Letters to a Stranger

by minorthirds

Summary

Fifty-some-odd letters, and he had not yet finished the one that mattered most before the return of its intended recipient.

Fury.

It bore repeating.

Notes

hey it's me! back at it again with no self-control!

a solid 90% of this fic inspiration came from the fact that i play aymeric at citta-alveare (yup, that's me!). i have an ongoing thread with violet evergarden, which led me to think about letters and xiv canon and i turned into an emotional mess as i often do and this appeared.

i have no idea how long this is gonna be but i'm thinking somewhere in the ballpark of 3-5 chapters? it depends on how much i feel like dying.

i won't keep you for too long prattling on about my own stuff. without further ado, please enjoy!
The night streets of the Pillars were quiet this evening.

For months it had been certain that he would hear footsteps outside approximately once an hour on
the hour, either Temple Knights intent on the route that had been fresh-penned to include multiple
loops around the manor house, clandestine lovers making use of the night hours afforded by the
new absence of the curfew that had defined all their lives, or residents of the Brume grown bold
with their new truth – Ishgard’s new truth – venturing into the kingdom of their “betters”, their
brothers, with quiet feet and quieter breaths.

Tonight, however, there was no sound but the guttering candle, the fire crackling in the grate
behind him, and the soft snoring of Ser Pawvien in an armchair facing the blaze.

He was not sure which he preferred. ‘Twas true the clatter from out-of-doors would distract him
from his work, but he found in time that the pattern of interruption was conducive to stretching and
pacing ‘round his room to gather his thoughts.

Once a week for over a year. Fifty-some-odd letters, some more quickly populated than others, a
hurried scrawl filling two pages front-and-back with more words besides to describe the
happenings in Ishgard or scarcely half a page of merely the most salient points, depending on the
topic. Not that he was ever wanting for news to discuss, only that he was mindful of the interests
of his audience.

Fifty-some-odd letters and not one in direct response, only once a solitary few lines penned on
vanity Hingan paper that was as brightly-colored as it was fragile.

(That one was kept in a drawer of his desk, nearby his own stack of parchment, and every time his
eyes chanced upon it he was seized with both pleasure and sadness – a queer mix alike to
nostalgia.)

Yet he would not cease his self-appointed task, certain that wherever he is, Estinien is receiving
each letter. He could not afford to be uncertain, else the doubt would cause worry to consume him
– of course the dragoon could take care of himself, but for the man to be so utterly beyond his
reach...

A flash of dragon-fire, blood-red mail across his mind’s eye, and Aymeric’s hand dragged hard
across the page, crossing a t with far too much force.

Discouraged by the sight, he closes the letter with more careful words and strokes.

Neatly in the bottom right, the closing read:

Yours faithfully,

Aymeric de Borel.

The candle, valiantly burning upon the top of his desk, was used to heat the wax for the seal –
perhaps too formal a measure, or perhaps not formal enough, considering that the letter contained
(in well-coded terms that the dragoon himself would be sure to understand) fair details about the internal affairs of their nation. Nothing too sensitive, of course – he was not that foolish – but he supposed that if Lucia were to discover the contents of these letters, he would be met with stern chastisement at the very least.

The wax was poured gently upon the folded envelope, addressed on the back to Estinien, care of Bokairo Inn, Kugane, Hingashi. The seal was pressed into it forthwith, the seal of house Borel, and then it was set aside to dry, the flickering candlelight casting odd shadows upon the slowly hardening crest.

His work completed save for seeing the letter into the morning post, he instead reached for another, sturdier piece of parchment, littered with multitudes of ink blotches and hurriedly scratched-out phrases.

Tired eyes fell upon these mistakes, the evidence of a frantic, muddled mind, and he found that the events of the day left him with little energy to continue his work; phrases such as “My dear friend”, “I trust this finds you”, and “I have news that might” were blotted over with heavy black pools, recognizable only to his own eye for having known which words he had chosen before better sense took hold of him, and the fact that he was still left bereft of the right words to convey the turmoil within his breast was just as wearisome to him as the grueling demands of the day-to-day of Ishgard’s Lord Speaker.

“Tomorrow,” he said aloud to himself.

Tomorrow.

The letter was mailed.

Lucia gave him another of her Looks as he returned from his mysterious “errand”, to which he could only respond with a wry smile. Of course they had their secrets from one another, despite what many of the gossipmongers might suggest; and he especially so, secrets he had breathed nary a word of to another soul, alive or dead.

So he smiled his wry smile, and she took the sentiment at face value and turned on a heel, and they both went about their business – and if there was a richer, rarer label on the bottle of birch syrup that accompanied his tea as a gesture of goodwill, neither would remark upon it.

“Why are we offering further aid to Ala Mhigo?” one of the lords interjected – a representative of House Haillenarte, yet a man he did not recognize, for it seemed the majority of the House had
fallen victim to a bout of illness of late and had had to utilize the most tenuous of relationships and flimsiest of favors to maintain a presence in the House of Lords – scarce a moment after he had finished speaking. He had but lain out the plans for the next few months as proposed by the heads of the Eorzean Alliance, which included a scant amount of aid, determined as the Ala Mhigan Resistance was to stand on its own legs. The assistance proposed by the Alliance amounted to, gil for gil, simply a cost reduction on the materials and labor pledged to the Resistance – yet, it seemed, anything less than market value for such goods and services was altogether unacceptable to the lords and ladies of the House.

“Have you forgotten the state of our own coffers?” another interjected – House Dzemael this time.

“We cannot pledge all of our resources to the aid of a foreign power while Foundation is yet—”

“Does the Resistance, nay, the Alliance think us a bank—”

“And what of our men? We are too short on able-bodied men to possibly—”

“That is quite enough,” Aymeric said firmly, bringing a sudden halt to the rising voices around the chamber. “You all know as well as I—”

*That it’s the right thing to do.*

Such an argument would not hold water with such people.

“—That we can ill afford to stand divided, now of all times. The Empire will cast its gaze upon us once more, and when it does, I would not wish to see the land many of our brothers – many of us – fought to liberate lain out before them as a welcoming tapestry to all Eorzea. The sooner our realm might present itself as a united force, *stronger* for its suffering, the safer we all – each of your wives and children, and each of *their* wives and children – shall be.”

Quiet mutters around the chamber as each dissenter swallowed his argument, though none spoke openly against him, and for that he was thankful. He found himself wishing for Estinien’s presence, despite the man’s hatred of politics: perhaps a firm verbal boxing ’round the ears would convince the House of Lords to accept even a single proposal without dozens of barbed responses from his more public declaimers. Just once, he wished, uncarrying of how selfish it was, he would like to see the dumbfounded expression on each man’s face – even Lord Baurendouin’s third cousin or something to the like, as he now recognized the representative de Haillenarte to be – to receive as reply the sharp tongue and crude words Estinien found most pleasurable to employ in the company of the High Houses.

Just once.

“You cannot expect us to donate blindly,” one of the older lords began, quietly at first but gaining in confidence, “to such an endless cause as we ourselves face.”

“Nay, I cannot,” Aymeric agreed. “What our Ala Mhigan brothers and sisters lack for coin they more than make up for in strength of spirit. To that end, I would propose...”

