question to Rodri who let up on glaring at Anur to look at her and reply.

“Flammability detection, Eminence,” he said, “Father Kir is making random things more flammable and I’m supposed to guess which one – well. Detect which one but… it’s basically been guessing. I thought I had it but… I accidentally lit it on fire instead of just detecting it?”

“That happens,” Kir assured him, “If you want to practice this on your own, use materials you aren’t familiar with and ask Jaina or Kari to accompany you. Listening for it without affecting it is difficult.”

“Listening?” Solaris prompted, clearly curious and by Hansa’s intent expression he was equally interested. Kari padded up beside Kir and gave a rolling shrug, fielding this reply.

:Everything is flammable, to some degree. Kir hears it as a hum, a buzz – the louder and higher pitched the buzz, the more flammable the thing is. It’s a sense of… potential, I suppose. I’ve never spoken to another Firestarter which uses the same techniques but I would guess they’re the same.:”

“I have,” Kir said carefully, “And his interpretation agreed.”

:Griffon?: Anur murmured to his brother alone, wordless assent all Kir sent back. By Rodri’s curious glance up at Kir, met by a shake of his head, he wanted to know who this other Firestarter was too, but subsided at Kir’s gesture. They would meet one day, Anur hoped, but best not mention details just yet.

“Interesting,” Solaris mused, “Does enchantment affect this?”

“Depends on the spellwork, but most of the time, yes,” Kir raised an eyebrow at her, “Any particular reason why?”

“Dealing with those trap-anchors that Brother Markov uncovered made me wonder how many other enchantments I wouldn’t approve of were left – none of those anchors remain,” she waved a hand dismissively at the thought of her dramatic midnight calling on divine power to cleanse an entire country of anchored curse traps and Anur bit back another snicker. “But the District is thick with spellwork from centuries of labor and determining where anchors are, as well as just what enchantments do, is difficult. I was simply curious if you would be able to detect spell-anchors, if you focused on it.”

“Possibly,” Kir said thoughtfully, “But it would probably be easier to use mage-sight – ah. No, you can ward against that with some work, correct?”

“It’s tedious but if the spell was something truly reprehensible,” Solaris sighed, “I’ve cleared the Son
of Sun residence at least, and have those I trust looking for them but… the District is quite large. If you could even just keep an eye out for such things, marking them for later, closer inspection that would be appreciated.”

“Easily done,” Kir agreed.

The time-keeping bell tolled and Rodri perked up, bowing deeply to Solaris and saying, “Excuse me, but I have class in a mark and must collect my texts.”

“Far be it for me to keep an initiate from their studies,” Solaris said with a smile, “Sunlord protect and guide, Initiate Rodri.”

“Father Kir, the forges tomorrow morning?” Rodri asked after bowing to Solaris again, Kir nodding thoughtfully, “I need a word with Axeli on a sun-forged steel spear anyway. I’ll see you this evening, Rodri.”

“Watch out for flaming rose-bushes,” Anur said solemnly, cracking a smile at the attempt at a withering look Rodri sent him as he walked away. “Having a student is fantastic!” he said, Kir and Solaris both snorting and exchanging wry looks.

“Yes, you would think so. You didn’t have to fill out any paperwork about the exploding pistachios incident,” Kir said.

“Please, as if you weren’t extracting vengeance by not telling him the gardeners allowed random fires in this section of garden,” Anur scoffed, rising to his feet, “You definitely enjoyed that horrified expression on his face as much as I did.”

“He’ll have to explain random fires himself eventually,” Kir shrugged, tone mild, “Might as well get practice without urgency.”

“I would hope that with proper instruction random fires wouldn’t happen,” Solaris commented, Kir hesitating before giving a nod and elaborating.

“Fair, and yes, in an ideal world – but practice is necessary and it is impossible to get a full grasp of Firestarting within a day – there will be at least a few days where he will need to be followed around by Kari or one of us trained Firestarters to ensure any flames only get non-animates.”

“How did you manage?” Anur asked warily.

“I left town,” Kir said grimly, “I made my excuses to Verius and I ran, and even then I made a serious dent in the local wildlife population. I learned later that there was a fever outbreak that quarantined the rest of my cohort and Verius, so I had enough time to get things under control. It took nearly three moons for me to have consistent and constant control over my flames – the thing that saved me was the fact I was traveling with three other Firestarter acolytes – only some of the random fires were blamed on me.”

Solaris frowned and said carefully, “Your pardon, Kir, but it sounds rather miraculous your Order has survived so long with as many ways you could kill yourselves in training and trials – and that’s without taking infighting into account.”

“It takes a lot for Firestarters to be dragged into District infighting,” Kir replied, “Well – it did, at least. It was understood that we were off-limits, as students anyway, simply because it was so easy to turn any harassment back on the perpetrator by accusing them of witchcraft – it’s not a difficult thing to fake evidence for, and very hard to disprove.”
“I have to know this Phyrrus story,” Anur groaned, “Everything I’ve learned is telling me it should never have happened but it clearly did and just – what did he do?”

“Essentially he tried to force Jaina into a situation where she would be beholden to him and have to repay him in some manner, presumably sexually,” Kir summarized flatly, “I took exception to that, and being young and foolish and more than half suicidal, I humiliated him and tore down a fair bit of his status while making it very obvious it was me. It took moons for him to recover enough political capital to apply true pressure on me, and by then Verius had already declared that I would be ordained and petitioned for me to go straight to the First Order Trials. Within a week of him filing those requests, he was dead.”

:I thought Kir heavily implied that one of his cohort had poisoned Verius, since that way they were all put up for ordination and he’d been holding them back,: Aelius pointed out, Anur half-remembering that conversation and latching onto Aelius’ implied question to distract himself from seething fury at the very idea of this Phyrrus character and from the quiet horror at Kir’s utterly factual ‘more than half suicidal’.

“I could have sworn you implied that one of your fellow students poisoned Verius,” Anur relayed, Kir making a few frustrated gestures and the ashes of the rose-bush starting to smolder before he managed a reply.

“I don’t know who poisoned him, besides it not being me, and probably not Jaina, she was honestly grieved at his death,” Kir finally said, Solaris sighing heavily and nodding, supplying the rest of the explanation.

“But acolytes wouldn’t have been able to poison their mentor without some outside assistance, not unless they were truly exceptional at it, and Phyrrus was known for being persuasive,” she said sadly, “He probably convinced one of them to help him – there were four of you?”

“The most likely one to have done it died before Verius, not by much, but he did,” Kir coughed awkwardly, “He – ah – botched one of my techniques.”

“The one that exploded?”

“One of your techniques can make people explode?”

“Not if you do it right!”

***===***pagebreak***===***

“So what happened to the fourth one?”

Kir twisted in the saddle to look back at Anur, puzzled by the question. They’d made it a habit to take their horses out of the city and just ride for a few marks at least every other day they were in Sunhame – both of them needed the chance to be out of the District, out of the crowds. It was growing more familiar every time, but Kir didn’t doubt that even if he survived to be old and grey he’d always view Sunhame with at least some distaste.

Should he be old and grey and, for some reason, Rodri couldn’t succeed him before his death, he’d undoubtedly be confined to Sunhame and the surrounding area for his twilight years. If it every got to that point, he might just lock himself in the Trial room and let the flames take him – after clearing it with Anur, of course.

As on edge as he was in the city, he’d probably agree to it.
“The fourth – the fourth member of our cohort?” Kir asked, finally figuring out what Anur was probably referring to. It had taken a few moments of circular conversation to assure Solaris that none of his techniques actually made someone explode, and to this day he couldn’t figure out what had actually gone wrong, but after that had been straightened out and they agreed to meet the next day with Markov in tow to figure out their story they’d parted ways, the two of them heading for the stables.

“Yeah,” Anur agreed, Aelius doing a few pivots presumably for enjoyment before jumping into a high-stepping trot to catch up, “There’s you, and Jaina, and the exploded one, so what happened to the last one? Presumably they were ordained around the same time as you and Jaina?”

“With Jaina, actually,” Kir corrected, “She took the post of Incendiary a few moons later – by Midsummer of our ordination year. I don’t think Bron died until a year or two later – the idiot drowned.”

“Wait – what?”

“He drowned,” Kir scoffed, cuing Riva to a rapid back and spin before rocking forward into a trot to walk by Aelius again, “I told him he should learn how to swim, I spent moons pestering him into it, I tried bribes, I tried threats – but Verius told us that if he wanted to die in such an unpleasant and avoidable way it was his right and I was to leave him alone about the matter.”

“He didn’t even drown in a fast river, or rapids, or a decent lake,” Kir continued, reins at least forcing his hands to remain steady while he worked on Riva’s side-steps, “No, he drowned in an oasis. An oasis! Half of those aren’t even deep enough to prevent you from standing! There’s no appreciable current, he could have floated to safety but no, Karse was a desert land, blessed by the Sun and he was one of the Sunlord’s chosen he would never drown – idiot.”

Looking over to see why Anur hadn’t responded, he rolled his eyes when he realized his brother was literally biting his sleeve to keep from laughing, shoulders shaking while Aelius crow-hopped a few times.

“You feel very strongly about that,” Anur managed a few moments later, voice strangled and a few snickers escaping at the end. Kir scoffed again, eyeing the footing on the far side of a fallen log before going to set Riva up for a jump.

“Drowning happens,” he finally said, Riva surging forward, “Even if you know how to swim!” he called over his shoulder as they landed, Riva wheeling around to canter around the obstacle and back to Anur and Aelius’ sides. “Blows to the head, tiredness, cold, being drunk, a strong current, the wrong clothes – anyone can drown. But to not even try to learn how to prevent it? Especially when his duties were going to send him traveling across Karse in all seasons? Sheer stupidity. When I heard how he died, I may have spent a few moments feeling furious and smug before repenting and praying for his soul – but should I ever have the chance to speak with him again, my first words are going to be I told you so!”

“Aside from that bit of arrogance, was he a decent enough person?” Anur asked curiously and Kir shrugged. His acolyte years had, before Anur, been some of the most contented of his life simply because he’d had company, had companionship that understood what they were facing, what they were going to become. Maybe they didn’t have the same opinions on what that meant, maybe they didn’t agree on methods or motives or anything at all, really, but they’d understood. They’d known, and been in the same situation or near enough to it.

“He was fine,” Kir finally said vaguely, “Mostly memorable because of the drowning bit and refusing to learn how to swim, honestly. We – we would watch stars together though. Neither of us
slept much – probably nightmares on both our parts, but who would admit to that? But we would watch stars, tell constellation stories. He’d been taken older, eleven or so, I think – he’d heard more of them from his family, so there were… quirks, pieces of lore I hadn’t heard from books or what stories I remembered.”

He fell silent, thinking back to the large, quiet boy that he’d never really thought of as older than him, despite size difference and at least six years. Half his fury at his death had been the fact that it had been so easily preventable and he’d seen it coming when Bron had flinched away from anything deeper than a bathtub. It raised the question of just why he’d gone into an oasis in the first place, but he’d asked around and there had been no signs of foul play. He’d just gone in to clean up, slipped and never managed to right himself.

“He would have liked to see Solaris’ changes, I think,” Kir admitted quietly, Aelius stepping closer so Anur could bump their shoulders together.

“He’s watching in Sunheart,” Anur said sympathetically, “Probably intensely regretting rejecting your offers to teach him to swim.”

“Verius probably gave him the what-for, if they ever found each other,” Kir said wryly, “He mostly made me stop pestering him because we were driving everyone else mad with it.”

“Calling drowning an unpleasant and avoidable way to die?” Anur snorted, “He was probably hoping to scorn him into trying. Shame it didn’t work. Now – race you to the end of that field?”

“No witch-horse cheats?”

“No more than your weird-horse che – hey!” Anur squawked, Aelius’ mental laughs ringing in their minds as he launched after Riva, Anur continuing, :Witch-horse cheats ha! More like your cheats! Cheater!: :What was that? I can’t hear you over the sound of my victory!: :That was my line!: :Funny how much more infuriating it is on the receiving end, isn’t it?: :Infuriating? I’ll show you infuriating!: :

The sun was well into its descent by the time they were heading back to Sunhame on one of the lesser used roads, but the day away from the city had been desperately needed. Anur was humming what could arguably be called a hymnal tune but was actually a drinking song and Kir was well on his way to finishing another knotwork project – again one of his suns but it was of a nicer cording than his usual, silk of mottled reds with scattered brass beads threaded on. He’d taken shameless advantage of being nearer to textile country and had ventured out to purchase strings and cords while in Sunhame early on in their treks here. It at least made the trip somewhat worthwhile in an utterly uncomplicated way.

He hadn’t worked with silk in a long time, it had taken some doing to get the knots to settle right, but by the time he was done anchoring it to one of the bangles he had a stash of for just this purpose, it would be an elegant enough piece. He’d spotted Jaina wearing one of his earlier efforts at a knotwork bracelet a few moons ago and figured he could start on Midwinter gifts early.

“That’s definitely a priest,” Anur commented, standing in his stirrups and shading his eyes, “And possibly Laskaris – he rides that buckskin mare, right?”
“Last I heard nothing had happened to her,” Kir said, looking up from his knots briefly but not doing more than glancing at the figure in question. They were keeping a slower pace, whoever they were, so the two of them would catch up soon enough – red robes alone indicated some member of the priesthood though. No lay person would dare wear that much red cloth outside of a wedding.

“He spends most of his time out with Lumira, riding up to Peak’s Town on his way into Sunhame and conducting patrols of the fatlands when he can,” Kir recalled, “Seems more than content to stay well away from Sunhame though – I wonder what is bringing him back.”

“If that’s even him - “

“Eldest?” a surprised voice called, interrupting Anur and invalidating their hesitation all at once, “I thought you would already be in Sunhame!”

“We’ve been in Sunhame a few days, but make a habit of going for a ride every so often,” Kir called back, Riva and Aelius picking up the pace a bit so they could get within easy talking distance. “What brings you back to Sunhame? As I understood it you were focusing on Lumira’s congregation for the time being.”

“I have to consult with some colleagues on them,” Laskaris said, tone grim before he lightened considerably, “But none of that now, Eldest, I hear our Initiate has had his first run in with the fourth fundamental truth?”

:The what?: Aelius asked, Anur managing to keep himself from being visibly puzzled. With a name like a fundamental truth, they probably assumed it was something the average Karsite would know – but not in this case.

“Everything burns,” Kir explained, smiling wryly, “There’s a collection of five things considered fundamental truths passed on rather – apocryphally, with stories, within the priesthood. I’m sure some lay people know them but they’re not common knowledge. I don’t think Rodri had heard them before Jaina laughed at him and quoted it.”

“The old I didn’t know it was flammable excuse,” Laskaris said fondly, “What was he going after? Lumira and I only heard that there had been an incident and no one was hurt.”

“Pistachios in a sealed container,” Kir said, the older man wincing and shaking his head.

“Thank the Sunlord for Kari then, there’s no way he would have escaped without injuries otherwise,” the priest said, Kir nodding agreement. “Now, I left Lumira’s congregation a week ago and haven’t really spoken to anyone on the road – there was some sort of mass lightning strike right about then do you know anything?”

“Oh yes,” Anur snorted, “We know quite a bit. First though, have you ever heard of or met a former black-robe healer named Markov?”

“He’s alive?”

“Alive and well, apparently there were anchored curse traps scattered across the country triggered by certain people reentering Karse, and he was one of them,” Kir said, Laskaris shaking his head.

“I’m not surprised, some of the stories I heard – well. I suppose his targets lined up with those Solaris’ reforms would have ruined anyway,” the priest attempted a shrug but any nonchalance was undermined by the concerned frown on his face.

“He admits his judgment is flawed and apparently only came back to verify Solaris’ changes for
others who are interested in returning, so he won’t be targeting any others. To be frank it doesn’t sound like he’s interested in remaining in Karse,” Anur said, expression not giving away the fierce focus Kir could feel burning against his mind, “He’d rather return to Valdemar.”

Laskaris’ nostrils flared and his knuckles went white, breath hissing out between his teeth, “Well then,” he said coolly, “That should be expected, I suppose, that people would flee there.”

“I’d say better there than Hardorn,” Kir grimaced, “At least they’re not fueling blood magic.”

“Instead they’re consorting with - !” Laskaris visibly struggled to bite back the rest of his statement, closing his eyes and exhaling slowly, “My apologies, Eldest. We have – mentioned it, at least. That those who fled may want to return but as it hasn’t actually come up yet I’ve let it lie without thinking on it too much.”

“Think on it now, then, and don’t take too long,” Kir said sternly, “Because her Eminence has already decided to welcome them home.”

:Oh this is going to go so well,: Anur grumbled, :Suppose I’ll have to work on getting to know him.: 

:Friendship wouldn’t help with him,: Kir sent back bleakly, :But he doesn’t have the ambition or drive to pursue things against my wishes, much less Solaris’ - he may hate, he may seethe, but he won’t act.: 

:Until something pushes him too far,: Anur pointed out, :It’s best we at least try to bring him into the fold more. Even just on the matter of Talents, forget Heralds entirely for the moment.: 

:Fair, he did have difficulty with that too,: Kir glanced over at Laskaris, who looked deep in thought, and didn’t hesitate to interrupt him.

“So, a consultation on the Hardornens? Is something wrong?”

“No – nothing is wrong, just some spellwork they asked after – they heard about the mercenaries and are willing to enter a similar contract, but only if we can guarantee \textit{witach} can’t bind them again.”

“A fair condition but one that might be tricky to pull off,” Kir frowned, “Especially with the true anchors of those spells far behind Ancar’s borders.”

“Precisely. I studied coercion webs, I have some ideas, but decided I might as well extend my next run to consult with colleagues in Sunhame,” Laskaris grimaced, “If any of them are left alive after that lightning storm – at least one of them made a study of death-traps, so he might very well be gone.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t mourn someone who set Fury swarms down on our heads,” Anur said dryly and Laskaris barked a laugh.

“Lieutenant-Enforcer, being honest, I wouldn’t mourn him either.”

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“I’ve had at least three people try to curse me as a demon-infested monster since I arrived.”

Markov sounded utterly delighted by the fact, Kir noted wryly, exchanging a glance with Anur while Solaris stared at the priest in question with no little incredulity.

“That is not what I would call good news, Brother Markov, not if you were intending to tell people it
was safe to return from Valdemar, if they wished to,” she said carefully, Markov bowing his head to her before replying.

“And I agree, but it is good to know that they will face opposition – and that the opposition is restricted to words. We have words thrown in our faces in Valdemar too, Your Eminence, it’s the threats of death and fire that scared them off. I can’t speak for all of them, I can’t even speak for most, but I know at least some would prefer to return to Karse and endure prejudice and hatred in a land they can call home rather than endure much the same in a land they call exile.”

“A fair point,” she admitted quietly, Anur taking the chance to speak up.

“It’s also good to know that most of their focus is on the Valdemar aspect rather than the Talent aspect, though that may also just be because it’s Markov, and he’s a priest, not a fled innocent,” he said, rocking back on his heels where he was standing by the window, “I know some of the Firestarters still struggle with the idea that Talents aren’t wicked, much less the possibility that Valdemar isn’t home to hellbeasts and monsters, but it gives us areas to focus on – and the more Talented we have among the lay-people, the better for that acclimatization.”

“So long as no one does something stupid,” Kir says sternly, “It’s a lot of adjustment at once, and many people were dissatisfied, were doubtful, that is true – but it’s not just the priesthood that hates Talented, Anur. Brothers would turn in brothers, parents turn on their children – it’s been lifetimes, generations, of knowing Talents were evil, were doom. Having more Talented and those sympathetic to Talented would help people get used to the idea, but it would also add a burden to the priest in the towns they were returning to, because they would need to stand as their shield, no matter their own opinions on the matter.”

“An idea then might be to get names of those who plan to return and where they plan to go,” Solaris suggested, “Then we could deliberately sound out those priests, explain to them what will be expected of them.”

“I can also brief those who are returning,” Markov said, “Explain what will be done to help them and what they will have to be responsible for and watchful for themselves.”

“No children returning alone,” Kir said abruptly, brow furrowing as he remembered the girl and her cousins, running north and so terrified, “Not unless – not unless we can confirm that the household they left is still there, and will still welcome them. If it’s a group of children – still not ideal, but better than one alone.”

“At this point we might as well have an escort service of some sort,” Anur pointed out, “Children are the ones that fled, and if any of them want to return they may not have an adult willing to accompany them – besides that, brigands and road hazards and whatnot, might as well have something set up to make their return and welcome as smooth as possible.”

“I have a fair number of young priests eager to do something,” Solaris mused, “At least until I can finish sorting out which priests need replacements or simply assistants, it will give them something to do. I can place Karchanek on that task, he is being driven mad by some magecraft problem that got presented a few days ago, some time away may do him good.”

“Well he can’t ride with us,” Anur said blandly, “Riva hates blondes.”

:I really am sorry about that whole mess...:
The letter addressed to Kiara Dinesh, Captain of the Sundancer sat in the Temple District for a full day before it was placed in the proper dispatch slot. Stored in a leather pouch with a selection of other missives, it was handed over to the messenger branch of the Sunsguard rather than the chartered and sponsored merchants who handled deliveries deemed less urgent by their senders.

Nothing about the letter to Kiara Dinesh indicated it was urgent, but the name Dinesh was not unknown in Sunhame and the priest set to sorting mail used his own discretion.

Once a week, the day of departure depending on district, messengers rode out of Sunhame with sealed bags, stopping at predetermined towns and handing over the relevant pouch to the local priest. From there, the priest sorted the letters to the smaller townships in his area, sometimes guessing based on names and titles when letters didn’t have a more convenient marker.

For those that lived outside the towns that were on the messenger’s route – often without a Sunsguard post in a day’s ride, since the main purpose of the messengers was relaying orders – their letters took a little longer, the priest either taking the initiative and encouraging someone to travel that direction or waiting for travelers to pass through in order to pass those letters on. Most of the time, there would be somebody willing to walk over to the next village and visit with their aunt or cousin or old friend’s brother with a few letters in tow. Often they got some coin out of the recipient, or at least offers of a meal and drink, so it wasn’t a bad way to spend a day the fields couldn’t be worked or the forge couldn’t be stoked.

In the same way, replies could make it back, messengers running through the route once a week. Each district had a rota of five messengers, so that no matter how far afield they ended up going (usually hunting down wayward Sunsguard captains off on whatever they called a patrol) the once a week schedule would not be disrupted.

Most of the time, especially in the furthest reaches of the country, in the north, in the Badlands, messengers would ride most of the month without a single message outside Sunsguard orders and reports in their bags. Solaris’ rise saw a marked increase in letters, both by messenger and by caravan, but once a week was still more than enough.

Captain Kiara Dinesh of the Sundancer was a recognizable name to the priest who received the letter, and he was able to pass it and others to a group heading to the fish-market two days after he opened the message pouch. The next day, the letter was in the hands of her priest, the priest who, nominally, had her in his congregation.

Storms and squalls made regular attendance somewhat difficult, of course, but he had noticed – the whole nation had noticed – that after Solaris’ rise, excuses to skip service and dodge priests were drying up, were being neglected, and temples were fuller than they’d been in a long time. But practically speaking, all that meant was he didn’t have to wait for a Solsday service to get the letter delivered – Captain Dinesh was at the Sun Ascending service the very next day.

A week and a half after the letter left Sunhame, it was placed into Kiara Dinesh’s hand.

She looked at it, took a deep breath, and put it in her vest for later. There was work to do before daylight was lost. The story of her brother’s death could wait until nightfall.

That night, she broke one dish, a chair, scraped her knuckles raw and cried until her eyes ached. What in Sunlord’s name was she supposed to do with a living brother?

Chapter End Notes
Took a bit longer than anticipated, and a review on ff.net requesting a whole chapter on the Karsite postal service (only half-jokingly too!) finally gave me that last push to finish the chapter. Hopefully can get on track for a monthly update schedule for September...
“The Mechanics of Death Wards? Is that to figure out how the anchored traps worked, sir?” Koshiro asked, Kir looking up from the book he’d been trying to work through for a week now and smiling wryly.

“Unfortunately no,” he replied, “The only way we can think of to ensure Lumira’s Hardornen congregation can never be pulled under blood-mages sway again is by anchoring a death curse to their minds, triggering whenever a compulsion is placed.”

The usual meeting in the 103rds barracks had taken longer than usual, with the logistics of the return of refugees needing to be worked out. Captains Ulrich and Koshiro had worked out their patrol exchanges and had taken a break before continuing to figure out who would take escort duty to the 103rd and, more critically, how they were going to manage securing the place when priests and children descended on it.

Solaris had authorized an increased budget and was sending priests and support staff north, with Karchanek leading them, but the buildings and facilities would need to be inspected and prepared at least partially for their arrival. Most of the barracks of the 103rd had been closed up when this shortage started and hadn’t been aired out since. That was what some of the men brought to the meeting were doing, Anur and Markov among them while Kir was stuck here trying to work out whether this proposed spellwork would compromise his Firestarters.

Koshiro took a seat across from him at his gesture, uniform dusty enough he had probably just finished inspecting some buildings himself. He drummed his fingers on the table idly for a moment before finally speaking, “I can understand why they would prefer death to being taken by blood-mages again.”

“I can as well,” Kir agreed, “I’ll be frank, I don’t particularly care about their deaths. I’m more concerned about the potential side effects this working might have on the practitioners.”

“Ah – is death magic anathema then?”

“Not in this particular incarnation, I think. I haven’t spent much time thinking about it, so that’s what I’m spending the foreseeable future doing – becoming familiar enough with the topic I can actually guide a decision,” Kir sighed, shutting the book and setting it aside, “I don’t suppose Tehan came with you?”

“No, he decided to stay in the 54th, but from what I remember he usually opted for that,” Devek replied, “Did you want to speak with him?”

“Not particularly, but if he was here I would feel obligated.” Kir said, looking over as the door opened and Captain Ulrich walked in, considerably dustier than Devek was. “I see your buildings were in worse shape,” he commented.

“Dust and some pests, shouldn’t take long to clear them out at least, our initial estimates should serve fine,” the older captain snorted, “It’s not like they’re the height of luxury, I can’t see any of them staying here long.”

“If the priests complain overmuch, we can just send them to Fathers Kir and Tehan, I don’t know

...
that they’d have much patience for their complaints,” Devek suggested, Ulrich snorting as he sat beside his former subordinate and Kir raised an eyebrow.

“My quarters are quite nice. Besides, from what I remember Solaris is sending mostly young, recently ordained members of the priesthood – they’ll have only just left acolyte dormitories anyway, it won’t be as large an adjustment for most of them. And then those more used to luxury wouldn’t be able to complain without losing face – I don’t think there will be any problems. If there are, I’ll gladly intervene.”

“I don’t suppose Father Markov will be escorting any of the children in?” Ulrich commented with a sly gleam in his eyes, “I’ve heard very good things.”

“About what, his ability to terrify priests?” Kir laughed, shaking his head, “I’m not entirely sure I imagined the collective sigh of relief when Markov announced he was going to leave Sunhame with us. He thought it was hilarious, I’m sure we can convince him to come back every so often.”

“Well I’ll have to leave you two to convince him of that,” Devek said, the three of them standing, “It seems we’re done here, if our first estimates are adequate. Captain Ulrich, you’re riding north?”

“Indeed. I have your letters, they’ll be passed on with the rest.”

“My thanks, Captain. Father,” Devek inclined his head to his former Captain and offered his customary salute to Kir before heading out of the mess hall they’d met in. Ulrich watched the younger man go with a thoughtful look in his eyes.

“I suppose we might see new Generals one day, too,” he mused, “He has the ambition for it, and his Valdemarans fairly good.”

“One day,” Kir agreed, “But there’s a ways to go before he’s ready for that – hells, before he even thinks of that.”

“Well, you have your Sunhame schemes to deal with, allow me my own,” Ulrich smiled, “I’ll meet you by the horses, I had best check in with the men we’re leaving behind one last time.”

“Agreed,” Kir said, picking up his book and finding Anur and Markov by the gates, already in their saddles. He shook his head slightly and went to get Riva ready to go, not entirely surprised to hear the whispered plots to return to Sunhame every so often to keep the rest of the priesthood on their toes. For all Markov had claimed to be content to never set foot in Karse again, he delighted in being a horror to his former colleagues.

Those two really were alarmingly alike, he mused, brushing Riva down. Anur didn’t see it, being too close to the issue but as many times as he’d poked at something – throwing knives at acolytes, catching something a bit too smoothly, responding a touch too quickly and all with a cheerful glint in his eyes – oh yes. He’d enjoyed the homicidal maniac routine he’d developed, he’d cackled at the chance to torment Loshern a little more.

Anur was more reasonable, more moral, than his surrogate uncle. He was no less vicious, particularly when protecting his own. Kir doubted it had been so obvious in Valdemar – how often had those he truly cared about been under threat? Delilah’s betrayal had shattered his confidence in his own judgment and sent him fleeing to the hinterlands, hardly a chance to exercise that cheerfully delivered edge. No, Karse had brought that out in him more than anything.

It didn’t reflect well on him that he was looking forward to Anur’s reintroduction to Heralds, to his reintroduction to Herald Dirk in particular. It would be jarring, he’d have to prepare Anur for that
odd homecoming—yet not, but it would be oh so entertaining to watch.

He shook his head at Anur’s mute inquiry, Anur only raising an eyebrow before returning to his discussion with his uncle and Kir left them to it. They didn’t have much longer to scheme as it was, and Kir could hardly begrudge them that time. Especially when all he had to offer was anticipation for an event moons in the future.

The Heralds had let a treasure slip through their fingers and Kir wanted to watch as they realized it.

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It hadn’t taken much in-person negotiating to work out how the border aspect of the returning refugees would be handled. Captain Ulrich had sent a message on to Naomi the moment they left the 62nd so they’d had time to think over their own side of things, and the twins had headed out at the same time to consult with their own contacts amongst the hill folk. Between that and the decisions he’d already come to with Devek, it had been relatively simple to get agreement from the other parties. The hill-folk agreed to act as a greeting party and intermediary so no stray 54th Sunsguard saw Valdemaran soldiers escorting those returning and Markov was able to work out a series of meeting points in southern Valdemar for the refugees to meet Captain Naomi’s soldiers for said escort. All that remained was seeing how the process worked with actual warm bodies, and that would take a moon at the least, if not longer. It depended on how desperate these people were to return to Karse, as autumn weather would start growing teeth soon enough.

It had been an odd assembly at the Children’s Spring – he really did have to ask about that name one day, Anur hadn’t had any idea – consisting of Ulrich and the twins, a cluster of hill-folk, Naomi and Joss, Markov and of course Anur and himself. Not the oddest group he had ever stood with, but it was still worth a second glance.

It was easy to forget, sometimes, that the 62nd wasn’t standing alone in this conspiracy with Valdemar, that people had been conspiring on one side of the border or the other for generations. Seeing the hill-folk and hearing their fluent switches between Valdemaran and Karsite, hearing their frank discussions of what things would take the longest for returners to readjust to, had been a nice reminder that this could work outside once-desperate soldiers and had worked for centuries.

But the meeting was long done, successfully and easily concluded, details wrapped up, letters handed off and he and Anur had escorted Markov northwest to the Valdemar border, tracing a route they had taken years ago, now, to visit the Bellamies.

It had been years. No matter how Midsummer worked out, they would have to arrange a time to visit the family. He missed them, and he wouldn’t have to worry about Anur trying to arrange some horribly forced reconciliation attempt between himself and Markov. They had come to an understanding easily enough, sharing brief words on the way to Sunhame after Cora.

If those words had been more along the lines of thanks for looking after Anur and vows to destroy any that harmed him, well—it couldn’t be said that their priorities didn’t match.

Looking up from his knotwork at Anur’s groan, he couldn’t help but grin at the sight of him burying his face in his hands, the grin on Markov’s face utterly recognizable. It had been eye-opening, to watch Markov in Karse, to see Markov as Karsite. It was fortunate there was no physical resemblance between Anur and his adoptive uncle or they’d never have been able to pass of the pair as strangers that had hit it off well.

Markov softened, apparently done with his teasing, and he rested a hand on Anur’s shoulder, waiting for him to look up at him before saying quietly, “You’ve done well for yourself nephew. I can’t say
it is a path I would have chosen for you, but you are happy, and I am proud.”

Anur positively glowed at that praise, nearly knocking Markov over when he lunged for an embrace, the older man laughing quietly and returning it, burying his face in Anur’s shoulder and Kir couldn’t help the brief pang because it was so very recent that the possibility of his own family had been raised and -

It wasn’t the same, it wasn’t even close to the same, but Anur and Markov had reconciled, hadn’t they? Had said their pieces, drawn their lines, and moved on still as family, still caring, and it raised the possibility that perhaps, just perhaps, he could have the same one day.

Hells, for all he knew this Kiara Dinesh was the only one left and she’d used ‘we’ as a formality, and everyone he had once known as kin was dead and gone. He wouldn’t turn her away, would never, not if she wanted a Firestarter for a brother, but it wasn’t what he was terrified of and what he was taking very great pains to not think on overmuch.

It wasn’t worth worrying about, losing sleep over, when he knew so very little of the situation.

He was startled out of his thoughts by Markov walking over to him, resting his hands on his shoulders and meeting his gaze for a long moment before nodding shortly and tugging him into his own hug, Kir not entirely able to contain his surprise.

“Ah – Markov?” he managed, “What are – are you all right?”

The elder man huffed a laugh and tightened his hold briefly, murmuring, “I am late, true, by years, and I am sorry for that. But you are sworn brother to my nephew, who I only have by a similar swearing, so it would be foolish in the extreme to not respect that. I try not to be foolish the same way twice, Kir Dinesh, so I am giving my newest nephew the farewell I owe him.”

If he ducked his head to hide damp eyes in Markov’s coat, no one here would say anything.

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His sworn brother was tending the hives when he returned, so Markov waited on the porch, a mug of spice-tea in hand. Anur had sent a stash of the blend early in the year and he had taken the chance to restock while he was in Karse himself, but this bag was Anna’s own attempt to recreate the flavors of his home. It had become more a comfort to him than the original in the years since she had first pressed it on him, positively giddy with anticipation.

She’d been horrified when he’d started to cry into it but Connor had at least been around to salvage the situation before she decided to burn the recipe and swear off tea blending in penance. Their first years had been so utterly awkward, with the children scampering all over their new uncle and their freshly returned da while the three adults tried to figure out just how this was going to change the dynamic of the household.

He’d wandered a lot, those first years, out of habit more than anything and then out of a determination to figure out just what it was about Valdemar that was so evil that he’d been raised on nightmare stories of the land. By the time he’d found himself a home and a trade of his own a few towns away it hadn’t felt right unless he spent a week each moon with his new family.

By the cheerful voices behind him, Connor had come in the back and been ambushed with news of his arrival, the other man bursting out the door and catching him up in a fierce hug, Markov rolling his eyes and smiling nonetheless. “Yes Connor, I’m back. It was a fine trip. How are you?”

“Don’t even,” the man growled into his shoulder, “You stopped by for one night and rode off in the
morning with a cheerful, ‘and I’m heading for Karse by the way’ without even – you swore you would never set foot in Karse again, Marcus. You *swore.*”

“I did,” Markov hesitated before continuing quietly, “Could we use Markov, again?”

“It’ll take some explaining and some getting used to, but of course,” Connor agreed, loosening his hold and pulling him inside. “It was always your choice on that, Markov.”

“Oh we’re switching?” Anna said idly, “I’ll do my best! Now – stew is set, Lilah is picking up bread while she’s in town and I finally caught up on mending. *Give me my letters!***”

Markov laughed as the couple hustled him in front of the hearth, wedging him between them on the couch and Anna dropped his packs in his lap with a pointed glare, Connor prying his mug out of his hands so he had no excuses. He had expected this; they loved their children so very much, how could they not, and Anur was the only one they couldn’t see within a day’s travel. It hadn’t been so bad, when they had known he was in Haven training to be a Herald, even knowing he was off on his internship or working as a messenger -

But when he had stopped by on his way to a guard posting in the south, he had been hollow-eyed and hardly smiled, a far cry from the cheerful and irrepressible boy they had raised and seen only moons before. Terrible correspondence aside, his visit when Mara was born had at least salved their worries because he had looked better – not restored, but they hadn’t expected that, but better. He had laughed, at least.

Then he had come home dragging a Sunpriest behind him and Markov had nearly ruined everything they had built because blind, unthinking terror had consumed him.

“Were you able to see Anur?” Anna demanded, “You were heading to Karse but did you see him? How is he?”

Pulling the thick letter out of his packs, he passed it to Anna with a smile at her gasp. “Anur is all right,” he said, pleased to see some of that tension fade from her frame, to feel Connor suddenly relax on his other side. “He is safe, safer than I could hope and Sunlord, Connor, he is so very happy.”

“He wrote a *novel!*” Anna cried, delighted as she paged through sheaf after sheaf of her son’s handwriting, Dinesh’s script showing up every so often. “Oh, this is wonderful!”

“Save that for after we read what he’s telling us,” Connor recommended, meeting Markov’s gaze and passing the tea back, “Couldn’t trust the usual messengers?”

“It would probably have been fine, but it wasn’t a risk they were willing to take,” Markov said, taking a sip of his tea, “You’ll have to read it, the story – it’s unbelievable, what those boys are doing.”

“Kir?” Anna said sharply, grip tightening on the pages as she stared at him, “I recognize his hand, of course, but you saw him?”

“You can’t see one without the other, I suspect,” Markov dodged, before sighing at her hard look and nodding, “I did – I was wrong, Anna. You told me, you both did and now – I apologized, to him and Anur both and sweet stars, those boys are a *miracle.*”

“They certainly made quite the impression,” Connor said, reaching out to poke at the Sun-in-Glory hanging around his neck, “Never seen you wearing one of these before.”

“I’ve never been willing to declare for the Sunlord before,” Markov admitted, Connor’s arm
wrapping around his shoulders and tugging him into an embrace, Anna taking his free hand in her own.

“That’s wonderful,” Anna said quietly, Connor nodding as she continued, “I’m so happy for you. Markov, that’s wonderful.”

They sat like that for a time, Markov finally feeling in his bones that he was truly home. But eventually he could feel his arm starting to fall asleep and Connor’s knee was wedged awkwardly into his thigh so he pulled back and straightened out, shaking his limbs slightly before reclaiming his mug and sitting back, smiling at the two Bellamies and saying, “Let me tell you of your son.”

Chapter End Notes

So I know I said September, but October 6 is pretty close right? Close counts in horseshoes, hand grenades and fanfiction posting schedules, that's definitely how it works...

Hope you enjoyed! Wanted to wrap some loose ends up and start a few more threads before jumping right back into the Kiara situation, and then the chapter ended up taking eight revisions so... good times! But it's done! Thank the Sunlord!
“Why does – Anur!”

He looked up from the second book Etrius and Seras had pulled for him – a historical survey of Incendiaries past, last updated three Incendiaries ago. It was interesting to compare this to the older edition he’d had to leave in Sunhame, last updated after Reulan’s death, because the older biographies had been clearly altered to suit the political agenda of the time rather than accurately copied. It raised the question of where they’d found the older edition, because reading between the lines some of these Incendiaries had definitely had witch powers themselves, and a few had been in full on feuds with the Son of Sun of the day, and he was nearly certain the Incendiary of Reulan’s day had been romantically involved with the Son of Sun – there were some very strong adjective choices describing the pair of them working together.

He smiled at Kir’s exasperated expression. The underlying fondness told him he had nothing to worry about and with the heavy robes Kir only wore on some High Holy Days draped over his arm, Anur had a good idea what Kir was talking about. No need to admit to anything though.

“Did you put spice tea in my vestments?” Kir asked dryly, Anur affecting a thoughtful look before giving it up.

“You asked me to put them away a few moons ago and the cedar chips weren’t scented anymore. Spice tea smells better,” Anur sniffed, Kir tossing the heavy crimson robe over him and he spluttered, managing to shut the book before spice tea dust rained on the pages. Pulling the robe off his face he smiled sheepishly, “Okay, so I could have wrapped it better. Why were you looking for these anyway? The equinox isn’t usually enough for you to pull these out.”

“Jaina pointed out the formal vestments I’ve used since my ordaining might not suffice for Sunhame,” Kir grimaced, “And if they need replacing or modifications I’ll need to put in the order the next time we’re in Sunhame.”

“Ah. Well, spice tea dust aside, how are they otherwise?” Anur asked, holding up the heavy fabric and trying to determine quality. It was a fairly fine weave, held dye well if these had been Kir’s since his ordination, but as there wasn’t any gold trim they’d need to make some changes anyway, and some of the hems were a little uneven – actually, by the small holes –

“How many times did you have to let these out?” Anur asked, bemused as he examined the highest set of removed stitches. “Hells, how much extra fabric did you tuck into the hems to begin with?”

“Two handspans,” Kir replied, and Anur looked at the current hem, raising an eyebrow. There as maybe a palm’s width of fabric left in the hem. Standing up, he held the robes against Kir’s shoulders, his brother just smiling ruefully as he thought it through.

“You grew nearly a head taller after your ordaining,” Anur said, feeling slightly faint because while sixteen was the age of majority, while he had gone on his internship at sixteen, imagining Kir trying to manage a chaplain posting when he hadn’t even had his last major growth spurt yet, “Sweet stars, getting their respect must have been a nightmare.”

“In that sense the Order’s reputation worked in my favor, “Kir allowed, “But it was a constant
struggle those first few years, yes.”

Anur’s expression must have reflected the horror he felt welling up at that idea, Kir’s own expression softening and he pulled him in to press their brows together, saying, “Anur, I’m fine. It was years ago, and I managed.”

“You shouldn’t have had to,” Anur muttered, hugging the damning robe to his chest, “It shouldn’t have been necessary.”

“And it won’t be for Rodri,” Kir replied calmly, “It won’t be for Maltin, or Etrius – no one else will need to convince a tailor that allowing for growth is worthwhile.”

It took a few moments for Anur to realize what Kir was implying and by the time his sheer rage had subsided Kir had pulled him into a proper hug, muttering apologetic reassurances.

“Kir, don’t apologize,” he ground out before giving up on words and switching to mindspeech. :Don’t you dare apologize. You’re not the one who – the fabric isn’t that high quality! Assuming you’d die before you finished growing -:

:It’s entirely possible the tailor assumed I wouldn’t grow much more, or that I would be recalled to Sunhame and get a replacement then,: Kir pointed out, Anur thinking that over before scoffing.

:You don’t actually believe that,: he said, pulling back to meet Kir’s eyes.

Kir smiled wryly, admitting aloud, “No, of course not. But it got you to calm down. It’s in the past, Anur. There are much bigger things to concern ourselves with. Now, will you hand over my vestments so I can actually inspect them?”

“Sorry about the tea dust,” Anur said, passing the vestments back to Kir, who just raised an eyebrow and shook them pointedly, a cloud of fine dust billowing off them and smelling exactly like spice-tea.

“If I wash these, I’ll get wool flavored tea,” Kir said dryly. “Next time you decide to make my vestments smell nice, pick something stored in proper sachets, will you?”

Anur rubbed the back of his neck as he sat down, giving Kir one last sheepish smile before hiding behind his book. At least the Incendiary that he suspected was Herald Mage Vanyel’s contemporary was entertaining to read about, he didn’t have to work too hard to fake total absorption in the book.

Kir just snorted and sat in his own chair by the hearth. No fire yet, Kir would probably light it when it came time for the Sun Descending service. After spending the day drying and storing the sage and assorted herbs they’d helped gather over the last two days there hadn’t been much for them to do for the unit itself, giving them some marks for their own tasks.

Anur had already updated his chronicle, checked all his weapons, repaired some broken chainmail and started a reply to Asher, so he didn’t feel at all guilty about spending some time with his book. Besides, undoubtedly Myste would be interested in anything he remembered from it come Midsummer.

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Kiara opened her door to find Lukas mid-knock, and she rolled her eyes at his sheepish look.

“Not busy, I hope, little sister?” he asked, Kiara scoffing and stepping aside to let him into her home. The houses were tiered into the hills around their little inlet and she had rented this sub-level the
moment she could afford it, knowing the landlady’s family and also knowing that if she lived with her mother and grandmother a day longer she’d go mad.

“Like I could be,” she said, waving him to a seat as she set out another mug for tea, “I just got in this morning, Lukas, what has you so anxious?”

“Have you heard back?” he asked, sitting in the more comfortable of her two chairs – it had taken months of visits and stubbornness to get him to take it when he stopped by, but now he didn’t even try to argue.

Kiara busied herself with tea, needing the few moments to compose herself because she had, she had heard back weeks ago, and the letter in question was tucked into her almanac and she didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t known what to say when she got the letter, she hadn’t even been able to think of a reply she could send off without telling her family, and now here she was, actually seriously contemplating lying to her oldest brother. Her oldest brother, she had two now -

“You have,” Lukas breathed, suddenly beside her, good hand on her elbow and she couldn’t meet his gaze, “Kiara you have – what – what is it, is - ” Lukas swallowed thickly, “Did we miss him by so little?”

“No, no, Lukas, it’s not that,” she assured him, leaving the mugs to grab his shoulders, meeting his gaze and wanting to cry herself when she saw the tears in his eyes, “Not that, Lukas, I just – I didn’t know what to say.”

“Let me read it,” he whispered, “Kiara – Ki. Please. Let me read it.”

“You’d best sit down,” she warned, ushering him back to his seat before she went for her few texts, digging the letter out and hesitating, only handing it over at Lukas’ impatient gesture.

He unfolded the letter slowly, and she only watched long enough to see the heart-broken wonder appear in his eyes before she turned back to the tea she was making, pouring steaming water over mint and lavender. By the time she put the kettle back on the stove, turning to set Lukas’ mug on the small table beside him, her brother was smiling through tears.

“He’s alive,” Lukas whispered, running stiff and twisted fingers across the text, “Kiara, he’s alive why – why didn’t you say anything?”

“He’s a Firestarter, Lukas,” Kiara said quietly, “What is Elisia going to do?”

“Our baby brother is alive,” Lukas said, joy shifting to something fierce, “She’s going to be happy.”

“Saying that does not make it true,” Kiara snapped, “Elisia hates Firestarters, Lukas! She hates them, and it’s not just because Kir was taken! Him being one of them isn’t going to change that!”

“He’s alive,” Lukas repeated faintly, staring again at the letter in his hand, “Kiara we can’t – we can’t not reach out.”

“And I agree,” Kiara said tiredly, sitting down across from him and rubbing her face with one hand, “I agree, Lukas but we have to be careful about it. He’s verging on indifference, his Enforcer sounds like he’d rip Elisia’s throat out with his teeth the moment she stared with anything less than welcome and – and this could tear us apart, Lukas.”

“If finding out that one of ours – that our brother is alive – could tear us apart, we don’t deserve to call ourselves a family,” Lukas said, tone ugly and Kiara snarled at him.
“Oh, yes, let’s tear everything apart just so you can see your brother again, forget your sisters, forget your nephews, your mother and grandmother all that matters is you and you wanting to see someone that we’ve all been treating as good as dead!”

“It’s worth it!” Lukas spat back, Kiara meeting his glare with her own and waiting.

It didn’t take long for Lukas to crumple, curling in on himself and weeping, both hands shaking as he murmured, “I don’t mean that – I don’t – I might. Kiara what are we going to do?”

She didn’t know, but it looked like she’d have to be the one to figure it out.

“I’ll write back,” she finally said, “I’ll write back, and ask to meet him. I can get some cargo to take me to Sunhame easily enough, the demand to take those routes has dropped off to not be quite so competitive lately and I’m owed a few favors besides. So I’ll write back, and if we can meet – I’ll discuss it with him. He deserves to know what he’d be walking back into before deciding.”

“Can I go with you?”

“No, not if we’re trying to do this without telling anyone else what’s going on until Kir has made his own choice,” she said bluntly before softening at Lukas’ devastated expression, knuckles going white around the letter. “I’ll carry a message for you, if you like. Give you time to write it. And if for some reason he decides not to return – I’ll get you to Sunhame then.”

“Thank you,” Lukas gasped, tears running down his face again as he stared at the letter, “Ki – little sister, thank you. You are the best of us.”

“Hmm. You say that now, but I suspect that will change,” she sniffed, smiling slightly nonetheless, “Drink your tea, and stop dripping over the letter.”

She spent the rest of the afternoon with her brother, trying to shore him up again and by the time he left there was no evidence he’d ever been crying, and little evidence that anything more dramatic than their usual visits had occurred. She then gave herself a mark to focus on something, anything, else before sitting down with slate and chalk to start drafting this letter.

At least now, her letter had a goal.

To Kir Dinesh,

I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, but knowing that it is possible to know my other brother before we reach the judging is incredible. I believe I’ve heard stories of you and your Enforcer both – Oathbreakers and fires in the Comb, and I would guess those rumors of old monsters being thwarted in the northeast had something to do with you as well?

Should you wish, I would like to meet you in person. There are occasional trade-runs to Sunhame, are there particular times you will likely be in the city? Your sworn brother is, of course, included in this.

Vkandis bless and guide,

Kiara Dinesh

She usually wasn’t one to hum as she worked, Jaina mused, setting the basket of missives and paperwork intended for the Firestarter Corps on her desk, but here she was, humming to the same
tune Maltin had been playing in the courtyard this morning. His illusions had nearly pulled Laskaris under a few days ago, but there was still something of a disconnect between the actual flames and his music. He had time to figure out the details though, and Kavrick was in no hurry to see him ordained so she wasn't concerned.

Muttering her way through the passage that served as her key-phrase, she ran a finger along the ties sealing the basket shut and smiled when the cord unwound at her touch, traps subsiding until the next time this basket was sealed. Kir had never bothered to remove her seal from the logs, seeing as he had no intention of remaining in Sunhame long term, so she still had access to all the information funneled into the Order using official means.

Aside from the occasional packet sealed with Her Eminence's signature – those were directed to Kir and Kir alone, undoubtedly referencing some as yet unannounced reform or making explicit mention of Bellamy's witch-power.

She winced, remembering Laskaris' closed door rant with Seras and her as the audience. Lumira's congregation was good for him, forced him to interact with people outside the Corps, but he was so unyielding in his beliefs - it made his study of coercion webs somewhat natural, as he was one of the rare few who could immediately recognize when someone tried to alter his stance, but it made any adjustment an ordeal and they'd been subjected to a flood of them.

If she could come up with a way to make the request without parts of it coming across as an accusation, she'd ask their leading duo to at least publicize Bellamy's witch-power within the Order. Half the problem was that while priests certainly had witch-powers, they weren't trained or treated or even acknowledged as such, so while she could name at least ten priests who had witch-powers off hand, convincing Laskaris that those were, in fact, the same abilities as those that were condemned would be next to impossible without a demonstration of something impossible to replicate by magecraft.

And talking anyone outside their Order into such a demonstration was another matter all together.

She shook her head, opening the first request of the stack and snorting before setting it aside to burn later. This again - every year after the first cold snap requests for Firestarters to warm cold meeting rooms flooded in. None of the buildings in the District were so poorly insulated as to require additional heat beyond the braziers already supplied, and Firestarters themselves were seldom able to provide heat without flame, Kir aside. No, these were pure power plays, trying to raise the status of whoever held the meeting by showing they had Firestarters on call for their comfort and convenience.

Though she had been tempted to send Colbern to a few of the more insistent ones. See them request a Firestarter for their power plays again!

Ha – perhaps instead, she should funnel one of the requests to Markov, should he ever return to Sunhame. Bellamy and he had apparently gotten on like a blood-mage on fire, so she wouldn't be surprised if he did return to Sunhame to scandalize anyone who looked at him too long.

Her smile faded as she remembered the source of most of that aghast horror - having it directed at someone not within their Order was a nice change, even if Bellamy and Kir seemed to relish in it, but coming from Valdemar...

Welcoming those who had fled made sense, they had fled in honest fear for their lives from a regime that was wrong and wicked, so it was only right that they be allowed to return home without consequences imposed on them from Sunhame. But there had been no mention of Markov returning to Karse permanently even after he finished arranging for the return of those who had fled and, more
critically, there had been no condemnation of his apparent choice to return to Valdemar and remain there, in a land she had been raised to view as the dwelling of demons.

In a land that had welcomed the innocents that fled the flames she called.

Seras was already looking for caches in the main archives and in their own Hall texts with an eye to finding out more about their northern neighbors, because there were more reforms coming, there had to be for so much plotting to be going on between Kir and Her Eminence, and with Markov drawing the eye to Valdemar so very blatantly... there was really only one way that could go.

Not many would think of it, not unless they knew someone who had fled and was returning, or had knowledge of Kir and Bellamy's continued meetings and sealed correspondence with Solaris. Even with those clues, not many would think of it because they wouldn't have to – why borrow trouble, after all? But she had some ideas and she was desperately grateful she didn't have to lead the Order through it. Sorting mail and serving as Kir's Sunhame bound second was more than enough.

Reaching for the next packet, she frowned as she pulled out a single letter, sealed with simple wax and a thumb-print rather than any insignia. There wasn't a trace of magic on the thing and between that and the plain quality of the paper this was almost certainly from outside the District. Turning the letter over she felt her lips thin as she saw who it was addressed to.

This was Kir's sister then, replying to the letter he'd fair agonized over weeks ago. Had to be, she didn't recognize the hand and Kir only received notes from Axeli in the district itself, everyone else that wrote to him – and she knew very well he had a network of some sort, he had to as well informed as he was about Sunsguard units stationed the length and breadth of the country – didn't address them to Sunhame.

She didn’t bother hesitating as she reached for a knife, heating it in her oil-wick lamp’s flame. She could pretend, certainly, could act like this was a difficult decision for her to make, like her brother’s privacy was more important to her than his emotional well-being, but there was no audience to influence and she knew her own mind. If this Kiara Dinesh wrote back and spat on him, the letter would be tragically lost and a ship would tragically sink sometime this winter. Storms, so sad.

Bellamy would agree with her, so even if Kir didn’t she’d have influential back up.

Carefully lifting the seal, she pulled the letter out and skimmed it before reading it more thoroughly and setting it down. Not a terrible response, she decided, but still not enough for her to send on without making some arrangements of her own.

Replacing the letter and delicately reattaching the seal, she set it to one side and returned to sorting paperwork for a time. When she neared the end, she picked up the letter again and called quietly, “Kari?”

The Firecat appeared on the chair Bellamy usually used, head tilting to one side and she smiled, unable and unwilling to suppress the sheer wonder she felt at seeing Kari, at hearing his voice in her mind, clear as bells.

:Yes, Jaina?:

“This letter – it’s from Kir’s sister,” Jaina said, the Cat jumping to stand on her desk and staring intently at the letter in question, “Could you bring it to him?”

:I believe I will check in with Anur to see if it’s a good time, but yes, I can take it – and I’ll bring any reply back here to be sent?:
“That would probably be the most timely result,” she agreed, the letter vanishing in a curl of fire and she felt a giddy grin spread across her face though it quickly faded when Kari gave her a knowing look.

:"And I'll just fail to mention the slightly smeared wax, shall I?:"

He purred, mentally laughing as she scowled at him, and he butted his head against her arm, Jaina unable to remain displeased in face of that and scratching his head instead, rueful amusement coloring her voice.

“Why did I even try?”

:"It is a noble sentiment, and had you not already I probably would have found someone to do the same so I could check it.: Kari’s shoulders rolled in his approximation of a shrug, "I presume though, that it is reasonably good if you are sending it on?:"

“It asks for a meeting, seems positive in tone,” she confirmed, “But I’d rather be certain, so I’ll be off to speak to Valerik shortly.”

:"Far be it for me to stop you. He’s in the Hall Archive, pretending to work on his reports. I will probably stay with Kir after he receives the letter to help him through that, so keep Rodri from experimenting until tomorrow.:"

“And here I thought he’d learned his lesson,” Jaina sighed, bowing slightly, “Thank you, Kari.”

:"You are most welcome, little sister,: Kari replied, disappearing in another wash of flame.

Basking for a moment in the faint warmth – in the fact she had just spoken to a Firecat - she then set out for the archive. Even without Kari’s help, Valerik wouldn’t have been difficult to find at this hour. He’d only returned from his and Tristan’s patrol a few days ago and it was too early for his usual bars to be exciting enough to attract him. He always spent those first days pretending to slave over the report he’d written on the road in the hopes an appearance of productivity would stop people from talking to him.

The fact that literally every Firestarter knew better than to speak to Valerik his first few days in Sunhame, especially after a route where he’d worked with Tristan, who he wanted to punch in the face on a good day, just meant it was a method guaranteed to work.

Unless, of course, Jaina had reason to interrupt and tacit approval of their Order’s Firecat.

“Valerik,” she said, striding up to his desk after checking the surrounding area was empty, “A word.”

By the pinching around his eyes, he was biting back some very strong commentary and she mentally congratulated herself for training him to treat her with respect regardless of when she spoke to him. There was making allowances and there was catering, and she had no tolerance for the latter.

So instead of saying something he would undoubtedly regret, he waved her to the seat across from him and she took it, folding her hands on her lap and getting straight to the point.

“I am calling in a favor,” she said, “When Kir next comes to Sunhame, you will be here, and you’ll go to the bars near the docks to find out everything you can about the Captain of a ship called Sundancer.”

“The captain’s name?” Valerik asked, some of his tension easing at the thought of going to the bars
he used as stress relief. She made another mental note to ensure Maltin’s coming of age took place while Valerik was far away from Sunhame before answering.

“Kiara Dinesh.”

That punched straight through Valerik’s remaining mood, the older priest sitting back in surprise and asking carefully, “A relative?”

“A younger sister, if I read it right, one born after he was taken,” she replied, “She offered to come to Sunhame to meet him, and if Kir takes her up on it I want to take full advantage of the chance.”

“Hmm. No word on how the other family members are taking news of his survival?”

“None.”

Valerik nodded shortly, “Understood, and agreed. Though you didn’t have to call in a debt, Jaina. Had I caught wind of this visit myself I probably would have gone of my own will – and had the Eldest asked I would have gone happily.”

“That’s not the debt,” Jaina replied, smiling slightly at Valerik’s well-hidden wariness, “The debt is you not speaking a single word of this to Kir without my agreement.”

“Ah. And if she should prove less than accommodating to her very near miraculously surviving brother?”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to figure something out.”

Chapter End Notes

To those who read the hint in the comments last time - you’ll note I never said who the reply was received BY :P

No, I didn't actually plan it that way but this seemed a good place to end and leave Kir and Anur's reactions to the next chapter, and it was still honest so haha!

Hope you enjoyed! See you in November!
An Invitation is Issued

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

:That was a lovely service,: Kari said, Anur tilting his head slightly in agreement while he lurked near the sacristy. He acted as an extra set of hands during the services occasionally, but that was before Henri had shown up and he’d never felt truly comfortable with it. Kir was the priest, not him. Without Kir he’d never have come to consider the Sunlord as a deity he respected, much less the one he considered his primary faith.

It would be a lot easier if he didn’t find every religion he’d encountered at least somewhat compelling. Sure, some had far fewer compelling pieces than they did absurd, but even that was hard to consider when he knew very well that had he learned about the Sunlord before ever meeting Kir, he’d have considered that a primarily absurd faith too.

:You make a very convincing mouser,: Anur commented, casting a quick glance towards the Cat at his feet, hidden as a plain tabby. The dark tail flicked and the Cat met his gaze briefly before turning back to where Kir was speaking with some of the newer soldiers. Kir reveled in being able to speak with his congregation without dealing with those cursed flinches, and the men were good about ensuring someone stuck around after each evening service, but this time he suspected it actually was something more than a contrived excuse.

Word had spread about Cora, after all, and it was one thing to hear witch-powers were no longer condemned, one thing to know that the Herald that lived with them wasn’t an incarnation of evil, and another entirely to hear that a soldier had asked for help with an out of control witch-power girl and received it. There would be more than a few questions on signs to look for and who to reach out to, and more than a few letters on the matter besides.

Carefully and obliquely worded, of course. Karsites were masters at saying everything between the lines, it had taken him moons of practice to pull half the information Kir managed to extract from the letters he was sent. He was just glad that he had no reason to put that much thought into letters he sent his own family, or at least not for that reason. He had hard enough of a time actually figuring out what to write to them.

The rambling pages long explanation of just what he’d avoided mentioning in letters for years had been sent along with Markov mostly because he knew if he didn’t, his parents would find out from his uncle anyway, and then he’d have one heck of a scolding waiting for him when they went to Valdemar after Midsummer. Better to explain everything as best he could in writing and take shameless advantage of the security excuse when they asked why he hadn’t written that explanation sooner.

:Is there a particular reason you’re hiding as a mouser?: Anur finally asked, returning Henri’s nod when the younger man exited the sacristy, having put away the service’s props.

There was probably a more sacred or respectful word for that, now that he thought of it…

:There is a letter waiting on Kir’s desk,: Kari said carefully, :It is from his sister,:.

And of course he couldn’t disappear to go and read it ahead of Kir, Anur grumbled mentally, his hurried calculations on how exactly he could get to that letter ahead of Kir cut off when Kari continued, :Jaina read it, and says it seems positive. Asks for a chance to meet, apparently,:.
Anur allowed, making a mental note to thank Jaina for her forethought. She had been more than respectful of their private correspondence in the past months, so he wasn’t at all worried that she’d start opening other letters while she sorted. Besides, Kiara undoubtedly had none of the protections that Solaris put on her letters.

And he would have done much the same.

“You’ll be staying, then?: he said, hardly bothering to make the statement sound more like a question, Kari simply bobbing his head and stretching, curling around his legs before stepping into a shadow and disappearing in a faint glow of coals. Much more subtle than his usual efforts, Anur would have to remember that one.

“Oh, I’m now on the desk myself. Just thought I should warn you first.:

“Much appreciated, Kari.:

Kir shut the chapel doors behind the last of the soldiers that had approached him with sidelong questions about just what the signs of witch-powers were, resting his head against the wood for a moment and laughing softly. Sunlord’s Light, had it really only been five years ago that he would have been duty bound and grimly resigned to burning anyone who came to him with even half of those questions?

He waved a hand idly, dousing all the lamps as he turned to face the Ever-Burning Flame, walking towards the altar and stopping at the one patch of ground he’d never be able to truly sanctify. Dropping to his knees, he let his eyes close as Lief Gero’s voice echoed in his memory, asking him for help he couldn’t grant anymore.

But what would he have done differently, had they not been in the middle of a conspiracy? Nothing, truly. If a soldier had come to him to accuse someone of a witch-power he may have been forced to act, but to express discontentment with Sunhame? To wonder if Valdemaran’s were truly evil? No, even without Anur to drive him forward, he would never have destroyed men of the 62nd for those so-called crimes and killing the accuser would be the only way forward.

“Would that you had been assigned a different unit,” Kir murmured, opening his eyes to stare at the flame and feeling inexplicably exhausted. The day had gone well, he had just been rejoicing in how far he and his people had come, but there was so very much that had gone into that progress, and so very much of it was regrettable.

Leif Gero’s family had been told a palatable lie about how their boy died. He did have family, Kir was always informed of the basic family line when there were funeral rites to be held, and they were never to know that their child had been executed in the Sanctuary when asking a priest for help, burnt to ash before the altar and swept out with the rest.

He had played this game before, tracked as many different possibilities as he could – could he have tried to convince Gero that there was no wickedness in what he had heard, would Gero have done any better in another unit, what about with another priest, if somehow the soldier had survived this long would he have adapted to Solaris’ reforms – but none of it mattered, because nothing could be changed. None of it mattered, because he’d made the only choice he reasonably could.

Fifteen innocents, now.

A curl of fire and Kari was trotting up to him, sitting at his side and leaning against him, head level
with Kir’s shoulders.

"I would like to say that if you had asked for help, I would have come," Kari said quietly. "But I do not know that I can say that, because you did ask for help – in your heart, if not directly, and I did not come:"

“If you had shown up before Solaris was declared I could have ended up stuck with her job,” Kir murmured back, wrinkling his nose, “I’d rather immolate myself, being honest.”

“Well that is a fair point," Kari’s purr echoed his mental laughter, butting his head against Kir’s shoulder. "I suppose admitting you were a back-up plan is a bad idea?"

Kir stared at the Cat, aghast and feeling his hands start to shake. Kari immediately leaned into him, hard and he had to brace himself to not fall over, hands tangling in the Cat’s fur as Kari murmured apologies, "I did not mean to startle you so, Kir, my apologies. We would have asked:"

“I would have said yes,” Kir shuddered at the idea because he would have. If he had been approached by a Firecat and asked to lead a revolution because he was their last, best option – if something had happened to Solaris, Sunlord forbid, before her Ascent – he would have shouldered that burden and hated it, hated himself, for the rest of his life.

“There are others, now,” he said, half to himself but half in a plea, “There are others if – it wouldn’t be me, next?”

Kari gave an uneasy sort of shrug, silence speaking volumes and Kir could feel panic clawing at his throat and reached blindly towards Anur when the Herald burst out of their quarters, knife half drawn and glaring at Kari, dropping to his knees next to them and dragging Kir close, resting their foreheads together and curling his hand around the back of his neck, murmuring, “Breathe, Kir, breathe with me for a bit.”

He tried, he managed a few cycles but the thought of having – of ever having to even touch a fragment of the power Solaris held, of the relics and rites she had access to as Son of the Sun -

“I killed Gero here,” Kir could hear himself babbling, “He was here, right where I am, kneeling and he asked me for help and I killed him and I can’t – Solaris has to last, I can’t take her spot I violated the Sanctuary, I won’t, Anur, I can’t ever - “

“Kari, I am going to make you a rug,” Anur grumbled, the Firecat projecting waves of contrition over them but Kir could barely register that as foreign at this point because Solaris was protected, protected by herself, by the guards, by Hansa and by Vkandis Sunlord himself but people died, it happened and there was exactly one tale of resurrection and he wouldn’t wish that death on anyone, much less the woman who’d become his sister.

Ha, his sister in Vkandis indeed he could have been stuck with her job he would have stolen her rightful place -

Some manhandling and he was pressed against Anur’s chest, could hear Anur’s heart beating against his ear, trying to match Anur’s breathing while his brother murmured assurances to him – mostly vows of flight to Valdemar and beyond if it ever came to that, Karse’s fate be damned.

“I don’t think we could outrun a deity, Anur,” Kir murmured, panic still coursing through him but at least subsiding enough he could think a bit.

“Oh and all that bit about Free Will is lip-service then?” Anur scoffed, “I think not. Besides Companions can call dibs, we’d just have to get you Chosen – a Grove-born, maybe, Aelius seems
to have dirt on Rolan we could get another one for you. Or Aelius could do it – I don’t think there are technically any rules saying one Herald one Companion, and Companions can Choose another after their Herald’s death so he could just Choose you pre-emptively. We could make it work.”

“You’ve thought about this,” Kir said, some of that terror fading away as Anur outlined a plan that was absurd in the fact that it actually seemed reasonable if you weren’t convinced of the Sunlord’s omniscience – and the jab about Free Will was well pointed out, he could always say no. Being able to stay firm on that no was another problem all together but if he had to – if he had somewhere to go -

If he had Anur, he could hold firm.

:You two are closely bound enough it wouldn’t be particularly difficult.; Aelius inserted. :And I could definitely get Rolan to go along with it. He owes me some long standing debts.;

:I am very sorry.; Kari said softly, tail thrashing in the air as he draped himself over Kir’s legs, :It should not come to that – it should never come to that, but you should be warned – and I will be honest, I did not think it would be such a shock to you.;

“We are going to have a long talk about timing, Cat;” Anur grumbled, “Damn and blast you pick now to drop that on him?”

“What’s wrong with now?” Kir asked, concern spiking at the question but not enough to actually move from Anur’s hold, “It doesn’t seem any worse than any other time – if anything having that happen now with no witnesses was probably best.”

“Agreed but – Kir;” Anur sighed heavily, “He showed up in the first place because a letter from your sister came in.”

Kir muttered curses as he remembered every time he’d bemoaned how boring it was living in the Sunsguard when they feared and reviled him. It hadn’t been often, he’d known better than to offer that sort of temptation to circumstance, but he had thought it a few times over the years, especially in winter.

So instead, he’d been gifted with these last five years that he wouldn’t trade for anything, though he could do without days like today.

“Will you read it first?” he finally asked.

Anur hugged him tighter, murmuring, “Of course.”

He waited until they were both in bed, Kir covering his eyes with an arm and trying to ignore the multitude of horrible scenarios that had popped up in his mind the moment Anur told him his sister had written back. His sister – he didn’t even think of Elisia or this Kiara when he heard the word, his sister was Solaris, was Jaina – blood-kin didn’t even occur to him anymore, not without conscious effort.

Should he even bother?

“To Kir Dinesh,” Anur began to read aloud, some of the tightness in Kir’s chest easing because Anur wouldn’t read it to him if it was terrible, he knew that, “I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, but knowing that it is possible to know my other brother before we reach the judging is incredible – other brother? Do you know that one?”

“Lukas, I hope;” Kir murmured, hope rising because she wouldn’t say that – she wouldn’t say that if
he were dead, surely? If Lukas were gone? There could be another younger sibling, it probably was but – he hoped it was Lukas.

He’d never had the nerve to ask Verius.

Anur must have noticed something because he squeezed his arm before continuing, “I believe I’ve heard stories of you and your Enforcer both – Oathbreakers and fires in the Com, and I would guess those rumors of old monsters being thwarted in the northeast had something to do with you as well? Hmm. Fishing, but she was listening for stories of you, that seems a plus, there’s no way you being a Firestarter didn’t come up in all of those so she may very well have reached out knowing you were a Firestarter if you survived.”

“Then why ask if I was dead?” Kir pointed out.

“Didn’t want to get anyone else’s hopes up? She’s only writing for herself, so maybe no one else really listened for those stories? Here, let me finish the letter. Should you wish, I would like to meet you in person. There are occasional trade-runs to Sunhame, are there particular times you will likely be in the city? Your sworn brother is, of course, included in this – ha, as if she had any choice – Vkandis bless and guide, Kiara Dinesh. She dropped her title even!”

Kir couldn’t really process the implications of the more affectionate salutation, of the less formal signing because he was stuck on one thing, “She wants to meet me?” he asked faintly, moving his arm so he could meet Anur’s steady gaze, “She really asked that?”

Anur’s expression softened and he held out the paper, saying gently, “Read it yourself.”

Kir sat up, taking the letter and letting an orb of flame form in the air above him to give better light than the dim oil-lamp Anur had been using. He traced his fingers over the rounded handwriting, so very different from his slashing scrawl and wondered who had taught her letters, if he really was going to be able to meet this woman and ask all the questions that were building in his mind but that he couldn’t quite bring to put onto paper. Not when he couldn’t use any of the mage tricks he’d learned in Sunhame to secure letters at least.

“She wants to meet me,” Kir repeated, feeling numb.

“She does,” Anur agreed, “Now, are you going to be able to sleep without writing a reply?”

“No, definitely not,” Kir broke into laughter as he saw the hovering pen, ink and paper making their way from his desk before he’d even finished the words. “I can walk over to my desk, Anur!”

“Why should you have to?” Anur shrugged, catching the items. “Here, use my chronicle to write on, that should be stiff enough. Do you know what you want to say?”

“Well our next trip to Sunhame will be the middle two weeks of the Hunter’s Moon, so I’ll definitely be mentioning that – and it would probably be best for her to come to the District and ask for the Hall, so even if we’re not in when she’s there someone could call Kari to get us – should I mention anything else?” Kir asked, eyeing the blank paper with some trepidation as he looked between it and the neatly scribed paragraphs his sister had sent.

Writing to the Bellamy’s was so much easier.

“Probably mention those stories were about us,” Anur shrugged, “Maybe return the sentiment that you’re excited to get the chance to meet her? Then pass it off to me for the post-script, of course!”

Kir chuckled faintly, and after a few more moments to think, he finally put pen to page.
Kari just stretched across their legs and purred.

To Kiara Dinesh,

Unless there are multiples of those stories floating about, yes, all of those were regarding myself and Anur. I am pleased to have the chance to know my younger sister - to even know that you exist is amazing. We are in Sunhame only two weeks of every eight, and we next plan to be in Sunhame the middle two weeks of the Hunter’s Moon, barring emergencies.

Should you be able to arrange a stop in Sunhame, it would probably be most convenient if you entered the Temple district itself. As it is now open to the public, entering would not draw excessive attention to yourself – once there you would be seeking the Firestarter Hall, and I’m afraid asking after that will draw attention to you, but all within the District know where it is. If I am not there at the moment, those there will know where I am and have means of contacting me quickly.

If you are unable to make those two weeks, I understand, and hope to continue correspondence regardless.

Vkandis bless and guide,

Kir Dinesh

To Kiara Dinesh,

Is the rest of the Dinesh family as pleased with Kir’s survival? I note that you speak only for yourself in your most welcome reply. Clarification would be appreciated.

Regards,

Anur Bellamy

Chapter End Notes

I agree with Anur - Kari’s timing could have been better, but it fit, and now this story has a bonus subplot I wasn’t anticipating so... thanks a lot, Cat. Hope you enjoyed!
Finished it yesterday, and couldn't justify making you all wait! Probably will post the next one before January anyway, with how early this one is, but no promises. Hope you enjoy!

There were advantages to having a Firecat feeling guiltily obliged to accommodate you, Kir mused, rubbing at his temples as he waited for his headache tea to steep. He had spent the past few evenings examining Kari’s strange fire transportation technique – he didn’t honestly think he’d ever be able to duplicate it, if his suspicions were correct it relied heavily on the fact that Kari was able to step entirely out of the world physical beings could detect and into the Astral planes. Physical beings weren’t meant to be able to do that, there were always horror stories floating around about those who had tried.

But the flames almost seemed a side-effect of Kari’s entrance into the world and they didn’t have the same origin as his own airborne flames – he ignited the always present particles in the air, harnessing the bits of air that were flammable to fuel it and then letting it run essentially on his will. The flames could still be smothered, they still burned breathable air, but it didn’t draw more particles in for fuel – at least not actively.

But Kari’s ignition seemed to come from breathable air in itself, without any fuel source from the particles to serve as an ignition point. It gave the flames that bizarre suddenness he’d noticed, because there was no near-instantaneous build up before the air was consumed, the air was just suddenly in the middle of being consumed.

He hadn’t quite figured out the trick of it yet, and Kari had extracted a promise that he wouldn’t experiment unless the Cat was present to ensure nothing catastrophic happened. By the shift in the humming he had trained himself to hear as background noise – he was expanding his range again, or at least starting to get closer to hearing something even lower in pitch, as he interpreted things. It was probably for the best that he didn’t experiment without Kari, he had a suspicion that his control would take a while to catch up when he had the breakthrough.

It was one of the reasons he’d called a halt to things last night – well, that and a headache that formed within two observations. He’d gotten through eight the night before that and the first night he hadn’t even bothered to keep count, but it had been until midnight. So instead he spent today working on nothing to do with his flames and managed to keep a headache from developing until midafternoon.

Janner had not been impressed when he’d started wincing in the sunlight after they’d spent some time working on poultices and treatments in the dark room designed for them and he’d been even less impressed when the headache didn’t go away after Kir’s eyes adjusted. Hopefully the tea would help, he really wasn’t looking forward to nursing this headache all day.

