CANIS CANEM

by Azzy Darling

Summary

When the leader of the Dark Brotherhood chapter in Dawnstar is murdered under strange circumstances, it leaves the chapter in the hands of John Shepard. He is young and inexperienced, and hardly a candidate to fill the vacuum of power. The Nightmother conveys through the listener, a strange request; to kill an ally and recruit a man they never heard of.

Notes

First off I'd like to warn everyone that this is NOT betaed, so the my two go-to girls are both tied down by RL, and I figured it had been so long since I posted anything that I really wanted this out there. So all mistakes, grammar fuck ups and what not are mine. But at the end of the day, it's just fanfiction.

I had planned on a ending with everyone dead in piles, but at the last moment I decided against it, sometimes I just have to write happy stuff. I had to make up for my MEBB story, so this story has both smut and a happy end - you're welcome.

Masquerading as a man with a reason
My charade is the event of the season
And if I claim to be a wise man,
Well, it surely means that I don't know

-Kansas

John had been nothing but a big kid when the world thrust him into this position, he had seen twenty winters by now, and he had killed more men and women than he could count. But he did not know the first thing about leadership. He had been Andersons prodigy that was his claim to the title, not because he was the best, not because he was their senior – but because he was Andersons son.

He had been an orphan just ten years ago, living day by day stealing what he could, and had never taken up a blade against another man before Anderson had taken him under his wing. John had done what Anderson had asked of him, he had basked in the attention and affection of his new family. But now Anderson was dead, he had been betrayed and was dead. John was not sure how, but he was sure it was the case, he knew it in his bones. Anderson was too good at what he did – the best – there was no way some uppity Markath noble had gotten the drop on him.

John fussed over the papers that Anderson had left behind, they were maps and notes, but nothing on the botched assassination. With a frustrated roar, John pushed the papers from the table.

“John?” A soft voice said behind him, John sighed and slumped in over the table in defeat. “What is it Vakarian?”

“The night mother spoke.” He said leaning casually against the doorframe, “And John – I think you need a break.”

“Yeah.” John grumbled, running a hand over his short cropped hair. He stood up straight and rolled his shoulders, “What did the night mother say?”

“No idea, you’d have to ask the Listener.” Vakarian smiled, “She is waiting for us.”

John shook his head slightly amused and walked after Vakarian out of Andersons study.

Vega, Kasumi, Krios and Zaeed was waiting. Liara stood next to the coffin with the night mother inside also waiting patiently. “Good.” She smiled as Vakarian and John came into the main hall. “The night mother chose to answer a rather strange request, and this is why I thought we all had to know.” She said.

“Strange how?”

“A young man whom just arrived to Dawnstar, he performed the dark sacrament.” Liara said, shifting her stance, making sure they were all listening. “The strange part is that the night mother does not give me a name, she said that he is a puzzle piece. To take his contract and his coin.” Liara looked straight at John, “And to initiate him.”

“What?” John sputtered, “That is preposterous! You must have heard wrong!”

Liara shook her head, “When have I ever.”

Krios crossed his arms over his chest, “that would be a first.”

“But..” John looked around at the others, “That is irregular, and –“

“The night mother has spoken John, who are you to go against her wish?” Liara’s voice was sharp
and loud.

“By Sithis, I am telling you this is wrong.” John shook his head.

“You didn’t earn your place in our ranks.” Kasumi muttered, “Or your title.”

John just stared at her, because he knew she was right. “Very well, you take this one Kasumi.” He nodded, “Seek out the young man whom just arrived in Dawnstar, and hear him out.”

He turned to Krios, “You pick up the contract of Darkwater Crossing, bring him to the cabin.” He pointed at Zaeed, “And you pick up the Rorikstead contract, bring her to the cabin.” He looked up at Vakarian, “And you pick up the Windhelm contract and bring him to the cabin.”

“And what will you be doing?” Vega asked with a huff.

“You and I will grab the young man when Kasumi reported back.” John stated.

“Why do you need me for that?” Vega asked angrily, “I’m sure you can overpower that whelp on your own.”

“Very well, I will do it on my own.” Shepard growled.

“I can hold your hand if you want me to.” Vega said with a grin.

John flushed with anger and shame, his cheeks and ears burning. “I’ll manage.”

“Alright.” Vega said with a laugh as he turned his back to John and walked back to the forge.

John’s fists was so tightly clinched that his nails drew blood. “So everyone knows what to do. Do it.”

“John,” Liara said softly, reaching out to him. As John spun around and left the main chamber, Liara followed. “Don’t let him get to you, John.”

John just huffed.

“This is exactly why he doesn’t see you as a leader of the dark brotherhood in Dawnstar, you are acting like a child.” Liara said, closing the door after her.

John turned and watched her in the dim light from the few candles lit, but remained silent, his gaze saying what his mouth refused to.

“Look,” Liara said softly, her smile was sad as she placed her hands on Shepard’s shoulders. “I know you seek his approval, but maybe you shouldn’t.”

“I know.” John croaked out, unable to look Liara in the eyes. “Sithis cursed, I don’t even like him.”

“Power is about as powerful an aphrodisiac as murder.” Liara said as she squeezed John’s shoulders. “And you are just not very experienced.”

“You are right, Liara.” John said in a near whisper, “I should not let him see my weakness.”

“Exactly.” Liara smiled.

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“I don’t like this.” Kasumi said as she walked into Andersons study, finding John bend over maps and notes as always.

John turned around and smiled a little guarded smile at Kasumi, “What is wrong?”

“The contract is for Frorkmar Banner-Torn.” Kasumi said with a somber tone, “pretty high risk.”

“You can do that.” John said confused, trying to read Kasumi’s concern on her face. “You took out more important men than him.”

“True.” Kasumi said, “But he is also the main instigator of the truce here in Dawnstar, without Banner-Torn – it could mean bad tidings for us.”

John looked down at his boots, how had he forgotten that? Sithis! He was so confused, so much information, liaisons and contracts to honor.

“John!” Kasumi sighed, “You have to get your head in the game.”

“I know.” John sighed, “Forgive me, there is just so many things I have to remember.”

“Maybe you should lead us, and not have your nose buried in these maps and scrolls.” Kasumi said, hands on her hip.

John looked up at her with a frown, “Not you too.”

“I see where the distrust comes from, that is all. We need you to lead us, not to blindly pursue a personal vendetta. We all want to see Andersons murder dead, but we also have to survive as the brotherhood.” She pulled down her hood and relaxed a little, “Besides, Sithis be willing, he or she is already dead.”

“I doubt it.” John muttered. “So you are telling me that I should put more faith in a mummified corpse, than in the man whom we all called father, and whom saved us all in his own way.”

“No – I didn’t mean that.”

“Then what do you mean?” John hissed, he gestured out over the papers on the table, “I am trying to figure out how some snotnosed upper class moron with a dagger got the best of Anderson. I refuse to believe that is the truth, he would never let that happen.”

“Maybe he got sloppy?” Kasumi sighed, “Look all I am saying is, leave it be for a while. And focus on the tasks at hand.”

John looked over his papers, and then at Kasumi, “Did you accept the contract?”

“I did.” Kasumi said, “The man’s name is Kaidan, and he is located at the Windpeak Inn.” She fiddled with the hem of her hood, “I just don’t like it, why would the night mother ask for him? I don’t trust it.”

“Me neither.” John said in all honesty. “But the night mother has spoken.” He pushed off the table and walked over to a cabinet to get his bow and dagger, “I am going to get him as soon as it get’s dark, I assume you already bribed Thoring.”

“Of course.” Kasumi chuckled, “The cellar door is open, and he is relocated to the northern most room.”

“Great.” John swung the bow over his back, and pulled up his hood as he walked past Kasumi.
John arrived at the room and watched the man sleep in the dark. He silently grabbed a jug off the table and silently walked over to the bed. He studied the young man for a moment, he was about his own age and was trying to grow a beard. He didn’t look like a Nord though. John raised the jug and wacked sleeping Kaidan over the head with it, and pulled the sack over his head. He gently lifted him off the bed, and carried him out the door, around the corner and down the stairs and out the cellar door. He tossed Kaidan over his horse and got up behind him. With one hand on the back of the unconscious man, he spurred the horse to run.

He only saw few guards on his wild ride out of the settlement, they ignored him and figured that whomever he had captured most likely deserved it somehow.

Once there he got off his horse and greeted Krios who was the last to get his contract in place. “Brother.” Krios said with a nod. “Brother,” John answered.

“Is the initiate ready?”

“Almost.” John looked over at the three kneeling people, and back at Krios, “He has no weapons, would you look in the chest if we have more?”

“Absolutely.”

John went outside to gently get Kaidan off the horse. He carried him inside and propped him up on the chair in the middle of the room. Krios came and placed a decent looking dagger at his feet. “See you back home?” Krios asked.

“Soon, brother.” John smiled.

John crawled on top some shelves and sat waiting for Kaidan to wake. He wondered why the night mother had made this request, he had to agree with Kasumi – he didn’t like it, not one bit. This was a bad omen. Kaidan was a Storm Crow, John knew it in his gut.

Kaidan stirred after a while, and pulled off the sack, gasping as he saw the three people lined up.

“Good morning.” John said softly, “You are finally awake.”

Kaidan turned to look up at John, rubbing the bump on his head. “Who are you?”

“I’m John.” John said, “Before you there are three captives, one of them have a contract for their life. It’s up to you to figure out who it is, and carry out the deed, at your feet you will find a dagger at your disposal.”

“What? No!” Kaidan got up from the chair.

“The cabin is locked,” John dangled the key from a long slender finger. “A life for a life, brother.”

Kaidan stared at John in the semi light, “The Dark brotherhood? We have a deal, we have a sodding contract!”

“I know.” John said, “But we noticed you.” He smiled under his scarf.

“Is this a test?”

“No brother, it’s an initiation.” John said, gesturing towards the three captives, “Listen to them, and decide which one would have a contract on their life.”
Kaidan sighed but turned from John and walked towards the three captives. John sat and watched as Kaidan interrogated all three, and then came back to John’s corner. “All of them?” Kaidan asked.

“That is up to you.” John said calmly.

Kaidan bent down to take the dagger in his hand, he weighed it and tested the grip. “This is a decent dagger.” He said softly.

“Of course, killing for a contract is an art form, and you can’t play the lute with a fork either.” John chuckled.

Kaidan surprisingly joined his chuckle, but it might have been the absurdity of it all. “The woman.” He said looking up at John.


“You’re no help.”

“I am not supposed to be, this is your initiation, not mine.” John said, and as much as his gut told him that Kaidan was an omen of ill tidings, he had to admit he liked his zest.

Kaidan hesituated and then walked behind the panic-stricken captives and stabbed the woman five times in her back until she slumped over. “There.” Kaidan said, wiping blood off his hands on his pants.

“Good job.” John tossed the key to Kaidan.

Kaidan caught the keys with ease. “Now what?”

John jumped down from the shelves, “I thought you just wanted to leave.”

“I do – but.”

John grabbed the bow from his back, aimed and planted an arrow straight in the face of mercenary, and then again in the merchants. “Truth is,” He said as he shouldered the bow again, “There was a contract for all three.” He smiled under his scarf again. “

“Come brother.” He opened the door and stepped outside where his horse was waiting.

“Wait!” Kaidan cried and sprinted after John. “You said the door was locked!” He held up the key in John’s face.

“I know.” John said, “Had you tested my claim, you would have found it was not.” He took the key from Kaidan’s hand, “And I have no idea what this key opens.”

“You ass!” Kaidan fumed.

“Not my fault you’re a milk drinker.” He winked amused, “So do you want to travel with me?”

“By the Nines! No!” Kaidan crossed his arms over his chest, his anger rolling off him in waves.

“Fine.” John swung himself up on his horse. “I take it you know your way from here back to Dawnstar?”

“Of course.” Kaidan huffed, looking around the march, not seeing any waypoint he knew in the horizon. “Maybe you could show me in the direction of the nearest settlement?”
“Morthal is a two day track that way.” He pointed North East to some ruins in the horizon.

“Liar.” Kaidan countered.

“Maybe.” John laughed.

“I will..” Kaidan bit his lip, “I would very much like to travel with you.”

“But of course.” John reached down to grab Kaidan, and he could swing himself up behind John on the horse. “Glad you saw it my way.”

“Out of options is more like it.” Kaidan huffed, and reluctantly wrapped his arms around John’s waist.

Hours later Kaidan asked for them to stop, John halted the horse and turned in the saddle, “What’s wrong?” He asked.

Kaidan stared at John who had removed the scarf, and he could see his face for the first time. It was scarred, sharp and serious, but the deep blue eyes was young and full of life. “I had not expected that!” Kaidan blurted out.

“Expected what?” John said confused.

“I don’t know, I thought you’d look more haggard and ominous.” Kaidan smiled disarming.

“Sorry?” John smiled a little amused, “So what is the hold up?”

“I need a break from the horse.” Kaidan admitted.

“Not used to horseback?” John said as he nodded, “We can take a break, we are in no rush.” He slid down from the impressive horse and held a hand out to Kaidan.