Such were the trials of the Lord Speaker – and such were his thoughts, having transformed the world around him but harboring an avaricious desire for more than that, such a desire as only man could have.

*Just once.*
The shadows grew long, and he found himself once more at his desk, the heavy parchment splayed upon the top, his ink and quill sitting ready if a little emptier from Ser Pawvien’s bout with the feather, as described to him with some amusement by his manservant upon his return home for the evening.

Possessed of a stronger will, what with his success this day gaining ground with the House, Aymeric lifted quill from bottle and scratched out an opener.

*Estinien,*

*My dearest friend.*

Crossed *t,* period. He sat back to examine the phrase with distance.

It was progress.

*It is my hope that you will forgive* –

No. He dragged the quill through the beginnings of a sentence far too *groveling* for the tone he is seeking.

An exhale.

What arduous work this is, he thought.

*It is my hope that you will consider,* he began again, *the entirety of what I intend to expl*—

A sharp knock at his bedroom door jolted him as he wrote, causing him to start and his quill to scratch down the page for several more ilms, the *L* descending like a dread dragoon’s lance unto the breast of some poor dr—

*Tap, tap.* Another pair of raps at his door.

Aymeric set the parchment aside, careful that his inkwell might cover the words, half-dried already because of his hesitancy.

“What is it?” he said, standing and opening the door.

Ser Pawvien darted between his legs and those of his manservant to escape the room, unhappy with the lack of food in the warm quarters and off to hunt for stray mice.

“My lord,” his manservant replied with a bow, holding out a sealed envelope. “Post for you. Please pardon the delay, I had happened to overlook—”

“That’s quite alright,” Aymeric interjected, halting the man’s sincere yet overwrought plea. He took the proffered letter with a small bit of confusion; it bore not the seal of an Alliance missive, nor any house he would recognize.

In fact, if he was not mistaken, the disfigured wax seemed almost to match...
“From Kugane,” his manservant supplied helpfully. “Dated two weeks ago.”

Aymeric nearly closed the door in the man’s face but jerked his arm to a halt at the last moment. “My deepest thanks,” he said through the small gap, appalled by his own behavior and hopefully presenting as sincerely as he felt. “Good night.”

“My lord.”

The door was shut, and then locked, and Aymeric nigh fell against it, his thumb already popping the wax seal upon the envelope – *his own seal*, pried free of his own letter and melted again to affix a seal upon this one.

At least one of his letters had reached their destination.

He found a tightness in his chest at the certainty he could now possess without fear. Estinien had been listening.

He fumbled open the envelope with numb fingers, making his way easily through the crisp but scant lines.

_Aymeric,

I sail for Limsa Lominsa at dawn tomorrow. Circumstances permitting, I will return to Ishgard in two weeks’ time.

I expect upon my arrival a round of drinks in my name and a colorful story or two about the salacious dalliances of the young nobles. How I have missed those.

And to the far right,

_Yours faithfully,

Estinien._

Aymeric sank an ilm or two further down the door, feeling as if the letter itself had punched him square in the right lung. Estinien’s dry humor was palpable even through his sharp script, and he had not realized until now just how much he had missed that wit at his elbow more hours of the day than he had ever truly been thankful for.

With a jolt, he stood full to his feet, pacing quickly to his desk to lay out both the letter and its envelope, searching the back of the latter for the postmark –

*Two weeks previous.*

*Two weeks’ time.*

“Fury,” Aymeric breathed, sitting heavily in his chair.

Then Estinien might arrive any day, at any hour. And he was most certainly not prepared for the immediacy with which he would be interacting with the dragoon – not while the heavy parchment yet sat under his inkwell, mocking him in its inadequacy.

_Fury._

It bore repeating.
One of the drawers of his desk lay half-ajar, the contents of which caught his eye from where he sat.

The single other letter he had received from Estinien, on Hingan flower-printed paper, filling him once more with a bizarre complexity of emotion. Longing and dread.

A queer mix alike to...

The word loomed in his mind, yet he refused to address it, refused to countenance it. Instead, with careful hands, he collected the newest letter and its envelope and set them both within the drawer, closing it gently.

Aymeric de Borel sunk his head into his hands.

Fifty-some-odd letters, and he had not yet finished the one that mattered most before the return of its intended recipient.

*Fury.*

It bore repeating.
II

Chapter Notes

this train never stops

let's hope i can keep updates this regular, considering in about five days my irl schedule goes straight to hell.

please enjoy!

There had been a squire posted alongside the guards to the Gates of Judgement with explicit instruction to alert Aymeric the very moment Estinien returned to Ishgard. He could hardly wait by the gates like some heartsick wretch awaiting news of a soldier, after all.

Instead he found himself, on the second day of this arrangement, waiting in his office to the same effect, powering through cups of syrup-laced tea and veritable mountains of paperwork; his small victory had assured him a few moments’ rest from the grueling affair of making a case of moral piety to an ensemble of overindulgent gentry, yet even as he made progress in one field, another – the duller of the two – begged for his attention.

His internal clock had been well-trained to the precise interval at which he was best served by taking a walk to gather his thoughts, or at the very least stand from his seat and stretch the aching joints that complained of too stiff a posture.

Upon one of these walks, he had returned to his estate to fetch the disastrous draft of the letter, thinking to progress further on the work between thirty-page proposals. On some level he knew it was improper of him to mix personal affairs with those of state, but on another... the dread with which Estinien’s impending return had suffused him would scarce abide by such an argument.

So it lay, both physically and temporally, between stacks of parchment upon his desk, while he himself stood for a spell, ostensibly intending to take a moment to check in with Lucia – while he had not formally vacated his seat as Lord Commander, his second-in-command had taken on the vast majority of his responsibilities and become de facto Commander. Such an arrangement behooved them both, as well as the state, though the circumstances being what they were he was ever more certain with each passing day that he was not the only element dragging his feet, so to speak, on the process of relegating him to a different desk in a stuffier building for the vast majority of the next few years.

Perhaps Lucia would miss him too. Perhaps she would take up his habit of long walks and mysteriously disappear to the Pillars between meetings for a round of tea and words, his treat.

He hoped. She was a dear friend to him, after all, and he would miss the constancy of her no-nonsense attitude.

She was a dear friend, and yet he could not in good faith call her the dearest—

A knock on his office door jarred him from his thoughts in a cruel reminder of several nights previous, and Aymeric paused in the process of refreshing his mug of tea.
“What is it?” he asked, finishing the process of carefully refilling the mug with hot water from the carafe he kept near his door before setting it aside to meet the knock.

He found at that moment he was thankful that he had set the mug down ere he had answered the door.

“My lord,” the runner said, “the Azu– er, the man of whom you wished to be informed is just recently come through the Gates of Judgement.”

So. The moment had come.

Dread and longing suffused him in equal measure.

He would take a few moments to conclude his work, he thought, and then set off to find the man. It seemed likely he would gravitate towards one of his particular favorite haunts, of which Aymeric could name three: the upper balcony of the Forgotten Knight, the Last Vigil overlook across the abyssal chasm that encircled the city, and–

Lost in his own thoughts, he had forgotten the runner still stood at his door ‘til the man cleared his throat.