Though it would give him another excuse to not pursue this air-ignition technique of Kari’s. He was intrigued, it had been so long since he’d found something new to explore with his knack that was so purely technical, but if he was called into combat anytime soon he couldn’t afford the potential loss of control.
Judging by the two Hardornen scouting patrols the 62nd had run across since Midsummer, he suspected this spring would see Ancar making a serious attempt on the Karsite border. It gave them a deadline to press against, and he’d already sent Kari back to the Order with word of their suspicions in the hopes it would make them put more focus on training for combat.

Colbern had pulled rank weeks ago and gotten the acolytes and Third Order Firestarters to invest serious time in weapons-training, pulling them into drills with the Sunsguard using a combination of bribery and blackmail that Kir was just grateful had more of the former. Valerik had apparently been bullied into working with them on dirty tricks and hand-to-hand, and the last time Anur and he had tested their skills they’d been approaching decent.

Colbern and Jaina were the only ones he’d consider real threats with steel in their hands, odd weapons choices aside, but the rest could at least do enough damage to have a chance to run or, even better, use their flames. Maltin was the only one still struggling with that just because his primary mechanism of music – and his flute, in particular – required both hands, but as a student he wouldn’t be sent anywhere near Hardorn without Kavrick and they still had time for him to improve besides. Not enough, but it was something.

He could feel someone entering the chapel, and he knew Henri was out gathering sage – the man had become somewhat fanatical about sage after their run-in with Markov and who could blame him – and Anur was working with the archers on drills outside the walls. It was something of a luxury to be able to feel comfortable without the other being within sight, or at least within shouting distance, and most days they were with the 62nd they took advantage of it for at least a mark or two.

With mindspeech they were never truly alone anyway.

Picking up his tea, he headed for the main chapel – if it were someone seeking a quiet space, he could simply walk past them to the sacristy and leave them in peace. Otherwise, the odds were good it was someone seeking to speak with him and even now, if he was in his quarters it was rare indeed for someone to knock. He was best served walking out himself.

And this case was certainly one of the latter.

Kir eyed the private sitting in the front pew thoughtfully, the man looking up at him and not saying a word, a determined straightness to his spine even though his hands were clasped together and white-knuckled.

“Private Nichter,” he said quietly, his voice still sounding too loud in the silence, “Would you join me for some tea in the sacristy?”

That offer, at least, cut some of the tension and put the younger man off-balance, blinking as his fingers loosened and regained some color, “Ah – yes, your Holiness?”

Leading the man into the sacristy he waved him to a chair while he pulled a mug and bag of tea out of the stash that was hidden away in a side cupboard – he’d really have to speak with Henri, the man was leaving sage bundles everywhere and they’d have no room for anything else at this rate – pouring water from a pitcher and heating it with a grimace. His tea hadn’t had a chance to kick in yet.

“I hope you don’t mind spice tea,” Kir said, careful to keep his tone mild as he passed the mug to the man, ignoring the faint trembling in his hands, “I think Anur has gone out of his way to replace every sachet in the building with it.”

“The Lieutenant-Enforcer is very enthusiastic about spice-cake,” Nichter agreed, appearing to regain
some of his equilibrium as he took a sip, Kir settling in the chair across from him and picking up his own mug. It wouldn’t be enough to settle the headache, he was sure, but it couldn’t hurt. Besides, he needed something to focus on while he waited for Nichter to bring up his reasons for stopping by – this wasn’t a conversation he could prompt.

“Your Holiness – I,” Nichter closed his eyes and visibly gathered himself before continuing, “I have no right to ask your forgiveness, but I apologize for what I have done.”

Kir blinked, honestly surprised that the man had approached – years after the incident in question – for the purpose of apologizing.

Apparently the man caught it and gave him a sickly sort of smile before focusing on his tea again as he murmured, “I’ve tried before sir, but never quite made it to your door. I couldn’t – I couldn’t bear it.”

He was being eaten alive by guilt, Kir realized, a slow process, something he’d been able to withstand for a while but it had finally grown to the point he couldn’t bear to not say something, to break through this status-quo of simply existing in the same unit without interacting overmuch. He hadn’t wanted to approach the man himself – first, because Anur would probably be breathing down his neck the whole time, and second, because he hadn’t -

Hadn’t wanted to hear the man say something that would force his hands around his neck as Gero had done.

“Private, I have always held you blameless,” Kir said gently, “You were frightened, and you thought you were doing the best you could for the unit. I can not blame you for that.”

“I nearly killed you,” Nichter whispered, a hollow sort of horror in his voice, “I nearly killed you and you’re – you’re a Sunpriest, your Holiness, a true one, I never – I didn’t think a Firestarter could be one and you have a Firecat that comes when you call and the Son of Sun herself smiles upon you and I nearly killed you.”

“You did not,” Kir replied, tilting his head as he watched the man shake his head, gaze locked on the floor and knuckles white around his mug.

“Private,” he finally said, “Look at me.”

He waited for him to meet his eyes, the process almost agonizingly slow, before saying firmly, “Know this, Private Nichter. Though the judging will take whatever route Vkandis wills, the one you wronged forgives you.”

The Sunsguard dropped his chin, one hand coming up to cover his eyes and shoulders shaking as he wept. Kir stood to make himself another mug of tea, giving him what privacy he could.

Staring at the mug of cool water, he frowned as he realized that mentally heating the water that he was using to brew headache tea for the headache he’d gained by using his gift for flames in the first place was rather counterproductive. But he also didn’t want to wait to do this the slow way, over an open flame that he wasn’t actively fueling – that wasn’t possible in the sacristy besides.

He’d just have to remember that next time, he supposed, heating the tea as quickly as he could and dropping another sachet of herbs in.

Seeing Nichter start to straighten up and wipe at his eyes with his sleeve on the edge of his field of vision, Kir turned and retook his seat, smiling faintly at the man and pleased to see that he looked less burdened than he had arrived. It was always nice, to see someone leave his company more content
than they’d arrived.

“Well,” he said, “Since I haven’t been able to speak with you before now without worrying about Anur swooping in out of nowhere to glower at you and juggle knives, I’m afraid I know far less of you than I do others in this unit. What brought you to the Sunsguard, if I may ask?”

“Nothing dramatic, Father,” the man shrugged, hesitating over the less formal title but apparently deciding he wouldn’t take offense. “I simply did not see the appeal of the trades that were open to me and thought the Sunsguard was a better choice.”

“And what trades were so unappealing?” Kir prompted, settling in for a long chat. It was rare that he got to talk to anyone of such low rank within the unit one-on-one, and he planned to take full advantage of it. Particularly since he wanted Nichter to leave this conversation knowing in his bones that Kir held no grudge, that he was forgiven, truly and completely – at least by him. Anur would probably never forgive the poor man. Markov had been a hard enough sell and he’d only caused Kir emotional distress and been known to and loved by Anur for most of his life. Nichter didn’t stand a chance.

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“Well, we don’t usually search brigands too thoroughly, but we’re going to have to start at this rate,” Nakel said, frowning at the Hardornen letters they’d found hidden in the lining of a vest. The corpse in question had, according to the letters, been an officer in Ancar’s army and was ordered to continue scouting efforts in Karse with a cohort of blood-bound soldier-farmers as underlings. One had to wonder when he was going to run out of officers, especially if every scouting group was sent out with someone not blood-enslaved – they had killed two known Hardornen scouting groups since Midsummer and at least four sets of brigands with this marking the fifth.

If those four had been sent from Hardorn as well – yes, Ancar was definitely getting ready to move on Karse.

Anur cut Kir a worried look, Kir rubbing the white Companion-hair Sun-in-Glory he only wore over his robes when they were with the 62nd with a faint frown. They’d woken up in the middle of the night with a roar of fire echoing in Kir’s mind – and he had immediately declared that the border ward had been breeched by blood-magic and needed to be inspected. A squad had been scheduled for patrol anyway so they joined in with Senior Lieutenant Nakel rounding out their number to nine and had headed off to investigate.

If Kir hadn’t been there, none of them would have been able to tell these five men were anything but the brigands they’d presented themselves as. Kir had immediately known that four out of five were bound with blood-magic and the fifth had powerful enchanted items on him, so they hadn’t bothered investigating their purpose and had simply engaged. With nine against four and Kir there besides, it hadn’t been particularly difficult to crush them without any casualties on their part. Finding evidence that these men were definitely working for Ancar had taken far longer.

“The last Hardornen group was a moon ago, if I remember the reports right,” Kir finally said, “And there were far fewer enchanted items.”

“Well, those were the enchanted items that survived long enough for you to inspect,” Nakel pointed out, “They could very well have decayed over time, or if we picked out the officer incorrectly they could have been burned.”

“What I don’t understand is why you registered the breach of the wards this time, but not the last two
times,” Anur finally spoke, looking between the two other men and raising an eyebrow, “The first one, fine, we were in the middle of returning from Sunhame and didn’t hear about it until we got back, if it’s a proximity thing then that would explain it. But that last group? We were wandering the dead-zone – it was a week before Lenora was captured, we were here. Why didn’t that one alert you?”

“I don’t know,” Kir said uneasily, hands slipping into his pockets and staring at the pile of potential mage-traps they’d dragged clear of the officer’s corpse. “None of the others have reported feeling breaches and there have been breaches closer to the Fatlands, those have been reported by the Sunsguard. So I doubt it’s a proximity issue.”

“Could be the ward gets stronger over time,” Nakel suggested, looking dubious even as he said it, “Some sort of distilling process?”

“It could,” Kir grimaced, pinching the bridge of his nose, “The problem, of course is that this ward was created from a purification ward designed to entirely enclose a polluted area and gradually cleanse the contained land. We managed to anchor it in a line instead, but that took some extremely creative work from some very bright mages in Sunhame and I still don’t entirely understand the finicky details of what went into stabilizing it.”

“So no one has any idea what this ward could do, is what you’re saying,” Nakel said, sounding deeply unimpressed.

“All we were really able to know for certain is that it would keep contaminates from ruining Karsite land and fouling Karsite waters and that it wouldn’t catastrophically fail and kill us all if something went wrong. That’s all we have.”

“That was an option?” Anur squawked, feeling suddenly much less sanguine about the whole experimentation with magical wards bit they had done, and even worse, they would be doing sometime near Midwinter. Colbern still hadn’t supplied details on these wards in the catacombs Kir might end up helping to reinforce and he didn’t even want to think about the possible ways a necromancy based ward could go wrong.

“It’s magic, Anur, catastrophic failure killing everyone is always an option,” Kir replied, rolling his eyes, “We at least had the assurances of Kari that it would probably work as intended, the majority of magical practitioners have no such reassurances.”

“Okay, fair point,” Anur said, Nakel shaking his head.

“Better you than me,” the Senior Lieutenant said flatly before continuing, jerking his chin at the pile of enchanted items, “What are we going to do with those?”

The pile of potential mage-traps included two knives, a necklace remarkable in how hideous its carved wood charms were, three leather bracelets with decorative stitching he suspected had been deliberately dyed with blood and a hat the man had been wearing in lieu of a helm. Kir had looked distinctly enraged when he’d killed the officer the moment he came in visual range, so Anur could only imagine how disgusting those things looked under mage-sight.

“I’d like to pull Karchanek out here to inspect those enchanted pieces,” Kir admitted, “They’re strong, and that man was no mage, I’m curious what the point of those things were. There’s no reason for you to wait for that – even if Kari agrees to transport him out here it’s going to be a mark or two.”

“Hmm. Well, the route we have planned takes us further east within the border before looping back
towards Hardorn and that stave you planted. Keeping a decent pace with no further troubles the
earliest we would arrive there would be midmorning tomorrow. What if you two met us there, with
the agreement that you don’t go out of your way to beat us?”

“We can agree to that,” Anur answered after Kir cast him a questioning look. He didn’t care one way
or another, and Kir was clearly invested in getting these enchantments looked at by an expert. It
would also force someone else high up in Solaris’ regard to look at Hardornen magic and see the evil
that was spawning, which could only help them when it came to convincing the generals and a
significant portion of Sunhame’s power bloc that the threat was real.

“Excellent. Father, Enforcer,” Nakel nodded shortly before heading back to the squad, assembling
them to ride out.

“So – Karchanek. Ask Kari then?” Anur prompted.

“I don’t have any other way to contact him quickly,” Kir agreed.

They left the enchanted things in their distant pile, the rest of the supplies and intelligence they’d
pulled from the bodies were carried off to be secured to packs and horses. He and Kir hauled the
officer’s corpse onto the pyre the men had built and by the time the squad and Nakel rode off the
pyre was well on its way to ash, thick smoke again drifting towards the Hardornen border. He’d
have to ask Kir about that, because while poetic, it was highly unlikely that every time they burned
Hardornens the wind-patterns sent the pyres’ smoke back to that cursed land without some sort of
interference.

By the time Karchanek arrived, Kari on his horse behind him, the pyre had burnt to coals and Kir
was nearly finished with Seras’ intricate page-marker, Anur stretched out next to him and reading.
The priest-mage had a bemused expression on his face when he returned Kir’s greetings, handing off
his horse to Anur with a faint wince when Anur mentioned Riva’s presence.

“I suppose I thought the matter was much more urgent than it is,” he finally commented, Kir stowing
his project away before standing and raising an eyebrow at the man.

“The fight is over, no casualties on our side, and we’ll meet up with the rest of the patrol tomorrow.
Why not work on our projects in the meantime? This isn’t exactly an unusual occurrence, aside from
these enchanted objects – there were only three the last time, and none so powerful,” he said,
walking past the smoldering remnants of the pyre and indicating the carefully separated objects.

“You are correct, of course, I’m simply – unused to it,” Karchanek shrugged, crouching near the
necklace, “I’ve spent most of my adulthood in Sunhame, I wasn’t let out much before Solaris began
her Ascent and even then, this is the first time I’ll have spent longer than a week outside the District.”

Kir grimaced, horrified at the idea of being stuck within the District for so long and the older man
chuckled, glancing up at him and continuing lightly, “No need for such a horrified expression,
Incendiary! I do not regret it, and am simply grateful that I managed to reach adulthood as an Adept
class mage.”

“Fair,” Kir acknowledged, unable to entirely hide his surprise at the man’s ranking. He had known
Karchanek was powerful, but hadn’t realized how much – Adept class mages were rare to begin
with, not many in the population had the potential, much less the active ability, but for someone that
powerful to then not fall into any of the many, many traps Sunhame crafted for those considered
strong enough to be a threat?

Magical power would be far from the main reason Solaris had chosen this man as her Hierophant.
Though his skill with magic was impressive, Kir knew enough about enchantment crafting to recognize that as he watched Karchanek inspect the items, occasionally murmuring cantrips to himself or humming snippets of some tune that he couldn’t quite recognize. Anur wandered over and watched without bothering to hide his fascination – even Kir’s occasional mage-light would spark wonder, which when compared with his casual use of mindspeech or his own Fetching or even Kir’s flames seemed utterly incongruous.

“Incandescence, could you melt this link of the chain – just this one?” Karchanek asked, pulling a stalk of grass from the ground to indicate the link he meant. Kir dropped to one knee beside the man, considering the necklace’s chain carefully. It wasn’t particularly fine, so it was certainly possible…

“If the adjacent links melt a little, but retain their shape?”

“That would be fine,” Karchanek assured him, “So long as they don’t fuse to the others.”

“Ah, that sort of weaving,” Kir muttered, eyes narrowing as he considered the piece, “Yes, I can manage that. Anur, could you watch the pyre? I can’t focus on it.”

“Of course,” he agreed, and Kir set to very careful work.

It was nearly dusk by the time all the pieces were neutralized – Karchanek had grown more grim the longer he spent on each piece, but he’d finally pronounced himself satisfied and wrapped each one in its own carefully crafted silk pouch. He hoped to send them to Sunhame for further analysis apparently. Kir would have just burned them, but admittedly that was his solution to most problems involving blood-magic.

“Will you be staying out here with us then?” Kir asked, Anur having set up camp while they worked.

“If you don’t mind, Incandescence,” Karchanek demurred, “I’d like to see this border ward you implemented.”

“You can call me Kir,” he said, for the third time that day.

And for the third time that day, the man hesitated over something before shaking his head and smiling, saying, “Allow me my formalities.”

“How many, then, were aware of Kir’s potential as Solaris’ successor before he was ever told?” Anur asked, voice dangerously idle and Karchanek flinched.

Kir grimaced, hands clenching into fists at his side and he looked away, letting his breath hiss out between his teeth.

“I – It shouldn’t come to pass,” Karchanek said, holding his hands up in a warding gesture.

“And innocent children should never have been sentenced to death by burning alive,” Kir said coldly, “Look how well that turned out. My name, Hierophant Karchanek, is Kir Dinesh. I would prefer that you use it.”

It wasn’t even Karchanek he was furious with, Kir knew himself well enough to know that, but as he strode towards Riva knowing the man wouldn’t dare follow with his gelding’s reputation, he couldn’t quite bring himself to care. Solaris should have told him he was considered a potential successor. Perhaps not when she was working on her own Ascent, he could admit that would have only borrowed trouble, but afterwards?
Karchanek apparently knew, or thought he knew, who would follow Solaris should the worst occur and was responding to him accordingly. One would think that the successor in question would at least get a hint!

And no, Kari’s existence didn’t count!

***===***pagebreak***===***

It had been a long while since he’d been put in his place so easily, Karchanek acknowledged ruefully, staring at the stars during his watch. He’d volunteered for the dawn watch, and Bellamy had immediately claimed the middle watch, probably solely so Dinesh wouldn’t have to speak with him in the middle of the night without his Enforcer there to interfere. The man was frustratingly protective but he understood and sympathized entirely.

He had grown up with Solaris, and had known for a long time she was meant for more. It hadn’t been so bad when they had been in training. Even when she had become a village priestess, rare for a mage of her strength, it hadn’t been difficult to restrict himself to the occasional visit and more frequent – but not suspiciously so – letters. But on her return to Sunhame he had struggled mightily with not jumping in to interfere with her plans in the name of her safety.

Larschen and Grevenor may have had to sit on him more than a few times, and Ulrich had become very good at tracking him down just in time to give him a withering look that made him feel a bare initiate again and then sweeping away without saying a word. Of the four of them he had spent the most time in Sunhame, having few reasons to leave and even fewer occasions to leave without drawing suspicion. It had come in handy occasionally, announcing a journey to one of the more remote temples or holy sites and venturing off to draw attention away from Sunhame.

He had become very good at playing Sunhame politics just enough to seem ambitious, but not so much or so well to be considered a true threat. When Solaris had come to Sunhame he’d been a distraction more often than not, and upon her Ascent he’d reveled in the chance to turn the full of his power to her benefit without too much worry for subtlety. That rampant joy hadn’t lasted long though, within a day he’d been sitting in a Council meeting listening to Solaris detail what steps were to be taken if she were to die and even only thinking of that session was enough to feel a chill in his bones.

Looking around briefly, he checked the basic perimeter ward he’d set while they ate – he hadn’t mentioned it to the other two though Dinesh had given him a sharp look when the circle closed – and let his eyes shut against the memory, lips tightening as that horrified realization welled again.

“Yes, yes, well done all of us,” Solaris had laughed, the golden light that had always enveloped her so much more obvious now that she had nothing to hide, “But to business. The greatest of the reforms I’ve already announced, now it is a matter of implementation – and insurance. I am confident in my own abilities, and I trust in the Sunlord, but He helps those who prepare for none and I would not see our revolution crash to nothing at my death.”

Horrified realization welled in the room and Karchanek had felt a rush of fury when Ulrich only nodded, a sad acceptance in the elderly man’s eyes and he had snapped, “You are the Chosen Son, Solaris! You’re protected by forces we can’t even comprehend!”

“And it would be foolish indeed to count entirely on those forces we cannot comprehend, would it not?” Solaris cut him off, expression stern, “Karchanek, we cannot afford complacency, not now. There must be a succession – the Sunlord’s choice, of course, but I will not have any of our Council accidentally undermining my potential successor. He will soon be en route to Sunhame, I sent a summons on the day of my Ascent and I hope to introduce you all to him soon enough, he will be
“As your successor, or has he some other role to play in the meantime?” Grevenor was the one to ask, Larschen still staring at his hands, mute.

“He has quite the role to play in the meantime,” Solaris said, a fond smile on her face and Karchanek sternly acknowledged and set aside the surge of jealousy. He had thought he’d worked past this when she’d pulled Larschen into their circle years ago when they were all freshly ordained, but apparently he was still susceptible which wouldn’t do at all. It was not this man’s fault that he was her chosen successor, and if the Sunlord had chosen him as such he was as close to a true brother as Solaris could ever have. He should be honored to have the chance to even know that two such people existed, not be jealous over the rightful attention Solaris gave him.

“Upon his arrival, he will be taking over as Incendiary.”

That had caused an uproar all its own, he remembered, as Ulrich had been the only one of their group to realize Solaris had never intended to disband the Firestarting Order. He hadn’t spent much time studying the ancient history of the priesthood himself, to be fair, and without Talented children to be sent to the Fires he hadn’t thought there was a purpose to the Order, even taking into account their calling against blood-mages.

Solaris had never forgotten, though, and the implication of what sort of revolution this would turn into if she should die – if a Firestarter were to take leadership of the country, when a Firestarter had never stood as Son of the Sun – had been terrifying. Was still terrifying, because Hansa now at Solaris’ side or not, he couldn’t forget what she had told them, what he had sworn to do if the worst happened and Solaris was unable to finish her revolution as planned.

He never wanted to see Dinesh in the Son of Sun’s robes of office, and the fact that Dinesh found the idea equally abhorrent wasn’t as reassuring as it should have been.

It didn’t help that the first time he’d actually met the man Solaris had claimed as her successor he’d just been yanked aside by alarmed stablehands and reassured by a clearly terrified stable master that they’d had no idea the berserker horses in question would react in such a violent manner. Hated blondes, please – he would grant that Dinesh’s roan clearly had some sort of grudge against him and that his hair color was rather rare in Karse, but there had definitely been stablehands with light enough colored hair that they should have also fallen in that category and the stable master had been honestly surprised at their fit.

He owed the man an apology, though. He hadn’t realized no one had told him Solaris had named him her successor amongst her Council, and he owed Dinesh the courtesy of using his name besides. They were equals in the rankings of Sunhame, even if he personally held the man above him with the Firecat he could call and Solaris’ own regard, so a first name basis was not out of the ordinary and, as members of Solaris’ Council, it could even be considered expected.

It was strange how much more informal a first-name basis felt when the person in question had two names, he mused, standing to wander around the camp and stretch his legs a bit. It was rare within the priesthood for family names to be kept, though quite a few of the remaining initiates and acolytes had decided to retain their family names in the wake of Solaris’ reforms. The only fully ordained priests using two names that he could think of off-hand were Kir Dinesh and Fredrick Loshern – he knew there were at least a few more, he just couldn’t remember their names, and he wondered at why they’d bothered. And why they’d been allowed.

Something to ask about, one day. A bit of idle curiosity couldn’t hurt.
“Well, aside from you spending the last week looking like you wanted to rip Karchanek’s throat out with your teeth, I think that went quite well,” Kir said dryly, Anur wincing before giving his retort.

“I was not that bad!”

“Lieutenant-Enforcer, I had three different men approach me about the mechanics of getting a body outside the walls without anyone noticing. You were most certainly that bad,” the captain said dryly, handing Kir the last of the dispatches intended for Sunhame. With how regularly they traveled, it had become a policy to announce their intended routes well in advance so the men could get the chance to write any letters or wrap any packages intended for people along the way.

Most of them boiled down to deliveries between men formerly of the 62nd and those still stationed in the north, but there were occasional deliveries to civilians too. Aside from those few that Kir had already met – namely, Synia Greves – they always delivered those letters to the nearest priest to continue through the usual mail system. It had worked out to the pair of them knowing the rough location of nearly every hamlet between the 62nd and Sunhame, and with Cora drawing them closer towards Rethwellen than their usual they might start exploring those routes too.

Anur didn’t mind – every mel of this country was a mel he never thought he’d be able to see, and Kir didn’t go quite as stiff every time a new person came within sight. The traveler’s chapels were still their default, but he’d managed to talk Kir into grabbing a meal in the nearest town a few times this year. It was progress.

“Agh. It wasn’t even that bad an offense, his timing was just terrible,” Anur grumbled, checking the ties on Aelius’ saddle once again. They’d seen Karchanek off from his impromptu border tour and one night in the 62nd that morning, and then it had been time for them to pack for their next trip to Sunhame. Five weeks since Kari had vanished with Kir’s reply in hand, with a few days before the start of the two week window they’d given Kiara Dinesh.

He couldn’t quite decide if he wanted her to show up or not.

“At least I didn’t have to put Nakel in charge of keeping him alive,” Ulrich allowed, “So it wasn’t as bad as you’ve been in the past.”

“That was exactly one time, and it was entirely unnecessary,” Anur retorted, knowing very well that the Captain was referring to Nichter and knowing just as well that he had been far from the only reason the Captain had given his second the explicit job of keeping the private alive.

“It let me sleep easier,” Ulrich offered a shrug, “Enjoy getting fitted for a dress uniform, Lieutenant-Enforcer, safe travels and patience, Father Kir.”

“Vkandis protect and guide,” Kir echoed, sketching the Holy Disc in the air and only urging Riva to walk when Ulrich had finished his brief bow.

“So, Aulch?” Anur asked as the gates shut behind them, returning the waves of a few of the men on the wall.

“Rodri sent a letter for them,” Kir agreed, and their horses launched forward.

He wasn’t unnerved when Aelius’ hooves didn’t chime anymore, not like the first few years where he’d always taken a few moments in the saddle to realize just what felt wrong about their riding. When Midsummer came he was going to have one hell of a time switching back.
Oh Chosen, we both will. Though I have to say not needing these goat-patches all the time will be nice. Only getting some good scratching in when we’re with the 62nd is very annoying. I’m going to spend half my time rolling when Midsummer comes around.

We can give the goat-skins a ceremonial burning, Anur promised.

That would smell terrible Chosen, how about you just buy me some of those rolled honey-oats from that farm a day’s ride north of Lisle?

The slightly fermented ones?

You have your prodka, I have mine.

Deal.

Now all they had to do was get there.

Though now that his mind was on Valdemar again -

“Kir, what would it mean if Valdemar doesn’t have as clear a boundary with Hardorn?”

Karchaneck had been the only one blatantly awestruck at the literal line that marked the border between Karse and Hardorn, but all of them had taken notice of its new nature. The scorch-mark was long gone, but vegetation on the Karsite side looked positively lush in comparison to the Hardornen. The sight of such a clear demarcation without anything else – with no wall, no faint shimmer of air like at the Iftel border, not even that literal scorch-mark to divide things with char – it was uncanny and sent a crawling sense of wrongness down Anur’s spine.

It also set off a flare of concern because he hadn’t heard anything about such a line in Valdemar and while he might not, he was so rarely there, what if he hadn’t heard because there wasn’t one? What did that mean for Valdemar, that Hardorn and Valdemar’s border wasn’t so clearly divided, so clearly off-set, and was there anything he could do to fix it?

He’d left a letter to Naomi with Ulrich – maybe working with her they could figure out a way to ask about the border further from Karse, to find out how things looked when there was no chance of residual Karsite purification helping them out. The witchy-weather Kir had told him about had continued, stronger storms than usual, lasting longer and harder and coming up out of nowhere a few times – but nothing truly unseasonal. There hadn’t been any blizzards before the fall equinox, and within a few weeks of the spring equinox they could be pretty sure that any storms were rain with occasional hail.

But how much of that was the Sunlord’s interference, and how much of that could be reasonably assumed to hold true in Valdemar too?

“At the worst it would mean that Ancar’s blood-magic is starting to poison the land of Valdemar as well,” Kir said bluntly, “At the best it would mean that vrondi barrier is capable of subtlety and there’s no taint spreading into Valdemar’s land, leaving the weather as the most worrisome side effect of nearby blood-magic.”

“And witach’s brood?” Anur asked, knuckles going white at the thought of those monsters in a land that had no tales of warning, “Do you have any idea what the odds are that they’d start showing up in Valdemar?”

“I would think slim to none based on that vrondi barrier but I really don’t know,” Kir admitted, “Aelius?”
I sent word to Rolan and he’s spread the word to other Companions; Aelius offered, I did that as soon as I could after you first described what witach’s brood was and where they appeared – there haven’t been any signs that he’s reported to me, I think they can be blocked. It would take work, a fair number of Companions would have to be devoted to that purpose but it could be done and I think it is.

“Well that’s something at least,” Anur admitted, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably, “I should have thought of it sooner but – it just didn’t occur to me, not until I was staring at that border again.”

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Kir said, wincing, “We’ll have to try and make a list.”

“Of what, things we should try and keep from happening?” Anur asked incredulously, “That’s going to be one excessively long list!”

“I was thinking more along the lines of things we need to accomplish this trip to Sunhame, and during the Midwinter stay in Sunhame,” Kir replied.

“And probably also things we need to do before that Midwinter stay in Sunhame,” Anur added, sighing. “Fair point. At least now we don’t necessarily have to burn our lists.”

“No, that will just be the ‘things to accomplish before Midsummer’ lists,” Kir said dryly.

“We could probably write those obliquely enough we’d be fine – and besides, we have enough to do before Midwinter that making any of those longer term lists would just be needlessly stressful. Should we pass through Anika’s Oasis on our way to Sunhame?”

“I’d rather not,” Kir said, shaking his head, “It takes us out of our way by quite a bit with the letters we have to deliver, and we’ll be visiting there within a moon or two regardless since Axeli and I have finally set aside some time to make her that sun-blessed spear.”

“That monograph you found for me about sun-blessed steel was decidedly unhelpful, by the way.”

“Why do you think it took Axeli and I years to figure out how to do it for molded weapons?” Kir said wryly, “The last moons have been spent trying to work out how to incorporate folding and hammering into the process and even now we don’t know for sure it will work as we want. It was never a process accurately recorded, at least not that we can find.”

“You’ll fix that, right?” Anur prompted.

“Why don’t you fix it?” Kir replied, voice slyly amused, “Get you in the archives as an author before everything goes mad?”

“So Seras and the other Archivists can hate me because I ruined their citation strategies? I think not!”
“You registered a breach in the border wards?” Solaris frowned, exchanging a worried look with Ulrich, one of the lead mages on the project and a Council member besides, “Were the enchanted objects anything unusual? I haven’t heard from Karchanek yet.”

“If anything the hat and one bracelet should have concealed their presence more – they didn’t, but that is probably due to my own growing sensitivity to blood magic,” Kir denied, drumming his fingers against his arm as he stared out the window, arms crossed. “I had noticed earlier that I could sense the ward as a presence, as a marker of where our border began, and I can certainly feel the difference crossing.”

“Kir, I could feel the difference on crossing and I’ve heard the soldiers muttering about foul Hardornen air a bit too often to think there’s nothing concrete behind it,” Anur commented, also standing but leaning against the mantle. They’d only ridden in a few marks ago and preferred to stretch their legs.

“Likewise,” Kir murmured, remembering, for a moment, the inn where they’d met – the Hardornens he had met, before Ancar’s rise and allowing himself to grieve on their behalf – at least for a moment. Someone needed to.

Sunlord, Hardorn was going to spend generations recovering from this and that was just the literal land, who knew what damage that witch had done – would keep doing – to his own people, the population. Purification rites were hard and costly when they had a nation’s faith backing them, centuries of tradition and history to draw upon. Trying to extend that to Hardorn?

At this point it would barely make a dent.

“My primary worry is what this means for you if one of the staves should be disturbed,” Ulrich finally said, “We designed the ward to be robust, so one removal or a few knocked down shouldn’t be catastrophic, but if, as you say, Ancar will invade come spring, there is no guarantee multiple anchors won’t be physically destroyed. The backlash would probably kill those nearby, but fine, they disturbed it in the first place. But if you’re sensitive to it now – and it’s only going to get stronger.”

“The ward itself, or Kir’s sensitivity to it?” Anur asked, worry clear in his tone. He truly hadn’t realized the potential hazards of an untested working – just as well. He probably wouldn’t have allowed them to go through with it – or at the very least would have insisted Kir not take point on the matter, leaving Jaina to serve as primary anchor, and Kir couldn’t accept that. He was Incendiary, taking those risks was his job.

They’d taken all reasonable precautions, but magecraft was dangerous, there was a reason so many had stood by while children were claimed for the priesthood or the Fires and it was the pure and simple fact that if they weren’t taken, if they were allowed to continue without training, it could be disastrous. Cora had only driven herself mad. That soldier-empath had only been able to drive one person at a time to suicide.

There were stories of entire towns gone insane, of whole families marching themselves into a flooded river, of astral beasts accidentally summoned devouring fields and homes and flesh. Some had probably been exaggerated, tales did that, but there was a germ of truth in them, a truth that people
knew in their bones.

Powers were dangerous. Valdemar was utterly bizarre in that people there didn’t seem to realize that, or at the very least didn’t act like it – they trusted people with Gifts because they were sworn to the Crown – if they weren’t, he had no idea how they were treated, admittedly, but they probably weren’t burned alive or executed in some other way. At least not for being Gifted – Talented, he really needed to try and remember the Karsite term they were trying to adopt.

Witch-power was so ingrained, though.

“Both, either,” Ulrich shrugged, spreading his hands, “The ward itself was designed to purify an enclosed region, originally, and as taint was drawn out and purified the process would speed up, some of that purified natural energy feeding back into the ward. I wouldn’t be surprised if the ward had doubled in power after near six moons of purifying the land nearest Hardorn – it will slow, now, as the taint will take time to get close enough for the ward to trigger, but it will only grow stronger, more efficient. It releases that natural energy back into the cleansed land, but Hardorn is being perpetually tainted – I have no idea where the extra natural energy is going. We thought, we designed, for the ward to release it into Karse – we could use the extra fertility for a year or so and where else could we put it? But I don’t know how effective that is, I’m not well trained with land and earth-magics, no priests really are.”

“Why not?” Anur asked, raising an eyebrow, “Is it that much rarer?”

“No, but it was standing policy that if someone had an earth-bound Talent we didn’t take them for the priesthood or the flames unless they had something else that was more condemning,” Kir replied, waving a hand dismissively, “As Ulrich said, Karse needs the extra help, agriculturally. We need to eat too.”

“Ah – so we need a priest that has a good working relationship with an uncannily good farmer?” Anur’s voice only grew more dubious as he continued, Kir chuckling while Solaris responded, amusement clear in her own tone.

“I don’t think we’ll find one of those anytime soon – much less one who is willing to learn what we’d need them to in order to get meaningful information about this purification ward, and then go anywhere near Hardorn. From my understanding, you two feeling the taint would translate to them being nearly crippled with nausea – anyone near Hardorn with that ability would have found a reason to move away at this point.”

“None of this answers the question of what would happen if the ward destabilized suddenly,” Kir finally dragged the conversation back to his main concern, “Are there even consistent records about what would happen to the original, circle based ward if it destabilized?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but to be fair most of the purification webs I know are designed to be applied to a person, the location-anchored ones I had to consult with others for – your own Archive has far more resources on that,” Ulrich said, Solaris nodding agreement.

“I’ll set Seras on it, then,” Kir said, letting his gaze go north for a moment before turning away from the window and shaking his head, “Very well. That will be something we’ll continue to work on, though if the pair of you could also consider it? I’m not very knowledgeable on mage-craft or wardings.”

“You know what else we aren’t knowledgeable about?” Anur said brightly, Kir barely having time to feel puzzled before he switched straight to exasperation at Anur’s, “Your succession plans should you die suddenly! What a strange thing for a member of your Council to be unaware of.”
“That was one of the least subtle subject changes I’ve ever heard,” Kir said flatly.

Anur gave him an exaggeratedly woeful look, “Not the least? I’ll have to try harder then.”

“Please don’t.”

“With Hansa’s presence, the matter was moot,” Solaris began carefully, thoughtfully looking between the two of them as Ulrich sat back in his chair, removing himself from the conversation as best he could. “Even before that, when Kir delivered that letter – when he said that the only thing that would cause him true distress under my regime would be a permanent posting in Sunhame – I had considered the matter resolved.”

She switched her focus to him entirely when she continued, every inch of her conveying sincerity, “I would not ask you to be my successor when you would hate every second of it, Kir. You would do well – if I died unexpectedly, you would not let my reforms fade to nothing – you would probably set a significant portion of the District on fire before you were done but the reforms would not disappear – but I had not realized how truly and deeply you would loathe it until then.”

“If you were to die tomorrow then, Vkandis forbid, who would succeed you?” Kir asked, practically feeling the weight settle across his shoulders at her hesitation.

“I do not know,” Solaris finally admitted, folding her hands in her lap, “I know that a proper successor has been chosen – I will know them when I meet them, I have Seen it, but that will not be anytime soon and I meet them as a youth, so there will be decades before they can take my seat even after that day. Were I to die tomorrow?” she looked towards Hansa, watching him bask in the sunlight with a pensive expression, “Were that to happen, if you did not take my place, I do not know who could.”

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The rage pulsing through him was entirely his own, Anur knew, stepping between Kir and the other two and feeling Kir’s resignation – and how that burned, that one conversation with Solaris could bury his desperation to flee so easily – twist briefly into amusement.

“It is not going to happen,” Anur said flatly, “We’re going to upgrade your security while we’re here, and even if something did get through, you all will find someone else.”

He spotted Hansa lifting his head and met the Cat’s withering look with a scowl, snapping, “Well you didn’t speak up earlier, so clearly you can make no guarantees! There’s exactly one story of resurrection in the lore so we can’t count on that either, and I will not see my brother consumed with self-loathing, because even if he said no and stood firm he would hate himself for it and count every Karsite death as a weight on his soul.”

“Anur,” Kir said, sounding tired and how Anur hated that tone, resting a hand on his shoulder, “Anur, it is all right.”

“No, it’s not because you were about to accept it,” Anur hissed, looking over his shoulder at him, “You were about to say fine, you were about to agree and it would destroy you! Being Son of Sun – you would hate it, you would be miserable, and I did not sign on to this revolution to see you hate yourself even more!”

“I would think that the entire nation of Karse - “

“Hang Karse!” Anur interrupted, snarling, “Karse can burn, you are my brother!”
“Stop!” Solaris said, stepping forward and resting a hand on Anur’s arm, on Kir’s shoulder, “Stop, please. Both of you.”

Anur met her gaze with a glare, because he didn’t regret a damn thing that he’d said except maybe his snapping tone at Kir, but Kir deserved that because he was giving up again and he wouldn’t stand for it. Solaris met his glare with a mild look before looking to Kir and softening, “Kir, brother, while I wouldn’t say it in the same way, listen to Anur, you chose him as your Enforcer for a reason. Though I would prefer, naturally, that you not set the entirety of Karse on fire. It’s probably a good thing you are the one with the Firestarting talent and not Anur.”

“That’s fair,” Anur acknowledged, feeling some of his tension ease because she was agreeing, she wasn’t trying to guilt Kir into something that he didn’t want to do. That he shouldn’t have to do. “And I apologize for the outburst but – you were about to say yes, Kir.”

“I was,” Kir admitted, “Because I don’t want this revolution to end without making true, lasting changes, Anur, and if my succeeding Solaris would help that – it won’t happen, it shouldn’t, but if having some sort of insurance in place should it happen – if that makes a difference, I would shoulder it.”

“We can find someone else,” Solaris said firmly, squeezing their shoulders briefly before stepping back, “We will find someone else. Worst come, I’ll get Karchanek to do it. He listens to Ulrich and is powerful enough a mage he’d probably survive.”

“I don’t know how to say this politely, but if you were dead, Karchanek would be the first one leading a charge of blazing vengeance on whoever killed you,” Anur said, “He’s not quite as rabid as me, but he’s close.”

“Ah, so you did recognize that kindred spirit,” Kir snorted, elbowing him in the ribs, “I had wondered.”

“He’d be glaring at me so hard right now,” Anur commented, shaking his head before looking back at Solaris and nodding, “Karchanek then. We could sit on him long enough to make it happen.”

“Grevenor and Larschen are very good at pinning him down,” Ulrich agreed, Anur jumping slightly because he had honestly forgotten the man was there. “And I am very good at glaring him into submission. We would be able to manage until your successor, but I am quite confident it won’t happen, not with Honored Hansa on the task.”

There was a knock on the door and servants bearing food came in – Solaris had declared they’d all be joining her for dinner the moment they walked in, so at least their timing had been good. Either that, or muffled shouting had been heard through the doors and the servants and guards had decided they weren’t walking into that for love or money.

Though judging by the steam coming from the soup, that hadn’t been what happened.

“Thank you,” Solaris said, the three of them nodding agreement and echoing her thanks as the servants bowed and left. There wasn’t much conversation for a while – the blessing, idle chatter about passing seasoning and commenting on the vegetables – before Anur had a thought, and snickered.

At the questioning looks, he grinned and said, “I know just the person to list as your successor.”

“Go on,” Solaris said, raising an eyebrow and trying to hide her smile but he was onto her, he’d gotten that expression out of her more than a few times now.
“Markov!”

Ulrich choked on his water and Kir dissolved into laughter, shoving back from the table so he didn’t knock anything over.

“That is a terrible idea,” Solaris said flatly.

“No one would dare kill you if they knew the next person for the job was Markov, I’m just saying, it would be a great security measure.”

“We should at least spread the rumor,” Ulrich managed, looking amused himself, “With a rumored selection of him, Karchanek or Kir, I don’t think anyone would dare breathe ill intentions your way.”

“Can you imagine – just – try to imagine – Markov, administering a Sunhame sermon,” Kir gasped around snickers, “What would he even say?”

“Haha, I win, take that Lastern’?”

“...Do you think there would be any rats?”

She tried, Anur would give her that, but he definitely caught Solaris hiding a smile while Kir tried to stop giggling and Ulrich kept musing aloud on the possibilities of a Markov-designed sermon.

Catching her gaze, he tipped his glass in her direction, nodding slightly and that was all the apology she would get for his outburst, for his snarls. She raised her own mug a bit and he knew that it was all the apology she would need.

Solaris really was magnificent. He’d have to bring her some spice-cake.

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Rodri had intended to start writing a draft of the paper on sun-blessed steel, if Kir recalled correctly. Instead the initiate was sitting at his desk, scratch paper ready and pen inked, cross-legged on the chair and staring at the arrowhead cupped in his palms with an utterly fascinated expression.

Seeing as he had left Anur doing much the same over his own arrowheads instead of reading the texts on wards Seras had pressed on the pair of them – more on Kir, both because of this new development in the Midsummer wards and the coming reinforcement of the catacomb wards, but Anur had insisted on reading them too, frequent questions on magical terminology aside. At least when he was actually reading, the past two marks had seen him get through perhaps a page and a half of text.

“Well, I was going to offer to edit what you’d gotten down so far, but I see that is unnecessary,” Kir murmured, Rodri looking up at him and blinking with a slightly dazed look in his eyes before he shook it off and looked at his paper, laughing ruefully.

“Yes, starting tonight might have been a little ambitious,” he admitted, “I just – want to get everything down before I forget.”

“You realize we’ll be doing this again, yes?” Kir said, grabbing a nearby chair and setting it next to Rodri’s desk before sitting, resting an arm on the table and meeting his student’s gaze, “We are going to go back tomorrow to make some spearheads and start trying to incorporate hammering.”

“Right, but I want to try and get things down so I can notice the differences tomorrow,” Rodri said, reaching to set the arrowhead on the desk visibly hesitating as he let it leave his hand, keeping one palm cupped over it as if it were going to run away.
“It’s warm, Father,” Rodri murmured, awe rekindling in his eyes, “It’s – it’s singing.”

Kir tilted his head slightly and listened – and yes, there was a bit of a tune in that hum, and what a way to finally have Rodri start to hear what he did. What a better way, than his frantic attempts to hear anything but screams, than Griffon’s desperation and rage splitting the world open before him – he would have to add that to Rodri’s monograph, whenever it was produced. It might be generations before someone with his and Rodri’s knack for fire arrived, and if they could find a way to hear that buzz without hearing someone’s death first -

It would be such a wonderful legacy.

“And that’s what I mean, by humming,” Kir said, “Not as beautiful, not as… tuned. But that pitch you’re hearing – the tones that make up the song – it’s what I hear from everything.”

“From – from everything?” Rodri asked, shaking off his dazed look – him hearing the song explained much of his distraction, because it was distracting to hear something no-one else could. The fact that the sun-blessed steel truly sang was probably all the worse for that. “Wouldn’t that be – how can you focus on anything?”

“Practice,” Kir shrugged, “It becomes background noise. It’s worse in crowds, people move and shift and alter too much for me to be able to ignore them easily – and the Talented are even worse for that, but mages are by far the most difficult to press to the back of my mind.”

“Is that why you hate Sunhame so much?” Rodri asked, brow furrowing, “It’s loud?”

“A reason,” Kir allowed, looking at the arrowhead Rodri was again examining, curiosity starting to burn in the boy. Good – with any luck, that could be directed to writing this paper he wanted to produce, it would be a shame for his goal of notes and first impressions to not be met. First thoughts were important.

“I’ll be right back, and I want at least a few highlights written down,” he warned, Rodri sighing theatrically and picking up his pen – the other hand stayed curled around the arrowhead and he was just glad they hadn’t been finely sharpened. By now Rodri and Anur would have sliced their hands to ribbons.

“Anur,” he said, smiling when Anur looked up from his cupped handful of arrows with a similar dazed look – perhaps he heard the song too, perhaps it was something else. He’d ask later, when mention of Heraldic Gifts wouldn’t be a disaster. “Could you neaten up the books? I’m going to get some string and then talk to Rodri for a while.”

“Course,” Anur agreed, starting to work and actually managing to put the arrowheads down so he at least wasn’t as drawn in. “I’ll meet you there.”

His basket of knotwork was tucked away in the Hall’s kitchen-dining area, as was usual when he and Anur were in residence. Finding the piece he was looking for easily, he carefully pulled it out and coiled it around his hand – it wasn’t much more than half-done, so he could easily alter the design for what he had in mind, and it hadn’t been intended for anyone in particular so it wouldn’t disrupt his carefully planned out gifting schedule.

Jaina and Seras were done, Anur’s was going to be difficult to finish in time since he had to wait until he wasn’t around – worst come, he’d get Aelius to distract him for a few marks, that’s what he’d resorted to last year. Colbern’s cording to rewrap his axe-handle had been finished in one evening, the pattern had been simple and the leather cord thick. Figuring out how to anchor the sun-pendants without making the whole thing non-functional had taken the longest.
Etrius would be getting a page-marker like Seras so that wouldn’t take long, and Maltin was getting a new fancy knotwork cord for the pipes he had taken to wearing around his neck – he’d started on that. He hadn’t figured out what to make for the others yet, but hopefully Jaina would have some ideas. It wasn’t entirely expected for every Firestarter to get a gift from the new Incendiary their first Midwinter in office, but it was something of a tradition, if he remembered right. He’d certainly received one from Jaina, sent with a pack of Sunhame dispatches – a confirmation of Phyrrus’ death and a box of fancy tea.

Exchanging good nights with Fabron when they passed in the hallway, he made a mental note to ask about what sort of string-magic he favored, because that might make an interesting focus for his gift and be useful knowledge beside – and then he was back in the Archives, hearing the low murmur of voices from the corner Rodri had occupied and shaking his head. Hopefully he’d gotten at least a few remarks down before Anur accosted him.

When he rounded the corner he paused, somehow surprised to see Rodri and Anur both sitting with their heads bowed over the paper, an oil-lamp relocated to the desk itself as they discussed points to include. The light was glinting off a careful pile of arrowheads, the metal’s peculiar golden sheen all the more evident, and Rodri’s was probably the one set distinctly apart from the pile. That made this easier at least.

Taking his chair again, Rodri and Anur each only spared him a glance and a smile before continuing to talk about the forging they’d witnessed this morning. There was apparently some debate on exactly when the flames had shifted from plain fire to clearly Other.

While they talked, he took the chance to pick up Rodri’s arrowhead, wrapping the base with a twisted pair of cords and securing it before starting to knot a flat strip for the arrow to lie upon. He could secure the braided edging he had planned after there was something to anchor it too – perhaps a simple seven-pointed sun design to lie on top, with the ends woven into the underlying knots? The effect of the gold-shimmering metal underneath the strings of various bronzes and browns he was using would be nice and subtle.

He was murmuring the protective prayers out loud, he realized – he only really did that when he and Anur were alone on the road or in their quarters, habit of a lifetime spent hiding the one connection to his family he’d managed to hold onto aside form his name. But there was no reason to hide it anymore, if there ever really had been, and aside from one or two glances his way from the diligently writing pair, they weren’t distracted by it.

Kir felt himself smile, and let his mind sink into his design.

“I had forgotten you made those knotwork pieces,” Axeli commented the next evening, the two of them sitting behind the forge in the small yard he used to test pieces and store barrels of scrap metal for smelting. It was essentially a hemmed in square of packed dirt, barrels along one side and a clear area for drills across, a few benches along the far wall, plain brick that he was fairly certain had the glass making district on the other side. There were doors connecting them somewhere in the grouping of smithies, but he had never had reason to venture outside of Axeli’s forge-cluster and even less inclination as a youth.

Even now, he didn’t want to wander Sunhame much. Riding different routes into the District and retracing routes to Axeli was enough.

“I’ve been making fewer than usual these past years,” Kir replied, tilting his head back to look at the
darkening patch of sky they could see, “I didn’t make many before my ordaining – just enough to remember how.”

“Thought it looked like Lake-work,” Axeli huffed, flexing his hands with a grimace, “You make good quality pieces. We might need to have Beka step in for the next forging, that took longer than expected and my joints aren’t thanking me.”

“It would probably good for one of them to be experienced in it anyway, if Beka and Rodri are serious about trying this themselves,” Kir allowed, casting a sidelong glance Axeli’s way and hesitating before asking, “Would heat help or make it worse?”

“Can’t hurt, but I don’t think setting my hands on fire would be any better,” Axeli said dryly, Kir snorting and holding his hands out, twisting to face Axeli.

“Please,” he said, “I think I would know better than that.”

Axeli held out his left hand and Kir placed his hands around it, not quite contacting aside from his fingertips and letting the air – and only the air – between them start to warm. “I worked out how to start warming things without visible flames a year or so before my ordaining,” Kir murmured, Axeli humming thoughtfully but not interrupting, “It wasn’t something particularly – useful, except for my own comfort, so I never thought to mention it. The one time I tried – well. You remember the story of how Darius died.”

“You were useless for forging that week,” Axeli recalled, wiggling his fingers carefully, “Had to sit you down with spiked tea to get the story out of you and even then you barely made sense.”

They sat in silence a while more, Kir carefully maintaining the heat around Axeli’s hand. It had been – well, it had been years, since they had sat in this back courtyard and not said much of anything. The times he’d managed to visit – at least once every time Anur and he were in Sunhame – they worked in the forges, maybe caught up while they waited for a piece to get to the right temperature or chatted in between explaining some project or objective to Rodri or Anur, but never to the point they stayed to shut the forge down.

Rodri had left his over-robe and Anur his sash before they went out with Yakob and Beka to pick up some food from an alehouse Axeli frequented when they stayed late. Kir didn’t like it, but he also was tired from being on his feet and essentially in a trance state for most of the day so he would just listen for any mental alarm and hope Kari was following as he’d promised.

“Switch,” Axeli said, pulling his hand from Kir’s heat-pocket and sliding his right hand into place, “Personal comfort only or not, it’s become quite useful. A good thing to cultivate.”

“It’s probably Anur’s favorite,” Kir said wryly, “The sheer volume of times he’s wandered over bundled up against the cold and looked pitiful until I warmed his coat up for him is absurd.”

“I’ll believe that of him,” the forge-master laughed, shaking his head, “No idea where you picked him up, but he is one of a kind, your Enforcer. Good to see you had someone watching your back for at least a few years, though. I’d wondered about you, but after how you’d left Sunhame – I didn’t want to bring any more attention down on you than I already had, letting you work with me.”

“Probably for the best,” Kir allowed, recalling those first few years in the Sunsguard. No, while he would have welcomed a letter from Axeli, drawing any more attention than he’d already gained with an absurdly fast ascent to First Order Firestarter, immediate exile into a chaplain posting when he was barely old enough to be conscripted into the Sunsguard himself, and being the first Firestarter chaplain since Colbern aside?
No, it had taken time for him to fade from Sunhame’s memory, and any letters aside from his reports to Sunhame would have only prolonged it, innocuous exchange of news or not.

At this point, only the sergeant and one hostler remained that remembered his arrival to the 62nd, and he doubted they remembered any of the close calls he’d had. They’d been well-designed to look like accidents or attacks by foreigners or witches or bandits, and he’d managed to live through them without much fanfare or drama to draw attention. Sunlord, he was so glad that was over.

“That bad, then?” Axeli smiled at his raised eyebrow, pulling his hand back and rubbing his joints idly, “Thank you for that, Kir. But really, you think I don’t know how chaplain postings usually worked? You were no headhunter, anyone with eyes knew that, so you were being sent out to die. I gave you what tools I could, but I wondered.”

“I managed,” Kir said finally, “And if you could not mention that to Anur I would be very grateful. I still haven’t quite talked him down from the latest mess.”

“Hmm. He’s been unbearably curious about that nearly burning down the forge story,” Axeli said, a teasing gleam in his eyes and Kir sighed, only half-faking its heaviness.

“Very well,” he conceded. “At least it will be a cautionary tale to Rodri.”

Judging by the half-amused, half-horrified expression on Rodri’s face as Beka and Yakob tried to piece together their half of the tale – they hadn’t been as drunk as him, actually remembering what had happened past Beka’s scoffing challenge, but they had certainly been impaired – it served that purpose quite well.

From the mix between gleefully amused and thoughtfully grim, Anur was getting a fair bit more of the subtext than Rodri was. Ah well, better this than thoughts on what his life in the 62nd had been like those first years – he hadn’t killed all his attackers after all, some had retired or transferred and he wouldn’t put it past Anur to at least try and track them down for extremely delayed retribution.

They had more important things to spend their time on.

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“You realize, of course, that you’re being entirely unreasonable about this whole successor issue,” Kir said later that night in their room, lying on the bed to read one of the warding texts that seemed most promising while Anur used the desk to update his chronicle and copy some passages on basic magical knowledge from another text.

It would be good for Heralds to have another source for knowledge of magic. Someone aside from the princess would need to have some idea of what was going on, and if it was a Herald with no drop of magic in them so much the better. Bringing mages back after centuries was going to be difficult, established system for people with strange powers or not – from what Aelius had said years ago, there had been something of a schism developing between Herald-Mages and standard Heralds, and he was curious to see how they would fix that.

Having mages that weren’t Heralds would probably help, of course. But then they’d have to set up an entire mage school – collegium, he thought the Valdemaran word was – and that could take decades to get running properly. It would take decades to run properly, and their legislation had probably shifted over the centuries to entirely disregard mage-craft…

He had so many things to research when Anur got summoned to Haven. Hopefully this Chronicler Myste would be satisfied with Anur’s chronicle – he had also put a request in for copies of some
common histories and monographs from their Archives, those should at least get him a foot in the door. She was close to Herald-Captain Alberich, from Anur’s muttering, so she probably spoke and read Karsite.

“Probably,” Anur agreed, grimacing, “I don’t actually think I’d rather see Karse slide back into its old ways than see you be Son of Sun, but with any luck the choice will never be put in front of me. You were terrified, Kir. I’ve never – I’ve never seen you that scared before.”

“Ah,” Kir said softly, looking up from his text and watching as Anur stubbornly focused on the passage he was writing. “My apologies, then.”

That got Anur to look up, giving him an exasperated glance and saying, “You don’t need to apologize for having feelings Kir, Ari’s sake. You scared me, sure, but my overreactions are on me, not something that you should blame yourself for. You’re my brother – and my equal.”

:Aelius is – everything.: Anur continued, switching conversational mediums when they discussed anything Valdemaran near habit by now, especially in Sunhame. :Heart and soul and – he’s my Companion, but he’s older, he’s an older brother, someone who looks after me. I take care of him too but it’s not as – equitable, as the two of us. He’s also in much less danger than you, day to day, or at least, what danger he’s in, I’m in too. The threats to you are unique to you, and most of the time I don’t feel like I can do anything to avert them and that makes things – worse, those times that I can. So I need to work on overreacting, you need to work on saying no to things that terrify you or make you uncomfortable, and we’ll go from there.: 

:How mature, Chosen.:  
:Oh shut up, witch-horse.: 

:And he’s back-slid again, my condolences Aelius.: 

:You two are both the worst.: 

“You swore by Ari,” Kir said aloud, tilting his head and smiling at the bewildered mental silence that followed.

“..yes? Did I do it wrong? Am I not supposed to?” Anur asked, visibly confused.

“No, no,” Kir laughed, “You used the phrase as I would, but it’s – it’s something only Firestarters do, really. I’ve never heard – no one else uses it.”

“Well I’m going to keep using it,” Anur shrugged, smiling wryly, “What’s one more thing setting me apart?”

:Fair point, Chosen. And it would help you fit in with the Firestarters at least – I have a question, now that we have a moment to speak. Kir, you seemed surprised, or at least – it didn’t seem like you expected your forging to succeed. Today you were trying something new, so I understood, but it seemed like the same attitude was there yesterday? Hadn’t you done arrowheads before, so you already knew that process?: Aelius asked, and Kir set his book aside because this conversation wasn’t going to lend itself to multi-tasking.

:I don’t fully understand the process, though: Kir admitted, :Axeli and I had to recreate it remember, and it took more than a few unsuccessful attempts before we hit something that worked and it was the week after my ordaining. I’d just ascended to First Order Firestarter and a full priest besides, it was right after Midwinter’s day itself – I have no idea of either of those things were components. If this hadn’t worked, we’d have waited until a few days after Midwinter and tried again, and if that
hadn’t worked we’d have had to start from scratch.

Would Kari have known? Anur asked.

I did ask, he says he isn’t familiar with the process. Admittedly, I never asked Hansa but the main archives don’t have much on it beyond mentions in stories of someone using sun-blessed steel. The few references I found to crafting such things were found here, I think a Firestarter is necessary – it’s certainly necessary for Axeli and my version of the process. Kir caught himself halfway through switching his shrug to a roll of his shoulders, habit forcing the gestures indicative of nonverbal conversation into something else. It would probably never fully break.

Well, Rodri is very excited. Anur commented, setting aside his pen and saying aloud, “Done for the evening, Kir?”

“Probably,” Kir agreed, rolling to his feet and carefully stacking and marking his spot in the books he was working through. He would return a few to the archives tomorrow but there were still two more he wanted to finish before this visit to Sunhame concluded – their next Sunhame trip would be the extended Midwinter stay, and the necromancy warding would be somewhere in there. Hopefully he wouldn’t need to step in at all, but he’d rather be ready for it than not.

I can’t blame him, Aelius admitted while Anur disappeared into the washroom, I rather wish I could have been there in person, instead of watching through Anur’s eyes. It’s a foolish idea for more reasons than one, but it would have been nice.

Perhaps one day we can manage something, Kir offered.

I’d like that.

Letter, alms, knives left behind – I’m not going to be any more ready, Kiara thought, taking a bracing breath in her cabin and running her hands down the front of the knotwork-on-silk vest her sister and grandmother had made her after her second year of captaining – she’d only really worn it for High Holy Days and meetings with the most influential of her clients, but for a visit to the Temple District of Sunhame -

Well. Nothing less than her best would suffice.

Looking classy, Captain, Gregor commented when she checked in with him on the deck. Fancy contract in the offing?

Don’t think so, Kiara shrugged with practiced ease, “But we’re here overnight to load that last shipment in the morning, thought I might see the District while I was here. Never thought I could, so why not?”

Her first mate hummed thoughtfully, meeting her gaze before offering an equally casual shrug and smiling wryly, “Good luck then, Captain. Back fore dusk?”

I’ll stand the evening watch, she agreed, clapping him on the shoulder before heading down the gangplank, ignoring the occasional double-take and ill-hidden skepticism at the sight of a woman captain with ease, though she noted the worst offenders. It wouldn’t do for her to enter business with someone who thought her lesser – not without preparation at least.

She deliberately merged with a stream of people very obviously not gawking at the Gates and even exchanged a nod of acknowledgement with one of the soldiers standing guard. The Gates were
lovely, and impressive, and had she not had a mission, had she really been here as a pilgrim, she’d have gladly gawked for a few minutes before daring to enter the sacred District.

If she paused, there were even odds she’d turn on her heel and dawdle in the markets until going back to Gregor wouldn’t make it obvious she’d turned tail and run.

The group scattered to their destinations once through the gate and she picked a random direction and strode off with equal intent, hands locked behind her back and she let her eyes drag across the gardens filled with slowly turning leaves and autumn flowers carefully arranged, across the gilded domes and spires plunging towards the sky – Sunlord this place was beautiful. Her brother had grown up here.

The pounding in her ears was her own heart, she suddenly realized, finding a bench tucked into a hedge in a deserted corner and she sat down, tucking her chin and forcing herself to breath evenly. What was she even doing here? Her brother’s letter said she’d be welcome, certainly, even gave her exact weeks where she could expect him here – he would be here, if all was well, she’d meet her brother -

She’d meet him, and if all went well, she’d tell the rest of the family.

He’d been so indifferent in that first letter, so cool. She understood, she had to, she didn’t even want to imagine what Elisia’s reaction to his position, to his Order, was going to be. But if there was any hesitation on his side, positively eager response to her own letter aside – there was no reason to break hearts if it wasn’t necessary. She could stand at least a little apart, judge things a little more coherently, without the longing for some boy that had been snatched from them who was, to be frank, as good as dead personality wise, coloring her vision.

She wasn’t going to let him break Nana’s heart with his presence. His absence was bad enough.

“Those look to be very deep thoughts,” a sudden voice nearly gave her a heart attack and she jumped, looking up at the priestess who’d spoken with wide eyes. The amber-eyed woman smiled faintly and said, “My apologies for startling you. I didn’t realize you hadn’t heard my approach. May I join you?”

“Ah – certainly Holiness,” Kiara managed, scooting aside and giving the tabby-cat that appeared to sit at the woman’s feet a curious glance. “My apologies for monopolizing the bench.”

“Oh not at all, it’s hardly my personal bench,” the woman chuckled, “I simply haven’t seen you around the District before and thought I might offer assistance. As I said – they looked to be heavy thoughts.”

“Not heavy – so much as conflicted,” Kiara admitted, “I – I’m here to meet my brother. Maybe.”

“Your brother,” the priestess murmured, tucking her hands into gold-trimmed sleeves – oh Sunlord she’d run into a high-rankingle priestess hold it together. “He is a priest then?”

“Yes,” Kiara said, resting her hands on her thighs and very consciously not clenching them into fists. “He – I don’t know for certain if he’s even within the District, I just – received a letter from him and managed to get a shipment to Sunhame scheduled so I thought – I thought I should try.”

“If you will permit me a guess,” the woman began, Kiara nodding shortly but nonetheless startled when she said, “Kir Dinesh is your brother?”

“I – yes,” Kiara said blankly, blinking in shock before asking, “How did you know?”
“There’s quite a resemblance,” the priestess admitted, “And he is within the District, as it happens – arrived four days ago. You’re quite lucky, he’s only here for a week or two at a time. Would you care for an introduction?”

Kiara hesitated, glancing between the woman and the cat sitting at her feet and feeling utterly stunned by her own daring she said, “If you will permit me my own guess?”

At the small smile on her face, Kiara guessed her question was answered but she said it anyway, “Eminence Solaris?”

“It is a pleasure to meet my brother’s sister in blood,” the woman said and Kiara felt faint as the tabby cat was suddenly triple the size and brilliantly cream-and-crimson, watching her with intelligent blue eyes. “But I hope you are not offended by my insistence that you step carefully around Kir – I would not see him hurt.”

“He does care then?” Kiara blurted, wincing and adding on, “Simply – his first letter, it was very bland and I understand, I do, but the only thing that hinted at him caring at all is his Enforcer’s postscript and his answer to my request to meet, and if he doesn’t care there’s – there’s no point in ripping open old wounds on either side.”

“Oh little sister,” the woman said with a weary smile, “You both care, you two care so very much.”

Kiara took a deep breath, glanced at the Firecat sitting at the feet of her God’s Chosen Son, and met the woman’s eyes again.

“Then I would be honored by your introduction, Radiance.”

Chapter End Notes

So this WAS going to wait until Dec 31st because of the title more than anything, but instead of working on my projects with deadlines in four days, I wrote this. Good job, me.

Hope you enjoyed! Don't expect another fast update because I have at least five versions of Kiara meeting Kir floating around and I CAN’T CHOOSE! Also, if you think Kiara was a little casual for suddenly meeting Solaris The Chosen Son of Sun - there are reasons, we'll see them.
Hello, Sister

Chapter Notes

Psst... happy belated Midwinter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Herald Bellamy, the Incendiary’s sister is in the district and we are escorting her to the Hall for an introduction. Are you present?: Hansa’s coolly formal voice startled Anur but he had a lot of practice at not twitching when sudden voices appeared in his mind, instead glancing over at where Kir was coaching Maltin through the fine details of maintaining a smoldering heat.

He looked relaxed, his mind felt at ease, and Anur hated to interrupt.

We are within the Hall, yes,: he sent back before reaching for Aelius, his Companion immediately understanding his worries and offering advice.

Kir will burn every hair on your head if you don’t give him a heads-up on his sister’s arrival.: Fair point.: 

“Kir,” he said quietly, standing and walking over when his brother looked up, keeping his voice low, “Hansa says he and Solaris are on their way over to speak with you.”

“Ah, thank you Anur,” Kir said, casting a curious glance his way before focusing on Maltin for a moment and saying, “Does that make some sense, at least?”

“I… think so,” Maltin frowned, twirling his flute between his fingers, “But I’m not sure exactly how I’m going to implement that with music without holding a note forever, which isn’t really sustainable.”

“With that, I can’t help at all,” Kir said wryly, “When you want to experiment, make sure you have help ready, but I think I need to leave you for a bit.”

“Yes, I need to think on it anyway, thank you Father,” Maltin said thoughtfully, walking away and starting to play brief sets of notes on his flute, apparently hunting for something that might work for this technique.

He didn’t even notice the pleased look on Kir’s face when the acolyte called him by his simplest title, the first time Anur could recall either of the acolytes besides Rodri doing so. Etrius and Maltin had stuck to Eldest – or Incendiary if they felt particularly formal. Anur clapped a hand on Kir’s shoulder and smiled, nodding slightly at Kir’s thrilled look and feeling a brief pang as he murmured, “Your sister is with her, apparently.”

Kir immediately tensed, breath hissing out between his teeth and Anur tightened his hold on his arm, “I said we were in the Hall. Do I need to ask them to stall?”

“No,” Kir said shortly, wincing when he heard his tone and rubbing his hand over his face tiredly, tension draining away, “No – I made the offer. I should have – I should have expected this. She came all the way here, I should meet her.”
“Kir that’s up to you,” Anur said gently, heart aching as he watched Kir stoically fret about what should be the most natural thing in the world. Sunlord, his sister was coming, at his own invitation, and Kir was acting like they were going to have to deal with one of the worst of the generals.

“I should,” Kir decided, grimacing even as he said it, “Oh I hope this goes well.”

:Getting an invitation and then coming all the way to the Temple is a heck of a lot of effort just to spit in someone’s face,: Anur pointed out, hoping that it wasn’t a misplaced confidence. Maybe it was some cultural thing, if you were going to cut off all contact with someone you should at least do it in person? Sunlord, now he was the one who was going to fall apart and that was not going to help Kir.

“You know what, how about we get tea started?” Anur said abruptly, “Think you can heat water reliably right now?”

“I’d have to be a lot further gone to mess that up,” Kir replied dryly, some of that jangling wariness fading at the idea, at having something to do. If Anur were being honest, Kir was relaxing at the idea of being able to employ his knack for flames. If he’d been able to come up with a way to make it less intimidating, he would have convinced Kir to actually properly light something on fire, or do his cat’s cradle trick, or make fancy shapes – working with non-lethal fire was something that immediately got Kir to relax, to focus on the fire, not on whatever was worrying him at the time.

Realizing that, and wondering how hard it had been for Kir to retain that ease, that appreciation, when he was raised to use fire for such ugly purposes, had been a hard few days. It had been hard to recognize that, and recognize how different Griffon’s attitude had been. Hells, watching the Firestarters interact with flames – respectful, understanding of danger, but not anxious, not angry or sad or bitter except towards their old purposes – it had been an eye-opener.

Dirk had taught Griffon because he was the only instructor able to react without fear when something went wrong, went even the slightest bit off-script. The only one, out of at least five that Anur knew had taught the Fetching group at various years, if not more.

Here they were in a country where people were regularly burned alive and there were more than double that number willing to work with fire and respond to exploding catastrophes with laughter and teasing, with reminiscences on their own mistakes and near disasters, and no flinching horror or terror at what the student had done.

Griffon would benefit so much from this group.

If they were able to get past the Herald Demon Rider thing, admittedly, and Laskaris was only the most vocal of those that didn’t like the idea of people coming back from Valdemar. Tristan and Henrick had both looked dubious, and he didn’t really know how to read Seras’ thoughtful expression when they’d discussed it near him.

Pulling down the boxes of tea, he chose mint tea for himself – spice-cake tea was delicious, but he didn’t need to drink it literally every time he had tea. The lemon-black tea went into Kir’s mug because he liked citrus and could use something bracing, and he was in the middle of debating between another of the same or a calming herbal blend – probably not very subtle but the real question is if it would be insulting – when the door opened, Hansa stalking in first.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked, directing the question to both of the women who’d walked through the door but entirely unsurprised when Solaris shook her head.
“No, but thank you Anur. I came across Captain Dinesh in the gardens and offered to escort her, since I would be able to get her straight to you two. Kir, Ulrich has an idea on the wards, don’t let me forget to tell you about it in more detail later – but for now, Kiara Dinesh, may I introduce you to Kir, my Incendiary and your brother. The other man is Anur Bellamy, his Enforcer and near constant shadow. They’re essentially a two for one deal at this point,” Solaris said, looking between the three of them before smiling faintly and concluding with, “And now I will take my leave. An honor to meet you, Captain.”

“The honor is mine, Radiance,” the woman said, bowing – Kir’s sister and sweet Sunlord the resemblance was incredible. She was a little shorter, but they had the same lean build and jet black hair, skin just as bronzed from the sun and her eyes were the exact same shade of gray. If he ran into her on the street he might not have immediately thought Dinesh, but he would definitely have noticed a resemblance to Kir.

Straightening, she looked over at Anur and said, “I would love some tea, any sort of black, thank you.”

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Between Solaris’ long introduction and Anur’s question about tea, Kir had plenty of time to take in his younger sister. They had the same eyes – grandfather’s eyes, from what he remembered. Her vest was something he recognized too, at least in style – faded memories of Midsummer best had all his family in clothes decorated with knotwork patterns. If he’d been taken on a Feast of the Children, he’d have been wearing a hat decorated that way, he’d been so thrilled to get one of his own the Midwinter before…

After Kiara expressed her tea preference, she looked back to him and he couldn’t afford to hesitate any longer.

“It’s very good to meet you,” he finally managed, suddenly grateful for the mug of tea in his hands. He had no idea what he’d have done with them otherwise, probably shoved them up his sleeves and defaulted to his blandest tone.

A faint smile, and she was as nervous as he was, thank Vkandis this wasn’t one-sided that had to be a good sign, it – it had to.

“It’s good to meet you too,” she echoed, raising an eyebrow when Anur passed the mug of tea intended for her to him first, and the other flew up to join it when steam started rising from the mug only afterwards. “That is wonderfully practical.”

“It is probably the ability I would miss most,” Kir admitted, passing her the mug and waving for her to join him at the seats clustered around a low table at the end of the room – recently one more chair had been added to the pair that he and Anur had dragged in moons ago, and if it weren’t for the timing of its appearance he’d have never noted its presence as odd. “Being able to make tea without having to stop and heat water with fire directly is fantastic.”

Anur settled in his usual chair, Kir flicking his fingers in that direction when he set Anur’s mug to steaming.

There was a brief silence, Kir very carefully focusing on his mug of tea and struggling to figure out something to say next that wasn’t incoherent demands for information.

“I have a letter,” Kiara said, tone hesitant even as she reached into her vest to pull the folded missive out, “It’s from Lukas, he asked that I bring it, since he couldn’t come himself.”
“He’s alive,” Kir whispered, Anur having to lunge and steady his mug when his grip loosened and he set it on the table heavily, bracing himself against the heady rush of relief at that knowledge because he’d been so *still* -

“What?” Kiara asked, sounding bewildered, knuckles white around the letter, “I – was there a reason you feared Lukas dead?”

“When I last saw him he’d been badly injured,” Kir said, leaving so very many details out but if she hadn’t known – if she hadn’t known why he might think Lukas dead, she could very well have no idea of the circumstances of his taking beyond the basic fact that he had been. Taking the letter she still held out, he hesitated over the seal before setting it aside for the moment.

Smiling at his sister – his brother was alive, Lukas had lived, there was a *chance* – he said quietly, “I will read it later, and if you would wait for me to write a reply I would appreciate it, but I do not know how long you have?”

“Told my first mate I’d be back for the dusk watch, so a few marks,” Kiara said, eyes narrowed slightly but not suspicious, just thoughtful. “His arm, then? I was ten by the time I realized he hadn’t been born that way.”

“Yes,” Kir agreed, because the arm had been the worst of it, he wasn’t surprised there had been permanent damage, and if she had gone ten years thinking Lukas had been born with a crippled arm then they certainly hadn’t spread around how it had happened. “It was – quite bad.”

“Well,” Kiara said, taking a deep sip of her tea before continuing, “He’s alive, the only one – grandfather had died before you were taken, right?”

“Years before,” Kir confirmed, and she nodded shortly.

“Thought so – then the only real loss you’ve missed is that our father went missing years ago, presumed dead. I had just turned thirteen,” Kiara shrugged uncomfortably, “He hadn’t been – right, for a long time though. I’m sorry.”

Kir could hardly focus on the fact his father was gone, had probably wandered off to die – he wasn’t surprised, he remembered – the *screaming* -

“I’m not surprised,” Kir managed to say, wrenching his focus back to where he was, to who he was talking to, “Though it is sad to hear. I’m sorry I – Nana is still alive?”

“Alive and terrorizing the town,” Kiara said dryly, expression softening slightly as she continued, “She’s one of the ones that wanted to write – to find out what had happened. Not – not everyone did. That’s one of the reasons I came. Well, that and – and to find out if you actually wanted to meet us again, to try. If you didn’t – there was no reason to hurt anyone needlessly.”

“Kir don’t even try to martyr yourself saying that there’s no need to tell anyone you’re alive, so help me if you try I will ruin your formal vestments and you’ll have to get a full refitting before Midwinter,” Anur said, Kir shooting him a glare at the threat.

“I wasn’t going to,” he denied, “And don’t even *joke* about that, Jaina would murder us both if she had to figure out how to bribe the tailors to get us ahead of the queue.”

Focusing on his sister again, who was hiding a grin behind her mug, he finally let himself relax a bit because now there were *objectives* for this meeting, there were *goals* and he didn’t have to flail for a conversation with a woman he’d never met but should have grown up knowing. “In case you missed it,” he said, “I would like to meet everyone again – to try, as you said. But not everyone – ma
wouldn’t have.”

He wrinkled his nose, because calling someone ‘ma’ felt strange, felt foreign but that was what his memories held, and calling her mother felt absurd, before setting it aside and continuing, “She wouldn’t have thought I was alive – not if she named you Kiara.”

