Semper ad Meliora

by Erandir

Summary

Idhren was born a slave, and from birth was told that was where he would remain for the rest of his life. It was all he ever expected, until he develops a quite unexpected talent for magic. The first mage in his pedigree for generations. But an elven mage, a slave granted freedom on account of his potential, must still scrape and claw for the recognition that his human peers take for granted.

The road toward happiness is long and full of pitfalls. At times it can be difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's there, though, and anything worth having is worth fighting for.

Notes

Warnings: Depression, suicidal thoughts, self harm mention, rape, underage, physical abuse,
emotional abuse, racism, misgendering, intersexphobia, transphobia, homophobia, minor character death, substance use/abuse.

I swear the majority of this is not as bad as that huge list of warnings makes it sound. The worst stuff happens off-screen.

Idhren is pronounced *ITH-rehn*
Prologue; Endless Possibilities

And His Word became all that might be:

Dream and idea, hope and fear,

Endless possibilities.

- Canticle of Threnodies 5:1

Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:27 Dragon

The first time Idhren set foot outside his master’s estate he was thirteen years old, and he was to be granted freedom. Freedom was something that Idhren had never contemplated before, at least not seriously. He had been born a slave, and until a handful of days ago he had fully expected to live the rest of his life that way. That fact had never bothered him at all. In fact, Idhren thought that he was incredibly lucky. His master was not cruel; did not harm his slaves without reason, ensured that they were fed every day, and even allowed them a half-day of rest every week. Certainly, Idhren could have been born into the service of someone much worse.

And of course Idhren had magic.

Four years ago, at the age of nine, his gift had made itself known. He had been playing with his elder brother, Sahren, in the dirt yard outside the slaves’ quarters. Four years older, Sahren’s longer legs were always able to outrun Idhren’s, which made games of tag terribly frustrating. Especially when Sahren kept taunting him, letting Idhren get just close enough before dashing out of his reach again. In one last desperate attempt to catch his brother, Idhren leaped forward to tackle him, missed spectacularly, but found that somehow one of Sahren’s feet had been frozen to the ground.

The ice melted quickly in the oppressive Tevinter heat, but not fast enough to escape notice. That very day Idhren was removed from his family and herded into his master’s great estate. He was not so young that he did not realize what he had done. In Tevinter, everyone wanted to be a mage. Mothers prayed that their children would be gifted with magic. Anyone would consider Idhren lucky, but at the age of nine, standing in the great hall of his master’s gilded mansion for the first time in his life, being prodded and questioned by the human servants, Idhren did not feel lucky. He felt scared.

Idhren never returned to the little dirt and plaster hovel that his family lived in after that day. He was sent to live with the house slaves, he was given new chores, and he was ordered to spend five hours each day being tutored in magic by another slave.

Alvinius was also a mage. For twenty-five years he had served as the master’s assistant in matters that required magical knowledge. But he was getting old now, dark hair going grey at the temples. (Lucky, most slaves do not live long enough to see themselves grow old.) He was a good teacher, patient but strict. He taught Idhren to read and write and to control the power at his fingertips.

In four scant years Idhren surpassed the skill and power of his instructor. That was the first time he met his master.
He was tall, or so he seemed to Idhren at the time as the young elven slave stood ramrod straight in the library, barely over five feet tall and impossibly thin. In contrast, Magister Linus Canidius absolutely dwarfed the young elf in height, width, and magnificence. But Idhren’s eyes were fixed on the tips of his boots, dark polished leather and glistening golden buckles burnished to such a sheen Idhren could almost see his reflection in them.

“So this is the little apprentice I have heard so much about,” the magister’s voice was not harsh, but it was not gentle either. He sounded amused, if anything. “You are a wisp of a thing, aren’t you?” he asked, and Idhren wasn’t certain whether he was meant to respond. He had never spoken to a magister before, and had no idea how to address someone so high above his own station. “Come here; let me take a look at you.” A hand on his chin and Idhren’s head was lifted up, not harsh, but not gentle either. For the briefest of moments Idhren’s eyes met the magister’s, a deep brown betraying no emotion, and then he quickly looked elsewhere, fearing reprisal for even an accidental act of insolence. “Pretty little thing, too. Look at those eyes. Violet is such a rare color it’s a wonder you weren’t snatched out of the slave quarters earlier. There are people who would pay good money for this face.”

Idhren swallowed thickly, but remained silent. His mother always complimented his eyes, but it did not sound like a compliment coming from Canidius. A moment later his chin was released and the slave immediately dropped his gaze to the floor once more.

“Alvinius, where is his talent the strongest?” Canidius asked, stepping past Idhren to confer with his tutor as though the elven boy were not even in the room.

“Master, although his first emanations of magic were of frost, he has proven far more adept at storm magic, and seems quite perceptive of manipulations in the veil,” Alvinius answered in a voice that was low and curt. “His barriers are strong, but he has little to no talent for healing.”

“An elf with no talent for healing?” Canidius repeated in surprise. “That is shocking. And yet you informed me yesterday that he had passed your ability to instruct him. How can this be?”

Alvinius was very good at healing. Elves were all supposed to be good at creation and nature magic. That was what all the books said. But no matter how hard he tried, and no matter how much his instructor explained and demonstrated, Idhren simply couldn’t make the threads of mana flow the way they were supposed to. He couldn’t heal much more than a papercut, so it surprised him even more to think that Alvinius considered him talented.

“Master,” the elderly slave bowed his head in shame as he attempted to explain, “Perhaps the failure is mine, that I cannot explain the intricacies of creation magic in a way that the boy understands. He is most talented the schools of spirit and primal magics, as I have stated, and in these he has already surpassed my ability to instruct.”

The magister made a thoughtful noise, and Idhren heard a shuffling of papers that made him curious enough to raise his eyes from the floor and peek over. Canidius had picked up a sheaf of papers from the small table that Idhren usually used as a desk and was looking through them with apparent disinterest. After a moment he set the papers down again. “I’ve looked over the boy’s pedigree,” he commented. “It seems he comes from mixed stock. There is no trace of magic on his sire’s side as far back as anyone would care to look, but his mother, it seems, is half wild. The mother’s mother was taken from one of those wandering tribes, what do they call themselves?”

“Dalish, master,” Alvinius answered without hesitation. Every elf knew that.

“Yes, of course,” Canidius murmured thoughtfully. “That must be where the magic comes from. The blood will be incredibly dilute, however. You’re positively certain he has further potential?”
“Yes, master,” Alvinius replied. “For the past month he has been engaged in self-study, under my guidance and observation, of course. He reads and writes as though he has been taught since birth. In practice I have on occasion been unable to break his barriers. And his academic understanding of the veil is well above what I would expect of someone his age.”

“How very intriguing,” the magister mused. He turned back to Idhren and the elven boy immediately dropped his gaze back to the floor again. “Tell me, servus, how old are you?”

For a moment Idhren’s breath froze in his throat and he was unable to speak. His master addressed him personally, asked him a question. “Thirteen, master,” he eventually managed to stammer out.

“And how old when your magic first manifested?” Canidius questioned.

“Nine,” Idhren answered, “Master.”

“A decent enough age,” Canidius commented thoughtfully. “We will have to find him another tutor, if his studies are progressing this quickly. It will at least give you more time to attend to your own duties, Alvinius.”

“Thank you, master,” the elderly slave said quickly. Idhren had never considered that his training was an additional responsibility, and he felt a sudden guilt for having taken up so much of his tutor’s time. Not that Idhren had much choice in the matter. He only did as he was told.

“I will look into the matter. Until then, he may continue with self-study and regular training exercises,” Canidius said. He spared the small elven boy a last curious glance, then swept past him and out of the room. The heavy hardwood door closed behind him with heavy thud that made Idhren flinch slightly.

The young apprentice was then dismissed from his lessons for the remainder of the day. The prospect of a new instructor had Idhren excited. Although they were often difficult, he enjoyed his lessons. He enjoyed reading his master’s books on magical theory and practicing new spells under Alvinius’ watchful eye. But a new instructor would be able to teach him new things, help him where Alvinius could not. He wanted to run down to the slave quarters and tell his family, but they would all be working still. His mother toiling in the kitchens to prepare the master’s dinner, his father in the orchard on the hills, and his brother in the training yard with the master’s guards and gladiators. He would not be able to see them until their half-day of rest in five days time.

But it was a full week before Idhren heard anything more about the subject. And then it was not at all what he was expected.

The elven boy was pulled away from his regular duties in the library and given a brand new set of robes to wear, the nicest that he had ever worn. The fabric was still rough spun cotton, but it was new and dyed dark, tailored to fit him properly, almost stylish, although Idhren did not know any better. There were no embellishments, simple brass buttons and buckles, and it did not hang far enough to cover his bare feet. For all the simplicity of the garment, as Idhren smoothed the fabric over his chest he felt for a moment like the fanciest Altus in the Imperium, and not a slave at all.

He was herded out of the mansion and into a gilded carriage on the front drive where Magister Canidius was already awaiting him. Idhren was too stunned and confused to do much more than collapse into the seat across from him and stare stupidly at the upholstery.

“Ah, good, you’re finally here,” the magister said, interrupting Idhren’s thoughts. He was seated on the cushioned bench across from Idhren and took up well over half of it. He had a folio of papers in hand that he did not look up from. “I’m afraid I don’t have much time to devote to this endeavor,
Idhren. It is Idhren, yes?” he glanced up from the papers and Idhren immediately looked down at his knees, where his hands were twisting nervously in the new robes.

“Yes, master,” the slave answered quietly.

“Speak up, boy,” Canidius scolded, but not cruelly, “You’ve nothing to fear. Do you know why you are here?”

“No, master,” Idhren answered. He managed to speak up a bit, but his voice trembled shamefully.

“You have far exceeded my expectations,” the magister said, and he finally set down the folio in his lap as the carriage began to move, bumping along the gravel drive toward the estate’s main gates. “Alvinius is not a terribly skilled mage, I will admit, but to have surpassed his abilities in only a few years is quite impressive. He is getting on in years, as I’m certain you noticed. Served my father before his death and is quite good at keeping notes, but not terribly bright. You, on the other hand, seem to have a bit of cleverness about you.”

Clever. No one had ever called Idhren clever before. Did his master actually think so? He had no reason to lie, so then it must be true. His master thought he was clever.

“And truthfully in a few years time Alvinius will no longer be able to fulfill his duties,” Canidius continued, oblivious to the flurry of emotions his young slave was feeling, “I had planned for you to take over his position, but we must first get you a proper education. It would be a shame if any of your potential went to waste.”

Potential. His master thought that he had potential and that he was clever. Idhren’s mind was running a mile a minute as he fought to take in such glowing compliments given by someone who was clearly much more accomplished than Idhren himself ever would be. Is that where they were going, then? To meet his new instructor? It was a surprise, Idhren had expected that his lessons would continue at the estate. He was certain that his master could hire or buy another servant to teach him.

“The easiest way to ensure you get proper training is to send you to a Circle,” Canidius stated casually.

All of Idhren’s swirling thoughts ground to a halt immediately. His eyes went wide, mouth agape, and he was unable to stop himself from looking up and into his master’s face for any sign that this was a lie. He saw nothing, only a curious and amused smirk on the man’s round face. Then his mind returned to the present and he looked away quickly, heart thundering in his chest. Insolence was a sure-fire way to get this privilege taken away. And it was a privilege, Idhren knew that. Circles were for Alti and Laetans, not slaves.

Not slaves.

Slaves did not learn in Circles. Not proper Circles, at least.

Now Idhren was confused. He was definitely a slave, so he couldn’t go to a Circle. What was Canidius planning, then? Where was the magister taking him?

“You look terribly confused over there, boy,” Canidius commented. “What seems to be the problem?”

Idhren swallowed thickly, pushing down the emotion in his chest, the disappointment after the brief moment of excitement. “Master,” he began hesitantly, “Slaves cannot attend Circles.”

“No, they cannot,” Canidius confirmed. “Which is why we must first see about making you
Liberati.”

Idhren’s heart stopped in his chest, his breathing caught. There was no way he could have heard correctly. Liberati? Free? His master was giving him his freedom? All because the magister thought that he was clever, and that he had potential? Nervously, and cautiously, Idhren raised his eyes again to catch a glimpse of his master’s face, but it was the same as before, watching him with veiled amusement and a bit of self-satisfaction. “Truly?” Idhren asked, voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course,” the magister assured. “It’s a dreadful hassle, but an even worse one to find a suitable private tutor. This will be easier for everyone involved, I think. I am certain you understand, however, that this is a great responsibility that I am giving you. To attend a Circle is a privilege afforded to few and I expect you to work hard while you are there. Do not let me see my faith in you misplaced, Idhren.”

“No, master,” Idhren assured quickly, perhaps too quickly. “I will study hard, I promise. I won’t let you down.”

“There’s a good lad,” Canidius praised. “That’s the attitude I want to see. Depending how well your studies go, I may even consider taking you on as my apprentice after your harrowing.”

Freedom, a Circle education, and apprenticeship to a magister? Idhren could hardly believe that any of this was real. It must be a dream, but no. He ran through all the usual checks, and this was no illusion, no demon tempting him with impossible dreams. This was reality, and it was the best day of Idhren’s life.

It was the first time Idhren had ever set foot outside of Magister Canidius’ estate, but he barely remembered to look at the scenery. The rest of the day passed in a blur. The carriage ride from the estate in the country into the bustle of Vyrantium’s center. The local senate hall, all marble and gold and onyx, towering statues of dragons and Archons long dead. Through it all Idhren had to speak very little, only confirm his name and perform a small bit of magic to prove that he was actually a mage. Canidius signed a large number of papers relinquishing ownership of Idhren. Papers that were then handed over to Idhren; certificates and contracts that recognized him as Liberati, a freed slave, a mage.

Idhren had never before had the opportunity to read such paperwork. He had never seen the deeds that tied him to Canidius, the pedigree that traced his family tree back for up to ten generations. But he had these now, and they were infinitely better. These were not titles of ownership, but symbols of freedom. The Imperium recognized him no longer as property, but as a person. And for the first time in his life, Idhren allowed himself to think and feel like a person, not an object, to dream of the future and of what someday he might make of himself.

The dream that Canidius had offered was the only one he could imagine, however. A Circle education and apprenticeship to a magister. The chance at a better life for himself, and maybe even for his family. He had heard stories, legends, fables, about slaves gifted with magic gaining their freedom and then the freedom of their loved ones in turn. Could Idhren become one of those? Perhaps if he worked hard enough, if he proved without a doubt that he was worth the chance that Canidius had given him his master – former master – would be kind enough to free his family as well. Then his mother would never have to set foot in a kitchen again, his father would no longer have to work long hours in the hot sun, and his brother would no longer have to risk his life in the arena.

If Idhren worked hard enough. If Idhren was good enough.

He would be, the boy determined that day. He would work as hard as his entire family combined to
earn their freedom, to earn their happiness.

He would be the best mage this country had ever seen.
Lowest Slaves, Highest Kings

Act I: Dum Spiro, Spero

While I Breathe, I Hope

All men are the Work of our Maker's Hands,

From the lowest slaves

To the highest kings.

- Canticle of Transfigurations 1:3

Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:28 Dragon

The main structure of the Circle of Vyrantium had originally been a temple to the Old God Andoral, and it still looked the part. It was a towering structure of dark stone and gold filigree trailing up to a domed roof. While the majority of the old draconic icons had been removed and replaced with more appropriate statues of Andraste and Hessarian, a handful of smaller images remained in less obtrusive reminder, looking down on apprentices and enchanters from molded ceiling tiles and out of dusty corners. The Dragon of Slaves, watching over the studies of a hundred mage children, many the children of magisters and not a one of them a slave.

Idhren thought it was a bit ironic.

He had been at the Circle for a year already, and the time had been simultaneously the best and worst year of his life.

The Circle’s library put Canidius’ personal collection to shame. Wide rooms and long halls lined floor to vaulted ceiling with bookshelves easily three times as tall as Idhren himself, each shelf packed full of books and scrolls dating back to the dawn of the Imperium. And an apprentice of the Circle had full access to the entire collection; a privilege Idhren was quick to take advantage of.

There was so much more free time than Idhren was used to. The schedules here were structured around the leisurely lives of the Altus class, who made up the majority of the students although a minority of the instructors. The first time that Idhren did not have to wake at the crack of dawn to perform his morning ablutions and see to his household chores before breakfast he had not known what to do with himself. His body woke automatically at the first hint of light through the window in his simple dormitory room and he was out of bed before realizing that he did not need to be.

Idhren was so used to waking early and going to bed late that he did not know how to sleep in. So in the morning, when most of his well-bred peers were still abed, he dressed and spent a few hours in the library. It was his preferred time to visit the library, actually. At such an hour the Circle was quiet and still, the library was peaceful. And with all of the Altus students asleep, it was the only time that Idhren could wander about unhindered and unquestioned.
After breakfast, mornings were spent in lecture halls, listening to the Circle's enchanters drone on about their latest theories and research. At times the subject matter was interesting, though most often it was simply rehashing a theory proposed and published a hundred years ago. Perhaps they hoped that no one would be aware of the old theory. Then lunch, and then private study either alone or with a mentor. For Idhren, this was mostly alone. His mentor, assigned by the First Enchanter, was not unkind to him, but the middle aged woman clearly had little interest in his instruction. Perhaps the assignment had been a punishment for her. Everyone seemed to think his presence was some sort of punishment.

So Idhren spent most of his free time in the library reading anything that interested him. Anything he could get his hands on.

Idhren loved to read. He loved to learn. At Canidius' estate he had read nearly every book in the library. Even Alvinius had not read all of the volumes their master owned. Idhren wanted to learn everything the world had to offer. However many theories he committed to memory, though, there were still talents that he could not put to use.

He still had no talent for healing.

"Idhren, I simply don't understand what the problem is," Galene, his mentor, complained one day after two hours of failing to mend the broken leg she had given a rabbit. The poor animal had even stopped whimpering in pain, although Idhren himself felt on the verge of tears. He wanted to help the creature, but he simply could not make the threads of magic tie together and stitch up the bone. "You can recite the theory verbatim, you understand what to do, but you simply won't do it." She was frowning at him, arms crossed beneath her breasts.

"I can't do it," Idhren mumbled, voice tight. He would if he could, but he simply could not make the magic cooperate.

"Who ever heard of an elf that can't heal," Galene scoffed. "Very well, enough of that for today," she brushed him aside and healed the rabbit's limb in a matter of seconds. The animal relaxed immediately as the pain subsided.

"I'm sorry," Idhren said quietly. He was trying, honestly.

"Never mind," she muttered with an exasperated sigh. "Let's work on something else now. What was that theory you were so enthralled with the other day?"

Idhren lit up at the offer to work on something he was actually interested in. He knew immediately which theory the woman was referring, even if his personal reading had since moved off the topic. Immediately he launched into an explanation, eager and excited.

Later that same afternoon found Idhren with his nose buried in a heavy tome about alchemy from a section of the library so little used that opening each book let out a cloud of dust and made him sneeze.

If he could not heal, Idhren reasoned to his mentor, then he should make up for that shortcoming with a knowledge of mundane remedies. Not nearly as effective as magic, but better than nothing. And there were certain reasons that a knowledge of alchemy could be beneficial to him in the future. He would be able to mix his own lyrium potions, or any number of useful concoctions. The people
of Tevinter liked to pretend that magic could do quite literally anything, but that was simply not the case.

That he had a rather more personal reason for this particular course of study no one except he needed to know. Just like no one needed to know what he hid under too-big robes. His pedigree, and then his Liberati paperwork, said male and that was all that mattered. Not that his chest was a bit too soft for a man, or his hips a bit too wide, or that between his legs—

Idhren didn’t think about what was between his legs.

Part of him wondered whether his body was at fault for his lack of talent for healing. If he couldn’t mold himself into the proper shape, then how could he be expected to do the same for anything else?

He had a journal half-full of notes on herbs and alchemical theories. Plants that alone had little effect on anything but if combined correctly could prove useful. The problem was getting his hands on these plants and the tools necessary to experiment with the potions. To requisition them from the Circle’s stores he needed to have a good reason. A damn good reason. Fixing the mess the Maker had made of his body was probably not a good reason. Besides, that would require admitting to the problem in the first place.