“My lord, if that is all—”

“Ah, yes, it is, thank you,” Aymeric said quickly, aware all-too-suddenly of the talk that would circulate were he to appear outwardly as distractible as he felt. Many of the men who had espoused the old order had not quite taken to him despite the unanimity of his election; these men would see him rise and then fall like a meteor to the earth, and ’twould be a simple matter of rumormongering to evolve an image of him characterized by overwork and a feeble mind – if not to convince his supporters of its verity, then at least to stand as counterpoint to his praise, the better to sow doubt in the minds of all.

“Then I shall show him inside forthwith,” the runner said, bowing as he exited.

“Hold a moment,” Aymeric interjected before the runner could close the door behind himself. “He is here?”

“Yes, my lord. The message I was instructed to pass along to him was of your request for his presence at his earliest convenience.” The young man, who had hastily straightened from his bow, shifted his weight onto his opposite foot as if nervous. “Should I have not? Lady Lucia bade—”

“No,” Aymeric interrupted, but gently, well aware of the young man’s plight. “No, you accomplished your task admirably. Thank you. Please tell Estinien I would be glad of his presence.”

Another bow.

The heavy door shut.

Aymeric spared a moment to wonder at the situation. What had Lucia intended by changing his runner’s orders? Did she know? She couldn’t – even had she beheld the draft of the letter, it was –

_The letter._

He crossed his office in several paces, sweeping the parchment under a heavier stack just as the door swung open again, the loud and low _clang_ of the latch being lifted and dropped to swing
around and smash against the underside of the latch’s settling point echoing through the room.

He knew without looking up. How customary of Estinien to make as much noise as he could before stepping into Aymeric’s office, as if to alert him to and prepare him for the other man’s presence.

The door closed once more with a heavy thud.

Steeling himself, Aymeric looked up from his desk.

Had he had another century to prepare, he still would not have come away from the scene entirely unaffected. Estinien leaning against the heavy door with his hair hanging free – or in a loose braid, as it were, freer than he was used to seeing – and his eyes less tired than Aymeric had ever seen them to be, a large and full-looking knapsack dangling from one hand and his lance strapped to his back, was altogether a sight that, prior to the end of the war, he would have thought impossible.

“My friend.” The words felt strange in his mouth, as if he had begun to shape something else. “You are returned.”

“I am,” said Estinien, and the sound of his voice both twisted and relaxed something in Aymeric’s chest.

He had to wonder why Estinien would not interrupt the moment as they looked at each other. Perhaps for him as well, words were insufficient for their needs.

Suddenly very self-aware, Aymeric stood straighter up, lifting his hands from his desk. “I daresay a stuffy office is not quite the welcome you deserve. Shall I inform Lucia of my departure? A round of drinks is mine, I believe.”

Estinien rolled the shoulder holding the knapsack as if it were stiff. “Nay, Ser Aymeric. What would your noble charges think were you to desert your post for a single man? You’d be the talk of the tea for weeks.”

Despite the statement, Aymeric smiled, sensing an intent on Estinien’s behalf – or at least perceiving one – to return posthaste to such banter as was their normal. “Estinien. Are you suggesting that I am not already?”

In response, the dragoon offered an answering smile. Both the fact and the sight – such an expression appearing quite at home on his once-humorless face – brought another sensation of tightness in the chest upon Aymeric; Estinien had been gone a year and returned changed, it seemed, for what Aymeric could only hope was the better.

“I merely took a detour on my path to the inn, Aymeric. There is no need to put aside your work.”

The inn? Of course Estinien would likely no longer find his quarters in the barracks palatable, but to pay coin a night for a room as if he were a traveler – “Whyever would you stay there, my friend? Ishgard is your home.”

The other man didn’t return his stern gaze, looking instead at the mug of tea steaming merrily away on the carafe stand, the one Aymeric had poured for himself but moments before Estinien’s arrival.

Silence stretched on for a few beats, a silence during which Aymeric became aware of the elevated rhythm of his heart. Why? The reaction confused him.
“An offer, if you would humor me,” he then said. “There are chambers aplenty in my home. I had taken the liberty of preparing rooms for you were you to ask, but it seems I am better suited to the initiative.”

“Aymeric, you are generous to a fault—”

“Hardly,” he interrupts, the tone of Estinien’s voice alerting him to the impending rejection. “Ishgard is your home, Estinien, and I will do whatever is in my power to make it feel as such.”

“I see,” came the reply, and Estinien finally met his eyes; his gaze was not sharp, merely... melancholy. “Then I would be glad of your hospitality.”

At the acceptance of his offer Aymeric fought the urge to exhale, a sudden inexplicable weight lifted from his shoulders. Only once the moment had passed did he realize the cause for his concern – were Estinien to reject his help, by extension reject him...

It would have been unfortunate timing.

His thoughts turned to the letter buried under the stack of paperwork, still leagues from a respectable product, and could not fight the downward twitch of his lip.

Estinien was right: though he might wish it, he could not abandon his work to gallivant about the city like a fourth son lent his father’s purse for the market for one man, Estinien himself or no.

Aymeric’s gaze lifted to Estinien’s once more, and this time his expression was happier. “My manservant will guide you to your chambers. I shall return in the evening, but do not feel any obligation to delay any prior engagements for the sake of my entertainment; we shall have our drinks when you wish it, and not a moment before.”

“You overestimate my popularity,” Estinien said lowly, but nodded in agreement. “Fare thee well on your,” and this was said with a glance at the veritable tower of parchment, “endeavors.”

“Do not worry, Estinien,” Aymeric said with a grin, “my distaste for such busywork is, as always, eclipsed by your hatred of it.”

“A vile invention,” he answered in kind with a shudder. “’Til then, Aymeric.”

The door shut behind him with much less noise and ceremony than it had opened before him, and at the final-sounding thud Aymeric found himself collapsing into his seat, breathing heavily as if he had taken a sudden sprint ’round the entirety of the city.

Oh, Halone, he thought to himself, settling one palm against his mouth. He truly was a mess in the company of the man, as he had feared he would be – time apart, and time alone with the decade-long realization he had only happened upon in Estinien’s absence, had left him ill-equipped to resume as if the man had never left.

In addition, he supposed it would only get worse with each moment he delayed the inevitable; once he had penned the letter, left it in Estinien’s care, he could prepare himself for the resultant cold treatment, and over time (over a long span of time) he hoped the wound would heal. Yet ‘til then it could not – ’til he took hold of the dagger buried inside his heart and wrenched it free, the muscle and tissue would continue to grow stronger around it, around the foreign intrusion making his chest pain so.

He wished it had never appeared.
But, he supposed, tugging the marred parchment out from its hiding place, such was the nature of hardship: it was not received with joy, but moved through with joy.

Aymeric only wished the Fury had seen fit to bestow upon him one less trial.
"imma keep this regular! [doesn't do that]\"

sorry, i'm here again, back with some more tooth rotting garbage.

enjoy!

It was for no idle reason so many of his fellows berated him for his tendency toward overwork; often did he burn to the stub several candles over the course of a night's work, and many were the folk who haunted the Forgotten Knight in the late hours of the evening that espied the Blue leaving the offices of the Temple Knights but a few bells before sunrise. In such a context, he supposed it was rather evident that his desertion of his post at a reasonable hour was a cause for concern.