“I am no lady.” Kaidan huffed as he slid down from the horse as well, his legs wobbly.

John smiled but didn’t comment it, he just set about to build a fire while Kaidan rested. He built the fire in silence, and when it was of an acceptable size, to his surprise Kaidan held his hands close to the firewood and a thick source of fire sprayed from his hands and ignited the firewood, “oh a magister, I had not seen that coming.”

Kaidan looked up at John with a bored expression, “Not many have.”

John sat down at the fire and warmed his numb fingers, “thank you.” He looked at Kaidan across the flame, “Used to carriages I take it?”

“I am.” Kaidan admitted. “Though I don’t often travel much.”

“You came to Dawnstar.” John pointed out, “Why?”

Kaidan stared at him deadpanned, “Everyone knows the Dark Brotherhood is in Dawnstar.”

“The Night Mother would have heard you anywhere in Tamriel.” John stated.

“Let’s for a moment take spirits out of the equation, then I figured there were a bigger chance of you learning of my wish to lend your services in Dawnstar.” Kaidan said.

John smiled knowingly. “The Night Mother is real, and she would have heard you, even back at
your nice little house in Solitude.”

“What makes you think I live in ‘Solitude.’”

John sighed, “Intuition.” He smiled again, “You are no Nord, and you come from wealth. You are not used to manual labor and you can afford to travel anywhere you wish by carriage. I’m sure you got your own servant too.”

“You can tell all that just by looking at me?” Kaidan laughed.

“As a kid I survived as a pickpocket, I can smell a heavy coin purse a mile away.” John stated.

“I’m sorry.” Kaidan said softly, “But it is true, except the servant – my father has servants, I do not.”

John laughed, “It is not an exact science.”

“You don’t look like a Nord either.” Kaidan said, “Can’t quite –”

“Breton.” John said with an emotionless expression, “Now with that out of the way, are you ready to ride?”

“If we must.” Kaidan sighed.

John stood up and went for the horse, but he wanted to end this discussion, Kaidan would soon enough join the choir of critics, there was no need to give him more information than necessary.

They rode in silence to Dawnstar, and it was not until they turned down the rocky path towards the sea that Kaidan spoke, “Did I offend you?”

“No.” John said flatly, he slid from the horse and gently tugged the animal carrying Kaidan, closer to the door. “Now it’s the first time you are to enter the sanctuary,” He looked up at Kaidan, “If the nightmother really finds you worthy of entrance, you will know the answer to the doors riddle.” He smiled at Kaidan.

Kaidan slid from the horse as well and gave John a strange glance before walking to the door.

“What is life’s greatest illusion?” The door asked.

Kaidan stood for a moment, and then he turned wide-eyed to John, “She whispered it in my ear!”

John nodded and his smile widened. Then he hadn’t made a mistake in the recruitment at least, the nightmother wanted Kaidan here, but why was the question.

“Innocence, brother.” Kaidan answered.

“Welcome home” the door rasped and swung open. Kaidan jumped as John placed a hand on his shoulder, “Come, let me introduce you to your new family.”

They met Kasumi upon entering, and John gracefully handed over the responsibility to her, and slipped out the side of the room. The questions mounted, why did Kaidan want Frorkmar Banner-Torn dead, his death would harm the balance in Dawnstar – a contract was a contract, he knew that, but he still had to wonder why.

He hung up his bow on it’s place but kept the dagger just in case, he didn’t trust Kaidan, and he
didn’t trust the nightmother either, though he knew to stay silent on the matter.

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Kaidan fell effortlessly into the family, it was like he had always been there, they loved his stories
about the magisters he had studied with, and most of all they loved the stories he had memorized
from spending years at the magisters library, gods and monsters. John found himself fondly listening
to Kaidan when he would tell stories about adventurers that went down into forgotten crypts to locate
a mystical artifact. Kaidan’s voice was soft and engaging, and he kept his audience wanting more.

This morning John arrived to an almost empty room, only Kasumi and Liara was there. Liara was
going over some papers and Kasumi was staring down into a cup. “What happened?” John asked
softly, the atmosphere in the room was so thick he could carve a path through it. “Kasumi?”

Kasumi looked up from her cup and offered John a flat smile, “Frorkmar Banner-Torn is dead.” She
stated.

“Good?” John said his voice uncertain, but that was the contract, so why was everyone so tense? He
sat down opposite Kasumi trying to catch her gaze. “What happened?”

“It was smooth.” Kasumi shrugged, and then sighed, “I found something, and I shouldn’t even be
telling you about it, I’m not sure –”

“What did you find?” John’s voice rose an octave, he wasn’t sure if her approach scared him or
worried him – or both.

“A letter.” Kasumi admitted, she looked over at Liara who just hung her head. With a deep sigh she
fished a piece of paper out of her pocket and slid it across the table. “Promise me you won’t do
something stupid.”

John gingerly took the letter offered, and started reading;

Frorkmar,

I send you the amount agreed upon for naming the leader of the dawnstar dark brotherhood, I trust
you made the proper arrangements, and I will see to ending this chapter.

Best regards

General Tullius.

He looked up from the letter at stared directly at Kasumi, “Frorkmar set up Anderson? But…”

“Seems like it,” Kasumi said in a near whisper.

“But why?” John searched Kasumi’s eyes for an answer.

Kasumi let out a deep sigh “Everybody have a price, even Frorkmar.”

John looked down at his hands on the thick oak table, “If someone wanted to take out the
brotherhood this would be an efficient way to achieve this.”

“Good morning.” Kaidan entered the main hall. He stopped dead in his tracks, “What happened?”
He asked looking over their somber faces.

“Nothing.” John mumbled.
Kasumi gave John a hard stare across the table but said nothing.

“Kaidan.” Liara sing-song, “I got just the contract for you, we received it only yesterday.” She stopped behind John and placed a hand on his tense shoulders. “It’s time you spread your wings.”

“He’s not ready.” John mumbled.

“What?” Kaidan argued loudly as he walked over to the table where John and Kasumi sat, “I am ready!”

“It’s an easy task.” Liara said as she squeezed John’s shoulder. “Only obstacle is that you have to travel to Riften to perform your kill.”

“Delvin?” John asked.

“I do not see how it matters, but yes.” Liara said softly, “As I said, it is an easy job.”

John locked eyes with Kasumi whom smiled amused, and John sighed, “maybe you are right.”

“I always am.” Liara smiled brilliantly at Kaidan.

John gestured at Kaidan, “Come, sit.”

Kaidan gingerly sat down next to Kasumi, and silently filled his mug with water.

The air was heavy in the room, John clined his head and looked at Kaidan with a mysterious smirk, “How many missions so far?”

“Three.” Kaidan said with a near whisper.

“Right.”

“John.” Kasumi barked, her dark brown eyes flickering with anger.

John nodded, “I’m sorry Kaidan,” He said, “Liara is right, you should earn your place here in your own right.”

Later that day John was fretting over a map that he found, frustrated that no matter how much he analyzed and went over details, he wasn’t closer to finding out anything new, on what contract had gotten Anderson killed. There was just something about this whole deal with Kaidan that he did not trust. How he had entered, and the reason behind the assassination of Frorkmar. Had it not been for that assassination they’d never have known about Frorkmars betrayal, they would never have learned who had ordered Andersons demise – but what was Kaidan’s role in this? Now that Kaidan was an initiate of the brotherhood, he couldn’t very well ask him.

John left the table and went over to Anderson’s bookshelf and took the next pile of notes to shift through, he would figure it out, they’d see! And when he did, they would love him for it. He knew they all wanted to see Anderson’s killer brought to justice, or well their justice. He gently placed the pile on the table, how did the old man have this many notes and maps? It would take him a lifetime to go through everything! John sat down on the chair, contemplating if he should go get more candles. When his eyes landed on the title of the book in the pile of notes he just picked up. “The Lusty Argonian maid volume two?” John said to himself, “Strange.” He took the book from the pile, he had not taken Anderson for the type of man who would spend his precious time reading
something like this. He opened the book and to his surprise he could see a piece of paper sticking out. John pulled the paper from the pages of the book and gently opened it.

_Last will and testament of David Anderson._

_It is my wish that Kasumi will take upon her the mantle of leadership over the brotherhood after my death, for she is both capable and wise._

_I wish for John have my steed Shadowmere, for they are both wild and ruthless at heart._

_I wish for Vega to have my bow and daggers, for his gift with the right tools shall pass over in history._

_I wish for Liara to have my collection of books, let her wisdom flourish._

_I wish for Krios to take upon him the mantle of diplomat and my list of contacts, his silvertongue will serve the brotherhood well._

_I wish for Vakarian to take upon him the mantle of recruitment and my list of possible candidates, for his eagle eye will sense those ready and right for the family._

_I wish for Zaeed to take upon him the mantle of teacher, his skills are unmatched and will serve the brotherhood well when shared._

It was signed by Anderson and Frorkmar, as a witness to its authenticity. John stared at the paper, was this Anderson’s real last will and testament? Then what about the paper they had received?

John jumped in his seat when a deep voice behind him asked if he wasn’t hungry. “Vega?” John turned in his chair, “When Anderson died, who brought the testament?” He looked at Vega’s broad form in the vague light by the door. “Do you remember?”

“I do.” Vega said, stepping into the light, “Why bring that up now?”

“Just answer me.”

“Krios did.” Vega shrugged, “Skald the Elder had summoned him upon Anderson’s death, and handed him the sealed parcel.”

“Answer me this; why would Skald the Elder summon Krios?” John bit his lip nervously, he knew he was on thin ice here, but something was very, very wrong.

“He was working for Skald before he became a brother.” Vega stated flatly, “I think it was quite understandable he would call for his once servant.”

John nodded, “You are right. Forgive me.”

Vega just stared at John, “Will you include me in your reasoning for this line of questions?”

“Soon.” John smiled disarmingly, “Please excuse me.” He stuck the paper inside his tunic and attempted to brush past Vega at the door.

Vega grabbed his arm, “John, you have to stop this. We have all been understanding for your lack of leadership, we know Anderson’s mantle is a hard one to pick up, and you are young – but this will not do, you must – “

John clasped his hands on each side of Vega’s head, staring straight into his eyes, “Brother, you must
trust me this one time.”

“I trust you brother.” Vega said softly, “so do the others, but do you trust us?”

John frowned, caressing Vega’s cheek with his thumb, “Right now I don’t know who to trust, I… I think we have a spy, I think someone here is, or knows who is, guilty of Anderson’s death.”

Vega’s eyes widened. “How?”

“I don’t know yet.” John whispered.

Vegas lips became a fine line, and he placed a hand on each of John’s shoulders. “I might not agree with you on much, and I don’t think you should be Andersons successor, but I trust you with my life.” He blinked slowly, “and I will trust that you are doing what you think is best for the brotherhood, and best for us.”

John sighed of relief and shot Vega a tired smile, “Thank you brother.”

“The nightmother preserve us.” Vega said as he pulled back from the touch.

John let his hands fall and nodded, “The nightmother preserve us indeed.”

John hurried to catch Kaidan, He jogged to the room where everyone slept, only to find it empty. He went straight to the main hall in hopes of catching Kaidan stocking up for his trip. And when he saw the back of the young black haired man, he mouthed a silent prayer. “Kaidan!” He called as he jogged up to where Kaidan stood, fishing potatoes up from a bag.

“Yes?” Kaidan stuffed the potato in another bag and looked up at John.

“I have personal business that takes me to Riften, mind if I share the road with you?” John asked as innocently as he could.

“What private business might that be? Etienne perhaps?” Vakarian asked from the far end of the room.

Cursed be that John had not seen Vakarian there. “No.” He just said, shifting his gaze to Vakarian, “But of you must know, my business is with Delvin as well, perhaps Niruin too – it depends.”

“Shame.” Vakarian smirked amused.

John sighed and returned his attention to Kaidan, “I promise I will not meddle in your assignment. The road to Riften is long, and there is safety in numbers.”

Kaidan narrowed his eyes and studied John for a short while, “You are lying; you just wish to have an excuse to join me in Riften to make sure I do not fail the assignment.”

“I swear that is not my intention, I only wish for a travel companion.” John said calmly staring directly into Kaidan’s eyes.

Kaidan’s jaw flexed, but he stayed silent.

“It was but an offer.” John said with a shrug, “Safe travels Brother.” He smiled and slapped Kaidan’s arm in a friendly manner before he turned and left the main hall. He could feel Vakarians smirk all the way to Anderson’s study. It was a shame that Kaidan didn’t want to travel with him, he would have liked to get to know him better, and he ached for a moment between them where he could ask why he had asked the nightmother for the contract on Banner-Torn. John took a deep breath, he had
to get to Riften regardless, the only one he knew who could determine a fraudulent letter would be Delvin, but he could not just ask him, since Delvin was also the only man he could think of who was capable of making a professional fake letter like this. Which led him to Niruin, he might not be a master fraud, but he had an ear to every door, even those in the guild itself, and Niruin owed him one. He would get to the bottom of this. If Kaidan didn’t want to speak so be it, he would unravel the mystery regardless.