Everything had been fine until that year. He had been able to ignore that thing between his legs because otherwise his body was fine.

Elves naturally matured slower than humans, and no matter what Idhren would never be quite as tall or quite as broad as any of the human apprentices. But where he had expected in time to grow a few more inches, for his voice to drop, Idhren’s voice remained the same, he grew barely a couple of inches, and his body began to fill out in all the wrong places. Like a girl.

It was wrong. It was all wrong, and he was desperate to prevent it from getting any worse.

But how did he get his hands on the materials that would require?

For Dorian Pavus the Circle of Vyrantium was only the latest in a long list of schools he had been forced to attend since his talents surpassed those of his private tutors. Fourth, he thought, but he wasn’t actually counting.

School was boring. His lessons were boring, his instructors were boring, his peers were boring. It was all just terribly boring. So dull it had even robbed him of his vocabulary.

The place had a decent library at least, and his mentor let him direct his own course of study, probably in an effort to win favor with the young Altus and through him the Pavus family at large. It wouldn’t work, but Dorian would happily take advantage of the man’s delusions for as long as they continued to benefit him.

The most interesting thing about this place was the elf.

The first time Dorian had seen him the elf had been carrying a stack of books so high he could barely see over them and Dorian had assumed him a slave, or at least a servant.

The second time, Dorian spotted him across the crowded lecture hall during a truly mind-numbing
debate about the true nature of lyrium (a topic that had been hashed and rehashed a thousand times already, every possible opinion and piece of evidence given a hundred times over). But despite the painfully repetitious and threadbare arguments, the elf was watching with rapt attention, sitting to the side of the hall, but otherwise with the rest of the Circle’s apprentices and lower-level enchanter. What was an elf doing in a Circle lecture hall? He couldn’t possibly be an apprentice, could he? Dorian nudged the apprentice seated next to him and asked just that.

“Oh, that’s the Liberati,” the other young man had sneered through his perfect teeth. Dorian sneered as well.

No one knew his name. No one cared to ask, and the elf never offered. He was quiet, kept to himself and rarely spoke to the other apprentices. None of them knew how a Liberati had wound up studying magic at one of the most prestigious Circles of Magi in Tevinter, but there were rumors, none of them flattering.

Outside of lectures and debates Dorian only ever saw him in the corner of the library, hunched over a pile of books and taking furious notes. To be perfectly honest Dorian rarely paid attention to the small, nondescript elf that sat in lonely corners of the library with his nose buried in ancient tomes. It was impossible to judge ages with elves, they all looked younger than they were, but Dorian expected the Liberati was a few years younger than himself. They had never had a lesson together, so the elf certainly was not on the same level as Dorian. To be honest, though, very few people were on the same level as Dorian.

Well, if they were letting in elves obviously this Circle’s standards had fallen.

It almost made him want to go back to Qarinus.

Almost.

Dorian did only as much studying as was required of him. Or required to keep him ahead of all his peers. One must have standards, after all. But as he mastered spells quickly enough to impress even the First Enchanter and memorized theory after theory, Dorian was still left with entirely too much free time.

It wasn’t that Dorian did not enjoy studying; he quite enjoyed it, actually. He relished pushing his abilities to their limits when he found a challenge worthy of his attentions. The problem was that Vyrantium did not offer any such challenges. Just like everyone always had, the Senior Enchanters fell over themselves to praise him.

Apprentices were not permitted outside the dormitories after sundown. A completely ridiculous regulation, as far as Dorian was concerned. Rules intended to instill good habits and a sense of decorum. Dorian had never been a fan of rules, and he was not known for his decorum. And if the only entertainment to be found in this Circle was in breaking such rules, then he would happily entertain himself.

Slipping out of the Circle was not terribly difficult. Enforcement of curfew was laughable, to say the very least. Settled as the Circle was in the heart of the city, it was not difficult once out to find a more engaging sort of diversion. There was very little in the Imperium that was beyond the reach of the son of a magister, even if he was technically underage. A flash of his birthright and a passing comment about his family were usually enough to get Dorian what he wanted. Namely, alcohol.

Usually all the other apprentices were asleep by the time Dorian stumbled up the stairs and into his own bed. But on this night, only a handful of weeks after his arrival, Dorian slipped through the doors as quietly as his inebriated state allowed, rounded a corner and then promptly tripped over
someone sitting against the wall. He stumbled, nearly fell on his face, but managed to catch himself against the wall before sustaining an injury to anything other than his pride.

“Venhedis,” he swore in a loud whisper, “What do you think you’re--,” the young man cut himself off as he turned around and laid eyes on the person who had been in his way. It was the Liberati. The elf was seated against the wall, legs now pulled up to his chest, though Dorian imagined that was what he’d tripped over. But the elf himself wasn’t what had stopped Dorian’s train of thought, it was the blood. The entire bottom half of the elf’s face and the collars of his robes were covered in blood; still running from what was obviously a broken nose. “Fasta vass, what happened to you?”

The elf was staring up at him with wide, frightened eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said in a hushed but urgent voice, “I didn’t mean to… I though everyone was in bed.”

Dorian frowned. That wasn’t what he asked. Well, it just went to show that even Circle educated you couldn’t expect much intelligence from an elf. “I asked you a question.”

“I…” the elf stammered, his eyes flicked down to the floor, then back up at Dorian’s face, then back down to the floor again. The young man realized that he was holding a bloodied rag that he’d apparently been using to try and staunch the flow of blood from his nose. “I tripped,” he said quietly.

“What, face first into a wall?” Dorian asked. It was such a terrible lie; the elf couldn’t possibly expect him to believe it. Then he remembered that this wasn’t the first time he’d seen the elf with some sort of injury. A little over a week ago he had seen the elf in the library with a black eye. At the time he’d thought nothing of it; an accident in spellcasting or simply a book fallen from too high a shelf. Now he wasn’t certain that injury had been so innocuous. “The black eye a while ago, you trip that time too?”

“Y-yes,” the elf stuttered, eyes still fixed firmly on the floor.

Dorian rolled his eyes, this was becoming annoying. Did the elf think his lies were believable? “No one is that clumsy,” he said. “Why are you lying?”

The elf’s gaze flicked up towards Dorian’s face again, filled with fear and pain, then he looked past Dorian to the line of doors on either side of the hall. “It… it doesn’t matter. You shouldn’t concern yourself with me. I—I won’t tell anyone you were out after curfew, I swear.”

It was that promise along with the frightened glance toward the bedrooms of their fellow apprentices that finally clued Dorian in on what was happening here. Someone had done this to him, and the elf thought that Dorian would do the same if given half a reason. “One of them did this to you?” he asked, cocking a thumb back down the hallway and its line of doors. “How gauche.” Dorian might also be of the opinion that the Circle was no place for an elf, but he would never sink to the level of physical violence. That was for commoners, and the students here were supposed to be better than that. “And why haven’t you healed yourself yet?” he asked.

“I… I tried,” the elf said quietly, and looked down at the bloodied cloth in his hands. “I’m not good at healing.”

Dorian sighed and crouched down on the floor. He grabbed the elf’s chin and turned his face toward him to get a better look at the injury. “Honestly, what are they teaching in this place? I thought Vyrantium was supposed to be a quality institution,” he muttered to himself in annoyance. The break was bad, but still fresh, probably less than an hour old. Easy. He raised his free hand to the elf’s nose, ignored the way elf flinched back in fear before the soft glow of healing magic formed around Dorian’s hand. Within moments the elf’s nose was as good as new, once more smooth and straight. It was a good nose, and behind all that blood Dorian realized the elf had a rather attractive face with
large violet eyes and impossibly kissable lips. As soon as the thought crossed his mind Dorian pulled away as though he’d been burned. He shouldn’t be thinking those things, even about someone who was barely above a slave. “There, all better,” he said curtly, and turned away.

The elf raised his hands hesitantly up to his face as though he didn’t believe Dorian had actually healed him. “Thank you,” he said, quiet but earnest.

“Well, we can’t have you bleeding everywhere, can we?” Dorian said flippantly, “It’s so hard to get out of the carpets.” The elf was quiet, and when Dorian dared turn back he found the tiniest of smiles pulling at the corner of his mouth. “Is it true you’re Liberati?” the young man blurted out suddenly, appalled by his own lack of tact. He would blame it on the alcohol.

“Yes,” the elf answered, ashamed.

Dorian couldn’t blame him for being ashamed; he certainly wouldn’t want to be a Liberati. He shuddered at the thought of being Laetan. “So how does a Liberati end up studying in the Circle of Magi?”

The elf looked shocked by the question. It was probably the first time anyone had bothered to ask, Dorian assumed. Come to think of it, he’d never seen anyone else talk to the elf. “It’s sort of a long story,” he murmured, “I’m certain you’ll find it boring.”

“That it’ll be no different from talking to anyone else here,” Dorian shrugged, and made himself comfortable – or as comfortable as possible sitting on the floor in a hallway. “I’m Dorian, by the way,” he replied, though suspected that the elf already knew exactly who he was. “What’s your name?”

The elf was staring at him curiously, but eventually answered, “Idhren.”

It was a painfully elven name. That certainly wouldn’t help him get along in Tevinter, but Dorian decided that it suited him all the same. “Alright, Idhren, tell me how a Liberati ends up in a place like this.”

Idhren knew that he was extremely lucky, and that he should be grateful. He was grateful. Most of the time. But it was difficult to be thankful when nursing a broken nose. Was this the price of his freedom and his education? A new bruise every other day? Tripped in the hall, pushed down stairs, his books stolen, his notes destroyed? Sitting up in his tiny room in the middle of the night furiously washing bloodstains from the collar of his robes?

His nose wasn’t broken anymore. That Altus had healed him, and for the life of him Idhren could not figure out why.

Dorian Pavus. The young man hadn’t introduced himself as such, but Idhren knew who he was all the same. You don’t survive as a Liberati among Altus without knowing exactly who everyone is, if only so you know exactly who to avoid. Dorian Pavus had been very high up on his list of people to avoid. He was the sort of person Idhren had thought more likely to hit him again than heal him.

So why was he sitting here in his room, healed? What was the Altus playing at, asking about Idhren as though he actually cared what a former slave had done to get himself into this place usually reserved for only the best in Tevinter society? And why had Idhren told him?
Because Idhren had not had a conversation about anything other than his studies since he had arrived at the Circle. Because he had no friends, and no contact with his illiterate family back at Canidius’ estate, and even his mentor didn’t actually like him. Because Idhren was desperate for some form of personal interaction that did not involve insults being hurled at him.

It took an hour, but he managed to get all of the blood off of his robes, which was a relief because he did not have very many spares. He hung them to dry by the thin arrow-slit window, tossed the bloodied water out the same window onto the flagstones outside, and then collapsed into bed.

Two days later he passed Dorian in the library and the young man barely spared him a glance, there was not a single indication that the Altus recognized him at all. Until that moment Idhren had considered thanking the young man again for his help that evening. But Dorian looked at him like a stranger not even worthy of committing to memory. Idhren shouldn’t have been surprised. He wasn’t, really, but he was disappointed and hurt. And a little angry at his own naïveté. Obviously he had been nothing but a momentary distraction, a curiosity. An Altus mage didn’t care about him and never would.

But then, little more than a week after his first late night encounter with Dorian Pavus, it happened again.

This time one of the Altus students had managed to break the wards that were supposed to keep Idhren’s small dormitory room safe from their meddling. Idhren did not know who was responsible, but he had returned from dinner to find his possessions lining the hallway. Pages of his notes were strewn about the floor, some crumpled and stepped on. Someone had even dressed one of the statues along the hall in his robes. Immediately he had set to retrieving his things. The notes first, of course. Clothes could be replaced (though he would certainly get a telling off from Canidius if he asked for replacements or spending money) but weeks’ worth of work could not be.

The sun had been down for an hour when he finally managed to round up the last of his papers and get them safely back into his room. Although perhaps that was not so safe anymore. He even managed to get his robes off the statue without ripping them too much. Dorian stumbled into the hall to find it abandoned by all save the lone elf with an armful of clothes and a few of his other possessions still strewn on the floor about the base of the statue.

“What’s this?” the Altus asked curiously when he set eyes on the strange scene. “Laundry day?”

Idhren flushed in embarrassment. As though it hadn’t been bad enough to collect his things while all the other students who lived in this hall were returning to their rooms for the night, to suffer the jokes and the malicious interference. Surely Dorian would do the same thing, and yet Idhren could not manage to keep his mouth shut. “Someone broke into my room.”

The Altus’ eyebrows crept up toward his hairline. “Didn’t you have it warded?”

“Of course I had it warded,” Idhren said irritably, bending to pick up his things off the ground. Keys were scoffed at by the upper echelons of Tevinter society. Anything of worth should be hidden behind not only a locked door, but several protective wards. Some of the more gregarious apprentices had taken to setting glyphs as well, ice was popular, a further punishment for would-be trespassers.

“Not very well, apparently,” Dorian commented. He leaned casually against the wall and watched Idhren collect the last of his possessions.

“Evidently,” Idhren grumbled. He was not in the mood to deal with any more spoiled Altus brats today. If Dorian had only come to gloat then Idhren wished he would get it over with and leave.
“What sort did you use?” Dorian asked curiously. “Aversion? Horror? Perception? It’s best to use multiple, you know. Even to layer multiple of the same. Most people don’t expect that and only bother to dismantle one.”

“I know how to ward my own room,” Idhren snapped, surprising even himself. It stunned Dorian into speechlessness, which was a further surprise. Idhren had not thought him capable of shutting up. “I’m sorry,” he said immediately, that familiar fear welling up inside him. Don’t talk back, you’ll be punished.

Dorian pushed himself off the wall and shifted to his weight to one foot uncomfortably, fidgeted a moment with the end of his sleeve. “Well…” he said, more to fill the silence than for any real purpose. “I suppose… Do you need any help… cleaning up?” That shocked Idhren enough that he stopped dead, stood up straight, and stared at Dorian in wide eyed confusion. The young man noticed his shocked stare and became even more uncomfortable. “What?” he asked, “Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something on my face?”

“You…” Idhren began slowly, “Want to help me?”

Dorian stared at him for a moment, and then shrugged. “Is it that ridiculous a notion?” he asked. “I mean… It’s rather pathetic watching you get yourself into these situations. Any sane person would do the same, right? If only so we don’t have to keep watching you flounder.”

It was completely ridiculous, from Idhren’s perspective. “Everyone else just ignores me,” he said plainly.

“Do they?” Dorian asked.

“Even you ignored me,” Idhren reminded him. “The other day in the library… You looked at me like you didn’t even recognize me.”

The Altus scoffed, “Well, you can’t expect me to go acting all chummy with the lower classes, can you? What would people think? I have a reputation to uphold, after all.”

Idhren looked down at the floor and clutched his things tighter to his chest. “A reputation. Of course,” he mumbled. Maker forbid he earn a reputation for sympathy.

“What? Are you upset?” Dorian asked, and he sounded genuinely confused. “Because I didn’t say ‘hello’ to you in the library? Would you rather I knock all of your books off the table? Call you ‘knife-ear’? Break past your wards and steal all of your things? Not that anyone could possibly want your things…” he added as an afterthought, eyeing the simple, unembellished robes that Idhren wore.

That wasn’t what Idhren wanted at all. He did not want this fake friendship, either. The Circle was so lonely and miserable, not at all what he had expected. Not that he had expected it to be a walk in the park, or to be overwhelmed with friends. Idhren knew what he was to these people. However, he had not expected the constant bullying, the indifference of the Enchanters, the disinterest of his own mentor.

“Listen,” Dorian sighed, drawing Idhren’s attention back to him again. The young man was standing with one hand on his hip, the other mussed in his hair. “I think it’s absolutely abhorrent the way some of the other apprentices treat you,” he said carefully, as though it was difficult to admit. “It’s childish and plebian. And watching you muck around like this? Useless at healing magic, useless at wards, it’s practically painful. So don’t get the wrong idea. If you learned to look after yourself I wouldn’t feel the need to go out of my way to help you. It’s only that I’m not so heartless that I can
watch you struggling pathetically and ignore it.”

The way that Dorian spoke made it sound as though offering help to Idhren was a chore. Maybe that was exactly how the Altus viewed it. It would be just like a magister to consider having a conscience an annoyance. “I’ll take my leave then,” Idhren said, swallowing down his disappointment. “So you won’t be burdened by my presence any longer.” With one last look up and down the corridor to ensure he had collected all his things, Idhren turned quickly and rushed down to his own door and quickly shut himself up in his room. He threw three wards up over the doorway out of habit and threw his abused belongings to the floor before collapsing into bed.

Sometimes Idhren wished he wasn’t a mage.

Dorian and Idhren never spoke in public. An Altus couldn’t be seen fraternizing with a lowly Liberati; he had a reputation to maintain. Not that Dorian didn’t revel in antagonizing his fellows, but there were certain societal lines that couldn’t be crossed. Dorian was still the son of a magister. He had to play the game, and Dorian was very good at this particular game. His weekly jaunts into the slums were secretive, no one of consequence knew about them and he dropped enough coin to ensure that less important mouths stayed shut.

It turned out that Dorian had a habit of sneaking back into the dormitories in the middle of the night. And Idhren had a habit of sitting on the steps or in the hall nursing his most recent physical or emotional wounds.

Somehow they had managed to build a rapport. Dorian generally complained about Idhren’s poor skill at healing – a branch of magic he proclaimed as mundane and simplistic – but still he patched up whatever bruises had appeared that day.

“Why do you keep doing this?” Idhren asked one day after Dorian had tended to yet another black eye. It was the third one this month. The elf really needed to learn how to heal a bruise. Or learn how to keep himself out of trouble.

“Why?” Dorian repeated as though he didn’t understand the question. “Because it’s absolutely shameful that a student of this circle can’t even heal a bruise. It’s embarrassing, really. And if they can’t teach the elf to heal, the simplest of magics, then it becomes nauseatingly obvious that you’re only here as some sort of political statement.”

“Just because it’s easy for you doesn’t mean it’s easy for everyone else,” Idhren snapped, interrupting Dorian’s monologue and startling the man. The elf was usually so soft-spoken and polite, just like every other elf Dorian had ever spoken to, but every so often Idhren opened his mouth and fire came out.

No elf had ever spoken back to him before, ever contradicted him. Dorian opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again. He could not possibly admit out loud that Idhren was right. “What is easy for you then?” he asked instead.

“Storm magic,” Idhren replied without hesitation.

“Storm magic?” Dorian repeated, and arched an eyebrow in disbelief. “What use is that? There is no practical application for storm magic, not to mention it’s completely unpredictable and impossible to use with any precision. Lightning strikes where it wants, you cannot direct it effectively.”
“You’re wrong,” Idhren insisted. “It is no more difficult to direct than a fire or ice spell if you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m wrong?” Dorian asked in shock. No elf had ever dared to correct him before. It was mildly insulting. Dorian was a genius, a prodigy - or so he’d been told for his entire life – and this former slave had the nerve to tell him he was wrong? “Then please enlighten me,” he challenged.

The elf hesitated for a moment, a lifetime of subservience telling him that it was dangerous and wrong to talk back to someone like Dorian, to contradict someone like Dorian. But he knew he was just as talented as any of the Altus mages here, more talented than some of them, and he had a burning desire to prove himself instead of sitting quietly and doing as he was told. “If wielded carelessly then you’re correct, storm magic is unpredictable. The nature of lightning makes it more difficult to control and aim than the other forms of primal magic. Ice is formed on the spot you want it; a fireball will always fly in a straight line. Lightning seeks its own target, arching toward the nearest object of opposite charge. If you are to use it in an offensive or defensive way you must ensure that you’re intended target is also the lightning’s choice target. So you make a path for it. If you warp the veil just right it can effectively charge the water vapor in the air so that the electrical charge jumps through it and along exactly the path you want. It’s easier in higher humidity, obviously, and would probably be next-to-impossible in an arid climate. I haven’t figured out how to compensate for that, yet.”