Sers Handeloup and Lucia were the most obvious in their critical stares as he bade his farewells for the evening, though if he were of the mind to be full honest, he would admit that his attention to the exchanges had been poor. Plainly, there was something else on his mind altogether.

The odd acquaintance on the streets between the Congregation and the Pillars called a greeting and he rose a hand in response in each instance, though in the other was held a single piece of parchment which kept captive the greater part of his focus.

He had in the very moments following Estinien’s departure taken the paper from its hiding spot under a rather dull summary of the reports of the Alliance lookouts from Porta Praetoria; it was hardly of any relevance of late and thus remained at the very bottom of a heavy stack of papers that Estinien may as well have been allergic to for his distaste of the subjects. Lucia, however, was not as averse, and he had cause to believe she harbored suspicions as to what may have been on his mind regarding the man in question, so it was for that reason he chose to keep it on his person. It was not that he distrusted her. Rather that… well…

For a man of his class and station to harbor feelings such as his, feelings that nigh made a requirement of such a delivery as a letter, was ill-advised at best, scandalous at worst. Little was the care for the gender of one’s partner — the high-roofed chapels of the Holy See had stood witness to an uncountable number of such unions, and he had faith the chapel in the Twelveswood had as well — but… as viscount of House Borel, to raise an heir was expected of him. As Lord Speaker, the height of good conduct was in turn. As Lord Commander, the object of his affections ought lay outside the immediate realm of his influence.

He could nearly hear Estinien, telling him to hells with “should”s and “ought”s. That the business of his life was his alone, sod all that might insist otherwise.

Yet in the year of Estinien’s absence, Aymeric had changed, too. Whatever his feelings on leading his people, he had accepted the station and all it required. The decay of the Church’s hold on politics had left him with a near- papal respect; he was no Archbishop, as all were aware (he had ridden on the back of a dragon, for the Fury’s sake), but the sudden vacuum in the wake of the death of even the seat of Archbishop required something to fill it.
There would be chatter if he were to wed even the most inoffensive noblewoman, that much was clear. Yet the uproar that would be sure to follow were he to…

He could not permit himself to finish the thought. To even entertain the notion of marrying the man he had loved for ten years, even if the depths of his feelings had remained unexamined by even him until Estinien’s sudden absence drove the dagger into his chest.

How weak the sight of Ishgard must be to ignore its darling’s open wound, he thought wryly, standing before his estate with his face turned upward as the last of the day’s clouds passed between the pale sun and the gleaming rooftops.

In the sitting room, upon the sofa, lay the still form of a dragoon, an arm cast across his eyes and his chest moving slightly with the passage of his breath. Upon his breast was curled the fluffy white shape of Ser Pawvien, his head tucked into the crook between Estinien’s neck and shoulder.

Errant motes of dust danced in the wintry light filtering through the panes of glass that remained so dutifully clear despite the room’s disuse, no doubt due to the loving touch of his manservant, and Aymeric closed the door gently behind himself before coming to a halt in the hallway, startled by the ache in his chest and the lingering feeling of itch and moistness at the corners of his eyes.

Estinien had arrived late enough in the day that the cook had not been able to procure the necessary ingredients for a feast suitable to welcome him, as the man told the two of them with a hurried bow and a flush. Aymeric looked to Estinien across the table, over the spread of steinbock flank stew and sourdough loaves, as the latter raised a hand to halt the frenzied apology.

“I am hardly the most distinguished of the Lord Speaker’s guests,” he said with a tilt to his mouth that seemed indicative of a smile, though not as freely given as the one he had reserved just for Aymeric in the privacy of his office. “This is a far sight richer than what I’d have made myself in the wilderness besides. Words cannot well express what a joy it is to simply be enjoying the fare of my home once more.”

Not nearly as to-the-point as Aymeric had expected from him; though he was gladdened by the sentiment nonetheless, offering an encouraging smile of his own to his cook when the latter looked to his lord for confirmation.

“Estinien is not a man to allow decorum to color his opinion,” he added with a glance to the man upon whom he remarked, one that was met only with the raising of a singular white eyebrow. “And you may rest assured I am in agreement. It is fine work as always, Eaunoux; thank you.”
Eaunoux accepted the sentiment with a quiet “my lord” and fell to the task of filling their goblets with red wine, attempting to hide the glances at Estinien that seemed laced with both fear and wonderment.

When the young man had left them to their meal Estinien sat back with a quiet laugh, raising the goblet to his lips. “For all my assurances he kept staring at me as though I was about to demand he resign his position. Am I truly so intimidating?’

“You are mistaken,” Aymeric said with an answering small smile, tearing a loaf in twain, the better to slather on a healthy spread of yak butter. “Those glances were not so much terrified as starry-eyed; he was enamoured with you.”

The smile he affixed as he spoke the words kept hidden the unease at speaking them, though even so it seemed Estinien held some qualm with the sentiment; the latter merely mumbled “Is that so,” into his goblet before setting it down and tucking into his meal in sudden silence, any trace of mirth banished from his visage.

Aymeric had meant to invite Estinien to the tavern following their dinner, but the sullen mood continued to pervade even when they together finished the bottle of red and a modest handful of tarts. With nary more than a polite word, Estinien excused himself to bed, and Aymeric found himself sitting in solitude to watch the flames guttering in the grate for some time, joined some time later by only one Ser Pawvien, who leaped into his master’s lap and cozied himself there, the soft purring the only sound but for the shifting of logs as they burned.

The day that followed broke overcast with snow-bearing clouds; it was the holy day of rest, but Estinien declined an invitation to join Aymeric for the Mass at Saint Reymanaud’s Cathedral. There were a multitude of reasons that might have combined to elicit that response, but Aymeric found himself dwelling overlong on the decision. Even as Temple Knights they had attended together; it was in the spirit of that tradition that he offered, and to have such declined after the events of the disastrous dinner gave him cause to worry that he had offended Estinien with the suggestion that a handsome young man like Eaunoux might have had eyes for him.

By the end of the service he had all but convinced himself that such was the order of events, and he had resolved to apologize upon his return — before Edmont de Fortemps placed a hand on his shoulder in the vestibule of the Cathedral, bringing him to a halt and causing him to turn with a surprised greeting upon his tongue.

“Ser Aymeric,” Lord Edmont began before he might speak the words he had prepared, “I fear the other moon should fall and reveal unto us a moogle of preternatural strength ere I were to gain your attention.”

The confused glance of one eavesdropper was lost on Aymeric as his jaw slackened, bereft as he was of a suitable response. “My apologies,” he said at last. “I have been… distracted, of late.”

“A result of your dogged determination to work yourself half to death, no doubt,” Edmont said darkly, though his tone brightened after the words, having come as close to admonishing Aymeric
as was appropriate in a space such as the Cathedral. Yet more rumours might take wing upon the observation that Edmont’s concern for Aymeric bordered on the fatherly, and Aymeric appreciated the decorum exercised by the man.

Mayhap he was too preoccupied with gossipmongers and their ilk… but the worse extreme was to ignore them and damn himself to an abysmal public image. He had no doubt Estinien would have qualms as well with such a mindset.

And with that errant thought, he had come around once more to the beginning.