“John.” Vakarian said as he closed the door behind him. “Please think, you cannot abandon Dawnstar now, we need you here – people are in serious doubt about your skills as a leader as it is… this will not ease their minds.”

“I know.” John sighed, “But I have to see Delvin, and I do not trust the rookie to carry a message from me.” He turned and looked at Vakarian with sad eyes, “I don’t trust anyone right now.”

“Not even me?” Vakarian asked, taking a step forward towards John.

“No.” John stepped back as Vakarian advanced on him.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Vakarian said, stopping at the corner of Andor’s large desk.

“While I am gone, I wish for Kasumi to be in charge.” John said to Vakarian, “Will you inform her of my decision?”

“I will.” Vakarian nodded, “Wise choice.”

John chuckled bitterly, “I know.”

There was a knock at the door which made them both look at the thick wooden door, “Excuse me, John.” Kaidan opened the door and greeted both inside.

“Kaidan.” Vakarian said with an amused grin, “I thought you left for Riften.”

“No.” Kaidan admitted, “I – “ He looked at John, “Meet me outside at midday?”

“I will.” John smiled, “But why the change of heart if I may ask?” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“You are right, safety in numbers. It is a long ride to Riften – and uhm..” Kaidan blushed slightly, “I do not know the way.”

John laughed softly, “I will meet you outside at midday.”

Kaidan left and closed the door after him, Vakarian turned to John, “I do not understand why you don’t just send for Etienne, do you really think it wise to leave Dawnstar at this time?”

“I am not going to Riften to see him.” John snapped, he turned his attention from the door to the table and started to pick some notes and cram them into his saddlebag. “Besides we didn’t part on good terms.” He cleared his throat nervously, knowing he said too much.

Vakarian leaned casually against the table with an amused grin. “Are you sure you are even welcome in the guild?”

“Etienne is not the master of the guild.” John sighed, “I wish you would leave the matter alone. ‘tis my personal problem, not a matter of the brotherhood.”

Vakarian grumbled something that John did not hear. And then he straightened up and said “Safe
travels brother, I will inform the others of your decision while gone.”

“Thank you.” John nodded and let Vakarian see himself out without looking up.

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Come midday John guided Shadowmere to the front of the Brotherhood, pleased to see that Kaidan was already waiting there with a horse. “Are you ready? It is a week in the saddle.” He grinned and swung himself unto the back.

Kaidan groaned but got in the saddle and slowly trotted after John down the road.

They rode for some hours in silence, “Where are we heading?” Kaidan asked.

“Windhelm.” John answered with a dull tone, “Easiest to avoid the mountain pass.” He turned slightly in his saddle, “Unless you are itching to fight trolls and wolves.”

“We aren’t entering, are we?” Kaidan asked, ushering his horse to follow pace with Johns. “I would rather not.”

“That was my plan, we need to stock up on some things.” He studied Kaidan’s profile, “Are you wanted amongst the Stormcloaks?”

“No.” Kaidan said, “But…” He licked his lips and glanced over at John for a short moment, “I am Imperial born.”

“I see.” John sucked in his breath, biting his lip thoughts racing. “We could camp oourse Windhelm, and I could go see to the items we need.”

“Thank you.” Kaidan let out a breath he had been holding.

“It will cost you.” John said flatly.

“Name it.” Kaidan frowned.

“The truth.” John said, spurring his horse to go faster, efficiently ending the conversation.

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They set up camp, and Kaidan got the fire going, already shivering from the cold. John smirked from his seat, “Regretting your choice? We could have a warm bed and a real meal – and mead.” He winked, “The mead here in Windhelm is some of the best in Skyrim.”

“Nords sure like their mead.” Kaidan mumbled. “No I don’t regret it.”

“So the camp is set up, now time to uphold your end of the bargain.” John inched closer to the fire to keep warm from the howling wind. “Why did you summon the nightmother?”

“You already know.” Kaidan answered, shifting in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation topic. “My contract has been carried out.”

“I know that, yes.” John said, his eyes never leaving Kaidan’s figure behind the fire between them. “I mean why did you want Frorkmar dead?”

“I’m sure there is a rule about this.” Kaidan huffed, “Never to ask why.”
“There is.” John clined his head, and pulled his hood closer to his cold cheeks. “I am asking you anyways.”

“No.” Kaidan, “That is my secret to have.”

“Very well.” John sighed. “I will go sleep, drink and make merry in Candlehearth Hall – and if you are still here by dawn, we will travel further south.” John stood up and brushed his sleeves for snow. “I bid you a good night.” He turned and left the camp, inwardly fuming that Kaidan had gone back on his promise, but on the other side he was completely entitled to his secret – it was a serious breach of the rules to even ask him. But he had to know if why, and if not that then why Kaidan had wished to join their ranks.

He pulled his hood up to obscure his face, because even if he was not a wanted man here in Windhelm, they did not take lightly to anyone who was not a Nord. John’s hair was too dark, and his ears too different for them to believe that he was anything but what he was. Not that the Nords had it out for the Breton, but he still had to be careful - this was a city of people who hated anyone who was not like them.

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Next morning John came back to the camp site to find Kaidan sleeping next to the dying fire. “Rise.” He laughed merrily, and dropped a bag next to Kaidan’s face. “I bring food.”

“Bread?” Kaidan asked still half asleep.

“Yes.” John smiled. “Did you sleep well?”

“I’m fine.” Kaidan said sitting up, wrapping the blanket around his thick winter coat. “Just hungry.”

“So are you a wanted man in Ivarsted as well?” John asked casually as he bent over to dig through the bag, tossing Kaidan a piece of bread.

“No.” Kaidan said.

“Splendid.” John said with a fake merry tone.

“I know you are angry that I won’t tell you why I called the nightmother, but I cannot tell you.” Kaidan said softly, taking a bite of his bread. “I am bound by an oath that takes precedence.”

“Very well.” John said, “Why did you wish to join us? Or is that a secret as well?” He sat down and looked at Kaidan with his piercing blue eyes.

“No not a secret, I will tell you – if you do the same.” Kaidan said with a little smile.

“Seems fair.” John said, “But I hardly see why my joining has any interest.”

“I am just trying to get to know you, and I assume you are doing the same with your questions.” Kaidan said, his voice sharp and slightly accusative.

“Very well. I joined the brotherhood because Anderson saved my life, he took me under his wing and taught me everything about the trade.” John said, knowing it was a very simplified version of the truth.

Kaidan just blinked bored, not satisfied with the answer.

“I was an orphan living in Riften, I had run from the orphanage because the matron was a sadistic
cow.” John poked the embers in the fire with a stick from the ground. “She would beat us and tell us no one ever wanted to adopt us, most of us were orphans conflicts around Skyrim. And honestly I do not know why my parents travelled here, or how I ended up at the orphanage. Probably a caravan robbed and murdered.” He looked at Kaidan who fueled the embers with magic to warm them both. “I would pickpocket and steal everything I could. Sometimes someone kind would hand me things like a warm meal, or a couple of coins.

“Were you a member of the thieves guild?” Kaidan asked.

“No, see I had a mean streak that made me unable to join them, I was angry, violent and didn’t care for the delicate work.” John admitted. “You can ask Delvin, because he knows exactly what I mean.”

Kaidan nodded. “Then what?”

“Then one day when I was around twelve winters, I got caught stealing. The guy was twice my size and had a pair of twin daggers, I swear my life would have ended that day was it not for Anderson.” John smiled fondly at the memory, “The man was one whom Anderson had tracked for a contract, and while I had botched his job - he had seen potential in me.” John looked up at Kaidan and smiled, “Anderson brought me home, and that was it.”

Kaidan sighed, “My turn I take it; I asked to join because I was ready to do whatever it took to get away from my family, and start over – maybe give my life a different purpose.”

“Most people would join the Dawnguard if they needed to join a group for the a new purpose.” John said, “Can’t say we have many in the Dark Brotherhood whom joined for a second chance.”

“Regardless – that was what I did.”

“Why did you want to get away, if I may ask.” John’s gaze softened to an almost friendly expression.

“Arranged marriage is still a part of life in the circles where I was born, and since childhood I have been betrothed to this woman. A woman that I do not know, or love. I only know her name.” Kaidan wrung his hands, “When I came of age they began to make preparations, and I saw my moment to run.”

Kaidan looked sullen as he spoke of it, and John believed him. “Good enough reason to blend with the shadows.” John said softly. “Come, lets get on the road, we still have quite a long way to go.”

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They rode on towards Ivarsted, the highway robbers they met took one glance at John’s weapons and decided to let them pass. And the journey in itself was calm and pleasant, their conversation less and less forced, and the laughs more frequent. By the time they came to Ivarsted one would think they were friends upon first glance.

John grabbed his saddlebag and joined Kaidan at the Vilemyr Inn, “If I said I didn’t look forward to a nights rest in a real bed, I would be a liar,” John sighed blissfully as they entered the inn.

They approached the barkeep, “Good day my lady.” John said with a brilliant smile, “We have traveled far and still have a long way to go.”

“We have a room for rent.”
“Great.” John said still smiling. “When is dinner?”

“I will ring the bell.” The barmaid answered. “But not for some hours.”

John nodded and let the barmaid take them to their room. To their surprise it was a large bed, not two separate beds. “Is this the only room you have?” Kaidan asked.

“Yes.” The barmaid said, “Don’t you want it?”

“We’ll take it.” John said, giving the barmaid a couple of coins, watching her disappear. “Come now Kaidan, the bed is soft and clean, and the food here is good.” He tossed his saddlebag on the ground in the corner. “Drink a mug of mead or two, and you won’t care who sleeps beside you.”

“I just never.” Kaidan shifted and he too placed his saddlebag on the ground. “Shared a bed with a man before.”

John blinked, “There is a difference between sharing someones bed, and sleeping next to them.”

“Oh of course, I never meant to imply that—“

“I saw a stream leading into the township, I could use with a bath.” He rolled his shoulders, smiling at Kaidan, “How about you?”

“Oh by the nine divines, I do.” Kaidan admitted.

“Come then.” John left the room and told the barmaid they would be back shortly before leaving the inn. He walked down the road. “Is this the first time you travelled this far by horseback?” He asked.

“Yes.” Kaidan said, “Quite a different experience than from a wagon.”

“I’d imagine.”

John stopped as they had walked down stream for a bit, “This looks perfect.” He pulled off his shirt, Kaidan just staring at the scars littering his back. John didn’t notice the stare, he just continued to undress and strutted out into the cold stream. “Are you coming?” He called.

“Later, I’ll keep watch over your things.” Kaidan called back.

John dived and came up spurting water. He turned and looked confused at Kaidan, “Are you shy?” He laughed when Kaidan didn’t answer. “What is a matter? Never bathed in a creek before?”

“Not since I was but a child.” Kaidan answered.

“Suit yourself.” John shrugged and went under again. When he finally emerged, he walked every bit as confident up from the water, causing Kaidan to look away. John just laughed softly and dressed himself. “I am going to trade for some things we need for the last bit of the journey, and then I am going back to the Vilemyr Inn, see you there.” He ruffled Kaidan’s hair and left the spot where Kaidan sat. He wondered what made Kaidan so jumpy, but decided not to dwell on it. He still needed to do something to get him to tell him the truth, why he had ordered the assassination of Frorkmar.

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Two bowls was placed infront of them, and a mug for Kaidan, John had his refilled. John smalltalked throughout the meal, waiting for the daught to take effect on Kaidan. It was a dirty trick, but he had to get Kaidan to lower his guard. It was nothing serious he had asked that the cook added to his meal, just enough so Kaidan would feel a drunk.

“I am not used to mead.” Kaidan excused, as he unbuttoned his rope two buttons. “It’s not half bad, I had expected it to taste like dishwasher water.”

“Come now, you milkdrinker – bottoms up.” John chuckled.

Kaidan wasn’t one to back down from a challenge, and so he drank the whole mug, leaving John laughing merrily, asking the barmaid for another round.

By the end of the second mug, Kaidan was sweating and had a hard time keeping his eyes open. “You need to lie down.” John said softly, “Come on.” He got up from his chair and pulled Kaidan to his feet. He managed to get Kaidan maneuvered into the bed and let him fall into the mattress. “Kaidan, are you awake?”

“Yes.” Kaidan mumbled into the blanket.

John kicked off his boots and laid down next to Kaidan in the kingsized bed, he turned over in the dark and looked directly at Kaidan’s drunk serene smile in the dark. “Who did you swear an oath to?” he whispered.

Kaidan giggled drunken. “Get me drunk and make me talk, is that your game?”

“Yes.” John chuckled. “Is it working?”

“No.” Kaidan yawned.

“Sithis cursed.” John hissed and turned over to his back. “It was worth a try.” John said to the ceiling and Kaidan beside him.

“Indeed.” Kaidan whispered.

John turned his back to Kaidan and sighed. “Tell me about Etienne.” Kaidan whispered as he spooned up behind John in the dark.

John’s eyes went wide with surprise as he felt Kaidan flush against him, and an arm drunkenly tossed around his chest. “A secret for a secret.” John whispered back.