“I was born within a year of you being taken,” Kiara said quietly, “But yes, she treated you as dead. Nana didn’t object to my name because she’s lakes, doesn’t think names have to be after the dead, but it didn’t help the arguments that started when word got out priests could contact their families again.”

Judging by the grimace twisting Kiara’s face before she visibly braced herself, there was worse coming.

“And Elisia – I don’t know which way she fell on the letter issue, but she hates Firestarters. She loathes them and I can’t imagine this going entirely smoothly on that front. Lukas – I heard stories, I mentioned that – I would tell him about them, but I don’t think he let himself seriously think you were alive, not until we got your letter. But he wants to see you again – he’s already made me promise to bring him here if you decide not to come back and meet everyone,” Kiara winced and looked away briefly, “If you do come back – if you visit, it’s only fair if you know going in what you might run into.”

“Do you know how the others took my Order?” Kir asked, staring at his tea. He hadn’t fished the sachet out in time, it was over-steeped and bitter. Elisia hated Firestarters.

“Lukas is the only one I shared your reply with,” Kiara admitted, “I wanted to make sure you even wanted to try first.”

“Well, I do,” Kir said, finally stating things plainly and meeting his sister’s gaze, “I do. And I’ve been hated by very many people, for a very long time. I will manage, should I be invited to.”

“Okay,” Kiara nodded, most of her own tension fading away and she leaned back in her chair, looking between the pair of them and smiling, “I’ll pass that along, and let you know. But now that that is out of the way, I’d like to get to know my brother – and his shadow.”

“If this makes Light’s Shadow stick as a title I am going to be so annoyed,” Anur grumbled, and Kir laughed before explaining the story behind that complaint to his sister.

His sister.

***===***pagebreak***===***

Marks later, she finally had Bellamy to herself. Kir – her brother, her brother the Firestarter, the Incendiary, who had gray eyes and a sly humor and had looked so resigned when she said Elisia would hate him, who had nearly cried when he found out Lukas was alive -

You two care so very much, she heard again, she had heard so many times while she talked with her brother, with his shadow, and laughed over their stories and wondered after the in-jokes and shared her own snippets and he had been thrilled to hear she made Captain in her own right years ago. He had echoed her vicious grin when she told the story of the pirate attack that her ship had run afoul of and that she and her crew had beaten back – his Enforcer hadn’t even blinked when she talked about running a business with no man to oversee it.

This just might work.
“He says people have hated him before, and fair, most of the country hates Firestarters, or at least did,” Kiara said, meeting Bellamy’s mild gaze and not believing it for a minute, “But Elisia’s his sister. I’ve already spoken to Lukas about it, we’re going to try and get things battened down before you two even have a chance to visit, but it could be ugly, and you need to know that.”

“Your honesty is refreshing,” Bellamy said politely, inclining his head, “And I’ll take it under advisement. If we were to visit, who would we stay with, or should I start thinking of inn arrangements?”

“Me,” Kiara said immediately, “Nana and Ma – we have family dinners there.”

“Neutral ground, Elisia would feel unwelcome and we don’t need to make it worse, agreed,” Bellamy replied, “Lukas?”

“Lives in a single-room set up near the shipyard,” Kiara shook her head, “I rent a sublevel – houses are tiered, the lower level is mine. There’s room for three. The inn rents out stable-space without renting rooms, so your horses can stay there.”

“Good,” the Enforcer nodded shortly, “Do you think before Midwinter would be feasible?”

“Should be,” Kiara said, tilting her head slightly as she tried to work out timing, “Really, the delay will be in letters, and we have eight weeks before Midwinter so it should be all right.”

“Send letters here, they can be sent on to us quicker than through standard messengers,” he explained, “That should help.”

“That would,” she agreed, deciding not to ask after that just yet. Maybe one day, when asking questions about the priesthood’s strange powers didn’t send a thrill of terror running down her spine. Kir’s warming tea had been startling enough, and that was something so at odds with the usual nightmares of fire and death that she hadn’t had time to be afraid.

They sat in silence for a brief time before the man shrugged and said, “We don’t have a particularly stocked pantry and larder in the Hall – but we have some breads and cheeses and cured meats, if you’d like something? I don’t want to drag Kir to the District’s kitchens and didn’t arrange for meals to be brought here today.”

“Something basic sounds perfect,” she agreed, “How can I help?”

Helping Bellamy put together a tray for the three of them to share kept her from fretting over what exactly Lukas had written and gave her the chance to snoop through cabinets besides. The Enforcer noticed what she was doing rather quickly but just grinned, “Kir and I had to buy mint-tea ourselves, the cheapest thing they had when we arrived was that lemon-black blend.”

“You’re kidding!”

The random anecdotes of the strange qualities life in the District had – catacombs that you could live in, there were nightmare stories of the round-the-fire type – were all delightful, because she never thought she’d hear them. They were pieces of her brother’s life that she’d never understand, not really, but that she had a chance to hear.

Also, it gave her plenty of impersonal gossip to fend off nosy busy-bodies with when it eventually came out she’d come to the District on her trek to Sunhame. They’d love these sorts of stories, and she would be able to milk these for weeks, easily.

No one but kin was going to hear the stories her brother had told, or the fact that she had actually met
Solaris, had *conversed* with her. She might admit to seeing her from afar, or glimpsing a Firecat, but that depended on who asked.

Bellamy was very visibly debating between starting a fire for warming more water for tea and waiting for Kir to return and getting him to do it when the matter was solved by Kir walking back in from the courtyard the Hall surrounded, followed by a boy who would only just be in his teens if she had to guess, but wearing Firestarter robes nonetheless.

“Enforcer Anur!” the boy beamed, “Seras finally accepted a draft!”

“Ha! I told you modifying those paragraphs would fix it!” the Enforcer crowed, pulling down another mug while the boy – an acolyte maybe? – boosted himself onto the counter to dig through the tea cupboard, heading straight for the back boxes.

“My student, Rodri,” Kir said quietly, brushing a hand across her refilled mug and she could feel the heat start to radiate through it almost immediately. “He and Anur have been working on a detailed description for forging sun-blessed steel.”

“Sun-blessed steel?” she echoed, blinking for a few moments as she tried to process that, “I thought that was just a – well, a description for the fact that holy people wielded weapons.”

“That’s one way to interpret it,” he agreed, nodding, “But there’s also a particular forging process that a local forgemaster and I figured out that seems to do something special.”

“It’s amazing,” the student said, appearing back at Kir’s side with a mug of soon steaming water in hand. “I can’t wait to learn how to do it!”

“Let Beka figure out the rhythm herself first,” Kir said, accepting his own refilled mug from Bellamy and moving towards the table, “At least one of you should know what you’re doing. Rodri, this is my younger sister, Kiara Dinesh.”

“Really?” the student perked up, sitting next to his teacher and Kiara settled across from them, Bellamy snagging the seat on the end of the table and sliding the tray of food into place between them. “Exactly what would you want in exchange for embarrassing childhood stories?”

“She wasn’t even born when I was taken for the priesthood, Rodri,” Kir said dryly, Kiara just laughing at the utter disappointment, so familiar – her nephews were around his age and Sunlord they would have demanded the same.

“Besides, I don’t think Kir managed something as absurd as the squirrel-fish incident,” Bellamy inserted, and Kiara was certain no one at the table even remotely believed his innocent tone and blandly smiling expression. Rodri certainly didn’t, groaning and burying his head in his arms.

“I cannot believe she actually sold me out!” she managed to hear him mumble, Kir patting his student’s shoulder and explaining.

“His sister – Rodri made a bargain with me to not try and find out the details, but he forgot to include Anur.”

“Ah, beginner’s error,” Kiara said with little sympathy, “At least you’ll never forget that detail again.”

“You are all the worst,” the boy grumbled, “But mostly Enforcer Anur.”

The man in question just shrugged, “Yeah, that’s fair.”
Conversation flowed fairly easily at that point, and by the time they’d cleared the tray of food and had another mug of tea for each of them Kiara was startled to hear the fourth-bell toll and honestly dismayed that this visit had ended. Kir noticed her jolt and smiled faintly, “You have to depart, then?”

“Yes, I have the evening watch,” she said, passing Bellamy her mug when he offered and rising to her feet, “And it will take me some time to get back to the docks.”

“I understand,” Kir said, also standing and coming around to her side of the table, holding a pristinely folded and sealed envelope with Lukas’ name written across it. “For Lukas,” he said unnecessarily, handing it to her and she carefully tucked it away.

She met her brother’s eyes – her eyes, if her mother was to be believed – and didn’t quite know what to say. Hesitating a moment longer, she finally plunged forward, “It was good to meet you. I – I’ll keep you posted, for a visit home. Maybe before Midwinter?”

“I’d like that,” he murmured, looking torn between hope and worry at the idea and she didn’t blame him at all.

Grabbing him in a hug, she buried her face in his shoulder and felt more than heard his faint gasp before he returned it, breath hitching momentarily.

“You’re going to come home,” she said fiercely, “You’re going to see Lukas again, and ma, and nana, and Elisia even if she hates it, because you’re alive, and that’s a miracle. We’ll make this work, Kir.”

He didn’t quite manage to verbally thank her, but the suddenly tighter hug got the point across nicely. She finally let him go, locking gazes for a moment and exchanging smiles before turning to the Enforcer, clasping hands with him and offering another silent farewell. Rodri offered her a smile and a wave, and she returned both with a small laugh before giving one last smile to her brother and heading out the door.

She remembered how to get to the docks from here. Memorizing escape routes was important.

***===***pagebreak***===***

“I believe you owe me an arrowhead,” Rodri said smugly, Anur scoffing but still handing over a sun-blessed arrowhead and Kir snorted.

“I had wondered why you were so insistent on seeing Anur immediately,” Kir said, shaking his head, “Did you even finish a draft of that essay?”

“An outline,” Rodri shrugged, pocketing his bounty, “But Seras said it looked like a good start. The meeting seemed to go okay?”

“Better than I could have hoped,” Kir admitted, raising an eyebrow at Rodri’s beaming expression and saying, “No arrowhead if it went badly?”

“Oh then I’d have gotten two for dramatically interrupting with accidental fire and maybe accidentally-on-purpose getting her hair,” Rodri said frankly, “But I’d rather get the one.”

He had to laugh at Anur’s utterly unrepentant expression and wrapped an arm around Rodri’s shoulders, shaking his head fondly, “I see this has been in the works a while. My thanks, Rodri. Go secure your bounty, we’ll see you at the Sun Descending.”
“I regret nothing,” Anur said as Rodri left, smiling nonetheless. “Though I am glad none of those contingencies had to come into play.”

“Contingencies, plural?” Kir snorted, shaking his head as he started cleaning their mugs. “Just how many people did you drag into this?”

“Well, Jaina had her own plans in place,” Anur admitted, clearing the table, “So we made sure not to conflict too badly. I had Kari get Rodri into place while we were swapping stories, and I mentioned to Solaris that you had invited your sister to the District during these weeks. I have no idea how she found her in the gardens, because a random happenstance is definitely not how that occurred.”

“Oh I’m sure she had some sort of alert set up,” Kir agreed, “And some sort of stay-calm effect, if Kiara’s nonchalance was any indicator.”

“That could be useful,” Anur mused, grabbing a towel to start drying things, “I’ll have to ask her if it’s mage-only or if anyone can do it.”

“At the very least it would require enchanted objects – or an empath, they could probably manage the same,” Kir replied, “But you can always ask. Jaina had plans too? We’ll have to tell her they’re unnecessary.”

At Anur’s silence, he glanced over and was immediately suspicious of the bland expression on his brother’s face. “Because they are,” he repeated, eyes narrowing, “Entirely unnecessary.”

“Vkandis helps those who prepare for no – hey!” Anur’s attempt at a pious tone was thwarted when he spluttered, not quite dodging the mug-full of wash-water Kir tossed at him. “It’s not my contingencies that are still in play!” he said indignantly, throwing his towel at Kir’s face, putting his hands on his hips and any attempt at looking serious ruined by half his hair dripping soapy water onto his uniform.

Kir peeled the damp towel off his face and just raised an eyebrow, “And yet you’re not planning to help me tell Jaina tha – Anur!”

“Haha!” Anur cackled, dodging the whip of flame he tossed out of habit, now empty mug flying to his hands while Kir tried to wipe some of the water out of his eyes. “You should know better than to get into a throwing match with – gah!”

Fire tossed at his feet set him stumbling and he managed to turn it into a roll across the table, a gesture sending the dried mugs at Kir’s back and heducked, lunging forward to shove the table into Anur’s thighs and overbalance him across the bench – between his flailing arms and failing to retain his balance the mugs crashed onto the floor with him.

Leaning over, he didn’t have time to smirk, Anur’s feet crashing into the edge of the table and sending it tipping over to him, Kir yelping as he knocked the bench back and not able to recover before Anur lunged over the furniture to tackle him -

Any further efforts were interrupted by the door opening when the two of them crashed into the floor, Kir throwing Anur off him and scrambling to his feet, meeting Jaina and Laskaris’ incredulous looks with a bland expression of his own. “Can I help you?” he asked calmly.

The bench slowly slid out from under the table and that precarious balancing act slammed into the ground too. Anur was grumbling about how he would have won in a few more minutes – Kir would let him cling to his delusions.

“I think it can wait,” Jaina said faintly. “Do you even have another set of vestments?”
Kir looked down at his vestments, half-soaked with dirty water, and then at Anur’s uniform, though at least that was mostly black and wasn’t as obviously damp, though the sash would need to be washed.

“My formal ones?” he replied dubiously.

“You mean the ones currently being re-hemmed at the tailor’s with gold edging?” she said slowly, Laskaris raising an eyebrow and carefully taking a step away from her. Kir just returned her glare with a mild look of his own and offered Anur a hand up.

“Jaina,” he said calmly, “I went to the main morning service, and no one in the Hall gives a damn if I preside without official vestments – if it bothers you, then we can have someone else preside for the Sun Descending. We’ll wash these tonight, and Anur’s sash, and we’ll clean the kitchen. Take a deep breath, and calm down.”

“They’re important,” Jaina insisted, stepping around the drips of dish-water and inspecting Kir’s damp sleeves, “Vestments are important Kir, appearances are important here you can’t just - “

“Jaina,” he cut her off, grabbing her hands and meeting her gaze, waiting for her to take a few breaths before he continued, “Jaina, vestments are your armor. Mail and metal-plated leather are mine.”

They held gazes for a moment longer before she sighed, bowing her head slightly and saying, “My apologies. I forget, sometimes.”

“You spent years managing the Order in Sunhame under Lastern,” Kir said dryly, “Well-maintained formal vestments, elaborately adorned, were very important in those battles.”

Laskaris gave a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he accepted a mug of water from Anur and dropped some tea in – Kir had already heated the water. “That they were,” Laskaris said, “I remember Lumira and Fabron working new spells into your vestments every year.”

“And rotating through adornments between all of us so I wouldn’t attend services with the same adornments two days in a row,” Jaina huffed a quiet laugh, “I almost forgot we wouldn’t have to do that this year.”

“All I’m hearing are more and more reasons to show up to Midwinter in our oldest uniforms, covered in road mud,” Anur grumbled, righting the table and shoving the benches back into place.

“Please don’t,” Jaina chuckled, squeezing Kir’s hands before pulling back and heading for her own mug, “I might have a fit.”

“Karchanek would probably be annoyed too,” Anur said cheerfully, Kir rolling his eyes and Laskaris snorting, shaking his head.

“You hold grudges against the strangest people,” the priest commented, passing Anur a rag at his gesture, “I thought it was just your horses that hated him.”

“He was the first member of Solaris’ Council we met after finding out I was originally in line as her successor,” Kir said dryly, carefully drying his vestments before turning his attention to the random patches of water on the floor, “No longer, with Hansa here to protect her, but it was a concern apparently, and no one made it clear to him that the succession plans were no longer necessary, nor did anyone realize I had never been told.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t stab him,” Jaina told Anur, “Though thank you for not doing that, having
to cover the murder of Solaris’ Heirophant would be difficult in the extreme.”

“I wouldn’t have lethally stabbed him,” Anur groused, “Why does everyone think I’d have killed him?”

“Kir as Son of Sun?” Jaina said, raising an eyebrow, “If I’d been told about that plan, I would have been tempted to kill somebody. You’d hate it. I suppose Solaris hadn’t known you well at that point, to think it was a feasible plan, but you would have immolated yourself inside of a year.”

“Yes well, it’s not going to happen,” Kir said, shaking his head. “Hansa is here to protect her and we’ve almost talked her into declaring Markov as her successor should she die before her planned successor is of age – she’ll know them when she meets them, apparently.”

“Well that’s one way to discourage assassins,” Laskaris snorted, “Though if that gets out, Markov is the one that’s going to be targeted in her stead.”

“We’ll warn him next time we see him,” Kir shrugged, crouching down to check a newly dried spot for any residual tackiness – nothing, so it looked like just sweeping away the particles left behind when the water evaporated would take care of things. “There will always be those desperate enough to try something, the hope is just that we can keep them from succeeding or attempting anything more than once. Aside from that one coup attempt there’s been nothing, and that was entirely outside of Sunhame, so any in-Sunhame conspirators are probably still around.”

“And if they’re going to act, near her first Midwinter would be a well-timed one, dramatically speaking,” Jaina frowned, “Is that something we’re worrying about?”

“In general, certainly, but specifically, as in we’ve heard rumors or hints? No, nothing on that front yet,” Kir shrugged, “Though I wouldn’t be one to hear those things. Not with how seldom I’m here.”

“I’ll get Seras to keep his ear to the ground,” Jaina sighed, passing him a broom, “And I’ll set Henrick on it when he returns from Ruvan patrol – though I’m leaving in a few days to meet with the mercenaries that have arrived, so you might need to pass on that message.”

“If you need us for any reason, call on Kari and we’ll be on our way as fast as we can,” Kir informed her, Anur nodding agreement as he picked up the fallen mugs.

“Thank you,” she said, inclining her head slightly before looking him over again and frowning, “Speaking of adornments, I’ve been meaning to ask – what happened to your Sun in Glory? You mentioned giving it to some girl, but have you not gotten a replacement?”

Kir looked down at his robes – foolish, he knew exactly what she was talking about, but he couldn’t resist – before meeting her gaze and shrugging, “I forgot, I suppose.”

Forgot because when out of Sunhame, when with the 62nd, he wore the white Sun in Glory he’d crafted from Aelius’ hair. It was only when they drew near Sunhame’s walls that he put that Sun in Glory away, tucking it under his vest. With only six moons to go before he could wear it openly – before he would wear it openly, no matter what anyone thought because it would be far too easy for people to target Anur, to forget that he stood with his brother in all things, and wearing a Sun in Glory emblem made from the hair of a Companion would at least serve as a reminder – with only half a year to go, it hadn’t seemed urgent. But if it would make Jaina feel better, he would requisition another one.

“Actually, Eldest why did you give it away?” Laskaris asked curiously, stirring some honey into his tea, “I assumed at first it was to Anika Brersi, but then I hear you’re gifting her with sun-forged steel
“She’s learning to wield a spear,” Kir said, opening the door to sweep the dirt from his and Anur’s brawl out into the courtyard and heading for a corner to continue – he was already sweeping, might as well finish the job. “Lieutenant Kalesh is helping whenever he goes through, and there are some veterans in her town – they’re so close to Hardorn, and she would use one wisely.”

“Oh no argument there,” Laskaris agreed, “I’ve heard the story from Kavrick more than a few times, he’s very impressed with her from the times he’s visited Loshern. Maltin’s harder to get words out of but from what little he has said she’s a very impressive person. But your Sun in Glory? It was a standard issue one, I assume, but why give it away?”

“I was asked to assist a girl who had abruptly woken a mental Talent – she was drowning in it,” Kir said, keeping Laskaris in the corner of his gaze and rather heartened to see the man’s eyes tighten, but otherwise not show his discomfort with those once condemned. “Between the old etchings I’d put on the back and some string-magic modification I was able to craft a shield that held her walls long enough to teach her to maintain them herself.”

“The usual mental discipline tricks work then?” Jaina frowned, “I wouldn’t think they would though.”

“Not quite,” Kir shrugged, rolling his shoulders and feeling Anur’s tension humming against his mind even while he managed an admirable casualness, re-cleaning the mugs they’d tossed to the floor, “It’s a separate focus. It was simple luck that I was able to get to her in time – the usual protective shielding only muffles that sort of thing, not silencing it.”

“And how did you learn this?” Laskaris asked, voice tight.

He looked directly at the older man now, taking in the tense shoulders, the white-knuckled grip on his mug, and decided to be blunt. He’d given the man nearly a year to get his mind wrapped around these changes, it was time to push him further and see where he was stuck.

“I have the same witch-power,” Kir said calmly, managing to suppress the shudder at admitting such a thing aloud – at saying it at all, much less saying it in Sunhame – and tightening his grip on the broom before his hands could start shaking. “Not as powerful as hers was, or I’d have never lasted, but I could hear others with the same – and hearing them burn even after their voices were smothered was the furthest thing from enjoyable.”

Laskaris hadn’t lashed out, that was in his favor, but he was practically vibrating with tension and wouldn’t meet his eyes, instead staring intently at the wall.

“I see,” he managed.

“When you define Talents by their power source – entirely personal, entirely mental, with no allowance for reaching out for mage-power to reinforce your own reserves – under that definition, the majority of my ability with flames is a witch-power as well,” Kir continued, rocking back on his heels and not taking his eyes off Laskaris – Jaina he wasn’t too worried about, not in the potentially doing something foolish like attacking him sense anyway.

The wounded noise Jaina made at that explanation hurt, though.

“Is that the distinction?” Laskaris ground out, “The only difference?”

“Magic is broader in scope,” Anur said, taking this explanation and speaking over his shoulder, still washing mugs though Kir suspected he’d been washing the same mug for a few minutes now. “My
and Kir’s mental Talent can’t be used for scrying, or to call fire, or to move objects – all it can be used for is mental communication. A similar level of potential in a mage would allow them to learn to do any and all of those things, though probably without as much skill as I can do with that one. But yes, being able to draw on outside power versus not is the primary distinction.”

:I want you both to know I am having a quiet panic attack in my stall right now,: Aelius said sternly.

:I’ll bring you an apple,: Anur promised.

:You’d better!:

“Thank you, for explaining,” Laskaris managed, squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his jaw for a moment before continuing, “I – do not know that I will make the Sun Descending. I need to think.”

“Take as much time as you need,” Kir allowed, returning his blessing gesture and watching as the man headed out the door.

Once it swung shut behind him he sagged, bracing himself against the wall and Anur swore quietly, hunched over the sink and trembling. Jaina looked between the two of them, hands fluttering slightly before she firmed and reached towards him, taking the broom from his hands and saying, “It needed to be said, Kir.”

“Oh I know,” he managed to bite back a hysterical laugh, “Sunlord, I know – that’s the only reason I said it, frosted hells tonight is going to be terrible - “

Anur laughed weakly, looking over at him with a smile, “What, acting out your nightmares doesn’t make them disappear?”

“Ask me again in a few weeks when neither of us have been executed,” Kir scoffed, managing to hold his reaction to widening eyes when Jaina flung her arms around him. Carefully returning her hug, he said, “You’re getting your own vestments dirty now, you know.”

Her laugh was distinctly watery and he winced. Needing to say such things to Laskaris aside, he probably could have afforded to pull Jaina aside first.

“We were trained to hunt you,” she gasped into his shoulder, “You were – you had to watch and listen and know and talk strategies with us and if you hadn’t been touched with fire I would have burned you and felt righteous doing it!”

“Jaina, no, it – it wasn’t that bad,” he murmured, casting a helpless look Anur’s way and startled by the shattered horror on his face, “Anur, it wasn’t that bad – when did my life turn into something where I have to hug two people at once and don’t have enough arms?” he demanded, relief flooding him when both of them laughed, Anur walking over and Kir reached to wrap an arm around his shoulders, pressing their foreheads together and murmuring, “It wasn’t that bad, Anur. It wasn’t.”

“It was terrible and horrifying and the fact you were so used to it you can’t see that doesn’t make it less so,” Anur retorted calmly, a smile on his face nonetheless, “But that’s all right, we’ll be horrified on your behalf.”

Jaina made a wordless sound of agreement, giving him one last squeeze before pulling away, brushing away tears with her sleeve. “We will,” she agreed, before some new thought occurred to her and her eyes closed, lips tightening before she looked to them and said, “Rodri – what he can do with flames, that’s a Talent, like you?”

“Yes,” Kir said, nodding, “He has no mage-craft at all, I’m at least a journeyman in that, so I was
able to take mage-lessons and force them to work for me.”

“But no others? He won’t hear – he didn’t hear them?” she asked desperately.

“No others – and he’s never witnessed a burning,” Anur reminded her, “By the time he came to Sunhame Solaris was on her Ascent and had arranged for burnings to be turned aside or waylaid, and no one in Aulch has been burned or taken for the priesthood in two generations.”

“Really?” Kir asked, surprised and Anur shrugged.

“You find out strange things when you’re hiding from a four-year old.”

“When you’re what?” Jaina asked, the sheer incredulity in her tone wiping away those traces of horror and grief.

“Oh you’ll love this,” Kir assured her, more than willing to explain.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I rewrote things a few times but finally everything just... flowed together. In the past that's indicated when things worked, and when I tried to rewrite those flowy bits or force something else into place it just ended terribly, so I hope it works for you all too!

Warning: Next chapter, there is a high forecast of feels attacks. Consider yourself braced.
He did end up presiding over the Sun Descending, dirty vestments not withstanding. Between distracting Jaina and finishing cleaning the kitchen the whole matter had been forgotten and Kir didn’t mind. As much as it could be seen as a sign of disrespect, so much of worship of the Sunlord had turned into rituals and rites that only the worthy could perform – worthy in money, in political power, in appearance, in things that had nothing to do with true rightness, true Faith – he would take this as a sign that his Order was returning to something they had lost, where the trappings were less important than the belief behind them.

As many times as he’d given services in robes still drying from a hasty scrubbing in some bucket, or scraped off the worst of the dried mud and blood before stepping up to lead a prayer – no, he couldn’t take faint discoloration from dishwater splashes too seriously.

“Rodri,” he murmured after the dismissal hymn, waving Anur on – he’d mentioned this already, and Anur wanted to dig through the archives some more anyways, “A word.”

His student met his gaze curiously before following him into the side-room that had started serving as a small meeting room ever since they’d dragged Maltin and Kavrick in here during that first visit to Sunhame. Taking a seat, he waited for Rodri to settle in his own chair of choice and clasped his hands together, leaning forward to brace himself on his knees.

“Is this about the arrowhead?” Rodri asked, a confused sort of worry starting to form on his features, “If Enforcer Anur needs it back - “

“No, no, you won that fairly,” Kir assured him, smiling faintly at the reminder. “I simply needed to speak with you before rumors went out of control.”

“No, it’s not that I don’t have the privilege of dealing with one rumor-worthy event at a time,” Kir said dryly, shaking his head – it should be easier to say, this second time, but here he was, struggling to find words. “No, after you left, while I was speaking with Jaina and Laskaris it came up that I’d given my Sun in Glory to a girl with an out of control witch-power to help anchor her shielding long enough to teach her. In the course of it Anur and I informed them that we each have a witch-power, the mental-speech one.”

“Like what Kari can do to talk to us?” Rodri asked immediately, and Kir had to laugh, because Sunlord what a sign it was, that his first association with mental speech, with Mindspeech, was a Firecat.

“Exactly like,” he admitted quietly, “Which raises interesting questions about how it came to be seen as evil, but for the moment irrelevant. I just wanted you to be aware before it came up elsewhere, because while I doubt it will spread widely, it very well might. We are planning to be less – careful
“So people start thinking about it instead of just ignoring it,” Rodri said, hesitating before continuing, “Is that why you told Laskaris?”

“He’s been trying,” Kir replied, inclining his head slightly, “But it’s been nearly a year, and all signs point to Ancar invading this spring. I want as few secrets as possible within our Order by then.”

“Oh,” Rodri said quietly, hesitating before continuing cautiously, “Is that all?”

“Not – not quite,” Kir huffed a laugh, dragging a hand down his face before shaking it off and looking to Rodri again, going for the oblique approach, “What do you know about the difference between witch-powers – Talents – and mage-craft?”

“Ah… one means you’re definitely being burned as a witch and one means you might live?” Rodri winced, shaking his head, “No, no I remember – um. Something about mage-craft being an exercise of skill and choice and blessings from the Sunlord and Talents being forced into a particular path contrary to the Sunlord’s will? Which isn’t true, obviously but – no one’s taught us what they actually are? Except not evil?”

Kir stared at his student incredulously, because while he hadn’t expected Rodri to rattle off the distinction based on power-source, he also had expected something that wasn’t essentially a direct quote from his own first lessons in witch-hunting, disclaimers for the current political opinion aside. “Well,” he said faintly, “I suppose I’ll have to get someone on designing a curriculum then – we won’t be hunting them, but if children are brought for testing priests will still need to be able to distinguish between prophecy and empathy. When did these lessons start up?”

“Well – for the identification course it started right after Solaris’ Ascent. Most classes this year have been pretty jagged, especially that one. Basic history and sums and tithe assessments didn’t change too much – I’m very, very excited to finish with the tithe assessment courses, Father, they’re so boring – but the identification and those more affected by the reforms?” he shrugged uncomfortably, “If anyone’s made official changes to the topics or message, the instructors don’t know that yet and they’re sort of just... teaching the old stuff, but with new adjectives?”

“Right,” Kir grimaced, shaking his head, “How many are in your course right now?”

“Four of us,” Rodri said, tilting his head slightly and admitting, “That’s probably part of it. My other classes and Etrius’ seminar on priesthood-selection procedures have all been more coherently affected. I think the fact that there’s so few of us and the fact that no one really knows any of this – not without the bias of them being evil, at least – is limiting instruction.”

“Undoubtedly,” Kir agreed, drumming his fingers on his knee for a moment before focusing on the topic he’d actually been aiming to address, “Right – I’ll have to deal with that at some point, please remind me in the next few days that I need to do this.”

“Of course Father – but, what is the difference, then, if you were expecting some other answer?” Rodri asked, shifting so he was sitting cross-legged on the chair.

“It’s in power source, though focus also, so your answer isn’t entirely false,” Kir said, taking care to explain this relatively simply, as Rodri wouldn’t be familiar with the terminology associated with mage-craft, much less with Talents. “For focus – mage-craft is more a general ability to manipulate the energies of the world in various ways. You can have an inclination for something, a natural gift for some branch – Jaina took very well to protective enchantments, Laskaris has a gift for unraveling coercion webs – but that’s not the only thing they can do with magic. Technically, so long as the
power requirements are appropriate to their level, a mage can cast any spell with any focus, not limited to those areas where they’re a natural.”

“Okay,” Rodri frowned, resting his chin on his fists, “So that’s where the free-will bit came in, you can choose to focus on a particular area of magic – so if someone had a natural talent – um. Gift? For some form of mage-craft, they wouldn’t have to practice that, they could choose whatever focus they wanted – within reason?”

“Exactly,” Kir agreed, smiling ruefully at the stumble over the word talent – it would take some time for them to be able to figure out how the new title for witch-power would shift in their language.

“And Talents can’t, like you and Enforcer Anur have the mind-speaking one,” Rodri said thoughtfully, shifting to tick them off on his fingers, “So there’s the mind-speaking one, and the heart-twisting one, and seeing-unseen one, and then you said Prophecy? I thought that was a Blessed Sign, not a Talent?”

“I think there’s a distinction between the Talent for seeing glimpses of the future, and true Prophecy, but I don’t actually know the difference,” Kir admitted, “I just know that there’s a witch-power which involves glimpsing the future, having a chance to shift things or react to that knowledge – that is what the Great Traitor had, reportedly.”

At least he managed to catch himself before he referred to Herald-Captain Alberich by the conglomerate title he’d come to use as a default, and even better referred to the man in the past tense.

“Maybe Prophecy has to happen?” Rodri mused, “And you can’t change it, and the Talent one can be changed?”

“Also, a less negative name for heart-twisting would be empathy. It allows the individual to feel the emotions of others, and potentially affect them – calming down someone furious, driving someone to suicidal despair – most of my examples are negative, I’m afraid.”

“I understand,” Rodri said, nodding thoughtfully before clapping his hands together, “Right! So that’s the focus bit – Talents can’t be turned from their given purpose, or at least, not as effectively as with magic. What about the power source part?”

“Mages can draw on sources of power from the world around them – you might have heard about ley-lines or nodes?” at Rodri’s nod he continued, “That’s really the identifier of mage-craft, having the ability to access and use those energy sources – the different sources you’re capable of safely drawing from result in the classifications you’ll hear tossed about – journeyman, master, adept and so on. Talents don’t have that, they draw solely from the person’s own stores. You can increase efficiency, or endurance – it’s like exercise – your body becomes capable of more, the same thing happens with Talents, your capabilities grow with practice and time, but you’re never drawing on truly external power to fuel whatever it is you’re doing.”

Rodri had begun looking deeply disturbed partway through his explanation, so when he had finished he sat back and waited. Whatever it was that was bothering him, he’d rather hear about it now and try and work through it with him, or at least start thinking on how. He’d also take any chance to delay telling a child raised in Karse that they had a witch-power.

“One of the objections to blood-magic is that the mages in question aren’t content with the power the Sunlord granted them,” Rodri said carefully, “Why were Talents condemned, if they drew only on the person in questions power?”

“Well first you have to acknowledge that whatever got Talents condemned as evil was wrong, was
incorrect, so whatever justification is offered may very well not make sense, not any longer – but you raise an interesting point. Here’s a different question – in what case can blood magic be forgiven?"

“Clearly the answer is not never,” Rodri muttered, frowning as he looked away before hesitantly glancing back and saying, “Ari’s story? When you – when you kill yourself?”

“When you make the sacrifice yourself,” Kir corrected gently, “Not all blood-magic requires death. Old land fertility rites required offering blood to the soil – we don’t do that in Karse, officially speaking, but some still might. I wouldn’t burn them for that – I would burn them for sacrificing other lives, lives they have no right to claim.”

“Like farmers that live nearby,” Rodri said quietly.

“Or the neighborhood cats,” Kir pointed out, “Blood-magic taints the land, if it’s not done carefully, regardless of who or what is sacrificed. Burning someone immediately for sacrificing pigeons so the crops succeeded would be an overreaction, but if we found someone doing that – it would require careful thought and examination. Things can escalate so quickly – and there are no guarantees in magic, never. Ari’s story tells us that at the very beginning!”

“Magic raged, wild and twisted, and only ones hands, kin, and God could be trusted,” Rodri murmured, reciting one of the more poetic versions of Ari’s tale.

“It’s a choice, Rodri, that’s the core of it. People have the right to choose – to choose to be content with what the Sunlord gave them the ability to access, is the message that particular piece of the condemnation of blood-magic is trying to deliver. So in that sense, choosing to be content with being a journeyman versus being content with having a Talent that lets you hear people’s unshielded thoughts are similar.”

“Oh,” Rodri said, looking abruptly concerned and tilting his head slightly, “If that song – the humming. It’s loud, and it’s just things – you said people are louder. Is that because of the thoughts too?”

“Undoubtedly that’s a part of it,” Kir agreed, “But my mental Talent isn’t strong, I can’t hear someone that has no Talent of their own, and then they have to be – quite loud, and unshielded themselves. The hum is different.”

“But it’s still a witch-power,” Rodri said, voice small and knuckles white, “That’s what – that’s the rumors you mean. Your knack for fire – our knack for fire it’s – it’s a witch-power. That’s why it’s so different from everyone else’s tricks for fire.”

“A Talent,” he corrected gently, “But yes.”

“I – I guessed, something was different,” Rodri murmured, hunching in on himself and a curl of fire appearing between his palms, “I mean – it had to be, for it to be so – for fire to make so much sense, but when I came here Sister Jaina and Father Seras they took one look at it – at me, and they knew it was like yours. That we were the same. So I didn’t think it was that.”

“Mental Talents were the ones that immediately condemned,” Kir said, shifting to kneel in front of his student and reaching up to cradle his own flame near Rodri’s. “Those that were physical – that affected things visible in the world, those were easier to use and subsume under priestly attributes and not worry about the individual’s chance to threaten those in power, because they were limited as individuals. Empaths, mind-speakers, people with prophecy – they could galvanize a population, they could affect crowds, and crowds are always dangerous.”
“I remember,” Rodri said quietly, gaze locked on their flames.

“As far as I can tell, you don’t have any others,” Kir said finally, looking up from his flames to his student’s face, “That may change, you’re still growing – but I think this fire-talent is all you’ll be stuck with.”

“...I’m glad,” he confessed, sounding near ashamed and Kir let his flames dispel, wrapping his hands around Rodri’s and waiting for him to meet his eyes before replying.

“Be glad, Rodri. Be thrilled – it’s what you have, and you’re using it well. There’s no need for anything more,” he murmured. He waited for Rodri to nod, ducking his head and smiling slightly, flame between his hands fading away.

“Are you going to be all right?” he asked finally, Rodri nodding again and only then did he rise to his feet. “If you need me, find me – or Anur, he can reach me anywhere. But for the moment, if you’re truly all right I need to go find Laskaris.”

“I’ll be all right,” Rodri said, standing and smiling up at him before admitting, “Probably. But I’ll let you know if I need anything. Thank you for telling me Father, and for explaining.”

“Of course, Rodri,” Kir murmured, squeezing his shoulder before heading out. He had some idea of where he would find Laskaris, though he didn’t quite know what he was going to say to the man. All he knew was that he needed to make some effort to reach out, even if to just assure the man he could take all the time he needed to think.

In theory. In practice, Laskaris needed to have most things squared away by next Midsummer or the next set of reforms would damn near crush him.

He let one hand trail along the wall as he headed down the stairs, crafting a small orb of fire to hover in front of him for lighting. There wasn’t much down here – with no access point to the catacombs, the Hall’s sublevel had remained for the Firestarting Order alone, and as all Firestarters were burned upon their death there were none of the bone-rooms typical to the underground structures of the District.

Turning left, he headed down the corridor that ringed the sub-level – there were a few rooms down here, primarily for relic storage but the focal point of this level – the central point for the Hall, truly, lay under the Incendiary’s seat in the entry hall. Rounding the corner, he let his flame die. It was unnecessary, the sconces flanking the bronze and copper adorned wooden door to the Trial always held lit torches, fueled by the same working that contained the chamber’s firestorm.

Laskaris was seated across from the door, leaning against the stone wall and staring up at the carved Sun in Glory, empty mug beside him and Kari sprawled across his legs.

Kir rapped his knuckles on the wall, Laskaris only inclining his head slightly but that was enough. He sat down next to him, keeping the mug and some space between them because he didn’t know this man, not really, but he knew what staring at this door could lead to.

“Do you want to take the Trial one day?” Kir asked finally, keeping his own gaze on the half-circle eyes of bronze and gold inlaid in the wall. They had always flickered in the firelight of the ever-burning torches, but he fancied it was more dramatic when a person was around to see.

Laskaris scoffed, shaking his head and continuing to card his fingers through Kari’s fur, “I completed the Second Order trial two years ago and have spent little to no time working with fire since – my coercion web studies have been used far more. Walking through those doors would be suicide.”
Kir hummed an acknowledgement but pointed out, “Yes, that is true now. But one day, do you want it?”

“For what purpose?” Laskaris shook his head, “Two First Order Firestarters is enough, and you are younger than me beside – I would never hold the post of Incendiary, and eligibility for that promotion is the only thing I can see as a benefit to the rank.”

“Ah,” Kir managed, chuckling slightly, “I suppose that is fair. I never thought much on the uses of being First Order Firestarter, beyond being able to browbeat some of the other chaplains and priests that came to the northern stretches and bothered my unit.”

“It’s all you’ve ever been,” Laskaris shook his head, “I’d been in the middle of considering training for the Second Order Trials when you were ordained – when Seras confirmed that Verius had recommended you for First Order Trials – I was convinced you’d been marked for death.”

“That was rather the point, I suspect,” Kir admitted, “Aside from Jaina and Verius – maybe Bron, but we didn’t speak much of fire. I doubt anyone expected me to live. That got us time to put other things into place.”

“Such as Jaina’s ascent,” Laskaris snorted, “Quite a few egos were bruised when she took the mantle of Incendiary. Most outside the order expected Seras or Colbern to finally take the Trial. That surprise bought us time too. She credited her survival to your help, you know.”

“Oh?” Kir blinked, honestly surprised at that, “I suppose she helped me with my own training for it, and I told her what I could of my interpretation but – it never seemed useful, to anyone else.”

“That must have been frustrating.”

“It was,” Kir admitted, looking over at the man and raising an eyebrow, “That tone spoke of experience. The coercion-webs?”

“Lumira and I started studying them together before we were claimed for Firestarting,” Laskaris said, scowling, “The sheer volume of times – there were nets laid throughout the District, students would run into them and they were traps, most of the time. Seldom harmless. It was frustrating, and dangerous, and if they believed us that they were there, they would just say priests needed strength of mind.”

“Are there still any?” Kir asked, knowing his tone was cold, was threatening, but the very idea of any of his people walking into a net and losing their free will made his blood run to ice.

“Every time I came to Sunhame I would clear out the ones I could find,” Laskaris shook his head, “The ones I’ve cleared out since Solaris’ Ascent haven’t been replaced – and when I was able to identify the people placing them I would pass the word to Elder Jaina, and they would be dealt with somehow.”

“Good,” Kir said shortly, feeling his lips twist into a snarl before he shook it off. Infuriating, yes, but he had come here for another purpose.

“I can feel it, when a web snags my mind,” Laskaris said finally, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably, lips thinning, “It’s – sticky is the best way I’ve found to describe it, but that is so lacking. I know my mind, my thoughts, and when they alter I know. Lumira helped me burn out the first one when we stumbled into them, and she was targeted for that sort of thing to begin with. It was all the motivation we needed but trying to explain some of the things I just understood to her – it was so very frustrating, to find her staring at me blankly when I knew, just knew that what I had said...”
“Interesting,” Kir mused, eyes narrowing. “And witch-powers – Talents, I’ve got to stop doing that – that affect the mind are less detectable?”

“By magic, certainly,” Laskaris agreed, shaking his head, “But that is an excuse. I have no traumatic experiences or hard evidence to support my bias. I just – for them to use their abilities, they have to mentally influence others. Any use – any at all – affects the minds and hearts of other people and how can – it’s not right.”

“With the right spoken words, you can affect minds too,” Kir pointed out, frowning thoughtfully though because he had a point, “I suppose the question then, is in what scenario would using the ability to affect minds be acceptable to you. Are there any?”

“No,” Laskaris snarled, finally looking away from the door to glare at him before looking down at the Firecat sprawled on his lap and deflating, “Maybe?”

“The mental Talent I have – it allows me to hear people who project their thoughts as conversation – I can hear Kari, and others with the Talent, but no one else, not unless they’re under extreme distress and I am too.”

“Like when you’re burning someone alive and you doubt their guilt,” Laskaris said dryly, Kir snorting and nodding an acknowledgment before continuing.

“Perhaps I could insert some phrase or dialogue into someone’s mind but I don’t think so – is the conversing aspect of it acceptable to you?”

“Can someone get away?” Laskaris asked promptly. “Can someone get out of range? I assume so, but for physical speech – if you leave the room, the building at the worst, you don’t have to listen to someone spew bile at you. If someone were under verbal assault with this mind power of yours, would they have to leave the building or the town?”

“For me, the building probably, but I haven’t exactly cultivated it – it’s possible to get a boost, Kari has done that so Anur and I can speak when we’re separated by some mel,” Kir replied frankly, taking in Laskaris’ apparent objection to the talent and understanding, really.

“Right, but it could be worse,” Laskaris said, accepting that with a grimace, shaking his head, “And how could one prove it? We can identify mental talents sometimes, but with our right to interrogate and accuse taken away, could we even intervene if someone was suffering that? The victim wouldn’t report it, even if now they wouldn’t be burned by some over-enthusiastic imbecile for hearing other voices in their minds, they could be compelled to remain silent through some sort of coercion – magical or otherwise.”

Kir leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and thinking that over, because it raised a good point. Witch-powers weren’t policed now – now people with them weren’t even required to become part of the priesthood or receive training unless they or their parents asked for it – hells, the way Solaris had announced things priests couldn’t even approach parents to tell them their child might have a Talent, the parents had to approach the priest for testing.

Which could lead to some disastrous incidents.

“It sounds like,” he began carefully, “What you find most disturbing is the ease with which witch – damn and blast, Talented individuals – could slip through the cracks and use their abilities in immoral ways, either via lack of training and good intentions or malicious intent from the start.”
“At least physical crimes there is a chance for evidence to be presented,” Laskaris agreed, “It doesn’t mean the person is listened to, or that the perpetrator is caught or punished, but at least there is a chance. A heart-twister could drive someone to suicide or murder and never fall under suspicion. One of those future-seers could arrange for their enemy to take a walk into an avalanche, or a bandit raid, or a fire – and everyone would say oh so sad, what a coincidence. You know this, you mentioned that heart-twister in the Sunsguard, when would that ever be acceptable?”

“When a panicked crowd is about to turn into a mob trampling the children in their midst – project calm, and proceed with an orderly evacuation,” Kir replied promptly. Admittedly, the only reason he could rattle that scenario off so quickly was because he had asked much the same to Anur some time ago. Valdemaran history was full of stories where Heraldic Gifts saved the day, and even had a few where they went wrong – before their story swap Kir only had the latter and the bone-deep certainty that those stories weren’t all there were.

“I suppose that would have helped extract Rodri,” Laskaris muttered, the admission sounding like it cost him deeply and Kir smiled wryly.

“At that moment, my fire was enough to intimidate them but yes, that is one place it could have been used. Heart-twisting – I was thinking empathy for a name that isn’t so negative, by the by – is the one I have the most trouble justifying – but if the Sunlord crafted people with that Talent, there must be some purpose.”

“Because it’s not a warping to evil,” Laskaris grumbled, “Which made understanding why it existed much easier.”

“Certainly,” Kir agreed, spreading his hands helplessly, “Condemning what we cannot understand or do ourself is always easier. But why would mage-craft be any different? Be any easier to detect?”

“I don’t know,” Laskaris ground out, hand not resting on Kari’s fur clenching into a fist and shaking, “I don’t – it was trainable, it was something we could see and it was accepted so I didn’t think of the similarities!”

Kir waited, leaning back against the wall and looking back to the door of the Trial room. He had pushed hard enough for the moment, and Laskaris was seeing and acknowledging the inconsistencies in his beliefs. He hadn’t come here to force Laskaris to make progress.

“I did not mean to push you harder,” Kir finally murmured, smiling wryly, “My whole purpose coming to find you was to assure you that you could take as much time as you needed to think this over, but instead I push harder. My apologies.”

Laskaris huffed, eyeing him sidelong and saying, “As long as I need? I doubt that, Eldest.”

“Let’s not push it past next Midsummer, hmm?” Kir suggested. Laskaris only groaned and let his head drop back against the wall.

“Midsummer,” the man said after a few long moments. “Well. At least it’s not Midwinter.”

“Oh no, for Solaris’ anniversary? Best that stay as calm and stable as possible,” Kir shook his head, “Or at least that’s the logic I heard.”

“Lull them all into a false sense of security,” Laskaris grinned suddenly, the expression taking years off his face and Kir was startled to realize he’d never actually seen the man smile before, “I might have to start placing bets outside the Order. I can probably get a few good favors out of it.”

Kir snorted, shaking his head and pushing himself to his feet, taking Laskaris’ empty mug with him.
“If you want to discuss these things again, I would gladly do so – you raise good points about accountability, saying that these abilities aren’t evil doesn’t remove the need for identification and instruction, so something will have to be developed.”

“I don’t like it still,” Laskaris shook his head, not moving from his own post and looking back to the door. “I don’t think I ever will, but if there were something in place – I would at least feel better about it. Thank you for your time, Eldest – and when your vestments are done, leave them in the Hall. Lumira and Fabron have gotten very good at weaving protection spells into existing brocade.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kir said, inclining his head to the pair and walking away, letting a streamer of flame light his way this time. Laskaris had been heard, knew he had been heard, and showed no signs of walking through those doors and letting the flames take him.

He wasn’t going to lose any of his Firestarters without a fight.

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It was a gaudy monstrosity and wearing it would give anyone neck-cramps, of that Anur was certain. Why would anyone even make this thing?

:Maybe if it’s anchored to your robes it’s less of a burden?: Aelius asked dubiously, :More than five gemstones, take a swig:.

“I might have been generous when I set the rules for this,” Anur mumbled aloud, taking a swig of his prodka splashed tea and setting the Sun in Glory medallion aside. Kir just snorted from where he was stretched out on their bed sorting through his own pile of adornments. Jaina had given them a box of potential Sun in Glory replacements from what had to be a horrific hoard somewhere in the depths of the Hall, with strict instructions to choose their top three so she could pick between them tomorrow.

They’d already found the first one – a literal duplicate of the standard Sun in Glory issued to every priest upon their ordaining, and exactly what Kir had given away minus the carved modifications – but the next two were a challenge, particularly as neither of them quite dared to pick the two most hideous ones in the hopes Jaina would leave them with the plain one.

She would definitely pick something terrible just to spite them if they tried that.

“You don’t even have to wear the things,” Kir grumbled, eyeing the intertwined rose and plain gold that made up the chain for the one he’d pulled from the box. Plenty of tigers-eye, maybe opals for the eyes on the Sun Disk itself, but in comparison remarkably tasteful.

:Just be seen next to you,: Anur teased, tossing his previous horror into the discard pile. “Think we can have these melted down and converted for the treasury?”

“Hopefully some of them,” Kir agreed, “Depends on the history of the pieces.”

“Nothing but death, despair and neck-cramps, I’m sure,” Anur scoffed, shaking his head and grabbing a promisingly plain chain from the pile, carefully untangling it and promptly gagging.

It was encrusted with clear crystals – hopefully not diamonds, that would be truly excessive – and what he suspected were actually peridots. That was a definite no.

Kir huffed a laugh, shaking his head and saying, “Read the letter on the desk instead.”

Anur reached over his head and felt around for a folded letter – snagging it with his fingertips he
hauled it down in front of him and raised an eyebrow at the slanted hand. “Your brother?” he asked, surprised, “You want me to read this?”

“It at least gives me somewhere to start,” Kir said bleakly.

Anur frowned and set his mug aside, pulling himself to his feet and sitting down next to Kir, tangling their fingers together before asking, “Start for what?”

“For what sort of nightmares are going to be waking us up tonight,” Kir said, sounding exhausted. “Half the reason I told Laskaris today was to at least have a shot of mixing things up a bit.”

“Whatever injured Lukas,” Anur murmured, frowning.

“Whatever,” Kir snorted, a bitter sort of grief in his voice, face turned away from him, “Whoever, would be more accurate. I can’t – I can’t say it, Anur, I can’t just tell it, it’s been – it’s been decades. Read it. Please.”

:Oh I don’t like this at all,: Anur said to Aelius, unfolding the letter with one hand and judicious use of Fetching, because he wasn’t letting go of Kir.

:We’d best go for a ride tomorrow, because being stuck in the stables for all of this is terrible.: 

:Agreed.: 

The hand was slashing, but readable – if anything it resembled Kir’s script, though Kir’s was neater, a little more careful.

Little brother,

Kiara has agreed to carry this letter to you, and if you don’t want to come home she’ll take me to you one day and that is non-negotiable. I refuse to have my last memory of you be that Firestarter dragging you screaming through those ashes if there’s some other option.

She’ll tell you father disappeared, presumed dead. Presumed suicidal, is what she means but doesn’t know enough to say – he lasted long enough to see Kiara safe from being taken to the priesthood, but that’s all he was waiting for. That burning broke him.

One of those healer-priests came through in the days after you were taken – I don’t remember this, but I’ve been told it enough. The man managed to save my arm, but it’s mangled – my wrist has limited movement, all but one finger have a permanent bend and I can’t fully clench a fist either, but it’s enough to get by. My ribs were fully healed and the arm is the only long-term damage I suffered, though most of my right side aches with weather shifts. I was able to retain my apprenticeship at the shipyard and am a master shipbuilder now, one of three. The Sundancer was one of my projects, actually.

Father considered you dead the moment that thing burned. Ma considered you dead the moment the priest dragged you off. We all did, really, because we’d never hear from you or of you again. I don’t think Kiara even knew you had existed until she was seven or so, we just – never spoke of the hole in our family. It wasn’t fair to her, father called her Kir half the time and nana tried to force her into knotwork for years when she hated trying to track all those strings, but she managed.

Sunlord Kir, when Kiara came to me with stories she’d overheard of a Firestarter not acting like a fire-breathing mad man who might or might not be named Dinesh – I didn’t sleep for weeks. I still think I’m dreaming half the time, when I walk into the Temple and hear no rhetoric on witches, when I hear people wondering about Sunhame without being drenched in fear – I’m terrified that
I’m going to wake up and it’s all going to be gone, you’ll still be as good as dead, people will still be choking on terror every time a priest looks our way and everyone will scoff at the very idea of a Firestarter not being a terror.

But I have to try. Please brother, come home.

Lukas

Anur carefully set the letter aside and equally carefully did not think about the questions that letter had prompted, about the lump in his throat at the idea of – at the description -

He buried his face in Kir’s hair, breathing harshly and felt Kir’s hands tangle in his shirt. His brother was alive, he could hear his mind crackling against his, feel his chest rise and fall, and had no reason at all to think his brother had disappeared in the past few minutes. But that letter -

“Kir,” he finally breathed, finally was able to voice a question, to do what his brother had asked in the first place, “Kir, why were you screaming? Who burned, and why did it break your father? Who hurt your brother, and why?”

“His name,” Kir managed, voice strangled and shaking, “His name was Wes. I think – I think the Companion’s name was Seraphi.”

:Oh, Chosen…:

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Kir hadn’t let himself think of details in – in decades, at the least, but more honestly ever. He couldn’t, he’d made a deal with Verius and he couldn’t break it, he couldn’t afford to -

“Cease your hysterics, come quietly, and I’ll send a healer to your brother – that was the boy with you, yes? Your older brother? A pity if his arm is lost, few traders take a one-armed apprentice - “

Anur made a wounded noise, arms tightening and Kir realized his shields weren’t fully up, weren’t steady he was pressing memories into Anur’s mind but if he stopped he’d have to say it, he’d have to speak of it and he couldn’t Sunlord, working up the nerve to say – to admit – Laskaris would never harm them, could never harm them he would crush him if he tried but the words the admission he’d still choked on it still barely managed to say -

Aelius called for Anur again, :Chosen, you need to shield, he can’t, you need to at least separate a bit - :

:CHOSEN!: he heard searing across his mind and he choked, fires blazing white-hot and Wes – the monster, the demon rider the witch – was dead, he was gone he wasn’t screaming anymore but someone else was and he’d just wanted the screaming. To. Stop.

:You killed him! YOU KILLED HIM!: the voice couldn’t shut up and he heard screaming why was there so much screaming everything was so loud.

“Kir! Kir, listen to me, hear my voice, please, let me help you,” Anur was whispering, hands shaking as they cradled his face, foreheads pressed together, “You’re safe, I’m here, no one is screaming, brother, please. Talk to me.”

“His name was Wes – he was a tinker,” Kir managed, shuddering, “My father – they were friends I remember him coming by – for meals, when he was in town, or hitching rides on the ships, when they went the right way. He wasn’t odd, wasn’t out of place he was – he was Karsite. But he wasn’t,
he couldn’t – Verius found him. I don’t know how, not – I don’t know how. But he found him, and he – he was burned.”

“Deception, lies – let the falsehoods be burned away,” the Firestarter said, flames starting to crackle and his voice echoing and Kir couldn’t – he was supposed to agree with priests, he knew that, priests were right, always, never say otherwise -

:Run Seraphi, please run escape you can still run - :

:Chosen no! We can both flee, we can both run there’s a chance, just keep trying at those ropes, please !:

Wes wasn’t – hadn’t seemed evil. Nana said evil hid, though, so maybe Wes had just hid really well? Maybe that was why a Firestarter had to find him instead if Father Yanci? They were supposed to hunt evil, he thought. Hunt it and burn it out. But they were so loud and so scared, why would evil things be scared?

He could smell the flames-on-flesh, pirates had been burned last winter and Wes had turned away – maybe that was the clue? That he hadn’t watched pirates-monsters-evil get burned and been happy, because he was evil too?

Lukas was shaking – Elisia wasn’t. Kir couldn’t quite see past Nana to Ma and father, but they were holding hands and Ma didn’t usually like that -

The screams were so loud, they were loud and it smelt and the fire was – fire was pretty, it was warm why were they screaming -

Suddenly he was wrenched out of the memory, able to watch without falling back in as his younger self worked out that the fire was too slow, that the screams were going to last far too long and they were all far too loud and if he just took the fire he could feel like warmth against his skin – nonsensical, he’d been too far away to feel that degree of warmth, not with the flames barely licking Wes’ flesh but he’d been seven and about to actively control fire for the first time in his life.

He could hear ragged breathing, and recognized it as his own, opening his eyes – when had he closed them? - and seeing Anur hunched over him, palms pressed against the side of his head and eyes shut, chin bowed and breathing slowly.

Anur must have pulled him out of it, Kir realized, though he was still remembering events – distorted from memory, from time – the screams were so much louder in his mind than they ever could have been, the Companion so much larger, so much brighter, than she could have been to have hidden in Karse for any length of time – but the story was the same, was true.

“The screaming was so loud,” he said, Anur shuddering but not shifting away. “I don’t know how I did it, how I knew what to do – but I set the flames to blazing, to white-hot and hoped the screams would stop, that it would be over quicker but Seraphi – the Companion she’d still hoped to save him...”

“She couldn’t have,” Anur choked out, shaking his head, “If he hadn’t freed himself from the ropes already – if she didn’t have allies waiting in the wings – she wouldn’t have been able to save him, not if he’d become known as a Herald.”

“She broke,” Kir said faintly, “She broke and people – people died. More people died. She knew I was – she knew I had done it, you see, I had taken that hope away and she -”

“She charged you,” Anur murmured, undoubtedly seeing it as it played out again in his mind, “She
trampled anyone in her way – she must have been hiding in an alley somehow, managed to sneak close but – oh, Kir no wonder you thought he was dead!”

Lukas had seen the danger coming, Kir remembered, Kir knew deep in his bones because he’d been seven, frantic and terrified from the enraged screaming beating against his mind and scalding his senses and half-way to screaming himself. He was in no condition to notice a blazingly white horse charge towards them with maddened blue eyes, but Lukas was, and somehow guessed or knew or just suspected the target.

Silver hooves had flashed and crashed down and his brother’s right side had taken the blow, blood and bone spattering while Elisia lashed out with her hair-pin and his mother had her knitting needles and father had a cane – nana had dragged him away and near tossed him aside and Kir -

He had answered that terror with fire. Looking back, remembering now, he wasn’t sure if the buzzing he heard echoing in that memory was imagined from what he knew he would have heard, had he been aware of the hidden fire in everything or if it was the first time he’d heard that buzz, and the last until it had broken free in his teens.

The creature – because she had been, at that point, a Companion he knew now, not a demon, not evil, but maddened with grief and pain and no longer coherent or rational or sane – she had died in a burst of flame and been reduced to ashes in minutes – Kir had barely managed to try and make his way to Lukas – watched over by his father, his ma and nana and Elisia trying to keep him alive and the crowd scattered and watching and so wary -

Verius had grabbed him them, hauled him off by the arm and he didn’t remember screaming, but he must have, because by the time he rounded the burning platform Verius had lost patience and slapped him across the face, grabbing his chin in the sudden silence and yanking his head round to meet his eyes, blue eyes so brilliantly cold in that childhood recollection.

And they had made their deal.

Lukas was alive – he hadn’t known, hadn’t dared ask because what if Verius decided to back out? What if the healing had only been half-done and any misstep on his part meant Lukas died, or was crippled, or was shoved into an icy lake? It was absurd, looking back, because why would Verius bother going to that effort after a healing, the easiest thing would be to make that promise and never follow through because how would Kir know – but his younger self – his current self, any self of his – hadn’t wanted to think that. Hadn’t wanted to assume Lukas had died there, maimed and murdered in his defense by the White Demon – Companion , she’d been a Companion he knew Companions, Aelius was no monster Harevis had seemed fine, Glenn had been so worried but not mad -

Verius had kept his bargain, miracle of miracles, and Lukas was alive. He hadn’t made that deal in vain.

“He’s alive,” Kir repeated, said again, would say a hundred times because he had never dared hope that Lukas had lived. “He’s alive. Verius kept his word.”

“He did,” Anur agreed, “He did Kir, Lukas is – your brother is alive.”

“All my brothers are alive,” Kir said, opening his eyes again and meeting Anur’s gaze, smiling faintly, “Both of my brothers are alive, and Sunlord willing I’ll never have to doubt that again.”

“I’ll do my best,” Anur promised, his relief crashing down on Kir in waves and he yanked Anur down next to him, burying his face in his chest and shuddering. He couldn’t even tell why, the motion was practically convulsive but he was terrified and relieved and so desperately sad – too late,
always too late, it was a tradition, on both sides and his father had watched his soul-brother burn to ash and how could he have borne waiting thirteen years to join him -

He had no idea how long it took him to fall asleep, had no idea how long he had lain there, empty-minded and shaking, but eventually darkness swallowed him up and he barely had a thought to spare to hope for a dreamless sleep.

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Anur waited for Kir to fall asleep, to be truly unconscious for long enough that the jagged, wild sparks and guttering contact against his mind smoothed out a bit, before he reached fully for Aelius, sinking into his Companion’s bond and love and support and letting himself ache. Aelius had tried to help them, but even his few words to Anur during Kir’s mix of flashback and night-terror and old, newly raw grief had caused Kir pain and neither of them could bear that.

:Aelius, Aelius what do we do – how did this happen?: he asked, feeling lost and adrift and hating every second of it even as he felt tears start to fall, curling tighter around Kir.

:Wes – I never knew him, or Seraphi but I heard about the program. He was one of four, helped by Herald Alberich to become truly Karsite in persona, and sent behind the lines during the Tedrel Wars – he was the only one to die in Karse afterwards. No one knew – well, people knew he’d been caught, that he’d been burned, but no one knew details. No one was really close with him after the Wars.: 

:He was Karsite:, Anur echoed Kir’s half-hysterical thoughts, :He was – I’m Karsite, at this point, hells I’m more at home in Sunhame than in Haven, that could have been – that could have been me.: 

:I’d have killed Verius, not the boy you screamed your mind and pain into. And I wouldn’t have done it in public, where White Demons would be recognized and vilified forever in the minds of the locals. He’d have lived until he left town, was out of sight, and then he’d have died, trampled and screaming and I’d have dragged his corpse into the wilderness so he vanished, and all evidence of his triumph had disappeared,: Aelius replied, voice dark. 

:You were going to do that to Cristan,: Anur realized, :If Kir hadn’t come.: 

:If I hadn’t been able to get you out, I’d have been mad with grief and rage,: Aelius agreed, :But not so mad as to target innocents. Henri would have escaped, for example. But Cristan himself, those who had traveled with him? No. I would have killed every last one before letting myself die. But Chosen, I’ve trained to deal with those worst scenarios, if Seraphi hadn’t – she’d be far from the first, to have gone so mad.: 

:I don’t blame her,: Anur said, heartbroken because Sunlord what a blasted mess this whole thing was, :I can’t blame her – or Wes – or even Verius – except he slapped Kir and made Lukas’ life a bargaining chip I can blame him for that the absolute bastard - : 

:I’ll trample his right side, you light his left side on fire?: 

:Deal. But for – for doing what he though was his job, I don’t blame Jaina or Laskaris or even Seras – well, okay some I blame Seras for but not the ones he burned for witchcraft – I can’t blame him for that. I can be upset that he didn’t think otherwise – that he went along with Sunhame but – but I can’t blame him. I can’t blame any of them – Aelius, the situation was – is – oh we’re walking into such a mess.:
Chosen, at this point, if we weren’t walking into a mess I’d be wondering what terror is lurking around the corner.: Aelius said, sounding wry and exhausted at the same time and Anur could completely relate.

:Kir’s going to think I’ll hate him,: he finally admitted, mental voice small and he felt absolutely miniscule, like absolute scum because that fear and resignation had been lurking in Kir’s mind and in his horror and disgust at the situation he was watching, at the story he was hearing – not with Kir, never with Kir – he hadn’t recognized it until later, hadn’t known what to say and hadn’t – he hadn’t told Kir there was nothing to worry about, that he understood, that he was sorry.

:Never,: Aelius said staunchly, and Anur was so, so lucky that he had a Companion who understood, who wasn’t jealous or confused or even questioning why he had latched onto this Sunpriest so hard, had built so much of their lives around this man. :You could never. Be angry, certainly, be frustrated, naturally, but never hatred. Not of Kir.: 

:I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but it must have been amazing,: Anur said, letting all his love and awe and thankfulness – gratefulness, thank the Sunlord this was his Companion, that Aelius understood – echo through their bond.

Aelius only chuckled, warmth and love and certainty washing back over him.

:Oh Chosen, it’s not deserving – it’s simply something you receive. We’ll go riding tomorrow, all of us, and we’ll get Kari to take us somewhere remote and empty once we’re out of sight of Sunhame, and I’ll be an overbearing four-legged nuisance until you and Kir straighten this out – or at least actually talk about it, beyond half-terrified venting.: 

:....I don’t know that we’ll make it out of Sunhame composure intact.: 

:Then Riva and I will mysteriously vanish and reappear in our stalls, and the Mystery of the Two Horses shall continue – trust me, I have been having schemes all my own out here. But in the meantime, rest Chosen. I’ve gotten Kari to teach me how to guard dreams, and I can manage for at least one night.: 

:You mean half of one night,: Anur said dryly, grateful again for mindspeech because speaking around the lump in his throat would be impossible.

:Well, a little over half, technically.: 

Chapter End Notes

So this Wes and Seraphi twist has been the plan since... uh... since I realized Kir and Anur had more than one story in them? It was honestly one of the first bits of Kir's backstory I developed, helped along by a reread of Exile's Honor and finding descriptions of the four Heralds Alberich helped make 'Karsite'. So hopefully you like it. Have fun tracking all the hints I layered in for the Companion/Herald burning source of Kir's trauma!

And this honestly was part of my hesitation over going through with the spontaneous Marcus/Markov twist, because I worried it would seem too forced to have the same sort of relationship in the previous generation on BOTH sides - and then I figured hell with it, it flowed so well it HAD to be true. So. Family tradition - on both sides!
It was well into the following afternoon before Anur was remotely ready to bring any of it up again.

Aelius was lying on the ground, letting them lean into his side and Kir was half-asleep against Anur’s shoulder, Anur keeping one arm draped over Aelius’ back so he could tangle his fingers in his mane and the other hooked around Kir’s waist. Kari had brought them here this morning – to a traveler’s chapel northeast of Lumira’s congregation, well into the dead-zone bordering all of Hardorn and used almost exclusively by Firestarters on patrol. Henrick had just restocked a few days ago before departing so there was little danger of anyone stumbling across them.

If anyone had been heading this way, the low-lying firestorm that had appeared the moment Kari let them stumble out of his Fetching would have sent them walking the other way. Anur had immediately latched onto Kir, half out of worry Kir would fall over, he was shaking so hard, and at least a quarter out of worry that without physical contact Kir wouldn’t realize he too was standing in the middle of the firestorm, please don’t burn his hair, thank you.

By the time it had subsided, golden-red licks of flame still dancing across Kir’s skin – across his own skin, and hadn’t that been unnerving, to see washes of flame skitter across his hands and his sleeves and leave nothing but warmth behind – Aelius, Riva and all their tack and his and Kir’s packs had arrived, Kari sitting on the pile of assorted gear and looking vaguely smug. But that was a default cat expression, so Anur hadn’t read much into it.

Flames still flickered into existence every so often, but mostly they were confined to the charred swath of earth in front of them. Some still showed up tangled in Kir’s fingers or shimmering across his sleeves and Anur was not entirely certain how Kir was keeping these seemingly involuntary fire-surges from burning him too but he would take it. Letting Kir go wasn’t an option at this point.


“I would argue sixteen, if you have to count Wes as your own,” Anur murmured, “Seraphi attacked you and your brother – that was self-defense, regardless of her being a horse-shaped person instead of a people-shaped person. Without Verius there, you wouldn’t have burned him, but I understand if you still count him as on your hands. I don’t agree, but I understand.”

“I’m glad my father’s not going to be there,” his whisper sounded guilty, sounded ashamed, and Anur wanted to punch the entire country of Karse in the face. All of Karse.

“That’s fair,” Anur said quietly. “I don’t think I could treat anyone who hurt you rationally, unknowingly or not, decades ago or not. Sunlord, Kir, everything about – this is all a mess. Everything - “ he laughed abruptly, hiding his face in Kir’s hair, “Kir you’re a miracle, how could you have smiled at me in that stable and offered a truce.”

“I hate the screaming,” Kir said immediately, shuddering, “I hate it, I hate them so much -”

“Easy, easy Kir, it’s quiet here,” Anur murmured, using the bizarre mental twist-pull he’d figured out last night with faint help from Aelius and lucky guesses to dull the sudden shrieks echoing in Kir’s mind. It was strange, because he’d heard those screams in Kir’s nightmares before, but he’d never heard the words, not until last night and now he could hardly avoid hearing them.
They weren’t all Seraphi. They weren’t all Wes.

Fourteen Talented – how many had been mindspeakers? How many had he burned himself, hearing their screams in his mind and only knowing to burn them faster, quicker, hotter so the screaming would stop? How many had he been unable to mute even in that way, because he was watching someone else’s Igniting and was forbidden from helping?

“Well, I’ll admit,” Anur finally said, letting himself smile, “I’m a little disappointed it wasn’t my sheer charm and charisma.”

When Kir choked on a laugh and ended up giggling half-hysterically into his chest, he considered it a victory. On Kir’s around-gasps reply of, “It was the hair, how could I possibly burn it?” he barked his own laugh and let himself grin, shaking his head.

“I knew it!” he said smugly, making a point of running his fingers through his hair in the most absurdly preening way he could manage. Kir wasn’t really looking up at him, so most of the effect was lost, but Aelius appreciated it he was sure.

:Oh of course Chosen, amazing.: 

:I know!: 

Kir hissed, suddenly tensing and Anur immediately shifted to focus on Kir again, “Are you all right?” he asked aloud, before remembering their earlier discovery on the new weakness in their shielding and wincing, “Ah, you heard that? Sorry, I thought we had shielded enough for the physical-contact relay to not get to you.”

“Well this is the first time all three of us have been in physical contact and you and Aelius have tried to mindspeak without me – actually I think this is one of the first times all three of us have been in physical contact at all,” Kir huffed a laugh, “It’s not something that would come up. I’m fine, Anur, just – startled. It shouldn’t bother me – it hasn’t for so long I don’t know why – well. No, I understand that telling that story would bring things up I’ve tried to lock away for years, but I don’t understand why it would hurt.”

“Mindspeech hurts you?” Anur asked, aghast because how could he have not noticed that? Upset Kir, yes he had realized that quickly, but actual immediate pain?

“Not always,” Kir grimaced, shaking his head, shifting back to meet Anur’s gaze, “Not ever, really, not with you and Aelius – last night, when I was hearing… Aelius’ voice hurt then. You noticed that.”

“We did,” Anur agreed, Aelius physically bobbing his head, “That’s why he stopped – and since I mindspoke with him afterwards and you didn’t react I thought our shields were good enough. Though fair point on all three of us being in physical contact, it’s not exactly common. But now – anyone hurts?”

“All three of the people I mindspeak to,” Kir admitted, looking ashamed for some reason because how could this possibly be his fault, “Kari only did once today and – I flinched. It was mostly the memories but there was – it stung.”

“And Aelius? Me?” Anur asked.

“You were more – a rasp,” Kir half-shrugged, looking unsatisfied with the description and elaborating, “Less than Kari. Aelius burned.”
Aelius managed an impressively distressed whinny, curling his neck to rest his nose on Kir’s arm. Anur wasn’t much better, but he instead focused intently on the shields he’d built around his and Aelius’ connection and asked aloud, “Aelius, do you have any idea what could cause that?”

:I have a theory – he didn’t flinch that time, did he hear me?:

“Kir?” he prompted, Kir just raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t hear anything, if Aelius said something to you,” he replied, smiling faintly when Anur gave a relieved sigh. “Does he have an idea? Is it – is it permanent?”

“Doubt it,” Anur said, Aelius also shaking his head, “And he does have an idea – a moment though, he needs to explain it.”

Meeting his Companion’s gaze, he kept half his attention on keeping those shields strong, the other half listening to Aelius’ explanation.

:He heard Seraphi and Wes before the burning started – I highly doubt they were broadcasting, especially if she was still trying to convince him to try to escape. They were powerful mindspeakers, so perhaps louder than any other he’d heard in Karse, but they weren’t broadcasting – others would have heard, and her presence wouldn’t have been a surprise. That doesn’t match, Chosen, if his mindspeech was waking at the same time as his firestarting, they should be similar strength and they’re not even close to comparable.:"

“Would that be explained by focused training?” Anur asked, doubting he’d be able to shield so fiercely and mindspeak at the same time and not willing to risk it.

:Not to this degree. He can only hear Talented, and unshielded Talented at that, and his range isn’t particularly impressive. No, Chosen, I think when Seraphi screamed into his mind, she blasted open that channel and scarred it badly. It would be a bad case of Gift burn-out – his youth would probably be the only reason he managed to retain any of it, growing minds can recover better than ones fully formed.:"

“Well, clearly he had a solid idea,” Kir’s voice broke through the roaring in his ears, “You wouldn’t be this furious at something vague.”

“Yes,” Anur managed and he shut his eyes, ducking his head and breathing through it. It would take some doing to explain this in a way that would make sense – Kir might not even be familiar with the idea of burn-out when it came to Gifts, and he definitely wouldn’t understand Anur’s near instinctive revulsion to the idea of causing it.

Finding words to describe the actual discomfort Mindspeech had caused him had been difficult, but not as difficult as watching Anur’s horror at the idea. Realizing Aelius could still speak to Anur without him hearing, and without any of them moving, had been an immeasurable relief. Being unable to hear the words that were horrifying and enraging Anur so badly had been surprisingly frustrating, especially given that a little over a year ago even Aelius’ voice had still given him pause.

He wanted that hard-earned ease back.

“You heard Seraphi and Wes long before screaming started,” Anur said carefully, voice tight, “But he doubts they were broadcasting – maybe not shielding as carefully as they could have, but not broadcasting to anyone who could possibly hear – not if Wes still was trying to convince her to escape. If – Kir that’s not consistent, with what your mindspeech is now. You’re not powerful, and if
your Gift was waking when you were seven – it would have been strong. I don’t think there’s been a single case where Gifts wake up before puberty and are weak. With your Firestarting – conceivably, you should be as powerful a mindspeaker as you are a Firestarter. Or at least somewhat similar degrees but you’re not.”

“And you don’t think that training Firestarting alone and ignoring or suppressing mindspeech would account for it?”

“We don’t think so – not to this degree at least.”

“So then something was changed,” Kir mused, staring out at the charred patch of earth, at the clear blue sky.