If Edmont noticed the sharp downturn to Aymeric’s lips he did not remark upon that in specific, though he did at least make clear that Aymeric ought to visit his home in a handful of hours; according to Edmont he had been rather starved for stimulating conversation since ceding the affairs of House Fortemps to Artoirel, and Aymeric’s presence at tea would be sorely missed on such a dreary day.

When such was said to him, there was little Aymeric might do but accept the invitation… though perhaps the company would be exactly suited to soothing his nerves.

Lord Edmont’s idea of a leisurely teatime activity seemed to be a rousing game of chess. The gracious host unpacked and displayed the glass board and metal figures upon a table next to a window that overlooked the Last Vigil, the outer battlements of the city usually visible from the vantage point obscured by the thickening snow.

With a knowing smile Edmont had his manservant fetch a bottle of birch syrup for his esteemed guest, and Aymeric had at least the good grace to look abashed as he stirred in no less than three spoonfuls of the substance, the soft clink of his spoon and the metal pieces with their felted bottoms sometimes striking an edge against the board breaking the silence wherein they thought upon what they might discuss.

“Now then,” Edmont said, seating himself after having positioned the pieces; it seemed one side was wrought of darksteel and the other of aurum regis, the dark grey and luminous red-pink eliciting Aymeric’s curiosity as to the reason for the choice. The thought was no more than an errant one, one to fill the space between Edmont’s words. “Governing a city-state is thankless work, my boy, and I must tell you I do not miss it one ilm; yet my retirement is a sure way to ensure I am not privy to any but the broadest and most urgent news. How fare the Houses? Threats of mutiny, perhaps?”

Aymeric smiled, though around this man he need not take the precaution of pretending it was not pained. As they began to play, he told of his recent endeavours to pass measures proposed by the Alliance in the interest of aiding Ala Mhigo; from Edmont’s expression it was obvious that the man was not at all surprised by the muddied, dug-in heels of his peers. They had been like this for a long, long time, the both of them knew, and it would take more than a year to change the minds of all those that relied so strongly upon the old ways of thinking. They might be forced to admit Ishgard was part of a larger realm when it came to her external threats, her foreign endeavours, but the buildings and firmament of their home had not changed — why should their minds?
Edmont seemed to detect the frustration Aymeric had inadvertently allowed to surface, and as such changed the topic, moving one of his dragoons several spaces; Aymeric’s eyes lingered upon the figure, its tiny spear gleaming in its gauntleted grasp (the detailing of these pieces was superb, he had to admit).

“Yet despite the challenges the House of Lords presents, they are ever the same as they were,” Edmont said, setting the piece down at its destination; its position left one of Aymeric’s pawns threatened, and he weighed his options, both in terms of the game and Edmont’s statement. But the man was not finished. “Something else occupies your thoughts, ‘tis plain. My ear is yours, should you have need of it.”

Aymeric took a few moments to collect his thoughts, settling on moving the pawn out of harm’s way, content that no other pieces would be endangered by the action. “I’ve,” he began softly, releasing the piece with some hesitance, “harbored sentiments I wish to express to the person that elicits them, and I seem unable to find the words.”

To discuss such a thing with Edmont stoked a fear in his stomach, but the other man was good, was kind; he would not pry, and he would not think any less of Aymeric for his concerns, which might amount to some as a display of Aymeric’s weaknesses. Whether he could keep the person to whom he referred vague enough, however… he would have to be very careful.

“How might you seek to tell this person?” Edmont asked, regarding the board as he sipped at his freshly warmed tea, as black as his lined coat.

“I have decided on a letter,” Aymeric said. “I wish to allow them the chance to reflect upon what such sentiments might mean for the future of our relationship, for good or for ill.”

Edmont made a soft noise, reaching for a pawn. “Do you have cause to suspect a poor outcome?”

To describe the details that elicit his concern, Aymeric would have to reveal the identity of the person; Estinien’s marked distance, the ways he has changed, the entire situation with Eaunoux… each only made more firm his decision. He hoped Edmont did not think overlong on the halting pattern of his words. “Perhaps,” he said, watching Edmont settle his pawn and reaching for one of his knights. “Yet I wonder if it is my caution that convinces me. I do not wish to undermine the respect I have worked to obtain—”

“Their respect?”

“The people’s respect.”

Edmont raised his eyes to Aymeric’s at that, an obvious frown on his face. “And how might the people be deserving of your consideration in a private matter that hardly concerns them?”

Aymeric placed his knight as an excuse to avert his eyes, reaching for his cup, which had gone cool to the touch. “I find it difficult to separate my private matters from my station,” he said after the pause. “What fragile authority I command is wholly reliant upon the opinions of the people.”

Edmont lifted his queen. “The people will not soon forget all you’ve done for us,” he said, eyeing the board, “their temperaments wholly notwithstanding. The character of whomever you have found worthy to hold your heart is unquestionable; you are a good man, Aymeric, and the people know that.” He placed her a few spaces away. “That is check, by the by.”

He had been too distracted to realize the opening he had given Edmont, and he took a long span of seconds to reevaluate the board and his own thoughts. He had only a pawn to move to delay the
inevitable; his king lay trapped between walls constructed of his allies, much as his own thoughts and concerns and preoccupations had been taken apart by scarcely a few sentences from a man who was more a father to him than the father he felled had ever been.

Aymeric moved the piece and shook his head slightly. “You are right,” he admitted, “as always, Lord Edmont.”

The man smiled back at him. “You are wiser than you believe,” he said to Aymeric. “You knew what I would say ere I said it; you simply needed me to.”

They finished their tea and their match, Edmont having soundly defeated Aymeric and sporting quite the collection of pieces as a result, and Aymeric aided him in the repacking of the set, handling each piece as if it were made of ice.

“Thank you,” he said at the door, “for everything.”

Edmont inclined his head, shaking Aymeric’s hand with a smile. The door in his grip, he paused as Aymeric descended the stoop, the cold snow tangling into his hair as he pulled his coat tighter around himself.

“And Aymeric,” Lord Edmont de Fortemps called, careful that no passersby stood witness to what he was about to say, “mayhap you ought to finish that letter of yours before the good ser dragoon wanders off to the next continent.”

The flush washed across Aymeric’s cheekbones as he gaped at the words, left in the snow with only Edmont’s jolly laugh as he closed the door behind him.
Scarce had the heavy door closed behind him, sealing him away from the chill bluster, the swirls of half-formed flakes, the watchful, inquisitive eyes, before his manservant appeared from another wing with the celerity of one who had been pretending to not be waiting for his master's return.

"My lord."

Aymeric had only a few times in his life been unable to read the expression on the man's face, and most of those instances had been before the death of his father -- the man who had been more of a father to him than the one who had sired him, at any rate.

"Celimbert?" Aymeric paused with one arm half-out of the alpine coat he had drawn around himself before departing the estate just after dawn, alone. "What is it?"

"My lord, Ser Estinien -- he is gone, left before the midday bells. He did not leave a note, nor do I know if he will return in time for supper, and Eaunoux has been most insistent that I inquire--"

Aymeric held up a hand, the better to slow Celimbert's deluge of words before the tightness in his chest aided in drowning him. "Did Estinien leave his things?"

Celimbert hesitated a moment, then shook his head. "He carried only his knapsack and lance, and neither were in his quarters when I tidied up."

"I see." Aymeric could only sigh. "Thank you for the report."