There were very few things in the world that could render Altus Dorian Pavus, prodigy of his age, speechless. This was one of them. Contradicted and lectured by a Liberati elf who, actually, had a fairly good argument. In theory, at least. Theory and practice were two different things. Dorian had seen Idhren with his nose buried in books, but he had never seen the elf cast an actual spell. He would be shocked if the elf could put his theory into practice. “Are you telling me that you can affect the charge of individual particles in the air to direct a static charge?” Dorian asked, challenging, disbelieving.

“Yes?” Idhren replied hesitantly, worried he may have overstepped the bounds of his station. “I haven’t perfected the technique yet, but I can usually get the lightning to go where I want.”

“You can do that but you cannot knit together a broken bone?” Dorian scoffed. Perhaps it was a bit cruel to laugh at him, but honestly. What self-respecting mage couldn’t perform even the most basic of healing spells? The vocation was generally looked down on among the Altus class. Generally that was the only thing elven mages were any good for.

“They aren’t even remotely similar,” Idhren protested defensively.

“Creation and primal magics are considered opposites, but they are not entirely dissimilar,” Dorian argued. “But that is beside the point. The amount of precision it would take to… Does your Magister Canidius know you can do this?”

“I expect so,” Idhren replied. “He oversaw all of my training.”

“Well, that explains why he was willing to pull strings for you to study here,” Dorian mused to himself. So Idhren wasn’t a charity case but an investment. An investment disguised as a charity case. Well played, Canidius. “To even conceive of such a technique without formal instruction… Most untrained mages can barely manipulate the veil enough to form a barrier.”

That almost sounded like a compliment, but Idhren could hardly believe it. No human had ever complimented him before. He was speechless.

“Can you show me?” Dorian asked suddenly, interrupting his own train of thought again.
“I can try,” Idhren offered. “It’s difficult.”

“I imagine so,” Dorian replied. “Humor me, though. Show me you’re not all talk.”

“I’m not,” the elf frowned stubbornly, “I can do it. What… What should I aim for?”

Dorian looked around thoughtfully for an acceptable target. Nothing metal, that would be too easy. “Ah, that statue there, down the hall,” he said, pointing toward a rather terrible marble depiction of some former First Enchanter of the circle.

“What if I break it?” Idhren asked in concern. They would throw him out in a heartbeat.

“Then you would be doing the world a favor, that thing is hideous,” Dorian said flippantly. Besides, he didn’t think it would actually work anyway. There were half a dozen metal sconces lining the walls between them and the bust. “Don’t worry, no one will ever know you did it. There’s no one here to see.”

The elf hesitated, but then nodded. He wanted to prove to someone that just because he was an elf and a former slave, that didn’t mean he was stupid or weak. He had talent and he deserved to be here just as much as a magister’s son. Idhren concentrated and held his hands out before him. He could feel the veil around them like a fog and pulled at it, twisting it into shape in order to get the effect he wanted. Beside him Dorian sat silent, watching in barely concealed fascination as this Liberati elf worked magic with more precision than some of the instructors Dorian had had in his youth. When finally a spark of electricity burst from Idhren’s fingers it shot down the hall, avoiding every bit of metal along its path and slamming into the bust with enough force to send it rocking on its pedestal for a moment before it settled again, unharmed. Idhren breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s fantastic,” Dorian exclaimed, leaping to his feet. “You can still feel the charge in the air, I bet you could do it again a second time without having to warp the veil again along the same path. And it completely ignored all of the easier targets,” he bent to examine a metal doorknob, but it didn’t hold even a hint of magic, then straightened and continued down the hall to examine the statue. “Oh, you definitely hit him,” he chuckled, “Poor old First Enchanter… Marcus?” he read from the plaque, “He’s got a crack on his nose. I don’t think anyone will notice.” Then he turned back to Idhren with a smile on his face. “I don’t say this often, but I’m impressed.”

“You… really?” Idhren asked in disbelief. Disbelief that Dorian would admit to being impressed by anything he could do.

“Don’t get me wrong, it still needs quiet a bit of work,” the young man hurried to correct himself. “It took you much too long to chart the path for this to be of use in anywhere but an academic setting. The veil warp itself, though,” that was the impressive part, in Dorian’s opinion, “If you could develop that precision it could be used for anything. Think of the possibilities!”

Idhren hadn’t quite allowed himself that luxury yet. He needed to be able to do this with more reliability before he could consider applying the technique to anything else. But Dorian’s enthusiasm was heartening. It was the most encouragement the elf had ever received in regards to developing his personal talents instead of forcing himself to repeat textbook spells to make his instructors happy.

“Do you want to see something else?” the Liberati asked, eager for the exceedingly rare opportunity to show off.

“That depends entirely on what it is,” Dorian replied as he made his way back to where Idhren was still sitting on the stairs leading up to their dormitory.
“Hold out your hands,” Idhren instructed, reaching his own out toward Dorian.

“If you electrocute me I’m going to be very cross,” the young man informed him, but held out his hands all the same.

“I won’t,” Idhren assured him. He held his hands up only a scant few inches away from Dorian’s and allowed the charge of electricity to form at his fingertips. Thin branches of lightning danced over his fingers and palm, sparking blue-white as they moved. Cautiously he let one and then another jump over to Dorian’s hands, never taking his eyes off the young man’s face, until the energy moved between them fluidly.

“It tickles,” Dorian breathed in wonder, watching in fascination as the tiny bolts of electricity jumped across his skin. What should have been painful was instead rather pleasant. Idhren had such effortless control over this element. Then he looked up, a comment on the tip of his tongue that died the moment his eyes met Idhren’s violet ones. The elf was far more talented than Dorian had initially given him credit for, and he was really very attractive.

Dorian pulled his hands away so quickly Idhren was momentarily worried that he had hurt him. But the young man didn’t look like he was in pain, in fact he was blushing. “I… should get to bed. And so should you. There are exams tomorrow.”

Confused and a little hurt, Idhren dropped his hands back down to his sides, all thoughts of party tricks gone completely. “Of course,” he mumbled, instinctively falling back on politeness and subservience to hide his feelings, “I apologize for distracting you.”

Dorian gave no response, only a curt nod before he brushed past Idhren and disappeared down the hall.
Chapter Notes

This is the chapter that all of those warnings are for. The rape happens off-screen, but it is discussed, nothing is graphic. There are some intersex- and transphobic comments, including misgendering, made by the perpetrators.

Those who bring harm

Without provocation to the least of His children

Are hated and accursed by the Maker.

- Canticle of Transfigurations 1:3

Vyranium, Tevinter Imperium; 9:29 Dragon

Everything hurt. His body, his mind, his pride. He ached everywhere, with even the tiniest of movements. He felt weak and sick to his stomach. And cold. A shiver wracked up his spine, chill emanating from where bare skin pressed against stone through torn robes. He should go back to his room, clean up, change clothes. But every movement brought pain, he’d barely been able to pull himself over to the wall where he now sat, knees pulled up to his chest as he tried in vain to compose himself.

His entire body ached, but what hurt the most were the emotional wounds.

They had laughed at his tears, his pleas. They looked upon his body with confusion, and then disgust. They called him a girl, held him down by the back of his throat, by his arms wrenched above his head.

Teach the knife-ear his place.

As though Idhren did not already know.

There is only one good use for an elf, and this one is so pretty. It's a shame for that face to go to waste.

Look at its body, though. No one would pay to fuck that. Can't even tell if it's a boy or a girl.

Fingers pressed into him, cold and harsh, made him bleed.

Oh it's definitely a girl, one of them jeered.

Idhren cried out and struggled, tried to lash out with his magic to knock them away, but when he reached for the Fade it was barely within his grasp before it was wrenched away, dispelled before the
magic could even form.

This one's fiesty. See, this is what happens when you let an elf think for itself, they start thinking they're better than you. Start thinking they can tell you what to do.

Something pressed into his mouth – magebane, bitter and sharp on his tongue – jaw forced shut, hands over his mouth and nose until he had no choice but to swallow or suffocate.

By the end of it Idhren couldn't cry out anymore. He was too exhausted. So when they wrapped his torn robes around his shoulders once more and shoved him unceremoniously out into the hall he had merely collapsed onto the floor. He tried to get back to his room, but his legs wouldn't work.

"Idhren?"

The elf startled at the sound of his own name and cowered back against the wall, fearing further torment. It didn't even occur to him that his tormentors would never use his name. If they even knew it to begin with.

"Idhren," the voice came again, softer this time, gentle, and closer, too. And it was familiar. "Idhren, it's me."

At first Idhren did not want to look, he did not want anyone to see him like this, least of all him. But rationally he knew that he could not make it back to his room on his own, he needed help. He needed healing. Swallowing back the nausea that suddenly welled up in his gut, the elf opened his eyes.

Dorian was kneeling in front of him, one hand halfway out toward the elf hesitantly and his brows furrowed in concern. Dorian had seen him injured before, bruises and cuts and the occasional burn, but nothing like this. Idhren did not want Dorian to see him like this. Anyone but Dorian. The one person whom he had tentatively come to think of as a friend. What would the Altus think of him now?

Just another knife-eared whore, like all the rest.

Dorian healed his wounds, but he never stopped them from happening in the first place.

"What did they do to you?" the young man breathed, and for a moment Idhren thought he sounded actually concerned. But that could not be the case. Dorian had never really been concerned about him. No one ever would. "You need a healer. I can't... This is too much."

It wasn't, actually. Aside from the blood dripping down his thighs, the bruises on his neck and arms, Idhren was relatively unharmed. Nothing serious. Nothing life threatening.

Not physically, anyway.

But of course Dorian wouldn't want to help him now. It had been a game for him before. Fix up the elf, a good chance to practice healing, but never a problem worth thinking about the next day.

"Can you stand?" Dorian asked, but Idhren only continued to stare at him blankly. "Can you walk? Kaffas, I don't... I'll go fetch someone. The healer. I'll go fetch the healer."

And then Dorian was gone.

Good. Idhren didn't want anyone to see him like this. He didn't want anyone else to know. Maybe if he could get back to his room before Dorian returned they could all just forget that this had
happened. Once more Idhren attempted to stand. He braced one arm against the wall and the other on the floor and managed to get as high as standing on his knees before the pain became unbearable and he was forced to return to the floor, feeling fresh blood trickle down his leg.

By the time Dorian returned with the Circle’s official healer in tow Idhren had managed to get himself all the way to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall, but had not managed to move himself any further down the hall.

The healer was an elderly woman, well past her prime. She looked to have dressed hastily, silver hair in a simple braid down her back and a plain robe thrown over her nightclothes. While all institutions such as this had a spirit healer on staff, it was not a terribly highly regarded position among the Alti. She was probably Laetan, then. Perhaps the pride of an otherwise Soporati family, just as Idhren was the pride of his. Or had been, at least.

She clicked her tongue when she saw him on his feet, face pale and drawn and legs trembling. “Come, child, let me take a look at you,” she said, quickly approaching his side. When she reached out to him Idhren flinched back instinctively. Her eyes flicked to the darkening bruises on his neck, and her expression softened. “It’s alright, child, I will do you no further harm.” Idhren watched her with wary eyes full of pain and fear. His gaze darted for a moment to Dorian, who hung back, his face still painted with concern. When the healer reached out for him again Idhren let her rest a hand on the side of his face. A faint green glow formed around her hand, and Idhren could feel the magic flow through his body like water, dulling the pain wherever it touched. He sighed in relief as his body went numb and slumped back against the wall. “There we go,” the healer murmured gently, “Now, let’s get you out of this wretched hall so I can fix you up properly. Which room is yours?”

Idhren raised a still-trembling hand to point down towards the end of the hallway. “Very good,” the healer praised before turning to Dorian, “Thank you for coming to me, my lord, I’ll see to him from here, you may return to your quarters for the night.”

“Will he be alright?” Dorian asked.

“I will see to him,” the healer assured again. “His wounds will be tended. You need not trouble yourself further, my lord.”

Dorian frowned and looked at Idhren, who could not look at him at all, only stared at the floor and wrapped his arms around himself protectively. “Should I… inform anyone else of what’s happened?”

“I will take care of it, my lord,” the healer continued.

After another moment of hesitation Dorian nodded and left in the direction of his own room.

The healer saw beneath his robes. Saw his too-soft chest, his too-wide hips, the confusion between his legs. Her eyes went wide in surprise, and then confusion, and then softened in pity. Idhren wrapped his arms around his chest to hide what he could and stared down at the floor. She healed the bruises on his neck and his wrists and his hips, and as she helped to wash the blood from his legs asked, “When was your last bleed?”

It took Idhren a moment to realize what she meant. “I’m not a girl,” he managed to whisper, bitter
and pained.

The healer gave him another pitying look that Idhren could not meet. “You’re not a boy, either,” she said like it was fact.

Idhren bit his lip nearly hard enough to braw blood as he tried not to cry. He failed.

With a sigh the healer finished cleaning him up. “I’ll give you a contraceptive just to be safe.”

Idhren pulled on a clean robe with still-trembling hands while she began to look through the small bag she had brought with her. He wiped the tears from his cheeks with the sleeves and she pressed a bottle of potion into his hands. For a long moment Idhren could only stare at it dumbly. Through the swirling emotions in his chest it was difficult to think and harder yet to accept what she was giving him. Even though the hurricane in his mind, however, Idhren could think one thing clearly. “Could you… fix me?” Terrified but desperate, Idhren glanced up at the woman from where he sat on the edge of his bed.

“Fix--?” the healer began to ask in confusion, before she realized what he was talking about. “No, I cannot,” she said flatly. “Magic cannot do such things.”

Idhren’s gaze fell to the floor once more, his shoulders slumped as he curled in on himself. It had been too much to hope for, but how could he live the rest of his life like this? Why had the Maker shaped him this way?

“Drink your potion, child,” the healer said, her voice somehow both stern and gentle.

Idhren stared down at the bottle in his hands and he knew he should, but he didn’t want to. That would be admitting it was possible, acknowledging that part of him existed. Idhren only wanted to forget about everything he hid under his robes as though wishing hard enough would someday make it true.

A hand came to rest over one of his and raised the bottle to his lips, gentle but firm. “Drink,” the healer ordered again, and this time Idhren obeyed. The potion was foul - thick and bitter - but he swallowed it all down and let the healer peel his fingers away from the glass when it was empty. “You are not the first one to suffer like this, and you will not be the last,” the woman told him, all business, as though Idhren’s entire world hadn’t just been torn out from under him. He didn’t care about other people right now. “You’re still young, in time you will overcome this. And if you are smart enough to study here, then you should be able to solve your problem eventually.”

She shut her bag with a snap that echoed in the silence that reigned over the small room. Idhren did not respond. At this moment he could not see how his life could ever be bearable again. “For now you should rest. If you still have pain or bleeding in the morning come to me again.” Without another word the healer left, shutting the door behind her with a soft click and leaving Idhren with nothing but the silence and his own thoughts.

Eventually he did lie down on the bed, wrap himself up in the blankets and press his face into the pillow. Tears came and went, came and went. By the time he fell asleep it was nearly sunrise.

Idhren slept through the morning lectures. And in the afternoon, after finally forcing himself out of bed, the elf still couldn’t bring himself to leave the room in order to meet with his mentor. As a result, she showed up at his door.

When he heard the three sharp knocks, Idhren was reluctant to answer, but he did so anyway. He expected a lecture about skipping on his lessons when he so desperately needed the practice, about
going nowhere in life if he did not push his abilities to their utmost. When it did not come, the elf was surprised.

“The healer informed me of your condition,” Galene said sharply, and Idhren flinched as he stepped back to allow her into his small room. “And that you should not be expected to attend lessons today.”

“I’m sorry,” the elf replied immediately.

Galene waved off the apology. “I think it may explain your difficulty with healing,” she mused, took a book out from under her arm and held it out to him. Idhren took it, but continued to watch his mentor as she spoke. “Healing requires more than an academic understanding of anatomy. Creation magic requires more finesse than the other schools, but finesse is never something you have lacked. Rather, it’s an area where you excel. It is also only healing where you stumble. Your nature magic is sound, as I would expect from an elf. No, you have never lacked for academic understanding or attention to detail in your casting, which is why I have never been able to understand the problem. Now I do, however: you are afraid of the human body. Or elven. Whatever.

Idhren stared at her blankly, blinking in shock and confusion until the woman scoffed and began speaking again.

“You are androgynus,” she said flatly. Idhren felt sick to his stomach. “If you are afraid of your own body, if you do not understand it, how can you expect to understand another?”

Unable to meet her gaze, Idhren looked down at the floor.

“Read that thesis,” Galene ordered, finally drawing Idhren’s attention to the book in his hands. It was not a printed volume, he realized, but a journal. “A generation ago, Enchanter Cleostrata Aruns was the same. She did not produce much of interest and her work was never published, however her writings remain in the library here as do the writings of all Enchanters of this Circle. In this volume she discusses the disconnect that her sex caused in her magic. She is quite frank. I think reading it would help you immensely. I’ve also requested that the healer prescribe you a contraceptive, as a precaution.”

That same panic from the night before clutched suddenly at Idhren’s heart again. “I don’t--,” he tried to protest.

“You don’t need it?” Galene cut him off. “Can you tell me that with absolute certainty? How old are you now, Idhren?”

“Fifteen,” he answered slowly.

“You’re still young. Just because you haven’t yet bled like a woman doesn’t mean it will not happen,” Galene told him. “Perhaps you never will. As I said, this is a precaution. I understand that you are not fit for training at the moment, so I will give you another assignment: Read that thesis, compare it with your research in alchemy, and then speak to the healer about your medication. When you’ve done all that we will resume your training.”

It took a moment for Idhren’s muddled mind to figure out what she was suggesting, but when he did his eyes went wide and he stared at her. Galene’s face so rarely gave away any emotion other than annoyance, but as he stared the tiniest of smiles quirked one corner of her mouth. “You’re clever,” she said carefully, “I’m certain you can overcome this setback. Do not disappoint me.”

“No, ma’am,” Idhren promised immediately, clutching the journal to his chest. “I won’t.”

“Good,” Galene replied curtly, and turned on her heel. “If you can finish this by the day after
tomorrow I will be further impressed,” she said, hand on the door handle, “Until then, farewell.”

“Farewell,” Idhren replied, and watched her leave, shoes clicking against the stones as she stepped into the hall and shut the door behind her. Immediately he threw himself onto his bed and began to read.

Idhren spent the rest of the afternoon pouring over Enchanter Aruns’ journal. Immersing himself in this meant that he did not have time to think about what had happened that night. He read the book cover to cover twice. The first time required several breaks to overcome the surge of emotions that welled up within him at times. He read it the second time to be certain those emotions weren’t skewing his perception.

The next day he skipped lectures again in favor of spending the morning in the library alone, reviewing all his notes on alchemy in light of the new information he had about his condition. Aruns had described it in the same way one would describe a medical condition, an illness. Idhren found it was much less painful to think about his body this way, though by no means was it easy.

The elf was alone for two hours before he heard someone open the door at the far end of the library, then the tell-tale sound of boots echoing across the floor. Idhren was supposed to be in the lecture hall, so he looked up in fear wondering if he should try to hide as his eyes sought out the source of the footsteps.

It was Dorian.

Idhren relaxed immediately.

The young man yawned and stretched his arms over his head as he made his way through the hall. When he opened his eyes they landed immediately on Idhren and the Altus stopped in his tracks, expression surprised. He glanced around the library for a moment, and then made a b-line for the table where Idhren was sitting. “Good morning,” he said, hesitating a moment before sliding into a seat two away from Idhren’s. “I’m surprised to see you here. How… How are you doing?”

Idhren looked down at the books in front of him. To be perfectly honest he was not doing well. While physically healed, the emotional wounds were still fresh. All the baths in the world could not wash away the feeling of their hands on him. Besides, what did Dorian care about what happened to him? “Shouldn’t you be listening to the debates right now?” he asked, avoiding the question.

“Shouldn’t you?” Dorian asked in reply. It was enough to make Idhren fall silent. “Did you tell them who did it? Are they going to be punished?”

Idhren shook his head slowly without lifting it. “Nothing will happen.”

Dorian frowned. “What do you mean? You told them, didn’t you?”

Idhren had told the healer, and she had promised to bring the matter before the First Enchanter, but the elf was under no delusions that his attackers would receive anything other than a stern lecture. They were Altus, and Idhren was Liberati. He might as well still be a slave for all the good his freedom did.