“Your relationship seems to be a rather public secret.” Kaidan argued in a mumble.

John laughed despite himself, and had to smile, “Right.” He wet his lips, “Your secret makes it hard for me to trust you.”

Kaidan sighed, his breath fanning out over John’s neck. “I see why.” The hand resting on John’s chest flexed. “I swore an oath to my father.” Kaidan finally whispered, “The contract was his wish.”

John took a deep breath, staring at the wall of the room. It made sense, it would make more sense if he knew who Kaidan’s father was. But he was sure that was for another day, this had been hard enough to pull from Kaidan. “Etienne…” John whispered. “A couple of years ago I was sent back to the thieves guild to learn how to control my temper and perfect my sneaking. Delvin was sent to the Brotherhood to run off his horns and get his fill of blood. Etienne was – “ John searched for the right word, “He was there, he listened and understood. He was the first friend I felt I ever had.”
John stopped and listened for Kaidan’s breathing to determine if he had fallen asleep. “Go on.” Kaidan mumbled.

“After some time we became lovers, he was handsome, fierce and loyal, all the things I strived to be. I remember I was in awe that he would show his affection in public, never hiding, never silent.” John smiled, “I like to believe that he loved me, and maybe he was proud of the man I was. He made me try so hard, and I learned how to shoot a bow, I learned how to move silently, and how to stay my blade. Etienne brought forth the best in me.”

“He sounds nice.”

“He was.” John whispered, “He made me happy.” He paused, “But… he went on what everyone assumed was just a heist, I do not know if he was set up, or if he was careless – I don’t know what happened.” His voice trailed off, and Kaidan curled his fingers around John’s wrist and squeezed gently. “He was caught by the Thalmor.”

“He lives yes?”

“He does.” John sighed softly. “I wanted to go after him, but I was escorted back to the Brotherhood, and told that the senior members would find out what happened and free him if he was alive.” John closed his eyes, “They never did.”

“What happened?” Kaidan whispered.

“Someone else, freed him from the Thalmor. But not before they had tortured him for so long that there was no longer anything left of the man I knew. The Etienne whom lives now is bitter and angry, he hates me.” John paused again, “I think he hates me because I did not come save him.” John suddenly pushed Kaidans arm off him, and sat up, no longer comfortable with the intimacy. “I wanted to save him, I truly did.” He stood up from the bed. “I need air.” He mumbled walking out of the room in long strides.

John hated himself for even telling that story, he should leave dead dogs lie. Every time he told that story it upset him, and what he had not told Kaidan was that when he had learned of Etienne’s return he had run, he had stolen Shadowmere and ridden it like the daedra themselves where hunting him. Anderson had warned him that Etienne had changed, but John had not wanted to hear it. Upon his arrival Etienne had tried to stab him. He had curled up in Niruin’s bed and cried his heart out for a day and a night, not caring who saw his grief. He had been but a child then, no more than nineteen winters, but even now, ten years later – he remembered the feeling of his heart breaking.

Vakarian did not know exactly what had come before, all he knew, like most. Was that John and Etienne had been lovers, and when John had rushed to see him upon his return, Etienne had given him a brutal beating and tried to stab him. They had laughed at him upon his return, and they still found it funny. Poor lovesick John, whose lover got so fed up with him he had to try and murder him. In some way it was funny to grieve someone who was still alive.

John walked briskly down the night dark road, angry that it still felt this raw. But if he was completely honest to himself, he had liked Kaidan spooning up against him, the feeling of a warm body that close to his own was not something he had experienced since. And prostitutes were only good for venting when it got hard to focus. He didn’t want to like Kaidan, and he most certainly did not want to play that game. If Kaidan wanted physical confirmation of belonging, he would have to seek out someone elses bed.

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The next morning John sat at a table in the inn eating breakfast, when Kaidan came out from their room. His hair tousled and he looked like he had the worst hangover. John smiled, “Good morning.”

“Don’t speak.” Kaidan whimpered.

John laughed, “eat up, we got a long day ahead of us.” He flashed Kaidan a genuine smile.

They left the Vilmyr Inn shortly after, and was back on the road. Kaidan rode in silence for long, until he suddenly asked “Do I remember right, or did we cuddle?”

John laughed merrily, “Do not worry Kaidan, it takes more to offend me.”

Kaidan sighed heavily. “I guess I owe you.”

“You said that my secrets made you not trust me, and I understand that.” Kaidan looked over at John. “I cannot tell you much, but I can tell you that I do not know why my father wished the death of Frorkmar, but I swore to him that I would travel to Dawnstar and preform the dark ritual, and present the member from the dark brotherhood with the contract on Frorkmar’s life.”

“But why?” John asked, “What did you get in return?”

“My freedom.” Kaidan said, “He let me slip away, and I did not ask questions.”

John nodded, mentally adding this information to what he already had. “Thank you.” He said with a soft smile.

“I did not mean to upset you last night.” Kaidan said with a soft voice. “Forgive me.”

“You didn’t know.” John answered. “I think the only one who knows the story is Niruin and Cynric, they were the ones to escort me back to Dawnstar.” He shrugged, “I never spoke of Etienne again – until last night.”

“And let us never speak of him again.” Kaidan said with a soft smile.

John nodded in silent agreement.

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Finally at Riften they both dismounted and paid the bribe to the guards, granting them access to the city. Once inside John took a deep breath, “Nothing smells quite like Riften.”

“If you meanrotting fish, then no.”

John laughed and started to walk straight to the end of the walkway, “There is the orphanage.” He pointed at a derelict house, “I would not be surprised if it’s still the same matron.” He turned down the stairs and walked down to the walkway just above the water in the river passing through Riften. “Come, I know a fast way.”

They walked through the sewers till John stopped infront of a door, “Are you ready?” He smiled at Kaidan, “I will take you straight to Delvin.”

Kaidan desperately grapped John’s shoulder. “Will you wait for me to finish the job before leaving?”

“Depends.” John said, “If you do it fast, I will. But I have too many bad memories here to want to
linger.”

“I understand. I will try and be quick.” Kaidan said.

“And careful.” John shot him a direct glare.

“Promise.” Kaidan smiled.

John pushed open the door to the Ragged Flagon, smiling wide as heads turned. “John?” Vex got up from her chair and went to embrace the young man. “I knew there would come someone from the Brotherhood, but I was not told it was you.” She smiled and held John out in stretched arms to look him up and down.

“It is because it is not me.” John said with a smile, “I am here on private business, Kaidan” He gestured at Kaidan, “Is the brother whom have come to honor Delvins contract.”

Vex looked at Kaidan, “Welcome.” She said a lot more coolly. “Let me take you to Delvin.”

Kaidan smiled and let the blond woman guide him deeper into the thieves hideout

John stood alone for a moment, he saw Vekel and walked over to the bar. “It’s been too long.”

“John.” Vekel smiled, “What brings you here?” He seemed a little shifty, which put John on edge.

“I’m here to see Niruin.” John said accepting the mug of mead that Vekel handed him. “It is of utmost importance.”

Vekel nodded, “I will send word.” He looked over at the door to the cisterns again.

“Are you worried I came to pay back Etienne?” John asked.

“No… Yes… I just don’t want my bar destroyed.”

John smiled, “don’t worry old man. I wish to see him as little as he wishes to see me.” John sat back and watched the well known bar, how he had many happy hours here back when he had been Mercers trainee.

Vekel came back with Niruin whom walked straight to John and embraced him. “John my boy, how are you? I hear you run the Dawnstar sanctuary now.” He paused, “I am sorry to hear about Anderson.”

“Thank you, and yes you heard right.” John smiled fondly at the elf.

“Wait till Mercer and Delvin finds out you are here.” Niruin laughed stealing a sip of John’s mead. “So what brings you here?”

“I need to speak to you, it is very important, and maybe very dangerous – but I simply do not know who to trust.” John whispered, “I trust you.”

“Right.” Niruin nodded. “Let us take a walk too many ears here.”

They both got up, grabbed the lantern from the side beam, and walked out into the ratway. They expertly found an abandoned cell and Niruin sat down the lantern. “So…”

“I don’t even know where to start, but I think that the less you know, the safer you are.” John handed Niruin the letter he had found in Andersons book, and the letter which had been presented by Krios
after Anderson’s death. “One of these are fake, I need to know which one.”

“Delvin is the master of –“

“But I cannot be sure that Delvin does not have a part in it. I need someone from the outside, someone who would not know any of the history behind it, but just that there are two last will and testaments and one is fake.” John whispered. “You know everyone.”

“I know this Khajiit merchant, who would probably be able to help you.” Niruin said, “How many coins do you carry?”

“Enough.” John gave Niruin a large pouch, “Should be ample, and the rest is yours for helping me.” He gave Niruin a tired smile.

“Will you tell me what this is about?” Niruin asked.

“I will, but first I need to know which is a fake.”

“Give me two days, and I will have your answer.” Niruin said. He pulled a key from his pocket and handed it to John. “There is a shed at the docks, no one uses it anymore. You can stay there.”

“Thank you.” John said with a genuine smile. “I do not want to cause trouble.”

“I know.” Niruin said, “I will let your friend know where you are, should he need to find you.”

John went effortlessly through the dark city towards the docks, just glad he didn’t cause more of a ruckus than he did. Eventually he would have to deal with Etienne, but it was not today. John entered the shack and was pleased to find a bed and a table, someone was using this place alright, and John was quite sure it was Niruin’s own hideout when the noise was too much in the cisterns. It was a nice place, it was almost silent apart from the waves against the poles underneath the docks. Maybe it was just what he needed, some peace and quiet to figure out what was going on here. If he was right, then the document that Krios had presented them with was a fake, but who could make a such? He knew of no one but Delvin who would have no qualms, and would perhaps have forged friendships within the brotherhood whom John knew nothing of. But if he was right then someone wanted him in charge, but why? It could be because they thought he was better suited, but he doubted it, more like the opposite – someone thought he would be easily manipulated. And with both Anderson and Frorkmar out of the picture, his list of allies ran thin. Not that Frorkmar had been an ally, he had ordered the murder of Anderson. John felt like the answer was right outside his grasp, like he needed to pull one thread and the whole thing would unravel.

Facts were that Anderson was dead, he was dead because Frorkmar had given his identity to Tullius, but why? What reason would Frorkmark possibly have to betray Anderson so. And Frorkmar was dead because Kaidan’s unknown father wanted it so. But why would he want that? Because he wanted to revenge Anderson? Or because he wanted him out of the game?

Later he heard a knock on the door, and he was very surprised when Kaidan entered the little shack. “Aren’t you out on your task?” John asked.

“Not yet. I had to come see you.” Kaidan said, he shifted nervously in his place. “I do not know what your business here is, but something is off.” Kaidan said, his voice hushed. “Delvin is asking an awful lot of questions. Questions about your business here, he seems nervous.”

John’s mind froze up, he had never considered that his presence alone would alarm some people. “I
should speak to him. Do not worry.”

“I met Etienne.” Kaidan said in a strange hollow tone. “The word is that he is leaving to join the Dawnguard”

“Sounds like a good plan, I’m sure this city and these people – cannot help him heal.” John said with a disappearing small voice. John looked at Kaidan for a gentle moment, “Turn around.”

Kaidan turned around. And John pulled a leather string from his sleeve, and gently pulled Kaidan’s hair back. His fingers buried in the black curly mess. “Your hair has gotten long.” He mused. He tied the string around Kaidan’s hair in a tiny ponytail. “There, for good luck.” He turned Kaidan around with a firm grip on his shoulders. His smile widened on it’s own accord as he noticed Kaidan’s flustered cheeks. “You’ll need it.”

“Thank you.” Kaidan said softly.

“Looks good.” John said nodding at Kaidan, “Very handsome.”

“Oh.” Kaidan managed to say.

John laughed softly, “I did not mean to make you uncomfortable.” Removing his hands from Kaidan’s shoulders, he nodded in approval. “You look every bit the brother now.” He smiled. “You can do it.”

Kaidan looked John directly into his eyes, “Thank you.”

For a moment they just stood there and looked at each other, until John cleared his throat. “I will see you in a day or two.”

Kaidan wet his lips, “Yes.”

John leaned in and and whispered. “Don’t trust Delvin.” In Kaidan’s ear. Kaidan turned his head and for a fleeting moment touched John’s lips with his. “I won’t.” He whispered against John’s lips.

There was only so much self control John could muster, he cupped Kaidan’s head with a hand on each side and kissed him back, awaking something long dead inside him as he felt Kaidan’s lips yield and open. When the kiss ended John was breathing hard, he pulled back enough so he could look into Kaidan’s eyes, searching them for the answer to this sudden action. Kaidan looked at him with such wonder that John felt his knees go weak. He caressed Kaidan’s cheek with a course thumb. “I will see you soon.” Was all he could think of saying.

“Yes.” Kaidan whispered, stealing a quick kiss before he turned and left the shack.

John was more than confused, wasn’t this the same man who had objected to sleeping next to a man, just weeks ago? He gingerly touched his lips with a finger, he wasn’t sure what he thought of this. But he wished of all his heart that Kaidan’s intentions was as they seemed.