Perhaps, he fancied as he hung his damp coat and marched stiffly down the hall towards his own quarters, he had not sounded as distant and as cold as he felt, that he sounded like the Lord Speaker rather than Lord Commander: accepting without reaction the news that Estinien had left the front at Ghimlyt, once again marching off to Halone knows where for another year after having only whetted Aymeric's appetite for more of him.

And he fancied, as he closed his door behind himself and paused, feeling the crumpling of his heart begin in earnest, that his reaction to the news did not speak plain what he had tried for a year to put ineffective, loathsome words to.
He might have stood there for a minute or an hour, such was his inattention. Lord Edmont's words circled in his mind like stray flakes caught in the lee of an archway, transforming with each repetition, each revolution, from gentle mirth to smug prophesy. "Before the good ser dragoon wanders off," he had said, while it had been happening at that very moment.

He no longer gave quarter to brashness and impunity—the wound of a dear friend's loss ached anew in his breast at the thought—but he could not help but wonder if his hesitance had cursed him to another year of melted wax patches and ink splotches in the dark, of half-formed thoughts denied of the purpose and direction he refused them, musings and fantasies upon the silk of Estinien's hair, the warm and rough calluses on his storied hands—

Aymeric sat at his desk, rifling through parchments for his battered and bludgeoned "working draft", if he could call it that. He found it tucked under an Alliance missive—why had he left it in a stack of resolved business? —and glanced over it with weary eyes, unseeing, as he had long since committed the page to memory.

Another sheet crinkled as he moved his left hand, and Aymeric stopped cold at the sight of it. A folded piece of paper had been haphazardly tossed upon his desk. He never folded paper until it was into an envelope. Someone else had been in his things.

The mottled and marred parchment was unceremoniously shoved in a drawer, and Aymeric fumbled open the note, a troubled frown creasing his face.

Aymeric,

As sitting in the window like a damsel awaiting her gallant rescuer has never suited me, I have gone to attend to some errands. There are people back home I mean to visit.

You may tell Eaunoux that he will have his chance to impress me at supper tomorrow. I wouldn't dream of denying him his fun.

As for you—I know you will be worrying. Don't. There is no wild beast that threatens me now.

I'm still looking forward to those drinks.

Estinien

So he had left a note.

Celimbert left his desk well enough alone, knowing that Aymeric had a system of organization that was perplexing at best to others, and so naturally he looked elsewhere.

Estinien, on the other hand, held little regard for such complex things; further than that, he meant to prove just how much Aymeric relied on work to keep him occupied, assuming (correctly) that
his desk would be the focal point of his attention upon his return.

It gratified him to know that Estinien had not left, not truly. He had always been the spontaneous type, and Aymeric knew that that about Estinien would never change, even if he had perhaps gained some significant insight or revelation from his time abroad.

It seemed that Aymeric's cook had caught Estinien's eye, as well. He only observed the fact; he dared not reflect or remark upon it for fear of misconstruing some vital detail. Yet even were he to do so, whatever trepidation he might admit to feeling would be entirely immaterial to his own situation; he harbored no illusions as to the outcome of confessing his attraction, and hoped only that the resulting discomfort and distance would be temporary as they both worked to move on from the encounter.

Perhaps if he continued to repeat that sentiment to himself, his heart would fall in line sooner or later. And if an ember of hope continued to smoulder in his breast, then of course it was the relief that Estinien would come back. That alone was more than he could have wished for.

He ought to have known that where every other inquisitive eye had glanced over him none the wiser, Lucia's would catch on his frayed edge, the worried seam that threatened to unravel him at the soonest snag.

"Lord Commander." She intercepted him just as he had reached the jamb of the heavy door of the Congregation, but moments before he could make his escape. And as he turned and met her gaze, he attempted -- and failed -- to conjure a suitable explanation for his abandonment of his post.

Lucia looked at him, and he looked at her, and her severe expression, once permanently engraved into her features, softened nearly immediately. As if she had read every concern, every frustration, every fear that had gripped him for the entirety of the day (and far longer besides).

"Go, then," Lucia said with a smile. "And see to it that you return only when your affairs are in order. No sooner."

"Lucia, I—"

She held up a hand, and he entertained only briefly, wryly the notion of reminding her that he was her superior officer. Despite whatever protests he may make, she would carry on with her brusque compassion exactly as she saw fit.

And he would not have it any other way.

"Begone with you," she shooed him. "I will keep things well in hand here myself. And if I catch you trying to sneak back inside, by the Fury—"

"I would not dream of it," he assured her promptly, though they both held in full knowledge that he had before and would likely do so again.
Her narrowed eyes were crinkled at the corners in the hint of a soft smile as he closed the door behind himself, the winter winds winding through the gaps in his armor and setting him swiftly to shivering.

Perhaps he might do with a flagon of mulled wine.

Gibrillont had furnished him with two, despite his complaints, waving him off with a smile and an assurance that "they're on the house, so long as you keep making sure none of your Knights mess around in my fine 'stablishment".

Aymeric had been young himself, of course, and he knew his predecessors had cared little for the feelings of those who kept their homes and businesses in Foundation, but -- surely what he had done to codify and enforce higher expectations of his men amounted to but drops in the bucket compared to all the work that remained. He had spent long nights awake, staring blankly out at dark and snow, pondering just how far the Temple Knights had fallen, what realities his eyes had been opened to in the wake of the Dragonsong War -- whether he could be doing the right thing by working to create change in the existing order rather than simply starting anew.

To say nothing of the resistance he would meet, especially in the House of Lords, were he to propose such a thing. The Knights began as an order of second-born sons, those children of noble houses who had little fortune to inherit but much pride to gain, and to retire such an institution was tantamount to spitting on the last relics of Ishgardian nobility.

Such purposeless musings aside, of course, Aymeric was pleasantly surprised to discover his words and actions had left some sort of mark on the Temple Knights. Perhaps it would behoove him to sit at Gibrillont's bar and trade words over ale on how he might better serve the tavern, central as it was to the Brume.

He had not consciously chosen, nor fully intended, to wander in the direction of the Arc of the Worthy, but he found himself there—beside a guttering brazier at the head of the steps—receiving only a glance and returning a simple nod as a silent exchange with the pair of Knights stationed to guard the gateway to the Steps of Faith.

'Twas but a bell before supper, and Estinien had promised.

Mayhap he understood the knowing look Gibrillont had given him, slid over the freshly-mopped counter along with the second flagon.

If the guards were wary, suspicious in the presence of their Commander, they hid it well, carrying on their murmured conversation with little regard for their audience. He was not here for them, and from the way he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and worked to relax his shoulders rather than square his jaw and stand stiffly at attention, he assumed it ought to be obvious that he had no intention of exerting authority over them.

Noise of some kind preceded the shapes crossing the abyss; at first indistinguishable sounds of metal armor, resolving—to his alarm—into the shouts and curses of a scuffle.
The outer gates opened, and the pair of guards drew together at the inner gates, blocking Aymeric's view of the situation. He strode forward, reaching only the foot of the stairs before the gates swung wide.

In the grip of two Knights, kicking and thrashing while they braced their gloved hands on each of his arms, was Estinien.

His teeth were bared like a wild mongrel, and his eyes were wild, unfocused—had he been struggling all the way across the Steps?