“Idhren,” Dorian prompted again when the elf did not answer.
The way the young man said his name almost made Idhren want to cry. It was full of so much concern. When everyone else was in such a rush to get rid of him it felt like Dorian actually wanted to be here. “Of course I told them,” Idhren said, bitterness seeping into his voice, “But they won’t do anything.”

“What?” Dorian was honestly confused. “Why not?”

“Do you honestly think that anyone would punish the sons of magisters for hurting an elf?” Idhren asked. Dorian might be kind, but he was naive. His whole life the world had been handed to him on a silver platter, an Altus could do no wrong.

When Idhren looked up again Dorian had a strange expression on his face, still confused but maybe he was beginning to understand what life was like for those beneath him. “So they’ll just get away with it?”

Idhren shrugged. He imagined they would get a talking to about cleaning up their messes, being less obvious about their activities, but he did not expect anything further. Certainly no serious punishment. “They were just reminding the knife-ear of his place in the world,” he bit out, chest tight, “So I don’t forget: even with magic an elf is only good for one thing.”

Dorian’s eyes went wide. “That’s not…” he stammered, at a loss for words, “You’re smarter than most elves. You’re not like them.”

“Smarter?” Idhren asked in disbelief. What was that supposed to mean? How was Idhren not like the rest of his people? Because he was a mage? Because he was not a slave? Because he could read? How many elves had great minds that were never allowed to reach their potential because most slaves were not permitted to read? “Why? Because I can read and parrot back complex theories? How many elves would be able to do the same if they were allowed the opportunity to learn? I’m not smarter than my brother just because I’m sitting here in a library and he is fighting in the colosseum. If I didn’t have magic I might be cleaning floors somewhere. Would you think me smart then?”

The words had come out all in a rush. Dorian looked as surprised to hear them as Idhren was to speak them aloud. The young man was stunned speechless. Idhren felt a rush of panic, fear that talking so candidly to an Altus would be punished, that finally he had crossed a line and Dorian would not put up with his backtalk anymore. But Dorian did not retaliate. Instead his expression turned thoughtfully, perhaps even a little regretful. “I… Have never thought about it before.”

Of course not. An Altus didn’t need to spare a thought for the slaves beneath him. Obviously Dorian had much more important things to think about.

Idhren looked back down at the books and notes laid out before him, and suddenly he couldn’t stomach the idea of this pretend friendship any longer. “I would like to be alone, please,” he said quietly, and hoped the young man would listen.

To his surprise, Dorian did. He pushed back from the table, chair legs scraping on the tiled floor, and took a few steps away before stopping and looking back over his shoulder. Sitting there at the end of a long table in the middle of this enormous library Idhren looked so small and so vulnerable. “Idhren,” he said quietly, drawing the elf’s attention back to him once more. “For what it’s worth… I’m sorry that this happened to you. You didn’t deserve it.”

Looking back down at his books, Idhren blinked back tears and remained silent. The healer and Galene, they had been understanding but not sympathetic. They wanted him to quickly get over it and go back to life as though nothing had happened. Dorian did not understand, but his parting words meant more than he would ever know.
There were so many times that Idhren wanted to hate him. Dorian was spoiled, egotistical, arrogant, and conceited. When there were other people around he pretended not to know Idhren at all. He was an ass, and yet he was the closest thing that Idhren had to a friend in this place.

It would be so much easier to hate him.

“Would you believe that Liberati’s really a girl?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I always thought it was too pretty to be a boy, even for a knife-ear.”

“It’s true. I saw for myself the other night.”

“Did you really? How did you manage that?”

“It took a bit of convincing, but that’s half the fun, isn’t it?”

“And how was she? A little thing like that is bound to be tight, I’d bet.”

“Definitely. I wouldn’t even be surprised if she was a virgin. Sure screamed like a whore when I fucked her, though.”

“That’s just instinct for them, isn’t it? Elves always act like they don’t want it, but as soon as you get it in they can’t get enough.”

“That’s certainly true. I just can’t figure out why the rabbit is walking around dressing and acting like a boy. It’s such an obvious lie.”

“Her owner probably keeps her dressed up like that to protect his investment.”

“He’s not doing a very good job, then, is he? I’d keep a thing like that chained to the bed. Maybe buy one of those Qunari mage collars. I certainly wouldn’t ever send it to a Circle. It’s an insult to all proper mages.”

Idhren heard the entire conversation from the other side of a bookshelf, frozen in place with the volume he had lifted clutched in a white knuckled grip against his chest. He wanted to run away, but he couldn’t move. He couldn’t feel his legs. He just kept remembering that night, less than a week ago, in painful, vivid detail. There had been two of them, both older and larger and stronger than Idhren; holding him down, tearing at his clothes, laughing and mocking as they violated him. Now one of them was bragging about it. Bragging and lying and calling him a girl.

Idhren wasn’t a girl.

He wasn’t. He wasn’t.

A loud slam, like someone dropping a book from a significant height, interrupted both the conversation and Idhren’s panicked thoughts, nearly making the elf jump out of his skin.

“Have the pair of you forgotten that we are in a library? Not the appropriate place for such a distasteful conversation, if you ask me.”

Idhren knew that voice.
“Nobody did ask you, Pavus. Do you have a problem with our conversation?”

“I have a number of problems with your conversation.” Dorian replied mildly. Idhren managed to make his legs work again and tiptoed to the end of the shelf, daring to peek around the corner. It was indeed Dorian standing there beside one of the library tables. There was a book on the floor at his feet, thrown from the table to serve his dramatic interruption. The other two Altus had their backs turned to Idhren’s hiding spot but Idhren recognized one of them all the same. Adrian Gallus’ voice and face haunted Idhren’s nightmares. That was not a person he would forget any time soon. “Chiefly that it is happening here where I am forced to listen to it,” Dorian continued. “Some people are using this library for its intended purpose. Your crude discussion is not only nauseating but tremendously distracting.”

“What’s wrong Pavus?” Gallus sneered, looking down his nose at the other mage. “You have a soft spot for pointed ears? Or are you jealous that I got the first taste?”

Dorian scoffed in response, “Neither,” he retorted stiffly, “I simply have no desire to hear your annoying voice while I am trying to read.”

“I think he’s only disappointed the Liberati is a girl after all,” the other cut in. Unable to see his face Idhren could not place a name to the voice. Perhaps that was better. “Everyone knows where your tastes lie, Pavus.”

Gallus laughed, “Oh, I see. But I think this one’s a girl even you could get it up for. Flat as a fucking board on top and you can barely tell it’s a girl at all even down there. That elf is some kind of freak, if you ask me.”

Idhren’s blood ran cold and he ducked back behind the bookshelf again, pressing his back against the shelves and still clutching the book to his chest. He was going to tell Dorian. He was going to tell everyone.

“I have no interest one way or the other in rabbits half my size,” Dorian said curtly. “I merely find your behavior so absolutely plebian that it physically pains me.”

“Plebian?” Gallus replied, his tone obviously offended, “That’s rich coming from a knife-ear sympathizer.”

“I sympathize with nothing except the poor reputation people like you give to this Circle,” Dorian spat back.

“You would know something about poor reputations wouldn’t you, Pavus?” Gallus sneered in return.

“No nearly as much as yourself, I imagine,” Dorian said, “Of the three of us standing here I am the only one not behaving like a Soporati.”

There was a long moment of silence following Dorian’s words, tense and uncomfortable even for Idhren. “You should be careful what you say, Pavus,” Gallus said tightly.

“Is that a threat?” Dorian asked.

“It could be,” Gallus replied.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be a little more clear, Gallus,” Dorian sounded so flippant, so unconcerned. “All this talk of reputations, surely you must have heard at least some of mine. If it’s a duel you want then you only need ask. I would be more than happy to remind a cock like you what a proper mage
Idhren imagined he could hear Gallus’ teeth grinding even from the other side of the shelf. Dueling was strictly forbidden among apprentices, but no one could refuse such an open challenge and escape with their pride intact. “You’re on, Pavus;” he spat, voice low. “Tonight, the Harrowing arena.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Dorian assured, “Be certain to have your friend here bring you an extra pair of trousers.”

“And you bring along the little knife-ear if you’re so fond of it,” Gallus sneered in reply. “I’d like to see the look on its face when I wipe the floor with you.”

“I’m afraid you’ll be terribly disappointed,” Dorian said, turned on his heel and quickly left the library. He passed Idhren’s not inconspicuous hiding place without noticing him, striding off down the hall and out the door without so much as a glance backward. Behind him, Gallus let out a string of furious curses before he and his friend departed in the opposite direction, leaving Idhren alone in the library and wondering what he had just witnessed.

It had almost seemed like Dorian was defending him. But why?

Idhren waited in the library, and then his own room, for Dorian to come and officially tell him about the planned duel, but the young man never showed up. He saw neither hide nor hare of the Altus for the rest of the day. So when evening finally rolled around, when students were meant to be in their rooms, Idhren slipped out and made his way through silent halls to the Harrowing arena. The arena had been added to the building after it was converted to a Circle, a wide floor surrounded on three sides by rows and rows of tiered seats. Idhren was told that it was similar to the Grand Proving Grounds in Minrathous or the colosseum in this very city where his brother fought for the entertainment of higher class citizens, albeit significantly smaller than either of those structures. The entire structure was warded to contain whatever sort of spells might be unleashed within, protecting any spectators or nearby structures from misfired or badly aimed attacks.

He slunk through the halls nervously, afraid of being caught and afraid of what he might find when he finally arrived. All the halls were empty and dark, however, and Idhren encountered not another soul. Upon reaching the arena he found one of the massive doors standing ajar. Idhren practically ran up to it and peeked inside. In the center of the arena he spotted Dorian first, staff in hand and dressed in more practical clothing than the intricate robes that he usually wore, across from him was Gallus, similarly equipped, and a few figures stood at the edge of the arena watching the whole display. Amid the small group of spectators was the other figure that haunted Idhren’s nightmares – Kaeso Fidelis. Laetan, though one of the well established families, and likely courting Gallus’ favor in hopes of further raising his family name. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t enjoyed torturing Idhren that night. Idhren felt ill just looking at him, and quickly turned his attention back to the center of the floor.

It seemed as though he had missed the very beginning of the duel. As he slipped into the arena the air felt charged with mana, the after effects of recent casting. There were scorch marks on the floor.

Watching as the two mages circled each other, Idhren still could not figure out why Dorian was doing this. Why had Dorian gotten so angry in the library that day? If he did not want to listen to Gallus’ gloating why not just leave? Why put himself in danger like this for no reason? There had to
be a reason, but the only thing his mind could come up with was that Dorian had been defending him. It was impossible, though. Even if Dorian felt any kind of sympathy for what Idhren had been through there was no way that an Altus would do something like this for a Liberati.

Dorian also had not told Idhren about the duel or the argument at all. If he truly meant to defend Idhren’s honor wouldn’t he want the elf to know about it?

In the arena below fireballs and lightning bolts bounced off barriers, glyphs were drawn and triggered. Dorian was breathing heavily. Gallus’ robes were singed around the hem.

Idhren still could not figure out why this was happening in the first place. Just like he couldn’t figure out why Dorian showed any interest in him at all. And the more Idhren thought about it the more frustrated he became.

Dorian was doing all of this because of Idhren, but the Altus wouldn’t even tell him about it. And Idhren had never asked for his help in the first place. So everything that had happened between them was just to entertain himself after all. That was the only possible explanation. Idhren was a momentary distraction, a diversion, an excuse to get into fights. What would happen to Idhren if Dorian lost this duel? What would happen if they were found by the Circle’s Enchanters? This was against so many rules; surely both apprentices would be in trouble if they were caught. If that happened would they blame Idhren? Of course they would. Someone would, in the end. Whether or not either Dorian or Gallus wanted to admit it, Idhren was the cause of this duel. One way or another Idhren would have to deal with the consequences.

A sudden scream shocked Idhren out of his thoughts. He had only been half paying attention to the action below. Down in the arena Gallus was knocked off his feet, his staff tossed aside, and one sleeve of his robes ablaze where his barrier had failed and Dorian’s fireball connected. On the sidelines someone cried out in alarm and rushed forward, an ice spell putting out the flames and then hands aglow with healing magic as they knelt at his side.

Behind Idhren the doors to the arena slammed open hard enough to make him jump and skitter quickly out of the way as he turned to look.

The First Enchanter stood in the doorway, along with a Senior Enchanter that Idhren did not recognize and several soldiers in templar armor. “What is the meaning of this?” the First Enchanter demanded furiously.

Everything down in the arena froze. Gallus curled on the floor in pain, the mage tending his burns, Dorian still poised to attack, Idhren halfway down the steps and cowering to the side. One by one every student present turned their attention to the interruption. Dorian was surprised when he laid eyes on the First Enchanter, but then he noticed Idhren and his expression turned to one of genuine shock. The elf’s violet eyes met his for a moment, and then quickly turned away.

“Duels between apprentices are strictly forbidden,” the First Enchanter snapped. He began descending the steps. “As is wandering about the halls after curfew. Who is responsible?”

“It was Pavus, sir,” one of the spectators accused quickly. It was the same boy who had been with Gallus in the library that day. “He gave the challenge.”

The First Enchanter turned his attention to Dorian, mouth pressed into a thin disapproving line. “Is this true?” he asked in a tone that demanded the young man’s full attention.

It forced Dorian to tear his eyes away from Idhren, who still would not look at him. Why was the elf here? How had he found out about this duel? Dorian had intended to keep it a secret from him
because explaining would be too difficult. Or at least keep it a secret until he could come up with an excuse that did not involve him defending Idhren’s honor. Dorian turned his attention to the First Enchanter and shrugged his shoulders. “That’s a matter of interpretation, I think.”

“You’re so full of shit, Pavus,” the other student growled.

“Silence!” the First Enchanter snapped. He looked over to Gallus, who was still on the floor, moaning in pain. “Someone see to this boy’s injuries,” he ordered impatiently, and immediately the Enchanter at his side rushed forward. “Pavus, I’ll speak to you in my office. The rest of you get back to your rooms. I’m feeling lenient today, but if I see so much as one hair out of bed in the next half hour there will be consequences.”

Idhren chanced one last glance back at Dorian, and startled when he realized the young man was looking at him again. He would have expected Dorian to be upset after being caught. Not only had he been out after curfew and dueling against regulations, he had seriously injured another apprentice in the process. But the expression on Dorian’s face as he stared at Idhren was only confusion.

Quickly Idhren tore his gaze away again and rushed out past the templars, trying to tell himself that his heart was racing only from adrenaline.

Following a rather long and involved lecture by the First Enchanter Dorian had been forcibly hauled off by two of the Circle’s resident templar guards, dosed with magebane, and dragged down into the lower levels of the Circle, past the cellars and the storage rooms, and to a dungeon that Dorian hadn’t even been aware of. It was a single corridor lined with three barred cells on either side, dark and stinking of mildew, as one would expect of a prison, but the cell that he was unceremoniously shoved into was at least clean. It was furnished with a low cot, a wobbly table, and a chamber pot. After the barred door slammed shut behind him the only light source came from the magefire sconces in the corridor. With the magebane still in his system Dorian could barely manage a spark, let alone enough of a flame to light his dismal cell.

Solitary confinement. That was his sentence. Presumably until they decided what to do with him, or until his father arrived to collect him. Or sent someone to collect him. At this point that would be less of a surprise.

Nothing would happen until at least the following day, however, so Dorian tentatively lay down on the poor excuse for a bed to try and get a few hours of sleep while he could. That ass Gallus was probably enjoying a nice nap in the infirmary right now, with a proper mattress and a feather pillow while Dorian wondered whether his blanket had been washed this decade. At least those burns would probably scar. That was the least he deserved for what he had done to Idhren. Not that Dorian would ever say so out loud. He certainly hadn’t told the First Enchanter the truth, though he had considered it. Had the man even been told about the abuse occurring under his own roof? Did he care?

Idhren had been right.

It was with that thought that Dorian managed to drift off to sleep, though his night was not particularly restful. The thin, hard mattress did not provide for a quality night’s sleep. Dorian tossed and turned trying to find a comfortable position, slept a few hours at a time before waking again because his back or his shoulder or his hip ached. Eventually he gave up trying to sleep, uncertain whether it was morning or not. The magebane had worn off, so he was at least able to conjure
enough light to properly light his cell, not that it did much to improve the ambiance.

He entertained himself with simple magic tricks, little pretty things that made children smile, until he heard footsteps at the end of the hall. They were quiet, but there was little else to listen to down here, so Dorian noticed them right away. Curious, he let the flame in his palm flicker out and turned his head toward the cell door.

He expected the First Enchanter, a templar, or maybe even his father, so it was quite the surprise when the figure that stepped into his line of sight was short, slender, and elven. Idhren. Violet eyes aglow in the dim torchlight, the elf looked decidedly unhappy.

“You’re not supposed to be down here,” Dorian said flatly.

“You’re not supposed to be fighting duels in the middle of the night,” Idhren shot back.

“No,” Dorian agreed, “How did you find out about that, by the way?”

“I was in the library,” Idhren informed him. “I heard everything.”

“Of course you were,” Dorian sighed. He should have expected that. Idhren was always in the library. That begged the question, though, of how much ‘everything’ the elf had actually heard.

“Why did you do it?” Idhren demanded furiously.

Dorian had never seen him so aggressive. It was startling, but of course he did not react. “This Circle has a very strange idea of what ‘solitary confinement’ entails,” he mused instead.

“Why did you do it?” Idhren demanded again, and gripped the bars of Dorian’s cell so hard his knuckles turned white.

Dorian shrugged and let his head fall back against the wall. “They were annoying me.”

Idhren barred his teeth in a snarl. How could the man be so cavalier about this? “I don’t need you to fight my battles for me,” he snapped.

“So it’s just a coincidence that you publically humiliated the one who… who…”

“The boy who raped you?” Dorian finished for him, and watched Idhren’s face go ashen, his entire body go rigid. Really that reaction was all the reason he needed to assure himself that his actions had been warranted. But in Tevinter an Altus does not go around performing random acts of kindness for a Liberati elf no matter how pretty, how endearing, how talented. “You say you don’t need me to fight your battles for you, but you didn’t seem very willing to fight them for yourself.”

“They’ll kick you out of the Circle for this,” Idhren said.

“Yes, I imagine they will,” Dorian mused, unperturbed. “And rightly so. A terrible example for the other students, I am. As though bullying and abuse are perfectly acceptable behaviors.”

Idhren’s hands dropped away from the bars and hung limp by his sides. “It is if it’s toward a knife-ear,” he muttered. “Otherwise I might forget my place. Didn’t you know, Master Pavus?” A smile crossed his face, a smile that made Dorian exceedingly uncomfortable though he couldn’t say why. “Elves are too stupid to think for themselves. That’s why we’re slaves, you see?” he let out a bark of bitter almost hysterical laughter, “We need you humans to look after us, tell us what to do. We’re
happier that way, taking orders and doing as we’re told. It was a cruelty for Magister Canidius to set me free. A cruelty to send me here, where it’s so obvious I’m too stupid and useless for an education.”

Dorian surged up off the bed and crossed the cell in two long strides, thrusting his arms through the bars to grab Idhren by the shoulders. “You are the most talented mage in this entire Circle!”

Idhren ripped himself out of Dorian’s grasp and staggered backward beyond his reach. “Do you think you’ve helped me, Dorian?” he demanded. “Do you think you’ve helped the poor knife-ear who can’t take care of himself? Who won’t fight his own battles?”

“What?” Dorian asked in confusion. That was the whole point, wasn’t it?

“No!” Dorian insisted, “That wasn’t—.”

“What do you think will happen when you leave?” Idhren interrupted before Dorian could say anything further. “Do you think everyone will ignore me because Altus Pavus stood up for me?” he sneered, “Do you think they will let their humiliation stand? Or do you think they’ll try and get revenge? And what better way to get back at the one who wronged them than to take it out on the knife-ear he tried to protect.”

Dorian stared at him agape. Idhren was right. Of course he was. The others wouldn’t be kicked out because the First Enchanter didn’t think they did anything wrong. “I didn’t think--.”