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By dusk Niruin returned to the shack, “I bring good news.” The Elf smiled, “One of these are definitely a fake.” He said laying both letters out on the table. John got up and looked down at the letters, shoulder to shoulder with Niruin. “So, in order for the testament to be legit, it must be overseen by the jarl, which in this case would be Skald the Elder.” Niruin said, “Right?”

“Right.” John looked at the elf confused, “But none of these have his signature.”
“No, but one of them is written in his halls, the other is not.” Niruin said, “Hold this paper up against
the candle.” He pointed at the one to the left, where John was the new leader of the sanctuary, the
one Krios had brought.

John held it up, but he saw nothing.

“No, now take the other.”

John held up the other, and there was a watermark, clear as day; it was the insignia of Dawnstar.
“Magic.” John whispered.

“Yes,” Niruin said, “And I promise you that one will burn the other will not. The one touched by
magic will not be touched by flame.”

“So this is the correct one.” John waved the paper with the watermark.

“Well it’s the legit one.” Niruin shrugged. “Now, will you tell me what this is about?”

John sat heavily down in the chair by the table. “Yes.” He looked up at Niruin. “where to start…
Someone wished for the leader of the Dawnstar brotherhood dead, Frorkmar knew Anderson and
sold his identity to this person. I do not know why this person wanted Anderson dead, but then a
young man came with a contract on Frorkmar – he claims he does not know why his father wanted
Frorkmar dead either.” John sighed, he sounded like a paranoid lunatic. “When Anderson died,
Krios was supposedly summoned to Skald the Elder to collect Anderson’s last will and testament, he
returned with that He pointed at the fake. “I do not know if Krios knew it was fake or not. But the
fake leaves me in charge of the brotherhood, which means that someone wanted me to be in this
position.” He looked at Niruin, “Anderson did not want me to lead them. The real letter makes that
quite clear.”

Niruin nodded, “And you are wondering why someone wanted you to lead the brotherhood.”

“I am.” John said. “I am the least experienced.”

“Maybe that is why.” Niruin said studying John. “Maybe they are counting on you dissolving the
brotherhood from within?”

“Maybe.” John looked down at his hands in his lap. “When I get back I will step down and leave it
to Kasumi as Anderson wanted.”

“No!” Niruin gasped so loud that John flinched. “No! that would give away that you knew about the
true testament.” Niruin grabbed John’s shoulders, “You have to play along until the spy reveals him
or herself.”

“Do you think the fake could be made by Delvin?” John asked, feeling oddly vulnerable as he asked.

“He sure could have made it.” Niruin said softly, “I hardly think that…”

“Come now Niruin, Delvin and Etienne was fast friends, I do believe that he wouldn’t have any
moral qualms making such a document.”

Nirun nodded slowly, “You are right.” He let go of John’s shoulders. “I will learn what I can from
my contacts, and I will be back tomorrow.” He smiled. “Keep a keen eye on the shadows my
friend.”

“I will.” John said with a dull and tired voice, “You too.”
Niruin had not been gone for more than a couple of minutes before a frantic hammering on John’s door shook him from his dark thoughts. “John, come quick!” Niruin called. John stuffed the letters inside his armor and ran out the door. “What?”

“Someone stabbed Etienne.” Niruin said as he hauled John off across the docks. “they stabbed him in the middle of the market.”

John stumbled up the stairs. “The market, but it’s closed – what was he doing there?”

“I don’t know.” Niruin said. “Maybe on his way to you?”

“Unless you told him I was here, he did not know.” John said flatly.

“I did not, I have not even spoken to Etienne since your arrival, I have been out tracking down the Khajiit camp.”

John looked long and hard at Niruin and then nodded, “Fine. Then there was no way he should know where I was holding up.”

Niruin and John came to a halt at the market. “Oh.” John gasped, but it came out as a tiny broken sound more than anything.

Etienne was on his back in the middle of the marketplace, surrounded by empty stalls, and people coming to look at the scene. He looked pretty peaceful was it not for the large red hand in blood in the middle of his face.

“But.” John looked from Etienne to Niruin, “No. This could be anyone! Anyone could have left that mark to frame the Brotherhood.”

“John.” A deep voice said, and John looked up at Mercer and Brynjof staring at him. “Why?”

“I didn’t kill him” John said, hearing his own voice rise an octave. “Why would I do that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Brynjof said. Crossing his arms across his chest.

“I wanted to see him healed, not dead!” John argued. “Pray tell Mercer” He shifted his gaze to the leader of the guild, “If I were to kill Etienne, do you in your heart of hearts believe I would do it this public?”

Mercer seemed to think and then he shrugged, “I do not know.”

“I don’t believe this.” John yelled. “You know me!”

“Maybe you should leave Riften.” Delvin said from the far left of the market.

Niruin placed a hand on John’s shoulder, “Maybe you should, you got the answers you came for.”

“And be accused of murder?” John argued hotly pointing at Etienne’s body.

“Quite the paradox for an assassin.” Mercer rose a brow. John’s lips became a fine line of anger. Mercer continued, “We are what we are, we are proud of what we are. But you, that is a whole different story.”

“I am proud of who I am.” John said, “Take a life, or ruin a man – I see no difference.” He shook
Niruin’s hand off him and took a step towards Mercer. “I did not kill Etienne.”

Brynjolf came to stand at Mercers side, “Yet you are the only assassin here, and the kill bears the mark of the Brotherhood.” He looked at John with sad eyes, like he wanted to believe him, but didn’t know how to.

“I am –” He looked over at Delvin, “Where is Vex?”

“Away.” Delvin said calmly. “Guild business.”

John frowned, she had been the only one to meet both him and Kaidan. “I will leave.” He said softly, and then looked back at Mercer and Brynjolf, “I did not kill Etienne, and if I were you, I’d take a good long look at my own ranks.”

“Are you saying someone from the guild framed you?” Brynjolf asked.

“Everyone has a price, Brynjolf.” John said with a sigh, he looked down at Etienne’s body. “Niruin, would you get my saddlebag, I will wait outside the gates.”

John pushed past Brynjolf who fell in line and walked next to John towards the gates. “Are you serious?” Brynjolf asked, “Do you really think that this murder was done by someone in the guild?”

“I don’t know.” John sighed, “But I know it’s not me, someone else made great effort to make it look so.” He looked over his shoulder nervously, “I can only guess someone wants me gone, or alienate me from my old teachers.”

“Or both.” Brynjolf said, “I believe you John, I do. I don’t think you could kill Etienne, even if the man he became was a far cry from what you have known.”

They stopped at the gate. “Be careful on the road.”

“I will.” John shook Brynjolf’s hand “And you keep an eye on the shadows.”

When John arrived at the stables, he saw that Kaidan’s horse was gone, had he left without him? Why would he do that?

John backtracked to Ivarsted, and to his surprise he found Kaidan’s horse outside the Vilemyr Inn. He tied up Shadowmere, and went inside. And there he was, picking his food while reading some thick book. “Why did you leave?” John asked as he crossed the room, his voice sharp and accusative.

“I was told that you’d meet me here.” Kaidan looked up at John with confusion written across his face.

“Sithis cursed.” John growled and kicked the wooden structure in frustration. He grabbed Kaidan’s collar of his coat, and pulled him half from his seat. “Didn’t I tell you not to trust Delvin?”

“Was the elf.” Kaidan croaked.

“Niruin?” John let go of Kaidan who stumbled back in his seat. “I can’t believe it.” John ran a dirty hand over his scalp. “I don’t understand.” He felt like crying or murdering the whole township. “What is going on?”
“He told me it was dangerous to go back to Riften, and that I should wait here.” Kaidan said, “Sounded true to me.” He reached up and caressed John’s cheek, “You are here now, that is what is important.”

John opened his mouth to counter that statement, but when he saw Kaidan’s gentle smile, he closed his eyes and leaned into his touch. “I need to rest.” John whispered.

“I will be there shortly.” Kaidan said.

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John laid down in the room which Kaidan had rented. None of this made sense to him, just trying to solve it made it head hurt. He had thought he had it almost figured out, but somehow the more he thought he knew, the more complicated it became.

He drifted off and woke when Kaidan entered the room. He came silently to the side of the bed where John lay, and gently pulled John’s boots from his feet. For a moment he just stood there and looked down at John, he wet his lips and said, “I got a secret.”

John blinked lazily, “Yes?”

“I cannot marry the woman I was betrothed to, because –” Kaidan started to unbutton his robe with a little secretive smile.

John laughed softly, “I think I know why.”

Kaidan shrugged his robe off, and proceeded to pull his thin tunic off.

John got up from the bed and to Kaidan’s surprise he walked past him and in a straight line to the window which he opened. “I don’t think this is wise.” John said leaning out the window.

“Don’t you want me?” Kaidan asked in a hurt tone.

“Oh yes.” John laughed brittle.

“Then why do you doubt?” Kaidan walked over to John and wrapped his arms around his waist, resting his chin on John’s back.

John’s head dropped, why did he doubt indeed? Because this was exactly what everyone expected from him, to not be level headed. Kaidan’s warm palm was placed on his inner thigh, and his cock twitched by the promise alone.

“I want you.” Kaidan whispered, his lips so close they touched John’s ear.

John swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut and slowly turned in the embrace, searing himself in the windowsill. He looked into Kaidan’s deep brown eyes for a moment, and then wrapped his arms around the other man’s neck, kissing him fiercely.

It had been so long that John couldn’t help but to make a little oppressed sound of delight, when he finally felt Kaidan’s skin against his. He knew this was not smart, but his entire body was on screaming for sweet release.

When Kaidan flipped John over, he let him. He waited with quavering breath, he could feel the oil they used run down his thigh, and when Kaidan slowly pushed inside, John buried his face in the covers and moaned.
John woke in the middle of the night, from a warm hand slowly caressing his cock, stirring it awake. He turned his head and looked straight into Kaidan’s brown eyes. Kaidan stretched his neck to kiss him. John smiled into the kiss and gently tugged on Kaidan’s arm to pull him onto him. He wrapped his legs around Kaidan’s waist, pushing him inside. It burned and sent tendrils of lust out through his entire body. John gasped as Kaidan filled him completely. He grabbed Kaidan’s neck and pulled him down for a sloppy kiss.

The next morning John woke by the light, he stretched his tired body. Pleased to find Kaidan sleeping at his side. He gently caressed Kaidan’s cheek, pushing some curly hair out of the way. “Good morning.” He said softly. “We have a long road ahead of us. We should go before we lose the daylight.” Kaidan smiled as an indicator that he had heard John.

The road to Windhelm was eventless, calm even. John had not missed the cold up here, he pulled the woolen cloak closer around him, his hand an angry red from being exposed to the wind, holding on to the horse rein. “I’d give a medium goat for getting inside for but a moment.” John said with a lame laugh.

Kaidan nodded, “You and me both.”

“Windhelm is less than an hour ahead.” John said turning slightly in the saddle to look at Kaidan riding at his left. “I will protect you.” He smiled.

Kaidan looked up from under his hood, his lips tinted slightly blue. “I’m not sure, I don’t think...”

“Kaidan,” John sighed, “They have music, mead, food and a warm bed.”

“I can’t remember the last time I danced.” Kaidan mused, “When I was younger, I often went to dances.”

“I am afraid I am a terrible dancer.” John said his smile still evident. “But I would love to see you dance.”

“There is dancing?”

“Yes.” John chuckled, “I would even pay the bard to repeat whatever song you want.”

John felt Kaidan’s hand in his as they walked into Windhelm. John went straight for the Candlehearth Hall, and rented a room. Kaidan stood behind him, his grip on John’s hand tight and scared. “Come.” John whispered in Kaidan’s ear, “They hate me more than you.” He smiled. “Could be worse, you could be Dunmer.”

“Not funny.”

It was nearly morning when they had their fill of food, mead and dancing. John fell backwards unto the bed with a blissfull sigh, “I wish it was always like this.” He smiled drunkenly at Kaidan.
Kaidan playfully fell down on top of John, and kissed him breathless. “You never told me why you went to Riften with me.” He kissed the corner of John’s lips.

“No I did not.” John whispered back.

Kaidan grinned as he pushed John’s left leg to the side with his knee. “And why did you tell me not to trust Delvin? Is that related?”

John closed his eyes, torn if he should tell him – he wanted to, but could he trust Kaidan? His silence was too long and he sensed Kaidan’s warm body move off him. John sat up in the bed and stared directly at Kaidan’s back. “I’m sorry.” John said, scooting over to wrap his arms around Kaidan. “I just –“

“After all this, and you don’t trust me.” Kaidan sounded sad.

John caressed some hair from Kaidan’s neck and kissed him, feeling goosebumps form under his lips. “I think Delvin forged Anderson’s last will and testament. That’s it.”

Kaidan entwined his fingers with John’s on his chest. “I see.” He said, sounding less sad. “So did he?”

“I think so.” John whispered against Kaidan’s neck, “I had to leave Riften before I could dig deeper.”

“He spoke highly of you, I don’t understand.” Kaidan brought their hands up to kiss John’s fingers.