“People can suffer burn-out,” Anur said quietly, “If a Gift is just waking up and something floods it, or even if you just overuse what you have – it can cause serious damage, and not just to your energy levels. There are records of people overreaching themselves and… ruining their Gift, essentially. Mindspeakers who go mind-deaf, empaths who can barely feel an echo of their own feelings anymore, farseers who can’t even imagine distant places in any detail without crippling headaches – the severity changes, but we wouldn’t be surprised at all if Seraphi’s screaming damaged your mindspeech beyond repair.”

“I owe her a debt then,” Kir said faintly, remembering those days spent obtaining control of fire, realizing that what he could do with some thought and a few minutes time would take some in his cohort marks to achieve – if he had been that way with mindspeech too, there is no way he could have hidden it. He would have burned.

“It speaks to how messed up the situation is that something Seraphi would have been severely censured for, had it happened in Valdemar, is something worth gratitude,” Anur huffed a laugh and Kir snorted, shaking his head.

“None of it would have happened in Valdemar,” he pointed out, “Literally none of that situation would have risen in Valdemar. I don’t see how me being grateful for her scalding my mind makes the situation anymore strange or wrong than the rest of it.”

“Fair,” Anur said quietly.

“But, back to more immediate worries, this… oversensitivity won’t last?”

“To the point of causing pain, no, but it might be different,” Anur replied, focusing more intently on Aelius for a moment, “Aelius isn’t sure if the memories – if they just caused echoes, bruising of a sort, or if they scraped at the old injury again – worst case scenario your mindspeech will have gotten stronger? I don’t know Kir, but we should be able to mindspeak without hurting you within a day or two.”

“Good,” Kir said, unable to hold back a laugh at that, at a sentiment he never dreamed he’d express, even after befriending Anur and meeting a witch-queen and dragging a Herald across the length and breadth of his nation.

“Good,” he repeated, meeting Anur’s smile with his own, “Because strange as it seems, I miss it.”

“We’ll make a Herald out of you yet,” Anur teased.

“Don’t even joke,” Kir snorted, shaking his head and looking towards Hardorn before continuing quietly, “Being there with you will be worse, I think – I don’t – I have no idea how they found Wes, how he was caught and if it was someone reporting him - “
“You think they could report me,” Anur said quietly, “I understand – but Kir, it is literally impossible for that to end in me burning, you understand? Even if by some freak accident everything-goes-wrong and you can’t stop it, Kari could get me out. If you’re worried enough by the thought we can arrange that with him before any visit happens that he keeps an especially careful ear out for us, though being frank I don’t think we’d need to ask. Jaina will probably make a similar request, if he doesn’t take it upon himself.”

“I know,” Kir managed, beating back the memories with fonder ones, of brawling in their kitchen and Jaina refusing to divulge her own contingencies – of Laskaris coming to the morning service and asking about details on how mental shielding worked. Hopefully they would be able to put something meaningful together for him without showcasing quite how much of the matter Anur had been taught, rather than stumbled upon.

“I know,” he repeated, “But I’ll still worry.”

“And I’ll probably be looking over my shoulder for this Elisia to knife you in the back or spread hateful rumors or equally terrible and hopefully unlikely things,” Anur shrugged, smiling wryly, “It’s going to be a very stressful visit all around – if it happens. Let’s not borrow trouble just yet though, maybe we’ll just have Kiara and Lukas visit via boat!”

“Ship.”

“...I really don’t understand the distinction.”

***===***pagebreak***===***

Aelius let the sunlight and laughter wash over him, relieved beyond measure yet still unsurprised that his Chosen had moved from worries and fears to trying to figure out why calling a ship a boat was unacceptable. They had never gone on the Evendim circuit, and the boats of the rivers of Valdemar were just that, so it had never come up.

By Kir’s disjointed explanation that seemed to boil down to it just doesn’t sound right, he didn’t have much of an idea either, which only made sense with him being taken from home so young.

Anur had been Chosen at twelve, and he had very nearly talked himself out of Choosing the innocent he’d found searching a pond for frogs because he couldn’t bear the idea of taking that joy away, of darkening it with growing knowledge of how the world worked. He hadn’t been swayed, he was a selfish man who’d wanted a heart-sib for so very long, but it had been hard.

But seven, Stars and Winds how could anyone do that?

Companions had in the past, he knew, but usually that had been when the child had no family or kin to cling too, was lacking support, or at the very least had Gifts too strong to leave untrained for even a few short years – had Kir been born in Valdemar, he very well might have been Chosen that young, with a powerful Firestarting Gift and Mindspeech unfurling just the same. But it was easier to think of that as a positive, as acceptable.

The lack of slaps across the face and blackmail over the bleeding form of a brother’s body probably had a lot to do with that, he admitted to himself sourly. He would never profess to be a good educator, to work well with children – Anur was his Chosen, had been twelve, and they’d stumbled along just fine. Some exceptions existed, but as a general rule? No, he’d leave that to people much better at it, and much more patient, than him.

Because he knew that about himself, and acknowledged that, and apparently Verius had not, or had
been the best of a bad lot because Aelius remembered Seras’ words, Jaina’s fond descriptions those few times she and Kir indulged in nostalgia. For a man who was described in terms of his love for his students – and why had he had four students? This one-on-one mentoring system seemed much longer standing, historically, and more sustainable than shoving all the students on one person – the one direct memory he had of the man did not match.

Maybe he’d had a bad day, but for a bad day to result in slapping a distressed child –

No, Aelius would not make excuses for him. And he wouldn’t let Anur do so either. As the member of their partnership with opposable thumbs and the ability to speak without getting screamed at for heresy, he was going to have to be the one to make inquiries. He was curious to see what the records said about Kir’s claiming.

To see if Verius had left any documents of his own.

Kari appeared in a wash of fire near their things again, trotting over and promptly sprawling across his pair’s legs. :I have ensured our presence won’t be missed for a few days, so we can afford to ride back to Sunhame rather than appear out of nothing again. We are trying to keep my presence somewhat circumspect, after all.:

Anur relayed that aloud and Kir replied, “My thanks, Kari. We could use the chance to – resettle ourselves.”

:Of course. Valerik was relieved you had departed by the time Jaina posted his bail, he had apparently been worried you would at last forbid his forays into Sunhame.:

Aelius snorted aloud and Anur cackled, passing the message on and he could feel Kir’s silent laughter against his shoulder, finally managing to murmur, “I don’t understand how he can still think we’re unaware of the fact that if he heads into town an doesn’t make the next dawn service, Jaina goes missing for marks and the discretionary fund takes a small hit. It’s literally written into the budget at this point, how could we possibly be ignorant?”

“Does anyone know how detailed those budget books are? Who checked Jaina’s numbers before us?”

“Evidently not Valerik!”

A careful knock at the edge of his mind and he cast a glance to Kari, meeting lighter blue eyes before letting his head settle and sinking into his mental landscape more thoroughly. Anur would reach for him if he was needed. He and Kari had spoken relatively often over the past year, but he wouldn’t say he knew the Cat well. A chance to see and speak with him outside their current shells could be useful.

Also, reading a cat’s body language was very difficult. He’d at least had practice with horses, both in this life and his last.

Opening his eyes to the constructed hearth and hall that served as his visualized mental meeting point, he stood on two legs and opened the external door, taking a long look at the man standing on the other side. Firestarter robes, unsurprising. Shorter than Aelius’ human form, but he had been considered unfairly tall. Darker blue eyes than his Cat shell, and the dusky skin and dark hair typical of Karsites, though Kari was manifesting as middle-aged at least, with a dusting of grey and lines on his face beginning to deepen.

He was receiving the same scrutiny, before the priest-Cat smiled, corners of his eyes crinkling, “May
I enter, honored Herald?"

Aelius snorted and stepped aside, waving the man in and eyeing the Sun-in-Glory around his neck – it wasn’t a conscious choice, how they appeared here, though effort could change it. He wore Whites and his knives here, not the armor he’d practically lived in – but his knives were his own, his boots well-broken in and scuffed, they were still his. He would expect Kari’s robes and emblems to be the same. The Sun-in-Glory Kari was wearing was nice – relatively plain, but with a shimmer he thought was familiar.

“I thought you didn’t know the process of Sun Blessed steel?” he asked, taking a seat by the hearth and rather unsurprised when a fire started crackling away as Kari sat.

“I don’t,” Kari said ruefully, hand pressing against his Sun in Glory, “This was passed on to me by a mentor.”

“Ah. Well, at least Kir’s method seems to produce the same aura,” Aelius mused, “So that reproduction at least succeeded. But to more critical matters – is Laskaris going to be a threat?”

“No,” Kari assured him, gaze going sharp, “He is conflicted and confused, but not violently so.”

“I will hold you too that,” Aelius said sternly, the priest only raising an eyebrow at him and replying mildly.

“I love them too, you know.”

“But you love all your Firestarters – I have my priorities,” Aelius shrugged, remembering so many scoldings for his attachments, for his ties to friends and kin overcoming those ties that he swore too – it had brought heartache, to be sure. But it had brought him Anur.

“They are my kin,” Kari said calmly, a rueful tone entering his voice as he continued, “That does not preclude me having favorites, though.”

“You don’t fool me,” Aelius snorted, forcibly lightening his tone to teasing and smiling as he said, “It’s Colbern, isn’t it.”

“You caught me,” Kari laughed, shaking his head, “It’s definitely Colbern.”

“Do you have any more specifics on what this potential necromancy warding is going to involve? The catacomb reinforcement one?” Aelius asked curiously, “Was necromancy an active part of the priesthood in your era?”

“I predate the establishment of a powerful theocracy,” Kari admitted, Aelius mentally crowing because getting information about past lives was like pulling teeth – to be fair, he was just as bad. They were in the habit, though he didn’t think Firecats were quite as strictly forbidden from revealing their reincarnated nature.

“The priesthood has always held power in Karse, we have long been a faithful land, but without a powerful theocracy there was less need for these wardings – we burn our dead but for those most sacred. It was only as the city grew and the Temple expanded that catacombs became haunting grounds, and necromancy is rare – not so rare as Kir’s manifestation of Firestarting, admittedly, but rare. I personally never met a necromancer, or at least not one that announced themselves as such, not until after my death.”

“Fair, not all lives can be so eventful as these,” Aelius allowed, taking mental note of the amused look on Kari’s face – so he thought his life had been this eventful, interesting – but letting the matter
“Now for the other ward of concern – I do have some ideas for the blood-magic ward Kir is growing more sensitive too. Exactly how much magical power can you channel safely? And can you direct it to a particular purpose or is it simply a pure redirection?”

“Depends on the purpose – and it wouldn’t be subtle, if Ulrich’s estimates on the power of the ward increasing is accurate, I’d be blazing white at the end of it,” Aelius warned, intrigued nonetheless.

He had channeled energy to Kir before, so at least that avenue was open – getting it to flow the other way would take some practice though.

Winds be merciful, they’d have the time.

“Captain?” Gregori asked after they finally exited the canal into Ruby proper, letting the sails out to take them on their way. “Successful visit?”

Kiara laughed slightly, because she should have known better than to think Gregori wouldn’t have a solid idea of just why she’d fought so hard for an overnight Sunhame contract, and looked away from the sun glinting of the water letting her smile widen, “My brother is alive.”

“...Lukas?” the helmsman called, shrugging when they both looked over, “What? It’s a small boat. Lukas is supposed to be dead?”

“No,” Kiara laughed again, “Not Lukas.”

Looking back over the water, watching the shore recede as they picked up speed, she said, “No. No, this brother’s name is Kir.”

Got a few notes for you all this time: first off, sorry for the delay, had a hard time figuring out how to wrap this chapter up and get through enough things to move on, but not unrealistically resolve everything, if that makes sense? Hope it worked, feedback welcome!

SECOND: Origami-Roses has gone ABOVE AND BEYOND and has made some absolutely GORGEOUS fanart for the fic - please look at it, admire, and adore. Have also finally figured out that I needed to go through an additional approval process for people’s gifts to me to be linked at the bottom of the story as "Related Works", so for those of you absolutely AMAZING people who have given me so many lovely gifts, your works are now linked into the series proper!

I've been going through and linking Origami_Rose's art pieces to the relevant chapters, but I'll go ahead and put the link to the entire folder here! (And thanks to the commentors that told me how to hyperlink things - you have made this possible!)

GORGEOUS FANART FOLDER by Origami_Roses
Kir watched as Kari Jumped from one pew to another, curls of fire only just starting to warm the wood which was intriguing, seeing as this had been going on for at least a mark. When they had stumbled out of Kari’s Jump yesterday he had been on edge, but not to the point an inadvertent firestorm should have started. He suspected that he’d been aggravating the surrounding air and buzzes to the point that the side-affect flames of Kari’s Jump had been enough to trigger a cascading reaction. Between the surprise of the sudden firestorm and his already present distress, he hadn’t been able or even willing to immediately crush the flames, instead focusing on protecting himself and Anur and just -

Letting things burn.

He might have to lock himself in the Trial room for a few marks at this point, he could still feel the world’s pitches fluctuating around him as his control shifted once again. Working with Kari those short weeks ago had been a good distraction and something valuable in and of itself, but it made these heat-shimmer flames far too easy to trigger.

He hadn’t honestly realized the golden sheets of flame skittering across his skin and the ground were actually there. He had been half convinced he was hallucinating or flickering between mage-sight and normal vision until Anur commented on them. No one had been harmed, and once he started paying attention he could detect the instabilities his talent was taking advantage of and avoid igniting them but it required far more conscious thought to restrain those flames than he’d needed in well over ten years.

Anur’s utter lack of fear or even trepidation in the face of random fires was an incredible gift, and he needed to remain worthy of it. Burning his brother was – it could not happen. He could not let it happen, ever.

So, he trained. Not that it was a burden, to work with fire – particularly not here, with no audience and no goal besides what he chose.

Judging by the cackles of glee and occasional whinnies, Anur and Aelius were having a grand time figuring out how far he could push his line-of-sight Fetching. Riva wasn’t vocal, but last Kir had checked his gelding had been sprawled on a particularly soft patch of grass, dozing in the sunlight. Which was odd in and of itself given the new location and less than relaxing antics going on nearby. He was hoping to get an excuse to stop by the trainers he had purchased him from in the first place just so the gelding could be checked out – he was fairly certain Riva was fine, but he didn’t want to risk one of his oldest friends needlessly.

He wanted to know if Riva’s bloodlines had any hint of this longevity or if it was his horse alone.

“When you step into the astral planes, is there any energy dispersed into those realms as waste or is it only the fire we see here that is extra?” Kir asked, Kari tilting his head and Anur’s voice entered his mind. They hadn’t risked mindspeaking again until this morning, and the sheer relief he felt when he’d heard Anur’s mental voice without any of the discomfort of yesterday was absurd, looking back to the horror he had once viewed any sort of mindspeech with.

Anur had declared immediately that they wouldn’t try anyone else’s voice until another day had
passed, and though Kir had wanted to object, he hadn’t quite been able to bring himself to. Aelius’ voice had burned.

:Kari says the latter, whatever that was:.

“Fascinating,” Kir murmured, eyes narrowing, “Is it possible for you to direct those flames? To have them focus on a particular patch of ground nearby or attack someone you are escaping from? Or are they entirely undirected?”

Kari’s ears flattened against his skull for a moment before shaking it off and looking particularly thoughtful. Either the answer was complicated or he’d never considered the idea before and was thinking over the possibility.

Rather than reply via Anur, Kari instead took on a look of intense focus before he pounced forward, fire whirling around him in something a little more directed than his usual flares, and he continued that a few more times, fire curling around him in streamers before Kari finally truly Jumped -

Kir immediately swore, lunging forward and catching the sudden burst of white-hot flame into a hurried twist, devouring particles in the air around him before he was able to call it back to his hands and quench it entirely. Aelius stuck his head in the door, Anur on his back and leaning forward to look in himself, saying dubiously, “Was that supposed to happen?”

Kari stood and shook himself from where he’d ended up behind a knocked over and seared pew, giving Anur a withering look that only made the Herald laugh along with whatever Kari had said.

“He says the unplanned nature of the incident should be quite obvious,” Anur relayed, Kir snorting and crouching next to Kari when the Cat padded over, running his hand over the Cat’s coat in an utterly useless gesture of checking for damage.

“You’re all right though?” he asked, Kari nodding and butting his head against his chest, Kir chuckling wryly and continuing, “Well, that method for directing flames didn’t quite work – that was flash-fire, there was a sudden abundance of burnable material when you crossed into the astral planes and the usually minor fire took dramatic advantage. And it looked like your exit was also affected?”

“Says the exiting flames were a fair bit more powerful and he had more speed than expected,” Anur relayed, shaking his head ruefully, “You two might want to continue experimenting outside.”

“Probably a good idea,” Kir agreed, “If you’re up to continue, Kari?”

By the eager leap the Cat made for the door, he wasn’t the only one excited to figure this out.

“How’s the Fetching going?” Kir asked, scratching Aelius’ neck as he slipped past him in the doorway. Anur’s answer was just a beaming grin and an expansive gesture towards the horizon – Kir looked out and barely managed to keep his jaw from dropping. There were arrows, knives and sticks all orbiting in the air, forming distinct circles that were interwoven. Flashy, the move itself was rather useless, but the number of objects moving distinctly, if with a pattern in their movements to make things a little simpler – it was impressive.

“You have been practicing,” Kir said, smiling. “Anur that’s fantastic.”

Anur let the materials settle to the ground, a frown of concentration on his face before he turned back and said, “Thanks! Aelius has to provide some stabilization for it, but a lot less than when we first tried – and there weren’t any flung arrows or daggers as I lost control, so that’s a plus. I’m still having trouble tracking their motion while I’m moving – whenever Aelius makes a sudden shift I have to scramble to keep things going, I’m too hung up on line-of-sight rather than any sort of sense
for where the things are."

“What’s the end goal for that?”

“It’s easier to redirect weapons like arrows or throwing knives than it is to stop them dead, so these orbits came up when I was trying to figure out a blocking technique that wouldn’t involve me shoving them aside and accidentally skewering someone next to me. I’d hope to be able to ‘catch’ arrows and have them circle to lose some momentum and then I could drop them without worrying – or, if I want to dream big, have them continue orbiting until I need one and then send it shooting off into an enemy but that’s not even remotely feasible right now.”

“It’s a pretty idea though,” Kir admired.

“It would be so nice,” Anur said wistfully before laughing, “Here I am acting like it’s not possible – Kir before I started thinking more creatively I wouldn’t have even thought what I just did was possible, so who knows?”

“Let’s stick to remote routes going north and back,” Kir proposed, shading his eyes as he looked up to Anur, “Take a little longer. Then you could practice more.”

“I’d like that,” Anur said, grinning suddenly, “But I have more than just the big tricks – I still have dice games that I can practice more subtly!”

“Oh and how’s that going?” Kir asked dryly, Anur looking abruptly sheepish and Aelius tossing his head with amusement.

“I wouldn’t bet on it yet, let’s put it that way.”

***===***pagebreak***===***

“If I just – duck to the other side and back, it should be fine,” Colbern muttered to himself, eyeing the border to Hardorn with far more trepidation than he’d assumed he’d feel. He hadn’t been within spitting distance of the border since their Midsummer warding, but when word had spread that their Incendiary was now sensing incursions of blood-bound soldiers as they crossed he had decided to detour and take a look.

He could see the heat-shimmer appearance of power, and that meant the wards were quite potent indeed. To be fair, part of it was just how his eyes worked – he always had a half-removed bit of mage-sight active, and had that been a hassle to figure out. At first he had thought it was part of his necromancy, but once he’d actually commented on it to his mentor he’d realized that wasn’t the case.

It had made teaching difficult, with half his descriptions utterly useless.

“Hmm. Maybe not myself though,” he muttered, pulling out one of his bone bags and dumping the contents on the ground. He carefully sketched a circle around the bones with the butt of his axe, the runes etched into the blade and the shaft growing brighter as he actively called on the energy they gathered, and with a feeling like ice along his spine the cat bones came together and formed a whole.

He was going to have to get a new set soon, he noted, spotting the floating gaps where bones had finally disintegrated into dust or been lost. The more of the original creature there was the less power he had to use to animate them, but animating corpses with ligaments and musculature to take some of the mechanical burden was definitely an in-the-moment sort of practice and not something he could plan ahead for.

Not unless he wanted to constantly be killing, and that got wasteful very quickly.
Obeying him with a flick of its tail, the skeleton pranced towards the border – the mark of a true animator was that there was some semblance of randomness, of *life* in their work. He had never had much of a knack for it besides with cats, any other animations were purely functional and it wasn’t something he really wanted to spend more time on anymore.

Cats and his fire would suffice.

His cat walked through the shimmering energy with barely a pause and promptly turned around and meandered back through with no troubles in that direction either. He felt something in his core relax at that very visible sign that necromancy was not blood-magic, was not anathema. The border would have at least flared, had his animation crossed that line. But it hadn’t. *He* hadn’t.

He wasn’t a witch.

Feeling somewhat better about this plan, he sent the cat ahead again and strode after it, nearly gagging on the other side of the ward – it had barely tingled against his skin but one step on the other side and the despair and *rot* was pervasive. Some of that was his sight, on this side of the border he could see little of his usual green and yellow and blue and everything was bleached to the shades of faded dying grass, withering in summer’s heat.

Or pulsing and rotting with ruddy-red poison – it was being pulled in along gullies in the natural lines of power from strongholds of the rot further in. Their ward was clearing it out, then, but it hadn’t been designed to pull things in from so far – hells, their ward was trying to purify a nation from one border, no wonder it had become so powerful so fast.

He shuddered to think at what would happen if it shattered – *when* it shattered, because if Ancar invaded their anchors would fall, and with enough of those down the ward would descend. They were going to have to develop shunts and fail-safes – the easiest thing to do would be set rigorous watches and the moment they had any hint of Ancar actually moving against Karse they would intentionally take the ward down.

But no one had ever taken one of these wards down, because a cleansing ward was designed to consume the tainted energy and burn itself out when there was no more taint to cleanse. They had plotted, had thought up a way to take their modified ward down, but it had never been tested on this scale.

Ulrich had an acolyte that was a Channel, but utterly untrained from what he remembered. He could at least put a bug in Ulrich’s ear about it, but he doubted the boy – now it was going to bother him, he’d *met* him before, he remembered the brief, ill-concealed panic on the boy’s face when he’d walked in on Ulrich teaching him some nuance of ancient Karsite and he had snickered when the boy positively ran…

Though since Ulrich had immediately scowled at him and demanded detailed reports on everything he could think of in retaliation it made sense he didn’t quite remember. Dodging Ulrich’s verbal jibes and sallying back some not quite idiotic retorts had been far more memorable.

Bah. It wouldn’t matter, Ulrich would never let his acolyte’s first act as a Channel be aiding this ward fiasco. He’d want something easy, like a mild ley-line redirection or an assisted healing to be the boy’s first exposure. Something like this ward would be a bit too much power for a freshly trained Channel – too much of a risk for burnout, and Channel’s were rare enough he found himself hesitant to risk the boy.

If he had to choose between this boy he couldn’t remember the name of and his Incendiary, who had served as the primary focus for the ward and was feeling the side effects of its power, he’d
choose Kir Dinesh. He’d choose Dinesh over quite a few people.

He knew their Incendiary wouldn’t agree because the man had a very poor idea of his own importance to their Order and country’s progress, but that just meant he’d have to consult with Seras on some workarounds for this ward issue in addition to raising concerns with the entirety of the Order and the ward design group. Seras and he would be able to implement schemes that others would reject out of hand, though from what Seras had been saying recently they’d have to at least get Bellamy to approve them.

Bellamy would be easy to persuade though, Dinesh’s life would be on the line.

“Well. That’s enough of that,” he said, taking one last look at the dying land of Hardorn before turning back this homeland, “Time to go home. Come along, cat.”

He stepped back across.

Colors sparked across his eyes and bells rang in his ears, his axe glowed every-bright and blazing his cat dissolved into glowing dust and it was too much too much he was burning –

“Stay back Kir!” he heard, feeling hands tangle in his vestments and haul him forward, his knees not quite up to holding him and he staggered, axe falling from trembling fingers and Bellamy carefully guided him to the ground. Colbern slumped forward, bracing himself against his knees and panting, flesh feeling raw and aching from badly controlled power and vision flickering like he’d stared at a flame for too long.

“It wasn’t the necromancy,” he managed to gasp, “At least – an animated skeleton was able to cross from both sides with no problems, it was just when I tried to re-enter the wards that… that happened.”

“It has to have partially been the necromancy,” Dinesh retorted, standing a careful distance away from the border and where he had collapsed, “I crossed the border when we realized I could sense incursions – otherwise something has dramatically changed in the past few weeks and that… doesn’t seem believable.”

“Could it also be a factor of location? Could the ward be stronger in this zone compared to the northern stretches?” Bellamy suggested, sounding tense and looking deeply concerned. Colbern didn’t blame him – even if this was some aspect of his necromancy acting up, that much power – no. This ward coming down had the potential to be very ugly.

:I find it more likely that Colbern is more sensitive to the energies this ward produces – it converts poison into more healthy energy which is then fed back into the land. Doesn’t your axe do much the same, converting death-energy into something you can more easily harness?: Kari said, presence at least answering the question of where these two had come from, he had been fairly certain they were scheduled to be in Sunhame at the moment.

“It provides a buffer in addition to storage,” Colbern agreed, “Raw necromantic power – it’s easy to go too far, for it to rush you. Every necromancer has some buffer or anchor against that.”

“So if the ward is producing or contains some energy that could fall in a similar category, your buffering could have been overwhelmed?”

Taking a look at his axe, Colbern couldn’t quite hold back a bit of hysterical laughter, pointing to it and saying, “It’s still glowing, Eldest. The last time there was that much power swarming the thing I was walking the grounds of a massacre. At least three runes on the shaft are active that I only carved
in when my mentor insisted on excessive fail-safes. It was most definitely overwhelmed.”

“So no necromancer should cross the border, or get too close to it, if it’s still growing stronger,” Bellamy summarized, eyes narrowing. “Same with you Kir – even if you did cross the border a few weeks ago I don’t want to risk it, all right? You have no buffer.”

“I’ll avoid it,” Dinesh agreed, brow furrowing as he stared at the ward with the peculiar half-there stare of active mage-sight. “We’ll have to work on ideas for dismantling it.”

“Thank the Sunlord, I thought I was going to have to beg,” Bellamy muttered, and Colbern barked a laugh, shaking his head wearily.

“It was such a beautiful thing,” he said mournfully, remembering the Midsummer rite they had conducted and how – strong, it had felt. How meaningful. And now they find that in protecting their country they risked destroying their leader.

“It is still a beautiful thing,” his Incendiary refuted, releasing his mage-sight and turning all of his focus onto him, “If it is this strong now, not even a full half-year, can you imagine how thoroughly our land would be poisoned? Perhaps it would not have drained so quickly without something active pulling it on, but leagues of territory near Hardorn would be poisoned and hunting grounds for witach’s brood. So far we have avoided the corlga and vankra entirely, and I would prefer to not have my lifetime marked by the re-emergence of every single one of our oldest enemies.”

“He will not invade in the winter,” Bellamy said quietly, “Raiding parties, maybe, scouting runs. But he’ll wait until spring.”

“Which gives us time to figure this out,” Dinesh finally stepped closer to them, crouching so he wasn’t looming. “Which gives us plenty of time – and I already have one question – could we channel energy from this ward into the wards we were going to have to strengthen this winter anyway?”

“Figuring out how to channel it could be irksome, but it should be a similar sort of energy – at the very least converting it shouldn’t be prohibitive, not if my axe is any indicator,” Colbern mused, vision finally back to normal and the raw scraped feeling along his nerves gone, leaving an ache that he could work through behind.

“You look steadier,” Bellamy said after a few moments of silence. “Will you be all right to get to Sunhame from here?”

“Yes, I think – yes, I didn’t lose much time to that. I’ll be able to make it to my next stop just fine,” Colbern agreed, checking the angle of the sun.

“Then we will leave you,” Dinesh said, offering him a hand and helping haul him to his feet. “Kari heard you screaming and I felt the wards flare like a beacon – we left the horses at the chapel and had best get back.”

“I probably won’t be back to Sunhame before you leave for the north,” Colbern said, picking up his axe and petting Kari when the cat bumped his head against his thigh. “But I will keep you posted on ideas for the ward.”

“I appreciate it,” Dinesh said, Bellamy catching Kari in his arms with what looked like the ease of long practice and Dinesh wrapped an arm around his Enforcer’s shoulders and tangled his other hand in Kari’s fur. “But call for back-up if you decide to experiment again, yes?”

He only had time to nod before the trio vanished in a curl of fire and left him standing alone near the
border to Hardorn, not another soul in sight and his mare continuing to placidly munch her way along a patch of grass he’d staked her near. An adventure – and such a quick one too, though he suspected he’d be feeling the aches of this one far longer than a bruise or scrape.

Looking at the ash pile that was all that remained of his cat, he sighed heavily. At this rate he was actually going to have to rustle up some dead cats and spend an evening or two extracting their bones himself, that was the third one this year.

He’d have to have a word with the animal caretakers when he got back to Sunhame.

Then he was going to have to speak to Tristan.

***===***pagebreak***===***

Somehow, he didn’t know how, but somehow, this was definitely Kir’s fault.

No, that was a lie, he knew exactly how he’d gotten saddled with this job, and only part of it was Kir’s fault. The rest of it was his tendency to poke at potentially disastrous situations just to see what would happen. So far he’d managed to get out of the messes he landed in mostly unscathed and with a brother he’d never have had otherwise to boot, so he wasn’t too worried.

Also, the idea of a Herald of Valdemar having a hand in redesigning the basic Talent identification courses for trainee Sunpriests was hysterically funny. The four in Rodri’s batch were going to have to retake the course next year anyway, and none of them were particularly upset about it. Instead of learning more wrong information they’d be spending the rest of the year working up questions and potential gaps in the policy changes that had been getting shoved through since Midwinter. It would be good practice for them.

:Are there any records of Bardic being distinct from Empathy in Karse?: Anur asked, frowning at the paper he’d been using to outline some basics for later research.

:I don’t know why you’d expect me to know that Chosen, but based on Kir’s confusion when we initially discussed Maltin I would doubt it.: Aelius replied, reminding him once again that they’d been taking care to shield mindspeaking so Kir wouldn’t accidentally hear. Just as well, he realized, looking up and smiling faintly at the flame-wreathed figure sitting in the middle of the courtyard, he’d have hated to interrupt Kir’s meditation.

They’d set out for Sunhame after returning from helping Colbern and ensuring no residual embers were lurking – apparently Kir and Kari’s experiments prior to their rushed departure had made for a much more dramatic burst of flame being left behind. Thankfully they’d been standing in the already burned zone when they left, Aelius hadn’t been looking forward to figuring out how to put out fires with no hands. It had meant Kir was still off-balance, but unfortunately they just didn’t have time to waste. The time out of Sunhame they had managed to get would do, and judging by the way Fabron was sitting on a bench and just watching, fascinated by the flames practically dancing around Kir while he meditated, it was just as well he still had some settling to do.

:Fair point,: he sent back. :Well that’s the basic identifying characteristics of the Gifts I can safely talk about written out – we’ll add the others after Midsummer.:”

“Fabron, did you need to talk to us about anything or were you just enjoying the weather?” Anur asked, capping his ink and carefully setting it aside on the bench he was using as a desk before standing.

“Ah – oh, Enforcer Bellamy, I found the records you – ah, mentioned, that you wanted to see and
came to tell you,” Fabron managed to say, stumbling over his words whenever a particularly bright or vibrant flash of flame curled around Kir’s form. “I’ve never seen someone meditate like that before.”

“We hadn’t either,” Anur said dryly, Fabron’s mouth twitching at the tone and the younger man looked up to meet his gaze.

“Fun surprise, that?” he replied.

“Such fun,” Anur grinned before returning to the original topic, “Thanks for finding those records, Fabron. Where are they?”

“I had Kari put them in your quarters,” Fabron said, gaze darkening, “They weren’t records you’d want lying around. Can the Eldest - ?”

Anur tilted his head and listened for his brother’s mind, hearing nothing beyond sparks and crackling flames and nodding slowly, “I think he’s too far in to hear you, for the moment. What’s wrong?”

“I read them,” Fabron said lowly, “I got Etrius to help me find them – with Seras off working on the ward issue he knows the archival system best, but I didn’t let him read them, he’s not ordained yet and he doesn’t – he doesn’t need to read that.”

“What happened?” Anur asked carefully, not caring for where this was going at all.

“I have no idea how close the Eldest was to the Demon-Rider who died on that pyre, but Verius made special note of the family he was close to, and Dinesh isn’t that common a name,” Fabron said, keeping his tone low and measured and Anur had to sit down at that, settling on the bench next to the priest. “And you know very well what is done to suspected Demon-Riders. It is not easy reading, and I would not have either of you look at those records unwarned.”

Anur let his eyes close, exhaling carefully because that was not as bad as he had feared. It was reassuring, if anything, because he hadn’t spoken with Fabron much, had few interactions with the man overall, and he still went out of his way to warn him of something potentially distressing.

“Thank you for the warning,” Anur said finally, opening his eyes and taking care to meet Fabron’s gaze as he said it. “Aside from that, was there anything concerning?”

“Verius’ word choice is odd, but all his reports are like that,” Fabron said, shrugging, “I never knew the man, but the stories I hear and the words I’ve had chance to read don’t quite – fit. I think he tended far more towards Colbern, but attached to students. To the idea of students.”

“He’s dead,” Anur said aloud, mostly to remind himself at this point, “No punching him.”

“At least Colbern knows he’s bad with people,” Fabron said darkly, “And is capable of screwing up once and learning.”

“That sounds like a story,” Anur commented, and Fabron shook his head, sighing.

“Perhaps someday. Sooner than later, if our lives are any indication, but for the moment you have enough to worry about and it’s over, done and learned from.”

“Hm. Something to do with the only student Colbern’s ever had being Tristan, I take it?” Anur took Fabron’s deepening scowl as confirmation and nodded, “Very well. Kir or I will ask eventually.”
“Ask me before you go for Tristan, please.”

“I think that we can manage. Thank you, Firestarter.”

“Thank you, Enforcer.”

Fabron watched Kir for a few more moments before leaving with one last half-bow towards Anur. He nodded back at the man and watched him leave thoughtfully. Fabron was young, the youngest of the ordained priests, in fact, and it was interesting that he appeared so knowledgeable as to the Order’s internal conflicts and dramas. Something to consider, and maybe bring up to Jaina – it would be easy to word it as a complimentary surprise, rather than some expression of suspicion, so she shouldn’t get too defensive about answering.

“He’s an interesting one,” Kir commented, Anur looking up and smiling wryly.

“Heard all of that, did you?”

“If you’re going to ask if I can’t hear something, opening with my title – a title that can only ever refer to me – is not the best of starts,” Kir replied, dark eyes barely visible behind the rippling curtains of flame he was still surrounded by but tone amused enough Anur wasn’t worried.

“Fair point,” Anur felt his smile grow to a grin as the flames folded in on themselves and vanished, a faint shimmer in the air from dissipating heat all that remained. ‘I’m not particularly interested in Wes’ interrogation, I’m more curious about how he was found and what Verius reported on your finding. I assume you never read them?’

“I was there and that was bad enough,” Kir snorted, rising to his feet, “I saw no need to read someone else’s perspective on events, especially not in the bare month I had in Sunhame after my ordaining. All records less than thirty years old are stored so only ordained priests have access, and anything under ten is locked up for the First Order members only. They can be accessed, but you need permission and for that you need a reason.”

“And that would have drawn more attention for nothing important at the time, I understand Kir,” Anur assured him, “I was simply curious.”

“Would you mind simply passing on what you learn? I’d rather not read it myself,” Kir said, sounding tired and Anur immediately agreed.

“Of course Kir, you need only ask. How’s regaining control going?”

“Well, actually. It’s a… hum I heard as background noise, unnoticed, but there. It’s far – it fits none of my usual descriptors, pitch will tell me the flammability of something, the amount of energy I need to ignite it and give me an idea of how dramatic the flames will be, and tone tells me more about the specific material – different blends of iron, different types of glass, that sort of thing – but this isn’t quite – it sounds difficult to ignite, for lack of a better phrase, but if you find the right…”

Kir was visibly hunting for words as he sat down in Fabron’s former spot, and Anur waited a moment before supplying, “Harmony, maybe?”

“That works,” Kir said reluctantly, face twisting because it wasn’t quite right but then none of what he was experiencing was actually heard anyway so there wasn’t much point complaining about the lack of words.

“If you find the right harmony to match that pitch,” Kir continued, “Ignition is terrifyingly easy.”
“And you’d managed to slip into that harmonization without fully recognizing it,” Anur murmured, leaning back slightly and humming for a moment before saying, “From observing Kari and trying to figure out his flames?”

“I believe so,” Kir agreed. “Now that I’ve figured out what it is, I can just – avoid that harmony. It feels strange to hold my flames from a particular manifestation so carefully but it will soon become habit.”

“Does that mean we won’t be finishing Anika’s spear this trip?” Anur asked, knowing he sounded wistful and not really caring because he had been looking forward to that. Finding a day Axeli could sacrifice entirely for the purpose of one spear – it had been hard, and he’d really hoped to deliver that spear to Anika before Midwinter.

“No, I think we will,” Kir refuted, “The flames for the forging are very specific and not close to this harmonization, so it should be fine. I will ask Kari to stand by, just in case, but we should be just fine. I’d like to deliver it on the way back north – it will also give us a chance to warn Loshern about the excessive power in the border warding. That oasis is one of the closest towns to the border any more, so he should be notified.”

“Excellent!” Anur practically sang, and cackled mentally as he started thinking of ways he could put Loshern just enough on edge to be uncomfortable but not quite far enough to get him to actually say anything. Markov had given him so many ideas!

“That poor man,” Kir sighed.
down, and it had only gotten worse as she grew.

“He wrote you back,” she said over her shoulder, pouring steaming water into mugs. “It’s on the table.”

He’d already spotted the carefully folded and sealed paper on the low table in front of him but hadn’t dared touch it. Setting the wax paper cone of nuts down, he carefully picked it up and felt his breath catch. It was ridiculous, he’d seen Kir’s handwriting so often – he’d come by to reread the reply he’d sent Kiara at least twice a week before she left – but seeing his own name in that slashing hand was different.

Was real.

He traced over the letters carefully, trying to press every stroke, every mark into his memory. None of Kir’s childish lettering remained – he’d saved a scrap of paper Kir had once written a passage of the Writ on. It had been intended to help him memorize it for the Presentation during the next Feast of the Children, but Kir had never had the chance to recite it. He’d put this letter in the same box he stored that scrap in and treasure it forever, no matter what it said.

Finally flipping the letter over and cracking the seal, he unfolded it carefully and felt his eyes burn even as he started reading it.

Lukas,

When Kiara told me you’d sent a letter – when I knew you were alive – well. I’m rather certain you know exactly how I felt in that moment. If you had not insisted to see me again, I would, because I can’t allow my last memory of you to be you bleeding and crushed on the ground. There was so much screaming that day.

I wish I had been able to see the Sundancer, I remember the day you got your apprenticeship at the yard, everyone was so proud – Kiara came into the District for our meeting, we thought it would call less attention to her than Anur and I searching her out on the docks.

She says Nana is alive, and I can hardly fathom it but am so very glad. I cannot say I’m surprised to hear about father, though. It was – it was hard. For him. Regardless of what he was, Wes had been a friend to him at the very least and for all that disaster to happen on one day – no, I am not surprised he never recovered.

She also says Elisia hates Firestarters. I’ve told her I don’t care, I want to try and visit anyway, and it’s true, and I’ve been hated by many people, for a very long time. It will be hard though.

But I can’t not try. I’ve considered you dead for so long Lukas, and all the family as good as because you were lost to me. I became a Firestarter, became one of those nightmares we were warned about in hushed voices, so that I could live because I couldn’t quite bring myself to give up that completely, and I hardly dared hope anyone would want to claim me as kin. If it weren’t for Anur, I probably would have taken a full year to write back, and even that would be doubtful.

No matter how we meet, you’ll undoubtedly meet Anur at the same time, he’s my Enforcer, officially, but he’s my sworn-brother in truth. I arranged for the Enforcer position mostly to grant him some measure of additional protection, and we were both rather surprised at how well it ended up working out. Sunlord knows I’d be dead and ash many times over without him.

If someone killed him, I would never forgive them, no matter what the circumstance.

Lukas, I’m almost glad I don’t have to see our father again. Ari’s sake, this is such a mess. There
are days where I wonder if the last years have all been a fever dream, some mad imagining out of
desperation but Lukas – I couldn’t dream this up. I wouldn’t dare.

I’ll come home, brother. I swear it.

Kir

“Lukas?” he heard Kiara ask worriedly, pressing a handkerchief into his hands and he suddenly
realized he was weeping. Hurriedly wiping his face, he held the letter away so he wouldn’t
accidentally drip on it and smudge those precious words.

“He wants to visit,” he managed, looking up to his sister who finally relaxed into her chair and
smiled brightly.

“He does,” she confirmed, “Him and his Enforcer – a sworn-brother, from what I heard and saw.”

“Kir mentions him,” Lukas agreed, looking at the letter again and feeling a pang of worry
at Kir’s confession of relief, that their father was gone. He couldn’t quite blame him. “It’s – good. To
know he hasn’t been alone all this time.”

“Does he mention his student in that letter?” Kiara asked, and laughed when he shook his head
before elaborating and he stared in no little wonder. She was lighter, his little sister, she was hopeful,
where before that had been tempered more with worry, with wariness. Kir had made quite the
impression. “His student came in with Kir after he’d written that, making some fuss about an essay
draft being accepted to Bellamy. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if he had schemed that whole
conversation to step in and make sure the meeting was going well. He’s not alone, Lukas. Not
anymore, at least. From some of the things he didn’t say – it was hard, for a long while.”

“It would have to be,” Lukas grimaced, looking again at the letter and feeling his eyes burn as he
read his brother calling himself a nightmare, a monster. Resigning himself to a sister’s hatred,
considering it his due.

“How are we going to tell Elisia?”

“I’ll be honest, I was hoping you would have ideas,” Kiara admitted hesitantly. He couldn’t blame
her, that was a topic rife with trouble spots and they all knew it. “I only know she hates Firestarters, I
have no idea exactly why.”

“Part of it was Kir’s taking,” Lukas allowed, continuing, “Even if that was all of it, him being alive
and a Firestarter doesn’t change her initial grievance. I think it’s best done all at once, family dinner
and we say it to them all. Anything more piecemeal and I’d worry she’d rage about being left in the
dark.”

“Ugly enough we want to make sure the boys and Pavel aren’t there or would the three of them
help?”

“Could go either way,” Lukas said after a long moment. Sunlord, the boys, he had hardly thought
about how this was going to affect them. Kiara had hardly known Kir existed, and she’d grown up
in a house with silences and little memorials scattered all over the place. Their nephews might not
even know another uncle had ever existed, depending on what they’d managed to piece together
from the most recent family drama. But asking Elisia to leave them behind would only make things
worse. “Best to just tell them day after tomorrow during dinner – if those three are there, then they’ll
hear it. If they aren’t, so be it, we’ll track them down later. I’ll warn Pavel there might be some
drama, just in case. Let him decide.”

“When isn’t there drama at our dinner,” Kiara scoffed, shaking her head and continuing, “Unfair,
apologies. It’s just been a rough year for it.”

“If he does manage to visit before Midwinter we can at least get the most dramatic dinners done in one year, that could be nice,” Lukas said, feeling wistful.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” his sister said dryly.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh this chapter was so hard to write, but in better news the next two are flowing really nicely so fingers crossed breaking down this wall broke down most of the others for at least the summer season. I hope the multiple rewrites/deletes/rereads/rewrites again worked out to a worthy chapter, it took forever to get one I was satisfied with.

Blame it on Colbern, seriously.

FANART! (Same folder as last chapter, guys, but I decided to go through and link each chapter-specific piece with the relevant chapter) And the pun in the title of this one is a true gem:
Nekomancy by Origami_Roses
No pun, but still fantastic!
At One With Flame by Origami_Roses
“I’m going to faint,” Kiara hissed, set of letters burning a hole in her vest pocket. Lukas just looked over at her and raised an eyebrow and she glowered, “Oh easy for you to look calm, you managed to shove most of this off on me!”

“We’ll be fine,” he assured her quietly before turning his attention back to the table where Elisia and Pavel had just deposited sweet-bread and a tea kettle, the boys passing around mugs before taking their own seats and eagerly waiting for Nana to take her piece – then it would descend to a free-for-all.

Kiara took a deep breath, everyone looking at her with the motion and she gave a stiff smile, drawing the letters out of her vest and blurting, “I met Kir he’s alive and wants to visit!”

“What she means to say is, we received a reply to that first letter saying Kir was alive, but it was very vague and we worried that raising the matter immediately would cause needless harm. So Kiara wrote back, expressing interest in meeting him, and receiving an invitation to Sunhame during the weeks he would be there. Which she accepted. And went to. And now that we have enough information to be somewhat meaningful, we’re passing it along,” Lukas said, tone utterly calm despite his unusually choppy sentences and Kiara had no idea how he managed it. Put her in a fight, in a storm, in an argument, and she’d be fine, but leave her to make the first move in a room filled with quiet tension? She’d rather dodge and run away spewing some ridiculous excuse.

“Boys, take your sweetbread and go out back, would you?” Pavel said and neither of them argued, despite Devin going through the stage of insisting on knowing all that the adults did, as he was ‘nearly thirteen, you know’. Pavel had been warned about drama but had probably hadn’t expected something quite this fraught.

“He’s alive?” Nana managed, wonder on her face and her hands shaking before she tightened her grip on her mug. “He’s alive – he really is?”

“He’s a Firestarter,” Elisia said shortly, and all the tremulous joy on their mother’s face vanished into a blank mask.

Kiara met her sister’s eyes and managed not to quail at the utter fury banked in them only because she remembered her brother’s resigned admission that he’d been hated for a very long time by very many people. She was his sister.

“He’s a murderer,” Elisia hissed, knuckles white and spine rigidly straight, “He’s a killer and now I’m allowed to say that.”

“He knows that,” Kiara said shortly, struggling to keep her voice even, “He knows that, and he calls himself a monster, and he wants to come home.”
Ma made a wounded noise at the word monster and Kiara shot her a glance, somewhat surprised to see her suddenly looking stricken, hand over her mouth. Nana just looked grim and braced like she’d need to launch to her feet at any moment.

“He wrote me a letter,” Lukas finally spoke up, “And I’ll gladly let you read it, so long as you swear not to ruin it in any way.”

“There’s no need,” Elisia said coldly, Pavel sitting beside her and just watching her with concern written all over his face. “Welcome a murderer into your home if you like. I wash my hands of this.”

“He’s our *brother*!” Lukas shouted, Kiara unable to repress her flinch at that because he *never* shouted, not like that he watched and waited and –

Lukas was on his feet, glaring at Elisia and shaking with rage, continuing with all the quiet lethality of Nana’s best rants, “He’s our *brother*, Elisia, you taught him to *read* and you and I prayed for his safety in Sunhame every night for a year and now, after all this, you’re going to spit on that? Spit on the very thing we prayed for?”

“I was a *child*,” Elisia spat, having stood the moment Lukas did, hands fisted at her sides, “I was a child, Lukas, we all were, and had no idea what we were praying for with his life. His life over the children he burned? Over the innocents he’s slaughtered over the years because powers forbid our generation be the one to be freed from Sunhame’s corruption? No, Lukas, I prayed for that year with no idea what I was praying for. I prayed I would be proud of my brother one day. Now here I am, decades later, with the boy I taught to read, with the boy I *loved*, turned into something unrecognizable! Into one of those monsters we coached him to *hide* from!”

“So his survival is something awful?” Lukas demanded, “We’re not allowed to take joy in the few miracles we have received, is that it? Sunlord forbid, you suffered something no one else will need to and that’s a disaster? That’s something not worth celebrating?”

“How *dare* you!” Elisia snarled, kicking her chair back and looking very much like she’d be launching across the table to claw Lukas’ eyes out the next moment when finally their mother spoke up.

“Enough,” Ma said, voice cutting across the argument like a knife. All eyes were on her as she rose to her feet, the grey in her hair glinting silver in the light.

“My youngest son is alive,” she said coolly, glancing between Lukas and Elisia almost dismissively before her gaze settled on Kiara, “Thank you, Kiara, for serving as go between on this matter. You do the family credit.”

“Lukas, you will hold your tongue on matters you do not understand,” she continued, staring Lukas down until he bowed his head, “You have never had children. Any children you do one day have will grow up having no fires hanging over their heads, no threat of screaming death for something they can’t control. You have not watched your children as a *Dinesh*, knowing very few generations of our family have escaped the Fires unscathed. You lost your brother, you were crippled saving him, but you do not know the same suffering as your sister. Apologize.”

“Elisia, I am sorry,” he said, looking in Elisia’s eyes as he continued, “For attempting to use your pain as a lever. I will not apologize for raging at your rejection of our brother, nor will I apologize for insisting on his visit.”

“Apology, piecemeal though it is, accepted,” Elisia growled.
“Kir is welcome to visit,” Tamara finally said, looking to Kiara again and she felt so very young under her mother’s eyes, “You will come to me tomorrow and we will discuss dates and particulars. The entire family will know these dates and particulars, so decisions can be made appropriately. Elisia, your children are yours, but I warn you that ignorance serves as scanty protection.”

“Understood,” Pavel supplied for Elisia, rising to his feet and placing a hand on Elisia’s back.

“I have said what I need to,” Elisia said flatly, “Pavel, collect the boys and follow me home, please.”

“At once,” he agreed calmly, watching her stride out the door and waiting for it to shut before he glowered at Lukas, saying, “Your warning was entirely inadequate, Lukas.”

“I didn’t want you to tell her and have her not come at all,” Lukas said, sitting down and sounding defeated, “I also wanted your reaction genuine so she wouldn’t know we went around her.”

“She knows very well you all treat me as a buffer to her, and she understands your reasoning entirely,” Pavel retorted, shaking his head and sighing as he righted Elisia’s chair and slid his own back into place. “Thank you for dinner, as always. We’ll discuss things tonight and let you know of our decision within a few days, regarding what the boys will be told. They will know of Kir’s existence and profession at the very least.”

“He has a sworn brother,” Kiara finally said, hating how small her voice sounded, “An officer in the Sunsguard, his Enforcer. So they’ll both be coming.”

“Thank you for the clarification,” Pavel said to her, inclining his head slightly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get the boys.”

“Quiet night, Pavel,” Nana said.

“Locked doors, Irma,” he replied with a faint smile before heading out to fetch his children and depart.

“Elisia did very well with him. And at least the boys got their sweetbread,” Nana said calmly, taking a sip of her tea, “Tamara, will you be having any?”

“I will not,” she replied, picking up her mug and turning to Lukas, “May I have that letter? I will return it to you unharmed in the morning.”

“Of course, Ma,” Lukas said quietly, passing the folded letter to her and everyone politely ignoring the way her hands shook as she took it. As soon as she had a firm grip on it, she turned from the table and strode away, the sound of her room’s door closing echoing in the quiet.

“Come closer, Kiara,” Nana said, pushing Ma’s chair out and Kiara quickly moved around the table to sit on Irma’s other side, her grandmother resting one hand over hers and saying quietly, “Tell me of my grandson, and this brother he’s dragging home. Did he look healthy? Content, at the very least?”

“Nana, I thought he looked happy,” Kiara admitted.

Her answering smile was beautiful.
Tada! I about had a heart attack when I went to upload this the first time and couldn't find the last THREE CHAPTERS on my word document - I was sitting in a coffee shop nearly crying because so much work was gone but then I FOUND IT thank higher powers for redundant backups as a habit phew...

FANART:
How Dare You by Origami_Roses
Spear Keeper

Chapter Summary

Look, I know I SAID last chapter didn't count for July, but I was clearly very much overestimating my energy levels and creative drive. It retroactively counted for July.

And this one counts for August! I'm hoping to have more Dinesh family stuff next chapter, but our friendly neighborhood exorcist just started jabbering my ear off and Anika definitely deserves a whole chapter named for her because she's awesome.

Also - I use the RichText copy paste and off and on it's not registered my 'enters' as paragraph breaks, just as line breaks, and it takes SO LONG to go through and manually edit the html for an entire chapter. I did that this time, but centering and italicizing did the same thing - I tried real hard to catch them all, if I missed some I'll be coming back to fix it, please let me know if you notice some!

The lookouts came to her first now and Anika still couldn’t quite fathom it. But she had been the one to look at those Nameless and say they were unsafe, to arrange for the children to be sent away, and she had been the one to pronounce them wretches before they were burned. She hadn’t met anyone that twisted in the near year since they’d harmed her town but she knew it was only a matter of time.

She didn’t have the luck to never see one again.

But these she didn’t have to worry about, and instead could just greet happily. If she weren’t too wary of the priesthood in general she would honestly consider the whole of the Firestarting Order safe enough to greet without concern because Father Kir would not have stood for one twisted beyond recognition to reside in his Order.

It was nice, to be able to trust someone like that once more.

“Traveling north again,” she commented when they reined their horses in near her, “Any news?”

“Nothing urgent,” Father Kir replied, dismounting carefully with the spear he had tied across his back. Perhaps they could spar, if he’d taken the weapon up. Jakyr was almost getting predictable when he came by. “We came here to pass on a gift, rather than pass on words though we of course have plenty of those to share.”

Anika was still stumbling over the idea that they had brought a gift of some sort rather than outlandish stories of corlga or another bishra or Sunlord forbid even more of those Nameless, and by the time she registered the fact that Father Kir was handing her the spear he’d been carrying, the wrapping on the blade pulled away to reveal a perfectly lethal point shining gold in the sunlight and it – it was singing.

“Anika Brersi,” her gaze snapped back to Father Kir, the Firestarter balancing the weapon across his palms and offering it to her, “This spear has been forged in sacred fire, engraved with prayers, and dedicated to you. Will you take up this weapon and use it to defend the Sunlord’s people?”

The shimmer in her vision was due to heat. Not tears.
“I will,” she said, hardly recognizing her own voice because it was far too strong, too confident, to be hers. She was being granted a weapon.

She was being called a defender.

Reaching forward, she managed to take the spear without a tremor in her hands, and she stepped back, spinning it quickly to get a feel for the weight and Sunlord bless it was perfect – the balance, the feel of it in her hand, the warmth and the golden-white light she could practically see it left in its wake –

“Then I name you Anika Spear-Keeper,” Father Kir said solemnly, mood lightening as he continued, “At least until a more absurd title comes along.”

“Oh please don’t encourage them!” Anika had to laugh, remembering his bemoaning the strange titles that his own rank had saddled him with. Fortunately for her ‘Denouncer’ was the closest anyone had come to coining a name for her out of that first story and she’d managed to squash that. It helped that this was a small town, and anyone who wanted to grant her a ridiculous name first had to resign themselves to never receiving her weaving again.

She wouldn’t withhold her services as an herbalist, but prettily woven cloth? They could get lesser quality elsewhere and suffer the consequences of their choices in peace.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured, examining her new weapon more carefully as the pair gathered their horses and walked to the town’s stables. “What is it made of?”

“Ironwood shaft,” Bellamy said, reaching over to tap on one of the runes that had been carefully etched into the wood, “Runic-prayer blessed like Jaina did her halberd, though not designed for active magic use – purification reinforcement, generic blessings and calls for guidance, things along those lines. Lumira added on some for clear vision and an unfogged mind – the hope is that any sort of magical coercion will be averted. In a wonderful world you’ll be able to break coercion webs and the like with this but we don’t actually know how that would work.”

“Worth a shot if you run into it and no one else is around to help, not worth counting on as of yet,” Father Kir elaborated, “It’s one of those things we’ve heard stories of but no one has actually tried to have work in recent memory.”

“Understood,” Anika said, turning her focus from the shaft – she would look more carefully at it, see just what she could recognize in the runes carved into it, but there was no question of the enchantments’ intent, her own developing mage-sight could see that clearly enough.

“What metal is this?” she asked, running her finger along the flat of the spear in no little wonder because it really was shimmering gold, in a way even her normal sight could see. She was no metalworker but this was not steel, not the way she’d seen it.

“Sun-blessed steel,” Dinesh said and she nearly choked, stopping in the middle of the road and clutching the spear to her chest, the two men taking a few steps past her before turning when they realized she hadn’t followed.

“Mistress Brersi?” Father Kir asked, brow furrowed as if he didn’t understand the sheer magnitude of what he had just gifted her.

“You just gave me a weapon you yourself forged!” she managed, “Sun-blessed steel – that’s weapons of stories and songs! You just gave me a weapon from the songs even Vanya Flamesinger had to fight for his!”
“Vanya Flamesinger had to take a treasure from one who had borne it decades, when the crafting of
the steel was on the decline or entirely lost,” Bellamy replied, looking at least slightly sympathetic to
her wonder if with far more amusement than she thought appropriate. “At least, that’s the way I read
the tale.”

“There’s some debate as to whether or not the entire increasing treasure trade ever actually happened
or was just constructed as a method of adding more modern moralities to a story essentially about
pirating the pirates and ensuring that the burning of their ships was timed to be dramatic and beautiful
looking even while the pirates tried to swim across burning water and died screaming.”

“I think you and I read very different versions of that story,” Bellamy said after a few moments of
staring at Father Kir incredulously.

“I grew up on Ruby Lake, if there’s one tale I heard more than any other it was the tale of Vanya
Flamesinger,” the man shook his head, “I may have been six when I was taken for the priesthood but
that was certainly a story I looked up and read everything I could on.”

“The version I heard was focused more on the rightness of the cause and his quest to complete it,
rather than details on how it was done,” Anika mused, casting her mind back, “And of course I’ve
heard people curse brigands and hill bandits, hoping the Flamesinger would get them.”

“If we have time this evening I would be more than happy to share the full version of the story with
you,” Father Kir allowed, smiling faintly as he continued, “But back to the spear you carry – yes. It
is Sun-blessed steel, a weapon whose forging was lost to time. At the moment, I and one forge-
master in Sunhame are the only ones who can produce it, working in tandem. One day that may
change. But Mistress Brersi, you help guard Karse from far worse than pirates and brigands. That
weapon is yours.”

“I will strive to be worthy of this trust,” she swore, bowing her head.

“And we will strive to be worthy of yours,” Father Kir said it so simply, as if it was right and just and
normal for those vows to be reciprocal, for trust to be earned on both sides. It was. It would be. She
would work to make it so.

“Incidentally, being a defender of the Sunlord’s people is a title that apparently gives you a similar
position in the Firestarting Order as an Enforcer!” Bellamy grinned at her, “No absurd titles though,
ever fear.”

“Because that was my primary concern,” she replied, struggling to keep her voice level but Father
Kir undoubtedly heard some of her worry because he looked at her sidelong before speaking.

“There are no additional responsibilities or duties – it simply means that should you call on us, we
would answer without question, and that you are in our records. None of that is something you didn’t
already have, to be frank. A Sun-forged weapon with blessings from the Order is simply a symbol of
an honor you already hold.”

Very well, the blurring vision was tears, not just heat. Neither man said anything as they all
continued walking to the stables, Anika pulling her handkerchief from her sleeve and wiping at her
eyes.

Tucking it away, she smiled at the two of them and said, “Thank you. I’ll have to run through my
drills with this once we’re done here – I suppose you’ll be wanting to speak to Fredric after your
horses are tended to?”
“A visit to this town is not complete without a meeting with Fredric,” Bellamy said cheerfully. Father Kir just sighed.

:Kalesh is going to choke on his own spit when he sees her next.: Aelius commented, Anur managing to hide his grin at the comment because it was very true. With her new spear in hand, Anika Brersi made even her drills look like something out of song. The forging had taken a full day, some molded spearheads and arrowheads made at the same time but the majority of their time and effort had been spent on the hammered spearhead now flashing through basic moves.

Rodri had a brilliant idea for Kir’s new Sun in Glory medallion, so the additional arrowheads had been necessary. Hopefully he’d be able to get things worked out with Axeli while they were gone because another trek to Sunhame without a Sun in Glory wasn’t going to work, and Kir’s options were slim.

“That spear marks her as an honorary Firestarter,” Loshern commented, shading his eyes against the sun.

“Between the day spent forging it and the inscriptions Jaina and Lumira worked into the shaft? I would say so, yes,” Anur agreed, not looking over at the man and remaining focused on Anika. Kir had gone off to check the wards around the burned out temple and he saw no need to tag along when he could instead make sure Anika was pleased with her weapon.

And keep Loshern on edge, but that was a pleasant bonus.

“I would hope she was informed of that during the gifting,” the exorcist continued, tone forcefully idle and Anur felt his smile sharpen. He had been waiting for this sort of opening.

“Naturally, we believe in disclosing all relevant information,” he replied. “Not just that which will ensure people agree with our course of action – anything less would be setting a terrible example for the new regime.”

The man’s eyes tightened and Anur congratulated himself for scoring a hit. Loshern had given some information regarding purification wards and potential pitfalls the last time they had been here because he had wanted answers regarding Colbern’s wards in Sunhame, but after having some time to think he had realized that Loshern was the most likely person to have any idea that their modified border ward had the potential to go wrong. He had professed experience with necromantic and purification wards, was stationed near the border with an example of the original warding system in the same town, he was conducting weekly purification rites to expedite things – and he had said nothing.

The ward was new, the way the Firestarters had done it, so Loshern could very well have been innocent and ignorant.

But he had flinched.

“I do not understand what you want from me,” Loshern said finally, voice tight. “I answered your questions regarding the necromancy wards to the very best of my knowledge.”

“You said nothing about potential hazards from the border wards.”

“I was not asked!”

Anur felt himself go very, very still.
“You were not asked,” he repeated, hearing his own voice as if from a distance and feeling no satisfaction as he watched Loshern grow pale. “So you said nothing even though you clearly have something to say!”

“Enforcer!”

“Anur!”

He let himself get pulled back, wrenching his arm out of Kir’s grip because he was so furious, there was no way he was shielding, and spitting on the ground at Loshern’s feet, the priest sprawled on the ground and holding his bleeding nose. Anika had knelt at his side, offering a kerchief and looking heartbeatingly wary, but if this was the sort of instructing Loshern offered she needed to be aware of it.

“If my brother is harmed because of your wilful silence, I will crush you,” Anur said lowly.

“What exactly is going on here?” Kir asked, voice stern as he looked between the two of them. “Wilful silence? Regarding what?”

“The border wards.” Loshern admitted, the nasal tone to his voice giving Anur a fierce rush of joy even as he raged at the surprise on Kir’s face and the shocked horror on Anika’s.

“I suspected the conversion from an enclosure to a line based barrier would have some dramatic consequences to the individuals responsible for anchoring it – purifications are designed to be self-contained, not abruptly ending at some arbitrary edge,” Loshern continued, grunting as he popped his nose back into place and muttering a curse before he continued, “But I was not asked about the ward and heard nothing about how it was going to be constructed until it was already about to be implemented. Kavrick told me about it and I doubted it would work right, but we were already detecting the taint here and I’d spent three days per week conducting purification on the water sources. I deemed the risk worth it.”

“The risk to people not your own,” Anika said, stealing the words from Anur’s mouth, tone cold as she asked, “You did not even mention that there was potential risk?”

“I did not,” Loshern said firmly, meeting Kir’s gaze and Anur wanted to spit because he knew the words that were about to come out of the man’s mouth and he knew that if he had phrased things properly Kir would have agreed with him, curses upon his ashes!

“I did not,” he repeated, “Because I knew Kavrick would insist on the entire thing being redesigned and the people of Karse would suffer.”

“I can respect that choice,” Kir said, voice cold and Anur wanted to crow with victory because Loshern had made a critical mistake a few sentences ago and hadn’t even noticed. “But I cannot respect your lack of concern for an entire branch of the priesthood.”

Loshern said nothing.

“You don’t even care,” Anur said, feeling almost awestruck at the notion because this was the man who was supposedly friends with Kavrick, who was supposedly romantically involved with Kavrick and he had consigned the entire Firestarter Order to potential magical backlash related death.

“I care!” Loshern hissed back, rising to his feet and Anika stepping away from them, watching this argument with narrowed eyes. “I care damn you! But the Order could be rebuilt, could be reincorporated into the main priesthood, and the land of Karse would not suffer for it – not as it would with poison seeping into these lands. I had to choose the lesser of two evils and I knew very
well what sort of evil I could live with weighing on my soul.”

“Karse would not suffer for it?” Anur repeated, furious all over again and barking a laugh as Loshern attempted to object, “Please, you can dress it up as choosing the lesser of two evils all you like but that doesn’t change the fact that you think Karse is better off with the Firestarting Order destroyed or rebuilt beyond all recognition.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Loshern demanded, “The Order wasn’t the only group to fall from the proper path, not by far, but they fell far and clawing out of that without starting from scratch will take decades!”

“And because it will take so long, it is not worth doing,” Kir said flatly, shaking his head and stepping back. “Anika Brersi, should you require assistance, or have questions you fear have not been answered completely, you know how to contact us. Fredrick Loshern, you have a holy calling, and I am done allowing that to excuse your behavior. Good priests need not be good allies, and I appreciate the reminder. Anur, we’re leaving.”

“Damn fucking straight we are,” Anur snarled, exchanging nods with Anika and giving Loshern one last glare before following Kir out of the town. Neither of them spoke until they were riding north again, heading for the next traveler’s chapel that they hadn’t truly planned on reaching tonight – usually they stayed in one of the spare rooms of the rebuilt Temple in the oasis town.

“We didn’t actually get details on the border wards,” Kir said abruptly, reining Riva in and Aelius slowed beside him.

“We didn’t,” Anur agreed around gritted teeth, “And we won’t. Kir, if I speak to that man about the issue I will kill him, or at least maim him, and I don’t want to.”

Kir’s startled look his way just made him furious all over again and he struggled to breathe through it, Aelius halting and Riva stepping closer so Kir could wrap an arm around his shoulders, tugging him in to rest their brows against each other. “You are beyond angry,” Kir said quietly, “And I can understand the rage, but don’t understand the degree.”

“I was giving him the benefit of the doubt for years,” Anur ground out, squeezing his eyes shut and dropping his head to rest on Kir’s shoulder. “I heard his explanation for why he attacked the twins and Devek, and was angry but understood because Karse has seen that sort of corruption for centuries. It was feasible, it was understandable and I excused him and yes I found keeping him on edge amusing but I didn’t not trust him, because his responses made sense and allies with different opinions are valuable and he wants you and the Firestarters hurt and dead and gone!”

“Ah,” Kir breathed, continuing quietly, “He’s not Delilah, Anur.”

“Tell that to Kavrick!”

“We have no idea the degree of their relationship, Kavrick could very well be entirely unsurprised,” Kir reminded him.

“You don’t honestly believe that,” Anur retorted, pulling back slightly to meet Kir’s gaze.

“Yes, Anur. You are Kir, you all are and restructuring the Order without rebuilding entirely is worth it. You know that, you’ve felt that, as often as you’ve complained or fretted about taking the easy way out.
Destroying everything and starting over isn’t the answer.”

“I know that,” his brother replied quietly. “But how many think as Loshern does? That our efforts are worthless and pointless, and better to build anew on our ashes?”

“Does it matter?”

“Perhaps not, it won’t change my own beliefs and actions but – it could harm the others. Jaina’s found anchors now, but some – I don’t know them well enough to know if people expressing Loshern’s opinion could drive them to something reckless, in the hopes that those rebuilding can do so on their bones.”

“Kir, I would bet that those in Sunhame have been more exposed to that sort of sentiment than we have,” Anur pointed out, before wincing, “Ah. Yes. Hopefully no one has been foolish enough to say that to the acolytes.”

“If someone tells Rodri he’s better off dead, I will end them,” Kir said mildly but no less sincere for the tone. “No, you’re right, Anur, it just – hurts. To think that allies, allies with true callings, no less, genuinely think Karse would be a better place with our Order dead.”

As much as Kir said he wasn’t taking Loshern’s words to heart, he was. Anur could see that plain as day, and he seethed. Someone he’d considered an ally, if nowhere near a friend, had knifed his brother in the back. Someone his brother respected had turned on them.

:Aelius, I'm going to need help delivering a letter to Kalesh. Do you think Kari might be willing to help?:

:Oh he’s already agreed to spend some quality time clawing at Loshern’s socks, I’m sure he’ll be perfectly happy to carry a letter as well.:

:You’re perfect, Aelius.:

:Your welcome, Chosen.:

***====***pagebreak***====***

The sun had set, people safely on their way after the Sun Descending service but not rushing to lock themselves away behind closed doors. It had taken time for that change to spread, but it was so very welcome. He had never been ordered to call on Furies outside his initial trials to show that he could, if called upon, and even prior to Solaris’ rise he had prayed every day that the pattern would hold. They weren’t demons, they didn’t claw at his senses as something wrong and wretched and evil, but they weren’t right either.

There was a trace of Divine presence in the back room so he lingered over some lemon water instead, not wanting any of the comfort tea could bring him. Whatever petty vengeance the Firecat was indulging in he would not argue. He deserved far worse.

Two sharp raps at his door, before it swung open and Anika stepped in, spear resting against her shoulder. She hadn’t put it down for more than a few seconds all day and had never let it out of her reach.

They had made a bargain, when he had first come here to work with her. It had been agreed that he would answer her questions as to his motivations clearly, and with little to no prevarication, so long as she did him the courtesy of asking potentially controversial questions privately. She hadn’t taken advantage of it too often, most of the time it had seemed more for the purpose of knowing she could
rather than any true need, but given the mess this day had turned out to be he wasn’t surprised to see her in his home at all.

“What the hells was that?” she finally asked, leaning her spear against the doorway and sitting across from him. “Your phrasing was careless and very near deliberately antagonistic, and you know Bellamy doesn’t trust you much to begin with. Why would you do this, Fredric?”

“Because that man sets my teeth on edge,” Fredric finally admitted, shaking his head and sighing as he admitted to himself that he’d been lying about this for too long.

“Kavrick described the warding to me and I let it go through without offering a critique because I deemed it necessary. I considered the ward being put up more valuable to Karse than the anchors of the ward. I find it hard to believe I’m the only one who heard of this ward and had doubts it would work without complications, I’m just the only one Bellamy’s found after he realized it was Dinesh that was at risk.”

“You’re also probably the only one they considered allies,” Anika pointed out harshly, crossing her arms, “For all Bellamy found putting you on edge amusing, they respected you and your calling as true to the Sunlord and that is no small thing.”

Fredric could feel his face twisting at that because she was right, there had been a sense of alliance and mutual respect from the very start, at least after his rash judgment on the Sunsguard had been straightened out. He had not ever forgotten that but – he had forgotten that it meant he would be held to a different standard. He had wilfully forgotten, in all likelihood because Bellamy’s extra edge when it came to dealing with him hadn’t been faked, as amusing as onlookers seemed to find it.

“Why do you dislike Bellamy so much?” she prompted, cutting to the heart of the issue as she was wont and as he’d been encouraging. Seeing the truth, ugly as it could be, was a necessity for anyone with a calling, but for someone serving as a defender of the faith it was all the more important.

“Because his soul is not his own,” Fredric said, “And I’m not allowed to help him.”

“Wait what?” Anika demanded, aghast, “He’s being possessed and you can’t help – what could possibly do that?”

“It’s not possession,” Fredric refuted, grimacing because that wasn’t quite accurate, and he had never really had to explain this before – he’d never had a student. Not in this.

“Everyone has some sense of other people’s souls. Some – you and I among them – are harder to fool, or can sense it more acutely – however you want to describe it, we simply have better perception of others’ souls and their condition.”

“I have never sensed someone’s soul,” Anika refuted immediately, and he just stared at her calmly because she was lying to herself. He would wait this out.

She finally looked away and pulled her coat tighter around herself, whispering, “They were – empty. Hungry, for something. It was wrong.”

“Not every evil damages the soul, at least not in ways we as mortals can detect,” Loshern continued, glad that at least his broken nose had netted him the chance to teach Anika a crucial lesson. He had wondered how he would be able to do this without exposing her deliberately to some evil and abusing her trust in him. “But those that do – I’ve never known someone to come back from that.”

“But souls can be hurt without fault,” Anika said firmly, and he was glad to see her straighten, uncurl from the ball of hurt she’d wrapped herself around. “Possession is often faultless – or at least due to
ignorance, not malice on the person’s part. You talked about spiritual healing – and you meant
healing the soul, not just the mind and heart, didn’t you?”

“They’re intrinsically connected,” he replied, smiling faintly because he remembered his own
surprise when he’d realized the true scope of those lessons. “Some – not me, but I know of at least
seven members of the priesthood I would consider true soul healers. There is some quality they have
that allows them to give those techniques and strategies just a little extra. I suspect you have that
quality, Anika. The healing rate of the villagers here – it picked up speed the moment you began to
step in on those sessions.”

“Oh,” Anika said, sounding thoughtful, but not surprised. She had noticed something then and not
said anything to him about it. He didn’t mind at all.

“Now that you’re consciously aware of what you do, I can put you in contact with others, if you’d
like to correspond about it.”

“Maybe,” she allowed, before giving him an intent look and continuing, “But back to the topic –
souls can be harmed without fault of their own.”

“Certainly,” he agreed, “But there are – signs. Of a struggle, or of flight, in the case of total
possession and Bellamy exhibits none of those. He is what I would consider unusually aggressive to
certain triggers but that is likely old trauma and his personality, not this possession.”

“So it is a possession, but not total, because you keep using his name,” Anika said, brow furrowing,
“A case of – you called it Influence, in that story you told.”

“Influence is often a step in the path to total possession, and that isn’t quite – I have never sensed a
soul like his before,” Fredric finally said, frowning as he stared at his water, “And none of my
colleagues have mentioned it in their letters to me, and you do not sense it yourself. So I don’t know
what to call it, really.”

“Can you describe it?”

“When I first met him – you have heard that story?” he asked, taking her half-shrug as she’d gotten
the gist from someone, undoubtedly Dinesh and probably that Sunsguard officer that was waiting for
her permission to pay court. He did not need to give detailed backstory then.

“I was so angry,” he murmured, “I overreacted, I admit that freely but – Sunsguard were so often
scum, Anika, and I had been sent out to help the Sunsguard before the storm delayed me and now
while I was tending to the sick I found Sunsguard I thought were – well. It doesn’t really matter. I
was wrong. But I was out of my mind with rage at this point, and when Bellamy showed up…”

Fredric shuddered at the memory. That burning blue-white presence had shrieked against his senses
and it had been ice-water down his back – facing an Enforcer, steel drawn and soul blazing so very
unnaturally – he had never thought a Firestarter would be a relief, but at least Dinesh’s presence was
undeniably human.

“It wasn’t human, what he was calling on. It wasn’t the Sunlord either. It was nothing I’ve ever seen
before and while it’s not quite so overpowering anymore – it fluctuates, meeting to meeting. I’ve
sensed it surge mid-conversation with him and it’s like ice on my spine, Anika, it’s not right. I’ve
sensed human-to-human soul influences, those are odd, but not this. That other presence has so much
more power than him – the degree of influence something that strong and that deeply anchored in his
soul could have on him – even if somehow Bellamy was able to register something was wrong, he
could be made to forget, to never even remember he’d thought something was off!”
He was pacing at this point, hands locked behind his back because if he gestured there would be sparks of power flung about and that wasn’t safe in an unwarded room with a non-mage.

:I was unaware you had that degree of sensitivity,: a passingly familiar voice said, Anika making a startled sound and Fredric more concerned with the implications of Kari’s statement.