“Of course you didn’t!” Idhren snapped. “Altus Dorian Pavus in his gilded mansion wouldn’t ever think about the consequences of his actions to anyone but himself. He certainly wouldn’t think about a lowly Liberati.”

“Then why don’t you stand up for yourself!” Dorian snapped. His brain finally caught up with the conversation, finally got over the shock of all that Idhren was saying. But if the elf had just stood up for himself in the first place Dorian wouldn’t have felt the need to do it for him. “Why don’t you fight back? You could have stopped this a long time ago if you did!”

Idhren laughed, bitter and hysterical and disturbing. “Fight back? Me?” he asked. “I’m an elf! Elves that fight back get killed!”

Dorian was once more stunned into silence.

“You’re a fool, Dorian Pavus,” Idhren spat. “Go back to your gilded palace, and next time you think about helping someone… Don’t.” He turned on his heel then and stormed off down the hall, footsteps soft on the stone floor until they were out of earshot entirely.

That could have gone better.

Apparently Dorian’s habit of being a crushing disappointment was not unique to his family alone. It also extended to Liberati elves that he had never been trying to impress in the first place. Yes, for once in his life Dorian hadn’t been trying to impress anyone, he had simply been trying to do the right thing, and still all the effort had been thrown back in his face.

He stepped back away from the cell door and slumped down on the shoddy excuse for a bed once again. Idhren was probably right. He should stick to what he was good at: sassing his instructors and
getting drunk.

Once they shipped him back to his father Dorian would probably never see the little elf again, anyway.

A week later Dorian was lead out of the dungeons and into a carriage waiting in the Circle’s courtyard. His father did not come, but he was headed back to Qarinus, that much was obvious. And then Magister Pavus would frown and lecture and be so very disappointed and find another school for his son. It had all happened before.

Even after a week to think about it Dorian didn’t regret scarring the Gallus boy. He only regretted getting caught in the act. Because after a week thinking about it Dorian realized that Idhren was probably right: Gallus would not let the insult go unreturned. He had hurt Idhren once before with no reason. Now Dorian had unintentionally given him very good reason, and now Dorian wasn’t around to fight on Idhren’s behalf or at least patch up his bruises in the aftermath. It was little consolation that Gallus would soon be facing his Harrowing. Tevinter produced men like him in the blink of an eye. Someone else would show up to fill the place he vacated.

Dorian didn’t regret the duel. He didn’t regret being thrown out of the Circle. He regretted leaving Idhren there alone without anyone to look out for him. He regretted that even down to their last meeting he hadn’t been able to be honest about his feelings.
Worthy of Your Endless Pride

My Maker, know my heart:
Take from me a life of sorrow.
Lift me from a world of pain.
Judge me worthy of Your endless pride.

- Canticle of Transfigurations 12:3

Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:32 Dragon

A Blight in Ferelden. The news did not reach Tevinter until the thing was already over. As a result, the general reaction was to scoff and say ‘well it couldn’t have been a real Blight to clean up so quickly. There’s no way those backwards southerners could have managed it.’ Proud denial was practically a Tevinter national past time - behind blood magic and backstabbing. But while the nobles scoffed behind their hands, the servants and slaves were saying something else. The Grey Warden who had slain the archdemon, the one who had miraculously survived and was now being called the Hero of Ferelden: he was an elf. If the nobles mentioned this at all it was accompanied by the words ‘fluke’ or ‘liar’, or by the sentiment that ‘he stole the honor from another’.

Never mind that it was the second time in history, that the Fourth Blight was also ended by an elf. That was another fact conveniently forgotten by the nobility of Tevinter.

For Idhren, freshly Harrowed and finally free of the terrible disappointment that had been his Circle education, that was the only fact that mattered. An elf had saved the world. Twice now an elf had saved the world, done the impossible. No matter how many magisters and Altus mages spat on him and belittled his knowledge, Idhren knew that he was just as capable as any of them. His ears were not a sign of inferiority, they were just ears. He was as smart as any of them. Dorian had even admitted it once, in that last furious conversation before the young man had been shipped back to his family.

Dorian. In the last years of his education Idhren’s thoughts had drifted to the Altus brat far more often than he would have liked. He told himself he merely missed the companionship, the illusion of friendship, the freedom of being able to speak his mind without fear of reprisal. Until he remembered watching Dorian disfigure his tormentor in that fateful duel, until he remembered the fire in the young man’s eyes as he called Idhren ‘the most talented mage in this Circle’, and something in his stomach twisted, his chest clenched, and Idhren forced himself to think of other things.

He arrived back at the Canidius estate outside Vyrantium with no fanfare. The magister had been kind enough to send a small coach to fetch him from the Circle so that Idhren did not have to walk the entire way. Just another item on the still-growing list of kindnesses his former master and current patron had shown him. Despite what a terrible experience he had had in the Circle, Idhren was still grateful that he had been there. The things he had learned, the progress he had made in his studies and his training, could not have been gained anywhere else. And now he was free to pursue his interests on his own, as apprentice to a magister and a fully fledged enchanter in his own right. So
despite everything that had happened, all the torment that Idhren had suffered, all the indignities, Idhren was still determined to give everything he had to being Canidius’ apprentice, to prove that he was worth the kindness that had been shown him. Just as he had promised all those years ago.

The magister himself met Idhren in the foyer after his arrival, dressed in his usual finery and face lined with amusement. Idhren had had minimal contact with him during his studies. Idhren wrote a handful of letters to assure that he was still alive and was indeed pursuing his lessons, Canidius responded with reminders to work hard and a few coins for Idhren to buy new clothes and such as they were needed.

“Congratulations on your successful Harrowing,” Canidius said by way of a greeting.

“Thank you, magister,” the elf responded happily.

Successfully passing his Harrowing had lifted Idhren up to the ranks of Laetan. A respected mage and a fully fledged citizen of the Imperium. Even the invisible shackles of the Liberati class held him no longer.

A snap of the magister’s fingers and an elven slave rushed up from the side of the room on quick, silent feet. It was a mousy woman with muddy blond hair whom Idhren did not recognize. He used to know all the slaves in the estate, but he had been gone for years. It made sense for Canidius to have purchased a few more in that time. “Valora will show you to your new quarters, the others will bring your things. Tomorrow morning Alvinius will help you get acquainted with your new responsibilities.”

“Responsibilities?” Idhren asked.

“Of course,” Canidius replied. “Everyone must have duties and responsibilities to tend to. If we only pursue our personal interests we grow lazy. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“No, of course not, magister,” Idhren replied, nodding in understanding.

“I have considered putting you in charge of the library,” the magister mused, “I recall you had a fondness for books, yes?”

“Yes,” Idhren answered eagerly.

“Good. I’m certain that parts of my collection are painfully out of date,” Canidius sighed, “But with my duties in the Magisterium I simply haven’t the time to sort through it all. I wouldn’t want our work to be held back because of it. It should be a simple enough task.”

“You mean… I can purchase new materials?” Idhren asked. It would be a simple task, but a great responsibility. He was absolutely flattered that the magister would trust him with this.

“With my permission, of course,” Canidius confirmed. “Alvinius will assist you as well. But that is for tomorrow. You may spend the rest of the day unpacking, or however you like,” he said with a flippant wave of his hand.

“May I see my family?” Idhren asked eagerly.

That question made the magister pause, and he looked down at Idhren with a frown. “Don’t be silly, boy,” he said, though Idhren was hardly a child anymore, even if he was at least half a foot shorter than Canidius and still only half his width. “They have their own duties to attend to. It wouldn’t be fair for you to distract them. You may see them on their rest day, as always.”
Idhren’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, even though he understood that Canidius was right. But it had been four years since he had heard anything from them. The few letters that Canidius had sent were hardly detailed, only confirming that his family was still healthy and whole. He wanted to see them with his own eyes, to hug them and tell them all about the Circle, and to hear all that had happened while he was away. “Of course, magister,” he replied quietly.

He let the slave woman lead him out of the foyer and toward the back of the house. Very little seemed to have changed about the estate while he was away. A few new or changed decorations, but nothing worth noting. It did not escape him that the woman was leading him toward the servant quarters, a wing of simple but serviceable rooms for the paid staff and highest ranking slaves. It was a step up from where Idhren had lived before the circle – in the household slave dormitory beside the cellar – but not exactly suitable for the apprentice of a magister. Idhren wondered if he should feel insulted to be shunned to the hidden parts of the house. Canidius had already showed him so much kindness, however, that he would not dare think of complaining. A room with a proper window and a view of the yard, a space he could furnish with his own possessions, was better than anything he had ever had before and it was more than enough for his needs.

“What is your name?” he asked suddenly of the slave woman walking half a step before him.

When he spoke she practically jumped, tensing and raising her gaze from the ground to look over her shoulder at him, before quickly looked back at the floor once again. “Valora, my lord,” she replied quietly, with an accent that Idhren could not recognize.

“I’m not a lord,” Idhren corrected her quickly. It was rather jarring to hear himself addressed that way, actually. “You don’t have to talk to me like that.”

“I’m sorry, ser,” the woman replied quickly, meekly. And that jarred him even more because it was not a title that anyone in Tevinter used.

“Where are you from?” Idhren asked curiously, “Your accent isn’t Tevene.”

“Ferelden, ser,” Valora answered.

“Ferelden?” Idhren parroted, surprised. No wonder he didn’t recognize the accent; that was the other side of the world. And to have kept her accent she must have been at least an adolescent when she came here. “That’s far,” he commented, taking a moment to look at her more closely. She looked to be only a year or two older than him. Then he noticed how her hands trembled ever so slightly, and when her arms moved to give a glimpse of her wrists beneath the simple cotton dress there were fading bruises, and there were bruises also where the thin metal band around her neck sat heavy on her exposed collar bones. “You’re new, aren’t you?” he realized suddenly. Not just new to the household, either. “To Tevinter.”

Her breathing hitched and she clasped her hands in front of her. “Yes, ser,” she replied quietly. “Just this year.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Idhren said quickly. “It’s alright if you don’t want to talk about it.” He couldn’t imagine how she felt, taken from her home and brought to a place like this. “And please, stop calling me ’ser’. I’m not anyone special. And I won’t get you in trouble, I promise. I was a slave, too.”

Valora looked over at him again, surprise on her face before she looked away, asking, “How should I address you, then?”

“My name is Idhren,” he replied.
“Idhren,” Valora repeated hesitantly, and came to a stop in front of a door identical to every other door that lined the hall. Here in the servants’ halls there was no decoration, the enchanted lamps were plain and utilitarian. This place was not meant to be seen by the magister or any of his guests, there was no use in keeping it pretty. “This will be your room. The footman should bring your things shortly. M-master Canidius says you may have the afternoon to yourself, but wishes for you to join him for dinner at eighth bell.”

“I will,” Idhren assured him. “Thank you, Valora.”

“Do you need anything else… Idhren?” the woman asked, a moment of hesitation before she allowed herself to speak his name.

Idhren hesitated as well. It had been so long since he had had anyone to talk to about anything other than his schooling. But he was not allowed to see his family, and he had not had anyone else he considered a friend. “Do you have other duties to attend to?” he asked.

The woman bit her lip nervously. “I finished all of my chores,” she began slowly. “I’m supposed to wait on the magister in case he needs anything.”

“Someone else must be doing that while you’re helping me,” Idhren reasoned. “I don’t think you’ll be missed for a while yet. I’d like… That is… Would you… talk to me for a while?”

“Talk… to you?” Valora repeated hesitantly.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had anyone to talk to about anything except magic,” Idhren explained. “Most of the apprentices at the circle were Altus. They didn’t want anything to do with me.”

Valora wrung her hands in front of her for a moment, looked down at the floor, then looked up and down the hallway. “I suppose it would be alright if I stayed for a little while,” she murmured reluctantly.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Idhren assured her. “If Canidius is angry you can tell him that I ordered you to… help me unpack. Or something. I really just… Want to talk to someone. Please?”

“Alright,” Valora agreed. “For a little while.”

“Thank you,” Idhren said earnestly. He pulled open the door to what would be his new room and held it open for Valora, who slipped inside before him. The room was utilitarian and undecorated at the moment, with only a bed, wardrobe, desk, and chair. It had a window that looked out onto the back gardens framed by two plain black curtains. But it was easily twice the size of the room Idhren had had in the circle, which itself had been immeasurably nicer than anywhere he had lived as a slave. “I’ve never been outside Vyrantium,” Idhren commented, sitting on the edge of the bed. Valora hesitated a moment before perching next to him. “What’s it like in Ferelden? I only know what I’ve read in books, and that’s mostly history.”

“It’s very different,” Valora answered slowly, looking down at her lap. “I grew up in Highever, on the northern coast. It seemed such a big city to me at the time, but it’s nothing compared to this place. And I seldom left the alienage; maybe that made it seem bigger.”

“I’ve read about alienages,” Idhren commented. “It’s really true they force elves to all live in one place?”

“You could buy a home outside the alienage, I suppose,” Valora commented, “If you could afford it. I don’t expect an elf could make that much money, nor would they want to leave the alienage even if
“Why not?” Idhren asked curiously. Why wouldn’t they want to live somewhere nicer?

“How did you feel living with humans in the Circle?” Valora asked in reply, “You said they did not want anything to do with you.”

Idhren nodded in confirmation, “Mostly they ignored me,” he said, “Some of them were… more cruel.”

“Shems are the same wherever you go,” Valora said bitterly. “The alienage protected us from them. At least… it was supposed to.”

The way she spoke, the tone of her voice and the expression on her face, made Idhren think that she understood better than anyone so far what he had suffered in the Circle at the hands of a few pompous Altus brats even without being told. “I think I understand,” he murmured. This estate had protected Idhren from the cruelties of the world, Canidius had as well, whenever he was present. Leaving the estate had meant more opportunities to learn and grow, but it was also putting himself at the mercy of Tevinter society.

After a moment of silence Idhren hesitantly spoke up again. “Were you there during the Blight?” She said she was recently arrived, so perhaps she had escaped the fighting; perhaps she knew no more than Idhren about what had happened down south.

Valora’s silence, however, was telling, even before she replied. “I was, for a time. I was in Denerim when the rumors started coming in, but the fighting did not reach that far north while I was there.”

Idhren nodded, feeling a bit disappointed. She probably didn’t know all that much, though. Still, he had to at least try asking. “Is it true what they’re saying?” he said curiously, “The Warden that killed the Archdemon… Is it true he was an elf?”

A look of pain briefly crossed Valora’s face before she managed to subdue it. “I don’t know for certain,” she admitted. “The news that made it to the alienage was not always reliable, but… There was a Warden who came to the alienage when everything was still just rumors who conscripted one of the men there after he… after he killed the Arl’s son.”

Idhren’s eyes went wide, “What?” he breathed in muted horror. He wasn’t entirely certain what an Arl was, but gathered that it was some rank of nobleman. “Why?”

Valora looked down at her lap, where her hands were fisted in the fabric of her dress. “The Arl’s son came into the alienage… He and his men took some of the women. For fun. Rowan and Soris snuck into the castle to rescue us.”

‘Us’ she said. “Did they…?" Idhren couldn’t make himself finish the question. “Did you…?”

Valora was quick to shake her head, “No, not me,” she said quietly. “I was lucky. When the guards showed up at the alienage afterwards Rowan took full blame. They would have executed him for certain but that Warden conscripted him instead. I only knew him for a day, but I thought… I thought if anyone could have done what they’re saying the Hero of Ferelden did, it would be him. Maybe it is him. All the stories forget his name by the time they make it here.”

“It was an elf, then, who ended the Blight,” Idhren was stuck somewhere between disbelief and admiration. “Everyone here thinks we’re not good for anything.” And part of Idhren still believed that, too, from time to time. It was difficult not to, with the way he had been treated.
“They’re wrong,” Valora said, her voice quiet but firm. “An elf saved the world. Maybe not all of us are cut out for that, maybe some of us are better suited to cleaning floors, but that’s no different from humans is it?”

“No, it’s not,” Idhren agreed. And it gave Idhren a little bit of extra confidence, knowing one of his people could do something that great. Idhren didn’t think he could save the world, end a war, or do anything else that would put his name in history books. But he could try and put everything that had happened at the Circle behind him. He wasn’t just an object to be used; he was a person, and a mage. He could do something with his life, contribute something to the world, even if it was just his research.

“Thank you for talking with me,” Idhren said earnestly. “And for telling me about Ferelden. I’d like to talk again sometime, if that’s alright.”

Valora glanced over at him and nodded, smiling faintly. “I think I would like that, too,” she agreed. “I should get back to work now.”

“Of course,” Idhren said, “I hope you don’t get in trouble because of me. You can tell Canidius that I kept you, if he’s angry. It wouldn’t be a lie.”

“I think I’ll be alright,” Valora assured. She stood and smoothed out the wrinkles on her dress. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Idhren.”

“And you as well,” Idhren replied, offering her a smile before the woman slipped out of his room and back to her duties.

---

When the day finally rolled around that Idhren’s family would be free of chores and he free to visit them he was ecstatic. Four years since he had had more than second hand news about their well being, and he was eager to see them again with his own eyes, to hear about anything that had happened while he was away. The houses for slave families were situated well away from the main house, beyond the manicured gardens, out where no high status visitor might accidentally stumble upon them. Idhren practically ran down the dirt paths that lead there, and then he slipped quickly between the small hovels until he reached the one where his family lived.

There was a small dirt courtyard surrounded by homes, a well at its center the only notable structure in the entire complex. A handful of slave children, most too young for work, played there, chasing each other and laughing. In the midst of them, with a child hanging from each arm, was Idhren’s brother. Sahren was nearly a full head taller than his younger brother, a solid wall of muscle from years spent training and fighting. His dark hair was cropped close to his head, skin tanned from days spent in the sun, and lined with pale scars, some fresh and some faded.

“Sahren!” Idhren called out as soon as he set eyes on him.

The taller elf turned around quickly at the sound of his name, and when he spotted Idhren walking toward him a grin spread across his face. “Brother!” he greeted cheerfully, setting down the children he had been playing with and bidding them play on their own before jogging over to Idhren’s side. “We’d heard you were back. You look… still short,” he teased, grinning, and patted his younger brother on the head.

Idhren glowered up at him. He had really hoped that Sahren wouldn’t grow any more while Idhren
had been away, but for every inch that Idhren had gained it seemed his brother had done so as well. “I don’t need to be tall to light you on fire,” he griped, though a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he swatted Sahren’s hand away.

Sahren laughed aloud and only ruffled Idhren’s hair again. “I’d like to see you try,” he chuckled. “But you do look well. Mother will be happy about that.”

“She worries too much,” Idhren commented, attempting to be flippant but not entirely succeeding. How many of her concerns had come to pass? There was nothing a middle aged slave woman could do about it, however, so there was no sense in worrying her.

“Tell her that yourself,” Sahren replied wryly. He wrapped an arm around Idhren’s slim shoulders and pulled him toward the hovel that the rest of his family called home. It had stopped being Idhren’s home a long time ago. Sahren had to duck through the low doorway as they stepped inside. “Guess who’s back?!” he cheered, pushing Idhren out in front of him.

It took a moment for Idhren’s eyes to adjust to the dim lighting inside the windowless building, but then he smiled. There were three small cots inside the hovel and a single small table. His father lay on one cot and his mother sat at another, table pulled close to her as she worked on mending one of their few threadbare garments. Both of them looked up when the brothers entered. His mother, Ashara, immediately dropped what she was holding and grinned from ear to ear. “Idhren!” she beamed, standing and coming over to him. “My baby, you’re home. Let me look at you.”

She had more grey hair than he remembered, and more lines one her face, but when she smiled at him her eyes sparkled with happiness despite the dark circles beneath them. “Mother,” he greeted in return, hugging her tightly. When he had left he had still been shorter than her, but now he was taller. “I missed you.”

“I didn’t think you would have time for that out there,” she teased lightly. “My son, a Circle mage.”

“Of course I had time to think of you,” Idhren assured. “How have you been? You look well.”

Ashara shrugged and held Idhren at arms length to look him up and down. “We have been well enough,” she assured evasively. “You’ve grown. But you’re so thin still. I thought you’d be having feasts every night in that place.”

“It’s a school, mother, not a banquet hall,” Idhren replied, trying to ignore the fact that he had definitely been eating better than them.