“He is a master manipulator, my star.” John said. “That is why he is so useful and dangerous.”

Kaidan turned in his seat to pull John in for a kiss, “Why did you leave Riften then, if you did not know I was in Ivarsted?”

John sighed heavily against Kaidan’s lips. “That is a story for another time.” He licked Kaidan’s upper lip playfully.

Kaidan swiftly grappled John’s wrists and slammed him down into the bed while grinning. “I don’t think so.”

John stared up at Kaidan. “Pleasure me with your mouth and I will tell you.” He said, his smile wide and it grew even wider as Kaidan let go of his wrists to undo John’s pants. Kaidan pulled them down over John’s buttocks, and leaned down and licked a long wet trail across John’s cock.

Closing his eyes, John grabbed a hold of Kaidan’s hair. The soft wetness was the most blissfull sensation he could think of. When Kaidan stopped, John looked up at the other man in the dark. Kaidan swiftly pulled John’s pants off, laying down between his legs. John let his head fall down on the mattress again, purring in content as Kaidan took him in his mouth again. John arched his back in pleasure as Kaidan breached him with long cold fingers. “Etienne was killed.” John whispered. John grit his teeth when Kaidan’s tongue curled around the tip of his cock. “I didn’t kill him.” John moaned, Kaidan added yet another finger making John gasp and push down against Kaidan’s hand to get more friction. “Someone else did.”

Kaidan let go of John’s cock for a moment, “Who?”

“I do not know.” John whined when the pressure from Kaidan’s fingers disappeared as well. He opened his eyes for a second and found Kaidan staring down at him, undoing his pants.
“Someone framed you.” Kaidan said hoarsely, grabbing a hold of John’s thighs, pushing his legs up against John’s own chest.

“I know.” John moaned feeling Kaidan fill him up inside, fucking him with such ferocity that John had to hold on to the headboard of the bed, not to slam his head up into it.

John was still catching his breath when Kaidan got up from the bed, he couldn’t muster the energy to sit up. “Come back to bed, my star.”

“I will.” Kaidan said softly. “I need to take a piss.”

John laughed sleepily and closed his eyes. “This has to be the strangest conversation I ever had.”

“And the best.” Kaidan said with a chuckle as he left the room.

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The next morning they were back on their horses, riding towards Dawnstar. “John I have been thinking.” Kaidan said, “the murder and the forgery. I think you have an imperial spy in your midst.”

“Why would you say that?” John asked, not confirming he might have reached that conclusion himself.

“Because it was someone with recourses who did it, someone with money.” Kaidan mused.

“Nords have money.” John argued.

“But Tullius is deadly afraid of the Dark Brotherhood.” Kaidan said, “Everyone knows that.”

John stared at Kaidan from his horse, “I didn’t know that.”

“Maybe it’s just every Imperial citizen.” Kaidan shrugged. “But he is.”

John wet his lips, “So he would have an interest in crippling the dark brotherhood, till it’s ripe for the taking.”

“Indeed.” Kaidan said.

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They arrived at Dawnstar, and slowly pulled their horses by their reins down to the Brotherhood’s entrance. “John, when we are back inside – do we still share a bed?” Kaidan asked.

John took Kaidan’s hand and entwined their fingers. “Of course, you are my star.”

“Is that a Brenton endearment?”

“I don’t know.” John answered flatly, “But you are.” He stopped forcing both Kaidan and the horses to stop too. “You are the brightest thing in my life.”

Kaidan smiled, “I love you too.”

John felt his heart skip a beat, and he squeezed Kaidan’s hand before letting go.

Upon their arrival, everyone wanted to know how it had gone, and Kaidan was quickly swept away by their brothers wishing to know how his first job had been. John turned and went into Anderson’s
study hiding the notes, he still wasn’t sure about anything. He knew that he trusted none, not even Kaidan. Or he didn’t trust Kaidan with the whole truth. Not yet.

“Words travel faster than you.” Zaeed stood entered the room, nonchalantly sitting down on a chair next to the large desk. “I hear someone murdered Etienne.”

John sighed. “It was not me.” He turned towards Zaeed, “Someone went to great lengths to make it look like I did.” His shoulders sagged, “Only thing I know is that it’s not someone from the Brotherhood, they would know not to leave a calling card, and I expect that Mercer knows this too.”

“Calling card?”

John reached for his mug and went to refill it with ale from a barrel in the study. “The murderer placed a handprint in blood on Etienne’s face.”

Zaeed looked confused, “Strange.”

“Indeed.” John agreed. “Etienne was leaving for the Dawnguard, I don’t know why, but either he knew there was a storm coming, or he had grown tired of Riften – I can only speculate.” John took a sip of his ale, “Who sent word to Dawnstar.”

“Devlin.” Zaeed said, “The message is with Kasumi, but it read something like; ‘John left Riften due to mysterious circumstances, please be alert.”

“Sithis cursed.” John growled. “I must speak to the Listener.” He left the office in a hurry, leaving Zaeed behind.

John found Liara in the main hall, preparing food. “Liara, have the nightmother spoken lately.” John asked.

“How to you as well John.” Liara turned around.

“Did she?”

“Yes.” Liara said, “But nothing you ought to concern yourself with.”

“Have she spoken about General Tullius?” John asked.

“No.”

John kicked a chair in frustration, his knees buckled under him and he almost lost his footing, “I feel like I am going mad.” He whined.

“Maybe you should go lie down, I can bring you some food. It has been a long journey, and I am sure Kasumi can manage one more night.” Liara said, quickly extending her wrist to feel John’s forehead. “You’re hot.”

“I don’t have a fever.” John countered sourly.


John sighed, feeling heavy and light headed if he was completely honest. “Alright, but if the nightmother as much as breathes a word about General Tullius, you will let me know.”

“Absolutely.” Liara nodded.
John’s fever lasted for three days. When he came to, the first thing he saw was Kaidan sleeping with his upper body across the bed and one hand barely touching John’s arm.

Kaidan woke the second John’s hand touched his. “You’re awake!” He smiled relieved. “I was so scared.”

John smiled weakly back, “I’m not leaving you yet.”

“I thought you were poisoned.” Kaidan whispered with hushed urgency.

“Can I have some water?” John mumbled, following Kaidan with his eyes as he went to fetch water.

John took the glass and downed half its content.

“I’m so glad you are awake.” Kaidan said moving over to the other side of the bed to be closer to John. He lifted John’s hand in his and kissed it gently. “I should fetch Liara.”

“Not yet.” John smiled sated and happy. His chest and muscles sore from the fever, but he had never felt more alive, to think that Kaidan had worried that much.

It took two days for John to be up and about, he was still feeling weak, which made the worry of Kaidan seem all the more true. Why would someone poison him? The only thing he had drunken was the ale from Anderson’s study, unless it was a slow working portion, then he could have received it anywhere between Windhelm and Dawnstar.

“Vega?” He called, seeing Vega’s shadow in the corridor.

“Yes.” Vega smiled, “Feeling better?”

“Yes.” John said, “I would ask a favor from you. Would you see to it that the barrel of ale from Anderson’s study is destroyed. No one is to drink from it.”

“Of course.” Vega said, “And it’s your study now.”

“Still feels like his.” John admitted.

“I miss him too.” Vega said softly. “And that barrel is as good as destroyed.”

“I think it’s poisoned.” John said, “It is very important that you dispose of it’s content.”

Vega stared at him with utter horror, “Poisoned?” He looked John up and down, “Wait, you think you were poisoned?”

“Yes.” John hushed Vega with a finger against his lips, “You never know who is listening. But I trust you.” He mellowed, “If you wanted the Brotherhood, you would simply have beat me up and sent me on my way.”

Vega shrugged, “Probably.”

John felt like he was going mad, absolutely insane. Was everyone in on this ploy for him to destroy
the last chapter of the Brotherhood in Skyrim? He laid sleepless in bed and stared up into the ceiling, and at that moment it felt like the cave which had always protected him, was his tomb. Like he was buried alive and his wick was running out, and he had to figure out how to survive before it did.

“What are you thinking about my love.” Kaidan whispered, kissing John’s naked shoulder.


Kaidan gently turned John’s head to face him, nose against nose. “Talk to me my love.” Kaidan kissed John lightly.

“All my leads point to General Tullius, He was the one who paid Frorkmar to ferret Anderson out, and probably also had Anderson killed.” John whispered.

“Mayhap a preemptive strike?” Kaidan whispered, “You could go after the General, the world would be a better place without him regardless.”

“Kill General Tullius?” John whispered. “think that would call for someone more skilled than I.”

Kaidan snuck his hand up under the covers to rest on John’s bare chest. “I thought your mission was to revenge Anderson.”

“All my leads point to General Tullius, He was the one who paid Frorkmar to ferret Anderson out, and probably also had Anderson killed.” John whispered.

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“Maybe that is exactly what my enemy expects me to do.” John his his face in his hands, “Sweet Sithis, I am truly losing my mind.”

“You are just under a lot of pressure.” Kaidan said caressing John’s chest, circling his hand lower to his abdomen, “You are not losing your mind.”

“How do I know the spy is not you?” John asked with a tiny, vulnerable voice. “You and your honeyed words.”

“You don’t.” Kaidan said, slowly moving on top of John.

John’s eyes widened with fear for a second, not sure if he was in danger or not. Kaidan just smiled, “My father’s name is Quentin Cipius.” He swooped down to kiss Johns lips, “I trust you, I trust that you love me still, even when you know whom ordered the assassination of Frorkmar.”

This eased John a little, but his heart was still hammering like a rabbits. “I do.” He whispered, “You are my only star regardless.”

Kaidan smiled, “My father is a tyrant, he and I don’t see eye to eye on much. Never did - I was not as fast, as strong or as dumb as my brother. The final straw was when my father realized I would not produce an heir.” Kaidan leaned down and kissed John again, “If anyone wants to hurt you, they have to go through me, my heart. Trust me on that.”

-9-

General Tullius.

How to assassinate General Tullius. John stared at his map of Solitude and Castle Dour; It seemed an impossible task.

Kasumi and Vega came into the study, Vega carrying a plate of food, and Kasumi just hovering. “Solitude?” She asked, before Vega placed a plate in the middle of Castle Dour.

“Yes.” John looked up at them both, “All I have learned, leads me to believe that General Tullius is
“the one behind Anderson’s murder.”

“Do you expect us to penetrate Castle Dour?” Vega asked in a skeptic tone.

“No.” John shook his head lightly and pushed the plate aside, “I am going to penetrate Castle Dour”

“Do not be an idiot.” Kasumi slammed her hand down on the map, causing the plate to jump. “You can’t do that on your own.”

“Kasumi, Vega.” John said as he walked over to fetch the letters he brought home from Riften. “Anderson died on what should have been a minor job. We all agree that it takes more than a drunk noblesman to get the better of Anderson.”

“Yes.” Vega nodded.

“Kaidan was the one asking for the assassination of Frorkmar, he told me that he had done so because his father willed it, it was Kaidan’s ticket to freedom so he obliged. His father is Legate Quentin Cipius.” John’s eyes narrowed staring directly at Kasumi, “He is stationed in Whiterun.”

“Makes sense.” Kasumi said.

“Kaidan and I arrived, we spoke with Vex, and then went our separate ways, I took up business with Niruin because he knows everything that goes on in Riften, and Kaidan with Delvin because he was the one who had called for a contract.” John took a deep breath, “I asked Niruin to find out which of these two was a fake, and to not involve Delvin, because he is the only person I can think of who could have created such a believable fake.”

“Makes sense.” Kasumi said.

“Niruin lends me his personal hideout at the docks, mostly so I would not stumble across Etienne, and cause trouble. Etienne was packing to join the Dawnguard for reasons unknown to me, and I do
not even know if it’s even important. Niruin goes to consult with some Khajiit about the letters, and I am alone. When Niruin returns he tells me that this.” He pointed to the fake letter, “Is a fake” He smiled awkwardly at Kasumi, “Which means that It was never Andersons intention to leave me to pick up his mantle.”

“But how?” Vega mumbled.

“I don’t know, but what I do know is that mere minutes after Niruin returns and asks me to join him, he hauls me to the market in Riften and there lies Etienne, dead. Not just dead but with a bloody handprint in his face.” John shifted and leaned against the table like Kasumi, “This tells me it’s not one of us, because we would never leave a mark like that – this is an imposter working to frame me.”

“You would never kill Etienne.” Vega said.

“No I would not.” John said softly, “Delvin then insisted that I was the only assassin there, even if he had had dealings with Kaidan earlier, and none of the other guild members but Vex had seen us, and Vex was away on a heist.” His voice trailed off, “I don’t know what to make of this.”

“Clearly it was Kaidan.” Vega said in his deep voice.

“No, for when I came to Iverstead, I found Kaidan who told me that Niruin had told him to run once the job was done, and to wait for me in Iverstead.” John argued.

“Kaidan is conveniently gone, and that story about his father sounds suspicious too. John, do not let his brown eyes blind you.” Kasumi said.

“Agreed!” Vega chimed in, “Just because you plough him, does not make him free for suspicion. And someone poisoned the ale in your study.”