"What is the meaning of this?" Aymeric demanded, as Estinien's captors dragged him up the stairs without sparing him a glance. At his words, Estinien's gaze snapped to him, his resistance faltering easily by half at the sight of Aymeric.

"Get them off of me," he growled, deliberately catching a boot on one of the stairs, the better to make his escort stumble.

With the opening, Aymeric shouldered past the two men and stood before them, barring their way; if not for the flagons of wine in his hands, he would have rested a hand on Naegling's pommel, staring each of them down with clear indignance.

"This man is the Azure Dragoon, and my guest besides, and you will unhand him at once."

One of the guards blinked and looked at Estinien, and then back to Aymeric—doubtless he had failed to realize, given that Estinien had only ever worn his helmet while holding that title (and as Estinien's expression told him, he was about to have some words for Aymeric as to how he had relinquished his post before he had left, but Aymeric didn't much care for splitting hairs at the moment) —but the other only glared right back at his Lord Commander.

"This man is no Ishgardian. We found him consorting with dragons, and when we detained him he rounded on us with the fervor of a crazed animal."

"Consorting with dragons is no longer a crime," Aymeric rebutted, his jaw tightening. "Surely this is all some misunderstanding."

"Maybe it’s not to you," the guard snapped back, "but there are still sane people in this city and I'll be damned if I let you turn them all into dragon-loving heretics."

Aymeric felt as though he had been slapped. The smug grin on the guard's face evidenced that his reaction was obvious.

"Get out of my way," the insubordinate Knight bit out, grabbing Estinien by the forearm and yanking him forward, followed by the clearly conflicted-looking accomplice, who chose then to set his jaw and keep marching. "We've a traitor to clap in irons."

"I ought to have you clapped in irons for this," Aymeric returned, shouldering past the lead guard with little care for how the wine in his flagons sloshed out and splashed across the man's chainmail, across the tabard that he wore. "I am your commanding officer, and this is insubordination--"

"You're no commander of mine," the Knight spat, figuratively—and then in a literal sense, turning his head and spitting in Aymeric's general direction, even as he kept marching.

Aymeric stood frozen beside the brazier, its heat ignored by the numbness in his arms and in his chest. He ached to dash after the pair with his blade drawn, but—there was naught he alone could
do that wouldn't aggravate the situation further. It was already disastrous, but... how many people shared that man's opinion? Where was drawn the line between insubordination and rebellion?

The nation was still too fragile. He could not afford the division, lest the tentative rapport devolve into chaos.

And were he to treat Estinien as the damsel he clearly wasn’t—he recognized the difference between a token resistance and a genuine one when he saw it, coming from the dragoon—it would take considerable effort to earn back forgiveness. There was a reason that Estinien allowed himself to be dragged away, and Aymeric meant to find out why.

The two guards that manned the gate seemed to be talking about what had just occurred, given their furtive glances in his direction. They seemed, however, to hold no animosity toward him, as they stood promptly at attention when he stepped in their direction.

"Resume your posts," he instructed, and he winced at the defeated croak that escaped him. "None of this is to be discussed with anyone else. Understood?"

It would hardly stem the rumors that were sure to fly, but their earnest nods put him a little more at ease.

With the wine-soaked tabard of the soldier -- the spattered crest of House Dzemael -- committed to memory, Aymeric began his slow march home.
A sharp rap sounded on the door.

The obvious ring of gauntlets on metal filigree set his stomach to rumbling; it seemed Lucia had trained him as well as she trained her dogs, that he recognized the sound of her fist as an indication of food (oft when she interrupted his thoughts and his work in such a way, it was to bring him a morsel to forestall his inevitable collapse from overwork).

Following that train of thought, of course, delayed his response to the signal, and he had only half-risen out of his chair before the rap was repeated, this time louder and accompanied by Lucia's strained-sounding voice.

"Lord Commander."

"What is it?" He had moved to the door in less than a moment once her distress had become apparent. It was hardly that he wrenched it open, but she still seemed startled -- perhaps it was by his rather haggard appearance, dark circles under his eyes and a pinched sort of look to his visage.

(He had hardly slept the night previous. There had been much to haunt his thoughts.)

"Ser," Lucia saluted him, having recovered herself quickly -- or so it appeared, but Aymeric knew her formality to be further evidence that all was not well.

"You have a visitor."

That response... had not been what he was expecting.

"Of what sort?" Could it be House Dzemael sending him a runner with their ransom demands, or whatever they had chosen to call their "terms" for Estinien's release? Aymeric's favor in some impending matter of great contention -- the Restoration Project, perhaps, though whoever had plotted this little gambit of theirs ought to be aware that the matter was to be handled solely by committee --

"Vedrfolnir."

His lips parted as though to give a cursory response, but he found he did not have one easily on hand. Vidofnir he may have expected to drop in unannounced, as she seemed to delight in the chaos that ensued in the wake of her great shadow dappling the Pillars... but try as he might, he could not raise a single concern that may have warranted the wyrm's attention.

It was rude of him to deliberate on suppositions rather than meet his guest, he realized, feeling as though his thoughts waded through snowdrifts taller than him twice over. "How long has he been waiting?"
"Not a few minutes," she assured him, likely registering the paleness of his complexion as concern over the delay -- it was, in fact, a steadily rising sense of horror, but he would rather be promptly thrown over Witchdrop than clarify the exact reasoning for it. "He caused quite the commotion when he arrived in the Forum."

Oh.

Oh, dear.

"Thank you, Lucia. I will see to it at once." He slipped past her, and she followed him out-of-doors at a respectable distance, calling to errant Knights to explain the situation lest the fervor result in an ill-placed arrow or the drawing of blades.

"Vedrfolnir," Aymeric greeted, halting before his guest a dozen paces away with a respectful incline of his head. "I welcome you to our fair city. Tell me, what matter brings you here? I presume 'tis an urgent one."

The great dragon—smaller slightly than his sister, Vidofnir, though larger than any wyvern he might have slain during the war (the idle thought prompted a twinge in his stomach)—lowered his neck and shuffled his taloned feet, stirring some broken cobbles and erring dangerously close to the stone rim of Saint Valeroyant's fountain, the better to meet eyes with Aymeric.

"We are well met, son of Thordan," the dragon greeted.

(One of these days Aymeric would have a conversation with Vidofnir along the lines of "proper greetings"; being reminded of his father every turn of the moon did little to simplify his already complex feelings for the now-deceased Archbishop, the difference between him and the long-dead King Thordan of course notwithstanding.)

Vedrfolnir let out a warm chuff of air alike to a snort, setting the longer fringes of Aymeric's hair to stirring. "Urgent, perhaps, though not quite so serious—you may dismiss that frown of unease."

Startled, Aymeric did just that, a rather embarrassing look of surprise rising to replace it, and Vedrfolnir rumbled deep in his chest.

"I have come to believe you may be wanting for a change in perspective." A jerk of his scaled jaw towards the curve of his back, the dip behind his shoulders. "Fancy a ride?"

"I—" Aymeric could not help the way his throat closed in surprise, but he cleared it loudly, feeling a faint flush creeping up his neck. "Come again?"