“I hope you didn’t spend so much time learning that you forgot to take care of yourself,” his mother scolded lightly. “You’ve always gotten lost in that head of yours so easily. Not hard to see why, though; it must be such a maze in there.”

Idhren swallowed back any unpleasant memories and kept the smile on his face. Remembering to take care of himself had been difficult at times, but he did not want to make her worry. “I’m just fine, mother, I promise.”

“Well, if you say so,” the woman replied, though there was something in her eyes that told Idhren she did not quite believe him. But there was no possible way she could know the truth. “Cyrus,” she called, looking over her shoulder to where Idhren’s father was now sitting on the edge of the cot, “Come see your son.”

“I can see him just fine from here,” the man griped, but he pushed himself wearily up to his feet and crossed the short distance between them. He was still taller than Idhren, and obviously where Sahren
had inherited his build from. Despite his age, Cyrus was still muscular, although he looked more tired than Idhren ever remembered seeing before. He looked Idhren up and down, taking in the robes he wore, his long hair, his hands callused only from wielding a staff. Idhren was suddenly keenly aware of how out of place he looked in this place, clean and fed and well dressed, beside their rough spun clothing and dirty bare feet. “You certainly look like a mage,” he commented.

“Don’t be so rude, Cyrus,” Ashara scolded, “He’s only just gotten home.” She squeezed Idhren’s shoulders supportively and pulled him over to the bed where she had been sitting before. “Come sit, tell us everything. I’m certain it was all very flashy and exciting.”

“It wasn’t that exciting,” Idhren protested as he sat down beside her. “I spent most of my time in lessons. It would be boring to talk about.”

“More exciting than anything going on here, probably,” Sahren sat down on Idhren’s other side and shoved his younger brother playfully by bumping their shoulders together. “How many times did you light yourself on fire?”

Idhren flushed in embarrassment at the memory from their youth. “I only did that once, when I was ten!” he snapped defensively. “I have perfect control over it now. I never burn or freeze or electrocute anything on accident.”

Sahren laughed, and the two fell to talking and teasing just as easily as they always had; as though they had not been parted for four years, as though they were not separated by such a vast difference in status. Ashara chimed in occasionally, asking a question or pointing out something that Sahren had forgotten, Cyrus stayed mostly silent throughout the conversation unless his wife made an effort at engaging him.

Idhren told them about the Circle, the building that was even larger and grander than Canidius’ estate, and about his mentor there. He mentioned nothing of the bullying he suffered, only that the Altus and Laetan apprentices did not seem very interested in talking to an elf. He also mentioned nothing of Dorian, the one Altus who had been something close to a friend. In turn he learned every bit of gossip that had passed through the slave compound in the past four years; every torrid forbidden romance, the handful of children born or lost, a smattering of new faces as Canidius purchased new stock. He learned that Sahren was courting one of the kitchen girls that still lived with her parents and siblings in the compound. Or he was trying to, but his unpredictable schedule of training and fighting at the colosseum did not allow much time for such rendezvous. Idhren wished him luck all the same, and promised to petition Canidius for their permission to marry, should it come to that.

Idhren stayed until it was nearing time for dinner back at the mansion, and said his goodbyes rather than force them to share their meager rations with him. As he left, however, Sahren followed him out of the hovel. “I’ll walk you to the gates,” he offered with a smile.

Idhren smiled back and the two walked in silence for a while before he managed to speak up quietly. “Are they really alright?”

Sahren sighed, “You think they wouldn’t hide it from me also?” he asked in turn. “I only get back here about as frequently as you did before you went away.”

“I know,” Idhren had to agree. But he had been away for years. What if something had happened? “It’s just… been so long.”

Silence fell between them for a moment more before Sahren spoke again. “Father gets tired a lot,” he said. “He’s been getting out of bed less and less on his rest days.”
Idhren bit his lip in concern and looked down at the ground as they walked. He had noticed that. Their father had never been a terribly open man. He had always been taciturn and stern, but when they were children he had always made some time to play with them no matter how tired he must have been. Today he had not looked well, and Sahren’s words confirmed Idhren’s fear that it was more than a passing weakness. “And mother?” Idhren asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Her knees and her back hurt sometimes,” Sahren replied. “She doesn’t like to stand up for very long, but she manages. She worries, though, about father and I, and about you.”

“She shouldn’t worry about me. I told you all I’m fine,” Idhren insisted without looking up from the ground.

“Are you, though?” Sahren asked, his voice carefully even. “I saw your wrists.” Immediately Idhren stopped in his tracks and looked at his hands, attempted to pull the sleeves of his robes down lower. “Don’t worry, I don’t think mother and father noticed.”

“It’s not what you think,” Idhren said desperately.

“What is it, then?” Sahren asked. “Blood magic?”

Idhren stared down at the ground in shame and wrapped his arms around himself. Not that the thought hadn’t crossed his mind. Blood magic might be able to fix his problems, but Idhren was not that desperate. Not yet. For a long moment the two brothers stood in silence. Sahren did not say anything, Idhren almost wished he would if only to know what his brother must be thinking. Finally, after a long moment the words slipped from Idhren’s lips, barely more than a whisper and filled with pain, “They called me a girl.”

“Did they hurt you?” Sahren asked, an edge to his voice that would have frightened Idhren if he didn’t know that it was directed elsewhere. Idhren swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded. A moment later he found himself pulled into a crushing embrace, Sahren’s strong arms around his shoulders and holding him so tight it was almost painful. Idhren tensed a moment, and then relaxed, leaning against his brother’s chest. “I wish I could protect you,” Sahren breathed into his hair.

“I’m not a child,” Idhren protested weakly, “I can take care of myself.”

“You will always be my baby brother,” Sahren countered. “Who cried when they took him to live in the mansion, and who’s never been very good at making friends. You know I would get back at everyone who hurt you if I could.”

“I know,” Idhren murmured. He wrapped his arms around his brother’s chest and hugged him back. “I would do the same.”

Sahren chuckled dryly, “That I would like to see,” he murmured. “You’d set the whole colosseum ablaze, I bet.”

“I wish you didn’t have to fight,” Idhren said quietly. “I wish mother and father didn’t have to work so hard. I wish you could all come live with me.”

“It’s not so bad out here,” Sahren said, trying to reassure him. He pulled back from the hug just slightly and leaned down to press his forehead against Idhren’s. “We’ll be alright. You just worry about being the best apprentice there can be. When you become a magister yourself we can come live with you.”

When Sahren said it, the task seemed so simple, but Idhren knew it would take years of hard work. “I’ll make sure that you can,” he promised.
“If anyone can, it’s you,” Sahren said confidently, smiling as he released Idhren from the hug and stepped back. “You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. We’re all very proud of you, Idhren. You know that, right?”


Idhren’s duties as Canidius’ apprentice and assistant were simple in the beginning. He worked in tandem with Alvinius, his childhood tutor, learning what the elderly slave’s duties entailed. Together the pair spent several hours each day constructing from scratch a catalogue for the magister’s neglected library. As a child with no proper education Idhren had not realized before just how out of date some of the books were. He was already compiling a list of what titles and authors he could remember from the Circle library to submit to Canidius for approval. And he was looking forward to a trip to the booksellers in the city to find any new materials. After all, Idhren could not begin his own pursuits until he had access to relevant sources.

As they worked Idhren shared a little of what he had learned in the Circle with his former tutor. However, Alvinius seemed to grasp only a little of what Idhren explained.

“You’ve always been smarter than I,” Alvinius told him with an indulgent smile.

“I’m probably not explaining it well,” Idhren reasoned apologetically.

“Don’t sell yourself short, boy,” Alvinius argued. “You’ve been exceedingly talented since the day we first met. The Circle did you well.”

“Thank you,” Idhren mumbled, embarrassed by the praise. When he was younger Alvinius had always seemed wise and skilled. Now Idhren was slowly coming to realize that the elderly mage had been right all those years ago: Idhren was a more powerful mage than his tutor would ever be. “I’m certain you’d do well there also, if you had the chance.”

Alvinius laughed softly. “Well, it’s much too late for me to start dreaming about that,” he commented. “You’ve got a chance at making something of yourself, boy, and don’t you let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“I… I’ll do my best,” Idhren promised earnestly.

Idhren threw himself into the work, determined to show everyone that he was worth the praise and the trust that they put in him. He collected nearly every book he could get his hands on regarding the subjects of storm magic and the veil. And he stayed up late into the night reading, because it turned out that was the only spare time left to him.

The rebuilding of Canidius’ library was, essentially, extracurricular, a secondary responsibility not to be prioritized over other, more important, duties. Duties which Idhren was also learning. He had always known that Alvinius was responsible for more than just Idhren’s education and keeping the library stocked with materials for research, but he had never known the details. The elderly slave was Canidius’ assistant in all matters that were not political. He kept track of the magister’s finances – a slave was more trustworthy with money than a paid servant, according to Tevinter’s elite, because they had no interest in it – and Idhren was trained to do this as well, so that he learned not to squander the pitiful allowance that Canidius paid him. And it was pitiful. Idhren saw what the other servants were paid, and his salary was significantly lower. When he dared to ask Canidius, the
magister merely explained that Idhren had far less experience with both work and money than the others. Idhren wasn’t certain that made sense; he had been working all his life. But he did not know any better, and he was still afraid of appearing ungrateful, of having what little he did own stripped away from him.

Idhren was a fast learner; always had been. In a matter of weeks he mastered every duty that Alvinius performed, they had completed a catalog of every book and scroll in Canidius’ library, and Idhren’s list of proposed new materials was now multiple pages long. Idhren was quite proud of these accomplishments, eager to prove his skills to the magister and begin his real work.

However, with each task that Idhren mastered Alvinius, though proud and free with his praise, grew more solemn and more withdrawn. It was a subtle change that Idhren did not notice at first, or perhaps wrote off as fatigue or some other such passing malady. As the weeks wore into months, however, the change became harder to overlook.

“Soon you won’t need me at all,” the elderly elf commented one day. A completely innocuous compliment, but compounded atop his odd behavior for the past few weeks it had Idhren paranoid.

“But I won’t be taking your job any time soon, certainly,” Idhren replied. Alvinius was old, even for a free man let alone a slave, his face lined with wrinkles and his hair white, but his mind was still sharp and his health was good for his age. The man still had several years of service left in him.

The smile that Alvinius offered him in return was slightly sad. It gave Idhren the feeling that there was something he didn’t know, something his former teacher was not telling him. “Eventually, though.”

“Eventually,” Idhren repeated. But how soon was eventually? And why as Alvinius acting as though it would happen any day now?

The answer came faster than Idhren could have ever expected. Less than a week, actually, after that first suspicious conversation Idhren showed up in the library one morning after breakfast to find it empty. Alvinius was always there before him, he had duties that required him to be up earlier. It was strange, but at first Idhren thought little of it. Perhaps his other chores had taken longer than usual.

An hour passed while Idhren reviewed his research notes from the previous day, and there was still no sign of the other mage. That was when he truly began to worry. So when the door to the library finally opened Idhren practically leapt out of his chair. He managed to restrain himself, but his head whipped up like he was ten years old and eagerly awaiting his newest lesson. Instead of Alvinius at the door, however, Idhren was surprised and mildly disappointed to see his patron. “Magister,” he greeted reflexively, unable to keep all of the surprise from his voice as he rose from his chair. “You’re here early today. Alvinius hasn’t arrived yet. Is he working on something else? He must have forgotten to tell me.”

“I’m afraid Alvinius won’t be joining us today,” Canidius replied. He let the heavy library door fall shut behind him and leisurely crossed the room to the desk where Idhren was working. “It seems he has fallen ill.”

“Ill?” Idhren repeated in concern. He had never known Alvinius to be too ill to perform his duties. Slaves did not get to take days off for illness, and in Idhren’s memory Alvinius had never had more than a passing cold. “Is it serious?”

“Nothing you need to worry about, I’m certain,” the magister replied flippantly. “He is getting on in years after all, it’s to be expected that his health will start to decline. He worked for my father before me, you know.”
Idhren did. For a magister, Canidius was actually rather young. He had inherited his seat shortly before Idhren was born, following his father’s death at the hands of a sudden ravaging illness. Or such was the official story. Rumors from the handful of slaves that remembered the event, now twenty years ago, said that the former magister had been assassinated. Poison. Likely from a political rival. Such was the fate of a magister who angered the wrong people. It was merciful, actually, compared to the fate that usually awaited a slave who had outlived his usefulness.

“Perhaps I’ll check on him later today,” Idhren commented.

“You wouldn’t want to disturb his rest,” Canidius replied, his voice the tone of a parent talking to an unreasonable child. “Your sentimentality is admirable, Idhren, but it may get you in trouble someday. In politics it will be seen as a weakness. Best start learning to hide it now.”

“Yes, magister,” Idhren replied automatically. But surely going to see Alvinius wouldn’t be too much of a burden. Idhren did no want to disturb his rest if his former tutor was ill, only to look in and see how bad the situation was.

A slave who had outlived his usefulness. Idhren swallowed hard and tried to make sure the sudden rising panic in his chest did not show on his face.

Against the magister’s orders Idhren slipped down toward the slave quarters following dinner that evening. While most of the slaves lived out in the small community on the outskirts of Canidius’ vast estate where Idhren’s family still lived, a portion of them lived in a dormitory down behind the kitchens. Dedicated house slaves, usually with no other family owned by the magister, so that someone would always be on hand. Alvinius was one of those, and Idhren had been as well when he was a slave, so he knew these corridors well.

With the kitchen and serving staff still cleaning up from the meal the dormitories at the back of the estate were mostly deserted. Idhren passed only a few slaves in the servants’ halls, and they paid him no mind. His presence here wasn’t terribly uncommon, he had a few acquaintances among the slaves who could almost be called friends and many remembered when he had lived among them.

By virtue of his higher status among the slaves – personal assistant to the magister – Alvinius had his own room rather than sharing a dormitory with up to ten others. Idhren knew exactly where it was, and rapped lightly on the door when he arrived.

There was no answer, so Idhren knocked again, but again he was greeted only with silence. Thinking that Alvinius might only be asleep, Idhren tried the door. They did not lock here, except from the outside, so it opened easily, swinging inward.

The room was empty.

Alvinius was nowhere to be seen and even his few meager possessions had been cleared out.

Idhren’s heart plummeted to his stomach even as he felt the sudden urge to vomit.

A slave who had outlived his usefulness.

Had there been an illness at all? Alvinius had seemed fine the day before. Where was he now? Had Canidius sold him, or simply disposed of a tool that was no longer needed?

There was no way that Idhren could ask, and even if he did he could no longer trust the answer.

Struggling to restrain his emotions, the horror and grief roiling inside him, Idhren turned on the ball of his foot and hurried back through the halls, ignoring everyone that he passed. Canidius was right
about one thing: sentimentality hurt. But Idhren was not yet ready to discard every relationship he had for the sake of political power. That wasn’t the sort of person he wanted to be.
There Is But One Truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Those who bear false witness
And work to deceive others, know this:

There is but one Truth.

All things are known to our Maker
And He shall judge their lies

- Canticle of Transfigurations 1:4

Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:34 Dragon

For two years now Idhren had served as apprentice to Magister Linus Canidius. For two years he had spent his days buried in academic texts, performing experiments and taking furious notes. It had been everything he loved about his time at the Circle, without the constant abuses and with the guaranteed once-weekly time to visit his family, still confined to the slave quarters. His parents and his elder brother were doing as well as could be expected in their situation, and were always happy to see him, for all that they always looked exhausted.

His mother still worked in the kitchens, his father still worked in the orchards. His brother had made his debut in the proving grounds while Idhren was still at the Circle. With sword and shield and barely any armor he had faced down everything from other gladiator slaves to exotic animals to Qunari prisoners straight from Seheron. That he was still alive after so many years of weekly bouts was nigh a miracle, and his squad was building a bit of a name for itself. Idhren was proud of him, even as he worried over the scars that marred Sahren’s tanned skin. And worried that as the popularity of the games waned it would not be long before Sahren and all his fellows were shipped off to Seheron themselves.

For now, though, his family was alive and well, and Idhren was allowed to pursue his research with Canidius’ oversight.

And wasn’t that the problem.

Idhren had not realized it before his time in the Circle, but Canidius was not all that talented a mage himself. He wasn’t untalented by any means. No one survives in the Magisterium without a fair amount of talent and intelligence. But on several occasions now Idhren had posed a hypothesis to him that Canidius had not been able to understand without extensive explanation of the theories that backed it.

Eventually he realized that Canidius had no published works. This was not a man who had been interested in academics previously. But Idhren kept his mouth shut. The magister was still the man to which Idhren owed everything, who had provided for Idhren his entire life, even after his freedom.
Without Canidius’ kindness Idhren would still be a slave, his talents never allowed to develop past what Alvinius was able to teach. Idhren was still determined to pay back that kindness. He would not humiliate the man by suggesting he was academically inferior to an elf, even if it was true.

At least, that was what Idhren had promised himself. Now he was not so certain.

For two years he had toiled and sweated over experiments while the magister stood back and nodded approvingly, and now he held in his hands the result of all that work but it was not at all what he had expected. The book that Canidius presented to him was slim, barely two fingers thick (and Idhren had very small fingers), bound in plain brown leather, the pages ungilt, but the binding solid and the printing good quality. None of that was the problem. Embossed on the cover, the title read Potentia Tempestatis, the Potential of the Storm, and below it was printed the name Magister Linus II of House Canidius. Frowning, Idhren opened the volume to the first page, but the words there were exactly the same: Potentia Tempestatis, written by Magister Linus II of House Canidius.

There was no mention of Idhren anywhere.

Like an idiot, Idhren opened his mouth and asked, “Where is my name?”

Canidius chuckled softly, and when he spoke it was with a tone like he was talking to a child. Never mind that Idhren was now twenty years old. “Don’t be silly, Idhren. No one would believe an elf wrote this. Besides, you don’t want all that attention, do you? There’s a note at the back, of course, acknowledging your assistance in the research. After all, you were absolutely vital.”

Absolutely vital was a disgusting understatement when all the ideas and all the work had been done by Idhren himself. When he sat down to read the book would it be word-for-word exactly what the elf had written?

This was his theory. This was his paper. It should have his name on the cover, not as some footnote at the end. No one would believe an elf wrote this? But an elf had written this. Idhren had written this. Canidius barely understood the theory, couldn’t even begin to explain it.

But what could Idhren do? What could he say that would not come across as ungrateful?

“I’m planning a small celebration, provided the book is well received. It will be in a few weeks time,” Canidius continued, completely oblivious to Idhren’s plight. “You will be expected to attend,” he said, and it did not sound like an invitation, it sounded like an order.

“Oh course,” the elf replied quietly. How could he argue?

That evening Idhren snuck out of his room and down to the slave village, into the dirt and plaster hut where his family still lived. He brought the book, even though it would mean nothing to his illiterate family. Part of him knew that it was incredibly rude to demand their time right now, when they must surely be exhausted from a long day of physical labor, but most of him just wanted comfort and sympathy from the only place he was certain to find it.

Only Idhren did not make it to the slave village. He didn’t even make it out of the estate before someone spotted him. Stealth was not a skill he’d had much reason to learn, and it showed. Thankfully, he was not set upon by anyone who could get him in trouble. While Idhren technically outranked everyone in the household aside from the magister himself, that wouldn’t stop some of the servants from telling on him. That was Idhren’s first thought when he saw a door open at the end of the hall he was sneaking down – not very well, apparently.

A figure emerged from the doorway, holding a single candle to light the way and peered up and
down the hall before setting eyes on Idhren. “Who’s there?” the figure asked quietly, voice tremulous and mired in a thick Ferelden accent.

“Valora?” Idhren asked, just as quietly, and took a few cautious steps forward, not relaxing until his eyes could make out her face in the gloom.

“Idhren?” the woman replied when she recognized him as well, “What are you doing here at this hour?”

The slaves would all be confined to their various quarters at this point. Idhren would usually be in his room this late as well, reading or preparing for bed. “…wished to go see my family,” he said, and realized as the words were leaving his mouth just how stupid the idea had been. If he was found, they would be in more trouble than him. “It was a stupid idea,” he muttered to himself.