“Kasumi’s study.” John corrected him.

“For the love of Sithis!” Vega growled frustrated, “Think with your head, not your cock.”

John shook his head, and took the fake letter and held it in over the candle till it burned. “I do not know if Krios is lying, if this letter did not come from Skald, or if Skald had the forged one. But someone wanted me to be in charge, and went to great lengths to make sure it came to pass.” He tossed the last bit of flaming paper on the floor, “This is why I am the one who has to go to Castle Dour.”

Vega and Kasumi looked at each other. “If we announce that the real testament has been found, the spy might make an attempt at your life.” Kasumi said.

“Then announce it when I already left.” John smiled. He pushed off the table and went to the rack where his knives and bow was neatly on display. He took them down, including the knifebelt and placed them at the table. “These are yours Vega. That was what he wanted.”

Vega looked down at the weapons and up at John, “Are you sure, I have fine weapons as it is.”

“I am sure.” John smiled sadly, “I have my own weapons in my chest in the room that I shared with you.”

Vega nodded, “But if you are going to Castle Dour, at least take the bow, you are a much better marksman than I.”

John reached up and cupped Vega’s head with his hands. “He loved us both like sons, and I am
going to honor his wishes. Take the weapons – *please.*”

Vega sighed “If it means this much to you, I will take them.”

“I am afraid that I must stay here in this room for another night Kasumi.” John said looking down at the map with a fleeting glance. “If I went back to my cot, they would know something was off.”

“You can stay here for as long as you wish.” Kasumi said, “You know that.”

“Kasumi, my sister – it is not my study to have. It was never mine, it was all fabricated by someone who wants to harm the brotherhood. They chose me because I am the poorest candidate to be a leader.” He smiled a little “Maybe it was the nightmothers game as well, the reason she accepted the contract on Frorkmar, to make sure that the Brotherhood would become what it was supposed to be.”

“You would have grown into your boots.” Kasumi said.

“Let me come with you.” Vega said.

“Brother, we both know that once I manage to take down Tullius, the whole city will lock down, and I do not fancy my odds of escape.” John fiddled the string of the bow on the table, “The less casualties the Brotherhood suffer from this, the better.”

“If that is your wish,” Kasumi said, “It is the least we can grant you.”

Vega grumbled something none of them heard.

The three of them went back to the main hall, it had been too long since John had just sat around sharing a drink with the others, listening to their tales of deceit and danger. When he sat there in the hall he found he had missed it, so wrapped up in his own personal revenge. “Where is Kaidan?” He asked Zaeed who lounged in the next chair, sharpening his sword with long strokes on a whetstone.

“He is preparing.” Zaeed answered, “He is leaving for a contract.”

“Already?” John was surprised.

“That was what he said.”

John took a sip of his watered down ale, maybe this was good – that Kaidan was busy and would be gone before John left. If he just kept silent, Kaidan wouldn’t know till it was too late for him to do something foolish, like insist that he’d come too.

“Ah John, there you are.” Kaidan smiled when he saw his lover in the main hall, “That is a rare sight.”

“I know.” John said with a smile to match Kaidans, “I promise it will change from now on.”

“I’m glad.” Kaidan said, “But John, I wanted to ask you where your map of Morthal was.”

“In the study.” John said, “Just left from the door, it’s the longest roll of paper, you cannot miss it.”

“Thank you.” Kaidan smiled cheerfully and left towards the study.

John got up from his chair and jogged after Kaidan, “You’re in a hurry.” He laughed as he caught up the Kaidan.

“I’m leaving tonight.” Kaidan said with a big grin that looked almost proud. “Liara asked me to take
John eyed the map of Solitude on his table, hoping Kaidan wouldn’t read anything into it.

“It’s not far, my heart.” Kaidan said reaching for John’s hand, holding it up to his own chest. “I will see you soon.”

“Yes.” John said, stepping one-step forward and kissed Kaidan with everything he had. “For good luck.” He whispered against Kaidan’s lips.

Kaidan kissed John once more and then let go, he picked up the map and left the study. John stood there and stared at his lover walking down the stairs to the main hall, it felt strange but not sad. He was not going to say goodbye, because maybe, just maybe, he would make it home. Maybe they should go on another trip down south just the two of them, no hurry, no contracts. John took a deep breath and started to prepare for his departure the coming dawn.

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It felt a little alien to carry his own bow again, he had gotten used to the oppressive weight of Anderson’s bow. Only one thing nagged him more than anything, why would Niruin tell Kaidan to go to Ivarsted, and not tell him? It made no sense, was Niruin a part of the conspiracy as well? John had a hard time believing it, Niruin had always been a true friend to him.

John decided not to turn north east towards Morthal, but to continue through the marshes straight to Solitude, there would be less Imperial soldiers there, than on the main roads.

It was almost blissful to ride alone in with his thoughts, knowing that soon all this would be over, and life would be his own once more. He thought back to the days when he and Vega would dare each other to run naked out into the ice cold sea, and Anderson would just huff and study his maps. They had been nothing but big boys back then, it had been fun – even the death and blood, they had laughed in it’s face. They had thought themselves immortal.

John heard the sound of the arrow before he felt Shadowmere collapse under him, he looked up and saw an arrow perfectly planted in the temple of the horse, “No!” He cried, desperately trying to get his foot out of the stirrup before he would get trapped under the horse. He wasn’t fast enough and the horse fell with all it’s weight on his right leg, pinning John between it’s dead body and the ground.

Pain flared up through John’s leg and he was almost sure it was either crushed or broken badly. He Desperately tried to push Shadowmere to pull his leg out from under her. He heard voices advancing, maybe he was in luck that it was a accidental shot and that they’d help him out from under the horse. He could feel bits of his broken bow borough into his back through the leather. He had not travelled a day yet, and already his mission looked to be a failure.

“John Shepard of Riften.” The tall legionnaire blocked the sun with his figure, but before John could say anything, the Legionnaire kicked him in the head so hard John tasted bits of tooth and blood in his mouth. “We finally meet.”

John looked at the imposing man, and something about him seemed familiar somehow. He couldn’t quite place it.

“I am Legate Constantius Tituleius. And you are my prisoner now. Be wise and stay alive for a little longer, filth.” He gestured to somewhere John couldn’t see, “Come move this cursed animal. And get him back to Morthal.” And then Constantius kicked John in the head once more, breaking his nose with a dull crack when the cartilage split.
When the legionnaires finally managed to roll the dead horse off John enough so they could pull him out from under it. John was dangerously close to passing out, the pain in his leg flared and was ten times worse than his face which felt on fire.

The only thing on his mind was how sorry he was that he had not been more vigilant. The legionnaires had to carry him to a wagon, he vaguely registered that they tossed him in the back of it. When next he woke they pulled him off the wagon and carried him to a cell, he registered the bars and the stone floor. His thought was ‘so this is how it ends’, but his mouth was swollen shut. The two Legionnaires who carried him there stood and looked down at him. “We should fetch the healer.” One said.

“Are you mad?” The other said, “I am not doing anything with this prisoner, that the Legate didn’t order.”

“Still, I don’t think he will live long enough for the Legate to even interrogate him.” The first legionnaire said.

“Not our problem.”

The Legionnaires closed the cell door and left John alone. John pushed up against the far side of the cell, looking down at his right leg, he could see that it was badly broken, it was bending in a funny angle it wasn’t supposed to. Still he smiled, glad he had left alone, and that this was just his end, not anyone else’s. He did wish that he had taken his time to say good bye to Kaidan, but what was done couldn’t be undone. He closed his eyes and drifted off into a dream where he and Kaidan was riding in a vast pine forest, nothing but the birds around.

“John?”

John opened his eyes in the vague light, and to his surprise Kaidan stood at the other side of the bars, but he wasn’t wearing his black uniform, he was wearing the uniform of an imperial Praefect. “No.” John felt like screaming and laughing at the same time, like his mind would rise and crash like a wave, splintering at the shore.

“Yes.” Kaidan said, his voice sad and devoid of all life. “My name is Caius Licinius, the Legate who are in charge here in Morthal is Constantius, my brother.” Caius pressed closer to the bars, “I will call for the healer, but this will have to do for now.” He cast a spell and John felt his entire body tingle with a pleasant sensation. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry that he hurt you, and I am sorry about your horse, she as a fine steed.”

John just stared at Kaidan, no Caius, he corrected himself. His long soft curly hair was gone, and in it’s stead was the standard imperial haircut. John closed his eyes and turned his head, unable to look at what he thought was the love of his life, and that too had been nothing but a lie. He couldn’t even comprehend what it meant right now, he just felt pain in his chest, like a part of him died. He didn’t care if Caius was still here, John curled up as much as his broken limb would let him, and cried. He cried for his broken heart, and for his life, how he wish he had spent it differently – and how he wished that he had never believed in Kaidan the one light in his life.

Caius stood and listened to John’s heartbreak for a while before he turned and left silently.

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When the healer arrived to mend John’s broken leg, he refused to move. “What did this to him?” The healer asked prodding John’s leg. “His horse.” Constantius answered briskly.
“Oh, and this too?” The healer turned his attention to John’s broken nose and swollen lips.

“No, that was me.” Constantius admitted. “And I would have done worse, were he not to be taken to Solitude, seems like my father made General Tullius take an interest in this murderer.”

Despite himself John felt all blood leave his cheeks. So that was why the Legate hadn’t just killed him.

“That is enough healer, he needs only be alive.” Constantius said.

“Master Caius said that –“

“Ignore that mewling fool. Will the prisoner live or not.” Constantius barked.

“He will live.” The healer said getting up from his kneeling position at the cells stone floor. “If he is ever to walk again, then…”

“He doesn’t need to walk to hang.” Constantius said with a shrug.

The healer shot Constantius a dirty look and left the cell.

Hours later Caius came back, this time John thought he looked more haggard than last. He sat down on the floor outside the cell and pulled some bread from his tunic, he handed it in through the bars. “Are you hungry.”

John wanted to deny it, but he was famished, he slowly reached for the bread, when he grabbed it, Caius didn’t let go.

“Look at me John.” Caius said softly.

John looked up at Kaidan’s brown eyes and full lips that he had kissed so many times. “What?” John wanted to sound defiant, but he just sounded tired.

“Will you let me explain?” Caius said as he let go of the bread.

John slowly plucked the bread with his fingers, chewing with the side, which was not ruined, he didn’t answer, he just stared at Caius.

“You were so close to the truth, so much closer than you think.” Caius said, his hand curling around the bar. “You would have made a great leader of the Dark Brotherhood eventually.” He paused and took a deep breath, “I never performed the dark rite, and I paid Liara to say the nightmother had spoken to her.”

John closed his eyes, he had not seen that coming at all. He had never in a million years thought that Liara would betray him.

“There were two agendas, that is why it didn’t make sense to you.” Caius said resting his forehead against the bars. “Tullius wanted you to be the leader, thinking that the brotherhood would dissolve itself from inside, if it was left in your care. And that is where the fake testament comes in, that was all General Tullius.” Caius’ hand squeezed tighter on the bar, “my brother wanted to see you dead, and I agreed to help him, because he would make sure that I did not have to marry that terrible woman my father had decided would make a perfect match.”

John pushed the last bit of bread in his mouth, and to his surprise Caius handed him a drinking bladder with water through the bars.
“General Tullius had paid Delvin to make the fake, you were right about that, but he also paid Liara to come up with the Riften job for me, and insist that I do it alone. But by then you had already discovered the connection between Krios and Delvin, so you came along.” He smiled at the memory.

“When we entered the ragged flagon, I did not go to the cistern, I went directly to the ratway and met with Delvin, and I stayed put. He told me about his plot to get to frame you for Etienne’s murder, I am not completely sure why he wanted to kill Etienne, but you were the perfect scapegoat.” Caius looked up at John’s deep blue eyes for a second and then looked down at his own lap again. “I had every intention of telling you to leave Riften when I came to the shack. But you looked so proud of me, I could not say no to playing along.”

“And Vex?” John asked in a whisper.

“Delvin waited in the door to the ratway, and told her he would take me from there, so she went to the cistern, and I would think she never thought twice about it.” Caius explained calmly. “Delvin murdered Etienne, it was not me. There was never a Riften job.” He wet his lips, “Your elven friend was anything but dumb, he figured out that I was the spy – his connections must have been good.”

“They always were.” John said handing the water bladder back to Caius through the bars.

“He left a note in your saddlebag.” Caius pulled a note from his tunic, and handed it to John. It read; 

Kaidan is your spy, watch your back. – N.

“If you had only looked in your saddlebag.” Caius said softly. “I had been in Ivarsted since I spoke to you in the shack. I knew you would ride back the same way.”

In some odd way it made John a little happy that Niruin had not been a part of it, that his friendship with the elf was still intact, and that some things were as they seemed.

“Liara poisoned your ale.” Caius said, “The nightmother have not spoken to her since Anderson died, and she blames you.”

John hid his face in his hands, his savior was also his assassin. It made his head reel.