“You know about it?” he demanded, whirling to face the Firecat now sitting on his counter, “You’ve let this continue?”

The Firecat’s ears flattened and Fredric managed not to flinch at the glare he sent his way. :It – he, if you must know – is not malicious. The partnership you are sensing is a contract of sorts, and both parties are agreed to its terms.: “Oh and how much did Bellamy know about what he was giving up when he agreed?” Fredric scoffed, because he had heard stories of contracts before.

:I would say at least half,: Kari replied, a faint amusement in his tone before the Cat shook himself and looked between the two of them. :It is not a one way street, this influence. You have not met the other half, but you would see evidence of a foreign presence there as well. I cannot explain further, it is not my place. I can only assure both of you that the presence – and the degree of influence – are sanctioned by the Sunlord and known to Bellamy and Dinesh both. Her Eminence knows some of it.:”

:I would have your word,: Kari continued, focusing entirely on him and not blinking. Fredric couldn’t quite hold the Cat’s gaze, and bowed his head to avoid it. :Your word, Fredric Loshern, exorcist, that you will not try and sever or remove this influence.: “I can’t,” he said bitterly, “I am not called to.”

:And in recognizing that, you show more wisdom than countless numbers of your predecessors.:”

The Cat stood, leaping down onto the floor and heading for the fireplace, before looking over his shoulder one last time and saying, :You are not the only one to realize the risks of the ward and say nothing, incidentally. But you are the only one such who holds the heart of one of my Firestarters.:”

Kari vanished in a crackle of flame, Anika letting out a slow breath before looking over at him and he recognized the worry in her gaze, and knew it verged on pity. He deserved neither.

“They’re going to tell Holiness Kavrick,” she said, “I’d recommend you write him a letter first.”

“I plan to,” he replied, exhausted, “But I already know what I’ve lost.”

Jakyr wasn’t quite humming as he rode towards Anika’s town. He had met her over the ashes of blood mages and she’d been so very strong. Denouncing those wretches as Nameless and arranging for the children to be safe and holding her townsfolk together by sheer will and her impeccable example –

Devek had started teasing him pretty much immediately, but not before quietly arranging things so he would get priority on messenger runs and check-ins to the small oasis town. Oh being known to the traumatized townspeople as trustworthy was true enough, but having a ‘knack for sensing problems of that type’?

He hadn’t sensed the bishra. It had been there for anyone with eyes and a winter of nightmare stories under their belt!
From letters, Devek was going to be racking up quite the debt, he was apparently looking into getting him transferred back to the north, as his current second in command was looking to follow Coronad into retirement. He had enough experience for the post now, on paper, and he had experience in the North and more than an idea of just what sort of controversy Devek was worrying about, but he wasn’t sure how he felt about it.

He’d lose excuses to meet with Anika, for one. He was worried about Hardorn, for another.

His friend had already promised not to file any paperwork or pursue it officially until he’d come to a decision, but Devek’s second was going to retire in the spring so he didn’t have too long to decide.

“Lieutenant Kalesh!” one of the lookouts called, waving, “Anika’s at the oasis! Said to send you there if you arrived.”

“Thank you!” he replied, turning his horse to go around the town to the oasis on the far side. The town itself was a little removed from it, just to avoid any contaminants and lower the risk of flash floods in the town itself. That removal did mean an important job was to check on the oasis for quality and contaminants, as well as the irrigation system set up to the fields they managed to cultivate.

Anika also checked on the chimes and the spiritual purity of the place. There had been tainted presences inching their way into the town before the border ward had been set up and he remembered helping her and Loshern set up one of the rites they’d used to push it back.

Hopefully Loshern wasn’t with her right now. He had some questions.

Anika was running through spear drills as he rode up, and while he tied his horse to a sturdy bush he watched. Professionally! He was checking her form – a tendency to favor her right, so he’d hammer the left in drills to bring some balance back into it – nothing more!

Devek hadn’t let up on the teasing, even if the words were delivered weeks after he wrote them.

“That’s a new spear,” he commented as she began her cool down, and Anika laughed, finishing her strike and turning to him, eyes bright with some sort of mischief as she laid the spear across her palms and offered it to him for inspection.

He looked at it carefully before reaching for it, spinning it and humming in truth this time, because it was well crafted. The runes were odd, a little overly decorative for his taste but he was also used to mass produced spears later cut to size, rather than something that was evidently custom made for her.

“Father Kir?” he asked, Anika nodding happily and he smiled. At least that answered the question of why he’d had to write a very detailed report on just what would constitute a weapon perfect for Anika’s form a few moons back.

Finally he looked at the spearhead, and he had to blink a few times before turning so the blade was in his own shadow because he could have sworn – “Is this golden?” he asked, twisting the spear and watching that golden shimmer with disbelief. “What kind of metal is this, Anika?”

“Sun-blessed steel,” she replied, laughing when he choked and accepting the weapon back when he shoved it towards her, “Now that is the appropriate reaction! Bellamy and Father Kir were so… they were almost nonchalant about it, Jakyr, it just was no fun at all!”

“Sun-blessed steel,” he repeated shakily, staring at it, “I thought all those weapons were lost – to be frank I thought they were just stories.”
“I’ll admit, I thought the same, but apparently Father Kir recreated the process with the help of a blacksmith in Sunhame, and only the two of them working together can make it,” Anika said, smiling as she gazed at the weapon in her hands. “I’d offer to spar with it, but I’ve adjusted my current spear to match it’s weight and heft instead – I don’t want – I’m not ready to spar with it yet.”

“I might just fall over and yield if you use that weapon against me at this point,” Jakyr admitted, meeting her gaze and smiling, “Now, why did you ask me to meet you here? Usually I just wait until you get back, unsaddle my horse and deliver messages in the meantime.”

“I know but,” she hesitated, before shaking her head, “Can you walk with me?”

“Of course,” he said, giving his horse one check before following – his mare was happily munching on the bush, naturally.

They were a quarter the way around the oasis before Anika finally spoke. “Did Bellamy give you a message?”

“He did,” Jakyr admitted, “I wanted to ask you about it, actually. I know you’ve told me about his… antagonism, with Loshern but I thought it was mostly joking – teasing, or something.”

“I thought so to – or at least didn’t realize how much it wasn’t a joke to Fredric,” Anika grimaced, shaking her head, “This past visit – I got this spear from them a few days ago, they rode in and presented it to me and while I was going through my first drills Bellamy and Fredric were talking and before I knew it Fredric was on the ground with a broken nose and Bellamy was furious. Jakyr I’ve never seen him that angry, even on the night of the Nameless.”

“How in the hell could Loshern have possibly threatened Father Kir?” Jakyr asked, incredulous, because he knew exactly the expression, the rage, that Anika was talking about. The Nameless were one thing, but threatening Father Kir?

Here he was, thinking Loshern had actually known them.

“Well that answers one question,” Anika laughed wryly, “Apparently Fredric had suspicions that the border ward’s modifications would lead to trouble, and in particular increase the risk the anchors were taking.”

“One of which was Father Kir,” Jakyr grimaced, remembering the set up of that ward. It had been – incredible. And somewhat terrifying, and only part of that was because he was working with Father Colbern, quite possibly one of the most terrifying men he’d ever met.

He remembered something else he’d heard during that warding and paled, “One of which was Rodri, Anika – Father Kir’s student was one of those anchors, entirely on his own! The other students supported their teachers but he had enough power on his own – no wonder Bellamy was furious, hells Loshern is lucky a broken nose is all he got!”

“That occurred to me too,” Anika said, voice dark. She shook it off and stopped in the shade of one of the pepper trees. “Father Kir pulled him off, they… discussed things, and in the end Father Kir declared him a priest with a true calling but a poor ally and they rode off. I haven’t heard from them since.”

“You will,” Jakyr promised, “Sun-blessed steel, Anika, they won’t just leave you alone after that. They might never speak to Loshern again though.”

“I know,” she sighed, pursing her lips before meeting his gaze and saying, “Do you know about this non-human influence Bellamy has on his soul?”
He didn’t quite choke on his own spit, but it was close. First off – how the hells was he supposed to explain this, and secondly – how the hells had she come to that conclusion?!

“I asked Fredric what he’d been thinking – his phrasing had been poor, and very unlike him,” Anika said, tilting her head back to watch the clouds, “And he explained that ever since he’d first met Bellamy, his training as an exorcist was screaming at him because Bellamy had a powerful non-human presence latched onto his soul, powerful and pervasive enough that – well. Fredric says Bellamy can be made to forget things, so even if he went against whatever that presence wanted, he could be made to forget a disagreement or something had ever happened.”

“And it – registers as wrong?” Jakyr asked carefully because he’d seen Bellamy and Aelius get into arguments – strange arguments to witness, full of half-spoken phrases and body language entirely at odds with the visible world’s atmosphere and he understood how uncanny it could seem. How bizarre that could feel to watch, but Bellamy would never have indulged in that sort of argument outside the 62nd, it was too dangerous.

But they’d had arguments. And Bellamy remembered them later, and a Firecat spoke to Aelius, would appear on his back in a curl of fire and Father Kir had come to trust the Companion so – no, while the things Loshern sensed were concerning, he knew enough to know that power wouldn’t be abused.

“Not wrong enough to require an exorcism,” she replied, and that was a relief to actually hear, even if he’d already known better. “But Kari had appeared at that point, and told Fredric that the fact he recognized that, and recognized that since he didn’t feel the need to exorcise the being, he shouldn’t – that recognition made him far wiser than countless numbers of his predecessors.”

Jakyr had to think about that for a few moments but when he finally registered what that was implying –

“Oh frosted hellfires,” he groaned, burying his face in his hands because if an exorcist was set on edge by a Herald – a Herald whose Companion was hidden, a Herald who was at least sort of subtle about what he was – he didn’t even want to know what reactions of those ancients had been to more obvious pairs. What would even happen if you tried to exorcise a Herald of their Companion? Or would you just be exorcising the Companion?

Either way, it sounded awful.

“You know what it is,” she said, and he met her narrowed gaze and almost crumpled.


“And this mention of the ancients – you think someone similarly bound was exorcised.”

“I’ll bet an attempt was made,” he admitted, wincing, “I… don’t really want to think too hard about how badly that would have gone.”

Killing a Companion was murder in Valdemaran law. To exorcise something – to literally attack a Herald-and-Companion bond through their souls – hells, it had probably killed both of them, and they’d died screaming. And if an exorcist thought they were wrong, thought they deserved screaming-in-agony death – that could have been twisted so very easily.

“So much history makes horrifying sense,” he groaned, looking to Anika and saying, “I need to tell them about this, Anika, it’s important.”

“I was hoping you could get a letter to them,” she said, sounding relieved, “Or at least would help
me write one, I just don’t know enough about the obviously horrifying implications of what Fredric said – you said yet though. I can know someday?"

“All of Karse can know someday,” he promised, “And of course I’ll help, Anika. It is my honor.”

He wouldn’t spit in Loshern’s drink, but he’d at least ask some very pointed questions about the exact nature of the evils exorcists needed to fight. Bellamy had even suggested some of the wording, and the man had been in a vicious mood when he’d written them.
So the RichText editor still isn’t working properly, which makes uploading a new chapter basically an hour long ordeal. I’m afraid to say that’s going to continue to seriously affect my update rates - finding time to actually write is hard enough right now.

I think I managed to get all the paragraphs, italics, and centering for pagebreaks done though. Fingers crossed, let me know about any errors!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

:Do you have a moment, Eldest?: Kari asked, Kir looking up from the reins he was oiling and raising an eyebrow at the Firecat. He had appeared on one of the unoccupied benches in the mess hall, next to a stack of leather gear that was due to be oiled.

Only a few of the men working in the hall did more than look up at Kari’s appearance before returning to work, and those that stared were quickly elbowed by their neighbors to focus on their current chores. The storm had rolled in from the north and was a bad one – mixed sleet and hail, thunder rattling the windows and howling winds. It was a good thing they had left Anika’s oasis town earlier than anticipated, being on the road in this would be terrible.

At least here there was plenty of busy-work that could be done without venturing out in the weather. Basing most of their work in the mess hall just meant transporting the necessary equipment took as few stops as possible, though it made for an interesting set of aromas between oil for their leather, oil for their blades and the spice packets that were being put together in the kitchen.

:I am so very busy,: he replied dryly.

:It’s polite to ask,: Kari replied, tail lashing at the air as he stretched. :Besides the news might not be the best,: 

:Has Kavrick murdered Loshern?:

:No,: Kari said flatly, shaking his head and continuing quietly, :He’s still – thinking things through. Loshern wrote him a letter and I delivered it. Better that this be resolved quickly.

:So long as it is resolved and not left to simmer for too long,: Kir grimaced, remembering Kavrick’s frozen features as he’d heard what they’d learned about Loshern this trip. He had deliberately waited a day to tell the other Firestarter anything, simply because he needed the time to process it himself.

The traveler’s chapel where that conversation occurred gained more than a few new scorch marks. He’d had to shove Anur out the door and order Aelius to keep him out, because his agitation over the whole situation was only compounded by the random fire outbreaks. They were lucky Kavrick had been far more concerned with controlling his own rage than listening to that rather disjointed conversation.

:I’ll give him a few more days before asking, if I don’t hear anything by then,: Kir decided, setting
his current reins aside to let the oil sink in before another application and reaching for another set,

:"All right, if not that, what brings you here?:"

:"Does this building have a sheltered porch? I don’t know that telling you this in a room filled with various oils is a good idea.: Kari replied.

:"Oh fantastic," Kir murmured aloud, putting the reins back into the unfinished pile and setting his rag aside before he lead Kari to the front of the mess, where there was a covered stoop – not particularly sheltered, occasional bursts of sleet hit him, but better damp than accidentally burning anyone.

:"Tell me.”

:"Fredric had reason to find Anur’s antagonism more than a little disturbing, and it is a prejudice that has apparently had horrific consequences in the past. I was – unaware of it, until speaking with him.:"

:"A prejudice? Against Anur?: Kir asked, brow furrowing as he looked down at the Cat, crossing his arms, :What do you mean?:

:"He could sense Anur’s bond with Aelius as an attachment of souls, and recognized Aelius as an extremely powerful and nonhuman presence with the potential to erase Anur’s memories and alter his very personality without his being aware.:"

Kir grimaced, because already knowing that Aelius had that sort of power – knowing he had actually altered Anur’s memories in the past – did not make hearing that sort of bald statement any easier to swallow, vow to never do so again or not.

:"Ah. That would be disturbing.: he acknowledged, :Particularly in light of Anur’s near unceasing hostility with the man. That has little to do with his failure to disclose the ward’s hazards though.:"

:"Little, agreed.: Kari inclined his head carefully but said nothing else for a few long moments. The storm wasn’t helping the situation at all – there was hardly a moment without thunder at this point and it showed no sign of letting up. Anur and Aelius were with the hostlers keeping the horses calm, and had been since just after dawn. Kir was idly counting how many flashes of lightning he could spot – and wondering if there was anyway to attract lightning to a particular location with his Talent, mostly because he had no idea how one would even start to test that – when Kari finally spoke.

:"Herald-Companion pairs have been attacked by exorcists four times in our history.:"

:"What?!"

"I think we can manage the horses ourselves for a while,” the chief hostler commented, staring at the literal pillar of flame that lashed against the storm.

:"And I will remain here, I think.: Aelius said, ears pinned back as more thunder rolled over them.

:"Oh this is an ugly one,” Anur mumbled, nodding in agreement to both statements and buttoning up his coat, holding the hood low over his face with his Gift and sticking his hands in his pockets before braving the storm. The hail had remained small, the size of a thumb-joint at the largest, so he wasn’t too worried about getting himself bludgeoned to death from the sky.

He had been very carefully not worrying over the fact that it was the tail end of the harvest season, and that this storm had rolled in from the north. He was going to have to go north after this storm
cleared, at least if Kir didn’t need him for whatever this mess was. He needed to know how Valdemar was doing, if they could hold out until Midsummer.

Harvests went later in Karse, particularly in the fatlands and that was the calendar he thought of first now. With any luck, the majority of the Valdemaran fields had already been taken in and prepared to fallow, so Valdemar wouldn’t hurt too badly. But he had to check.

:Kir?: he asked carefully, worried because there had been very little build up to this very visible expression of fury, and Kir’s presence against his mind had gone straight from faint concern to horror-fury-no, no one would dare-how could they-oh blessed fires –

Kir was standing in front of the mess-hall, the scorch marks on the steps leading to the door and the faint steam rising from the door itself indicating that he hadn’t started out standing in the middle of the storm without any sort of coat. He was already soaked to the bone, flames dancing across the puddles at his feet and Kari pacing on the stoop worriedly but not stepping in. The door had been open a crack to allow one of the twins to peer out and when he came into sight it slipped shut. There was not finding Kir intrinsically terrifying and there was approaching him when he was very clearly in a killing rage, he couldn’t blame them at all for the caution.

“Kir?” he asked aloud, not quite holding his breath as he stepped into the fire and not quite sighing in relief when the flames parted for him, because he’d almost become used to it. Resting a hand on Kir’s shoulder, he repeated, “Kir? Let’s go inside, all right?”

“Not the mess hall,” Kir said grimly. “There’s too much oil in there.”

“These flames aren’t – intentional, then?” Anur asked, looking at the flickering flames worriedly and, yes, they were a little more golden than Kir’s usual. That new harmonization, then.

“No. They are not.”

“Wonderful,” Anur muttered, shaking his head as he focused on the problem at hand, “The chapel then? We’re already soaked, walking to get there won’t make it any worse.”

“We might want to go to Aelius instead,” Kir said, each word enunciated extremely precisely and Anur winced, because if Kir thought that about the news it was going to be bad, but if that was the way he was saying it –

“Can you stop the random flares? Because if you can’t guarantee that – guarantee, Kir – the stables will be a very bad idea, even with most of the horses divided into sheltered paddocks rather than stalls.”

:I can guarantee it, with your permission Eldest,: Kari offered.

“Do it,” Kir agreed.

When they reached the stables, Kari was waiting for them and by the worried looks the other men were casting their way, his presence was the only reason they were even considering this. As it was, they quickly had this barn to themselves, the hostlers and other volunteers heading for other forms of shelter.

Pulling Kir into Aelius’ loose-box with him, he kept one arm wrapped around Kir’s shoulders and tangled his free hand in Aelius’ mane, lowering the few shield layers he’d been keeping up between himself and Aelius because he had a feeling this was going to be bad.
Then Kir reached up and tangled his own fingers in Aelius’ mane.

“It’s that bad,” Anur said faintly.

“Anur,” Kir said quietly, “Exorcism rites are designed to trigger and bolster the soul’s natural defenses against possession and interference. But in particularly long-term cases, more severe rites are used and the possessor’s connections to the victim are – are severed. According to the descriptions. Healing from that afterwards takes – can take a lifetime.”

“Okay,” Anur said carefully, very deliberately not thinking about how utterly horrifying that sounded.

“It’s been done to Heralds,” Kir managed, voice strangled, “Kari said – he said it’s happened four times.”

He couldn’t hear Aelius he was so cold Aelius was gone he couldn’t hear Aelius –

:Anur, Anur, breathe, I need you to breathe with me, Aelius is here, he’s fine, you need to let him get a word in edgewise, just listen -

:Chosen!:

:Aelius!: he gasped, turning to bury his face in Aelius’ mane, breath hitching as he tried to calm down – he wasn’t being attacked. The lothga was dead, dead and gone, destroyed entirely. He was safe. They were safe.

“There’s a list,” he said aloud, knowing he was about to start rambling but entirely unable to stop it, “There’s a list of the – the deities, that Baron Valdemar called on, when he asked for help and the first Companions came into being. The Sunlord’s on it, Kir, the Sunlord is on that list how could they, Kir how could they possibly think it’s – that a Companion – oh god I’ve been taunting an exorcist I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Easy, easy,” Kir murmured, carefully guiding him to the straw covered floor and Aelius shakily settled on the ground next to them. He might have to sleep here.

Huddling against Aelius’ shoulder, Anur let his head drop to rest against Kir’s chest, trying to even out his breathing.

“Four times,” Anur managed, voice wavering on the second word and Sunlord this explained – so very much. “I don’t – why are we surprised, Aelius? Why isn’t this something every Herald who goes to Karse knows?”

:I have no idea,: Aelius said, sounding just as shocked and horrified as the two of them, :I knew that exorcism wasn’t a major component of Valdemaran lore, that we could technically perform it but preferred not to – I don’t know Chosen. I never – I never knew this.:”

“Who would?” Anur demanded, suddenly furious that this had been forgotten, that this threat, that this danger, was a surprise to them. They were told about the torture, they were told about burnings, they were talked to by escapees and veterans and old spies alike about the dangers and the threats and the risks but no one had even whispered the possibility of someone directly attacking the Herald-Companion bond through their souls.

:Rolan, most likely. I don’t know that anyone else would. Kantor has the most experience with Karse, through Alberich – I think Sayvil? Maybe?: Aelius sounded more and more dubious as the sentence went on, before finishing more firmly with, :Rolan is our best bet, and I needed to speak
“Will this Rolan be honest?” Kir asked, “This is – the Grove-born, you call him? And the Grove-born is always the Companion’s leader?”

:Rolan is Grove-born and he is considered the most senior of the Companions, yes. He Chooses the Monarch’s Own.:  

“I’m going to have to study those terms again aren’t I?” Kir sighed, Anur stifling laughter because he had only tried to really explain the Valdemaran Court once to Kir during their first winter together, and Kir had been so bewildered by it they’d made a drinking game of it.

Needless to say, there hadn’t been much accurate knowledge retained from that evening.

“Yes, you are,” Anur agreed, smile fading as the horror returned, “Will Rolan be honest, Aelius? You won’t – you won’t forget?”

:Companions are protected from that sort of interference, and even if Rolan could make me forget, he would not. He will not lie to me. He may refuse to answer, in which case we will have to wait until we’re physically in Haven and I can properly corner him, but he will not lie.:  

“So you can blackmail a Companion,” Kir said thoughtfully and it took Anur a few moments to figure out where that conclusion had come from but when he did –

“Aelius!” he scolded half-heartedly, “Really?”

:It’s – less blackmail, more a debt. Do not worry about it Chosen, just take as given that Rolan will not lie to me. And of course you can blackmail a Companion, it’s just more difficult to find out what to blackmail us with, seeing as so few people consider us intelligent enough to bargain with and our standards and morals are not yours.:  

“The longer view,” Anur recalled from that very first conversation discussing Companions’ power over their Heralds’ minds, and Aelius’ solemn promise to them both.

“Horrifying as this historical knowledge is, I assume it came up in reference to Loshern?” Anur finally asked, able to at least start thinking things through. He was definitely sleeping in the stables tonight though, and probably for the next few nights. If he was able to drown Aelius out in his own mind – at least physical contact would let him confirm that Aelius was there.

“He can apparently sense Aelius’ bond with you as some form of soul bond, and identify Aelius as extremely powerful and nonhuman with – with the potential to erase memories and alter your personality should he will it,” Kir said, wincing towards the end and Anur had to echo it.

“He’s not – wrong,” Anur allowed slowly, Aelius simply projecting regret and iron determination.


Their eyes caught and all it took was one twitch before they were both laughing, trying to muffle their laughter in their sleeves and calm down but they only had to glance at each other before they were set off again.

“I’m defending a White Demon, I am literally contemplating how to educate an exorcist on just why they’re not malicious demons Ari’s sake what has my life turned into?” Kir gasped, Anur burying his face into Kir’s shoulder and wheezing with laughter still.
This does help explain why the White Demon name has stuck so very well, Aelius mused, which only served to set off another round of at this point hysterical laughter.

“Right – right, we need to focus. Kir, we need to focus,” Anur said after a while, straightening and trying to stay serious, “What do we do with this knowledge? We’re going after Rolan, or at least Aelius is with these mysterious debts that aren’t blackmail, but what do we do?”

“This changes nothing of our dealings with Loshern,” Kir replied, “Well, aside from the fact you’re never going to be alone with him again, but that was a plan from the beginning.”

“Agreed, on both counts,” Anur grimaced, “I’m already furious with him, add a healthy heaping of utter and complete terror and odds are good I’d kill him for twitching.”

“As I thought,” Kir said dryly, shaking his head, “I want the names of the other exorcists, and to sound them out on if they’ve sensed this connection of yours. You’ll never be alone with any of them either.”

:Definitely agreed, Aelius echoed Anur’s response. :One of them was that Ulrich fellow we’ve met a few times now, but he didn’t seem to treat Anur warily or particularly oddly.:  

“Ulrich is an exorcist and was once one of the senior-most summoners. He is a First Order Black-Robe, a powerful mage if not on the order of Karchanek, and plays the harmless old scholar role very, very well,” Kir recited, raising an eyebrow as he exchanged glances with Anur, “I would be far more surprised if you had noticed him treating Anur warily or oddly. He does trust and honor Solaris though, so if he has raised any concerns on the matter in the past, Solaris would have informed him to leave it alone and he would listen, so that is something. I will ask her if he ever did.”

“Jaina mentioned that he twitched – when he asked after you, and she mentioned me, he flinched and made some excuse about Seras saying we were alike – what if that wasn’t it?”

“Or if that was only part of it,” Kir corrected, “I’m certain Seras made that comment, he acts as though he considers you a kindred spirit. But that statement could be – more concerning, than we had assumed it was, if he thought you were being possessed by some powerful nonhuman influence he didn’t recognize as sacred.”

“Huh, that’s a decent point,” Anur mused, “Ulrich would have been around when Solaris was speaking with Vkandis’ Voice – was Loshern?”

“I thought he was present for the Midwinter Miracles,” Kir frowned, thinking it over before saying, “No wait, he must have been. He was the one who relayed the message about Jakyr, remember?”

“Right, we were incredulous about him having contacts in the Sunsguard,” Anur said, brow furrowing, “Well, I suppose that indicates it’s a different sense than that, or at least not even similar enough to be associated.”

“Is there any Gift you know of that acts like that?” Kir asked curiously, “Sensing soul influences?”

“Eh – empathy? If there was anyone with a Gift like that it would probably be assumed to be empathy, they’d get trained as a mind-healer, if they were trained at all. Or they’d become priests, or whatever their faith’s equivalent is, I suppose,” Anur said thoughtfully, “Now I’m curious though. Something else to ask when we’re in Haven, I guess.”

“Is this something you’re going to want to pass on?” Kir asked, sounding worried.

“It’d be very hard to explain why it came up,” Anur admitted, wincing, because this was a very real
threat he was thinking about keeping to himself. A threat he knew was entirely unknown and also entirely unique to Karse.

“We could – reference histories,” Kir suggested, looking over to Kari, who was sitting in the doorway, and asking, “Kari do you – are there actual records? Or did you find out with other means?”

:Other means, but we could possibly find records,: Kari admitted, tail lashing the air as he stood and walked closer, settling half onto Kir’s lap. :What information do you need for the ruse?:

“Names,” Anur said immediately. “Of the Herald, at the very least, and any sort of era information you could get – given, we have pretty poor records of Sons of Suns ourselves, so it’d be difficult to cross-reference era markers, but it couldn’t hurt?”

:I can confirm the name Randyl, Chosen of Sonya, and Trevor, Chosen of Mattis. The other two I haven’t tracked down specifics of beyond the event occurring. Randyl occurred during the reign of Son of Sun Carris. Trevor within a decade of Randyl, but I don’t know in which direction.

“That was – that was a thousand years ago,” Kir said after some careful thought. “And within a decade – for that to have happened – could knowledge be suppressed and forgotten so quickly?”

:I would suspect that it was intentional. That whoever was first didn’t have a chance to explain what had happened, and for souls likely extremely traumatized – well. It would be a mystery. If someone went out to investigate, not realizing that their very bond was what triggered alarms – it would end in a repeat, though hopefully some information was gained from it,: Aelius said, sounding highly disturbed. :One thousand years ago – that would be somewhere around or shortly after the reign of King Jason, if I’m not mistaken. First time the Monarch’s Own, Queen-Consort and Council triumvurate served as regents due to the previous king’s death before King Jason finishing training. There should be plenty of records around that era on Court matters at least, as they were establishing a precedent.:

“There’s a comprehensive list of past Heralds and how they died along with approximate dates, we can probably find them there,” Anur said, remembering having to consult that list for more than a few history projects and gruesome childhood bets. “Though I suppose repudiated Heralds aren’t on it? Would someone exorcising a Companion end up registering as a repudiation, actually?”

:They’re not,: Aelius confirmed, sounding annoyed. :To this day the only one people remember is Tylendel, and that’s really only because his repudiation and suicide was considered formative for Herald-Mage Vanyel. It’s short-sighted and foolish. As for distinguishing between an exorcism victim and repudiation I have no idea, though my instinctive response is that of course they can be distinguished, one was willingly done by the Companion and one was not.:”

“Is there a list of these repudiated Heralds then?” Kir asked, seizing the diversion, “Even if it’s restricted knowledge someone must have recorded them.”

“I’ve never seen such a list,” Anur said, shrugging as he admitted, “Not that I ever really looked. Yet another thing to check I suppose. We really do need to make a list of our own. Anyway – between the names and a rough sense of timing, we’ll be able to pass it on up the ladder as an important but not quite urgent matter without raising too many questions as to why it came up. We can just say I asked about records concerning Heralds in Sunhame.”

“Do they know I even go to Sunhame at this point?” Kir asked, “I did make a point of my aversion to Sunhame.”
“Ah – good point. I’ll ask Captain Naomi for help with the story,” Anur said, wincing. “I am sorry Kir, but I don’t think this can wait.”

“No, definitely not,” Kir agreed immediately, shuddering and some of Anur’s worry eased. He knew Herald Eldan was sent to Karse fairly frequently, and the idea of his instructor in colloquial Karsite – of anyone – being caught by an exorcist and not knowing what the threat was – it was horrifying.

:You know – we are trained in keeping our bonds... not suppressed, but not as – casually active as they are in Valdemar. It’s part of the going-OutKingdom training Companions get when our Heralds are sent abroad.: Aelius pointed out, :Perhaps that’s in response to this?:

“No excuse for not knowing about the threat entirely,” Kir snorted, before shaking his head and allowing, “But the fact that there was some response, some sort of training to avoid or avert that threat, does make it a little more acceptable.”

“You lot have training too?” Anur asked bemusedly, the rather absurd image of a cluster of Companions wedged into one of the classrooms, one of the older mares at the wall slate and leading a recitation of heroic Companion deeds of history.

:Not quite like that, Chosen.: Aelius replied, whickering laughter and evidently presenting the image to Kir, as he immediately snorted in amusement, shaking his head, :But yes, we do have training of our own. Not a lot, not years worth, but some. Specialized depending on what our Heralds end up going into and our own interests.:”

“Like blackmail.”

:Oh no, Chosen, that’s a natural talent of mine, no training required.:”

It was hard to hear the stable doors over the sound of hail and sleet pounding the roof with thunder rattling the shutters, but murmured conversation was easy enough to make out. Kir leaned out of the loose-box to get a look at their company, saying, “Second Scouts Sescha – what brings you?”

“Dinner started, and we volunteered to bring you two something,” Balin replied, shrugging while his brother snorted.

“We were told, sir, but we had planned to volunteer anyway. Is everything all right out here?” Galen asked, setting a basket of sausage rolls and a cask of ale on the ground near them while they sat down in front of the loose-box after hanging their coats over another stall door. It was rather reminiscent of the lothga evening, actually. Horrifying news, hiding from the rest of the people nearby, and being brought food.

Lovely, just what his mind needed. More reminders.

“It seems that Loshern, as an exorcist, was able to detect Aelius’ bond with Anur and found it… very concerning.”

“And Kari has informed us that historically, four Herald-Companion pairs have died when exorcists attacked their bond,” Anur shuddered.

Both brothers had a pallor under their tan, and Balin reached up to his coat pocket and pulled out a flask, handing it to his brother mutely and the man immediately took a swig.

“Another reason to never be alone around Loshern, then,” Galen said shakily, shuddering and shaking his head, “Holy calling or not, Father I’ll never trust that man’s judgement.”
“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Kir replied, and Anur grimaced as he recalled the whole reason they’d even met Fredric Loshern. “I will be frank, outside of a few very limited matters, I won’t be trusting his judgment either.”

“Let’s not talk about him,” Anur decided, leaning forward to have a better line of sight on the brothers and snag a roll while he was at it. “What’s the latest with you two?”

“Well, we’d been meaning to talk to Father Kir soon anyway,” Balin admitted, taking his flask back from his brother. “Our term of service is coming up, moon after Midwinter. We don’t plan to re-enlist.”

“Of course not,” Kir said, surprised that this would bring them to him, “You had always planned to leave after one term of service, I would not expect that to have changed.”

“Ha,” Galen muttered, “Told you he’d remember.”

Balin calmly elbowed his brother in the gut and ignored his muffled swearing as he continued, eyes on Kir, “Certainly, Father, but given our frequent forays into strange incidents we thought you deserved the courtesy of knowing we’d have to be replaced. We also wanted to assure you that we don’t plan to simply retire to herding – we’ve been speaking with others and plan to approach the Captain on ways we can help the border. Guiding returning refugees, offering translations, serving as an extra pair of eyes – we may not wish to be sent out to fight bandits and risk our lives regularly, but we don’t plan to abandon the cause either.”

“Ah,” Kir breathed, evidently understanding a little further just why they were telling him this.

“We figure there won’t be any names for us to investigate,” Galen said, shrugging, “We’ll be too remote for it to be helpful. But we wanted to know if there was anything else we could do to assist, or that would be useful to you, Father, rather than the Captain.”

“At this exact moment, I can’t think of anything.” Kir admitted after mulling it over, “But if I do think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Excellent,” Balin smiled, clapping his hands together and climbing to his feet, hauling Galen up after him. “We’ll leave you two in peace then – Father Henri already claimed the Descending Service, and quoted our low stock of candles as a justification, while also assuring us he’s ordered more.”

“We have plenty of candles he just can’t find them because of all the sage he’s stuffed in the cupboards,” Kir scoffed, smiling, “Pass on our thanks, nonetheless. I probably would burn through them all within one service.”

“We thought so,” Galen replied, cocking his head and asking, “The golden flames, sir, are those new?”

“Fairly, yes,” Kir admitted, “I’m still working on controlling those consciously.”

“We’ll pass that along,” they replied, exchanging grins at the chorus before securing the coats and heading for the door.

The sounds of the storm growing louder and then muffling again indicated their exit.

“The 62nd without the twins – that’s going to be an adjustment,” Anur huffed a laugh, “Rather forgot about their long-term plan, all things considered.”
“Not surprising,” Kir smiled, shaking his head, “They are a bit of a mainstay of the unit. But I’m glad they’ll have the chance to live as civilians again. I doubt their lives will be any less hectic or adventurous, but at least they won’t be actively seeking out danger as part of their jobs.”

“Just as part of their callings,” Anur pointed out dryly, “Life in the borderlands has never been particularly safe, even if the Furies are done and gone. Their family territories are more towards the 103rd than Hardorn at least.”

“True,” Kir frowned, before sighing heavily and admitting, “I wish we had a better idea of what the ward failing could do.”

“Well let’s see what Aelius can work out as far as draining energy off before you fret too much about it,” Anur advised.

“Hypocrite.”

“I never denied it.”

***===***pagebreak***===***

It was strange, but being on a boat with children not her own was the closest she could get to that contented sensation of being home anymore.

Tamara leaned back against the bow and watched the youngsters – five of them, between ten and fourteen – figure out how exactly they were going to get enough speed out of today’s winds to cover worthwhile distance and make it home in time for dinner. They were almost ready for a basic one-night run, depending on how well they did today she’d start planning it out.

They weren’t making the choices she would, but they weren’t making any dangerous errors either so she simply watched. At this stage, speaking up would hurt their progress more than making a mistake and learning from it.

Keeping them in the corner of her eye as they started adjust sails and man the wheel, she cast her gaze northwards, towards Sunhame. She’d seen the city once, with Ivan. Never the Temple District, of course, they hadn’t been there for a formal pilgrimage and saw no point in wasting the money they were required to donate for the privilege of entering. Neither of them hadn’t believed in the Sunlord – but the priesthood had enough bad eggs they paid lip-service more than anything.

Her husband had only grown more disenchanted with time, and it hadn’t been the Demon-Rider’s fault entirely.

Wes, she forced herself to remember the man’s laugh, the man’s terrible sense of direction and his cast-iron stomach, He had a name, Demon-Rider or no.

Ivan had loved that man desperately, and she had enough affection for her husband that she couldn’t spit on someone he’d been so devoted to, even with decades between their last meeting. Even with that White Demon’s crimes against her family. Wes had little to do with it. The Demon had not targetted them because of Wes, it had targetted them because of her son, the son Wes had watched worriedly, that Irma had adored and Ivan had doted on.

They had been discussing – obliquely, carefully – his need for more opportunities than they could give him.

*Allow yourself specifics,* Tamara ordered herself, lips thinning, *we had been discussing his flight – anywhere but Karse.*
They’d planned for Kir to vanish within a moon of the Feast of the Children – only a few moons after Wes had been captured, and his lies revealed to everyone, and any flight for Kir impossible.

*Elisia would have preferred Kir trampled to death by the Demon than a Firestarter,* Tamara thought bleakly, knowing her daughter and sympathetic to her grief, to her rage, even if she couldn’t quite understand it. It had been so much easier when they had all assumed Kir was dead.

Well they had picked up decent speed, but their heading wasn’t ideal – they’d have to adjust course often, they were going to be crossing the main lines soon. Two had been assigned as lookouts though, so at least they were aware of the risk. Tamara walked over to check what markings they were making on the charts, ensuring they were documenting their decisions properly - they could take things on faith and intuition when they were old enough to have earned it, for now these children would be recording and justifying and reviewing everything.

Nothing to correct at the moment, so she stepped up on the railing and hooked her arm around a sheet, leaning out over the water to let the wind excuse her watering eyes.

Her daughters were so brave, the two of them.

Kiara had taken a shipment to a town nearer the main messenger routes, letters to Kir in her cargo, and was more eager than she was fearful of the possibility of his visit. Irma was thrilled – how could she not be, this was the grandchild she had thought lost but had never fully given up on, had prayed for his survival and his safety, if not happiness, every day without fail since his taking.

Irma’s twin sister had burned, and one of Ivan’s cousins had died trying to kill the priest who had accused him. Tamara couldn’t begrudge her the hope that not knowing had given her. She was almost jealous. At least then she might have been less blindsided by Kiara’s revelation.

At least then she might have had years to wrap her mind around her little boy growing to become a Firestarter.

There was nothing else he could have been, he had been fascinated by flames and the little tricks one could play – waving your hand through a flame fast enough to not be burned, holding a lit candle over the smoke-trail of another and watching the fire leap through air – he had adored them. All children did, but Kir – the last birthing day he’d had with them they had each given him a candle, just so he could burn them to nothing by having fire leap along smoke time after time after time. Wes’ death, mercifully quick in one sense, had been enough for her to know – the Firestarter’s eyes had widened when the flames blazed and he’d immediately spotted Kir behind her and Ivan.

She’d had no time to grieve this fresh loss though, as that Demon had immediately attacked her son – in vengeance, no doubt. Foolish creature, Kir had been giving what mercy he could.

Perhaps frightened, she mused darkly, *of just how many of those wretches my boy could kill in a heartbeat.*

Lukas, her foolish, brave shipwright, had nearly died. If that healer-priest hadn’t arrived within a day, if the priest hadn’t deigned to help them – she would have lost both her sons in one day, and Ivan with them. It had taken weeks for her to realize she was pregnant and once Ivan knew there was another child on the way he was able to try and claw his way back out of the despair he’d fallen into, but he’d never managed it entirely.

Letting him go after Kiara reached thirteen had been a mercy.

There was only so much mercy she was capable of giving, however, and in her letter to her son she
had asked for his return. For him to visit, knowing that it would cause hurt on both sides – on all sides – and she had to simply hope it would be worth it, that this reunion would end in more than heartache.

But she would not pray for this to go well. She hadn’t prayed for his survival, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! Tamara is an intriguing character, I’m pretty excited to explore her more - especially since she was an unnamed "Kir's mom" until... really recently.
“Ulrich helped you write this list?” Naomi asked, pulling the sheet of paper closer and leaning forward, small glass of prodka spiked wine in hand. “Hah. Of course he did, he’s asking about uses for cracked arrow shafts besides kindling. He must be very bored.”

“It was a long hailstorm,” Anur shrugged, twisting the chair around so he was sitting on it backwards, resting his arms along the back.

“He handed me a bunch of scrap papers with his questions and concerns on them and I sorted things into one list. Gave me something to do while Kir hunted down more specifics for our own inquiries.”

“This Sunhame sourced intelligence,” Naomi said, frowning and skipping to the end of the list, “The word exorcisms surrounded by stars for importance doesn’t explain much. It’s that sensitive?”

“Potentially,” Anur allowed, looking up as the door opened and relaxing when he recognized Lieutenant Corinth coming in alone, continuing, “Mostly in – well. I can’t think of a way to justify this coming up now as opposed to earlier without at the very least admitting Kir has reason to travel to Sunhame, and we’ve spent quite a bit of time playing up the fact he loathes Sunhame and has no reason to go – which is half true.”

“Ah, that sort of difficulty,” Naomi snorted, leaning back in her seat after passing Anders the list, “Right. Well, tell me what we have to work with.”

“Exorcists deal with matters involving the soul,” Anur had spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out how to explain why this information was so horrifying, especially in a culture that didn’t have exorcism lore, not to the extent Karse did. “In particular, in rooting out malicious influences and powers that can latch onto human souls. There’s some sort of… feeling, that these people have, that tells them when their abilities are needed, but in addition to that they can apparently sense people’s souls, at least to the extent of knowing if they have some foreign influence. At some point in history, foreign and malicious became synonymous, at least in one case.”

“Demons,” Anders said slowly, pulling things together, “Exorcism stories call the enemies demons – and the Karsite name for Companions translates as White Demon.”

Naomi swore at that, apparently perfectly capable of guessing where things were going and straightened in her seat, meeting Anur’s gaze and saying grimly, “That’s it, isn’t it? The Companion-Herald bond is some sort of soul-level connection, and these exorcists have the tools to attack it directly, and have done so.”

“The only exorcist we’ve encountered has stated that he senses my bond with Aelius as a strong nonhuman entity, but has none of that calling to act, so he at least recognizes that the bond is without malice and therefore not something he is to deal with – but another source looked into things and found that that is not universal – so historically, yes. Exorcists have attacked Herald-Companion bonds directly, and all parties involved died horrifically.”

The main delay in his traveling north had been waiting for Kari to finish collecting what details he could. After a night of middling-poor rest they’d had questions for the Firecat and he had promised to at least try and track down answers. Those answers were recorded in Anur’s journal-cum-chronicle
for reference, and they’d hopefully craft a believable report out of it.

“And this is a surprise to you,” Naomi said faintly, leaning back again and staring at her glass like it had betrayed her. “Damn it all Herald, that should be – that should be a briefing every Herald venturing into Karse receives!”

“My thoughts exactly,” Anur said harshly, feeling his face contort into a snarl before he managed to wrench it back and exhale slowly, continuing more calmly, “I agree. Aelius will be asking Rolan some very pointed questions, as the Grove Born is the most likely to have knowledge of this, but I want it on paper, in human and non-Herald hands, as quickly as possible. With Kir and Solaris’ favor I have a defense, but if Herald Eldan or some other Heraldic agent is sent south without this – they’ve been safe for centuries, the last one occurred before Lavan Firestorm, but it is a risk I’m not willing to let go unrelayed.”

“And rightly so,” Anders said, placing the list of questions on Naomi’s desk and pouring himself some of the wine. “Also, relaying this puts us in a much better position going forwards, to think on that Midsummer deadline we’re facing – you relayed true threat information as quickly as possible, all the things we agreed to keep out of reports weren’t a threat. Look at how responsible and dedicated we are.”

“Oh I’ll be filtering dross reports for the Lord Marshal for the rest of my days,” Naomi scoffed, “Doesn’t matter how much he agrees, he’s going to be annoyed to say the least. But that is my problem. Also, a very good point for your inquiry in front of the Council, Herald. But that aside, we still need to figure out a way to source this. What specific information are you hoping to pass along without giving up sources, Bellamy?”

Pulling his book out of his packs, Anur flipped to the correct page and scanned it for the critical points.

“First up is names – we have confirmed names for two Herald-Companion pairs and the Son of Sun who was reigning for one of them. That should be enough for cross-referencing, so any records in Haven that deal with this can be pulled out, and if they can’t be found – well that’s useful information too. The other matter is the fact we found this out because I have been in a… semi-antagonistic feud with an exorcist for a few years now, and when another party was discussing his apparent bias this came up. So the means of discovery needs to be heavily edited.”

“Semi-antagonistic feud, Blessed Twain, I don’t even want to know,” Anders groaned.

“I didn’t know about this!” Anur said defensively, “And to be frank I was doing it for amusement more than any real bias or antagonism towards him, though I’ll freely admit that even without thinking I’m being possessed or influenced by some demonic evil it’d be fairly easy to read it as actual antagonism.”

“Of course it would be,” Naomi said flatly, before shaking her head and continuing, “Fine, fine. Source, specific names – anything else? Demands as to why this isn’t widespread knowledge among those sent into Karse, but that needs no excuse.”

“There’s two more known cases, but we don’t know names yet,” Anur finally said bleakly, “I don’t know if we’ll ever find them in Karsite records. There’s a tendency to – not record Heraldic names. Just that they were White Demons and Demon Riders, and – and how they died.”

Verius’ report had made that clear, as had some carefully timed questions to Kir about the records and the possibilities of getting more details on the victims of wrongful exorcisms. Never, not once, had Verius referred to Wes by name, even though the Herald had lived in Karse for long enough to
have built up contacts and networks that needed to be evaluated later. In the section dedicated to suggested future actions, he had finally admitted that the ‘Demon-rider assumed the name of Wes and guise of a tinker’ but with no allowance for it being his actual name. Seraphi was never named at all, only called the Demon or the Monster.

The matter of fact list of casualties following her berserker charge – the fact that Lukas Dinesh – crippled, candidate for healing appeared on that list – made the titles understandable. Made him almost agree, when he knew damn well he’d heard similar stories in histories, in songs, and never given a thought to those people that had been trampled in the escape attempt. Never considered that not only evil blackguards would be trampled. Which was stupid, and shortsighted, and childish, because he knew how histories could be biased and wrong, much less tales and songs, but without a deliberate example – without a specific case he could point to – it had simply never occurred to him.

Karse is not divided into fanatics and Valdemaran sympathizers, Herald! Kir had shouted at him years ago. He knew that – had known that, in theory, knew it now, in his bones. But going further with that thought, allowing it to run its course logically, hurt.

“Of course not,” Naomi scoffed, “Never humanize your enemy, it makes them sympathetic. Especially when the whole point of the targeting is how uncanny you all are compared to good simple Karsite folk. Monsters don’t have names, they have disguises.”

“Um.”

The captain snorted, waving a hand at him, “I disagree with the idea, because forgetting your enemies are human makes it far too easy to under or overestimate their skills and capabilities, both of which are dangerous, but it is a common strategy to get the masses behind a war effort. Anyway, back to the matter at hand. Relaying information without betraying sources. I think we can manage it nicely.”

“Oh?” Anur prompted.

She grinned, spreading her hands wide, “Why, we let someone else deal with pesky questions of source. We write the report, flagging it as urgent intelligence for the Lord Marshal only, and send it via Herald Griffon when he heads north in two weeks. The only person who might read it in the interim is Griffon himself, which is far from a bad thing, if you want it spread to as many human hands as possible. He asks questions of the Lord Marshal, the Lord Marshal grumbles and says any inquiries into our matters directly must wait until Midsummer. If we are feeling generous, we can state that the matter came up in theoretical discussions and research into the origin of the Karse-Valdemar feud, and Father Dinesh used his proximity to Valdemar as an excuse to call for records out of Sunhame on the nation’s most-ancient enemy.”

“Long-standing enemy,” Anur corrected out of habit, wincing at the captain’s raised eyebrow and elaborating, “Sorry, the phrase ‘most-ancient enemy’ is pretty much reserved for blood-mages, the correction is habit.”

“Fine, long-standing enemy,” she allowed, before looking between the two men and asking, “As for the explanation, thoughts?”

“Intelligence games are beyond my purview,” Anders shrugged, “Story sounds fine to me. I’m here for these questions about blood-magic taint and harvest numbers, forget this exorcism business, though it is that extra degree of horrifying my day was missing.”

“Oh the blood-magic taint will get you that too,” Naomi assured him, “You’ve missed out on the best nightmare stories, I promise you. Very well, Anders signs off, Herald?”
“It sounds fine to me,” Anur said, “My only hesitance would be in the two week departure – no messengers going sooner?”

“None so fast and secure,” Naomi replied, frowning, “If you’re worried about people being sent in – could you have Aelius relay to the Companion herd that there is intelligence coming in that’s relevant, delay departure for a few weeks? I rather doubt anyone would be sent in during winter, it’s an odd time to be traveling, pilgrimage allowances aside.”

“That may be true but I’d rather err on the side of caution,” Anur said, Aelius agreeing wordlessly. “That relay should work. I’ll write up the actual report tonight or tomorrow morning then. My thanks Captain.”

“Bah, all those years writing detailed reports should net me something, writing just enough details to wet the palate is old hat. Anders and I can deal with the more trivial requests tomorrow, but I want to get details on this blood-magic taint. I’ve passed your questions on it up and down the border, mostly via Herald Griffon, as he’s a rather passionate believer in the horrors of blood-magic at this point, but are there any other signs we can look for?”

Anur was asleep, at last. It always took him longer to fall asleep when Kir wasn’t within sensing distance. Aelius waited another mark or so to be on the safe side before carefully sinking into his own mind.

No visualizations, not this time – instead he focused his efforts on tracking down the traces of pair-bonding that they’d managed to hold onto for this cycle and carefully pouring just a touch more energy into each fragment. He could, in theory, mindspeak with any Companion, it was only the range that could cause problems. Haven was quite far away, and he only had the portion of that Gift that came with his Companionhood, in his human life he’d never quite been able to catch Rolan’s words outside of emergencies, relying more on the visuals and odd emotional feedback he’d been able to pick up for everyday communication.

Once those anchors were shored up, he slowly started weaving them together – they’d done this before, when Kantor had been preparing to go to Karse in the first place, to serve as something of a safety net, but he’d been a freshly born foal at that point and most of his full awareness had been turned to processing the inborn knowledge Companions were gifted with. It took time and minimal distractions, but once it was done he could take a breather – and check on Anur, still peacefully sleeping – before giving the mental anchor the equivalent of a sharp tug.

Surprise echoed in the connection, and Aelius allowed himself the mental equivalent of a wince before bracing for the flood of energy Kantor subjected it to and letting himself get snapped into Kantor’s mental receiving room.

“Aelius!” he heard, meeting Kantor’s currently brown eyes and smiling wryly at his friend’s worry. At least he was wearing the appearance he’d known him with, the first few times they’d met like this Kantor had shifted between faces and it had been a little disconcerting, though he was assured that, eventually, he too would be used to that sort of thing.

“What is the matter?” Kantor asked briskly, dragging him over to the couch in front of a roaring fire before bracing for the flood of energy Kantor subjected it to and letting himself get snapped into Kantor’s mental receiving room.

“Alls!” he heard, meeting Kantor’s currently brown eyes and smiling wryly at his friend’s worry. At least he was wearing the appearance he’d known him with, the first few times they’d met like this Kantor had shifted between faces and it had been a little disconcerting, though he was assured that, eventually, he too would be used to that sort of thing.

“What is the matter?” Kantor asked briskly, dragging him over to the couch in front of a roaring fire so they could sit down.

“When you were briefed on Karse, did you receive any warnings on exorcisms?” Aelius asked, knocking his knee against Kantor’s and continuing wryly, “And why is it that every time we do this I end up wearing half-Whites, half-Palace Guard uniform? One or the other would at least make sense
but this split looks ridiculous.”

“Why do I show up looking like I’m in my forties when I died at seventy-three in this skin?” Kantor retorted, shrugging, “I have no idea, Aelius. As for the exorcisms – of course I did.”

“What sort of warnings?” Aelius asked, feeling at least some of his tension ease with Kantor’s reply. At least there had been something to acknowledge the danger. At least Kantor hadn’t entered Karse completely blind.

“Mostly that no matter how many shields and layers I could bury myself under, once Alberich was Chosen it would be impossible to hide from everyone,” Kantor said after a few moments’ thought. “There are techniques for hiding already established bonds from all but the most discerning of eyes, but the act of Choosing apparently blasts all of those away in the formation of the bond, and without a truly established connection it would be impossible to implement those concealment techniques.”

“And how were those warnings phrased around exorcisms, exactly?” Aelius asked, raising an eyebrow.

“As a warning of consequences of discovery, apparently exorcism rites are fairly distressing,” Kantor replied, shrugging, “Why? You discovered something different?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say different, but – Kantor, were you ever told that it is possible for outside forces, such as exorcists to attack and sever the Herald-Companion bond?”

Kantor paled.

“You weren’t,” Aelius breathed, horror verging on fury clawing at his mind again, “Kantor – winds and stars, we’ve found records – records of exorcists attacking Herald-Companion pairs at least four times! Of sensing the Herald-Companion bond and thinking there was some malice in it, and trying to – to save Heralds’ souls.”

“By tearing them apart,” Kantor said, sounding numb.

“Everyone died,” Aelius said, “The exorcists not until afterwards, but it – apparently wasn’t obvious enough. Or the bond was so uncanny, so foreign, they had no understanding of how it could possibly be benign.”

“The Sunlord had a hand in our making,” Kantor said, starting to scowl, “How could they possibly –”

“I don’t know,” Aelius cut him off, because those questions could go on forever, and there were more important ones to answer. “But why weren’t we told? Why weren’t you told? If anyone had a right to know of that danger it was you! And you were never told!”

“Hells,” Kantor murmured, bowing his head, “I don’t know.”

“Can you help me reach Rolan?”

“Perhaps Ratha, first. As she’s the next most likely to have received that sort of warning,” Kantor suggested, “And the one who will need it in the future – I won’t be going to Karse again anytime soon.”

“And she can keep her mouth shut in case we end up forgetting,” Aelius agreed, “Right. I’ll boost your call.”
Kantor didn’t reach for the other Companion though, instead staring at him somewhat incredulously. Aelius returned the stare, raising an eyebrow, and Kantor finally said, “Aelius, you don’t honestly think Rolan would make us forget.”

“I know that these years are rife with changes that we – and Rolan in particular – have been working towards for centuries,” Aelius replied, “I know that Gwena and Cymry had to work hard at arguing their Chosens’ cases and much of their argument’s success was due to the sheer distance involved, even the Grove-born need to focus to reach that far. I know that though Rolan loves his Chosen Heralds, he also has a deep and abiding love – devotion – to Valdemar.”

“Perhaps we should contact Jasan as well.”

***===***pagebreak***===***

Anur was due back in two days, and while he hadn’t heard from him to confirm he and Aelius were on their way, he also hadn’t heard anything to say they would be delayed. He could wait.

Eyeing the letters Kari had left stacked on his desk with more than a little trepidation, he corrected that thought to should. He should wait. He had managed reading the letter from Lukas without Anur hovering over his shoulder but they had been in the same building. With other letters – Kiara’s hand, Lukas’, and two others – he should wait. He had no idea what response to his existence the rest of his family had, and even aside from the emotional distress of the letters and Anur not being there, there was the purely practical matter that he still slipped into that flash-fire harmonization far too easily when under stress.

He’d already asked Kari if he would be able to accompany them on any visit to his family. The last thing he needed to do was accidentally burn someone already leery of his Firestarter status. The men of the 62nd had taken his explanation of slightly different and not-quite controlled flames rather well – though it had definitely helped that a large portion of them had seen him remove himself from a room filled with oil and other flammable hazards before receiving potentially distressing news. The fact that he took precautions was apparently enough.

He couldn’t count on everyone being that practical though.

But Lukas had seemed accepting…

Before he could spend another mark debating this – it was nearly midnight, and he was leading the dawn service tomorrow – he snatched Kiara and Lukas’ letters off the desk and placed one of Anur’s half-finished whittling projects on top of the other two. He could read these two. The unknown letters would wait until Anur was back.

Settling onto his bed, he lit the mirror-backed oil-lamp with a glance and shifted so his own shadow didn’t interfere as much. Opening Kiara’s first, he carefully unfolded the paper and smoothed out the creases before reading it.

**Dear Kir,**

*I told the family you’re alive, with Lukas’ help. It went about as well as can be expected. Nana is thrilled, of course, as is Lukas. Elisia is upset about your being a Firestarter, as I mentioned. Pavel, her husband, has assured us that their sons will know of your existence and profession within the week, so by the time you visit they’ll at least know what is going on.*

*We do want you to visit – and Bellamy as well, I made sure they know he’ll be accompanying you as your sworn-brother, and that you’ll be staying with me. I didn’t have to argue too hard for the*
privilege, thankfully. Would a four day visit ending a week or so before Midwinter work? I am guessing you need to be in Sunhame for Midwinter itself, being the Incendiary, but it sounds like you stay up in the northern reaches as much as possible.

If that does work, let me know as soon as you can. I’ll make sure the inn-master keeps two stalls for your horses.

I hope you’ll be able to visit. If you can’t make it before Midwinter, we’ll have to pick a set date afterwards or Lukas will start walking to Sunhame!

Pass on my greetings to Bellamy, and hope you both are well.

Kiara

Four days, ending a week or so before Midwinter. They could manage that, Kir didn’t even need to consult the maps. It was a little over six weeks to Midwinter itself, they’d been planning to leave for Sunhame in four and a half weeks – leave in four instead, perhaps a few days before that even, so they could stop in Sunhame for a day or two before heading out to do this visit, and things would work perfectly.

Being able to count on making the trip from the 62nd to Sunhame in three and a half days, four at the most, was incredibly convenient.

Setting Kiara’s letter aside, he stared at the one from Lukas, turning it over in his hands a few times. He could wait for Anur – he was definitely waiting for the other two letters, since he didn’t know what to expect from them – but Lukas’ last letter had only been upsetting in that it had forced him to remember Wes and Seraphi, to not just gloss over their deaths.

This one probably wouldn’t be as bad.

He managed to avoid wincing at that thought, because he should know better, but he opened the letter anyway. If he was debating the issue so much he would only end up talking himself into it, and it was better to get this over with quickly so he could process his reactions and sleep, if possible. He didn’t want to skip another service.

Little brother,

You’re coming home! Kiara and I told the family at one of our weekly dinners – it didn’t go terribly, though Elisia wasn’t happy. We did rather ambush her with the information, but there wasn’t any help for that. Her sons will know about you and the upcoming visit well before you get here; Pavel will probably be the one to take care of that.

Pavel is Elisia’s husband.

Ma’s read your letter to me – I have it back now, but I lent it to her, and she wrote to you and said she asked for a visit, and I know Nana asked for you to visit so I hope the proposed week-before-Midwinter dates work for you. If they don’t, Kiara has already agreed to transport me to Sunhame right after Midwinter so I can see you.

Perhaps you could meet us at the docks – then we’d be able to show you the Sundancer! Though I suppose you haven’t sailed since you were here, if Kiara’s tales of cavalry units are accurate. You’re a braver man than me; I haven’t been able to get close to a horse since that day. Thankfully it isn’t something that comes up very often.

I look forward to meeting your Enforcer. His post-script to Kiara’s first letter left little doubt that he
cares for you, and it is a relief to know that you haven’t been alone all this time. Kiara also mentions that you have a student? I suppose I’ll have to come to Sunhame one day, regardless of you visiting home, just so I have a chance to meet him. He sounds a character.

Brother, I am so happy to know you are alive. That I’ll see you again.

Lukas

Not painful at all, this letter and Kir practically sagged with relief. There were hints of trouble – mostly in their non-descriptions of Elisia’s reaction, and he hesitated to say that was all of what they had meant by the revelation going less than terribly.

It sounded like she was the only one of his siblings with children. Reason enough, to have internalized a terror and hatred of Firestarters, even without one’s own childhood to anchor that bias. He didn’t remember a Pavel, but he barely remembered his parents. He didn’t actually remember his mother’s name and none of these letters mentioned it, nor had Kiara. Hopefully she would sign the letter with her name, or he would just get Anur to ask.

Tanya? No, that wasn’t it, though it sounded somewhat familiar – maybe her name had similar sounds in it.

Maybe it was mentioned in Verius’ records – he’d have to ask Anur once he got back.

He carefully set his two letters aside, sticking them in the nearly full chronicle he’d been working on. He was going to need to get another of those books before long – before Midsummer, certainly. He would have to look around in Sunhame.

Lying back, he extinguished the light and tried to fall asleep, which was always a bit of a process when Anur was out of even mental reach.

Terillee? No, that was Valdemaran.

Chapter End Notes

Aelius' bit has a lot of hints to his backstory, Companion headcanon and names some obscure names to boot:

Ratha - Eldan's Companion (source: By the Sword), told because her Herald goes to Karse a lot.
Jasan - Daren's Companion (soure: By the Sword), told because his human life was as a contemporary with Aelius and one of Kantor's go-rounds.

Sorry for falling of the face of the earth, but The Thesis demanded some dedicated attention. And I moved, which was not well-timed but necessary. Also ended up spending way too much time trying to figure out a Marvel Cinematic Universe AU (where Valdemar is a county in England, Karse is a country in... Turkmenistan-ish, and there's mutants instead of Gifts and infinity-stone based drama to explain why two entirely separate tiny regions would hold a death grudge match and then trying to shoehorn in Arthurian legends somehow... look, it was a lot of fun, but a mess and very distracting). Anyway, hopefully now I can get back to regular, if slow, updates for the actual Karse and Valdemar fic!
No dice on fixing the RTE issue either. Hopefully Support is able to figure something out...
3rd Year of Selenay and Darentallis’ Reign, Flower Moon

Dear family,

I have received a promotion! Mostly because Kir has received a promotion, and I got dragged up the ranks with him for cover purposes, but still. A promotion! I’ve never been promoted before – well, I suppose I’ve gone from Trainee to Herald, but I don’t know that I would call that a promotion? It feels different, though I suppose it’s the same idea.

I’ve gotten a chance to see Kir work in a forge now, Jer, and it’s fascinating! I can see why you’d want to get Griffon in to work with you, but I really don’t think he has the fine control necessary – though I could be wrong, I haven’t actually spoken to him, much less seen him work with fire, in a long time.

We’ve had quite a busy set of weeks, right around Midwinter – it’s a High Holy Day in Karse, which apparently makes for a lot of potential drama. Something I found out – it’s never cloudy at high noon on Midwinter’s Day! Kir made some comment on the miraculous lighting of the next year’s fire for the Ever-burning flame coming from lightning on a clear sky, and I made some comment about of course it was clear, far more dramatic, and Kir responded with of course it was clear, it was noon on Midwinter.

I’m not crazy, we have had Midwinters where it’s cloudy all day, including noon, right? I could swear there have been years with full on snowstorms over all of Midwinter, but I also wasn’t consciously paying attention to it. Can anyone back me up on this? Was it cloudy this year? At noon, on Midwinter’s Day. Specifically at noon, mind!

We’ve had some more adventures dealing with blood-mages and the problems they leave behind – I’m very glad you’re far away from the border. I’ve sent letters and alerts up and down our own border to make sure people know what to look for, but all the remedies Kir knows are very Sunlord based which... might not work, for us. Hopefully the vrondi are dealing with it, Aelius says the Companions have been looking out for the monsters at least, if not necessarily the land-based taint.

If you wouldn’t mind growing some sage around the house, just in case. It’s very useful in most of the wardings against these monster things. And you can cook with it, so at least it’s a multi-purpose incense plant. The spices we’re including aren’t for emergency spirit monster killings though, they’re for the spice cake! Also the tea has citrus in it!

No news from me on the princess’ quest either, I guess we’ll have to hope that no news is good news in this case. Aelius says he hasn’t heard of anything going wrong, so there’s that at least! Is Pascal still all right? If I remember right his enlistment term ends this year, is he planning to stay? Hope everyone is well.

Love,
Anur

Dear Bellamys,

I wrote this letter in Karsite below, in case Mara still wants to practice. I hope the spices and tea
came through without damage or too much mixing – I haven’t been able to find Valdemaran names for some of them, so if you recognize the ones with only Karsite labels please let me know! We had a chance to do some shopping closer to Sunhame than usual and it meant there were more chances to find foodstuffs aside from the basics.

The blood magic taint has started seeping into Karse’s lands, so a group is working on a warding to prevent further damage and purify the borderlands, but as Anur mentioned whatever we come up with will be based on our religious rites so I don’t know how helpful it will be – hopefully whatever we come up with can at least be extended into the Valdemaran borderlands close to Karse and Hardorn, so there is that.

There’s actually a group of former Hardornen blood-bound soldiers settling in Karse, they were sent into the country after Midwinter and intercepted. Thankfully the coercion webs were badly anchored so one of the priests sent after them was able to break it and free them before anyone was injured.

The stories they tell – the things they’re amazed by, because we’re not complete monsters – it’s awful.

But they’re happy to be freed, and the township they’ve settled in is happy for the influx of new blood and the relief being delivered from Sunhame to lessen the burden on their resources, so that is working out well at least.

It is strange that Anur finds my fire-forging and the small bits of magic I can manage so incredible – or at least it seems strange to me, in the face of all the uncanny and bizarre things he accepts so easily! The promotion, incidentally, is within the Firestarting Order, it gives him a little more authority within the Order, whenever he’d have the need to exercise it.

I hope everyone is well.

Vkandis bless and guide,
Kir Dinesh

3rd Year of Selenay and Darenthallis’ Reign, Midsummer Moon

Dear family,

If you hear any bizarre stories about fire walls on the Karse-Hardorn border, you’ll know the plan worked! It’s a side-effect of the ward Sunhame has managed to put together to purify Karse’s borderlands from blood-magic and keep it out without priests having to ride out and do purification ceremonies all the time. I’ve gotten to see Kir conduct a few of them over the years and they’re fairly straightforward, but to manage the whole border indefinitely would take a fair number of people constantly working on only that. Hopefully this ward works.

Hopefully the vrondi are managing something similar for Valdemar – I still haven’t gotten solid answers on that, but it’s hard to detect – honestly I might have to take one of my ventures into Valdemar and ride up the Hardornen border myself, just so I can see it with my own eyes. I think at this point I’d be able to feel the tainted lands, or at least be able to feel the difference between Hardorn and Valdemar, if Valdemar is clean.

It sounds like the weather is getting more unseasonal? I wish I could help more – I wish there were ways to fix this that didn’t require magic instead of Gifts! Or at least methods I could try and convert into using Gifts, but there’s nothing!

At least in Valdemar everyone knows that Hardorn is a threat, if not to the health of the land
because of blood magic, to the health of the land because Ancar cares nothing for our people. Here it feels like half the time Kir and I are trying to beat into people’s heads that Ancar doesn’t care about Heralds versus Sunpriests. At least there was that token force against Karse right after Midwinter, it kept people from being monumentally stupid and suggesting an alliance with that madman.

Kir wouldn’t be the only one lighting things on fire if that had been proposed, after the taint cleansing and designing this ward a fair number of the priesthood and all of the other Firestarters believe that Ancar is a very real threat. Actually, Kir and I would probably be the voices of reason if it had ever come to that.

I would be a magnificent voice of reason. I mentioned that revelation to Kir and he just laughed at me.

Mara’s letter was great! She’s really good at this – has she managed to get her hands on a dictionary yet? Some of the spelling is a little weird, I think, but Kir says some of it’s regional differences. I didn’t realize there could be regional differences for spelling!

Things in Karse are changing – hopefully I can come up and visit with Kir sometime soon so we can explain more, it’s far too much to explain in one letter! How are the boy’s apprenticeships going? Pass on congratulations to Lilah and Pascal, I’m glad he was able to get put on the reserve list for year or two. Remind him that if he upsets Lilah I now have an entire order of the Karsite priesthood I could probably get him in trouble with!

It would take some careful wording, but I’m sure I could manage it.

Love,
Anur

Dear Bellamys,

Anur is perfectly capable of being a voice of reason, but not about that. I certainly am not. It’s fortunate that those Hardornen slave-soldiers were sent to Karse and freed, it makes it much easier to point to the soldiers as innocents – it is not feasible to save them if they attack, at least not often, but it makes burning our way across the countryside for the sole purpose of getting to Ancar less feasible.

The ward Anur describes is based on an already existing one, just changed from a circle enclosing the taint’s source to a line barrier – there is no way we could encircle Hardorn, though it would be better for the land itself if it could be managed. Unfortunately I don’t think even using the entire priesthood for the effort would make it work – there are twelve of us anchors for the Karse-Hardorn border and that’s minimal, for an entire enclosure to work we’d have to have twelve main anchors for each edge at the least, and probably seven sub-anchors between each of those – then there’s transit times, and managing a simultaneous effort across one border is hard enough to coordinate, across multiple nations – no. It wouldn’t work.

It’s going to be decades before Hardorn recovers.

The weatherworking Anur describes is theoretically possible for us but I don’t know anyone that’s really done it. Or at least not at the level we would need to manage so no damage was caused elsewhere – calling rain to a region is all well and good, but somewhere else may end up suffering a drought – though this ward might help. I’m not really familiar with how tainted lands affect mage-damaged weather systems. I don’t think they’re particularly connected, with the tainted lands being relatively unique to blood-mages and mage-caused weather problems happen with any powerful
A reply to Mara’s letter is also enclosed, and entirely in Karsite. I’m sure you can work it out, Mara, your efforts with the last one were very impressive! I am rather fond of those word origin puzzles myself; it makes languages much more alive, to see how one word evolves into another but with a different meaning entirely – can you think of any Valdemaran examples? I’m afraid I’ve only been formally taught some Hardornen and spent many years on different stages of the Karsite language, so I only have examples from my own tongue.

Vkandis bless and guide,
Kir Dinesh

3rd Year of Selenay and Darenthallis’ Reign, Hay Moon

Dear family,

I damn well hope you intended to tell us about this family tradition sometime soon. I realize it was Markov’s story to tell, but if his stories of correcting Mara’s Karsite are any indication he was being less careful anyway. I’m a little angry about this, but mostly because not knowing made it easier to hurt Kir and Markov both. By the time we meet again, I’ll have forgotten the anger and managed to see how funny this all is, but I wanted the fact that I am angry to be written down somewhere.

I’d written a letter to you already, but thankfully hadn’t managed to send it when Kir’s frantic call for back-up came in. Markov entering Karse snapped a lot of traps that called hordes of Nightstalkers down and Kir and Henri were the ones that had to deal with it, because I was in Valdemar. Herald Lenora had been captured by Ancar’s forces and when word came in the 62nd, maniacs they are, decided the immediate response was to change into their Valdemaran uniforms and ride out to save her.

Things have changed so much here. We were able to save her. Captain Naomi came down too, and Herald Griffon followed her, and we were able to save her, and no one was lost. That sort of luck happens once a lifetime I’m told, but I’m damn glad this effort – Valdemarans and Karsites working together to save a Herald – was the one to benefit from it. I went north with Lenora after she’d recovered enough to move so we could explain things and dodge enough questions about just why I was able to relay Lenora’s situation to Karsites so quickly, and ask for leave to keep secrets a while longer.

We’ve set a deadline for that by the way, next Midsummer. So Kir and I will be traveling north around Midsummer to explain things in Haven, and will definitely stop by to visit on the way there and probably on the way back too! So start thinking of gift requests, I’m terrible at those.

I know I explained what I was doing in Karse the last visit, how I was working with Kir to help prepare Karse for changes – but I never really mentioned what those changes were, because they hadn’t happened yet, and Kir was so worried things would fall through, or be delayed or – or any number of things, really. But Midwinter was when everything changed, so now I can tell you it, especially since Markov will deliver this to you and you alone.

Please don’t spread this around. We have a plan and strategy for letting Valdemar know about things, and it would be really nice to keep things quiet a little while longer. Since it’s not going to harm Valdemar to keep this secret, I am going along with it.

When Kir first came to Valdemar to ask for help, all those years ago, after he’d gotten back to his unit he went off to speak with another military bunch that had been sent to reinforce the border against one of Ancar’s more organized attempts on Karse. While there, he met a priestess named
Solaris, and somehow realized she was the next Son of Sun and would be starting a revolution. She round-about asked him to correspond with her about things and he agreed, obviously.

Because he passed along this knowledge to the captain and officers of his assigned unit, they were willing to enter that bandit-hunting agreement with Captain Naomi, because they knew it would only be temporarily criminal to do so. That arrangement where Kir and I were the go-betweens ended with him coming to visit that first time and Markov and I having that fight. I didn’t know about Solaris at this point, by the way, I just knew that the 62nd was overstretched and needed help covering their region of responsibility, and was excited to have the excuse to see Kir regularly.

That arrangement continued into the spring, when the Rethwellen Army crossed Karse to get to Valdemar without losing their mages like the Skybolts did, because of the vrondi. Kir made sure that the army made it across without getting attacked by Furies and terrified the local bandit hunting units into locking themselves away and letting the Rethwells through. He helped Griffon that time, and came back to Valdemar to recover from the overexertion of his Gift, and in the course of that visit he offered me the option of going undercover in Karse as his Enforcer. I agreed to try it out, intending for short term visits where Kir might need the extra help, and when I got there Kir read me in on whole Solaris revolution bit.

I decided I wanted – needed – to help, but couldn’t do it as a Herald, because one, I was in Karse and I am not suicidal, but more critically if there was any hint of foreign (and especially Valdemaran) influence on Solaris’ Ascent her entire regime could be undercut, and being the first female ruler of Karse, and over-turning centuries of tradition and policy besides, was going to be difficult enough.

After running the plan by Captain Naomi and my unit, they agreed to cover for me which I am forever grateful for, and ended up living in Karse with occasional visits to Valdemar to keep people from realizing I had moved. Over the next few years, Kir and I went on missions for Solaris all over the country, investigating people that were potential threats to her regime change and dealing with them as appropriate. We also ended up dealing with various blood-mage monsters, corrupt priests that hadn’t made her list, and forest fires in the Comb with ghostly intervention. A lot of things, really. I did write them all down! So did Kir, after Father Gerichen met with him and handed over that book Asher bought for him. Hopefully keeping accurate – or at least, as accurate as possible – records will keep Herald-Chronicler Myste from murdering me in my sleep when this is over.

This past Midwinter, Solaris Ascended and by all accounts it was very dramatic – the next year’s Ever Burning Flame was reignited by a lightning strike from a cloudless sky that also vaporized the previous Son of Sun, a massive statue in the likeness of Vkandis Sunlord started moving and gave Solaris His own crown, shrunk from extremely large to a perfect fit on her head, and there was some sort of booming announcement, and more immediately for us, every fire in Karse was lit without interference from the priests.

Kir was the only one who realized something was different for our own Midwinter service, everyone else just assumed he had lit the fire, as he usually did.

A Firecat – Markov can describe them, I had a very confused idea of what a Firecat was, he’ll explain why that was so funny too – appeared and told us that Solaris had Ascended and he looked forward to seeing Kir and I in Sunhame, and ended up delivering a summons from Solaris that implied Kir would be entirely replaced and permanently stationed in Sunhame.