Vedrfolnir did as best an impression of rolling one's eyes that a dragon might do, which amounted only to staring blankly at Aymeric, waiting for him to comprehend what he had failed to. Yet the dragon took mercy on the man, who had passed far beyond perplexed, unaided by the handful of pressing burdens that had occupied the forefront of his attention since the night before; the haphazard direction of his thoughts had left him unable to devote more of his mind to the present, and here he was at the logical outcome of such a state—failing to follow a rather important conversation.

Thus Vedrfolnir took mercy upon him, and he chuffed at him once more. "I have matters I wish to discuss with you—in private. Come."

Ah. That would make sense, wouldn't it.

A dozen or so Temple Knights watched in mixed awe and revulsion as Aymeric approached the
dragon's flank and did as he was bid. He'd done it thrice before, but never while so frightfully aware of the gazes upon him; he secured his grip in two places, one of Vedrfolnir's spines and a ridge of bone at his shoulder, and hefted himself up rather gracelessly. Just like riding a chocobo, he kept telling himself -- and perhaps it was, if a chocobo were capable of slicing his nethers to bloody bits with one misstep.

"I take it you have somewhere in mind," Aymeric mumbled once he had properly situated himself.

"Indeed," Vedrfolnir said, raising his wings—with enough clearance to not take the statue of an Ishgardian saint with him, thankfully. "I am always prepared."

If Aymeric had had a response, it went unspoken, forced back into his chest with the rest of his breath as Vedrfolnir tensed his haunches and leaped, up into the clear blue sky.

All of Ishgard would know of Vedrfolnir's appearance by nightfall, Aymeric knew. Bigotry aside, to engage in what could be referred to "cavorting about with a foreign dignitary", both the finer points of the situation and Vedrfolnir's own wishes wholly aside, would be looked upon with disapproval by anyone who happened to be in requirement of something to be disapproving of. Aymeric was far, far too used to being so closely observed, but at present he could do without the impending uproar.

Silently filing away a reminder to thank Lucia for her continued and valued help in managing his public image, Aymeric let his gaze wander to the peaks and valleys of Abalathia's Spine that defined, in sharp contrast, the border between land and sky.

A conversation up here would be impossible; Aymeric could hardly hear himself think over the wind whipping in his ears, chapping them more ferociously than some of the fiercer Coerthan blizzards. All he could do was lay braced against Vedrfolnir's neck, clinging to the dragon both for dear life and as a breaker against the wind.

A low rumble, deep in Vedrfolnir's chest that Aymeric felt rather than heard—the dragon tilted one wing, setting them to a slow, wide downward curve.

It seemed they had arrived at their destination; they had flown east, towards the expanse of tundra Ishgard had not laid claim to since before the Calamity. 'Twas not for lack of trying, of course—they simply did not have the resources for resettling such a stricken area, not while embroiled in a thousand year war.

Estinien had come out this way, Aymeric recalled. To visit the ruins of Ferndale, his home. And then he had been "arrested" (kidnapped, more like) for consorting with dragons by men wearing the uniform of the Temple Knights, only with the crest of House Dzemael on the livery. Who were those men, and what were they doing so far east of Ishgard?

For that matter, why had Estinien consented to his kidnapping? It would have been beyond simple for him to overpower two typical Knights. Even before the Eye had chosen him, he was a brutal force of nature on the battlefield, and now...

There were just too many questions for him to be able to come up with a logical narrative, a version of the story that would make perfect sense.
Vedrfolnir alighted in the snow and Aymeric nigh on tumbled from the dragon's back; his thighs and back ached from the awkward position, and it took him a moment to realign his joints in the proper positions. They stood on a bluff overlooking the burned-out remains of an abandoned village, and Aymeric knew without a word just why they had come.

"He was speaking with you, wasn't he?" Aymeric spoke, turning from his view of what was once Ferndale and meeting Vedrfolnir's eyes from a handful of fulms away. "When he was here... when he was taken."

"He was not." Vedrfolnir's answer was direct, though not crisp. "He has cultivated a strong bond with a pup of my brood—Orn Khai. The two traveled together during their time in Othard, and it was the good dragoon who aided my mate in recovering from her madness. It is because I owe him a debt that I have brought you here."

"What do you mean?" Aymeric crossed his arms, both to ward away the odd shiver and because the shift in Vedrfolnir's voice was apparent to him, even if its cause was not.

"I am come to warn you."

Yes. He had recognized the trepidation, the unease.

"He is... changed. One cannot expect to remain the vessel of Nidhogg for upwards of a year and emerge from the experience wholly unscathed."

These, too, were things he had already guessed.

Estinien would not have complied with his capture if he believed he was in the right. He had felt as if he had done something wrong, as if he had committed a crime to warrant the punishment.

Changed or not, however, he was still Estinien. Even if he was a stranger... he was not one.

"I tell you this out of compassion for him," Vedrfolnir said, looking past Aymeric and at the ruins of Estinien's childhood. "The hate and rage that so consumed Nidhogg, that murdered his brood and destroyed what he loves... it is a part of him. He cares for you, and I doubt not but that he wishes to protect you."

Aymeric was silent, allowing Vedrfolnir's words to ebb and flow around him and through him, the better to comprehend—the better to immerse himself in feelings Estinien would never share with him, could hardly bear to experience and comprehend himself.

Even charred to oblivion some of the structures yet stood; Aymeric fancied he might be able to pick out Estinien's house, knowing what he does about him. He was a shepherd, an older brother... the only survivor when Nidhogg razed his town, him a hill or two away with his flock, helpless to protect himself, let alone his family.

Some time later Alberic found him, in a state so sorry the man feared for the boy's life.

That was all he knew.

"If your love is as great for him as I believe... you must let him go."

Aymeric did not turn. "I have never said those words."

Vedrfolnir did not respond; it was not a denial.
"I love him," Aymeric said finally. "I have loved him for ten years, and I will love him for dozens more." His heart felt lighter as he gave voice to the sentiments he had breathed nary a whisper of for a decade. "Perhaps it is not my love my dearest friend requires of me -- perhaps it is bravery. Perhaps it is mercy."

When he turned, the sunlight struck Vedrfolnir's silvery scales just so that they glinted in his eyes; he was reminded of drawn blades and spear tips, of Estinien coming to Aymeric's rescue and he to his, over and over again, as they had for so long that Aymeric could hardly become acclimated to a life without Estinien in his shadow or in the frame of his window.

He looked Vedrfolnir evenly in the eyes as he gave his response. "Whatever it is I must do, I will do it, and gladly. If it is his wish—he need only ask."

Vedrfolnir studied Aymeric, and Aymeric stood rigid. He would not, could not, allow for another to take Estinien's freedom from him. He had given up on Estinien once before—presumed to decide for him that he should die a puppet, a slave, for fear he would never be anything but. Never again, he had vowed. Never again would he allow his faith to be shaken by anyone other than Estinien himself.

He'd done the impossible—he'd come back.

Compared to the full weight of Nidhogg's mind, what could possibly pose Estinien a threat?

"Very well, son of Thordan," Vedrfolnir acquiesced, dipping his haunches once more. Their conversation was over. "I have repaid my debt. Your choices are yours alone to make."

The flight back to Ishgard was silent but for the roar of the wind and the even louder rumble of Aymeric's thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

can't have ishgard fics without the dragons, amirite

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