Valora heard, of course. It was quiet in the hall this late at night. Slowly she stepped all the way outside of the room and eased the door shut behind her. “Is something wrong?”

Idhren wasn’t certain if he should say. It seemed so insignificant now. Why would a slave care about what name was on a book. None of their work was ever acknowledged or appreciated. And that work was generally much more taxing. Yet here he was complaining that Canidius had taken credit for two years worth of research and experimentation: time spent largely sitting at a table in one of the finer rooms in the estate. “It’s nothing,” he muttered shamefully. “I’m an idiot.”

Valora took a few steps forward, closing the last of the distance between them. “Do you want to talk?” she asked gently.

Over the past two years Valora had quite unexpectedly become a bit of a confidant for him, and he for her. Her primary position was as a gofer, and the nature of her duties meant that she was able to spend a significant amount of time with Idhren. She could read and write, which made her unique among Canidius’ slaves, and made her quite helpful fetching specific materials for Idhren’s research. She had been witness to a handful of frustrated tantrums when his spells wouldn’t go right, brought him leftovers from the kitchens when he accidentally worked through dinner, ventured into the marketplace with him in search of materials. At some point he had come to consider her a friend, and Maker knew he didn’t have many friends.

Idhren bit his lip and looked down at the book in his hands. Looking at it again, seeing Canidius’ name staring back at him from the embossed cover, all those feelings welled up again. “He stole my work,” he breathed. “He stole my work and he’s bragging about it.”

Valora frowned in confusion. “How did he steal it?”

Wordlessly, Idhren handed her the book and she took it with her free hand. “I wrote that,” he said after she had read the cover, his voice thick with emotion. “I wrote every word. He took it, and he put his name on it, and I’m barely a footnote at the end.”

“Oh, Idhren,” she murmured sympathetically, “I’m so sorry. I know how hard you worked.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it, either,” Idhren lamented. “Do you know what he said to me?” he asked, looking into her face. Frustration and grief and anger all swirled and warred in his chest until he didn’t know what he should be feeling anymore. “He told me that no one would believe an elf could write this.”

Valora sighed and shook her head. “Shems are the same no matter where you go,” she said solemnly. “They don’t think of us as people. We’re just things to them. Things to be used as they
It was a truth that Idhren knew far too well. Was that not exactly how he had been treated by all his peers in the Circle? Why had he ever thought that Canidius would be different? “I’m such a fool,” he whimpered, slumping back against the wall and sliding down to sit on the floor. After a moment Valora joined him, setting the book and candle between them and wrapping her arms around her knees. “I thought he was different,” Idhren said quietly. “He… He set me free. He let me go to the Circle. He said I had potential. I thought…” it all sounded so moronic now, in hindsight, “I thought he actually cared about that, about my potential. But he doesn’t. He did all of that to make himself look good. I really am just a tool to him.”

Valora laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “They’re good liars, aren’t they?” she asked. “They know how to make you trust them, and then they wait to show their true face until there’s no way for you to escape.”

“There was never any way for me to escape,” Idhren murmured. “I was completely dependant on him. I still am.”

“Did I ever tell you how I became a slave?” Valora asked suddenly.

“No,” Idhren replied. He had to admit that he was curious, but he had never asked. He knew a little of the life she had been taken from, a fiancé and a home. Because of that he imagined that it would be difficult to talk about how she wound up here.

“I was in Denerim,” Valora said slowly. As she spoke she stared at the blank wall across the corridor, lost in memory. “After… After what happened to the arl’s son they locked the alienage gates. There was a purge. The city guard came. Anyone found to own a weapon was taken or killed. Even after that they kept the gates locked. With the Blight and the civil war… It was like they just forgot about us.

“And then the men from Tevinter came,” Valora murmured, “They said they were healers, that there had been reports of the Blight sickness in the alienage. We didn’t know any better than to believe them. Everyone who so much as coughed was rounded up and put into quarantine. Some people even went willingly. But inside… inside it was obvious they were no healers. They put us in chains and cages, forced us out through hidden alleys to the docks and onto ships.”

She didn’t need to say anymore. Idhren could imagine how it went from there. He had seen the slave market in the city, the people in rags and chains stuffed into cages and pens like animals. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. It seemed insignificant in the face of what she must have suffered at the time, but he could think of nothing else to say.

“It’s not your fault,” Valora replied. “Humans lie and manipulate. You aren’t the first to fall for it.”

“I’m such a fool,” Idhren mumbled, hanging his head and burying his fingers in his hair.

“No you’re not,” Valora argued. “You’re very smart, or he wouldn’t have gone to so much effort to use you. But you’re naïve. I was, too, before everything.”

“I won’t be anymore,” Idhren promised himself. Pushing his hair off his face he looked over at the woman again. He still felt hurt, betrayed, but he was also angry. Angry at Canidius and angry at himself. “I know now. I know that he’s a liar and an idiot. He’s not half as good a mage as I am, and I always knew it but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“What are you going to do?” Valora asked.
“I…” Idhren began, but cut himself off. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I won’t let him steal any more
of my research, but what can I do? I can’t leave, I’d have nowhere to go, and what about my
family?”

Valora smiled softly at him. She picked up his book from the ground and looked at it for a moment
before handing it back to him. “You’re very smart, Idhren, I’m sure you can think of something.”
She picked up her candle once more, now burning low in its holder, and stood up, brushing dust off
her nightdress. “I should go back to bed before anyone misses me. Will you have need of me
tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Idhren replied, he held the book close to his chest as he stood up as well. “Canidius is
going to host a party if the book is well received. It seems a good excuse to spend his money on new
clothes.”

Valora’s smile widened. She enjoyed going into town with Idhren, the change of scenery was nice.
And she had much better taste in clothes than he. “Then I will attend you after breakfast, my lord,”
she said with a small curtsey. In private, where no one else could see the formalities, it felt like a
joke.

Idhren nodded his head respectfully, “Goodnight, Valora,” he replied, before turning to head back to
his own room, a small flame at his fingertips lighting the way.

By the time the evening of Canidius’ fete rolled around Idhren’s mixed emotions had settled into a
low, simmering annoyance. He could not bring himself to enjoy the gathering in the slightest, not that
he had much reason to in the first place. The magister enjoyed entertaining his fellow politicians, and
every time he deigned to host a gathering such as this Idhren was duty bound to attend. After all, he
was the magister’s apprentice. He had long since stopped being mistaken for a slave by the usual
attendees, but that hardly made the evening more palatable.

The book - Idhren’s book - had been available to the public for nearly three weeks now, but few had
read it so far. Most of the conversation involved congratulating Canidius on his work and speculating
whether he would dabble further into the subject matter. It was no secret that the magister had little
interest in academics. In fact, he stated as much to several of his peers. Canidius had no interest in
academics, so of course he would not be wasting his time presenting the paper in a Circle for debate.
This was merely a hobby, helped along by his new apprentice, the former slave.

And when they turned their attentions to Idhren - to coo over how lucky he was to be apprenticed to
a magister, to murmur how illuminating the whole experience must be for the poor fool elf – he was
forced to smile and nod his agreement and proclaim that he was happy with how well his mentor’s
work was being received. The whole experience made him feel sick to his stomach.

After his fifth round of smiling and playing the stupid elf, Idhren had lifted a glass of wine from one
of the slaves attending the party and found himself a nice quiet patch of wall to prop up. From there
he was able to survey the party without forcing a smile onto his face. All of the usual faces were in
attendance: Canidius’ acquaintances and political allies. Idhren doubted the magister had any true
friends; he was far too concerned with forming alliances and influence mongering. There were also
some faces that Idhren did not recognize, and a few he had been introduced to only tonight.
Academics like Magister Gereon Alexius and his wife, who until now Idhren had known only by
name and reputation. If they had come hoping for insight or debate on what they thought was
Canidius’ work they were now sorely disappointed.

There among the crowd, however, was one face that Idhren had never expected to see again. A face he had, in fact, expected to hate if he ever did see it again. Dorian Pavus had a goblet of wine in one hand and was gesturing expressively with the other while he spoke with another guest. He was dressed in the height of fashion, as far as Idhren could tell, robes perfectly tailored of the finest silk and brocade.

Idhren caught himself staring, but still could not tear his eyes away. The man cut a handsome figure, captivating in the way he moved. Somehow Idhren had managed not to think about the man since leaving the Circle, drowning himself in his research until he couldn’t think of anything else, forcing all memories of the Circle down into the deepest depths of his subconscious. With how seldom Idhren left the Canidius estate he had largely been able to avoid seeing anyone he might remember from his four years of schooling, and that had made it easy to try and put everything behind him.

A flash of Dorian’s smile across the room, though, and it all came flooding back. The bullying, the abuse, the hateful words and petty violence. The feel of Dorian’s magic healing his bruises, the way the young man’s eyes lit up when they debated magical theory in the common rooms late at night. The fire in his eyes when he had said Idhren was the smartest mage in the circle.

He wanted to hate Dorian because hating him would be easier. But for all that Dorian had done wrong, for all the times he had turned a blind eye or actually made Idhren’s life more difficult, the man had been the closest thing he had to a friend in that place.

Idhren was still staring. Across the room Dorian turned his head as though he could feel the elf’s eyes on him. It all happened too quickly for Idhren to escape from. Dorian turned his head, Idhren considered running, and then the Altus’ eyes met his, confused for a moment and then widening in recognition. A moment later Dorian was making excuses and bowing out of his conversation and heading across the room to where Idhren was standing.

Panic shot through him for a moment, his eyes darted around the room in search of an escape, but by the time he was debating between jumping out a window or slipping out through the servants’ entrance Dorian was already standing in front of him.

“Well, I knew there was a reason Canidius’ name was so familiar,” the Altus looked as cheerful and unaffected as ever, “But it didn’t quite click until I saw you hiding over here in the corner. It’s been a long time, Idhren,” he smiled. Idhren was surprised the man remembered his name. Then Dorian’s eyes looked him up and down and Idhren shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny. “You look well, if as drab as ever. I understand if Canidius doesn’t pay you enough for nicer clothes, but you could at least do something with your hair.”

Self-consciously Idhren reached up to tuck a stay lock of hair behind his ear. There was nothing wrong with his hair. It was clean and brushed, and he had intentionally worn it down for the evening instead of in his usual ponytail. It hid his ears better this way. “I see you haven’t changed at all, either. If anything, you’ve become even more insufferable.”

Dorian looked shocked for a moment, and then let out a bark of laughter, “You’ve grown some teeth, it seems,” he commented in amusement.

“I didn’t have much choice,” Idhren told him flatly. “You saw to that.”

“Ah,” the smile faded from Dorian’s face. He glanced around the room, but no one else at the party was paying them any attention. “I suppose you would appreciate an apology? It really was never my intention to make things more difficult for you.” All the more reason he was glad to see that Idhren
was, physically at least, in good health. For several weeks after their conversation in the dungeon it had haunted Dorian, the thought that he had only made things worse, wondering whether or not Idhren was alright. And then he had been swept off to Minrathous and a new school, an even worse school, and if when he escaped he sought company of the petite, elven variety it was completely unrelated.

“And yet that’s exactly what you accomplished,” Idhren muttered.

Dorian looked decidedly uncomfortable. “It was apparently an ill thought out idea to come over here,” he said. He hadn’t expected Idhren to be completely happy with him, but it had been years and he had expected the elf’s anger to dampen with time. Apparently he had been wrong. “I’ll leave.”

Idhen had not meant for his words to come out so bitter and angry. That wasn’t how he felt at all. Well it was, but not entirely. “Dorian, wait,” he said as the man turned around, and much to his surprise the man stopped and looked back at him. “I…” Idhren hesitated. “I do… appreciate everything you did for me back then,” he managed to get out. “You were one of the only people who were kind to me, even if you weren’t very good at it.”

Dorian turned around to face him fully once more, swirled the wine in his cup, took a drink, and then spoke again. “I suppose I wasn’t very good at it, was I?” Too concerned with keeping up appearances in public rather than doing the right thing. If he hadn’t been, he might have been able to prevent Idhren getting hurt in the first place. “I’m sorry about that.”

The apology was better late than never, Idhren supposed. He still bore scars, physical and emotional, from his time at the Circle, but he was trying to put that part of his life behind him. He had learned to fight his own battles, or thought he had. But one glance over at Canidius reminded him that he wasn’t nearly as strong as he thought. “What are you doing here?” he asked, eager to change the subject. “Shouldn’t you be off getting drunk somewhere?”

“I am getting drunk somewhere,” Dorian informed him, equally happy with the change in conversation. “Right here. At the expense of your very generous patron.”

“I’ll be sure to extend to him your compliments,” Idhren mumbled. Generous was not a word he was willing to apply to Canidius at the moment.

“I take from your tone that you’re not enjoying the party?” Dorian asked.

“Smiling politely and playing the stupid elf for a bunch of Alti just to make Canidius look good?” Idhren asked in turn. “No, it’s not exactly my idea of a good time.” His eyes sought out the magister across the room unwillingly. Canidius’ substantial form was hard to miss, even surrounded by a group of fawning brown nosers. At the sight Idhren was unable to suppress the sneer that crossed his face.

“You don’t look terribly happy for your patron,” Dorian commented thoughtfully. “His work has been quite well received; it’ll do wonders for his reputation.”

Idhren clenched his jaw and his frown deepened. Canidius’ reputation. What did Idhren care about the magister’s reputation? He saw the man now for what he truly was: a liar and a manipulator who cared only about keeping himself powerful, wealthy, and fat. “It was mine,” Idhren said, lips barely moving and so quiet that Dorian had to strain to hear him. “The research was mine. That paper was mine. Every single word, I wrote it and he just…” the elf cut himself off, hands clenching tight, fisting in the fabric of his robes. Dorian realized why he’d seemed so tense, it wasn’t nerves from being around so many important and influential people; it was anger. The elf was furious, and rightly
so if he was telling the truth.

“I read the paper,” Dorian commented, his tone light despite the suddenly heavy mood. “In hindsight
the theory is… rather what I would expect from you, to be honest. You were a bit obsessed with
storm magic back then, as I recall. It was… Not quite genius, but it was certainly inspired. The idea
has great potential.” Idhren scoffed and turned his head away from Dorian so the man could not see
his face. “If he’s taking credit for your work why haven’t you said anything?”

“You think anyone would take the word of an elf over that of a magister?” Idhren asked bitterly. “I
don’t have any proof. No one else saw the research, no one else knew about it. Besides, no one
thinks an elf is capable of doing anything smart.”

That was unfortunately true, Dorian had to admit. He had thought much the same until Idhren proved
him wrong. For all he knew elves as a whole might not be terribly bright, but Idhren was clever
enough to impress Dorian and that was no easy task. “So you’re just going to sit on your hands and
bite your tongue?” he asked. “I take back my earlier comment. You haven’t grown teeth at all.”

Idhren turned furious violet eyes up towards Dorian, his gaze filled with enough venom to frighten
Dorian a little bit. “You’re still a blind fool,” he snapped, voice low so as not to be overheard.

“You still won’t do anything against the people who hurt you,” Dorian accused. “You’ll keep letting
people use you for the rest of your life because you’re too scared to fight back.”

“Because if I fight back they’ll throw me back into slavery, or worse,” Idhren hissed.

“Leave his service then,” Dorian argued, “Find someone who will recognize your work.”

“People aren’t exactly lining up to take an elf as an apprentice,” Idhren shot back, “Besides, Canidius
still owns my family. Though I suppose it never occurred to you that I might have one. If I leave here
I will never be able to see them again.”

“You’re just going to keep letting him walk all over you, then?” Dorian asked.

Idhren fumed, “I realize you Altus pricks don’t actually have feelings,” he sneered, “But my family is
important to me. So yes, if that’s what it takes to keep them safe I’ll pretend to be the perfect servant
for him.”

Dorian scoffed. And that was why Idhren would never get anywhere in life. He would stew silently
in his anger but never act upon it, too afraid of the consequences. “Then by all means,” he replied
flippantly and ducked a shallow, mocking bow, “Enjoy your life of servitude.” With that, Dorian
turned on his heel and slipped back into the crowd, leaving Idhren to fume silently in his corner.

And fume he did. Idhren downed the last of his wine in two swallows and put the goblet back down
with more force than was strictly necessary. He was furious at Dorian, but also furious at himself.
Furious at Dorian for provoking him, for the man’s willful ignorance and flippant attitude, but he was
furious at himself because Dorian was right. People like Canidius would continue to manipulate and
use him as long as he didn’t fight back. And if he didn’t fight back, what right did he have to
complain?

Idhren was also furious at himself because deep down he wanted Dorian’s sympathy and his support,
and receiving neither was more of a disappointment than he wanted to admit. For two years he had
been able to purge his mind completely of all thoughts of Dorian and the kindness he hid behind that
maddening self-absorption. Then one look at his stupid face, the first time in years, and all the
confused feelings from his fifteen-year-old heart came flooding back. Desperate for a friend, and
Dorian was so kind but so cruel at the same time.

As soon as it could be deemed polite Idhren slipped away from the party. At first he headed back to his room, but halfway there changed his mind and slipped out of the estate through the servants’ entrance and began walking toward the city. Though on the outskirts, Canidius’ estate was about as close to the city as was possible without encroaching on the city walls. The magister could not abide being too far from civilization.

Idhren’s footsteps lead him toward the slums, down through the circles of the city, past the broad, gleaming avenues of the city center, the high walls of Altus estates and toward the alleyways and ramshackle houses where the rest of his people made their homes. He needed to be away from the gilded prison that he lived in, away from the suffocating grasps of propriety and respect. He did not care where he went except that he needed to get away.

Gradually the smooth flagstone streets and regularly spaced street lamps gave way to more rough cobbles and smaller lanterns. Only then did Idhren pause to take stock of his location. He was not far from the upper market district, where magisters and their ilk did business. The streets here were still clean and well lit and the buildings in good repair, though everything was decidedly more cramped, homes pressed up against each other or with only narrow alleys separating them. This was probably what Altus brats like Dorian thought were the true slums. Maker save them from ever venturing into the true bowels of the city, where their expensive incensed lampposts did not stand and no amount of incense would ever cover the smell of filth and decay that permeated the place. Idhren’s wanderings had only led him that far a handful of times. It was not somewhere he was eager to revisit, though he knew in another life he could easily call that place home.

At this time of night most of the shops were shuttered. A few lights flickered in second-floor windows where families lived, and a few doors down a small lantern hung in front of an otherwise un-noteworthy store front. The lantern was lit with blue flame. A lyrium den.

Idhren had certainly imbibed his fair share of lyrium; every mage had needed a potion at some point in their life, but he had never used it recreationally. That was an Altus hobby, sophisticated and mindless and potentially very expensive. Prone to addiction.

Smoking lyrium was supposed to be a completely different experience from drinking it. Less rush of power but other pleasurable side effects. At least, that was the rumor. Dorian would probably know.

Maker, no, he didn’t want to think about the man anymore.

A mixture of curiosity and the desire to numb his mind and forget about every problem in his life guided Idhren closer to the blue lantern. The windows were shuttered but the door was open, flooding the street directly outside with the scent of incense and lyrium. A familiar smell to anyone from the higher echelons of society. But the incense here was sweeter, not meant to cover up anything unpleasant, but to compliment the scent of lyrium that hung in the air.

Without giving himself a moment to second-guess himself, Idhren stepped through the door and into the dim, smoky interior. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, even given how dark it was outside. The streetlights kept the city well lit, but inside only candles and glow lamps illuminated the area, and much of the light was obscured by a thin cloud of smoke.

“Well, you’re quite an unusual sight,” a voice purred from Idhren’s left, and he turned instinctively. Leaning against the wall beside the door stood an elf dressed all in silks, red and gold flowing and floating around him, loose fabric revealing tantalizing glimpses of dark bronzed skin at the slightest movement, ebony hair hung loose around his shoulders and down the length of his back. “An elf all dressed up like a magister,” he smirked, and dark eyes ran up and down the length of Idhren’s body.
“What brings you down here, pet?”

Idhren bristled slightly at the term. “I am no one’s pet,” he said bitterly. He had spent too much of this evening being treated as such, and he didn’t want to be reminded.