I’m sure you can understand why the entire unit kicked up a huge fuss about that – Kir would hate it! It was nice to see Kir get some idea of how valuable he was to the unit, I don’t think he had really accepted that the men of the unit wanted him as their Sunpriest until they raised such a fuss about
him being taken away. Needless to say, between the letter of objection signed by every member of the 62nd, Kir’s admission that cities and especially Sunhame are abhorrent to him, and my declaration that if she tried I was grabbing Kir and fleeing the country, to hell with her revolution, he retained his post in the 62nd and simply received a… subordinate priest? Not really an acolyte, and that’s the phrase I was going to use. Anyway, Henrich, who goes by Henri, was assigned to us as Kir’s second – essentially he’s Kir’s assistant and can serve as a full priest when Kir goes to Sunhame, which is fairly regularly, since that promotion I mentioned was to the head of the Firestarting Order, which comes with some absolutely fantastic titles!

Incendiary is the one Kir prefers to use, though I’m rather fond of Incandescence or Luminary, but by far the best is Illuminatory!

The Firestarters call him Eldest though, because he’s the First Order Firestarter who has been ordained the longest. He’s not the Eldest age-wise though, he’s actually one of the youngest Firestarters in the Order – there are three students, one of which is Rodri, who we saved from a blood mage monster during the build-up years, and who is Kir’s student because he also has the Firestarting Gift. None of the others do, which is… a little surprising? Mostly because their whole Order is based on setting fires, but they all have their own ways of doing it. One of the other students, Maltin, uses his music and the Bardic Gift to craft flames and illusions, it’s really strange. Caught me in a flashback once, since I wasn’t expecting it, but Kir was there so we were able to straighten it out fine.

It’s been very interesting to meet all of these people – and working with Kir to assure them that they still have a purpose, even with Solaris’ declarations.

That’s the big news! Solaris has declared that Witch-Powers (Gifts) are no longer anathema – or rather, worthy of burning – and that children have to choose going for the priesthood rather than being snatched for it. I wonder if they’ll end up having provisions for adults wanting to enter the priesthood, as it used to be that children were pulled to the priesthood until 13 and then were considered safe, unless they developed a Gift. Or committed some other crime. She’s declared that same-sex relationships are fine – she rather just declared that as long as everyone involved was consenting and old enough (which seems to be sixteen, though there’s some allowances for when both parties are foolish teenagers much like home) it’s fine, and she’s adjusted how tithes are collected (similar to taxes) and opened the District for people to enter without paying for it and made sure that more resources are available to the common people and a bunch of other smaller things, but the big one is that Gifts are okay now.

The consensus seems to be to call them Talents.

The one thing that hasn’t been announced as not-Anathema is Valdemar and Heralds and Companions. That’s the Midsummer deadline I mentioned, it’s a planned announcement, but Solaris and her Council (which Kir and I are a part of!) have decided to leave it for this coming Midsummer.

Is it strange that it doesn’t feel real? I don’t think it will until it’s happened, and even then I’ll probably forget or think I dreamed it. Being a Herald again – well. I suppose I mean not having to hide being a Herald from anyone – I probably won’t advertise it, but I won’t lie, and Aelius is looking forward to no goatskin patches – it’s going to be so very strange.

I’m trying to figure out a way to get Kir to contact his family – or get his family to contact Kir. Or at least investigate them to see if they’re likely to not be terrible about the fact he is a Firestarter. He says it’s obvious, the way he was taken, that he’d be a Firestarter, and who would want a Firestarter as kin which – is infuriating, because I can see how he’d think it’s true. I can see how
there would be so many cases were it is true. I hope that’s not the case here. I’ll keep you all posted on that front.

Kir’s not adding a post script to this, incidentally, he’s already written his own letter to hand off to Markov. Otherwise I wouldn’t have mentioned the above – he’s worried about it, but not willing to risk it, which I understand. So I don’t want to pressure him into things. So best not to mention it in letters back to me, at least until I say we’re clear.

But see! Not keeping secrets from you too much! Some things I just forget, it’s not intentional.

Sunhame is beautiful. For a city that Kir hates with a fiery passion at least – it’s the crowds, apparently his mindspeech shields aren’t designed the way ours are, he just figured out something that worked on his own that apparently feeds into his firestarting Gift or is at least influenced by it – it’s a miracle he made it this long, seriously. I hope everything is well with you. I hope this is enough of a letter.

Pass on my love to everyone.
Anur

Dear Bellamys,

I sincerely hope you were planning on telling Anur at least about some of the reasons for Markov’s immediate horror at my calling, Markov’s reaction hurt Anur badly. I will not say I am entirely used to being received with horror and fear, but I am at least not surprised when it happens.

Anur insists he is going to explain everything, so rather than leave you with more information to digest, I simply wanted to say thank you, now that you have more of an idea of the monumental risks you have accepted Anur taking. Thank you so very much for accepting Anur’s half-hearted explanations of living in Karse, of allowing him to brush off questions with declarations that he can’t quite explain things yet.

Thank you so very much for allowing me to steal him away.

Vkandis bless and guide,
Kir Dinesh

3rd Year of Selenay and Darenthallis’ Reign, Frost Moon

Dear family,

At least I don’t have to dance around topics much anymore – the main updates I have for you are on the potential reunion with Kir’s family! His family wrote asking after his death, as they’d assumed he’d died. Which makes sense, unfortunately, it has been well over twenty years since he was taken for the priesthood.

Which was – traumatic. Apparently the dragging a Herald and or Sunpriest home to meet the family is a tradition on both sides, as his father had a friend named Wes who was a Herald, and his execution was when Kir first really used his Firestarting Gift, to kill him quickly, which his Companion didn’t appreciate, and nearly killed Kir’s older brother, when she was trying to kill Kir. It’s – a mess. It’s going to be a mess – but I knew that already, at least, so now I just have a better idea of what sort of mess we’ll be ending up with.

The fact Kir can mindspeak with me and Aelius – that he’s willing to, that he accepts Heralds now – it’s incredible. It always has been, even without knowing this.
I’m worried about this visit. Hoping it doesn’t go terribly is about all I have right now. His sister Kiara – named after him, apparently – came to Sunhame and is very impressive. There’s a pretty strong resemblance too. She passed on a letter from Lukas, Kir’s older brother, and that letter is what pulled the whole story of Wes’ death out. Meanwhile, the ward we were so happy with this summer is too strong, or growing to quickly – there’s worry that if it destabilizes when Ancar invades, because it is a matter of when, not if, that the anchors will be badly affected.

Since Kir is the Incendiary, he’s the primary anchor, which is just exactly what I needed to hear. Aelius has some ideas to pull some of the energy into Valdemar, and there are some other plans to divert the power to workings within Karse, so hopefully things are resolved without me resorting to desperate measures. I haven’t figured out what those are yet, but I will.

Needless to say we won’t be visiting until Midsummer, things are moving far too quickly here.

Ma, the exorcism stories won’t be spoken often. It’s going to be hard to find any, but thank you for asking around. I’ll write you after our visit to Kir’s family – well. After Midwinter. Things are going to be pretty tight, timing wise.

Love,
Anur

Dear Bellamys,

Well, Anur has described things well. I assumed Lukas dead – or at least I did not let myself seriously consider him alive – so receiving a letter from him was a huge relief. It looks as though out of my three siblings, only one holds a grudge against Firestarters, which is far better than I ever hoped.

Anur and Jaina (the former Incendiary, we trained together in our acolyte years) have apparently developed elaborate contingency plans in case this visit doesn’t go well, so no matter how things work out I will not be bored. We haven’t determined dates yet, though the goal is to manage a visit before Midwinter. We have to be in Sunhame this Midwinter, which makes it the first High Holy Day I’ve had in Sunhame since I was ordained.

I’m not particularly looking forward to it. Anur is already trying to figure out how he can smuggle snacks in without being glared at too fiercely, we’ll see if I end up letting him go through with it.

He is going to be in Valdemar investigating a few things. Hopefully it will give me time to finish his Midwinter’s gift, trying to craft something when we live in one another’s pockets is difficult.

Vkandis bless and guide,
Kir Dinesh

Chapter End Notes

More of a summary chapter than anything - but I couldn’t let one family get totally neglected for other family drama! Hope you enjoyed.
“Tamara!” Kir cried, the soldiers inspecting the chapel’s shutters looking over at him and one of them asking, “Father Kir?”

“Apologies, a name I was trying to remember,” he assured them, “It’s been bothering me for days.”

Days where he could have just opened the letter and hoped she signed it with her name, but he wasn’t going to invite that much stress with Anur not yet back.

“Those are the worst – no. The worst is when you’re trying to remember and you finally do but only after you’ve called the wrong name and now you look like an idiot. I thought my niece was named Bertha for some reason. It’s Becka.”

“Those at least sound similar,” the man holding the ladder steady offered, “I spent a while convinced that my former sergeant’s name was Alec, but it’s apparently Gunnar.”

“Those names are completely unrelated!” Lars, actually on the ladder, complained, “This shutter looks fine, Father. The ones on the northern side need some slats replaced but otherwise the chapel is clear. We’ll take those off and add them to the rest.”

“Good to hear,” he said, picking up the bucket of glass scraps – none from the chapel, thankfully, and heading for the forge. At this point all the windows had been examined for damage and those panes that needed replacing pulled out entirely – it looked like the quartermaster had enough replacements for now, but the blacksmith had worked out molds for the thick-paned cloudy glass they used here years ago and would make more replacements out of the scraps. If one looked, it was rather easy to pick out the windows made by glassmakers and sent out to the Sunsguard and those repaired by the blacksmith in his forge, but they at least got the job done and weren’t that much frailer.

One day Kir would have to go to the glassblowing district and ask after theory – or encourage Rodri to do it and send a list of questions. It would depend on how much he felt like interacting with strangers that day.

Dropping the glass fragments with the blacksmith he joined the group carrying crates of arrowheads to the armory before getting called over to help Janner with the infirmary and it was well past noon when he felt Anur’s presence against his mind again.

“Bellamy is on his way back then?” Janner asked, Kir looking up from the herbal blends he was measuring out, surprised.

“Ha, don’t look at me like that, sir. You relaxed a bit, but nothing here has changed, stands to reason Bellamy is within range again. You’re always a little bit on edge when he’s out of reach,” the Senior Lieutenant snorted.

“Henri will be pleased,” Kir finally said in lieu of a direct response.

“Father Henri will be thrilled, the poor man left stashes of sage at every doorway to the chapel and left three bundles of it hanging in the tackroom.”
“There are worse quirks to have,” Kir sighed, “Come spring I’m going to recommend he just plant some around the barracks, hopefully he’ll feel less of a need to bring some back every time he rides outside the walls if there’s a crop of it growing here.”

“Maybe so – especially since the cooks have scared him off their patch for the herb garden.”

“He tried to get into the herb garden and managed to survive?” Kir asked incredulously.

“Everyone understands why he’s so panicked about not having enough sage, Father, it gives him a little leeway – but only enough to survive that foolishness once, I’m sure,” the man replied, continuing, “How is your range then, will the Herald be riding in soon or do we have time to finish another batch of blends?”

“Another batch, easily. I can sense his presence when he’s halfway here from the border, we have at least another mark.”

“One would think I’d be used to how fast you two can move,” Janner said after a few moments of blank staring, shaking his head as he continued, “But no. Every time, I’m surprised. At least the Valdemarans are startled by it too, at least some of the time.”

Kir decided not to mention that most of the surprise from the Valdemaran end was the fact Riva was able to keep pace the majority of the time. After explaining that Aelius could help ordinary horses keep up in some specific cases, there had been fewer questions. Neither he nor Anur had bothered mentioning the fact that the last time Aelius had given Riva that aid was when Anur and Asher were fleeing Karse.

Once the alliance with Valdemar was announced, he promised himself, once that had been announced, he would send a letter to the horse-breeders that Riva had come from asking about his bloodline and for any ideas as to the source of this insane endurance and odd tolerance for dramatic fires. So far he had avoided corresponding with them on official Order business, letting Jaina deal with the renegotiations of the tithe-credit contract the Firestarting Order had held with them for the past fifty years. He used the excuse of not being familiar with the current deal, and wanting it arranged as quickly as possible, but it was really so he didn’t have to answer any potentially incredulous questions about just how the gelding he’d been given over fifteen years ago was performing.

He was fairly certain Jaina thought he’d had multiple horses over the years and used the same name for all of them, it was what she had done for her two.

They were putting everything away when shouts from the walls announced Anur’s approach, and Janner just scowled at Kir’s offers to continue helping, so he ended up meeting Anur at the stables. He was in the middle of handing off missives and reports to Nakel, as Ulrich was off at the 107ths barracks to coordinate with Koshiro, so Kir bypassed them and headed for Aelius, who had been untacked and was eyeing the neat stack of goatskin patches by his stall with quite a bit of loathing.

“It itches abominably. I spend at least a mark a day rolling when those things are off. I cannot wait for Midsummer, truly.”

“While your reason is unique, you’re not the only one,” Kir replied. Anur wrapped up his conversation and went to brush down Aelius’ other side, and once the Companion was groomed he ducked under Aelius’ neck and grabbed him around the shoulders.
“No Furies?” Anur asked, “Lilah’s husband hasn’t shown up admitting he too was once a Sunpriest? Rodri hasn’t blown up another bucket of pistachios?”

“While I have no idea as to the latter, but many hopes, the other two haven’t happened at least. Any verging on disastrous encounters with the Lord Marshal or suspicious Heralds?”

“Didn’t hear so much as rumors of another Herald in the area!” Anur beamed, clapping his shoulder, “Right. I’ll get the adhesive then?”

They busied themselves getting supplies organized to reapply Aelius’ disguise, and it wasn’t until they were mid-application that Kir finally asked after the matter that had sent Anur riding north so urgently in the first place.

“Message passed on successfully?” Kir asked, passing one of the goatskin patches with fresh adhesive to Anur.

“Written and sealed, with the Captain planning to hand it off to Griffon with specific verbal orders that it go to the Lord Marshal alone, though she’d run out of sealing wax so it was his own honor keeping it unread,” Anur agreed, holding the goatskin with his fingertips and carefully pressing it to Aelius’ neck, holding it in place before running his hand over it in the direction of the hair to flush out any excess adhesive.

“One way to spread the word,” Kir huffed a laugh, looking to Aelius and asking, “Word from the Grove-born?”

:Unsatisfying, but not appalling,: Aelius summarized, :It’s rare, Rolan knows of seven total cases over the nine hundred or so years our nations have been enemies, with the last pair being Randyl, Chosen of Sonya, occuring in the reign of Elspeth the Wise, grandmother to King Theran, who ruled during Lavan Firestorm’s lifetime.:”

“And why were we surprised by it?” Anur prompted, having apparently waited to ask about this.

:Because it did not occur to Rolan that it would be surprising,: Aelius said, ears flattening along with his tone before he heaved a sigh and continued, :There were two aspects of this exorcism issue I found distressing – but the main aspect is that we are never warned of the possibility of an outside force severing our bond with our Herald. Exorcists being capable of it is a specific example of a phenomenon I had no idea was possible, nor did Kantor, Ratha or Jasan – Kantor and Ratha have entered Karse previously and are the most likely to have received the warning. From what Kantor has passed along to me, no one aside from Rolan knew for sure that this was possible and everyone is highly disturbed by it. There are some that admit the possibility makes sense, given their knowledge of the bond, but none who had consciously realized it was vulnerable to outside mortal forces.:”

:But for some reason, Rolan thought more people knew?: Anur asked dubiously, finished with combing Aelius own hair over the edges of the patch and moving onto the next area, Kir adding the adhesive to the next patch.

:If not knew, at least didn’t think it was impossible. He was under the impression that everyone knew such an attack was possible, if not likely. As it is so rare, he did not think it required to be specifically stated as a threat when entering Karse – particulary since those techniques I mentioned, for concealing the presence of our bond, do provide some form of defence against such attacks – essentially they delay things so an escape is possible, and provide a form of immediate backlash against whoever is attacking our bond so. No one I’ve spoken to was aware that those techniques did that, but they do.:”
So it’s a case of a more general remedy – or as close to a remedy as one can get – being applied, and the specifics of what that remedy acts against being forgotten. Kir said thoughtfully, passing the next patch over to Anur and grabbing a comb to start removing the excess adhesive from the first patch.

Right, Aelius agreed. So in summary, we were given defensive measures against attacks of that nature, though they’ve been steeped into our own lore as concealing the bond more than defending it, and over the generations the specific situations that required that remedy have been forgotten. That ignorance is being remedied now, and was unintentional.

“Good to know Companion herd knowledge can be lost too, I suppose,” Anur said aloud, “Or if not good to know, it is at least good to be reminded of that.”

On all sides, Chosen, it’s a valuable reminder on all sides, agreed.

They worked at reapplying Aelius’ disguise in silence a while longer, his coat occasionally twitching as the patches’ grew more anchored.

Also, I do rather think I’d like to burn these patches come Midsummer.

“That can be arranged,” Kir promised.

It wasn’t as good as actual spice tea, but his mother’s attempt was good in and of itself and a reasonable replacement besides.

“Try this,” he said, offering his mug to Kir, “I’m thinking of using this as my gift for Solaris, it’s a tea blend my mother made after hearing Markov’s descriptions of spice tea.”

“You come by the preference honestly,” Kir snorted, before looking startled and correcting, “By… proximity, or something. I suppose. I forget Markov isn’t blood-kin to you.”

“Oh I do too,” Anur assured him, “Hells I think half of Mara and the twins’ surprise at Markov being Karsite is going to be the reminder he’s not related to us all by blood. Anyway, thoughts on the tea?”

“I rather prefer this,” Kir admitted, examining the mug and taking another sip, “It’s – is there ginger in this?”

“I think that’s horseradish actually,” Anur said, trying to remember the blend he’d only ever watched his mother make a few times. “Maybe ginger?”

“This does not have horseradish in it,” Kir retorted, aghast, “There is no possible way this has horseradish in it – nevermind. We’ll have to ask for the recipe next summer. If trying to figure out the spice-cake recipe translation taught us anything its that we both have no idea what each other’s plants are called without samples to look at.”

“Fair point,” Anur agreed, “So, I have a carved box from a few winters ago, put the wax-cloth bag in that and a gift for Solaris?”

“Appropriate – is that the one where you tried inlay?”

“It is the one where I mostly succeeded at inlay. The trying at inlay one isn’t worth gifting. Who’s left out of the Firestarters?”
“This one for Valerik is all that’s left. With trying to work in those gemstones for his firestarting it was the most complicated pattern,” Kir replied, finishing wrapping one of said stones in knots and moving to the actual cord. It had taken them an absurdly long time to figure out that the easiest thing to do would be making all the Firestarters the same gift, with some personalization in color and style of carved beads that were Anur’s contribution.

Figuring out reasonably simple motifs that were still unique to each person had been a fun challenge, and he’d only really finished his part of things while waiting for Kir to finish explaining the Loshern situation to Kavrick a few weeks ago.

“Are you going to save the other gifts you made for a different occasion then?”

“Yes, aside from Jaina’s Sun in Glory. She’s been extremely helpful and has the highest rank besides, it would not be strange for her to receive more than the others,” Kir shrugged, “The others I’ll save for after winter, use the excuse of bad weather leading to excess projects. I’ll probably hand off Colbern’s axe-cord when we stop in Sunhame next, to start selling that story. Not Jaina’s Sun in Glory though – giving it to her unprompted will just make it more likely she raises a fuss about my lack of Sunhame appropriate Sun in Glory.”

“Oh right,” Anur said, making a mental note to chase down Rodri when they reached Sunhame and ask how Kir’s new Sun in Glory was going. “I forgot she hadn’t gotten back to us with a verdict on our three picks.”

“I think she forgets until she sees me going to a service without one,” Kir said idly, the lamp’s flame growing brighter as he reached a tricky bit in his pattern, “Also, we haven’t actually been back to Sunhame since we gave her those options, she could just be waiting for us to return.”

“True,” Anur allowed, his gaze caught by the half-finished carving of a Firecat Kir had used as a paperweight, “By the way, are you going to read those letters tonight or are we putting them off another day?”

Kir froze, letting out a careful breath before continuing with his pattern and saying, “Tonight, I suppose. I need to write back to Kiara and confirm the dates.”

“Four days is a good amount to see how welcome we are without overstaying or feeling like we’re running,” Anur commented, repeating a sentiment he’d shared on reading Kiara’s letter. Curling his fingers absently, he caught the letters and small figurine out of the air and sent the letters to rest on the small table at Kir’s side.

With that done, he focused on the figurine in his hands, turning it over and wondering how to proceed with it. He’d stopped working on it moons ago, simply because it was missing something – he had yet to figure out how to convey that extra something that distinguished Firecats from oversized ordinary cats without paint. Watching Kir work and thinking over Rodri’s plan for the Sun in Glory project he’d thought of adding some burn marks to the design, but the idea wasn’t formed enough yet.

A few minutes later he heard rustling paper, and Kir huffed a laugh, “She didn’t sign her name. Anur, was my mother’s name mentioned in Verius’ report?”

“Not that I recall,” Anur said, thinking back, before the implication of that question hit home and he straightened, giving Kir a worried look, “You don’t know her name?”

“I think it’s Tamara, it’s the name I came up with this morning after trying for the past few days to recall it. It sounds right, but I can’t be sure. Would you mind asking after it at some point early in the
“Of course,” Anur agreed, and with mindspeech he didn’t even need to make sure Kir was in earshot when he asked. “That’s your mother’s letter, then?”

“It is,” Kir said, gaze flicking across the page and he smiled faintly, “She asks for us to visit – it’s very matter-of-fact. That fits my memory of her, at least.”

Anur accepted the letter when Kir handed it over, shifting his chair so he had a better angle for lighting and taking a sip of tea to stall for time. He wanted to give Kir the chance to open the next letter if he wanted to, but by the slow way Kir was turning that last letter in his hands he was going to wait for him to finish reading this one.

To my son,

I named Kiara for you because I thought you were dead, and needed as many ties to bind your father to this world as possible. He is gone now, after he saw Kiara to her apprenticeship there was no reason to hold him here.

Lukas and Irma are the only ones to have truly prayed for your life all these years. I saw it as pointless. Elisia saw it as cruel, and Kiara had no reason to believe it was needed. That does not mean I do not welcome news of your survival, even as a Firestarter.

There is nothing else you could have been.

I hope to see you and your sworn-brother both before Midwinter.

Your mother.

Anur stared at the letter for a few long moments, his own breathing echoing in his ears.

Kir’s hand pressed warm against his shoulder, Kir murmuring, “You are far more upset by that letter than I expected.”

“I – I am,” Anur agreed. “There’s a lot – a lot packed into these words Kir.”

“There is,” Kir agreed, settling his weight against the arm of Anur’s chair, “But it leaves little to question, which I appreciate.”

Anur took a deep breath, and tried to pull himself back, to remove himself from the situation a bit, and look at things from Kir’s perspective. There was little sense of sentiment, of affection, in this letter. There were listings of fact, of reasons for actions, and an admission that she was at least not-unpleased that he had survived. There was a request to meet the two of them.

There were no expectations. Lukas’ letters had been filled with reminescing, with reminders that they had once loved each other and the hope that they would again. Kiara’s was less heavy with memory, but loaded with apprehension and hope that this reunion would end less than terribly. Kir’s mother’s letter – he would try to refrain from mentally calling her Tamara until they confirmed it was her name, it’d be foolish to make the wrong name a habit – was devoid of any of that.

“I can see that,” he finally said, handing the letter back to Kir. “Sorry Kir. What’s the next one then?”

“From my grandmother,” Kir said, a faint tremor in his hands as exchanged his mother’s note for the one remaining sealed letter.
This was the one Kir was most nervous about, Anur recognized, and wrapped an arm around Kir’s waist, saying, “Let’s read it then.”

Carefully peeling back the seal, Kir unfolded the letter, far longer than his mother’s had been, and held it so they could read it at the same time.

My dearest grandson,

Lukas does not begrudge me the adjective, never fear. I never dared dream that my prayers for your safety would somehow result in me seeing you again. On the more difficult days I feared my prayers for safety were condemning you to misery, as safe is not happy, but happy was far too much to ask.

I have questioned Kiara very carefully about your meeting – we did that girl a grave disservice, naming her for you. It made it far too easy for your father and I to treat her as a replacement, as a substitute – I at least remembered her actual name, Ivan slipped to calling her Kir far too often. She’s come into her own though, and now here she is, plotting her way into protecting the family. I am very proud of her.

I am very proud of you, no matter what people may claim of the things you needed to do to survive. You lived, my dear one, you lived when others died, when others would see you dead, and that is a triumph. The dead cannot change. And the changes you have wrought! Exactly how long have you been working with Her Eminence Solaris towards this revolution, hmm?

It does not excuse any crimes or sins you hold as your own, but it gives hope to those of us who have far longer to have accumulated sins on our hands.

Tamara will hold her heart away from the issue, she is very good at that, but my heart has never not been with you, dear one, faint though that faith may have been at times. I look forward, desperately, to seeing you again, to seeing how you have grown. To meeting this brother of yours, this one you’ve claimed as kin, and the knotwork you’ve managed to hold onto.

Please come to see us, dear one. It may never be home to you again, but that is fine. Family need not share blood, much less a home.

Love,

Your grandmother

Kir practically collapsed in relief, and Anur swiftly stood, hauling Kir into a hug and letting him shake. This was the letter – the relative – that Kir had truly believed lost to him, had never even considered seeing again. The others of his family he could at least imagine the remote possibility of running across, but his grandmother? Anur had no idea how old the woman actually was, but for her to have her youngest grandchildren be as old as Kir and Kiara were, she had to be near seventy. Not an impossible age, by any means, but an improbable one.

And that was without taking into account the fact that she had apparently served as a ship captain in her own right for decades, it wasn’t the safest profession around.

Anur didn’t sigh when golden flames started flickering over his skin again, but he did frown.

“Kir, are these flames still unintentional?”

Annoyance flared in the back of his mind and Kir grumbled curses, pulling away slightly and wiping at his eyes, “Yes,” he finally said, taking a few deep breaths before the flames faded away again. “I’d been meaning to ask you about that – we should be able to manage a few days in Sunhame before
heading to this visit, how opposed would you be to me locking myself in the Trial chamber for a
night to try and get these locked down? Without just – letting them go, I’m having a hard time
solidifying my hold on them but that room is the only place I can actually do so without causing
serious damage to my surroundings – and with Hardorn behind that blasted ward I can’t even go
over and find some tainted lands to purify.”

“Also that firestorm you threw around Griffon was well over a hundred yards across at its narrowest,
we’d have to clear a heck of a lot of territory of innocents before letting you loose which isn’t exactly
feasible,” Anur pointed out, buying himself time to think past his kneejerk horror.

Once he pinned it down, that horror was pretty obviously based on his own experiences with fire and
had little to nothing to do with his knowledge of Kir’s own skills and preferences. That being said,
he didn’t care for the life and death aspect of that room.

“How literal is the locking yourself in? Can you leave, once you’ve done what you needed to? Or if
something goes wrong? I’m not saying it will, Kir, I’m asking if you can – from the description of
the Trial it sounded like you were literally stuck in there until sunrise, is that an aspect of the room or
just because it’s the official test?”

“I – don’t know. I’ve never heard of anyone going back,” Kir admitted.

“That makes sense,” Anur said, thinking it over, “Okay. Let’s ask Kari – both about the Trial room
and if he can get you out, should something go wrong. I’d be… I won’t say comfortable, but I won’t be
upset with you entering the Trial room so long as you can exit safely, at any time.”

“Reasonable,” Kir agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I’ll admit that I really, truly hope Kari
does say he can get me out or that I can exit myself at any time, because relying on him to keep these
flames from appearing when I’m distressed isn’t sustainable.”

“And definitely not ideal with this visit, emotional distress is practically guaranteed and bad reactions
to suddenly appearing fire just as likely,” Anur said, “I completely understand why you want to get
this under control before the visit.”

“I’ve already asked Kari to accompany us on this trip, barring emergencies with the other
Firestarters,” Kir said, a wry smile on his face, “These golden flames have shown up a few times
while you were gone. I’m just lucky that the 62nd seems to take the fact that I do my absolute best to
avoid collateral damage as sufficient reassurance – and the fact they apparently have decided
superficial scorch marks don’t count as damage.”

“Good plan,” Anur agreed. “Right – will you be writing responses tonight? Also, any preference for
one collective response versus individual ones?”

“I’m tempted to say collective, simply because they’ll undoubtedly be sharing the letters anyway and
I’d rather consolidate my effort,” Kir said.

“Perfectly sensible,” he assured him, heading for the desk and guiding Kir back to his chair en route.
“Also, it looks like your guess of Tamara was right! I can’t think of any other person your
grandmother could have been describing.”

“Good point,” Kir said, sounding faintly pleased and Anur smiled, handing over paper and ink.

“So,” Anur said, carrying his chair over to be closer to Kir’s and holding the other three letters for
reference, “What are we going to write?”

Dear family,
Kiara, four days ending a week before Midwinter works well for us. For a specific date of arrival, let’s say the tenth day of Midwinter’s moon? Judging by distances, we’d arrive sometime in the afternoon. As for the horses, we’ll of course pay for it but if you could mention that both are battle-trained and partnered when you speak to the inn-master, that would be appreciated. We’ll need to discuss things with the inn-master to ensure everyone remains safe regardless but they would probably appreciate the advance notice.

Lukas, as you can undoubtedly guess, these two horses would not be ones to try and work past your entirely understandable anxiety with. I rather think I was too worried about all the other ways I could be killed to focus on horses as a particular issue when it came up the first time. Thank you for the information about Elisia, I’m glad to know that no one in the family will be surprised by this visit at the very least.

Mother, grandmother – my apologies but I really don’t know how to address you, so I will go with formality. Thank you both for your letters. I appreciate knowing that my being a Firestarter, should I survive, was as obvious as I thought it must be. As for how long Anur and I have been working with Solaris, it has been around four years.

I look forward to seeing all of you.

Kir

I have nothing to add beyond echoing that sentiment, so thank you for the invitation and we will see you in a few weeks.

Anur Bellamy

Chapter End Notes

Another Chapter! I seriously think I might end up calling the chapter where they finally get to the Dinesh hometown - which... I should probably name at some point.. "They Finally Get There!"

I had a lot of fun figuring out how Tamara and Irma would write their letters, and how to convey their own emotional responses to Kir’s survival/personalities with the text. Hopefully some of that came across and at the very least it’s clear how different every one of the Dineshs (Dineshes?) are.

Hope you enjoy, and see you in... a few weeks? Hopefully?
Preparations for a Visit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The list of issues to follow up on once they reached Sunhame was frustratingly long, and only due to get longer. Kir sighed, and added a note to Anur’s scrawled necromancy ward because yes, that was coming up and there had been some discussion of channeling energy from the Hardornen ward into that effort. Hopefully that plan had actually come through, it would be nice to at least have proof of concept for bleeding off some of the border-ward’s energy.

He also added the exorcist Ulrich’s name to the list, but without any details. Even though this list was intended only for them, there was no sense being reckless and writing something to give away or even hint at Aelius’ White Demon status. Especially now that they knew some members of the priesthood could detect his presence without any extra effort or scrying put into it.

Though in their follow up discussions with Kari it had sounded like he was surprised Loshern had that degree of sensitivity, which seemed to indicate it wasn’t a standard ability for exorcists. Or perhaps it was, and so few exorcists were around to pass on their lore that detecting and identifying Companion-Herald bonds had fallen by the wayside. Either way, it was another potential avenue for questions, and questions he could potentially ask Ulrich directly without using Solaris as an intermediary.

Most of this could be left for their two week long stay around Midwinter’s Day itself – between the first Conclave he would ever attend as an ordained priest, Anur’s first ever High Holy Day in Sunhame, and this list of objectives, their stay would be extremely busy. That wasn’t even taking into account the fact he was hoping to visit with Axeli and would probably need at least a day to recover from whatever happened in this visit to his family. It didn’t matter how well it went, his stress levels would take at least a day or two to come down from.

“This is going to be our longest stretch away from the 62nd,” Anur commented, hanging his coat on a peg by the door. This was one of their favorite traveler’s chapel, a half-day’s hard ride from Sunhame (a full day, if not day and a half, for anyone else) yet still far enough off the beaten path Kir was fairly certain they had done more upkeep for it recently than the actual chapel keepers. Not that it was a bad thing – it was useful work, and it meant they could add details for their own convenience besides.

Namely, actual pegs to hang coats and a raised rack for boots so they could dry properly, along with a few shelves by the fireplace now holding some basic carved boxes with basic medicinal herbs and bandages in them along with some tea to supplement the basic rations all these chapels stocked. And a small stack of knotwork projects, including four bookmarks, three Sun-in-Glories, and two bracelets with beads from Anur’s earlier efforts.

Kir had left four Sun in Glories their last time through, so at least someone else was coming by and occasionally taking them. Before they’d left the 62nd Kir had reorganized their quarters on the hunt for knotwork projects to try and get a reasonable sampling of what he could do, and he’d found two satchels filled with completed projects that he’d forgotten about over the years. Thankfully he’d put cedar disks in the satchels early on so none were moth-damaged, but two satchels. They’d counted them out and there had been fifty-eight projects! Not all had been high quality, but none had been bad, and fifty-eight!

That wasn’t even counting the projects he had known were in his quarters. He’d brought one entire
bag with them on this trip and had vague ideas of scattering pieces around Sunhame so someone—
anyone—would take them.

At least he had been able to leave a large stack of Sun in Glories with Henri in case anyone received
orders to transfer out while he was gone. Captain Ulrich had made a habit of not actually sending
men away until Kir was able to see them off, but as Anur had said, this visit would be their longest
yet.

Hopefully their longest ever, but he wasn’t holding out hope. Midsummer was going to be long—
especially if one counted time away from the 62nd rather than time in Sunhame, since they’d
undoubtedly have to spend some time in Valdemar.

“It’s probably going to end up being an entire moon cycle,” Kir agreed tiredly, huffing a laugh when
Anur sat next to him and practically plastered himself against Kir’s side.

“You cannot possibly be that cold,” he said fondly, Anur grumbling disagreeably and hauling one of
their woolen blankets off the end of the pallet and draping it over himself.

“It is foggy out there, Kir,” Anur complained, “Foggy. The entire world is now soggy and cold, and I
hate it. Horses are blanket ed, and the bricks are finally warm all the way through so they have a
warm wall on their side.”

“I hate to break it to you. But lakes often have fog.”

“I hate it.”

“Of course you do,” Kir agreed, warming the air under Anur’s blanket at least and grinning at
Anur’s pleased hum. “Anything else you can think of for the list?”

“Probably not,” Anur said, peering over Kir’s shoulder and skimming it. “No, though are there any
we want to make sure we cover in this first Sunhame run before heading back out? Besides the Trial
room visit, but that’s obvious.”

“The necromancy ward – at the very least I want to speak to Colbern, Seras or Ulrich about whether
or not I even need to be involved, it sounded like I was a last resort option and if it’s necessary I
would like as much notice as possible. The rest can wait, though once we get back from this visit
we’ll need to pretty much immediately begin preparing for the Conclave – it’s going to be a long one
this year, it has to be. What about you, any topics you want to make sure we pass on in the next
days?”

“We definitely need to speak to Solaris about exorcists – and ask her about Ulrich, at the very least. I
don’t know that we want to speak to him directly about it just yet. Also, have you heard from
Kavrick yet?”

“He’s asked to speak with me when our paths cross next, but I don’t know that he’s going to be in
Sunhame just yet. I think he planned on one last patrol with Maltin before returning to Sunhame for
the Conclave. To be frank I don’t care what he does, it’s his decision, I just want to have some idea
of what that decision is so I can back him on it, should anything come up.”

“Makes sense,” Anur said, covering a yawn. “You’re not doing the Trial room tomorrow night, by
the way. We have three nights in Sunhame scheduled, you’ll do that on the middle night so naps can
happen. Which they will.”

“Yes, Anur.”
Anur twitched again, Kir’s mental presence surging with another roar-of-flames-glee before returning to the fainter crackle of a campfire he’d always interpreted as contentment. Shaking his head, he turned the page on his copy of the Charter draft. Etrius had taken it upon himself to ensure everyone had a copy to review before the Conclave began, so it was only right that he actually read the thing.

“I certainly hope that wasn’t in response to something in the Charter draft,” Seras commented, sipping his tea and continuing with his own writing, barely glancing at him.

“Ah – no,” Anur said, blinking a few times as he tried to focus on the words in front of him again, “I underestimated how distracting this Trial was going to be for me.”

Seras paused, Anur very deliberately not wincing at his slip and continuing to read the page. He probably should have sat out Kir’s firestorm training session in their room but he had wanted to drink some tea while looking over the Charter and the kitchen had been empty when he arrived so he had seen no reason to leave.

“May I ask about it, or would that make you uncomfortable?” Seras finally asked, Anur hesitating slightly before setting the papers aside, wrapping his hands around his almost-lukewarm-enough mug of spice-tea to keep them from shaking too much. If he was going to be discussing his witch-power with someone who just over a year ago would have burned him alive for it, he needed something to hold.

“You can ask,” Anur said carefully, “But I reserve the right not to answer.”

Seras snorted, waving his hand dismissively, “Of course, this isn’t an interrogation, I’m simply curious and it’s not as if I’ve had much chance to ever ask before.”

“True,” Anur replied, amused at the idea of Firestarters of old trying to ask for technical details and limitations from people they were planning to burn alive, “There wouldn’t have been much incentive for answering.”

“Much less answering honestly,” Seras agreed, pulling a piece of paper from his stack and glancing at it before asking, “Jaina said you two said you shared the mind-talking one, and from what Laskaris relayed it has different degrees of strength?”

“I have a larger range than Kir,” Anur said, nodding, “That’s what we mean by stronger anyway, but I think there’s another type of strength in what sort of people you can hear – that girl we helped and Kir gave his Sun in Glory too – she was hearing people that didn’t have any sort of Talents or mage-craft, and picking up a bit on dreams too. Neither of us can hear anyone that doesn’t already have the Talent on their own.”

He stared at the list Seras was scawling notes on, murmuring to himself, and asked bemusedly, “Is that list of questions all for me?”

“For you or the Eldest,” Seras confirmed absently, “I’ve been waiting months to ask these, I’m glad you two finally admitted to it.”

Anur’s knuckles went white around his mug and by Seras’ wince when he looked up his face matched.

:Anur?:
"That was different," Seras said intently, before wincing again and flattening his hands on the table, "My apologies, I’ve made you uncomfortable. There were discussions, amongst all of us, about you two. Colbern and Jaina and I at the very least were well aware you had a witch-power and that Kir probably did too, your synchronization was too much to pass off as familiarity. None of us wanted to ask, though, that could have gone badly. So we waited for confirmation. We were planning to say something nearer the Conclave, if it hadn’t come up yet.”

Anur felt some of his tension ease at Seras’ clear worry for his own distress, smiling faintly when Kir’s mind settled into an intent sort of focus that brought to mind his most intricate fire-sculptures, and he said, “One of the reasons – well. Aside from Kir’s personal distaste for cities, we very intentionally avoided long-term interactions with anyone outside of the 62nd, as they were read into things rather early on.”

“Sensible,” Seras agreed, taking a few moments to adjust his papers and ink in a clear stalling gesture.

“What is he saying? If I may ask,” Seras added hastily, and Anur had to grin because that sort of curiosity was something to encourage at this stage of the reforms. He was even putting conscious effort into being polite about it – it would be interesting to see what sort of etiquette evolved around the use of Talents in Karse as they became more accepted and the users of Talents became less wary.

“Aside from that last bit, where you recognized it as different, I’m not hearing words,” Anur replied, sipping at his tea to stall for time so he could figure out a way to explain things but Seras immediately pounced on that with more questions.

“So the mental speech one doesn’t require words?”

“No more than hearing does,” Anur pointed out, “Depends on how well you know the person too. If I were to mindspeak with – um. Hansa, he’s a good example. When I speak with Hansa it’s mostly words, there’s a bit of tone that comes across but it’s fairly muted. With Kir I have more of a range of nonverbal communication – if you asked someone a yes or no question and they just sort of hummed at you, depending on the person you’d know what they meant, right?”

“Hmm, yes that makes sense,” Seras murmured, adding notes to a few places on his list of questions.

This was actually a good chance to ask about some things he hadn’t been able to find sources for, now that Seras had brought up his and Kir’s synchronization.

“What I get from Kir isn’t mindspeech alone though,” he said, Seras looking intrigued as he continued, “It picked up a lot after he performed that hunting rite on the first Nameless One we encountered – before that we could speak words to one another and if I focused I could get a general sense of where he was and what sort of mood he might be in, at least if he was strongly agitated in some way. Similarly for him, based on what he’s said when we discuss it. After that it accelerated pretty quickly and ended in what we have now, which is a constant presence in each other’s minds, as long as we’re close enough. And I was out talking to some of the people on the refugee chain in the north when Markov came across and triggered those traps, so we now know that even when we’re out of our usual range, extreme emotions can come across as a bit of a beacon.”

“That hunting rite – I’ve read the reports Sister Rhianne sent of the event, it sounded like Kir at the very least manifested the Voice?” Seras asked, sounding practically hopeful which was honestly a bizarre tone for the man, but then he had been waiting for and occasionally mentioning his and Kir’s records to no avail. That hand-off would have to wait until after Midsummer.
I do think this Midwinter you’ll be getting requests for stories, Aelius commented.

Good point. And we’ll probably get some with this visit too. Best start thinking of ones that are entertaining with minimal to no references of your White Demon-ness.

Or your Fetching.

That one’s fairly easy to leave out of stories or gloss over, but fair.

“Kir did first,” Anur agreed, finally taking a sip of his watered down tea. “It was – the first thing I ever saw that was clearly miraculous.”

Even remembering those moments – the smoke spiralling into a Sun in Glory, the flames turning gold and wrapping around Kir like a cloak, sinking into his skin, that Voice – years removed, the memory still brought awe.

“I don’t know how much of it Kir remembers, or at least I don’t know if we remember the same thing,” Anur said finally, meeting Seras’ gaze again, “But once I was invited to join the Hunt, I don’t actually remember our ride after the Nameless One. Once we found him, I remember shooting the arrow into his thigh and what I said, but I wasn’t – the one making those decisions. I was a vessel. Kir agrees with that, he only clearly remembers things after the Nameless one was down and judgement was being passed, and even then it wasn’t until that man was dead that he was making his own decisions.”

“Do you know how long that period lasted?”

“It was right around noon when we started, and I think it was mid-morning the next day when we found him,” Anur said, tilting his hand back and forth as he added, “I’d have to check our records to be sure, I can’t say that with any certainty – but it was definitely the day after we started, and based on distances we were riding through the night without much, if any, slowing.”

“Fascinating,” Seras murmured, Anur content to wait while the man thought things over so he stood to put the kettle on.

By the time he wandered back Seras had come to some form of conclusion and barely let him finish sitting before he said, “A joint manifestation, then. Perhaps Kir was the center of it, but you were drawn into a similar state. Records from those who have manifested the Voice vary slightly but all agree that they were not the ones in control, and were unaware of what might occur next.”

“We’ve been calling it that,” Anur agreed, “A joint manifestation, I mean. Are there any records of that occurring? And after affects like what we’ve run into?”

“Nothing explicit,” Seras replied, raising an eyebrow at him and continuing wryly, “Though I suppose if there was anything so obvious you two would have already found it, as much time as you spend in our Archives.”

“Still haven’t gone to the main Archives,” Anur pointed out, but not bothering to deny that he and Kir had already searched the Hall for information.

“And there might be more references hidden away, but the closest I can think of to a similar occurrence would be in our library if anywhere – we quote the six hundred years since the last blood-mage in Karse quite frequently, after all,” Seras replied, and Anur straightened in his seat, intrigued.

“You’re suggesting that hunt had a similar guidance,” he said slowly, trying to remember the few
facts he’d managed to glean from Kir on that story and the versions he’d read of it here besides. “Kir mentioned that the hunting rite was used then, when he was explaining how he’d found it.”

“He did not find it,” Seras replied quietly, “If it was in our records hall to be found, it would have been. There are fragments of references, I suppose, but I suspect he recreated it.”

Anur’s eyes narrowed, saying carefully, “Kir said he pieced together the details of how it was performed, and that it took a lot of time. You’re saying recreated as if it should mean something… more special.”

“It is,” Seras said, inhaling sharply before shaking his head and sighing, “What do you know of how the Rites were created?”

:Kir, quick question, should I know how Rites are created?:

:What? No. I can make ice!:

“Excuse me one moment,” Anur said, turning slightly away from Seras and focusing on Kir, :Ice? Kir, what the hells are you talking about?:

:When I cool water the heat has to go somewhere, I never managed to go from cool to ice but I did!:

:Where are you getting water from in a locked room filled with fire?:

:Safety bucket.:

“Why is there a safety bucket of water in the Trial room?” Anur muttered aloud, shaking his head and leaving that conversation for the moment. Kir was clearly distracted and enjoying himself besides, so he would leave him to it and focus on Seras. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to interrupt Kir any longer – actually, next time anything came up, he would ask Kari instead.

“The Eldest needed to use it?” Seras asked once Anur looked over at him, and Anur blinked for a moment before remembering the bucket and he laughed, shaking his head.

“He made ice out of it,” he explained, Seras only looking more confused before apparently figuring it out and switching to thoughtful.

“The bucket is a secondary test,” Seras finally said, “For one thing, it’s wood – those taking the trial, if they want water around, need to keep the wood from burning. Also, it makes it at least a little more likely they won’t parch their lungs to the point of damage. It’s not actually useful for putting out any fires in there, from what I’ve been told. Though it could also just be a bit of a cruel taunt for those sent in there to die.”

“Oh, fantastic,” Anur said flatly, before returning to the conversation they had been having, “Anyway, no I don’t know anything about how the Rites were created beyond my own guesses.”

“What? Oh – the Rites, my apologies I rather forgot what we were discussing,” Seras said, Anur just grinning.

“Rites, within the priesthood, are held to be divinely inspired, in the sense that they are designed with the Sunlord’s direct influence, if not an explicit mandate. These are distinct from ceremonies, which are unfortunately also often called rites, as those are crafted by mortals – perhaps with the intent of honoring the divine, but not crafted by the divine. Does that distinction make sense?”

“You’re implying that this hunting rite is a divinely inspired one,” Anur said slowly.
“It’s designed for divine interference,” Seras said, shrugging, “Its success is contingent on that divine interference. There is no other possible category it could fall in. The fact that it was lost and not rediscovered until Kir decided to recreate is… quite something. That is not even taking into account his recreation of the forging of sun-blessed steel! It will be interesting to see if Rodri is capable of it as well, or if it is a Rite that relies on his presence.”

:I didn’t even consider that the ritual could be dependent on Kir’s presence,,: Aelius said thoughtfully, :It is a good point – he’s conducted it with Becka at least, so it is not dependent on the smith.:  

:Aside from the familiarity the smith and the Firestarter have to have with one another in order to keep time,: Anur corrected, before conceding, :That is a fair point. I don’t know that I’ll raise it with Kir just yet.:  

“I rather doubt Kir would be comfortable with the implications of that,” Anur finally said aloud, looking over as the door into the corridor opened and continuing as Jaina walked in, “So I hope you don’t mind that I hope Rodri is able to learn the process.”

“Oh I hope so too,” Seras agreed, returning Jaina’s wave, “For one thing, he’s so very excited about it, it’d be a terrible blow to him if he could never learn. For another it would be a true shame if it could not be taught directly for future generations rather than recreated every time someone with the gift came along.”

“Sun-blessed steel?” Jaina said tiredly, dropping a tea sachet in a mug and staring at the kettle. “How long has that been warming?”

“It should be lukewarm at least,” Anur said, “It’s full.”

“Refills for either of you?” she asked, pouring lightly steaming water into her own mug and walking over to top off Anur’s when he asked. Seras shook his head and she put the kettle back before slumping onto the bench next to him.

“Are you all right?” Anur asked carefully, “Also, yes, we were talking about the sun-blessed steel rite and hoping Rodri could learn it.”

“At least the witch-power – Talent, the Talent he and Kir share for fire explains why he hasn’t discussed attempting to teach anyone else,” Jaina said, her face practically in her mug. “I dreamed I was being shoved back into the First Order Trial with no preparation, warning, or willingness. It was horrible. Also the manager of the gaol I keep having to bail Valerik out from was involved somehow, which was bizarre.”

“One of these days you’ll have to take Kir with you to bail Valerik out,” Anur insisted, “Valerik’s panic will be hysterical.”

“Oh I’m saving that for a day where he has truly annoyed me,” Jaina promised with a sharp grin, Seras laughing with him.

Jaina’s smile faded and she stared at Anur for a moment before asking hesitantly, “Kir is – he is all right, yes? You would know, if something went wrong?”

“I would,” Anur promised, reaching out to rest a hand on hers as he said, “I would, Jaina, and Kari is listening for him besides.”

“Good,” she breathed, bowing her head and looking so very relieved. “Good. I know he speaks of it – he was looking forward to it. When he spoke of it to me after he first took the Trial he was so
clearly *wistful* – I hate redoing the wards every couple of years, and that barely takes a mark or two. It takes me days to get a solid night’s sleep after one of those re-wardings. And he sounds *wistful.*

“He’s enjoying himself,” Anur said, hesitating a bit, but the piece he wanted to share wasn’t potentially troublesome at all so he continued dryly, “He called an uncontained crown fire up by White Foal a beauty.”

“He *would,*” Jaina groaned, burying her face in her hands, “Ari’s sake the man’s flame mad, if he didn’t hate the screams so much he would have been a terrifying witch-hunter. In the wrong sense. I’m sure he’s still a terrifying witch-hunter for the *witach.*”

“He is,” Anur agreed, remembering the Nameless, remembering their runs into Hardorn, remembering Kir’s matter of fact declarations that it was a shame they couldn’t make it to Crown City without burning far too many innocents on the way.

“Though to be fair,” he continued, “I may not have his gift for fire, but I’m just as bad.”

“I think most of us are, it’s just his flames make things much more dramatic,” Seras pointed out before focusing on Jaina. “The re-warding won’t be necessary for another year or two, correct? By then Kir should be able to manage it alone.”

“I’ll help him with the first round at least,” Jaina said tiredly, waving off Seras’ concern, “Perhaps it will be better with company. I want to try it with him at least once – I want to see if I can see what he does, or at least understand how he can see the Trial that way.”

“It makes me wonder a bit, at the Trial’s history,” Seras admitted, looking between the two of them before focusing on Anur, “Particularly with your sensing him – I rather thought the wards on the Trial would prevent it. They prevent drawing on mage-power outside your own, after all.”

“Based on Kir’s words and what we saw with Cora – I don’t think standard shields for magic, even communication based ones to block scrying, work effectively on Talents,” Anur said, glad that Cora’s problems were providing so many excuses for his own knowledge.

“With the wards keeping us from drawing on outside power, I rather think one of the underlying *points* of the First Order Trial is to force unTalented people to limit themselves similarly and still manage to excel,” Jaina admitted, “Stronger mages have an advantage on the other two trials, the First Order Trial is the first time journeymen and masters are forced to the same playing field. If anything the weaker mage has the advantage, not being used to relying on outside power.”

“The level playing field is certainly a motivator,” Seras agreed, “Though that is an interesting point about the Talent versus magecraft aspect. I’m also wondering if we’ve been misinterpreting the older records – there are references to people making multiple attempts at the First Order Trial.”

“Oh,” Jaina breathed, apparently immediately understanding Seras’ point, “That – that would make some sense.”

“How so?” Anur prompted.

“It was – oh, ages ago. Nearly a thousand years, I think,” Jaina said, brow furrowing, “That was the last record of someone succeeding on their second attempt at the First Order Trial. We’ve been taught to think of that as making multiple appeals for the *chance* to take the Trial – you need to accept your nomination and then be approved, and that approval isn’t guaranteed.”

“It’s mostly guaranteed,” Seras corrected, “At least in the last two hundred years I can’t think of a single case where it was denied.”
“Because it was a killing ground,” Jaina scoffed, “Not because there weren’t candidates who should have been denied. Regardless – you’re suggesting that perhaps those older instances weren’t multiple appeals but truly multiple attempts.”

“Either that or scarring was once also considered failure,” Seras said, then admitting, “Though that is inconsistent with other records from similar or older eras on successful candidates being scarred. But for these mental Talents – and the fact you’re saying Kari could get someone out of there – even the fact that the doors opening ends the Trial – it makes me wonder if there used to be a safeguard. Someone with your mental Talent monitoring the contender and if they were losing control, if they were going to suffer crippling injuries soon – they could call the Trial off and open the door. It would count as a failure, but they would live, and have the chance to reassess.”

Anur sat back a bit, feeling his brow furrow as he thought that over and sighing when Kir’s mental presence suddenly blazed with curiosity-tinged triumph and distracted him from his thoughts. Dragging his mind back on track, he said finally, “I can see it either way – you’re right, it could work as a safeguard. But I would guess there were additional restrictions on using that safeguard – a set number of times it could be employed or something along those lines. The way I understood it half the point of the First Order Trial is that one needs to accept the nomination – some sort of test of self-awareness.”

“Well even if it wasn’t how it was done in the original incarnation, it’s how we should do it, if we end up wanting to try a safeguarded trial,” Jaina said, hesitating and then sighing before she continued, “Emotionally, my response is of course we want to safeguard the Trial. But at the same time – would that safeguard undercut the nature of the Trial itself? None of our current Second Order Firestarters are interested in attempting the Trial, so we have years to make a decision on it, but it is worth thinking about later.”

“Maybe leave some remarks to that effect on this year’s Conclave notes,” Anur suggested, “You know, ‘follow up next year, First Order Trial safeguards’, just so we remember this was even discussed. You’re right though, we have a fair amount of time before it will be an issue.”

“Just as well,” Seras chuckled, pointing at the Charter draft Anur had been reading through at the start of all this. “We have more than enough issues to deal with this time.”

Jaina echoed the laugh, finishing her tea and rising to her feet, saying, “Very true. Anur, do pass on my thanks to Her Eminence for letting us know no new announcements would be made this Midwinter. It would have been infuriating to spend a week on a new Charter and other issues only for another set of reforms to be implemented!”

“The Charter looks flexible enough to accommodate further reforms without risking backsliding,” Anur pointed out, “I highly doubt maliciously careless blood-mages are ever not going to be on the burn list.”

“Fair point,” Jaina said, Seras shaking his head with a grin. “Well, thank you for the reassurance, I’m off to try and sleep again. Are you going to be up all night, Anur?”

“Probably,” Anur admitted, “Even if I tried to sleep right now, I’d just be woken up a few times a mark.”

“Then I’ll take Rodri to the forges tomorrow morning,” Jaina said, placing her now clean mug aside to dry. “Good night, both of you.”

“Good night,” Seras and he echoed, turning to their own papers as Jaina left.
He managed to get through another page or so of the draft while taking notes before he remembered they were planning to ask Seras something.

“Seras,” he said, the older man looking up and raising an eyebrow, “That necromancy ward – is Kir actually going to have to be involved?”

“No,” Seras replied, sighing and elaborating, “After Colbern’s report on the border ward and the suggested redirection of energy from that ward into the necromantic wards on Sunhame, it became a bit more of an ordeal than the usual – all the exorcists are going to be involved in the channeling while the necromancers and Her Eminence will be anchoring here. With Kir’s sensitivity to the ward we didn’t want to risk his involvement, so Ulrich approached her for help.”

“I hope it goes smoothly,” Anur said, not bothering to hide his relief.

Seras only smiled faintly, still looking worried and Anur frowned, prompting, “Seras? Is there a problem?”

“The necromancers don’t – have the best of relations to one another,” Seras finally admitted, “It’s not my story to tell and it won’t interfere with the ward itself at all, but it has led to some difficulties here. Don’t be surprised if Colbern is in a foul mood for a portion of the Conclave.”

“Fair enough,” Anur allowed. “I’ll pass that along.”

He made a note to that effect on the draft – and added Tristan’s name with a question mark. Colbern had been his teacher, and Tristan was the only student Colbern had ever taken. As hostile as Tristan was towards the man, it was doubtful Colbern had chosen him out of any sort of personality meshing, but if Colbern was in a bad mood he would likely let fewer of Tristan’s occasionally pointed remarks slide, which could end badly. One of these days he and Kir would need to actually ask about that relationship, but for now they’d let the pair manage themselves.

They had more than enough to be dealing with.

***pagebreak***

“Eldest? Could I have a word?”

Kir looked up, startled, and quickly rose to his feet, tucking the Charter draft he’d been reviewing under one arm and exchanging blessing gestures with the woman. Lumira had of course planned to come to the Conclave, this year would be the first since his ordination where every Firestarter was actually present, but he hadn’t expected her so early.

“Of course,” he answered, taking in her still dusty robes and the saddlebags slung over one shoulder as he continued, “Is the courtyard all right or should we go elsewhere?”

“It’s about the death wards we’ve been discussing,” she said carefully, glancing over at the corner Fabron and Anur had claimed to practice throwing knives, the younger Firestarter having asked for advice after the Ascending service this morning. “I don’t know who all you would like to have involved in the discussion.”

“Depending on the decision we’ll of course have to expand the circle but for the initial findings I’m perfectly happy with just the two of us,” Kir replied, eyeing her thoughtfully. “You have concerns?”

She huffed a laugh and shook her head, saying wryly, “Who doesn’t? I also wanted to speak with you about the Second Order Trial.”
“Kitchen or office, then?” Kir offered.

“Office, if you wouldn’t mind,” she replied, one shoulder lifting in an almost-shrug as she continued, “I prefer official discussions to be held without others wandering through at will.”

“Understandable,” Kir replied, sending a quick explanation Anur’s way before heading out of the courtyard, waving Lumira through the door ahead of him. “How were the roads?”

“Rather congested,” she replied, following him up the stairs, “I was surprised how many people were traveling towards Sunhame – though I suppose people might be anticipating more miracles to witness.”

“The current plan is for the Midwinter service to be relatively understated,” Kir replied dryly, “People may be disappointed.”

“Oh never that,” Lumira laughed bitterly, “A female Son of Sun is far too much of a novelty for anyone to be bored just yet.”

Kir glanced over his shoulder at her while he opened the door to the office he and Jaina had taken to sharing. “You find that upsetting?”

“I find being treated as a novelty because of my gender upsetting, and have a tendency to react similarly even if I’m not the one being focused on,” Lumira replied tiredly, dropping her packs at her feet as she sank into a chair. Kir claimed one angled across from her rather than sitting behind a desk – while he would work with her preferences for some degree of formality, he wasn’t going to make himself uncomfortable.

“That is understandable,” he said, tilting his head to one side as something occurred to him and continuing, “I hope you don’t think I suggested your attempting the Second Order Trials because of your gender.”

Lumira grinned at that, the corners of her eyes crinkling and some of the tiredness fading away, “Oh no, you were never one to worry about that. I remember you as an acolyte you know – you are in a rare group, never once looking to a male priest for confirmation when I answered a question or asked you to do some task. Of the Firestarters I knew as students - you and Fabron are the only ones who never once did that. Oh, Rodri too, of course, but I also haven’t been around him enough for something like that to come up.”

“Really?” Kir asked, startled, because he had known priestesses were not a majority within the priesthood, and the higher one went in the ranks the rarer they became, but he hadn’t realized priestesses faced such nonchalant and widespread doubt.

“It will get better, in future years,” Lumira allowed, “Now that women have legal rights and privileges that were once reserved for men alone – though it will take time. A long time. But at least there are no legal reasons to deny a woman rights and privileges. I doubt some of those laws will be taken advantage of anytime soon, but I could be surprised. Anyway – the death wards.”

“Right, my apologies,” Kir said, shaking his head slightly and leaning back in his seat, “So long as every person the death-ward is applied to has the potential consequences and wrongful activations explained to them in detail, and they have the opportunity to ask any questions they like, I cannot see anything inherently wrong or anathema in crafting the wards. I’ve discussed things with Solaris and her Council, and they agree, with various caveats of their own that fall under mine aside from one – Grevenor raised the point that we need to carefully vet the priests we end up approaching for aid on this, and possibly retain some rather specific oaths to follow the same rules for applying these wards
at any future point in time.”

“I like that,” Lumira said thoughtfully, “Particularly as we now have the proper hunting rite available to us should any break their oaths at a later date. My primary concern boiled down to how easy it would be to craft these wards to trigger on something besides being subject to a magical coercion and the potential for abuse once we finalize the design and teach others about it.”

“Whereas my primary concern was in how discerning we could make these wards when it came to what is classified as coercion – if they were ever subject to a Firecat’s Tell Me True working, would that trigger it?”

“That is a good point,” Lumira winced, “My only thought on that was to tailor the working to only activate if the coercion was blood-magic based.”

“I had similar thoughts, but I have no idea how difficult imposing that sort of condition would be,” Kir admitted, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair for a moment and sighing, “We are going to have to seek external advice for the crafting, I think.”

“That is my feeling as well,” Lumira said, tone rather careful for someone agreeing with him.

Kir tilted his head and raised an eyebrow, “You sound concerned, yet we agree. Do you have ideas of who to ask?”

“That is my source of concern,” Lumira huffed a laugh, “Necromancers are very good at death wards, true, but exorcists are better at tailoring things against specific outside influences, and I have worked with Frederic Loshern before and thought to ask him.”

“Ah,” Kir said flatly, pinching the bridge of his nose and breathing carefully for a few moments. “Exactly how widespread is the knowledge of our… hells. At this point it really is a feud.”

“Fabron keeps me up to date, and he heard about Kavrick’s troubles from Maltin, who knew Kavrick got the information leading to those troubles from you,” Lumira said, smiling faintly, “I don’t know quite how Fabron became so good at keeping his ear to the ground within our Order, but it is very useful to have in a student. He sends me letters when he can’t make it out to me, though, to be fair, he arranges his patrols and routes to allow visits fairly frequently.”

“It’s good to see a mentor-student pair that gets along well after ordination,” Kir told her, Lumira actually grinning at that.

“Colbern and Tristan, then?” she said, grin fading to something sadder, “It’s – unfortunate. How badly that fell out. They’re better now.”

“Oh I know,” Kir snorted, “Jaina told me some horror stories. It might be worse this Conclave, incidentally, the necromancers as a whole need to work on the wards here this winter and Colbern will apparently be in a worse mood than usual after it.”

“Colbern will be in a – oh damn it all,” Lumira said, pinching the bridge of her nose, “You’ve had no reason to be told – right. Eldest, I would appreciate it if you kept the fact I told you this from everyone – aside from your Enforcer, I suppose – but the reason Colbern took Tristan as a student was because he showed talent for necromancy. A powerful one.”

Kir stared at her for a long moment, letting that sink in

“I am an idiot,” he cursed, standing and pacing over to the window, staring down at the courtyard. “I should have seen that.”
“You should have been told that,” Lumira retorted, voice sharp, “Respecting Tristan’s wishes to never work as a necromancer is one thing, but never mentioning a key part of his abilities is irresponsible in the extreme. I honestly thought someone had told you in the last year.”

“I suspect everyone thought so – I suspect the others wanted to respect Tristan’s right to disclose that information, and he did not. With intent or without, it doesn’t truly matter for the moment, but he did not,” Kir said, shaking his head and returning to his seat. “I will have to speak with him during the Conclave. Who within the Order definitively knows he is a necromancer?”

“A better question to ask who might not. All the older ones certainly know – Henrick might not, but I rather suspect he does, he and Tristan worked together a lot as acolytes. Fabron does, he looked up to Tristan quite a bit and helped manage the fall out of Colbern’s and his relationship collapsing. The three students might not, though I suspect Fabron would have passed the information on to Etrius at least, they are good friends.”

“At least that explains Fabron’s standoffishness with Colbern,” Kir muttered.

Lumira huffed a laugh, shaking her head, “Elder Jaina hasn’t shown you her complicated schedules ensuring all our feuds never ended up in one place for too long, has she?”

“She’s referenced them, but never mentioned she had them written down,” Kir replied, smiling faintly, “I’ll have to ask to take a look at those.”

“They’re very thorough,” Lumira said, her smile fading as she turned the conversation back on course. “Fredric Loshern, though. Will calling him in on this ward be offensive to you?”

“I will be unable to work with him, but I am not particularly gifted as a mage anyway so am unlikely to be helpful,” Kir said frankly, “So long as Anur and I do not work with the man – or, indeed, speak with the man anytime soon – I do not object. Who else did you want for the working though?”

“Not Kavrick, not to worry,” she replied, running a hand down her face tiredly, “Or Valerik, come to that. They have one of those ‘only I am allowed to torment him’ relationships most of the time. No. I rather think Laskaris and I will be the only Firestarters involved – Loshern, perhaps one other mage. That should be sufficient, I only have eighty-three men total, and not all of them are truly interested in this.”

“Very well. Whatever resources you need,” Kir assured her, hesitating a bit before continuing, “I suspect Ancar is going to act against us this spring.”

“I feel the same,” Lumira said grimly. “I want these wards starting to go on during wolf moon, at the latest. I’ve already arranged for someone to cover me while I’m here – I won’t be leaving until most of the details are ironed out.”

“I will leave that in your hands then – if you need anything at all, let me know, and we will figure out a way to get it for you,” Kir promised, tilting his head and prompting, “Now, the Second Order trial? Are you interested in it?”

“I am,” Lumira said carefully, “But not for some time – perhaps by Midsummer, but I rather think I’d prefer autumn.”

“I was going to suggest waiting until after these wards had been crafted at the very least,” Kir assured her, “It is your Trial, and your timeline. I will be frank, I never officially took the Second Order Trial – I simulated it on my own, to see if I could, but never officially took part, so I don’t know what if any advice I could offer.”
“Not much that would be helpful to me, except as someone to practice with and as one of the ambushers, I think,” Lumira admitted, “Your fine control of flame would be a boon for experimenting without risking serious injuries or damages.”

“A good point,” Kir allowed, smiling wryly.

“Wait – how on earth did you simulate it?” she asked abruptly, looking puzzled, “The whole point of that Trial is for flames you did not start and did not anticipate being quickly recognized and either neutralized or allowed to burn depending on what they’re on and where they are. It’s the only one that really requires other Firestarters.”

“Not other Firestarters,” Kir corrected, feeling rather nostalgic as he remembered the various mechanisms he’d worked out to simulate a group of Firestarters ambushing him with spontaneous flames at varying degrees of heat, intensity and location for at least one mark and no more than three. “It was a rather expensive endeavor, and I don’t think the shepherds ever did work out what happened to that poor hillside.”

“Oh you will have to give more details than that,” Lumira protested, before sighing and continuing, “Though I suppose it should wait for the Conclave when everyone is here – if you truly crafted an entire network of variable flame traps, Kavrick would love to hear about it.”

“He still works with his powders then? He didn’t mention it in his style summary, so I wasn’t sure,” Kir said.

Lumira grinned again, “Oh are you in for a treat this Vigil. He uses it for showmanship, never really bothered as part of his duties, so he doesn’t mention it officially. But he’s gotten very good, and quite enjoys it.”

“I look forward to it,” Kir replied with a smile of his own, “Back to the Trial – of course you may conduct it. I would appreciate a month’s notice of when you plan to do so, as I think the Incendiary has to serve as one of the ambushers or at least as a witness?”

“Quite,” Lumira agreed, “Advance notice will be easy enough. I’ll ask around about ambushers, but I will probably ask for you and will definitely be asking you for some practice sessions in the meantime.”

“I look forward to it,” he said again, planning to ask if there was anything else before he remembered an issue he had wanted to approach her about, “Actually, if you don’t mind, I wanted to ask if you have any idea of how Laskaris is adapting to the mental Talents issue. The last time we were in Sunhame there was something of a crisis involving that and I know you work together frequently.”

“He came to me the moment he left Sunhame after that,” Lumira replied wryly, inclining her head slightly and sighing, “I thank you for speaking with him about it, Eldest, and listening to his concerns. That truly did help him. I can’t say that he’s comfortable with the idea – I can’t say that I’m comfortable with the idea – but something he mentioned – there is a way to shield your mind from that sort of interference?”

“There is,” Kir agreed, “Would you like to learn?”

“I think we should all learn,” Lumira replied, “To be frank, I think it should become part of the mandatory education of our youth, in addition to the Writ and Word for basic reading and writing, but that is something a ways off.”

Kir blinked at her for a few moments, finally breathing, “A ways off or not, that is brilliant. I’ll speak
with Anur and others we know about methods for teaching – try and determine how someone without such a Talent can teach it – but teaching everyone – that would work so very well.”

By the pleased smile, Lumira appreciated the admiration. Good – if word of this interaction spread, the Firestarters would be more likely to come to him with their own ideas for potential avenues of improvement. The more minds they could set to these sorts of problems – the more minds they could get thinking in terms of progressing with Solaris’ reforms, rather than trying to fight back or overturn them or work around them somehow – the better. If they became invested in seeing their own pieces of the reforms come about they were far more likely to accept the others along with it, or at least more seriously consider them.

Also – it was a useless strand of a thought, it made no sense contextually – but how different would his early years have been, had mental shielding been something he was taught, taught properly, rather than something he stumbled into and vaguely pieced together?

***===***pagebreak***===***

It was rather unfortunate that he’d completed all of the follow up tasks Lumira’s conversation required as soon as they’d finished speaking, Kir admitted to himself, staring at the mug of steaming water he’d placed on the counter a few minutes ago. The majority of the Firestarters were still out of Sunhame so they had gone to the main Descending service as a group before retreating to the Hall for the evening and winding up at the long table in the kitchen with their own projects. Supposedly he’d been making tea for himself, but he couldn’t figure out which blend he wanted – did he want to try and help himself sleep, wake himself up, or just choose based on what taste he felt like?

“What taste did he feel like?”

“Tea usually isn’t this complicated for you,” Anur commented, coming up to stand next to him and leaning against the counter, mug of spice-tea in hand. “What’s wrong?”

Kir just gave him a withering look and his brother gave him a sympathetic one back before pulling out a sachet of chamomile tea and dropping it into his mug.

“You’ll need the help,” Anur said. “We’ve got one whole day on the road before we get there, Kir.”

“It might be easier if we didn’t,” Kir admitted, wrapping his hands around the mug and putting conscious effort into not hunching over it. The four sitting at the table behind him were making a noble effort at ignoring their conversation, but he could see Jaina shooting him concerned looks and Etrius very deliberately rereading the same page over and over again.

Seras and Lumira he couldn’t actually see in his peripheral vision, but their low-toned conversation about potential candidates for the death-ward project was repeating itself at this point.

Before he grew exasperated enough to call them on it the door to the kitchen burst open and Rodri skidded in, holding some sort of object wrapped in red silk up like it was a medal of victory. Anur took one look at the teen and beamed, “You finished it!”

“To be fair, we finished it this morning!” Rodri replied, also beaming, “I just needed to figure out wrapping it. And if I should give it today or not, but honestly, I couldn’t wait.”

“Oh is this the project you finished at the forge?” Jaina asked, looking intrigued, “Do I get to know what it is now?”

Rodri just grinned, looking delighted at the clear curiosity on the others’ faces before heading straight for Kir, who pushed back from the counter to face his student more squarely, knowing he had a
ridiculously fond smile on his face and unwilling to try and prevent it. “What sort of project, Rodri?” he asked, accepting the silk-wrapped disc with a raised eyebrow, “Is this for me?”

“Of course it is!” Rodri replied, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. “It’s from – well. Enforcer Bellamy helped with the materials, and Axeli and Becka and Yakob helped with the crafting. So its from all of us.”

“It’s from Rodri,” Anur corrected, looking almost as eager as Rodri for this gifting. “His idea, he made the requests and figured out forging times and such – don’t credit me with it at least.”

“Hmm. I’m intrigued,” Kir admitted, looking at the silk and carefully undoing the knot binding the bundle together, the entire silk square unfolding over his hand and he gasped, eyes widening as he heard that song –

“I think he likes it,” he heard Anur murmur.

“I love it,” he said faintly, blinking and shaking his head slightly in an effort to clear it because – because Sun-blessed steel sang, true. But this was – this was almost a tune.

Eight Sun-blessed steel arrowheads, arranged on a brass disk with a copper centerpiece carved with the traditional half-moon eyes and slit mouth of a Sun Disk. Two small loops attached to the back, off-center so he could anchor it to whatever chain or knotwork cord he felt like, and around the edge of the disk someone had painstakingly carved one of their Order’s oldest mantras in archaic Karsite.

Let our flames burn evil away, cleanse the innocent, and push back the darkness.

“Rodri, this is beautiful,” he said, looking up from it to pull Rodri into a hug, his student wrapping his arms around him immediately. “This is wonderful, Rodri, thank you so very much.”

“I had to make you something,” Rodri mumbled into his robes, “You didn’t save any for yourself.”

“I – what?” Kir asked blankly, pulling back slightly and looking down to meet Rodri’s gaze, “Rodri what are you talking about?”

“You didn’t save any for yourself!” Rodri repeated, frowning and holding up his left hand, the knotwork bracelet he’d crafted around Rodri’s arrowhead chiming briefly against his senses. “Sun-blessed steel, Father Kir. You gave me an arrowhead, you gave Yakob and Beka and Axeli all an arrowhead each, Enforcer Bellamy still has seventeen arrows made with it, and you gave Honored Anika Brersi the spear! You’re the only reason any of it exists, you’re the only reason anyone has any Sun-blessed steel anymore, and you didn’t save any for yourself!”

“I – oh,” Kir blinked, “I suppose I didn’t. All my original arrowheads are – long gone.”

“Yeah and I’ll be asking about that later,” Anur admitted, smiling as he leaned back against the counter again and crossed his arms. “But I’m glad you like it.”

“I’m glad the silk wrapping actually muffled the song,” Rodri replied ruefully, “I wasn’t sure how I could make it a surprise with Sun-blessed steel singing so loudly – especially with all eight pieces!”

“It does sound amazing,” Kir agreed, staring at the Sun in Glory in his hands and keeping his free arm wrapped around Rodri’s shoulders. “There’s almost a tune there.”

“It changes too!” Rodri reported, beaming, “I don’t know why or how, but that almost-tune changes, Father Kir!”
“Fascinating,” Kir murmured, tilting the medallion to watch the shimmer of light-on-metal and that golden gleam of Sun-blessed steel.

“May we see it?” Jaina asked hopefully.

Kir straightened abruptly, looking at the other four and wanting to laugh at the near identical hopeful expressions on their faces. Instead he just smiled and said, “Of course.”

Walking over to sit between Jaina and Lumira, hauling Rodri along and keeping him tucked under one arm, he laid his hand flat on the table with the Sun in Glory gleaming against crimson silk.

“It’s lovely,” Jaina breathed, leaning forward with the others to get a closer look, “Oh, Rodri, well done indeed.”

“Good thing you hadn’t gotten around to picking out Kir’s next Sun in Glory,” Anur pointed out, coming up to stand behind Kir and setting his mug of chamomile tea on the table in front of him. “Don’t know that you’ll need it anymore,” he murmured, resting his newly empty hand on Kir’s shoulder, “But might as well.”

“Thank you, Anur,” he replied quietly, Seras and Etrius muttering back and forth to one another about where else they could look for records of Sun-blessed steel artefacts, hadn’t there been pieces of legend that mentioned a similar Sun in Glory, did the other think reforging Sun-blessed steel was feasible, if this metal fusing was possible without losing the blessed aspect –

At least he wouldn’t have to come up with experiments of his own, they would take care of that part. He could just worry about putting them into practice.

“I really hope I can learn to craft it,” Rodri admitted, after everyone had fallen silent staring at the emblem, as entranced as if they too could hear it singing.