“I had to lure you out here alone, I knew you would take this mad suicide assassination yourself.” Caius reached for John’s hand through the bars, but John pulled his out of Caius’ reach. “I had to be here to make sure my brother didn’t just murder you. The only reason you are alive is because I sent word to my father and General Tullius that we caught the leader of the Dark Brotherhood.”

John looked at Kaidan for a long time. “You were my star.” He whispered. “I gave my heart to you, and yet you sit here and talk of your betrayal like were it a dinner conversation.”

“Oh John.” Caius sighed, reaching once again for John’s hand, this time catching it. “That part was not the plan, that part was me.” He reached for John with his other hand as well. “I couldn’t change the events, but I am going to do everything in my power to persuade my father to let you go home to High Rock, and I would come with you if you still want me.”

“I like your dream.” John said, “But I am never going to High Rock, and you will not come with me.”

“Please John, I am trying.”

“As my father said, the brighter the dawn, the darker the night. I think I know what he meant now. Kai – Caius, if you wanted to, you could have told me earlier, you could have warned me. I would have forgiven you. I would.” John said pulling back from Caius and pressed again the far end of the
cell.

“I didn’t know – I never wanted it to end, I never wanted you to look at me like you do now. I wanted to share your bed forever and, stay at your side for an eternity.” Caius’ voice broke in a sob.

The door to the cells slammed open with so much force both John and Caius jumped. “Brother, are you making friends with the filth? Wouldn’t be surprised if you allowed it to plough you too.” Constantius stared down at Caius with barely contained anger, “You and your bleeding heart.”

“Brother, I already explained to you that back when Taurinus Duilis was killed, it was still the nightmother whom dictated the assassinations carried out, this means that John was just a tool, someone else wished your friends demise.” Caius argued, standing up facing his brother. Constantius were both taller and wider, but he still took a step back.

“Tool or not, he held the knife.” Constantius said. He turned to John, “The man you murdered, do you know his wife died shortly before, and my wife and I now house his children.”

“No.” John admitted.

“There is always a price to pay, no matter the orders given.” Constantius huffed.

“That is rich.” Caius pushed his brothers breastplate, “You who order droves of Stormcloak soldiers murdered in their sleep, and you who send imperial soldiers to their death.”

“Silence!” Constantius roared slapping Caius across the face.

Caius just stared at his brother, rubbing his cheek.

“We are leaving for Solitude, so finish with the prisoner, and join me for the journey.” Constantius said sternly and pressed a key into Caius’ hand before he left with a huff.

“Let me help you stand.” Caius said, as he opened the door to the cell. He cast a spell once more and John felt the blissful tingle in his limbs. “Come.” Caius swung John’s arm around his shoulder and hoisted him up on his hip. “Once we are in Solitude, I will see if I can find a way to let you go.” He rested his head against Johns for a moment, “That would be my atonement.”

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The trip to Solitude was long and John had far too long with his own thoughts. He still had a hard time believing what Caius had told him was true, that both Liara and Krios had betrayed him, even if it was for two different reasons, and had maybe not even known about each other. John was both glad and sorrowful that he had made sure that Anderson’s wishes was carried out, otherwise the brotherhood would be in sore disrepair, but Kasumi was their matron now, and Vega had Anderson’s weapons. John decided that was his legacy, the one thing he had done right.

“Soldier.” John asked.

The legionnaire riding in the back with him placed his helmet on the hay between his feet. “Yes?”

“Who was Taurinus Duilis?”

The Legionnaire looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then apparently decided to answer since he leaned closer to John and whispered. “The Legate in Morthal before Legate Constantius, rumor has it they were childhood friends. I would not be surprised if they tortured small animals for fun.”
John nodded, “I see. Thank you.”

So that was why, John had carried out a contract on Constantius’ childhood friend. But how did Constantius know it was him? Liara would have been the only one who would have known.

They arrived in Solitude, and John had never seen anything like it. Tall houses made of stone, and almost everyone wore fine clothes, most certain not a city of farmers.

His eyes caught the scaffold, one noose dangling in the wind, and he could only assume it was his. It was so long since John had felt fear, pure raw fear, but now it pooled in his stomach and flushed his organism like diving in ice. The romantic notion of a suicide mission was always followed by the dream of a narrow escape. Where he was he saw no escape.

He saw Caius and Constantius ride in front, they got off their horses and greeted an older man, John could only assume this was their father, the cart took a steep turn and his line of vision was cut off by a brick wall. He was escorted out of the wagon and carried to a cell deep in the bowels of Castle Dour, and the poetic justice of it all was not lost on John – he had made it to the castle, like he planned.

The dungeon was full, but oddly silent. All John heard was sniffling and someone crying from afar. So this was how it ended, everything Anderson had warned him about when he was a boy, everything he had tried to shelter him from by giving him skills and tools – and he had to go let his cock lead him straight into a trap. John laughed softly, it was a maddening thought – those whom he thought he could trust had been worse betrayers than the spy. He took a deep breath of the piss-scented air, the spy… He didn’t know how to feel about Kaidan, the man whom never existed. He wanted to believe his honeyed words, he wanted to believe that what had been between them had been true, and that Kaidan would free him and come with him. Kaidan had no reason to tempt him, there was nothing that John knew that Kaidan didn’t, and all John had to look forward to was a hangman noose. But for all that, John didn’t trust him. He felt all empty inside, not even like when Etienne which had broken his heart – he felt nothing. There was nothing to feel, and no reason to do so.

When Caius came to see him, even in the dim light John could see he had been crying. He didn’t need to ask why, because he knew.

“The general.” Caius whispered, “He said he is going to make a statement out of you, that you being here is a gift from the Gods.”

John sighed, fear mingled with apathy as he looked up at Caius, “shame that.” He whispered back.

“Are you listening?” Caius asked, clearly upset. “They are going to hang you dead.”

“That is usually how a hanging goes.” John answered back, shuffling to get to his feet, keeping all his body weight on his good leg, and used the wall as his crutch to slide over to the bars where Caius stood. “You make a terribly spy, Kaidan.” He said.

“I know.” Caius laughed softly through his tears.

John reached a dirty, grimy hand through the bars to Kaidan, who took it in his soft, clean ones. “If you ever thought anything of me, you will leave my friends alive.”

“I promise.” Caius whispered. “I decided that… that when you,” he paused and squeezed John’s hand, “I am going to join the Dawnguard.”
“I wish you had done that to start with.” John said with a little smile.

“Me too.” Caius whispered with a disappearing low voice.

For a while they just stood and looked at each other, several times Caius opened his mouth to say something but no words formed. After a while he finally managed to whisper “I was such a fool, I thought I could make everyone happy, my father, my brother, me and you – I did this to you.”

“Your brother would have found a way eventually.” John answered, “Your involvement just hastened the end.”

“I… I – think you are right.” Caius admitted. As the door opened to the corridor he was standing in, he turned his head and saw a delegation of his fathers soldiers.

“Praefect Caius Licinius.” One of the soldiers said as they stopped right at John’s cell. “We have orders to take the prisoner, I ask that you step aside.”

Caius looked at John, and then let go of John’s hand and stepped aside to let the men inside the cell. A soldier held John up, supporting him from both flanks, and thus escorted him out of the cell and up into the bright sunlight. John closed his eyes as the rays blinded him, he could hear people talking and yelling and the further they through the city the higher the sound of the crowd became.

For a moment he dared to open his eyes and looked straight at the noose dangling in the wind, his eyes focused solely on the rope, blocking out the crowd. Not that he wanted to look at them anyways, he could only imagine what they had been told about him, they were hardly this angry about a Legate from another town. He knew intellectually that he ought to be contemplating life, or mourn the chances he would never get, forgive his trespassers – here at the end of his life. But his mind was empty like the void, he couldn’t collect a single thought other than staring at the dangling rope swaying gently, wondering how much it would hurt, funny being afraid of the pain more than death.

A strong arm yanked him up on the small platform, and John almost stumbled. “John Shepard.” The older man that John had thought was Kaidan’s father, said. “You have been found guilty of murder, and will hang by your neck till you are dead.”

John looked over at Kaidan – Caius, walking up the stairs to the platform too, flanked by three legionnaires. He looked more scared than John felt.

Cold hands placed the noose around John’s neck, and he closed his eyes taking a few little panicked breaths. He heard the arrow before he saw the impact, his eyes opened wide and he turned towards the sound, it was his executioner that collapsed behind him, and confused yelling erupted behind him. He heard another arrow splitting the air close by, and heard the crowd scream as Constantius fell off the platform with an arrow straight through his right eye. John’s hands had not been tied hard since the binds had been to please the crowd, more than the purpose of immobilizing John. He effortlessly wiggled out of the binds and pulled the noose off his head. He turned to Caius who pointed up at the rooftops, John turned his head and saw Vega stand up there with Anderson’s bow.

So the milkdrinker had followed him anyway, and thank Sithis for that. John looked up at the scaffold and realized that Caius was wearing heavy parade armor, he would never get up on the roofs with him, wearing that. “Meet me at…” Another arrow split the air close to John’s ear, and lodged itself in Caius’ shoulder.

“Go!” Caius groaned.
John grit his teeth climbing the scaffold, his leg was far from healed, suddenly he felt his body go all tingling and warm, and for a split second he looked down at Caius who just smiled at him. Magic, he would never get used to it.

Jumping from the scaffold to the roof of the nearby house, he was met by Vega who pulled him close. “We have to make ourselves invisible, right now.” He pulled John along, “Come.”

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Hours later they were slowly riding through the planes. Vega’s plan had worked and they had gotten out of there, and managed to get the horses that was waiting for them. “Vega..” John said softly, “How did you –“

Vega turned in the saddle, “I had some days to prepare while you were in that cell under Castle Dour.” He shrugged, “But I suppose that is not your question.” He smiled, “I saw what happened, and I followed you to Solitude to kill Kaidan. I was thinking that if I could not save you, then I could kill the traitor.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No I didn’t.” Vega agreed, “I was waiting for him in his private chambers, and I gave him a chance to explain himself – not entirely sure why I did that, it felt right.”

John adjusted himself in his saddle, his leg burning fiercely now that Caius’ spell was gone. “I’m glad you did.”

“Kaidan and I made a plan, a stupid and dangerous plan, but the only one we could come up with.” Vega sighed, “Not sure I trust him.”

John lowered his head and nodded. “I made a mess of everything.”

Vega stopped his horse, and grabbed the reins of John’s horse too. “You did not, Krios and Liara did, the second they sold out a brother, Sithis will punish them somehow.” Vega looked long and hard directly into John’s eyes, “The fifth tenet, remember? - Never kill a Dark Brother or Dark Sister. To do so is to invoke the wrath of Sithis.” He smiled, “And that was exactly what the both of them were trying. I must admit that the brotherhood is better with you not at it’s reins, but I never wished you dead, I just wished you would become the man and the leader we needed, fast.”

John nodded, and then frowned, “I am not going back with you.” He looked out over the planes, studying the lonely trees in the distance. “I cannot go back after all I have done.”

“I wish you would come back, you are my brother, and you are a truly gifted assassin.” Vega said, “But I knew you’d say that, so I took the liberty of making plans for you.”

“Plans for me?” John looked back at Vega, confused.

“You are to ride to Whiterun and wait, Kaidan will come meet you there – or that was what he told me.” Vega said, his smile grew as he saw the happy smile on John’s face. “I still do not trust him, but you seem to, even after everything that transpired.”

“The Dawnguard.” John whispered as he nodded in agreement.

Vega chuckled, “yes.” He placed a hand on John’s knee, “I am sorry to lose a brother, but the Dawnguard will be better for it.”
“Thank you.” John said, “I will write you, maybe we can go drink some ale once I am all mended.”

“I look forward to it.” Vega said smiling. “Now, ride to Whiterun and I will go home and talk to Kasumi. She would want to know what happened, and that liars and traitors are in our midst.”

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The Bannered Mare. It had been John’s hideout and prison in one, for the last month. He had reluctantly begun making preparations for leaving towards Fort Dawnguard alone. He had been waiting for Kaidan for weeks, and in the end he had lost hope that Kaidan would come. Maybe he was dead, maybe Tullius had discovered the plot for the escape? And maybe Kaidan had just told Vega that he would join John here in Whiterun to make everyone happy, but never intending to keep that promise. Once a liar, always a liar? John looked at his saddlebag, he had everything he needed for the trip south.

Tomorrow I leave, he told himself – like every day for the last week. And instead he went to the market to purchase some potions that allegedly helped his leg. The healer had said he would probably always walk with a limp, but the pain should vanish completely over time.

The sun was shining, and the city of Whiterun was calm as ever – not counting the lone zealot always spreading his message at the market. He went across the market place towards the magic shop when something caught his eye. A unruly mass of black curls, could it be? John turned and stared at the man coming up the alleyway from the main gates. It was! He would recognize that face anywhere. Suddenly he was unsure of what to call Kaidan, was it Kaidan or was it Caius? So he just yelled, “Hey stranger.”

Kaidan looked up and saw John, relief was written across his face.

John had lost hope for a moment, but when he wrapped his arms around Kaidan, and kissed him, he knew - They were here.

And the future was theirs to be had.

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