“I do too,” Kir replied.

They all retired soon after that, Rodri happily accepting another hug from Kir and his repeated thanks before echoing the gesture with Anur and then heading for his room. Anur ended up having to guide Kir around corners and up the stairs, he kept getting distracted by the Sun in Glory in his hands and that almost-tune – faintly different from the first time he’d heard it, Rodri was right it did change, how curious.

“Kir,” Anur’s voice came through, Kir shaking his head quickly and looking up, feeling dazed. By the amused expression on Anur’s face, he’d made a few attempts at getting Kir’s attention. “You need to change.”

“Oh. Right,” Kir said blankly, staring down at the Sun in Glory and hesitating –

“Put it on the desk,” Anur urged, “Just for a few moments, all right?”

“Right. Right,” Kir agreed, shaking his head again and reaching over to place the disk and silk on their desk before shoving himself backward and gathering his nightclothes, “I’ll – right. Be back shortly.”

By the time Anur was ready for bed himself, Kir was staring at the Sun in Glory again, now feeling a faint wistfulness after something had occurred to him.

“I can’t wear both,” he said, Anur settling next to him and pressing their shoulders together. “I had planned – do plan – to wear the white Sun in Glory after Midsummer, so people remember – are
reminded – that we’re together, that Aelius may be your witch-horse but you’re my brother regardless. But this one – ”

Anur sounded decidedly smug when he said, “I thought of that.”

Kir blinked a few times, attention finally pulled away from the Sun in Glory to lock onto Anur. “What?” he asked blankly, “You – what do you mean, you thought of that?”

Anur had already called the white Companion-hair Sun in Glory over from where Kir had placed it with his vestments, the object settling gently into his hands and he laid it out across his legs.

“May I?” Anur asked, pointing to the metal Sun in Glory, and Kir handed it over immediately, wondering what Anur could possibly have planned for this.

“There are two options,” Anur said, “Depending on what you want to display more prominently. These double anchor circles can be anchored to the cord with a small length of chain on each side, the angle will work, and if the chain is anchored behind the knots just so – ”

He carefully placed the metal disc on top of the knotwork piece and Kir was startled to realize that the braided border he’d incorporated into the white piece was still visible and framed the metal disc perfectly.

“Oh,” he breathed faintly.

Anur grinned at him and held up a finger, “Ah! Not all! I said there were two options, right? I’m rather proud of this one.”

He flipped things around, so that the metal disc was under the the knotwork Sun in Glory, and Kir had to laugh – because the dense knotwork center perfectly covered the face of the Sun disc, and the twisted-hitch spokes lay perfectly between the arrowheads. It was much less obviously a Sun in Glory, to those unfamiliar with the emblem, but it showcased the Sun-blessed steel Rodri had so carefully incorporated even as it sat behind the witch-horse hair Sun in Glory he had crafted so very many years ago.

“I cannot believe you managed to arrange this without actually being present for the crafting,” Kir said, taking the metal Sun in Glory back from Anur while the Herald sent the knotwork piece back to its resting place.

“All I really had to do was suggest Rodri keep it to the simpler pattern to showcase the Sun-blessed steel more than any complex design and compare your knotwork Sun in Glory to the standard size metal one – the fact that the braided border fit perfectly around a standard size Sun in Glory medallion was a very nice surprise,” Anur admitted, smiling, “I’m glad you like it. And I’m glad Rodri gave it to you before this visit.”

Kir pressed the metal emblem against his chest – still singing, still with an underlying melody – and echoed that smile as the song sank into his bones.

“I am too.”

Chapter End Notes

Every time I think "this is the chapter! They're going to finally get there!" more things
and worldbuilding and stuff happen. But I've been planning this layered Sun in Glory thing for literally months, so I'm glad it finally made it in. I have a drawing of it somewhere, I'll figure out posting it one of these days...

Hope you enjoyed!

(Seriously, next chapter, they'll get there!)

Oh, incidentally, thanks to the commenter(s) on the comment train a few chapters back for the idea to make basic mental shielding part of Karse's standard educational package! It was one of you, but I'm too lazy to go find your name right now, I'll do it and cite you properly I promise!

ADDED LATER: It was a user by the name of Mjh on the first page of comments for Chapter 9 - thank you so much it works so well!!! (And thanks for finding the name for me Somariel)
“We do definitely know we’re heading to the correct town, right?” Anur asked two mornings later, looking abruptly worried as he swung onto Aelius’ back.

“I checked the tithe records, definitely the right town, and there’s only one inn as of last Midwinter, and that hasn’t changed in decades so I don’t think it’s going to have changed in the last year,” Kir replied, checking Riva’s cinch one last time before mounting up. Kari, looking like a slightly oversized tabby cat, waited for him to settle before leaping up to perch on Riva’s saddlebags, the gelding just shaking his head with a jangle of tack.

“Oh good,” Anur said, clearly relieved and Kir sent him an amused look.

“If I didn’t know better,” he commented, “I’d say you’re more nervous than me.”

“I mean – maybe?” Anur said, the horses trotting apace as they left the traveler’s chapel behind. “The fact there weren’t any specifics beyond ‘citizen report’ for how they caught Wes isn’t helping, if I’m honest.”

“Nor for me,” Kir sighed, looking over his shoulder at the disguised Firecat. “Thank you for agreeing to accompany us, Kari.”

:*If we get through a few emotionally tense moments without dramatic golden flames needing to be suppressed, I might depart a few times to check on the others, but everyone is quite content with you two receiving all of my attention for this. Even if they don’t know part of the concern is an emergency evacuation for Anur and Aelius.*:

“Let’s not borrow trouble then,” Anur shrugged, shooting both of them a wry grin, “I think we’ll be running into enough trouble without it!”

“Undoubtedly,” Kir agreed, huffing a laugh. Examining the road, he was pleased to see the footing looked decent enough, especially in the raised middle, and they were far enough off major routes that it wasn’t too congested. “Lope for a few marks?”

“You set the pace – let’s not arrive too early!”

Kir nodded agreement and nudged Riva into his next gait with a shift of his weight, the gelding happily picking up the pace but without going to extremes. It was something they’d noticed over the year, with more frequent long-distance rides and vast stretches of empty land to experiment over, especially after adding Anika Brersi’s oasis town to their destination rotation. When Riva was the one to lead, even by a nose, he kept his pace to a reasonable long-term lope and didn’t speed up to the less than sustainable speeds he was apparently now capable of managing for marks at a time.

When *Aelius* led, he had the habit of using Riva’s presence in his peripheral to mark his pace, but Riva’s endurance was now well into absurd territory so that wasn’t as much of a limiter as it should
Once they’d realized that, it had been easy enough to adjust any gait changes so Riva led them unless they were responding to some emergency. Not only did it keep their travel time to a little less than absurdly and noticeably quick – though they still did often stay an extra day in one of the more remote traveler’s chapels when they were en route to Sunhame – but it kept their own expectations of others’ travel times more reasonable. Riding north with Henri last winter had been eye-opening in how spoiled they had become when it came to travel times and days on the road.

The morning passed fairly quietly – there were a few travelers they slowed to pass, exchanging greetings far more casually than they were used to thanks to the decision to avoid any trappings of the priesthood or even the Sunsguard while they were on this trip – and some places where the road conditions required or at least suggested slowing down where they might exchange a few words of their own, but for the most part they each kept to their own thoughts for this ride. Kir had made the conscious decision to focus his thoughts on recalling the minutiae of Conclave procedure, seeing as he’d never actually attended one as a fully ordained priest. That last winter in Sunhame he’d gotten to see more of the Conclave than usual since he was scheduled to be ordained that Midwinter, but he had still missed a fair amount of it.

At least the others had all agreed that the students needed to at least hear all the discussions they were going to have, if not be expected to contribute. The degree of changes they were going to be formally recording and deciding on was something all of them needed to be entirely aware of. It was honestly the only reason no one was pushing for Etrius to start preparing for ordination – they wanted to make sure he had a better idea of what sort of Order he would be committing to than was possible at the moment.

He doubted anything would be changing Etrius’ – or any of the students’ – minds about remaining. But ensuring they made a fully informed decision was still something to insist on.

For the majority of the ride the lake was behind hills, so they only caught occasional glimpses of water, but the last mark or so they took a branch of the road that wove closer to the shore, before finally they got within sight of the hillside town Kir hadn’t laid eyes on in nearly thirty years.

Reining in to a walk so the horses could cool down, he forced his expression to remain truly casual, rather than his more habitual neutrally forbidding, and took in the way the buildings advanced up the hillside from the little inlet the docks took advantage of – a little further south of the main trade docks he could spot the shipyard where Lukas apparently worked.

“It’s bigger than I thought,” Anur murmured, Aelius now exactly alongside Riva.

“I’d say it’s middling – fisher-towns are smaller, having only the one main income – this town is a loading town for the majority of wine-country, and a good stopping point for river trade from Vondera towards Sunhame,” Kir said, only some of that coming from memory – the tithe records he’d tracked down this last time in Sunhame had told him the rest.

Those records were so dry he had considered it safe enough to manage alone.

“Right – you know where this inn is?” Anur asked, eyeing the increase of traffic as they reached the town boundaries.

“Fair idea,” Kir replied, leading the way. There were other riders and horse-drawn carts about, making deliveries, en route to other places, so they didn’t stand out particularly though their lack of tradeable goods was probably remarked upon. It was far enough to Midwinter that many travelers were still on the road or only just setting out for whatever pilgrimage they planned to complete or
visits they intended to make though, so even that was less unusual than it might have been.

Anur held the horses while Kir went to speak with the innkeeper, but as promised the arrangements had been made so Kir simply had to make the required payment before taking Riva and leading the way around back to speak with the stablemaster. They’d taken some time the previous evening to figure out exactly what sort of instructions they wanted to give, but with a Companion present in this town well within living memory they had decided to lean on the side of caution.

“So we’re just to be feeding them and keeping the water clear, and when you come by to let them into the paddock for two marks per day one of the boys will clean out the stalls, and you’ll return them to their stalls as well,” the stablemaster summarized. “Well enough. My thanks for actually informing us of their battle-training, we’ve had some incidents.”

“We are quite familiar with the like,” Kir replied dryly, exchanging some closing remarks with the man, but Anur was focusing on grooming Aelius without dislodging or interfering with the goat-patches yet not doing it obviously enough that anyone would notice something off about how he groomed his horse.

“The innkeeper sent a runner off to Kiara, she apparently paid for the advance notice,” Kir informed him, settling Riva into the adjacent stall. “Just as well, I have no idea where anything else is here beyond the major landmarks.”

“Thoughtful of her,” Anur replied, checking over Aelius one last time before throwing his travel-blanket over him and cinching it. “Secured tack room, right?”

“Yes, and properly so,” Kir said, looking up from his own untacking of Riva to point at the relevant door. “Claim two lockers, would you? We take the keys with us.”

While Anur was there he inspected the room and the stable itself a little more thoroughly and was reasonably impressed. This place definitely got a fair amount of horse-traffic, from this set up, and had found it profitable to treat those horses and the gear they required well. It was good to see – they would have tolerated worse, but it would have added one more piece of stress to the visit that they really didn’t need. His momentary panic over whether or not they were even heading to the right town this morning had been more than enough.

There were two new sets of footsteps, a murmur of words and some chirp of thanks – ah. Kiara had arrived, and undoubtedly tipped the messenger sent after her. Kir’s sister walked into the stables and familiar grey eyes lit up with relief on seeing them.

“You both made it,” she said, a smile stretching across her face.

It was foolish, but after cleaning her entire home from top to bottom this morning she had spent the remaining marks waiting for the messenger fretting over whether or not Kir and Anur would even show up. Perhaps they didn’t know the town name, what if they couldn’t find the inn, what if they’d been murdered in their sleep before ever being able to reach them –

It had gotten quite out of hand by the time the inn-keeper’s boy knocked on her door and said her visitors had arrived, would she like him to lead her to them?

Of course he was only after the tip she would hand him once they reached the stable doors, but his presence was useful in other ways – it kept her from sprinting.

Foolish or not, her relief on actually laying eyes on her brother and Anur was a weight off her
shoulders and she said as much, smiling as she watched the pair of them finish settling their horses, a tabby barn cat twining between their legs before stalking away, tail twitching.

“Was there that much doubt?” Kir replied, letting Anur take his tack from him and looking oddly hesitant as he glanced over at her.

Kiara let herself laugh and took the remaining step necessary to wrap her arms around him, glad to see that it didn’t take him as long to reciprocate this time. Pulling back, she smiled again and said, “I wouldn’t say doubt, but my morning has been filled with bizarre scenarios that keep you from making it. Good call on the lack of uniforms, by the way."

“We thought it might make things a little easier – or at least not guarantee more drama,” Kir admitted, before he huffed a laugh and plucked at the dark green shirt he was wearing, “Not much call for anything not a uniform, though, between the two of us we only managed three decent quality sets. Sunsguard uniform pieces are going to be thrown into the mix.”

“I can understand that,” Kiara agreed, greeting Bellamy with a hug of his own once he got over to them. He was better at reciprocating but was startled – to be expected, she’d only shaken his hand last time. But he was her brother’s brother, and from what she’d heard and read between various lines he was the only reason Kir was able to make it here this winter.

“Right – well. We’ll get you two settled at my place, and then we’re having the usual family dinner tonight, though I suspect Lukas is going to show up at my door within a mark or two. Everything worked out fine as far as the horses go?”

“We’ll be coming here to turn them out and take them back in ourselves each full day we’re here,” Bellamy said, hooking his saddlebags over his shoulder and holding Kir’s out for him to grab. “Battle-trained and all, better safe than sorry, especially since we’re not the ones that would end up crippled.”

“At least you’re honest about it,” Kiara snorted, hooking her arm through Kir’s so she could guide him without obviously leading and Bellamy easily fell in on Kir’s other side. “A noble plus their entourage came through last spring for a wine and sailing cruise and one of the guard’s horses practically savaged a stablehand. Thankfully with the reforms he was able to access proper healing without too much delay and successfully demand proper compensation from the horse’s owners besides, but if it weren’t for both those factors he probably wouldn’t have made it.”

“I… think we heard about that,” Bellamy said, exchanging a glance with Kir, who was looking strangely amused. “Oh, no, don’t tell me, this is the one Valerik was trying to convince Colbern to help him with?”

“At the very least that noble had a similar incident occur with their guards, and was heard complaining about how much more expensive decent entertainment was now that Solaris was in power, which many took offense to,” Kir replied blandly.

Kiara looked over at him and raised an eyebrow, “Many, is it?”

“To be fair, Valerik has apparently had a grudge against this particular noble for some time, judging by the intricate plan he presented to Colbern, but it was a lot harder to convince people that his plan was an unreasonable response than it would have been without a lot of people being offended,” her brother admitted, and Kiara felt a grin stretch across her face.

“How bad was the plan?”
“In the sense of likely to fail, not bad at all. In the sense of the plan’s success resulting in nothing but nightmare stories for decades with no actual learning of errors? Very bad.”

“It was definitely a Markov-inspired plan, or at the very least one he’d approve of,” Bellamy agreed, and by her brother’s snort of amusement that statement meant something to him. She’d leave it for now – though later on, when they weren’t walking through streets and ignoring the startled glances and supposedly hushed questions that their trio was prompting – she was definitely going to ask about details, and ask if anything had actually been arranged for that noble.

“Hopefully the weather holds for your whole stay, though there might be a bit of a squall tonight,” Kiara commented, checking the sky out of habit before she made that claim, “With any luck that will be the last of it through your trip back as well, riding in sleet is less than ideal.”

“Less than,” Kir agreed, a rueful smile on his face as he continued, “But at least we’d be on a reasonably maintained road. Some of the northern routes practically disappear in poor weather.”

“We hardly ever use the roads in the north anyway,” Bellamy scoffed, stepping to walk behind them as they turned down a narrower road and headed towards the lake for a few streets, “You prefer cross-country.”

“Oh certainly,” Kir agreed, looking over his shoulder, “But that only works because I’ve been stationed there for so long – if we tried that here we’d probably end up lost. And also, I prefer it because poor weather or not, there are few disadvantages to going cross country up north, in bad weather the road conditions are essentially equivalent to no road at all.”

Kiara stepped onto her stoop and finally let go of Kir’s arm so she could undo her deadbolt and open the door. Stepping aside and waving them in, she couldn’t help the faint nervousness in her voice as she shut the door behind them and said, “I rent this sub-level from the owner, they live above us with entry at the next street up – it’s not much but – “

“Kiara,” her brother interrupted, smiling at her, “It’s wonderful. It’s yours. Where should we put our things, and boots go on that rack?”

“Yes – right,” Kiara said, kicking her own boots off and smiling at them both sheepishly, “Sorry for the round of nerves – I’ve never really had guests stay here before.”

“And you met us in Sunhame,” Bellamy replied, a wry look on his face, “The city’s impressive, but more than a little overwhelming.”

Kiara grinned back, “Exactly. Here, let me show you the sleeping quarters.”

It was a small room behind the hearth with a bunk system pressed up against the brick – a wider bed as the lower level with a narrower one up above it. Usually she claimed the wider one for herself, but she’d rearranged her linens so she’d be taking the single and the two of them would share the larger bed. Based on their stories they shared rooms and probably beds most of the time anyway, so that was one part of the accommodations she hadn’t worried about. Those traveler’s chapels they claimed to use most of the time were small.

“You did bring your knotwork Sun in Glories,” Kiara said dubiously, staring at the two of them after they finally removed their coats and hung them on the proper hooks. She had remarked upon Bellamy’s Sun in Glory when they’d met that first time and mentioned it to Nana, she’d be disappointed to not see it.

They both huffed laughs and Bellamy pulled his out from under his dark blue shirt, the orange and
red Sun showing up dramatically against it. Kir shook his head at her enquiring look and said, “Rodri recently gifted me with a copper and bronze Sun in Glory that I use as my primary, but I brought some of the other projects I’ve made recently. Found well over sixty projects in our room at the 62nd, I’d apparently put some away and forgotten about them.”

Kiara couldn’t help but shudder at that as she led the way back to her small kitchen and dug around for mugs. “Nana tried to get me into knotwork,” she explained, finally pulling her mismatched assortment down and then heading for her tea selection, “But I had no patience for it. Too many strings to keep track of, trying to put them down and walk away was an ordeal in itself if you wanted to come back to it later – I spent most of my time untangling things forget actually making progress on projects! It was terrible. I prefer wood inlay.”

“I need to pick your brain then,” Bellamy said, leaning against the counter, “I’ve been trying to get into inlay-work. I mostly do wood-carving – figurines, chains, beads and the like – but even my best efforts at inlay are extremely basic by necessity rather than choice. Some of the first projects are never going to see the light of day and might have been used for kindling.”

“I don’t remember how well I liked knotwork as a child,” Kir said, huffing a laugh when Kiara stared at her kettle and interjecting, “I can warm the water, Kiara, just put it in the mugs directly.”

She cheerfully did so and didn’t bother to hide the intent way she watched it transition from cold pump-water to perfectly steaming. Useful, hells, it was fascinating.

They waited for their teas to steep and Kir returned to his original topic, “Knotwork was something relatively easy to excuse – initiates weren’t encouraged to find hobbies that weren’t somehow related to their studies or the Sunlord, and string magic can be used to harness fire. I rather quickly returned to simple crafting, rather than necessarily working enchantments into my projects, but I could still excuse my work as practice.”

“Also, making Sun in Glories,” Bellamy pointed out.

“Also making Sun in Glories was very easy to justify,” Kir agreed, taking a sip of his tea and humming thoughtfully, “Wood-inlay – Lukas went for wood-carving as well, but I would guess that changed.”

“None of his miniature detail work, not like he once did from the older pieces I’ve seen,” Kiara allowed, shrugging slightly, “But he still carves bigger pieces. Even those are fairly detailed at this point, he’s had a long time to practice. Elisia prefers gardening and herb preserving and such, her house has potted plants in every potential spot.”

“Ma mostly does inlay,” she continued, before recalling something and snorting in amusement, “Also, mother and grandmother? Really?”

“Calling anyone ‘Ma’ after all these years feels extremely strange,” Kir retorted.

Bellamy choked at Kir’s response and spluttered a laugh, shaking his head, “Hearing you say ‘Ma’ sounds strange.”

“Yes, thank you, Anur,” her brother said dryly.

Any retort was cut off by a rapid series of knocks at her door, and Kiara frowned even as she went to answer it, “Lukas, probably,” she said over her shoulder, “But that’s a lot sooner than I expected him to be able to get away – boys!”

“Aunt Ki! Hello fancy seeing you here excuse us,” Devin babbled cheerfully, shoving his younger
brother through the gap between Kiara and her own doorway and barreling through himself right afterwards. Scowling, Kiara shut her door and rounded on them, interrupting Devin’s undoubtedly 

hasty introduction by grabbing an ear of each and twisting.

Both her nephews yelped and she said quietly, “Just what do you two think you are doing.”

“Meeting our new uncles? Ow ow sorry sorry!” Devin winced when she twisted harder, young Ivan looking up at her with impressively doleful eyes and taking over the explanation.

“Ma keeps changing her mind about bringing us to dinner tonight, and Pa’s no help at all because he says it’s her decision, but what about our decision, Auntie Ki?” Ivan even managed a little tremble in his lip as he said her name, eyes suspiciously shiny.

“You brats,” Kiara said in disgust, letting them go and lightly cuffing each of them on the back of the head, “Who exactly is your mother going to murder for this, hm? Not either of you!”

“At least the weather’s bad most of the season so we won’t be missing out on too much fun when we’re locked in our rooms,” Devin said pragmatically, the stubborn gleam in his eye all Dinesh and Kiara knew, even if she had caught wind of this plan early enough to intercept the two of them, she’d have never managed to actually stop them from following through with it.

“He raises a good point,” Bellamy said, sounding amused, curse him.

“You are no help at all,” she scowled at them both, because Kir was hiding a smile behind his mug. “Right. Boys, this is your uncle Kir, and his sworn-brother, Anur Bellamy. Kir, these are Elisia’s boys, Devin and Ivan.”

“You’re in the Sunsguard, right?” Devin asked, practically bouncing on his toes, “Your letters said you were a chaplain.”

Kiara spluttered halfway back to her mug and rounded on them again, both boys blinking up at her with utterly false innocence, “And just how did you two get those letters? I know your mother never looked at them or would agree to let you two do it.”

“Nana,” Ivan admitted immediately, and well he should because if there was anyone that you could safely point to in their family to pass off blame it was Nana. Though usually she respected Elisia’s decisions about raising her children more than – wait a minute.

“As in my Nana? Or as in my mother?” Kiara asked, eyes narrowing.

Both of her completely terrible nephews just grinned.

“This is the best,” Bellamy barely bothered to whisper.

***==***pagebreak***==***

Kir knew very well that Kiara had a point in her grumblings, because any chance for him to meet Elisia without some form of immediate defensiveness on her part was lost, but at the same time he couldn’t regret that his nephews – his nephews – had apparently decided to take matters into their own hands. Devin was nearly thirteen and evidently entirely convinced he was an adult in all but name, which undoubtedly let the younger Ivan talk him into leading a wide assortment of schemes. He remembered doing much the same to Lukas, or at the very least Lukas letting him do so.

Kiara got the two of them settled on stools at her counter and filled two more mugs, though she ignored Devin’s hopeful request for citrus tea and dropped what appeared to be a violently fruity
blend into his mug – by the wrinkle of his nose, not his favorite.

“Don’t you need the kettle?” Ivan asked, brow furrowing when Kiara slid the mugs towards him rather than their nephews and Kir went ahead and touched each of the mugs individually, only sending them to steaming after contact. It made the answer to Ivan’s question a little more blatant.

“You can make things warm?” Devin demanded incredulously, hauling his mug towards him and apparently entirely uncaring that it was a blend he didn’t care for, practically sticking his nose into it. “How does that even work?”

“How technical of an answer do you want?” Kir replied dryly, Ivan groaning and accepting his own mug from Anur with a nod of thanks.

“As much as you can,” Ivan said sourly, “He wants to know everything.”

“Like you’re not as bad!” Devin scoffed, tugging on one of Ivan’s dark brown curls and Kiara pointedly clearing her throat was clearly all that kept that squabble from going further.

“I like stories,” Ivan protested after scowling at his brother for a few moments, “I don’t want to know the entire history of who built the bridge they’re crossing!”

Another knock on the door and both boys immediately hushed, as if that would make a difference to someone hearing their voices from outside, and Kiara looked positively grim as she marched towards the door. Anur was half-grinning as they turned to watch again, leaning against the counter with their mugs in hand, murmuring, “So, what are the odds the entire reunion happens in the next few marks, with people trying to avoid a dramatic dinner?”

“Don’t even joke,” Kir muttered back, even if he wouldn’t truly mind.

“I heard some worrying voices,” whoever was at the door said – it had to be Pavel, looking for his sons, or Lukas, coming as Kiara had expected. Kiara just huffed a laugh and stepped aside, waving the man in and Kir immediately passed his mug off to Anur because he may not have recognized the voice, but he recognized that face.

“Kir,” Lukas breathed, and before he knew it Kir was halfway across the room and burying his face in his older brother’s shoulder, Lukas’ arms wrapped around him and his brother practically giggling as he said, “My first thought – was that you’re so much taller.”

“Since I was six? I would hope so!” Kir retorted, pulling back slightly and meeting his brother’s hazel gaze, smiling faintly. “Stars, Lukas, I thought you were dead.”

“You thought I was dead,” Lukas demanded, poking Kir in the shoulder, “I thought you were dead. So it’s a day for resurrections all around, isn’t it? Come on, introduce me to this brother of yours.”

Kir stepped back and looked over at Anur, who had put both their mugs aside and had a brilliant smile on his face. “Anur, this is Lukas.”

“It’s very good to meet you,” Anur said, Lukas taking three long strides and grabbing Anur into an embrace of his own.

“I owe you a debt,” Lukas said, voice shaking, “For looking after my brother for me.”

“Well, he looked after me more than a few times too, to be fair,” Anur commented, returning the hug far more easily than he had with Kiara, perhaps because he’d expected it more this time, “There is no debt. It’s what brothers do. When we’re not hauling each other into trouble, admittedly.”
“Ha! Agreed,” Lukas barked, letting Anur go and stepping over to his nephews, resting a hand on each of their heads and saying, “You two know all about that, don’t you? Confess, which one of you had the idea.”

“It was more of a mutual decision,” Devin said loftily, before coughing at Lukas’ positively withering look and admitting, “My plan, Ivan’s idea.”

“That’s how these things usually go,” Lukas sighed, looking wistful for a moment before lighting up, “Wait I can tell these stories now!”

“You could tell them before,” Kir pointed out, reaching for his tea again and flicking his fingers in Kiara’s direction when she held up another mug of water.

“But he’ll never have a more appreciative audience than me,” Anur retorted, grinning at him, “How many favors do you think I can talk Rodri into for a few of these stories?”

“A few? Don’t be cheap, you can get multiple favors for one,” he scoffed, “And he’ll do the same for ones of you, once I get around to telling them, so watch yourself.”

“Can we trade?” Kiara asked, admitting, “I really do want to know about that story with the squirrel and a fish, it’s been bothering me for weeks.”

Kir looked at Anur’s over-the-top hopeful expression – which was entirely unnecessary, Rodri had tracked him down after the Ascending service yesterday morning and informed him that using the squirrel-fish story as an icebreaker was perfectly acceptable, and by Anur’s smug look when he’d said it Anur had undoubtedly been the one to prompt that offer – before sighing and playing along, “As long as you all swear to never tell Rodri how you heard this story – deal.”

A few embarassing childhood stories later – Kir had even been able to remember one of Lukas, once prompted, which had been a pleasant surprise – and the remaining tension in this small group had vanished entirely. At least until Kiara checked the angle of the sun and winced, saying, “Right. We had best get going for dinner. We skip the Descending these evenings, and everyone would just be staring at us besides.”

“You don’t need to explain,” Anur promised, “Hells, I’m still trying to figure out a way to smuggle snacks into the Midwinter’s Day service in Sunhame, it apparently lasts all day.”

“A mark before dawn to a mark after noon,” Kir corrected.

“All day,” Anur repeated flatly.

“Nothing crunchy,” Ivan suggested, sliding off his stool and readjusting his coat. “It’s really obvious to the people nearby, especially if you get surprised by a moment of silent reflection.”

“And nothing too crumbly either,” Devan replied, nodding seriously, “The crumbs are evidence, and get stuck on your scarf. Cheeses are a safe bet, as long as they don’t smell too much – but winter services aren’t bad for that.”

“Jaina is going to murder you in your sleep,” Kir said pointedly.

“If I keel over in a faint in the middle of the service, will she murder me less? I think not,” Anur scoffed, shaking his head and nodding at the boys, “Thanks for the advice.”

“Speaking of murder,” Kiara said darkly as everyone pulled their boots on, “How are we going to avoid being murdered by Elisia?”
“We won’t be murdered,” Lukas objected, but he looked rather worried which undercut it.

“Who won’t she murder?” Anur suggested, and all the adults turned to where Ivan was watching Devin try to pull a boot on one foot while hopping around, looking far too judgemental for a nine year old.

“Brilliant,” Kiara breathed.

Kir blinked, looking over at his younger sister and frowning, “I don’t think showcasing the fact her children snuck over here is going to help.”

“Oh no, little brother, that’s not the plan at all,” Lukas said, practically cackling. “But we’ll keep it from you. Best to minimize the things she has to be angry at you about.”

:Anur?:

:I think I know what they’re planning – maybe. I was honestly thinking about how we dodged the Markus problem all those years ago, but I rather thought it wouldn’t work well – seeing her sons near you would probably make her more upset, not less, but apparently they have a different idea.:  

Aelius spoke up as they exited Kiara’s home, waiting for her to bolt the door before the two of them trailed after the four locals. :And I have a different idea than you, Chosen. May the best guess win.:  

:Win what exactly?:  

:Bragging privileges of course.:  

:Oh yes, of course, my mistake.:  

Kir managed to refrain from rolling his eyes at the background conversation, spending most of his effort forcing his expression to remain pleasantly neutral rather than forbiddingly so – it was hard, with people they passed in the street apparently recognizing the group and therefore knowing who he was. It was – uncomfortable. He was used to people staring at him and looking away when he met their gaze, but knowing that it wasn’t because of his black-edged robes – or at least, wasn’t because he was wearing those black-edged robes – was making the entire thing more difficult to ignore.

Anur bumped shoulders with him and Kir felt some of his tension ease with Anur’s worry. So far today had gone better than they had any right to expect, and he had seen Lukas again, and met his nephews. Even if everything went terribly from this point forward, he would be content. Eventually.

“So,” Devin spoke up as the neared the house – it was strange, Kir half-remembered it – the route there, not so much, but this particular building – it was familiar, but not familiar enough, it felt like. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll take Ivan,” Kiara said, scooping her smaller nephew up under her arm. “Bellamy will take you.”

“Take me where?” Devan asked, but he didn’t struggle when Anur shrugged and caught the teen around the waist.

“To the door!” Lukas said cheerfully, stepping up onto the stoop and opening the door with a cheerful, “Hello everyone! Look who we found hiding in Kiara’s home! Go, go, go!” he hissed, Kiara practically throwing Ivan through the doorway when Lukas stepped aside and Anur shoved Devin in after him before Lukas slammed the door shut and said, “Run for it!”
“Wait, what?” Kir asked, Kiara grabbing his arm and hauling him after her around the corner. The four of them ended up huddled up against the side of another home, just out of sight.

“And now,” Lukas said with a grim sort of cheer, “We wait.”

“For what, exactly?” Anur asked dubiously. “I mean – giving everyone a chance to realize neither of them are injured or dead or something is all well and good, but how long could that possibly take?”

“Was Elisia even in there?” Kir asked.

By the blank looks on Lukas and Kiara’s faces, they hadn’t checked.

“Okay – we can still save this,” Kiara insisted, looking between them all before focusing on Lukas. “Right. Lukas – you go in, and if Elisia is there, sort of… back out of the door like you’re thinking of running but visibly brace yourself and go in. If that happens, we’ll know to wait for your signal. Otherwise, just walk right in, and we’ll know she’s not there yet, and we can keep an eye out here until we see her and Pavel go in and give everyone some time, and still wait for your signal.”

“What signal?” Anur asked practically.

“Why me?” Lukas practically whined.

“Open the shutters of the window closest to us – say you felt a draft or something and wanted to check them,” Kiara said, before scowling, “And it has to be you. It can’t be me, everyone knows I was the one greeting them!”

“The things I do for you,” Lukas grumbled, shaking his head as he started across the street.

Kir stood back while Kiara tried to subtly peer around the corner and not look suspicious – she wasn’t precisely succeeding – and exchanged another dubious look with Anur.

“Damn it,” Kiara mumbled, “She wasn’t there.”

“Right,” Kir said finally, “About that. If she hadn’t come to see if they were visiting you this entire afternoon, and the boys apparently didn’t bother to offer an excuse before they ran off, is it conceivable that she’s trying to find them? Because she thinks they’re missing?”

“The boys wander off all the time, everyone knows to regroup for these dinners,” Kiara waved off, leaning against the wall.

“Oh certainly, usually,” Kir agreed, “But what are the odds she’s understandably under more stress today, worried about her children’s safety, and didn’t consider that.”

His sister’s worried grey eyes met his and Kiara’s shoulders slumped.

“We just really want this to go well,” she finally whispered.

Sighing, Kir reached out and wrapped an arm around her, Kiara tangling her fingers in his coat as he said quietly, “And I appreciate it, sister, more than I can say. But I’d rather not hide behind elaborate schemes – it won’t help. Speaking as someone who has been the target of some of the most ridiculous avoidance schemes you can imagine, if it doesn’t hurt, it is unbearably frustrating.”

“But being on this end of them is kind of fun,” Anur added, “Though I can’t say anyone ever threw other people at us as a distraction while they literally ran away. The ones we ran into were subtler.”

That won a chuckle from Kiara, and she shook her head before straightening and squaring her
shoulders.

“Right then,” she said firmly, finally looking more the captain he remembered first meeting, “Let’s go.”

He hated to think it. He hated to think it. But there was only so much trepidation that could be taken as a joke, or as genuinely affectionate respect and worry. Something didn’t feel right here, and it looked like the source was his own older sister.

A tabby cat meowed and wandered over to them, Kir pausing to crouch down and scratch the blue-eyed Cat behind the ears and take a moment to settle himself. He would keep his eyes open, he decided, Kari bumping his head against Kir’s knee before heading off and Kir stood to follow Kiara again. He would keep his eyes open, and see what there was to be seen.

He hoped there was nothing. He suspected he’d be disappointed.

***===***pagebreak***===***

Anur could feel Kir’s anxiety fade into more targeted concern, and while he’d prefer neither, at least concern was less likely to result in spontaneous fire outbreaks. He couldn’t disagree with it, either. Watching and participating in Lukas and Kiara’s rather absurd plot to avoid their own sister had been entertaining, certainly, but the fact that they considered it near necessary, rather than amusing, was worrisome.

Citizen report, relayed by local priest. A frustratingly unhelpful source listed on Verius’ report on Wes’ burning. He had confirmed that the current local priest, a man by the name of Yancur, had first been stationed here well after Kiara’s birth, much less Wes’ burning, but exactly which citizen had reported it – and how that report had been worded – was a mystery. Not even one they could pursue, as both Verius and the priest who had passed the mysterious report along were long dead.

But to one trained in avoiding attention, in avoiding behaviours that marked you as foreign, the odds of a random person noticing something off about you – off enough to report you to a priest – were fairly low. It happened, certainly, Asher catching him was proof enough of that. But he hesitated to say that scenario was likely.

Which meant whoever reported Wes had known the man fairly well, and from Kir’s memories, from everything these letters had said, the Dinesh family through Ivan Dinesh would have been the most likely candidates.

Kari’s presence was a very welcome crutch, and Anur gave the disguised Cat a quick glance before following Kir and Kiara through the door they’d almost reached last time.

“But the plan!” Lukas was spluttering, Anur smiling faintly as he shut the door behind him and spotted Kir’s exasperated expression echoed on an elderly woman’s face.

“Lukas, that plan was terrible,” Kir said bluntly, before repeating to this new audience, “Also, speaking as someone who has been the target of some of the most ridiculous avoidance schemes you can imagine, they never result in me calming down.”

The elderly woman – Kir’s grandmother, there was no one else she could possibly be – had risen to her feet and snorted in amusement at Kir’s reply, rounding the table Lukas and the boys were seated at and walking towards them as she said, “You come by that honestly enough, dear one. Watching people dodge rather than just take the blasted hit and get things over with is infuriating.”

“Hello, Nana,” Kir said, apparently overcoming his difficulties with informality on seeing her in
person, and the woman beamed, grabbing him into a fierce hug that Kir immediately returned.

“You’re truly here,” Anur could hear her murmur, “Oh, grandson, I am so happy you’re here.”

Kir’s eyes were shiny when they pulled back, and his grandmother was not even bothering to hide her tears as she smiled up at him, saying, “And look at you! Actually managing to be taller than me, like you always promised.”

“Lukas was surprised at my height too,” Kir replied, somehow managing a dry tone, “Though his seemed to be that I had grown at all.”

“I was in shock!” Lukas protested, smiling while he wiped his own eyes on his sleeve. “I didn’t actually think you hadn’t grown at all since you were six, give me some credit here!”

“Nana, this is my brother Anur Bellamy,” Kir was murmuring, ignoring Lukas aside from a fond glance that man’s way, turning and pulling Anur forward by the arm. “Incidentally my Enforcer, but brother came first.”

“It’s a perfectly good shield to offer someone,” the woman agreed, offering him one hand to shake while the other remained firmly wrapped around Kir’s waist. “I’m Irma, Anur. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Anur smiled, shaking her hand firmly and not entirely surprised when the woman reached to poke at the Sun in Glory he’d pulled back out from under his shirt on their walk to the door.

“Your work, grandson?” Irma asked, taking in Kir’s nod out of the corner of her eyes and continuing to poke at the knotwork Sun in Glory that had truly started his whole adventure, examining it with a discerning eye. “It’s very well done, dear one.”

“Especially when you consider how drunk we were when he finished it,” Anur couldn’t resist adding.

“We?” Kir scoffed, “I was not entirely sober, I will grant you, but I was certainly not drunk.”

“How do you keep track of the strings?” Kiara groaned, sprawling in a chair next to Lukas, “It’s hard enough sober!”

“Seeing as I made that piece four – “

“Six.”

“It was not six!”

“Ancar became king of Hardorn. That wedding I had to attend. Visiting my family. The accidentally have two Enforcers story. Last swarm of Furies we had to deal with before Markov. Solaris Ascended. Now,” Anur ticked off each winter on his fingers and raised an eyebrow, “Six years, Kir.”

Kir wasn’t the only one staring at him, though the Dineshes were split down the middle as to which of them they were staring at, before Kir finally swore under his breath and said, “You’re right. It has been six years. Well, regardless, Kiara – six years ago I had over a decade of practice making knotwork Sun in Glories, that undoubtedly helped.”

“Fair point,” Kiara allowed, before she tilted her head and gave a sly smile as she asked, “Two
Enforcers story? Is there another sworn sib of yours we haven’t met yet?"

“Definitely not,” Anur snorted, shaking his head and looking to Kir, “You want to tell this one or shall I?”

“You go right ahead,” Kir replied, Irma hauling him after her towards the back of the house, saying, “Stories will wait! The boys are watching the food, Kiara, supervise them and get your brother some willowbark, Lukas you will drink it. You two are with me – Tamara had to go into the root cellar.”

“So he is hurting,” Kir murmured, giving Irma a worried look, “I hadn’t been sure if I was interpreting his tells right.”

“It’s winter,” Irma said tiredly, “And a storm due tonight or tomorrow. Of course he’s hurting. Some days I fear he’s never not hurting.”

Kir’s wounded sound hurt to hear, and Anur stepped forward to wrap an arm around Kir’s shoulders, saying lowly, “Not your fault.”

“No!” Irma said, aghast as she turned to them and tightened her grip on Kir’s hand, “No, dear one, not your fault at all.”

“You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t accept that so readily,” Kir said, voice tight and Anur grimaced before nodding slowly.

“Fair enough,” he allowed. Irma’s lips narrowed and it looked like she planned to keep arguing when the trapdoor they had been heading for opened and a woman climbed out of the cellar, empty-handed.

“Arguing already?” she said, hazel eyes – Lukas’ eyes, this had to be Tamara – flicking over them before she turned away to shut the door, stomping down on it when one corner got stuck. “Elisia isn’t here yet. It’s going to get worse.”

This woman – Kir’s mother – sounded exhausted. Still, she turned back towards them and smiled at Kir, Irma stepping aside so she could take both of Kir’s hands in her own. “It is good to see you again, Kir.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Kir said quietly.

“The boys have met them already, Pavel implied they’d be helping us make dinner,” Irma reported and Tamara rolled her eyes, the gesture highlighting her own resemblance to Kir, even if his coloring must have been due to his father.

“Elisia is not stupid, she is going to see right through that,” Tamara said sharply and that tone was definitely something Kir had inherited from her. “Why on earth they think that is a reasonable strategy is beyond me, lying does not help! You met them,” Tamara said, tone abruptly softening, “That’s good. I won’t say it will help, but if anything went poorly tonight it would have been far more difficult to ensure they met you.”

“And you must be Anur Bellamy,” she continued, turning to Anur and offering her left hand to shake – his right was still wrapped around Kir’s shoulders, and the fact she to all appearances automatically accommodated that was interesting. “It is good to meet you. Thank you for your assistance in ensuring this reunion happened.”

“Of course,” he replied, shaking her hand before removing his arm from Kir’s shoulders and sticking his hands in his coat pockets, “I’m glad you decided to reach out.”
“You may call me Tamara,” she said, turning to Kir with a faint smile and continuing, “You may as well, Kir, if you prefer. Winds know I never called my mother ‘ma’ after I left home.”

“I – might take you up on that,” Kir said, clearly relieved.

“Good. Well then, we are waiting for Elisia and Pavel? They’ll be here soon,” Tamara said, hooking her arm through Kir’s and walking back towards the front of the house, “They’re never far off of on time. Has someone made Lukas his willowbark?”

“Kiara has already poured me a mug, ma!” Lukas called, apparently hearing them when they emerged from the hallway and sounding more than a little exasperated, “I am in fact capable of taking care of myself, for the record!”

“Of course you are,” Tamara said bluntly, “You simply choose not to. Thank you, Kiara, tea would be lovely.”

Lukas was still spluttering over his mother’s reply, Irma making a scoffing sound and patting him on the head when she sat down. “There there,” she said dryly, “I’m sure your pride will recover soon.”

“Kir, the kettle’s empty, can I just hand mugs to you?” Kiara asked, handing a mug to her mother and beaming at Kir’s nod, Devin and Ivan immediately racing to fill up mugs of water for themselves.

Tamara waved them both to seats, sitting across from Kir at Irma’s right and took a sip of her tea, rapping Lukas on his bad shoulder and raising an eyebrow at his wince. Rather than object, Lukas just sighed and took a longer swig of his willowbark tea.

Anur made a mental note to ask Kari about what sort of healing might be possible now that the healers weren’t being restricted in who they could help. It couldn’t hurt.

By the way Tamara looked abruptly puzzled and glanced at Lukas before cutting her gaze to Kir, Kir was at least slightly warming the air around him, if not his actual clothes, so he wasn’t alone in his thoughts on how to help.

Between Devin, Ivan and Kiara there were seven mugs placed in front of them and Kir huffed a laugh, saying, “Who is the extra one for, then?”

“I will definitely drink two,” Devin said immediately, shoving his mugs closer to Kir and staring at the water intently, “Does it actually boil?”

“I could boil it, but that would ruin the tea,” Kir said, resting one finger on the mug and raising it’s temperature to steaming far slower than he usually did.

“I won’t add tea!” Devin insisted, hauling the now steaming mug towards him and nudging the other one hopefully.

Ivan was giving his older brother his best attempt at an exasperated look, and it was pretty good. He must see that expression a lot. Anur wasn’t surprised.

Irina and Tamara both looked just as fascinated though, so Kir gave a small smile and set the water in Devin’s next mug to boiling with a quick tap of his fingers. His nephew gave a thoughtful hum as he dragged the mug towards his own seat and stared into the lightly bubbling water, apparently deep in thought.

“I’d just like a normal tea-temperature, please,” Ivan requested, and Kir set the other five mugs of
water to lightly steaming with a few raps of his fingers. He would probably continue to make
gestures and even contact with whatever it was he was warming for the rest of the visit. It made
things harder to brush off as accidents, but more importantly it let people believe they would have
advance notice of his Talent being employed.

Every so often, Anur thought of Griffon, and what the responses to his Talent had started turning
towards after the initial rush of gratitude and awe at his war hero status had worn off. He might have
to ask after him more intently the next round of letters to Captain Naomi – Griff’s reports on his hunt
for traces of blood-magic taint in Valdemar had been very on-topic and unlike him.

Lukas was staring at his own shoulder thoughtfully, so he had noticed Kir’s presumed interference as
well, but didn’t say anything. Instead it was Tamara who spoke first, huffing a laugh as she
examined Irma and Kiara’s mugs.

“Not the first thing I thought of, when I realized what your love for fire meant,” Tamara admitted,
Anur not quite managing to refrain from giving her a sharp look because that phrasing was different
from what he had expected. At the very least it indicated a family aware of Kir’s knack for flame
being a possibility well before that catastrophic burning had made it all too obvious.

“Is it that you can make things warm, but most things that get warm enough catch on fire?” Devin
finally asked, a curious gleam in his eyes that reminded Anur of Seras, pulling out a list of questions
he’d been waiting months to ask. It made him wonder what sort of trade Devin would end up
pursuing.

“Essentially, yes,” Kir agreed, “For the most part there needs to be some form of flammable material
around to source the ignition, but once a fire has started I can keep it burning on air until I exhaust
myself. And of course it goes both ways. Most of the time I end up cooling Anur’s tea down after it
steeps, he prefers his drinks lukewarm.”

Every single Dinesh made a face at that declaration.

“I realize it’s not a popular preference,” Anur said placidly, “But it means not many people steal my
tea without getting at least somewhat punished for it.”

“Ah yes, petty vengeance and spite, how could I forget,” Kir muttered, casting him a sidelong grin.

“I’m very good at it,” Anur agreed. He wasn’t even lying, so long as the person in question
threatened someone he cared about, rather than himself.

Three sharp knocks cut off any further conversation and by the yelp Devin let out before he leapt to
his feet someone had kicked him under the table. He went to open the door nonetheless and proved
he was braver than his aunt and uncle by opening with, “Ma! Pa, glad you’re here. Ivan and I went
to Aunt Ki’s a few marks ago and met everyone, they’re great.”

“He died as he lived, honest to a fault,” Lukas muttered.

“Very well. That nets you one month of limited outdoors access for wilfull misinterpretation of the
rules, two weeks of your least favorite chores without complaint for lying about your whereabouts,
each reduced by half for confessing within a day,” Pavel said levelly, definitely the parent Ivan took
after most in looks while Devin seemed to be an even mix. The man looked past his eldest son to
stare at Ivan, raising an eyebrow as he said, “Anything to add, Ivan?”

“My idea, Devin’s plan,” Ivan admitted as his parents stepped into the house and let Devin shut the
doors behind them.
“Similar punishment for you then. My thanks for watching out for them, Kiara, Lukas. And you must be Kir.” Pavel said, finally looking over at the pair of them and smiling, “You have the Dinesh look.”

“It’s fairly distinctive,” Kir agreed, looking over the other man with obvious curiosity, “I didn’t think your name was familiar.”

“Oh I didn’t meet Elisia until a year or so after you were gone,” Pavel agreed, turning to his wife at last and finally the tension that had been lurking under their chatting snapped to practically visible levels. It was almost a relief, Anur realized, to not be ignoring it. How very different, to that first visit with his own family. There was no avoidance here, no dodging, as Irma described it, and perhaps that too was a Dinesh characteristic. Perhaps it was simply a lack of patience, of willingness to wait.

Elisia – taller than her husband, perhaps the tallest of the Dinesh siblings, actually – carried that same Dinesh look. Not so strongly as Kir and Kiara evidently did, but while she had hazel eyes rather than grey, dark brown hair rather than black, her build and facial structure was in the same mold as them. It was a little unnerving, to see that similarity in her face but be unable to read her expression.

“I don’t want you here,” she finally said, very first words sharp enough to draw blood and Anur wanted to curse something because Kir’s presence in his mind felt relieved. He wanted to bewail his own life choices because he felt similarly.

“I understand,” Kir said, cutting off Lukas’ undoubtedly furious response with a curt gesture. “I will not seek to impose my company upon you.”

“Good,” Elisia replied shortly, lips thinning and Anur’s attention was drawn to the stillness that seemed to wash over the table. Lukas’ anger dimmed a bit, or at least was pulled back under control. Kiara’s spine straightened, knuckles whitening around her mug but she didn’t so much as twitch, instead watching Elisia with a worrying sort of intent.

Kir was practically humming with tension. Kari was definitely earning his keep, if Anur’s guess as to what that peculiar double-toned hum entering his mind meant Kir’s Talent was trying to produce.

“I cannot stay here,” she said finally, voice choked with emotion, bowing her head and turning on her heel. Every one of them watched her leave, but not a one of them said a word.

“Well. That could have gone worse,” Pavel finally said, stepping forward to rest a hand on his sons’ shoulders and murmuring to them, “Do me a favor, and avoid sneaking out the rest of the time? Permission – so long as a visit is with supervision – will be easy enough to grant.”

“Of course,” the boys chorused.

On one level, he doubted avoidance would work forever, though at least all parties were admitting that avoidance was the goal and they weren’t trying to hide said avoidance from anyone. On another, he was very fascinated by the clues even this small interaction had offered on the Dinesh family dynamic and was rather curious what else he might figure out if they ran into Elisia again.

But finally, it hurt to think that Kir’s family wasn’t entirely welcoming. It was an unrealistic hope. It was a ridiculous fantasy that he had known was false from that very first reply from Kiara. But he had hoped that there would at least be an attempt at reconciliation from the one person who admitted to disapproving of Kir’s survival.

:You all right, Kir?:

:I’m fine, Anur. Better than expected. Incidentally, I do believe that Elisia is an Empath.:
Oh yeah, forgot - promised in comments last chapter I'd post a link when I finally figured out deviant art to show you guys my version of a knotwork sun in glory. Here you go!

Knotwork Sun in Glory 1 by Muerarashaye

Also a sketch of it being layered on top of Rodri's - figuring out a symmetry option on my friend's tablet was SO HELPFUL and also SO COOL. Incidentally - in the earlier version of Chapter 18 I quoted seven rays of the sun for the emblem, which Origami_Rose pointed out was wrong because a) Storm trilogy quotes 8 and b) the emblems we each made also had eight, which was hilarious because I was CONVINCED there were only seven. So I went and had twist ties put around each of my emblem's rays while I counted, and turns out I just can't count. It's definitely eight.

Except in the drawing I'm posting. It's seven there. Because I drew it before I double checked my counting skills. Anyway.

Knotwork and Metal Sun in Glory (Layered) by Muerarashaye
Enjoy! This chapter surprised me a lot while writing it, hope you all like it too.

:An Empath,: Anur repeated later that night, leaning against the still warm brick wall Kiara’s beds were pressed up against and tangling his fingers in Kari’s fur. :I saw something off in the way everyone was feeding off her moods – but Empath?:

:She has shields of some sort,: Kir replied, head tilted back to rest against the wall, eyes shut. :When she isn’t under extreme emotional stress I rather think she would be completely undetectable, but I was her focal point – I could feel… pressure, and she’s the only possible source.:  

:Then she’s had at least some training. You can’t shield successfully for this long without training of some sort, even you had not-quite-right mage-shields to base your guesses on.:  

Kir hummed thoughtfully. The dinner had gone well, all things considered. Hells, all things considered, the dinner had gone fantastically. Pavel had been an interesting man to meet, the story exchange they had been conducting before setting out from Kiara’s home had been easily resumed, and they had made tentative plans for the next day. The fact that Elisia couldn’t bear to be in the same building as Kir had been accepted without a fuss, and that acceptance of her reservations, of her boundaries, had been immensely relieving for the both of them.

:If her Talent woke up in the standard age-range, the only person who could have taught her anything would have been Wes,: Kir said.

:Without actively testing her shields, which she would undoubtedly notice, there’s no way to determine how well her shielding is crafted. Depending on the strength of her Gift, on what her mechanisms are, she could have shields on the verge of collapsing and we would have no way of knowing until they did,: Aelius pointed out reluctantly.

:And testing her shields could end badly, especially as you’re the one who would need to do it,: Anur replied, :Even if she never met Seraphi and only caught the edge of her madness, she might recognize you as a Companion or at least nonhuman presence.:  

:Likewise for myself,: Kari said, continuing, :Also, mental Talents are not exactly my area of expertise, I could test for shielding but would have no way to recognize how well constructed they were.:  

:No, it would have to be me,: Aelius agreed, :And that’s a risk I’m not comfortable taking right now.:  

:None of us are,: Kir scoffed, shaking his head and hesitating noticeably before continuing, :The easiest path, with the least risk, is to ask her outright.:  

:Oh that’s going to be a fantastic conversation to have,: Anur replied, shuddering at the idea because Kir was right, but he also remembered the panic that had surged when Seras had blatantly referenced his mindspeech, and that was when he was already well aware that Seras knew about his Gift. :I’d
best be the one to do that then.

:Of the two of us, you’d be the only one with a chance of getting through that conversation without serious backlash.: Kir agreed, sounding aggrieved. :Not that I like it.:  

:I’ll take care of that tomorrow then, if Kari would accompany me.:  

:Of course.: the Cat agreed, and Anur felt their tension ease at that assurance because this was going to be a horrifically tense conversation no matter what. Having Kari on hand to intervene if it turned truly ugly was an immense relief.

They sat in silence for a time, listening to Kiara’s steady breathing from above them.

:Do you think this is why she hates Firestarters?:  

:Hatred seldom comes from one reason.: Kir replied, shaking his head, :A contributing factor, certainly. Especially as she has children who could very well have inherited a Talent and been burned or taken. She could have taught them shielding, of course, but it would only take one moment of ill-timed poor discipline, and if a child was caught with noticeable shields, questions as to how those shields had been constructed would have been raised and certainly investigated.:  

:Ari’s sake she must have lived these past decades scared out of her mind.: Anur murmured, a horrified sense of sympathy rising in him. :Fear for yourself, fine. But fear for children relying on you?:

:I’m astonished all she wants is to avoid you.: Aelius admitted.

:I am too.: Kir said, huffing a quiet laugh as he continued, :She is incredibly strong.:  

:I rather think that’s a trait of your whole family.: Anur said fondly.

:I only had to interfere the once, incidentally.: Kari reported, butting his head against Kir’s hand until he started scratching the Cat behind his ears. :When she first spoke. Even then, it would not have been a particularly violent set of flames. Easily visible and alarming to those unfamiliar with it, certainly, but much better than you managed before using the Trial room again.:  

:I had rather forgotten how much of my focus goes into avoiding collateral damage.: Kir admitted, :Or perhaps I simply require more of that focus now, what with my increased efficiency since my Trial. Whichever it is, it was extremely useful to not have to worry about that at all for a few marks. Enjoyable and even relaxing as well, of course, but also extremely useful.:  

:…would it have helped Griffon?: Anur asked, remembering the firestorms that, between Kir and Griffon, had scarred Hardorn’s land severely enough there were still patches of visible damage.

:No. I don’t know that he’s trained for that sort of Trial in any way, it would probably kill him. The firestorm he wrapped himself in nearly killed him as it was, he claimed Harevis was essential in keeping himself alive and unburned.: Kir replied, wincing. :I kept the flames off of him and myself as much as I could until he started putting the flames out, and once he started I didn’t fight it. It’s an entirely different skillset to survive a firestorm not of your own making that you literally cannot extinguish. If one were to try the Trial by brute-force extinguishing every flame that came close you would exhaust yourself within a few marks and then die. Or be pulled out, if we’re discussing a safeguarded version. If that version gets approved – and our alliance is a few years old at the very least – it might be interesting to pull him in and see how he handles it, but right now I wouldn’t put him anywhere near that Trial. I rather doubt he could manage the Third Order Trial at the moment, though I could be wrong. Depends on if he’s managed something akin to the cat’s cradle exercise.:
I mentioned that one in a letter to him, so he’s at least had the idea, Anur said. I’ll have to try and pin him down for an actual conversation the next time I’m in Valdemar, I can ask him then.

I’ll pass that on to Harevis when we get back to the 62nd. Now that Harevis and Griffon at least know that we go into Karse frequently enough to have disguises ready to go, there’s no reason to avoid calling him while we’re within Karse’s borders. Unless he’s particularly close to the Karsite border he won’t be able to tell we’re not within Valdemar anyway, Aelius said.

I think you mean ‘we go into Valdemar seldom enough’, Kir corrected dryly.

You’re not wrong. I need to catch up on my records before the Conclave, I’m going to want to take notes on that each day as it goes – Myste will definitely cut me some slack for those records!

I was considering finding some of the more general texts in our Archives and ordering copies made so we could offer some of those. Given, I’d like for it to prompt an exchange or at the very least gain me access to some of Haven’s records, but it would be another gesture.

And a very good one, Aelius agreed. I would definitely suggest whatever records were found on the exorcism of Companions.

One complete written record, Kari supplied, tail lashing the air for a moment before he stilled, continuing. The others are simple references, less than useful as a first step. But I can get you the name of that one complete record once we’re in Sunhame.

And I’ll take your word for it, Kir replied, leaning into his side when Anur shuddered, knuckles going white. No need for the actual description to lurk in my memory. Our own nightmares are bad enough.

Agreed.

Kir wrapped an arm around his shoulders, tugging him down so they were lying down properly, Kari twisting so he was still sprawled across their legs in his true form. They were in a town where a Herald had been executed, where a Herald had been caught, and they had only recently discovered, much less come to terms with, the fact that Heralds – by a priest with the right gift – could be identified on sight.

Perhaps if none of them had said anything about the issue, they would have been able to avoid making that connection. But that peace would have been a lie.

On a happier note, you haven’t flinched on hearing me these past few weeks, Eldest. Is that – well. Will that remain the case, barring wounding or reawakened trauma? Kari asked, sounding hesitant.

Anur propped himself up on his elbow to get a better look at Kir, because he had noticed it too and wanted to know. Kir didn’t look at either of them, instead staring up at the wooden slats above him – not that he would be able to see them with any clarity. The squall that Kiara had predicted had started a mark or so ago, so there was no moonlight creeping through the shutters, and while Kari was impressive, he didn’t literally glow unless he wanted to.

One can avoid flinching. Kir finally said, each word clearly chosen with care, but still not be at ease.

Kari’s ears flattened and Anur winced. Even if neither of them had enough of a connection with the Cat to feel an echo of his hurt, there was no doubt it was there. He reached down to rest his hand on Kari’s neck, Kir echoing the motion and twisting so he could meet the Cat’s eyes, continuing. Kari, you are – you are incredible. Your presence is a gift, and I would count you as a friend. With time,
your voice may be as acceptable to me – as easy to hear, for me – as Aelius’. But it will take more
time. I am sorry.: 

:You don’t need to apologize!: Anur said stridently, scowling and acknowledging Kari’s mental
murmur of agreement as he continued, :Kari says that, and I say it too. Kir – please, Kir. Be kinder
to yourself.: 

:Please,: Kari agreed, rubbing his face against Kir’s chest. :Eldest – Kir. I gladly count you as a
friend. You, Anur and Aelius all. Your mind is scarred, Eldest. Scarred badly, by what you have
endured. If you ever wish me to relay messages through Anur – if you, Anur, ever think that perhaps
today, relaying messages would be better – tell me. Let me know how I can help you, and I will do it.
Please do not let yourself hurt, or push yourself too far, out of some sense of obligation to me.

:Rebuilding the Order with a Herald as one of our number is giving us all enough stress to be
going on with without our own communication methods adding to them.: he finished wryly. :And,
on that note, if neither of you are asleep within the next half-mark, I’m placing a rest-easy working
on the pair of you. Exhaustion and family drama never go well together, regardless of Talents.: 

:Fair enough,: Kir agreed, and Anur could feel the smile in his voice so he promptly collapsed on
top of him as a distraction and a reminder that they were supposed to be sleeping. :Really?: 

:You’re warm!: Anur replied blithely.

They’d managed to get a decent night’s sleep, against all odds. Kiara stumbled into the kitchen well
after dawn, glowering at both of them until Kir slid a mug of tea under her nose.

“How are you awake so early?” she grumbled, “Mornings are terrible.”

“Kiara,” Kir said dryly, “I am a Sunpriest. More than that, I’m a Sunpriest who has been ministering
solo for nearly my entire career.”

“You poor bastard,” she mumbled, pulling out a hunk of dark bread and a crock of butter to slap
down on the table with some preserves, “You can never sleep in.”

“He’s gotten me to do it to,” Anur said wryly, shaking his head as he started slicing bread, “One time
I was off on my own trip and nearly panicked when I realized I’d slept right up to dawn instead of
waking up a mark or two earlier.”

“I alternate days I attend the Ascending services,” Kiara said, making a face before continuing,
“Well. Now I do. I usually managed to dodge services aside from Solsday before Solaris.”

“Fairly widespread,” Kir agreed, smiling faintly and continuing, “I still startle over how well attended
the 62nds services are nowadays, and that change happened years ago. You going to attend
tomorrow’s then?”

“Are you going to come?” Kiara asked, wincing and passing Kir the butter knife, “I’d rather dodge
until the visit is over if I’m going to be going alone. I’ll be cornered for questions immediately. I’m
already expecting our visit to the Sundancer to get interrupted by people, though hopefully Gregori
and Mikel will be focusing on their own families instead of ours.”

“First mate and helmsman, right?” Anur asked, pleased at Kiara’s nod because those names had
really only come up once or twice, so it was nice to know he’d remembered right.

“One of Lukas’ friends will be the ones to stop by,” she said darkly, “Because Lukas wanted to
warn people. Not warn them, that’s not the right wording,” she waved her hand dismissively,
shaking her head, “I think he wanted to head off rumors at the pass. Prevent some of the inevitable gossip from going in completely wrong directions.”

“My family thought Kir and I were romantically involved the first time I dragged him home for a visit,” Anur reminisced, Kiara having to spit her tea back into her mug when she laughed.

“Finding out about that assumption explained so much about that first day,” Kir muttered, shaking his head.

“How on earth did that visit even happen?” Kiara asked, laughing as she pulled another piece of bread towards her. “Sunsguard aren’t encouraged to visit family, right? They can write, but visits?”

“They were en route,” Anur said, shrugging, “It was winter and there had been some – less than ideal days. Reckoned getting Kir out of the 62nd for a few days would be valuable, so found an excuse to go the right direction and ran it all by the Captain so he didn’t report anyone missing or something, then went for a visit. Was the first time I’d seen them in nearly five years, and I was terrible at writing letters, so they were all very pleased, and made their assumptions when I wrote to say I was dragging a friend from the guard named Kir with me.”

“Wait, wait, you didn’t say he was a sunpriest – of course you didn’t, that’d be a bit of a stretch,” Kiara muttered, looking to Kir and saying, “And you dressed like a guardsman, no vestments in sight, I assume?”

“Of course,” Kir snorted. “At this point I hadn’t even formally named him my Enforcer yet, I had only started to organize the proper paperwork.”

“So what, they assumed you had cut off contact with them to avoid any chance of them reporting you two for being lovers? This is great,” Kiara cackled, not even waiting for Anur to confirm which was just as well, since he’d managed to avoid actively lying to her so far and would rather continue that trend. Wiping at her eyes, Kiara took a sip of tea and continued, “Oh to have been a fly on the wall when they realized you were a Firestarter – it went well?” she demanded, sounding abruptly horrified and looking between them anxiously, “It went well, didn’t it?”

“Suprisingly so,” Kir assured her, clearly touched by her concern, “It helped of course that by that time there were more than a few stories of mutual life-saving to share.”

“Those always help,” she agreed, relaxing back into her seat and smiling, “All right. Now that I know it went well I can laugh about it more freely. Kir, that’s hilarious.”

“After we started writing joint letters to them, I think my mother was willing to forgive Kir anything,” Anur continued, coughing awkwardly before admitting, “I was pretty terrible at them.”

“He writes them a letter and passes it to me to add a post-script,” Kir described dryly, Kiara leaning forward with an anticipatory glee, “And the man has literally written ‘We’re both alive. We had an adventure with ghosts and soul-eating monsters, but we’re fine. No injuries to speak of. Hope you are well’.”

Kiara was doubled over, wheezing with laughter and Anur couldn’t begrudge her it, smiling himself as he recalled some of the other letters he had sent back in his Collegia days. Believe it or not, but that one he had shown Kir was better than his early efforts, and was twice the length of his first draft.

“I realize,” Kir allowed, waving between the two of them, “That my first letter to you wasn’t much better. But! I also had no way of knowing your response to my survival and didn’t want to spend time agonizing over a letter that could very well be sent back with scorch marks and curses. He has
“Well now you don’t have the excuse either,” Kiara said, reaching out to wrap her hand around Kir’s wrist, “So you’d best continue writing, and proving yourself a better letter writer than Anur.”

“Gladly,” Kir promised, still looking more than a little stunned, as he had every time one of the Dineshes referenced him staying in touch with them, or coming back for another visit someday. Last night, Lukas had mentioned getting Kiara to take him to Sunhame someday for a visit and Kir had been so blatantly poleaxed Anur had actually needed to reassure Lukas that such a visit would be welcome until Kir recovered enough to say so himself.

“Good,” Kiara said cheerfully, draining the last of her tea and standing, “Right then. Let me finish braiding this mess and we can head off to the Sundancer – you mentioned wanting to turn your horses out beforehand?”

“Stablemaster mentioned mornings would work best for his schedule so we might as well accommodate the man,” Anur shrugged, Kiara bobbing her head in agreement.

Kir took her mug out of her hands and waved her off, saying, “We can finish up out here Kiara.”

“Thanks Kir,” Kiara said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders in a brief hug before vanishing into the back. Anur didn’t bother hiding what he was sure was a ridiculously fond smile at Kir’s startled expression, gathering up the few dishes they’d used.

“When do you want to talk to Elisia?” Kir murmured.

“Boys are meeting us for lunch at the Sundancer, figure I’ll head back to return the horses a bit before that and take a little detour on my way back to you,” Anur replied lowly, “Kari can help me find her, and I’d rather this conversation happen with minimal witnesses. I think we’d all be more comfortable with that.”

“Agreed,” Kir replied, putting the food back in the proper places while Anur dried the dishes.

Just over three marks later and he was shutting the door to the stables behind him, setting off with a spring in his step and carefully following Kari without blatantly tailing the Cat.

:I hope this works out smoothly,: Aelius fretted in his stall. :We’re certain the boys left already?:

:Kari says so,: Anur said, understanding Aelius’ nerves and feeling some of them himself, but this was necessary. None of them could, in could conscience, leave Elisia alone without at least trying to verify that she had properly constructed and built shields. An Empath with shattering shields would rarely manage to only harm themselves, and even that self-harm was something they’d do their very best to prevent.

Kir was not going to be called in to kill his sister as a rogue Empath. Hopefully, that would be because it was never necessary, but if she didn’t have proper shields and refused any sort of training, from them or from someone else, he might be consulting Seras once they got back to Sunhame.

:I don’t necessarily look forward to being known as a Companion in Karse. It will be undoubtedly awkward. But I am definitely looking forward to being able to provide proper back up without worrying about blowing our cover,: Aelius groused.

:Agreed,: Anur said, spotting Kari’s signal that they were close and offering a brief half-prayer, half-wish that Pavel wouldn’t be home. He could work with him as a witness, but he’d rather not.
But by the pre-arranged flicks of Kari’s tail as he settled on her front steps, Elisia was alone in the house she and her family called home. Slipping through the gate to the garden that ran alongside the house, he headed for the back door – rather than split along levels as Kiara’s landlord’s was, this was a set of two narrower homes built with adjoining walls. He wondered if they were the renters or the landlords for this property – Pavel had professed being a fisherman with occasional forays into trade, and there had been no mention of Elisia’s current profession, though herbalist was a solid possibility, given Kiara’s summary of her hobbies.

Rapping his knuckles on the wooden door, he took a measured step back from it so he could avoid any appearance of looming and waited, hands in his pockets.

The curtains flickered in one of the windows before the door was opened a crack, Elisia’s cool expression not quite enough to hide the brief surge of pressure against his shields. She was very good though. Without paying attention to it – without that experience from the rogue empath out in the Plains and Cora so very recently prompting a reexamination of his own shields – he would never have registered it as important.

“What do you want?” she said shortly.

“I wanted to speak with you, as someone who has lived with the danger of burning hounding my steps,” Anur said, keeping his tone calm and his volume fairly low. He very carefully made no claim that it offered him common ground with her – she had gone to a lot of effort to hide over the years. He would never put that at risk, even now that she was technically safe.

Her lips tightened, but she opened the door wider and stepped back, waving him through.

He followed her through the first level of the home quietly, glancing up the narrow stairs leading to the upper level but Elisia led him to a corner off the kitchen holding a small table and bundle after bundle of drying herbs hanging from hooks on the wall and in the ceiling, with potted plants and well-cared for trellises keeping some patch of her garden alive even in the winter. There was a split door that Elisia put her back too which looked to lead into the garden alongside her home and he was sure that in good weather she left the upper half wide open to enjoy the air.

The fact that it gave her an escape route right now was certainly a pleasant bonus.

She clasped her hands on the table’s surface and stared at him flatly.

“Well. You wanted to speak,” she said.

“You’ve been taught shielding properly, I hope?” Anur said. Now that they were in her home, in a space clearly hers, he did not bother prevaricating too much. But undoubtedly hearing some stranger speak of her Talent was unnerving, so he offered a no-longer-secret of their own, continuing, “I had to teach a young girl proper shielding a few moons ago, and it came out in the course of that that Kir had been using patched together and fortunately functional shields, which is very lucky without any proper instruction or real idea of what to look for.”

Elisia grimaced, ducking her head and breathing out slowly before she met his gaze again and said, “That is very lucky. Successful guesses are rare.”

“I consider it a less than minor miracle he made it to adulthood sane from that factor alone,” Anur admitted freely, tilting his head to one side and smiling faintly, “You have been taught. I was taught by someone similar, I think.”

Her breath hitched at that and her knuckles went white, spitting out through gritted teeth, “Just what
are you insinuating?"

“Nothing,” Anur said, spreading his hands wide, “I am simply telling you that I was taught to shield by an expert with northern origins. I suspect you were taught by the same sort. They are rather well known as experts in the field after all.”

“Was yours followed by a monster that tried murdering your brother too, then?” Elisia growled, tone ugly and gaze intent in a way he recognized. Her voice had cracked on the word monster though. He wondered if that was what she genuinely believed Seraphi to be, or if it was what she forced herself to feel. This was not the time to ask. It may never be the time to ask.

“No, I was fortunate that our contact ended without drama,” Anur said honestly, because his shielding instructor had primarily been Herald Bryce, a man who was still alive and specialized in tracking. He had taught the orienteering and outdoors survival courses for the older years as well, but Anur had never spoken with or even seen the man after he became a full Herald.

“Fortunate indeed,” she said flatly, tension easing a bit before she continued, “What do you want, Enforcer?”

“In my heart of hearts? I want my brother happy,” Anur shrugged, giving his less potentially confrontational reason for visiting her. He saw no reason to admit that he had primarily come to find out if he needed to arrange for her instruction in shielding or a tragic accident. “He is happy, right now. Or at the very least not unhappy, and I would see that continue. But I wanted you to know that reforms or not, your brother has known for a very long time that what we now call Talents are no evil in and of themselves. We can both say that as much as we like, but it is hard to find evidence of it. My survival and claiming as his brother is the only thing I can offer as tangible proof.”

Anur was careful to look her in the eye for this last bit, saying finally, “I wanted to offer you as much proof as I could, that your children are safe with him.”

Elisia went pale at that, eyes wild as she said quietly, “Get out of my house.”

Anur bowed his head and left.

:Could have gone better; he informed Aelius and Kari alike as he shut the back door behind him. He shrugged when he caught Kari’s gaze, continuing, :Could have gone worse. Thank you for the back up, regardless, Ka - : 

Kari’s ears abruptly flattened and the Cat took off running, darting into an alley and it was only through long, determined practice that Anur gritted his teeth over Kir’s abrupt spike from anxiety to true panic and restrained himself to a brisk walk. Kari had gotten out of sight, and undoubtedly Fetched himself straight to Kir’s side. This was the entire reason the Cat was here.

He’d spend every step of his walk to the docks reconvincing himself of it.

***===***pagebreak***===***

Kir was not panicking. He was not.

Kari was purring loudly, pressing into his chest and forcing the shimmering gold flames he had gotten better at holding off but clearly needed more practice with back. They weren’t vanishing entirely though, and Kir suspected it was because Kari was holding off any of the scorch-mark traces that should be left behind, leaving him less energy to spare for holding off the shimmer of flames dancing over their own skin.
“Lukas back off!” Kiara was snarling, “Damn it all let him breathe it is fine.”

“Lukas, come on, give him space, I should have passed on a message,” the ex-soldier that had started this whole mess was saying, Kir inhaling sharply and shaking his head as the constant background song surged in his mind, drowning everything out in a rush of potential –

“Move,” Anur’s voice cut across everything and his brother was there, dropping to his knees next to him and wrapping an arm around his shoulders, utterly uncaring – so blessedly uncaring, Sunlord that he had this much trust that Anur shouldn’t even hesitate – of the golden-white flames now dancing across both their skins.

“Kir, easy, you’re all right,” Anur was murmuring aloud, the sentiment echoing in his mind with Aelius offering his own silent but so very present support. “Easy. It’s all right. You’re safe. I’m safe. So is Kiara and Lukas, you haven’t hurt anyone, Kir, it’s fine.”

“My charts aren’t even on fire,” Kiara added, her voice prompting a sharp twitch of surprise and Kir looked up from Kari, meeting his sister’s worried gaze and unable to hold back his relieved sigh when she smiled at him. She was in the doorway to the small room she used to store records and charts – they’d come in here as part of the tour, she’d been planning to haul out her records and pick his brain about Sunhame’s commodities market, regardless of how little he knew – but then Lukas’ friend had arrived.

After a few more moments of steady breathing, he was able to extinguish the flames and directed his focus to warming the air around him in a distinct pattern – keeping the bands of warmth properly directed would give him something to focus on that required using his Gift without risking that harmonization slipping through. Hopefully that would get them through this conversation – he had truly thought his evening in the Trial room had resolved this, but it seemed he’d need to spend longer focusing exclusively on it. At least with the Conclave he’d have a chance to, trying to enter combat situations again without the same degree of control he was used to would be a terrible idea.

Giving Anur a nod, they rose to their feet, Kir keeping one hand tangled in Kari’s fur.

“Thank you, Kari,” he murmured, the Firecat nodding solemnly and still pressing into his side. Looking at his sister again, he winced slightly before saying, “Kiara I am so sorry about – “

Kiara cut him off, grabbing him into a fierce hug as she said, “Shut up, Kir. It was alarming, but you – none of us were even singed and you were terrified, and Honored Kari showed up right away – are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he assured them, repeating at Anur’s scoff, “I am fine. I was – startled. And on edge already, which did not help. The golden flames – they’re relatively new.”

He huffed a laugh as he realized something, and continued wryly, “First time I managed them was the day after we first met, actually. I had been working with Kari on some of his own techniques and the added stress was enough to push through the last barriers. I haven’t managed to entirely lock them down since.”

“We’re going to have to deal with that this winter,” Anur said worriedly, Kir meeting his gaze with a grimace as he nodded agreement.

“I have to,” he agreed aloud, “If I tried combat Firestarting without the control I’m used to…”

Anur echoed his grimace as he trailed off, because the potential consequences and casualties that could result didn’t bear thinking about.
“Combat firestarting?” Kiara parroted, eyes narrowed when they looked over at her, “I realize you do investigations, but why is combat firestarting so important to you?”

“Hardorn,” Anur said quietly, “Hard to convince everyone we need to of it, but Hardorn is going to be a problem sooner than later. This spring is the best bet.”

“Hells and of course you’ll be on the front lines.” Kiara murmured, wincing and shaking her head, changing the subject, “Right. Lukas hauled Silas back onto the deck, do I need to go throw them overboard or do you want to speak with them? I can also just toss Silas off, you have options.”

Anur barked a laugh and Kir grinned at his sister’s offer, because it was so very clear that she would follow through, and was even looking forward to the chance to throw their brother and his friend into the lake. Any other time – if this wasn’t his first visit home – he would take her up on her offer, particularly as he could ensure Lukas warmed up and dried off quickly, lessening the risk of sickness. But not today.

“I need to talk to them,” Kir replied, huffing a laugh at Kiara’s grumbling and continuing, “I’d rather get them to agree to keep Kari’s presence quiet, and I need to apologize besides.”

“No, you don’t need to apologize,” Kiara said pointedly, Anur nodding vigorously beside him. Kir rolled his eyes at them both and headed out the door, ignoring the pair of them trading off on reminding him of all the reasons why his apology was utterly unnecessary.

The rumbling purrs Kari was making were impossible to mistake as anything but laughter.

He ducked under the doorway and emerged on the deck, a glance letting him find Lukas and Silas seated on coiled ropes and talking quietly. They spotted him and Lukas immediately scrambled to his feet, practically pouncing on him in a hug and babbling, “Kir are you okay? I am so sorry I had no idea – you’re not hurt? You’re alright, truly?”

“Lukas,” Kir huffed a laugh, returning his brother’s hug briefly and meeting his gaze, “Lukas, I am fine. I would have to be far beyond merely upset or panicked to actually burn myself. I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Kir, of all of us here you are the last that owes any apology!” Lukas spluttered.

:That’s the third person to tell you so, Eldest, I rather think you had best reconsider your stance,: Kari said, clearly amused and by the twitches and startled oaths he was broadcasting – and possibly only just allowing himself to be noticed, if the way Lukas startled on even seeing him was any indication.

“I – a Firecat?” Lukas asked, wonder clear in his voice.

“This is Kari,” Kir introduced, quickly elaborating with, “He is here for the Firestarters, but with this visit it was agreed he would – well. Follow us around, essentially. In case of incidents.”

“Like the one I prompted,” Silas finally spoke, on his feet but carefully staying back and keeping his hands visible, which Kir truly appreciated. They had come to something of an understanding in the days before his discharge, but out of all the Sunsguard based attempts on his life, the ones this man had organized had come the closest to succeeding.

“Of anyone here, I rather think I owe the apology,” the ex-soldier continued, bowing his head slightly, “I only told Lukas that I was interested in meeting you again, not that we had met since your taking. And I never mentioned to you that I had known you as a child and knew your family, so there would be no reason for you to think I would be here.”
“This does explain some of the persistence,” Kir murmured, eyeing the man thoughtfully with this new knowledge in mind. Now that he wasn’t being swamped by the hum of potential bathing the world he could make out the rather distinctive song that was coming from Silas’ necklace, rather than Anur’s pockets. “You still have the arrowhead I gave you.”

“Never encountered Furies again,” Silas replied agreeably, mouth twisting in a smile at Lukas’ surprised hiss, continuing, “To be fair, I was never targeted by them again that I know of. It’s – rather why I wanted to speak to you. If it was you.”

Reaching up, he pulled the leather cord up and over his head, wrapping it around the carefully dulled arrowhead that had hung from it and stepping forward, holding it out to him.

“Furies are gone, now,” the man said quietly, “Or at least, there’s no reason for me to think I will encounter them again. But if what I’ve been hearing about monsters from Hardorn is at all accurate, you’ll be needing all the weapons you can get.”

Kir watched him carefully, considering both the offer and the possible responses he could give, before stepping forward and grabbing the man’s hand, curling his fingers back around the pendant.

“I gave it to you to offer some protection against Furies,” Kir said, “To give you at the very least a weapon that worked against them, should you be desperate. Furies are gone now, true, but those threats you say you’ve heard rumors of are not solely found in or close to Hardorn. I would prefer you keep this. Pass it on to someone else if you must, but I’d rather weapons against those wretches not be held solely by the priesthood.”

“Besides that,” Kir continued, smiling ruefully and indicating Anur, “Now that I go to Sunhame fairly regularly, I can make more. Not many more, it’s a time consuming process, but it can be done, and has.”

“Of course,” Anur grumbled behind him, “Of course he gives away all his Sun-blessed steel to people that tried to murder him, why would I ever think something else had happened?”

Kir laughed quietly and shook his head, pushing Silas’ hand back before looking over his shoulder, replying, “I really don’t know, Anur, you should know me better than that by now.”

“Tried to murder you?” Lukas asked, voice flat.

Kir caught Silas’ wince out of the corner of his eye when he turned to face Lukas, hesitating at the expression on his brother’s face but pressing on, saying, “Lukas, I was ordained at sixteen and immediately sent out as a chaplain so I would die in a convenient accident. It took two years for the man who’d put out that order to die, and there were plenty of attempts in the interim. When you received those sorts of orders – refusal wasn’t precisely an option.”

“Even if you didn’t refuse, you would probably still die because you were evidence,” Silas added quietly. “I was discharged before the pressure to continue those accidents eased. I had no reason to think he had managed to continue surviving and no way to ask, so I never said anything.”

The silence that fell was tense, all of them focusing almost entirely on Lukas. Kir’s panic at being essentially ambushed by a once-enemy aside, Lukas was clearly the one who was the most affected by this.

“I’ll go,” Silas finally said, bowing his head to Lukas before turning to Kir and saluting, “It is – very good to see that you’ve survived, Holiness. I’ll keep quiet about Honored Kari.”

With a nod to Anur and a murmur of farewell to Kiara, he quickly climbed down to the dock and
walked off, Sun-blessed steel back around his neck.

“I’ve seen that arrowhead before,” Lukas said quietly, “I’ve asked what sort of metal it was, because it looked odd, and he never said anything.”

“I can understand why he wouldn’t,” Kiara said, subdued, shrugging when they all looked over at her.

“It’s something like what we did, isn’t it?” she asked, giving Kir a wry smile and continuing, “We didn’t tell anyone we’d heard from you until after I’d met you, to make sure things would – well. That you were at least invested in a reunion, that you were interested. If you hadn’t been, or had been – had been awful, I don’t really know what I would have done, but I would have wanted to convince everyone you were actually dead so no one ever had to be hurt by your survival when your death was bad enough.”

Turning to Lukas, she continued, “If Silas had any idea how upset – how scarred – you were by Kir’s taking, which would be damn hard to miss, frankly, then I completely understand why he wouldn’t tell you that he’d met Kir as a chaplain while he was in the Sunsguard, oh and he had a death mark on his head from a higher ranked priest. That is what happened? What you were talking around?” she asked, directing the last questions back to him.

Kir shrugged before nodding, looking between his blood siblings worriedly, explaining, “I offended a high ranked summoner named Phyrrus. He died in what was called an accident, was unofficially known to be a Fury summoning gone wrong, and what was actually the result of deliberate sabotage on the part of one of the other Firestarters, though we hadn’t gotten that last bit of information until recently. It took a year after his death for the attempts to truly stop.”

Eyeing Lukas for a moment, trying to assess exactly how much information he should offer, he finally said, “Silas Thorton was a junior officer in the 62nd when I arrived, and from rumors he was being watched as a candidate for promotion if he renewed his contract. The scars on his face and throat – I assume he still uses the mountain cat story? – were actually from Furies. A swarm decimated his squad and he was the only one with survivable injuries. While we were working on the story, we also tried to figure out why they were targeted, because they definitely were deliberately targeted, and the best theory we had was that the priest essentially blackmailing him into attempting to kill me had grown suspicious of his consistent failures and decided to cut his losses by killing the loose ends.”

Lukas had sat down halfway through that explanation, burying his face in his hands, and Kir walked over to sit beside him, continuing quietly, “Relatively amicable parting aside, I knew his face and voice as someone who had tried repeatedly to arrange my death and gotten the closest of anyone in that batch to succeeding. Being startled by his entirely unexpected arrival while already on edge – because I am Lukas, every moment we’re here I’m on edge, it feels like, and Anur wasn’t within sight which always makes that worse – I panicked.”

Kiara came over and sat on Lukas’ other side, resting her head on his shoulder, and Anur settled next to Kir. Kir kept his focus on Lukas, who finally lifted his head and looked over at him, smiling faintly, “Fair enough, Kir. I’ll give him a chance to explain. But I’ll be angry for a while longer. He could have at least told me you might react badly to him!”

“Agreed,” Anur said, and by Kiara’s hum, she was of the same mind.

Kari gave his purring laugh, and padded over to drape himself across Anur’s and his laps, head just reaching to rest on Lukas’ knee. The Cat made for an excellent distraction, and the sheer wonder on Lukas’ face when he hesitantly ran his hand through Kari’s fur eased a fair bit of Kir’s worry. Kiara
was leaning forward to look around Lukas and probably ask something when they heard their nephews’ voices on the dock.

"- anything can be warmed up Ivan, it’s just a question of if you want it to be warmed up –"

"No! We agreed that we’d get stories this time, not technical details!"

“But what if they’re important to the story?”

“One detail. One per story.”

“Deal!” Devin crowed, appearing around a barrel, basket in hand and making a strangled noise halfway through his wave.

“Devin?” Ivan asked, pushing his brother forward with a sideways look, “What are you – Firecat.”

“Hi boys!” Anur called cheerfully. “You coming aboard or are you just going to stare at us?”

“Okay fine, two details per story,” Ivan muttered.

Kari’s tail twitched lazily and blue eyes met Kir’s, the Cat saying to him alone, :I plan to get so many fish out of this arrangement.:***===***pagebreak***===***

Lukas had been off balance from the moment he woke up. He hadn’t planned to attend the Ascending service, but he had always prayed in the mornings, and he’d been halfway through his habitual petition for his brother’s safety and health when he had realized that – that his brother was here. That he could actually go and see him, see that he was safe, that he was healthy, with his own eyes, right now.

By the time he’d regained his composure and been halfway through his own breakfast, a knock on the door had interrupted him and Silas had been there, asking if he could be reintroduced to Kir sometime, it’d be interesting to see who he had grown into. He hadn’t thought for longer than a moment or two before saying yes, telling Silas to meet them at the Sundancer in a few marks, because Silas was the only person he’d mentioned Kir’s visit to that had taken the news with a worried expression to go with his well-wishes, instead of only somewhat successfully concealed glee at the potential drama and gossip.

Being able to show Kir the Sundancer, one of his own projects, and descend into the usual bickering with Kiara about what sort of things were actually necessary for a ship to be considered complete, had been – incredible. Had been a sharp reminder of all the years they’d missed, of all the years Kir had been gone, when he and Bellamy listened to their banter with the polite bemusement of landsmen.

Bellamy had gone off to deal with their horses, and by then Kiara had already rolled her eyes and given him permission to inspect the ship that they still occasionally bickered over exactly who owned while hauling Kir into the room she used as a bunk and office in one, plainly planning to question him about Sunhame’s mercantile interests. He doubted Kir knew many of the details she’d need, but he might have fragments she could use.

He hadn’t even thought to mention Silas was coming by. Kiara knew Silas well enough, they went to his alehouse fairly frequently and Lukas counted him as a good friend, and Kir had been six when he’d left, he probably didn’t remember Silas at all. At least Silas would be fairly polite about whatever staring he did.
He hadn’t thought twice about waving a greeting and pointing to where Kiara and Kir were, saying, “Kiara’s interrogating him on mercantile interests in Sunhame, go save him would you?” and returning to the prodding examination of the anchor chain house he was almost done with.

Silas had hesitated, and Lukas would be kicking himself for years for not saying anything about it, for not putting aside work he could do anytime at all and going in to introduce Silas himself, to give his siblings a heads up on their visitor. But Elisia aside, Kir’s visit had gone so smoothly. He had slotted into their family, into his and Kiara’s banter, so very well. It hadn’t occurred to him that anyone besides perhaps Elisia could interrupt that.

He had never been burned. He didn’t even remember much of that burning that stole Kir from them, to be frank, all he truly remembered was that thing charging forward and having enough presence of mind to know in his bones that it wanted Kir, that it wanted his little brother, and stepping in its way. Everything after that was pain and screaming and his brother being stolen from him anyways.

But watching golden fire dance over Kir’s skin while his brother pinned himself into a corner, flames curling around him and somehow not turning the whole ship to tinder, he thought he could hear that screaming all over again. Kiara had stepped between them and shoved him out just as he glimpsed a Firecat – a legend – appear out of nothing and glue itself to Kir’s side, and Silas had hauled him back onto the deck, insisting that it was his fault, that he should have known better, that he was sorry.

Bellamy hadn’t even looked at them when he arrived, jumping to the deck and immediately going to Kir’s side. He rather doubted they’d even been noticed.

Listening to Kir and Silas’ explanation afterwards – hearing Kir try to apologize for being scared when he should have been safe – it had been heartbreaking and infuriating and utterly bewildering all at once. His brother had made it home to them, and it hurt to think of all the ways it might have never happened, and it ached to hear that one of his best friends could have been the reason why.

The Honorable Kari made for a magnificent distraction, and if Lukas wasn’t entirely mad his ribs were hurting far less than they usually did after this much excitement, though that could be unrelated. He had intended to listen to Devin’s technical questions and perhaps ask some of his own, he had noticed the odd warmth surrounding his crippled side the night before after all, but instead he found himself resting his head on Kir’s shoulder, half-dazed, and carding his mangled fingers through Kari’s fur.

Not sleeping well last night – his brother was home how could he possibly sleep? – undoubtedly didn’t help.

“Pa!”

Stirring from his daze, Lukas forced himself to blink, to focus, and somehow felt far more rested than he had any right to after all of this, and managed to find a smile at the utterly poleaxed look on Pavel’s face as he stood on the Sundancer’s deck and his sons, for once truly unified in their enthusiasm, babbled at him.

“Pa, the Honorable Kari’s agreed to tell us stories in exchange for fish! Only one fresh fish a week!” Ivan whispered, practically bouncing with glee.

Devin wasn’t far behind, grabbing his younger brother’s shoulder and adding on, “With two technical detail questions per story! Please? What chores or errands can we tack on for a fresh fish a week?”

“We’re on punishment detail, what other chores are there?” Ivan hissed.
“We have some money saved up we can definitely pool together long enough to get past punishment detail,” Devin whispered back.

Pavel rested a hand on each of his son’s heads and they looked up at him hopefully. Lukas doubted Pavel even noticed, he was staring at Kari and had been from the moment he spotted him. Pavel’s to the bones practicality and knack for contract details – Devin was certainly his father’s son – kicked in eventually though and he asked, “Is this a continuous arrangement of a fish per week forever or is this more of a one story per fish per week? If you miss a week, or we delay starting, is the deal off? If you have a two fish week, can you skip the next week or get extra questions answered? Will the fish exchange and the story happen at the same time? Will it be a consistent time and place per week? Also, define ‘fresh’.”

“All very good questions,” Devin mused.

Pavel shook his head suddenly and cut his son off before he could redirect those questions at Kari, saying, “Right I came here for a reason. Boys, change of plans. I’ll bring you by Nana’s home after the Descending service tonight, but I need both of you to go home now.”

“What’s wrong?” Ivan asked immediately, eyes wide.

Pavel looked grim, and Lukas had to close his eyes and suppress a curse at his reply, because of course, because why hadn’t any of them thought of this –

“Found your mother with the box of Ingrid’s things.”

“We’ll go right back,” Devin promised, grabbing his younger brother’s arm and tugging him away, Ivan nodding vigorously, “We’ll go right back and stay in sight at all times and everything, promise, Pa.”

“Thank you boys,” Pavel said, sounding relieved and Sunlord somehow they’d managed to do such a good job with those kids. Their group of four watched both boys run off, Devin keeping his hand wrapped around Ivan’s wrist, and neither looked back.

“Ingrid was your daughter?” Kir asked quietly.

Pavel’s eyes shut, jaw tightening for a moment before he reopened his eyes and nodded shortly. He let out a shuddering breath before apparently catching the oddity in what Kir had said and joining the rest of them in sending a puzzled glance his way.

“How did you know we had a daughter, but not her name?” Pavel asked slowly.

Kir gave a wry smile, replying, “Tithe records don’t list children’s names, only the heads of the household and number of children each year. The third child vanished off the lists too young to have started their own household and there was no reference to Fires or claiming. I wanted to make sure we were going to the right town, amongst other things.”

“I really should have just given you directions,” Kiara grumbled under her breath, “Would have saved the lot of us some worrying.”

“What would your directions have consisted of? You’ve never traveled overland,” Pavel pointed out, brow furrowing as he examined Kir more carefully. “You truly don’t remember much of this, do you?”

“Exactly how much do you clearly remember from before you were six, keeping in mind that no one was around to tell stories of your childhood and trick your mind into thinking you remember it?” Kir
retorted, Lukas wanting to give a pained sound at that but he couldn’t. He couldn’t say anything. He managed though, when Kir snorted and continued roughly, “Had a whole plan with Anur for him to ask my mother’s name and ensure I overheard it. Thankfully Nana’s letter mentioned it.”

Pavel’s gaze was heavy, but he didn’t say anything further on the topic, instead giving the Honorable Kari another bewildered look before turning his gaze on Lukas, asking worriedly, “Are you all right Lukas? You seemed in a daze when I got here.”

“Turns out Silas was never attacked by a mountain cat, it was Furies, and Kir somehow saved him from them even though Silas had spent years making various attempts on Kir’s life at the behest or blackmail or something of another priest,” Lukas rattled off, knowing he sounded as shaken as he undoubtedly looked.

Pavel stared at them flatly before dropping down to sit on the deck himself, cross-legged and burying his face in his hands, muttering what sounded like some vehement shipboard curses.

“This other priest,” Bellamy began, sounding thoughtful, but quickly cut off by Kir’s amused snort.

“He died in one of the early Menmellith campaigns, Anur, stop plotting his misery.”

“I would never,” Bellamy replied virtuously.

“Liar,” Kir said, an undisguised fondness in his voice and as heartening as Lukas found it, that his brother had someone so very determined to keep him safe, it was – disturbing. Unsettling.

They were so used to lethal defense. To being attacked, and to ending it.

Kir had killed his first man at six years old. Lukas had been very careful to not think of it very often. To not focus on it. But sometimes, when he watched people shy away from priests, when he had ducked his head in fear more than respect, he had thought of that, and wondered.

The Cat had somehow moved from sprawled across Bellamy and Kir to mostly sprawled across Kir and himself, and interrupted Lukas’ thoughts by butting his head with his hands and meeting his eyes with blue-blue –

Shuddering, he looked away quickly and met Kir’s gaze instead, offering a faint smile in response to Kir’s concerned look.

:Well I am stumbling over all sorts of scars today,: the Cat’s mental voice rang with a self-depreciating amusement that was so very human Lukas could hardly believe it, and Pavel laughed into his hands, looking up at the four of them and shaking his head.

“That’s how you know it’s family,” he said dryly.

None of them were able to keep from laughing after that.
He had known this visit would be dramatic, would be tense, no matter how it worked out. So far, things were going unbelievably well – his brother, his sister, his mother and grandmother and nephews and brother-in-law – they all welcomed him and Anur both. They accepted them into their homes, into their lives, and how could he possibly regret that? How could he possibly look at their looming departure date with relief because one more day he could make it. They could make it. This day was almost over, it was well into the evening at this point, and there was only one full day left which was already half-filled with plans for a more elaborate family dinner than usual and tentatively adjusted for a morning attendance of the Ascending Service. Perhaps.

They would make it, and he would not set any more inadvertent fires. Hopefully.

“Would you walk with me, Kir?”

Kir looked up from where he was watching Anur try and fail to understand Devin, Lukas and Irma’s muddled explanations of how to play this particular version of a dice-and-card game, already on his feet by the time he fully recognized that his mother was asking the question.

“Of course,” he replied, taking her coat and the boots she carried as signs that this walk would be outside and away from the ever-listening ears of the rest of the family, so when Anur looked his way he waved at him to stay where he was. Elisia hadn’t shown her face at all today, and Pavel had, as planned, walked the boys over after they’d attended the Descending service, the only of the Dineshes to do so. Lukas would be the one to walk them home later this evening, as Pavel had headed back to join his wife.

One more full day here. Then they would leave.

Following her to the door and then outside, Kir hesitated on the steps long enough for Tamara – for his mother – to huff a laugh and loop her arm through his much as Kiara had taken to doing. Kiara was a little shorter, ears level with Kir’s chin. He was the same height as his mother.

He remembered her being so much taller.

“Cold enough to keep people inside,” Tamara commented, breath clouding in front of them as they started to walk. “I love walking the town on winter nights. It’s quiet.”

“I like night wanderings too,” Kir murmured, mouth twitching in a smile, “Much the same reason, usually.”
“Hmm. Nighttime wanderings were a bit more of a risk in the northern reaches,” she said, “Would make the right sort of nights quieter, I imagine. And the wrong sort unbearably loud.”

“I was lucky, and able to do something about that loudness,” Kir replied softly, inclining his head, “But you’re right.”

They walked in silence for a time, heading towards the lake itself. There was the occasional low murmur of background conversation, but no one was walking the streets right now and they were heading away from the alehouses and inns that might house carousers. A light breeze picked up every now and again, and before long they could hear the lapping of wind-stirred water against the shoreline and docks.

Tamara headed for a pier, not the same one the Sundancer berthed at, their boots rapping against the wood sharply and they bypassed the secured boats and ships and floating platforms, heading for the very edge. She finally stopped there and unwound her arm from his, sitting down to let her feet dangle over the edge and patting the wood beside her. “Join me, Kir.”

He did, settling close enough that their arms brushed one another, that if one of them moved a touch, their knees could press together, and leaned back on his hands, watching the wispy clouds scuttle across the moon-bright sky.

“When you speak of coping with loudness,” Tamara finally said, voice low enough that he was almost straining to hear her, “You do not mean simply eliminating the source of the noise, or muffling your ears.”

Kir couldn’t help but pause, startled that she would – that she had so quickly –

“I do not,” he replied quietly.

“You weren’t truly coherent – your screaming, when you were taken,” Tamara elaborated, a bitter smile twitching at her lips while she bowed her head, “But you mentioned wanting the screaming to stop, and Wes hadn’t started screaming yet when your flames manifested.”

“Oh,” Kir said blankly, leaning forward now, placing his hands on his knees. “I – I don’t remember that.”

“You were six,” Tamara scoffed, shaking her head, “You were six, and you were hysterical. I’m not surprised you don’t remember scattered babbling. It wasn’t something I truly thought about either, not deeply. You were gone, and I had Ivan to anchor and Kiara to bear.”

She sighed heavily, reaching over to rest a hand on his and smiling when he flipped his hand over to clasp hers.

“Your father loved that man,” she murmured, looking out over the water. “Loved him desperately. We knew you were at risk for the priesthood, and there was a plan to – to take you away. For Wes to take you away. He was caught a few months short of it coming into fruition.”

Kir froze, because – because he would have – if he had been – He would have been Valdemaran. He would not have grown to see the Sunlord as his God, he would have never remembered more than perhaps one faint story of Firecats, he would have never ended up trying desperately to hide snickers as he overheard a truly filthy drinking song set to the same tune as a hymn, he would have –

He would have never burned children.

:Kir, are you all right? Do you need backup?:
There was no verbal response, but Kir could clearly sense Anur’s doubt. Hopefully he would make somewhat reasonable excuses if he ended up leaving – or he would tell the rest of the family they both had mindspeech, apparently Tamara knew already anyway.

“Either way, I would have considered you dead. I’m glad things went the way they did,” Tamara continued bluntly.

Kir straightened from where he’d hunched over, burying his face in his hands, and peered at her curiously because – that didn’t make any sense. Wes had died screaming. He had been torn away from the family. His father had been driven mad with grief. Lukas had been crippled. Elisia hated him. Why would she be glad of that?

“Not in the details,” she continued, a curt gesture dismissing the very thought as she turned back to the water, “The details are regretful. But if you had been taken by Wes – I would truly have never seen you again. He was not planning to ever return, and I would have eventually lost your father anyway. To death or to trying to find his way to Wes still alive, I don’t know, but he would not have stayed any longer than he did. Would Lukas have been healthy? Certainly. But he would be hateful, because you would have vanished into the night, and we would not have said anything. You would have been kidnapped, disappeared, with no one to blame, and that would have torn at him. We still would have named Kiara for you, Irma would still pray for your safety for years, Elisia would still be so very angry at so very many things, and you would never come home.”

“Tamara – mothe – ma,” he finally murmured, reaching out to take her hand again and tightening his grip when she shuddered, wiping at damp eyes with her sleeve.

“I was going to lose either way,” she whispered hoarsely, “You were gone, either way. I cannot regret a path that brought you home.”

She leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder, and he hesitated only briefly before resting his head atop hers. Their breath continued to cloud the cold night air, and there were only brief snippets of music and conversation and laughter brought their way by the breeze. For the most part, all they could hear was lapping waves and the creak of ropes.

“Ma,” he finally said, knowing there would really be no better time to ask, “Who turned Wes in?”

“I don’t know,” she answered quietly.

Footsteps rang out on the dock and they both straightened, turning to look over their shoulders and Kir rolled his eyes when they confirmed what he’d sensed. Of course it was Anur. Kari – though wearing his tabby-cat shell – was trailing behind, tail flicking. By Tamara’s amused huff, she caught his gesture.

He waited until Anur had sat down beside him to bump their knees together and murmur, “Thought I told you not to come.”

“Since when have I listened to that?” Anur retorted, before admitting, “Wasn’t planning too, but practically as soon as you said you were fine you started spiking again, so I decided to follow my gut instead of your insistence and went after Kari. Helps of course that Lukas spotted me twitch and immediately threw the game and called it a night. Neither of us have been very subtle, apparently.”

“Kari would be you, Honored Firecat?” Tamara asked, Kir jolting with surprise and looking over at her. She raised an eyebrow and said, “Why would an ordinary cat follow someone in the middle of
the night all the way to the docks when they have no food to offer? Also, your siblings and nephews are only sneaky when they’re dealing with small conspiracies. As soon as all four are involved they’re incapable of maintaining proper security.”

Kari chuffed in amusement, the Cat padding forward from where he had draped himself over some coiled ropes and shifting until, by the time he reached them and settled against Kir’s back, he was in his usual shape.

“You raise good points,” Kir allowed, shaking his head and sighing, directing at Kari, “Were you even trying?”

:I could have tried harder,: Kari replied, an amused gleam in his eyes, :But be honest, after this afternoon, subtlety can be considered essentially dead.: Anur snickered, to which Kir sighed again and focused instead on explaining his mother.

“He helps the Firestarters,” Kir said, smiling faintly when Kari butted his head against his shoulder, “And they all agreed that he should focus on us during this visit – to at least be a crutch for us, if nothing else. I – he’s not mine, I don’t want you to think – “

“I understand,” Tamara cut him off, smiling ruefully, “Besides, I don’t think that Elisia would react particularly well to his presence, not just yet. Perhaps someday.”

“What happened to Ingrid?” Anur asked quietly, “Pavel mentioned her but – that was it.”

“She died eight years ago. Ivan was only a few months old. She was twelve – died in her sleep,” Tamara said sadly, shaking her head, “No real warnings – complained of a bit of a headache, had her tea before bed, and when Elisia went to check on her and Devin before she retired, she was dead.”

“Yeah, I fucked that up,” Anur grumbled and Kir groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Anur, what did you do?”

“I made an unfortunately chosen closing remark for our conversation,” Anur said, hastily adding, “Before that it went – fine. Not well, but fine. Civilized, got some important things out of the way, and so on. But when she asked me why I had bothered to come and speak with her, I listed some things and concluded with saying I wanted to offer her as much reassurance as I could that her children were safe with you.”

“And in her mind her children are never truly safe,” Tamara groaned herself this time, “Damn it we should have made sure you knew about Ingrid, but it so rarely comes up anymore – it’s such fundamental information to us – it didn’t even occur to us.”

“I knew they’d lost a child and not to the Fires or the priesthood,” Kir sighed, “I’m sorry I let you walk into that blind, Anur.”

“It happens,” Anur replied ruefully, “Conversations accidentally trampling over people’s scars are par for the course these days. Could have gone worse.”

“Trampling over scars is what family does,” Tamara sighed, jumping when they laughed.

“Pavel said much the same earlier today,” Kir explained, shaking his head with a smile, “So who learned the saying from whom?”

“Oh I learned it from my family,” Tamara replied, brow furrowing, “I suppose it could be a rivers
thing, he is from a town a day’s sail downriver of where I grew up. But I rather think it’s a common
one across Karse. I suppose priests would have no reason to hear it.”

“A fair point,” Kir allowed, Anur shrugging at his glance so evidently he hadn’t heard a similar
saying before. Perhaps they would ask Axeli or the twins, if they remembered to.

Soon enough they were heading back, Tamara pulling him into a hug that he returned tightly before
they parted ways. Kari had shifted back into his tabby-cat shell, and apparently decided to try harder
at going unnoticed this time as Kir only caught occasional glimpses of him the rest of their walk back
to Kiara’s home. His sister was sitting on her front step, watching the stars with a mug of tea at her
side, but she quickly stood on sighting them and waved them inside, holding the door open for those
extra seconds to allow Kari to slip in after them.

“Everything is all right?” she asked, nerves showing in the way she was drumming her fingers on her
mug while they hung their coats.

“Everything is fine, Kiara,” Kir assured her, offering a smile that she could hopefully see was real
even in the now mostly blocked moonlight. “There were tense moments, but that’s rather inevitable
with these conversations. Everything is fine.”

“Good,” she breathed, heaving a sigh and finally smiling herself, “Good. I was – ma’s really hard to
read, most of the time. I didn’t think she was unhappy but – I couldn’t be sure.”

“Hmm – not so hard, I think,” Kir murmured, “Just – very reserved.”

Flicking his fingers absently, he called a yellow-white orb of fire into being above their heads to
provide some light, forgetting the fact he hadn’t done that in front of Kiara before until she gasped,
making him wince. Looking at her though, she wasn’t horrified, or afraid – she was blatantly
delighted.

He let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“That is so useful – and pretty, I suppose,” Kiara’s tacked on addition was decidedly dubious and Kir
had to chuckle at that, and took it as a prompt to shift the orb into a spiral by making it look as
though the whole thing had unwound like a ball of yarn, before having it coil and twist into what
was clearly a square knot.

Anur had to lunge to catch Kiara’s mug when she forgot herself and clapped delightedly before
squawking in dismay as her mug fell – Kir would guess that Anur had helped himself along a bit
with Fetching, ensuring it didn’t slosh as badly as it might have – but the three of them ended up
laughing over the whole matter and with that – it truly didn’t matter at all.

“Thank you for showing me that, Kir,” Kiara said while Anur put her mug away, pulling him into a
hug he easily returned this time. “Thank you for trusting me with it.”

“Thank you for not flinching,” he murmured back, hardly able to fathom that somehow she hadn’t
startled, she hadn’t been frightened or even alarmed by his brief, restrained display. That even after
he had panicked on her ship, had visibly and blatantly lost control of his fire, she wasn’t afraid of
him.

“Well I’m never going to pull off what Bellamy managed earlier, but you clearly know what you’re
doing and have additional safeguards in place besides,” Kiara said, nodding to where Kari was
curled up on one of her armchairs.

“I don’t think anyone besides Anur can pull off what he managed safely, so please don’t try,” Kir
said hastily, Kiara raising an eyebrow at him and he winced, elaborating, “We’ve – there’s some form of bond, between us, that we started noticing after a joint manifestation of the Voice – that Oathbreaker story we told earlier today. It lets me find Anur by just letting my feet carry me, and vice versa, and I think it allows me to register him as – as an extension of me, when it comes to my flames. Other people can go unharmed by my flames but I have to consciously think about it, with Anur it seems to automatically happen. Given, we haven’t tried putting it to the test, not truly, but that seems to be the pattern.”

“That’s really interesting,” Kiara mused, “Shame Devin already used his technical questions on that one.”

“We don’t really have any idea about it either,” Anur replied wryly, “Haven’t found any helpful records yet and at this point I’m rather doubting they exist anymore, if they ever did.”

“I feel much the same,” Kir sighed, before shrugging, “We’ll give it one last search this winter before calling it quits.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Anur said agreeably, “Now, I don’t know about you two, but if we want the Ascending service to even be an option tomorrow, I need to try and sleep.”

“Ugh,” Kiara grumbled, “You two had best wake me up or there will be no option at all.”

At least the Ascending service itself kept people from staring too blatantly. It was just as well they wouldn’t be here for the Solsday service – or rather, that they wouldn’t attend the Solsday service – the staring they were getting from the smaller crowd was bad enough.

Though perhaps if the crowd had been larger, they wouldn’t have been noticed by everyone quite so quickly?

“Come on,” Kiara muttered, hiding a yawn behind her hand and hooking her arm through his, “Lukas is probably done shouting at Silas by now.”

Kir snorted, Anur shaking his head as he paced on Kir’s other side, the three of them ignoring the stares and whispers that followed them – if someone actually spoke to them, they’d reply. But if all they wanted to do was whisper and watch, they wouldn’t bother extending the effort to interact. This visit had enough trouble without borrowing the effort to interact. This visit had enough trouble without borrowing more. Lukas had met them on the way to the Ascending service but only walked with them long enough to say he’d be skipping today, as he planned to corner Silas and, in his words, ‘pull some truth out of his teeth’. Kir had only hesitated briefly before suggesting they meet him there afterwards.

He didn’t particularly want to see Silas Thorton again, but he didn’t want his brother to throw away a friendship over something that, to be frank, was entirely unimportant.

He hadn’t yet figured out a way to say that without sparking an argument from all of his siblings. Anur and Kiara had already proven more than capable of supporting one another arguments when it came to convincing him of something and he didn’t doubt that Lukas would be able to join in on that effort fairly easily. They would not convince him he was wrong, not in this, but that didn’t mean he particularly wanted to have to listen to the same argument three separate times.

By the time they reached the alehouse that Silas apparently owned and lived above, the expected shouting was at least over with. Instead they found Lukas and Silas sitting in the kitchen, at one end of the long prep-table with a kettle of chava in front of them. Both looked up when they walked in,
Silas inclining his head slightly and waving to some other stools, saying, “If you wish to join us, there’s enough chava to share.”

“I will pass,” Kir said, sitting down beside Lukas and Anur claimed the stool on his other side. Kiara had gone to grab herself a mug before settling next to Anur.

The ex-soldier eyed him thoughtfully, taking a sip of his chava before lowering it and saying pointedly, “I never bothered trying poison.”

Kir barked a laugh at that, because he was right. Silas Thorton’s plots had always been remarkable in their precision. Poison in an environment with a communal mess hall would have far too many chances for collateral damage, as Kir had run into at least twice. Thankfully the cooks had never figured out just how their stewmeat had been charred beyond edibility that one time.

Looking over at Anur, he bumped his knee against his and murmured, “We agreed former attempts did not count.”

“I never officially agreed – ow!” Anur squawked when Kir rammed his elbow into his ribs, “Fine! Fine! I agree, damn it Kir, fine!”

Lukas and Kiara were both snickering, and Thorton was shaking his head, a wry smile on his face as he said, “A good thing our tenures never overlapped, I think.”

“Being honest, I haven’t actually killed anyone that threatened Kir without it being a direct combat situation,” Anur said, spreading his hands wide as he shrugged, “Technically speaking, I haven’t even violently injured someone for threatening Kir outside of direct combat situations.”

“Loshern?” Kir said pointedly.

“Technically speaking, I could have been punching him in response to his threat to Rodri,” Anur replied, before rolling his eyes and admitting, “Fine, once. I’ve actually retroactively attacked a threat to you once.”

“Rodri? Your student?” Kiara asked, giving them a worried glance over her mug, “Is he all right?”

“It wasn’t – he’s fine,” Kir sighed, feeling a familiar worry descend on him as he thought about the latest threat to his Firestarters. “The border ward to prevent blood-magic taint from entering Karse isn’t something that has been done before – we had to heavily modify an existing rite to get something close to what we wanted, and it’s looking like we need to dismantle it to prevent any catastrophic backlash on the anchors when it’s forced down. Rodri was one of the anchors, with Kari’s assistance, and a priest by the name of Loshern had heard about the planned ward and guessed something along these lines would happen, but did not give any warning about it.”

Shaking his head, he continued dryly, “If the man had given that warning, none of the argument would have happened in all likelihood. We would have gone forward with the ward anyway, there hadn’t been any chance we would leave it undone, but we would have planned to dismantle it eventually from the beginning and none of the students would have been involved. Kari could have served as a solo anchor easily enough.”

“I broke his nose,” Anur supplied at Kiara’s prompting gesture, and both the local Dineshes hummed with satisfaction.

Silas snorted, saying, “Well, you two are certainly related. I passed the arrowhead onto Lukas, Holiness, I don’t – I no longer need it.”
“I could tell,” Kir admitted, glancing at Lukas and smiling faintly when his older brother looked worried, “I’m glad to know you have that protection, Lukas, truly. It is not – I did not hand them out as some sort of sign of favor, not then, I only thought to offer them to people who needed the extra protection. Even then, at least two of my original eight were destroyed entirely.”


Kir shook his head, drumming his fingers against the table and finally admitting, “I destroyed one myself, using it to interrupt a summoning rite. It was slag and vapor by the time it was finished. The second one was destroyed when the man carrying it tried to kill me a third time and I burned him to nothing. The fire shouldn’t have been enough to destroy the arrowhead, but when the ashes were cool there was no trace of it.”

“How?” Anur said, apparently finally realizing a secondary reason Kir had given Sun-blessed steel to people who attempted to kill him, “You could detect Sun-blessed steel’s presence, even then?”

“Always,” he agreed, smiling wryly, “Never quite heard it as a true song until Rodri pointed it out, but it was – distinct. I would say three of my giftings were primarily due to needing an early warning system.”

“Song?” Lukas prompted, hand resting over his heart and undoubtedly where the arrowhead hung under his shirt.

“I hear – ah. The potential for fire, that everything carries. I can hear it as a sort of – hum. At least that is the best description I can come up with, it’s not truly something I hear but it is – it is always there. Sun-blessed steel has a very distinctive sound for lack of a better description, and after Rodri witnessed a forging he pointed out that it actually was more of a song rather than a flat hum. Non-living things don’t have that multi-toned aspect, not truly.”

“Even if it’s one object with multiple things? Like – a piece of wood with nails? That doesn’t register as multi-toned?” Anur asked, propping his hand on his chin and narrowing his eyes as he thought that over.

“Not – well. Not as blended?” Kir grimaced, “It’s the difference between hearing two or more instruments playing different songs while next to each other, and hearing a duet.”

“That sounds – very distracting,” Kiara said, wrinkling her nose, “And very – well. Loud, if we’re continuing to use sound as a reference.”

“It is,” Kir agreed, “Half of my gaining control was learning to make that noise fade into the background unless I need it. Those golden flames you saw yesterday – I could not hear them before, not until I worked with Kari on one of his techniques because – well. Because I was curious, and I enjoy working with fire, frankly. But once I heard them, it became very hard to ignore them, simply because of their newness, which makes it far easier to reach for them when I am startled or alarmed or distressed in some way.”

“Do all Firestarters hear fire this way?” Lukas asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Kir admitted, hesitating briefly before shrugging and continuing, “Currently, it is only myself and Rodri that hear things this way. It’s – technically, it’s a witch-power. Talent. I meant Talent.”

“We’re never going to get that right,” Anur grumbled.

“I doesn’t help that the few times I do remember, I’m not entirely certain that whoever I’m speaking
to will understand what I’m talking about,” Kir muttered back.

“I didn’t even think of that, fair point,” Anur chuckled.

“Oh,” Lukas said, voice quiet, and Kir reached out to rest a hand over his brother’s, watching him worriedly.

Lukas glanced over at him and smiled faintly, turning his hand over to curl his fingers around Kir’s as best he could. “It’s not – well. I’m finally realizing that there was never any chance you would have grown up here. That I wouldn’t have lost you somehow.”

Kir smiled faintly, because it echoed their mother’s statement yesterday so very well, and replied quietly, “No, Lukas. There was no chance.”

“Well,” Thorton said into the silence, voice rough before he cleared his throat and continued, “Well then, all there is to do is offer thanks the path things took brought you back. On a different note, how is the 62nd doing? It sounds like you are still stationed there?”

“Oh yes, never been transferred from them,” Kir replied, “And rather well – the only one left from your tenure is Sergeant Griech, at this point, though I suppose you might have known one of the veteran transfers at one point or another.”

“If I had to guess anyone of the unit to stay there and survive this long, he would be the one,” Thorton mused, shaking his head and drumming his fingers on the table idly, “How badly has the restructuring hit the north, then? And you mentioned conflict with Hardorn, is that what the mercenary companies we’ve heard rumors of are here for?”

Kir was glad to answer those questions. Working together to pool their knowledge and try to piece together what was going on in different sections of the country, to theorize what might happen next, was always valuable, and less filled with emotional scars to trip over. The fact that these three had very different perspectives from the people they usually spoke with only made the knowledge swap more useful.

They ended up staying long enough to join Silas for a basic luncheon before departing so the man could start preparing for business – apparently he usually opened mid-morning, but two days a week delayed until mid-afternoon. Undoubtedly that was part of the reason Lukas had chosen to track him down for their argument today in particular. Lukas and Kiara were still working on piecing together scraps of rumors and, more critically, how the various possibilities for Hardoren conflict would affect water-route trading, arm in arm and barely looking up to navigate the streets as they chatted.

Kir matched pace with Anur behind them and took the chance to breathe.

By the way Anur bumped shoulders with him, raising an eyebrow at him when Kir glanced his way, he noticed the easing tension in his shoulders. Shaking his head ruefully, he gave Anur a small smile and a shrug before returning his focus to taking a few moments for himself. Anur huffed in amusement before slipping his hands in his pockets and tilting his head back to take in the winter sunlight himself.

They would be fine.

A mark or so later he was alone in his childhood home for the first time this whole visit. Anur had gone off to work with the horses, Kir waving him off when he’d left as he’d been in the middle of poking through his pile of knotwork projects with Nana. Tamara had taken the boys for the day, apparently needing to inspect rigging on her boat and planning to put the boys to work. Kiara had
tagged along, having some questions or ideas to go over with Tamara, he hadn’t quite figured out if she was looking for advice or for someone to swap ideas with. Nana had been guiding him through some of her tricks for knotwork anchoring – akin to what had gone into making Kiara’s fancy vest – when Pavel had shown up and asked Irma to come with him to the fish-market, as apparently she was better at quick bargaining than him.

Kir had declined the invitation, because if they wanted to get any errands done quickly he had best stay well clear of them, and taken the chance to investigate something he had noticed early on in the visit and never quite gotten a chance to look at – the household shrine.

He’d seen the shrine – hard to miss it, it was in the main room of the house across from a westward facing window, and as most of their visits had been in the afternoon the whole thing had been bathed in light. But he hadn’t said anything and none of his family had pointed it out to him.

But a half-finished knotwork Sun in Glory that was clearly started by an amateur could only represent so many things.

So here he was, taking advantage of the time alone, to stare at the shrine and wonder if finishing the project would be appropriate without being invited to. He rather doubted it, household shrines were very personal, but it would be a nice symbol and his fingers practically itched with the desire to at least finish the thing, if not fix the mistakes his older eye could now see.

There was one sharp rap on the door and Kir startled, brow furrowing as he looked over but before he could debate answering it the latch undid and the door opened to let Elisia step in, his older sister not glancing at him until after she’d put her key safely away and re-latched the door behind her. When her gaze finally swept over the room and caught on him, her scarf did nothing to hide the tightening of her jaw and her hands shook briefly before clenching.

“Pavel took Irma with him to the fish market,” Kir said carefully, as that was the only truly unplanned excursion of the day and one she might not be aware of.

“I know,” Elisia said, letting out a shuddering breath, “I asked him to.”

“Ah,” Kir murmured, watching as Elisia jerkily removed her outerwear and hung everything on pegs before removing her boots for house slippers.

Eventually though, she ran out of things to place in their proper spots and turned to him again, lips thinning when she realized he was simply watching her before she strode forward, practically swayed when she halted and then turned to drop down onto one end of the small bench seat in front of the fireplace.

A cut-off, sharp motion waved him down to sit on the other end and Kir carefully did so, very aware of the just over handspan distance between their thighs, and turned his gaze to the banked coals. The silence near sang with tension.

“Bellamy has spoken to you?” Elisa said abruptly, Kir managing not to flinch at the sudden sound only by dint of long practice and he had no need for a mirror to know their expressions were cast in a similar neutrally forbidding form.

“Of your Talent? Yes. And of your training, which was a relief to hear about.”

“He said much the same,” Elisia replied curtly, and when Kir gave her a glance out of the corner of his eyes he nearly winced at the corded muscles in her neck, the clenched jaw, the pallor under her tan.
He returned his gaze to the coals and waited.

“I had a daughter,” Elisia finally said.

The wind had picked up a bit – the shutters were rattling every so often.

“I taught all my children to shield like I learned,” she continued, hands tightly clasped in her lap. “Sometimes, I would invite parents to leave their children with me a few days a week, so they could learn herb lore. Or I would take some specific apprentices onto my longer trade runs, when I still regularly sailed.”

“Eight children have survived to see these reforms because of that training,” Elisia said after a long moment.

“That is a triumph,” Kir said quietly.

“Not when it could have been nine,” she whispered, head bowing with grief intense enough he could feel it swelling against his shields.

“Ingrid was a heart-reader, like me,” Elisia said, voice shaking, “And her shielding wouldn’t hold. I tried – oh how I tried. I tried to explain it a hundred – a thousand – different ways. I asked some of the other children to try and explain, I had Pavel attempt it but they wouldn’t hold.”

Kir wanted to touch her hands, shaking despite their being white-knuckled in her lap, or rest a hand on her shoulder, but he didn’t quite dare. That wasn’t what she was here for.

“We tried – we tried so hard,” Elisia whispered, eyes shut now and clearly lost in the past, “But it wasn’t enough, people were noticing, and before we could arrange for her to be sent away, apprenticed elsewhere, anything, the priest pulled me aside after a service and told me my daughter was gone, a demon had taken her place.”

“A demon!” Elisia spat, horror jolting to fury, “A demon! How dare he, she was my daughter!”

Kir waited quietly while Elisia gasped for breath around tears, finally pulling a clean handkerchief from his sleeve and offering it to her. She glanced at it and noticeably hesitated before taking it with a sharp jerk.

“And you were trapped,” Kir said after another long silence, though this at least was less fraught, now that he had some idea of what had brought Elisia here after arranging for no witnesses.

“We were trapped,” Elisia agreed flatly, eyes slipping shut again, “Our whole family could not run, we’d never make it. If I vanished with her my boys would come under scrutiny and undoubtedly one would be burned in our place. Even if she vanished alone, one of her brothers would die in her stead. If she burned – if any of the children I taught were burned – their shields would shatter, and if the wrong priest was a witness, questions – damming questions – would be raised.”

“So I thanked the priest,” Elisia said, taking a ragged breath, “I thanked him, and went home to my family. I scolded my son for mischief, reminded Ingrid to finish her dream tea, and told my husband I wished to stay up and watch the stars. Before I joined him in bed, I checked on each of my children as I always did and woke half the street with my wailing.”

Elisia was truly sobbing by the end of the story and Kir couldn’t bear to simply watch any longer. Sliding closer, he carefully wrapped an arm around her shoulders, but was still surprised when Elisia leaned into him and wept.
“I was taught – I was taught the trick by Wes,” she whispered, “He said – that mercy was all you could hope for, some days. But Ingrid.”

One last sob, and Elisia pulled away, squaring her shoulders and Kir easily removed his arm, though he didn’t move back to the other end of the bench. Her eyes were still glittering, but she actually looked at him this time, saying nothing.

“Claiming a death to be a mercy is always a poor salve,” he finally said, counting again those fifteen (seventeen) deaths weight on his heart. But his sins weren’t what Elisia needed to hear – she already knew them. Meeting his sister’s gaze, he asked quietly, “Would you tell me about her?”

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Anur paused in haltering Aelius, shaking himself free of his momentary daze when Aelius ducked his head into the halter himself, focusing on the task at hand and worriedly prodding at Kir’s mental presence because – he wasn’t distressed, not truly. But he was sad.

:I’m fine, Anur,: Kir murmured back, continuing at Anur’s dubious prodding with more than a little exasperation, :Anur. I am fine. If you wouldn’t mind stalling on coming back to the house, I would appreciate it. Pavel and Irma are at the fish-market last I heard,: Exchanging one last dubious look with Aelius, Anur sent back agreement and gave Aelius a quick rubdown before returning him to his stall next to Riva and heading off. At least finding Pavel and Irma would be relatively simple. Kari had been planning to follow the man and give a more precise definition of fresh fish for his bargain with Devin and Ivan.

Sure enough, when he asked Kari for his location, he provided directions that brought him to the fishmonger’s dock, and rather quickly to Irma and Pavel’s side. Irma was the one dickering, Pavel standing back and watching the entire interaction. It wasn’t particularly noticeable unless one was looking for it, but his eyes were flicking in a not quite random pattern – probably responding to Kari’s occasional statements, if the way his glances followed the tabby-cat wandering the market and dodging passerby was any indication.

“Decided to leave bargaining to an expert today?” Anur asked dryly, Pavel wincing a bit. As he well should; Pavel was a fisherman, if there was anyone who would be an expert at bargaining in a fish market it would be him, Irma’s apparent glee at the whole bargaining process aside.

“Ah. It should not be a bad conversation, and it is needed,” Pavel temporized, Anur snorting and shaking his head, settling in to stand next to the man after returning Irma’s wave of greeting.

“Needed, I will grant,” he allowed, “I’ll withhold judgment on bad for now.”

Irma apparently finalized her deal, slapping palms with the fishmonger and exchanging cheerful banter as the fish were wrapped and coin was exchanged. They were undoubtedly long acquaintances and by tone, old friends. Dressed fish successfully purchased, Irma turned to the two of them, raising an eyebrow imperiously before handing the fish to Pavel and hooking her arm through Anur’s, turning them both back towards the main thoroughfare.

“Have we given you long enough for whatever you plotted?” Irma asked over her shoulder, Pavel sighing heavily.

“I was properly sneaky, once,” the man said woefully. “You wouldn’t know it now, but I truly was.”

“Try it on someone who didn’t help you cut your eyeteeth on selling half-true stories,” Irma scoffed, poking Anur in the side and saying, “Well? Kir is alright?”
“He’s fine,” Anur agreed, wondering exactly how unsubtle they had been – or how much news the Dineshes had exchanged in the brief moments he and Kir weren’t around to witness the information swap – for Irma to so frankly reference his ability to check on Kir from a distance. “A little annoyed at my constant fretting, even, which is always a good sign.”

“At least someone frets over him,” Irma snorted, “It is a good thing my hair’s been grey for decades, your stories would have bleached any black I had left.”

“Oh please, you were born old,” Pavel scoffed, yelping when Irma swiftly turned to kick him in the shin.

“You deserved that,” Anur said blandly.

“For my sins,” Pavel grumbled, hobbling exaggeratedly for a few steps before giving it up and half-jogging to catch up with them at the Dinesh’s door. Irma unlocked the door and eased it open, glancing in and raising an eyebrow at whatever she saw before shrugging and shoving the door all the way open. Anur immediately ran his eyes over Kir, tallying any signs of distress and ignoring the way Kir was rolling his eyes and smiling fondly to register the faint tightness at the corner of his eyes and the way his shoulders were a little too deliberately slouched for him to be truly relaxed. But those signs aside – and the fact that Kir’s mug of tea wasn’t actively steaming, because he never let his tea go below steaming if he could help it – Anur would accept Pavel’s claim that this conversation hadn’t been a bad one.

By Pavel’s immediate beeline to his wife’s side after setting the fish in the kitchen, he had come to a similar conclusion, resting his hands on her shoulders and murmuring lowly when she turned to him, leaning into his side and ignoring the mug in her own hands. Jerking her head toward the kitchen, Irma herded both of them into the room, a little cramped with three adults, but it got them out of line of sight of Pavel and Elisia, which was really all the actual privacy they could offer them without leaving entirely and apparently Irma didn’t think that was necessary.

“No scorch marks and nothing was broken, I’ll take that as a sign the conversation went as well as could be expected?” Irma murmured, giving a relieved sigh when Kir nodded and hugging him fiercely.

“Thank you, dear one,” she said quietly.

Anur pointedly didn’t bring up the way Kir’s free hand shook slightly before stilling as he returned her hug, tucking his chin to rest his cheek on his grandmother’s hair. Instead, he stole Kir’s mug of tea and took an experimental sip, because it was lukewarm enough for his preferences and a blend he didn’t recognize the smell of besides – eh. Too bitter for his taste, but he would take it.

“Right then,” Irma said shakily, pulling back and needlessly adjusting Kir’s collar for a moment before clapping her hands together and continuing briskly, “Right then. You two will help me with dinner, yes?”

“Oh you two would have been terrible to manage as children,” Irma muttered.

“I was a perfectly well-behaved child,” Anur sniffed, Kir and Irma both snorting at that and Kir shot him a sly glance that immediately put Anur on alert.

“Oh so the story of a Justicar startling you into falling into a muddy pond chasing frogs to slip in your sister’s bed was about some other Bellamy?”
“Who told you about – Markov!” Anur hissed, eyes narrowing as he heard Aelius cackling in his mind. Of course Markov had told that story –

:Oh no Chosen, I told that story, though to give Markov credit he is the reason I called myself a Justicar in it’s retelling,: Aelius admitted through chuckles.

:I’ll get you back, see if I don’t!: 

Irma, at least, was laughing hard enough that she wouldn’t have noticed the brief exchange of glares and grins that took place in the course of that conversation. Though even if she had, it probably wouldn’t matter. Apparently Tamara was well aware Kir had mindspeech, Kiara had been told of their odd joint Voice manifestation induced bond, and if Lukas and Irma’s actions were any indication they had their own suspicions as to their connection.

It was a little strange, to not have to worry about giving away their Talents.

It made the whole trip feel far more like a true visit home.

Dinner that evening was almost bewilderingly free of tension – there were moments of awkwardness, moments where people exchanged worried glances and prepared to distract as necessary, but for all their worry, the first gathering with truly the entirety of the Dinesh family went well. Elisia and Kir’s conversation – whatever it had been about – had truly helped. Had truly meant something.

Anur was eyeing Devin and Ivan as the meal wound down, and he wasn’t the only one. Their whispering and cut off mutters not even remotely subtle, even when they managed to time their discussions up with some louder exchange at a different part of the table.

Irma was the one to finally say something though, raising her voice slightly to cut across the conversations and say pointedly, “Something to say, boys?”

Devin looked cornered, glancing to his parents who raised an eyebrow each at him, while Ivan instead pounced on the chance to ask his father, “You got the extra fish, right?”

“You mean I got the extra fish, and I cooked the extra fish, with your uncles’ help, because your father insisted we needed more fish than we actually did for ourselves, and kept insisting, as if I don’t know the proper quantities of fish to buy for our dinners!” Irma retorted tartly, arms crossing and raising an eyebrow at her great-grandchildren, both of which turned their pleading gazes to Kir this time.

Kir just stared back at them blankly, not understanding what they were asking and Anur huffed a laugh, leaning over to murmur, “Kari, Kir, they’re trying to mutely ask about Kari.”

“Oh,” Kir said blankly, blinking and Anur snickered when he could practically see Kir trying to figure out what his nephews were actually asking, though Kir finally shook his head and tried, “Ah – it is fine? Actually, I still don’t understand the question. What’s the question?”

“You are useless,” Devin groaned, head thumping against the table and Elisia snorted, carrying on as if she hadn’t done anything when most of the table shot her a glance.

“Who, or what, is Kari?” Irma asked, her other eyebrow rising to match and she threw her hands up in exasperation when the entire table exchanged glances, “Oh, what, I am the only one who doesn’t know who this mysterious person is?”

Kir was shooting Elisia a quizzical look, and she didn’t look up from stirring honey into her tea but
pointed at her husband nonetheless.

“It seems so,” Kir said, huffing a laugh and turning to his grandmother, “Apologies, Nana. Kari accompanied us as – well. As back-up, essentially, in case this visit went badly.”

“This does not answer my question!” Irma shot back, standing and propping her hands on her hips. “Right, I am getting more water, and by the time I get back I expect an actual helpful ans – wer.”

Irma had frozen in the entryway to the kitchen, and promptly backed back out and turned on her heel, hissing, “There is a Firecat in our kitchen!”

“That’s Kari!” Ivan said brightly.

:*This fish is excellent, by the way. I love the preserved lemons.*: Kari broadcast.

Kir promptly dissolved into laughter, the rest of the table not far behind. Anur managed recover first, subsiding to chuckles and checking on Irma. The woman was watching her family with glittering eyes, and when she caught his gaze, her smile, beaming though it was, was distinctly watery. He rested a hand between Kir’s shoulder blades, his brother still shaking with laughter, and felt his own eyes sting as he smiled back.

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Kir finished drying the last dish and set it aside, hearing a rap of knuckles on the counter and looking over to see Elisia, bundled up to head out soon. Devin and Ivan were by the door pulling on their own coats and scarves, and Pavel was very carefully focusing only on his sons.

Elisia let out a shaky breath, before holding out her hands and Kir caught them in his own, looking up slightly to meet his sister’s eyes and waiting.

She smiled, a small, bitter thing, but a smile still, and said quietly, “I do not know that I can ever call you loved, call you brother, but you are family, still. Perhaps one day I can at least call you friend.”

“Perhaps,” he echoed, returning the smile because she was right. There was too much, on all sides, for them to slip straight back into being siblings again. The fact that Elisia was the only one visibly struggling with this, that of his three blood-siblings only she was seeing the changes he’d undergone as he grew and how they turned him into a stranger wearing her brother’s face, was ridiculous. Was miraculous.

Being able to speak with her, to meet her eyes and share a smile, was more than he had ever hoped for.

“You should finish it, before you go,” she murmured, squeezing his hands before letting go, slipping them into her sleeves. At his quizzical glance, she raised an eyebrow and looked over her shoulder at the shrine they could just see the edge of.

“Ah,” he said, quickly catching her meaning but hesitating still, shooting her a worried look and asking quietly, “You are certain?”

“You are not the same person who started it,” she offered quietly, “You could not be. You are not even someone I could have imagined that boy turning into. But that doesn’t change that you once started something that some of this family has desperately clung to for nearly thirty years, and you should damn well finish it.”

Elisia’s last words were accompanied by a stern glare, and he recognized that look from his
childhood, biting back a laugh and simply bowing his head, saying, “All right, Elisia, you’ve convinced me.”

She sniffed imperiously, and turned on her heel, sweeping out of the house with her children ushered in front of her. Pavel walked over when they passed, offering his hand and Kir returned his firm shake.

“Thank you, for listening to her,” the man said quietly, “She has – never truly spoken of it, before.”

“She is unsure if you know,” Kir murmured back.

Pavel huffed a laugh, shaking his head as he slipped his hands in his pockets, a wry, heartbroken smile on his face as he said, “You Dineshes are not the amazing liars you think you are. Of course I know. But she has taken comfort in my seeming ignorance. Thank you regardless, Kir, and it was a true pleasure to get to know you.”

“You as well, Pavel,” he replied, watching the man leave with a wave to the rest of the family and letting himself briefly wonder at his story. Perhaps someday, over the years, he would be able to find out.

Sunlord, that such a thing was even an option.

“Seems things have at least gotten better on that front,” Lukas commented, Kir meeting his brother’s eyes and smiling faintly, nodding but not saying anything further.

“You always were good about keeping sibling secrets behind your teeth,” his brother murmured, Lukas stepping forward and hugging him fiercely, Kir returning it and burying his face in Lukas’ shoulder. He warmed Lukas’ sweater and coat while he was at it, some of the tension Lukas carried easing with the heat and his older brother shook his head, saying fondly, “Another person to fuss over me, I see.”

“As if you are not just as bad,” he scoffed, Lukas’ sun-blessed steel necklace singing in his ears and perhaps he could use it as a base for some sort of warming spell that Lukas could activate on bad days… he would ask Jaina and Lumira, they were the main spell-crafters on Anika’s spear, they would have a better idea than him if such a thing was even possible.

“Kiara is still going to bring me to Sunhame sometime,” Lukas said quietly, “I look forward to seeing it, and seeing you there. We will probably wait until spring is well underway, I have a mastery project to supervise and a large barge contract to finish a moon before the equinox. Letters to Sunhame will reach you fastest?”

“Yes,” Kir murmured, hesitating before extending an offer Kari had given last night, “If Kari is not busy – he is the relay, when a letter for me reaches Sunhame he Jumps it to me – he has offered to Jump my replies straight to Kiara’s home, and if you two are there when he arrives he will gladly wait for a reply barring emergencies, but otherwise you will simply receive my replies as soon as I have written them.”

“Every day faster helps, that would be wonderful, pass on my thanks to the Honorable Kari,” Lukas said, pulling back and shaking his head ruefully, “What a world we live in, Kir. What a time. I need to go to the yard tomorrow, or I would be here at breakfast to see you off. But I am so happy to have seen you again, little brother, and to have learned at least something of the years we have lost, and I will see you again. I will write to you often enough you are sick of it, and that is a promise!”

“Impossible,” Kir promised.
“Challenge accepted,” Lukas replied smugly, laughing when Kir rolled his eyes and hugging him one more time. “Good night, little brother. Write us after Midwinter at the latest, yes? And travel safe.”

“We'll do our best,” Kir chuckled, reluctantly letting Lukas go and returning his wave when he ducked out the door after calling farewells to the others. Everyone else had also been getting ready for them to depart, so he managed to pull his coat on before saying the more temporary farewells.

Tamara and Nana both hugged him fiercely, Tamara meeting his gaze and saying with the same stern tone Elisia had just put on, “You will be coming to breakfast tomorrow, and we’ll say goodbye then.”

“Of course, ma,” he said quietly, returning her smile.

His grandmother’s hug ended with tears on her part, and he didn’t doubt his own eyes were glittering, but the three of them managed to get out the door before he actually started crying. Kari as a tabby-cat twining himself between their feet as they walked. Kiara had hooked her arms through theirs, standing between them, and was chattering about possible dates for her to bring Lukas to Sunhame, speculating on what sort of contracts she might be able to get out of people on those treks—all sorts of things, but all of them involved them seeing each other again.

His vision was decidedly blurry by the time they made it back to Kiara’s home, but he managed to get through wishing his sister a good night and preparing for bed and sitting up with Anur, backs against warm bricks again and Kari sprawled across their laps while tears finally fell. Breath hitching in quiet sobs, he buried his face in Anur’s chest and let himself weep, Kari’s rumbling purr starting up again as the Cat pressed closer.

There was a creak of wood and a thump when Kiara jumped down from her bunk, hauling a knitted blanket with her as she crawled over to his other side and settled against him, head resting on his shoulder and arms hooked around his waist. The fact that she was there—the fact that his sister, his little sister, he had a little sister and she was here and he would see her again—really only made the tears fall faster.

Kiara sniffling didn’t help.

Eventually, of course, the three of them fell asleep, and when Kir woke up at his usual mark before dawn his eyes burned and his head ached, but he felt properly rested for the first time in weeks. Anur was, as usual, a strange tangle of limbs and blankets—one of which was Kiara’s—and mostly on top of him, while Kiara had ended up curled against the wall with her arms wrapped firmly around Kari, face buried in his fur.

“Cat stealer,” Anur muttered, eyes cracking open, and Kiara mumbled in her sleep before her own eyes opened and she lifted her head to glare at Anur over Kir’s head.

“Blanket hog!” she accused, promptly settling back against Kari’s fur and closing her eyes, to all appearances falling straight back asleep. Kir huffed a laugh and poked Anur in the ribs to keep him awake, mentally asking, :So, can you Fetch objects aside from line of sight without it being an emergency?:

:Depends. What am I Fetching?: Anur asked.

:If possible, that half-finished knotwork Sun in Glory my family has hanging in their personal shrine,: Kir replied cautiously.
Anur stilled, then twisting around to wrap his arms around him tightly, saying intently, *That, I can manage, Kir.*

Anur’s mind quieted as he focused, and Kir only barely managed not to jump when the Sun in Glory in question dropped onto his chest with a light thunk. Exhaling shakily, Kir carefully shifted so he was sitting upright, leaning against the rungs of Kiara’s bunk, and picked up the faded and slightly tattered piece. Anur ended up twisting until he was sprawled across Kir’s legs and almost nose-to-nose with Kari before slipping back into his own doze, and Kir gave him a fond glance before turning his focus to the knotwork project in front of him.

It took a few moments to figure out what pattern he had been attempting, and how to continue it without having to unravel the mistakes, but once he had that settled sinking into the calming pattern of strings and murmured prayers was as easy as breathing.

The sun had properly risen by the time the other two were awake and he had finished the Sun in Glory. Kiara grumbled her way through a large mug of tea while they packed the few things that had escaped their saddlebags, Kari sitting at her side and receiving frequent scratches behind the ears while they waited, much to his approval.

Finally they were walking out the door, Kari slipping off in tabby-cat form to meet them there, no longer seeing a need to dog their steps. Kiara hooked her arm through Kir’s again and hummed quietly for a moment before saying, “I think this went very well.”

“Better than I could have ever hoped,” Kir admitted, smiling at her, “Thank you, Kiara, for ensuring this happened.”

She squeezed his arm briefly, but didn’t reply. Her smile said enough.

They were lingering over tea after a simple breakfast together, waiting for Devin and Ivan to show up to say goodbye, when Kir finally took a steadying breath and pulled the Sun in Glory out of his pocket, offering it to Nana. She took it and stared at it blankly for a long moment, before twisting in her seat to look at the shrine and recognize that yes, the half-finished one that had been there was missing, a hand clapping over her mouth as she gasped for breath and promptly burst into tears. Kir hauled his chair closer to hers and hugged her fiercely, Nana cradling the finished emblem in her hands and finally starting to laugh through her tears.

“Grandson,” she murmured, pushing him back so she could meet his eyes and rest a hand on the side of his face, “Oh grandson I am so happy you came home.”

Tamara reached across the table and grabbed his hand tightly, a faint smile on her face and a suspicious shininess in her eyes. Two rapid sets of knocks prefaced Devin and Ivan sticking their heads in, Devin spotting their Nana’s tears and promptly offering, “We can go find something to do for a while and come back.”

Anur huffed a laugh and said, “No, you two had best come in. We do actually have to leave soon if we’re going to keep schedule. And we can’t not keep schedule, unfortunately. Jaina would murder us in our sleep.”

“Also our list of things to accomplish before Midwinter has only gotten longer,” Kir grumbled, giving his mother’s hand one last squeeze before letting go of her and tightening his hold on Irma before pulling back from her as well.

“You had better write,” his mother said sternly, all of them rising to their feet.
“I will,” he promised.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Anur tacked on, Kiara snickering, undoubtedly remembering their stories of Anur’s rather pathetic attempts at letters to his own family.

There was one last round of farewells before they ducked out the door, Devin and Ivan practically bouncing as they followed the three of them to the stables. The stablemaster was walking out when they arrived and raised a hand in greeting, but didn’t say anything as he headed into the inn. Just as well, they were having to pile Devin and Ivan’s arms with things just to keep them from bounding through the barn and startling some of the horses.

A blue-eyed tabby Cat was sitting at Kiara’s feet while they groomed and saddled their horses, Devin, as could almost be expected, peppering them both with questions about said horses. Kir fielded most of them and kept Devin focused on Riva and generic horsemanship, allowing Anur to skate by without any direct lies. They had managed fairly well on that front this trip, and he’d rather keep that pattern.

Finally, there weren’t any more tasks to do, and he was practically tackled by his nephews, his breath hitching as he rested his hands on their shoulders.

“It was very good to meet you both,” he said quietly, both boys pulling back and smiling at him. Ivan darted over to Anur and gave him a hug, Devin quickly following and Kiara laughed, stepping forward to grab him herself.

“You came home,” she murmured, Kir squeezing her tightly. “You came home, Kir, it actually happened.”

“It did,” he replied quietly, “Just as you promised. I’ll see you later, Kiara.”

“You can count on it,” she vowed, grinning as she pulled back and moved on to give Anur his farewell. The two of them moved into the stableyard, gave their tack one last check and swung up, Kari’s tabby-shell leaping up to settle behind Anur.

“Safe travels!” Kiara called, Kir giving her one last wave over his shoulder before they rounded a corner and were out of sight, and heading out of town.

“Well, overall that was far less dramatic than we feared,” Anur said brightly, “Maybe a sign for the whole Midwinter season!”

Kir groaned, burying his face in one hand.

“Anur why would you say that?”

Chapter End Notes

I can tell you right now what Kir's first post-Midwinter letter to the family is going to open with.

"Dear Family. Anur cursed us on the way out of town..."

Got most of the next chapter sketched out already actually, so I'll see you all again in May!
Midwinter Missives

Chapter Notes

Okay - so I know I said there would be a few more chapters covering Midwinter and then we'd be moving on, but Anur seriously CURSED THEM and I am now in the middle of a document I am for the moment calling "Midwinter - Take 13". It's gone through enough iterations I'm honestly not comfortable posting it without it being finished, it's changed so frequently and so dramatically each time.

So instead, here's a - well, basically a filler/wrap up chapter for the family arc so it's not quite so abrupt a transition and I'll leave you all to theorize wildly about what exactly Midwinter - Take Vkandis Only Knows ends up becoming.

Damn it Anur.

Midwinter had always been a hard holiday.

All right. To be fair, High Holy Days had always been hard. It was honestly bizarre to see how much tension had been missing this Midwinter, because Kiara had known Kir’s absence had affected the family. Had impacted everyone in ways she had no way of recognizing, because she had grown up with him gone. But of all the things to change with Kir’s return, with Kir’s existence, she hadn’t expected High Holy Days to get easier. Well, not that much easier.

It was heartbreaking.

A double-set of raps on her door set her eyes to rolling and she opened it, staring down at her nephews and saying, “No, Kari hasn’t arrived yet. Why are you so convinced two days past Midwinter is the day? This is the third time you’ve stopped by!”

“Midwinter was on a Solsday this year,” Devin replied, coming in at her gesture, “And the Honorable Kari said our fish and story exchange would be scheduled for Second-Days, though he might have to take the fish and run if there was an emergency in progress, and if he’s already here, today being letter-delivery day would make sense! And we’re right, because Kari just finished with his story and took the fish and said he’d be delivering letters next! He just wanted to finish his fish, he gave the story first this time.”

“He said something about lording it over someone named Hansa too,” Ivan shrugged, “Is Lukas coming here?”

“I think Lukas is at Nana’s place,” Kiara replied, only managing to get a few steps away from her door when another set of raps pulled her back. This time she expected Lukas, but was surprised – and a little alarmed – to see both Ma and Nana behind him.

Greetings exchanged, Kiara waved them all in and offered hospitality, very pointedly not including Lukas until last. Her brother at least winced, as well he should, because they had a deal not to spring parental visits on one another without warning!

“Honored Kari stopped by to say he would be delivering a letter shortly, and that this letter was to
the collective,” Irma said, taking Lukas’ usual chair and rubbing her hands together briskly, “We won’t do this every time, Kiara, just – just this first. The others we can wait for a family dinner or for you to pass them on.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Kiara replied dryly, Ma huffing a laugh because she at least knew Kiara was right.

It would take at least a few of these letters before any of them were willing to take their coming as given. Kiara rather doubted anyone would end up taking them for granted, except perhaps Devin and Ivan. They were young enough – Ivan especially – to forget in all but the most abstract way what living under the old regime was like, missing uncle no one ever spoke of and all.

“So what story did you ask Kari for this time?” Lukas prompted.

“Devin made a list of questions about Vanya Flamesinger, so we asked for that one,” Ivan said, shrugging, “We know it, but his version was different enough to keep it interesting. Also Devin got to ask his detail questions.”

“And Kari laughed when we asked, and said how timely, so there’s that,” Devin agreed, grinning at their intrigued glances and continuing, “He deferred one of my detail questions even because apparently the letter should explain or at least sort of answer it!”

“That – is rather worrying, actually,” Tamara murmured, brow furrowing as she glanced Lukas’ way – no, Kiara realized quickly, as she glanced Lukas’ arrowhead’s way. “What question was deferred?”

“If the music Vanya Flamesinger used to call fire was at all related to the way Uncle Kir hears fire, and if so how and if unknown what sort of testing methods could be used to get an answer,” Devin replied promptly, Ivan shaking his head at his older brother.

“You really are lucky one follow-up per question was included,” he muttered.

Devin scoffed, “Please, luck had nothing to do with it, that was negotiated.”

“Whatever discovery was made could have happened less than dramatically,” Lukas said, even though he sounded extremely dubious, and rightly so.

Ma sighed heavily, exchanging a heavy and oddly amused look with Nana before saying, “Only one thing for it then. Time to start taking bets.”

“Three meals of dishes on whatever discovery being entirely accidental,” Irma fired off.

Ma scoffed, crossing her arms and saying disdainfully, “Please, that is a given. Four net-mendings on a student being in the middle of it.”

“Three button sets on this Flamesinger-fire connection being the least of it,” Lukas offered, Kiara about to make her own offer when Kari appeared on her table, a rather thick envelope under one paw, and his blue eyes gleamed, the Cat taking in the scene.

:Ah. Bets. Any others to add before I pass this letter off?:

“No,” Kiara said cheerfully, snagging the letter out from under Lukas’ grasp and saying, “Ah! You can’t read it Lukas, you made a bet that might bias you! Boys, either of you making a bet?”

“Ma says gambling is recklessly stupid and if she finds out we did it without rigging the game first
she’ll ground us, and we’re still grounded from the whole sneaking off to meet you thing,” Devin replied, “Besides, Uncle Lukas took my bet.”

“I was going to bet on there being little to no drama at all, but that letter looks way too long for that to be a good idea,” Ivan admitted.

Every Dinesh scoffed, Tamara patting her youngest grandson’s head and saying wryly, “Oh Ivan. You are so very young. Never bet on the drama-free option, not if a Dinesh is involved.”

Kiara, meanwhile, had unfolded the letter, recognizing the first hand as Kir’s and snickering at his opening lines, clearing her throat before starting to read.

“Dear family,” she recited, “Regardless of what Anur attempts to claim later on, he cursed us. I would like that stated for the record. We were cursed. We made good time back to Sunhame, nothing dramatic en route, but it was all an attempt to lull us into a false sense of security…”

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