“Ahh, my apologies then,” the elf replied in a voice that was low, but sounded sincere. “I meant no offence. But that does not answer what has brought you to this place.”

Idhren glanced away from the elf in the scarlet robes and into the lyrium den, well aware that he was still standing in the doorway. Through the dim lighting and the haze of smoke he could see that the place was structured like a lounge, with low sofas and plush cushions surrounding tables on which the lyrium pipes stood, some in use and some empty. There were few customers in the salon at the moment. To the side of the room a man with bloodshot eyes and a birthright on his neck that Idhren could not make out lounged with a pair of young men in silken robes similar to those worn by the elf, one of them almost entirely in the Altus man’s lap.

This wasn’t just a lyrium den, it was a brothel.

Idhren’s face flushed at the sudden realization of just what he had walked into. The door had only had a blue lantern, not a red one as well. “I…” he stammered, suddenly at a loss for words. “I don’t…” What had brought him here? The desire to forget about the outside world for a time. Maybe that hadn’t been a very good idea.

The dark-skinned elf pushed himself off the wall and approached Idhren slowly, practically gliding, and Idhren was frozen to the spot, eyes instinctively drawn to the patches of bare skin revealed as the elf moved. He was taller than Idhren, but that was not so unusual. “Is it your first time in a place like this?” he asked, an amused smile curling the corners of his mouth. Up close Idhren could now clearly see his face, the dark almond eyes lined with gold paint, the deep dusky red of his lips. “What’s your name?”

“Idhren,” he answered without thinking about it.

“Idhren,” the darker elf replied, “It suits you. I’m Varius. Perhaps I can help you find what you need.”

Idhren’s mouth went dry, but his chest clenched in fear. Varius was incredibly attractive, obviously aware of the fact, and knew how to make good use of it. It would be a blatant lie for Idhren to say he was not the slightest bit interested in what was clearly being offered. But Idhren had never willingly let anyone see him undressed, let alone considered letting anyone touch him in that way. He had never even touched himself that way.

“You’re so tense,” Varius purred, slid a hand around Idhren’s shoulders, which were tight with mixed fear and anticipation. “Why don’t we share a pipe, help you relax a bit.”

Mutely, Idhren nodded and allowed the whore to lead him into the establishment. To his great relief, Varius lead him towards a rather secluded corner of the lounge and gestured for him to take a seat amidst a pile of plush cushions on the floor. From there, a half-wall hid them from view unless someone were to walk directly past their little alcove. Idhren made himself comfortable while Varius turned his attention to the lyrium pipe, a contraption of bowls and pipes that needed to be filled with water and charcoal along with the mixture of lyrium dust and herbs. It was unnecessarily complicated, but that was how the upper classes liked to do everything. Down in the slums you would find lyrium addicts smoking dust and elfroot straight from handheld clay pipes, but this was supposedly more sophisticated, more pure, and less addictive.
When Varius sank down into the cushions beside Idhren he held a pipe in each hand and offered one to Idhren with a smile. The elven mage took it hesitantly, but only stared at the object blankly. He still wasn’t certain this was a good idea. How much did this stuff usually cost, anyway? How much money did Idhren have on him?

“It’s best if you don’t breathe too deeply at first,” Varius instructed, pulling Idhren out of his thoughts. The whore smiled gently at him and lifted his own pipe to his lips, wrapping his mouth around the tip before sucking in a deep breath. Taking the pipe away from his lips, Varius held the smoke in his mouth a long moment before blowing it out again.

The smell of lyrium had already been noticeable throughout the room, but it became even more prevalent as Varius breathed out. Idhren had to admit, he was curious. He had only ever used lyrium in potion form, and only ever when training exercises depleted his natural mana reserves and left him weak. Only as much as required to keep himself from fainting, never to give himself more power, and never recreationally. The sharp metallic smell mixed pleasantly with the incense that filled the air and the effect was intoxicating. So Idhren lifted the pipe to his mouth as well and took an experimental breath. The smoke was heavier than air and it caught in his throat, forcing Idhren to pull the pipe from his mouth as he coughed.

Beside him, Varius chuckled, light and low, and rubbed a hand up and down Idhren’s back until he could breath easily again. “Easy there,” he murmured.

Eventually Idhren’s breathing evened out and he looked dubiously at the pipe still in his hand. “Why does anyone start doing this?” he asked. It seemed so unpleasant that anyone would be turned off after the first breath.

“Once you get used to it, the effect is really quite pleasant,” Varius assured him. “Moreso for mages, I’m told. Do you want to try again?”

To his surprise, Idhren found that he did. Even though the first attempt had been rather unpleasant, he could taste the lyrium in the smoke and that, at least, had been pleasant. It was not enough to have any effect on his body, but it was enough to make him want more. Again he brought the pipe to his lips and took a shallow breath. Prepared now for the sensation, it did not bother him as much. His throat hitched a few times and his outward breath was unsteady, but he managed to keep from coughing all the smoke back out immediately. The next pull from the pipe was even easier, and afterward Idhren thought he could feel it starting to take effect. “Is it supposed to make my fingers tingle?” he asked.

Varius laughed, “It can do that, yes,” he replied. “Starting to feel it, then?”

“I think so,” Idhren said. And what he felt so far was actually rather nice.

After several more lungfuls of smoke Idhren was definitely feeling the effects. The tingling had faded, but there was a pleasant humming running through his entire body. He felt immensely relaxed, mind muddled and yet more alert at the same time. At some point he had relaxed enough to slump against Varius’ silk clad shoulder. The whore allowed it, shifting so they could lay together slightly more comfortably amidst the pillows and cushions, and wrapped an arm around Idhren’s shoulders. It was more physical contact than Idhren would usually allow, but with the lyrium humming through his veins and the herbs clouding his mind he couldn’t bring himself to care. Actually it was rather nice. Varius’ body was warm and comfortable.

“Do you want to see my party trick?” Idhren blurted out at the exact moment the question came to mind, immediately embarrassing himself.
“Party trick?” Varius asked curiously. “I would love to.”

Idhren struggled to sit up slightly, setting down the pipe in his hand. “Give me your hand,” he said, holding both of his out. Varius arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow but held one hand out to him. Idhren held it palm up in one of his and held his other hand a few inches above. The first spark of lightning that jumped between their fingers was barely visible, but it made Varius gasp softly, his dark eyes wide with surprise. Idhren built it up gradually, let the little bolts of blue-purple energy jump between their fingers and dance along Varius’ skin. The same trick he had shown Dorian in a dark empty hallway all those years ago. “It’s warm,” Varius said softly, “It’s… nice. I thought it would hurt.”

After a moment Idhren moved his hand father from Varius’, leaving enough space between them to form shapes with the bolts. Geometric shapes were always the easiest, a sphere, a cube. “Lightning travels point to point,” Idhren commented thoughtfully. “People think that makes it hard to control, but it’s not, really. I used to do this to practice my control, now it… helps me relax. It’s comforting.”

“You’re very clever, aren’t you,” Varius purred. It was not a question, and as he spoke Varius leaned closer to Idhren. Too close for it to be considered proper. Idhren could feel the other elf’s breath hot against his cheek, could smell the scented oils in his hair and on his skin. The magic between their hands guttered and cut out, Idhren felt his face heat up and he jerked away, eyes wide and uncertain. Varius looked at him with confusion. “What’s wrong?”

“I…” Idhren stammered, finding it difficult to collect his thoughts enough to speak. “You’re…” He very suddenly realized exactly where he was on a level that he previously hadn’t acknowledged. This wasn’t just a lyrium den, this was a brothel, and that meant that Varius was a whore. So if he was coming onto Idhren it wasn’t because he actually wanted to, but because he had to.

“I’m what?” Varius asked, head tilted to the side and long hair cascading over his shoulders in a black waterfall. “I’m not a slave, if that’s what you’re concerned about,” he said slowly, and traced a finger along his collarbone, free of chains or scars, “I’m a free man, just like you.”

That hadn’t been entirely what Idhren was concerned about, but it was a mild relief. It meant that Varius was not forced to be here. But whether or not the dark skinned elf was interested in him by choice or not was, in fact, the least of Idhren’s concerns.

“Let me ask you, Idhren, what is holding you back?” Varius asked. “Is it because you do not desire me? Because of some moral quandary? Or because you are afraid?”

It was obviously not the first, and Varius had to be aware of that. Idhren had been blushing practically the entire time he had been in here, and it could only be blamed on the drugs for the past half hour or so. Varius was not a slave, he wasn’t exactly being forced to sell his body, so there wasn’t much moral grey area there. The truth was that Idhren was afraid, he was afraid of letting anyone see or touch him, afraid of a negative reaction. He was afraid that once Varius saw him the other elf would be disgusted, would mock him, would hurt him. Because that was what always happened.

“Can I assume that you have never been with anyone before?” Varius asked softly, gently.

“Not by choice,” Idhren admitted quietly.

“Ah,” Varius sighed, and his expression softened. “I’m sorry you’ve had to go through that,” he murmured, and when Idhren chanced to look over he was surprised to see not pity in his eyes, but sympathy and understanding. “Then I’ll stop offering, if that makes you uncomfortable. But, if you wish I could also show you that it does not have to be painful and frightening. It should not be.”
Idhren knew that, though it was hard to imagine when he had such a painful relationship with not only sex but his body as a whole. “It’s not just that,” he said, and looked down at his toes, buried beneath the pillows on which they sat. “I’m… I’m not…” Could he actually make himself say it? “I’m not… entirely male.”

A moment of silence, and then “Is that all?” Varius asked. “You would be surprised by how many people do not live as the sex their body dictates.”

If only it were that simple. That might even be easier to bear; perhaps fewer people would look at him with disgust. “I’m not that, I…” Idhren felt himself choke up and panic well up in his chest. Self consciously he pressed his knees together. “I’m not either… Or I’m both, or… I… I don’t know.” He could barely get the words out, and was resisting the urge to just flee the situation, run back to Canidius’ mansion and live the rest of his life miserable and alone.

He didn’t realize he’d been crying until Varius reached over and wiped the tears from his cheeks with gentle fingers. “Shh,” he breathed softly, “I never meant to upset you.”

Idhren sniffled and turned his face away in shame.

“You’ve been hurt because of this, haven’t you?” Idhren had expected to find only disgust and pity from his admission, but instead Varius’ voice was full of sympathy and understanding. Once more gentle fingers wiped the dampness from Idhren’s cheeks. “The Maker has a cruel sense of humor, doesn’t he? The magic doesn’t really make up for everything else, does it?”

Idhren shook his head weakly. He was incredibly glad to be a mage. He loved his magic and everything it allowed him to do, the opportunities it had given, but there were times the elf thought that trading it for a body that made sense would not be so bad.

Lips pressed softly against his temple, and then Varius drew away from him. “I think you need a drink,” he said in a voice that was trying to lighten the mood. “Have another pipe, puer dulcis, I’ll fetch us something a bit stronger.” As he spoke he took up the lyrium pipe and pressed it into Idhren’s lax hands, then he bent and pressed their lips together. The kiss was soft, chaste, and over before Idhren even realized it was happening, by which point Varius was already leaving in a swirl of crimson silk.

Two hours later Idhren stumbled out of the lyrium den, in a significantly better mood than when he had arrived and with a significantly lighter purse. Somehow he had spent nearly half his monthly wages, meager as they were, but could not bring himself to regret the extravagant purchase. His thoughts were clouded by alcohol and lyrium smoke, the flash of gold around Varius’ eyes and the taste of his lips. There had been several more kisses throughout the course of the night, some light and chaste, others decidedly less so. Despite that the evening had not progressed beyond kissing and a few over clothes caresses, the whole experience left Idhren feeling rather euphoric. Or perhaps that was an effect of the lyrium smoke. For the first time in his life Idhren did not feel ashamed of his body.

Three weeks later, after several sleepless nights and two traumatic, disastrous attempts at exploring his own body, Idhren was back on the doorstep of the lyrium den. He had forgotten to take note of the name last time, which made it a little more difficult to find, but he did not miss the sign today: *Magister’s Mercy*. How painfully ironic.

He found Varius again and with the aid of an entire bottle of wine, allowed the whore to pull him into a private room. When Idhren’s hands trembled too much Varius peeled the mage’s robes off his shoulders, cooed comforting words softly against his skin as he kissed Idhren’s lips, neck, chest, stomach, thighs, until the mage was trembling not with fear but with desire. Then he put his mouth
between Idhren’s legs until the mage cried out with pleasure and stopped trembling entirely.

Varius laid himself out beside Idhren and traced comforting circles on the smaller elf’s stomach as he came down from his climax. When Idhren finally opened his eyes again his companion was smiling softly, and it was a gesture that was impossible not to return. “Thank you,” Idhren sighed softly, still breathless.

“Whatever for?” Varius’s voice was somewhere between a laugh and a purr.

“Not… being disgusted with me,” Idhren said quietly. That had been his biggest fear coming here tonight. His only experience with sex had been painful and humiliating, something that haunted him to this day. Everyone who had ever seen him naked had looked at him with disgust and pity, but not Varius.

“How could I be disgusted by such an adorable creature?” Varius asked with a smile. “There is nothing wrong with you, Idhren. You are perfect just the way you are. Anyone who thinks otherwise is not worthy of your time or your thoughts.”

Idhren swallowed thickly and rolled onto his side to lie facing Varius. Even though the dark elf was paid to do this, he found it difficult to believe any of this was an act. “How can you say that so easily?”

“Because it is true,” Varius insisted. “We have no control over how the Maker shapes us. He does not make mistakes, so however He has chosen to form us it is for a reason, even if we cannot see it.”

“You believe in the Maker?” Idhren asked.

“Don’t you?” Varius asked in turn.

It was an idea that Idhren had not given much thought lately. When he was younger, and at the Circle especially, he had wondered why the Maker would give him this body. Later he wondered why the Maker would curse him with both this wretched body and also make him an elf. Eventually he had concluded that it had to be a mistake. But the chantry said that the Maker did not make mistakes. If that was the case, then the Maker could not have had a hand in his creation. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

Varius reached out and pushed Idhren’s hair back from his face with gentle fingers. “I suppose that’s no surprise, given how cruel the world has been to you.”

“Has it not been cruel to you as well?” Idhren asked in confusion.

“You think because I work here that I am miserable?” Varius smiled indulgently. “I’ve had my struggles and my heartbreaks, but I’m happy as I am now. I am not a slave; if I wanted I could leave this place, learn a trade, get married and have children. Perhaps it seems strange to you, but I choose to stay here because I enjoy it here.”

It did seem strange to Idhren that anyone would willingly choose this line of work. “Truly?” he asked. “You enjoy it?”

“I do,” Varius confirmed. “Because I get to meet sweet things like you,” he grinned and tapped Idhren’s nose playfully. It made the mage blush. “And I can make people happy. Are you happy?”

Idhren took a moment to think about that, and much to his surprise he realized that he was. In this particular moment, lying on silk sheets with a prostitute, Idhren was happy. Or at least, he wasn’t
miserable. “Yes,” he breathed.

Varius smiled and leaned in to kiss Idhren’s lips softly. “Good.”

Chapter End Notes

I've always been a fan of the headcanon/theory of lyrium as recreational drug in Tevinter. Because that seems like the sort of thing Tevinter would do.
Spite ate away all that was good, kind, and loving
Till nothing was left but the spite itself,
Coiled 'round my heart like a great worm.

- Canticle of Maferath, Dissonant Verse

**Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:35 Dragon**

In the year following Canidius’ theft of Idhren’s work, the elf’s research languished. With no chance at ever seeing recognition, Idhren felt there was no point in putting in so much effort. He went through the paces, spent most days in the library with his nose in a book, scribbling notes, or long hours in the practice yard testing spells. When Canidius asked about his progress Idhren shrugged and fed him excuses: the theory is difficult to put into practice, I can’t quite get the spell to work correctly, I need to find more supporting evidence.

The magister was unhappy, but without Idhren’s cooperation he could not advance the research himself.

Idhren fed his patron just enough pages of notes and half-formed spells to make it look like he was working, but that was all that he could bring himself to produce.

He was spending more and more time in the lyrium den.

Then one day he went down to the slave compound to visit his family to find his father once more abed, but barely able to sit up.

Idhren rushed to his father’s side, hands aglow with what small wisps of healing magic he could manage to conjure. It did little to sooth sore muscles and ease overworked joints. “Don’t you bother about me,” his father protested, but he sounded so weak and tired that Idhren couldn’t help worrying.

“You can’t possibly continue to work like this,” Idhren protested.

“I will manage,” Cyrus assured him. “It’s not nearly as bad as it looks. Besides, you know what will happen if I don’t.”

Idhren did. He remembered clearly how his old mentor, Alvinius, had simply disappeared from the estate one day never to be seen or heard from again. Although living in the mansion had shielded
him from most of the cruelties of slavery, Idhren was still well aware of how the others could be
treated. If his father did not show up to work the next day an overseer would show up at their door
and force him one way or another. The overseers were paid servants, sometimes Liberati, who cared
for nothing except that the work got done one way or another. Idhren could appeal to Canidius on
his father’s behalf, but doubted the magister would care. Slaves were not people to a man like him,
Idhren knew that now.

So he did what he could to ease his father’s pain, well aware that it was every bit as bad as it looked,
and returned to the mansion that night with a heavy heart.

The next week when he went down to visit his family his father was not there.

“He collapsed in the field two days ago,” his mother informed him solemnly, tears glistening in her
eyes but never falling from them. “When he couldn’t get back up… the overseer had him killed.”

Idhren sat down heavily on one of the beds and his mother perched wearily beside him. Just like that.
A tool that had outlived its use. One of the other slaves must have brought the new. Sahren was off
at the colosseum this week. Did he know yet?

“He held on a long time,” Ashara murmured, wrapping an arm around her son’s trembling shoulders.
“He did good work, and he got to see his sons grow into fine young men. I know he didn’t show it
much, but he was happy here. And he was proud of both of you.”

It was shallow consolation. “I could have done something,” Idhren murmured, voice tight, “If I were
better at healing. I could have helped.”

“It’s not your fault, Idhren,” Ashara soothed gently. “It’s not anyone’s fault.”

But it was. If his father had been able to rest, if he had had proper care, a real healer and not just
Idhren’s fumbling attempts, maybe he would have been alright. But the overseers did not let him rest,
did not send for a healer, and Canidius would not have allowed it anyway. Slaves were not
deserving of rest or healing. It was Canidius’ fault that his father had died.

Idhren had once thought the magister lenient and merciful and kind. He had been a naïve fool back
then. He knew the truth now, that Canidius was no different from any other magister. He did not
abuse his slaves, but he did not care for them, either. They were not people to him, only tools, and
despite his freedom Idhren was too.

There were no funerals for slaves. No ceremony, no priest to speak the right verses of the Chant. The
body was simply removed, cremated, and the ashes discarded. A different slave would take on his
father’s duties and everyone would be expected to go about their lives as though he never existed in
the first place. As far as Canidius was concerned, his father probably did not exist. Just another tally
mark on paper, his death no bigger loss than a broken quill and just as easily replaced.

It was, however, one less thing with which Canidius could manipulate his apprentice. Or so Idhren
thought.

“You’ve been spending too much time lately down in the slave quarters,” Canidius commented
several days later in the library. Idhren was hunched over a new book about the veil, fingertips
stained with ink as he took notes.

Idhren raised his head to watch the magister peruse the titles on one shelf as though he was actually
looking for something. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Canidius actually read a book.
“My family is there,” Idhren reminded him.
Canidius scoffed, so soft that he probably thought Idhren would not hear, but even ears were sharp in more than just appearance. “It’s highly improper,” the magister said, “Even you have to realize that by now. For a mage to be associating with slaves so casually would be an incredible scandal if anyone found out.”

“But they’re my family,” Idhren protested. “My mother and my brother. It’s where I was born.”

“But it is not where you are now,” Canidius reminded sternly. He turned away from the bookshelf and crossed his arms across his chest. It was probably meant to make him look more imposing, but it only served to emphasize the man’s incredible girth. Somehow over the past year Idhren thought the magister had gotten even fatter. “It’s time you left behind such childish pursuits. Sentimentality will only hold you back, especially if you intend on reaching the magisterium someday. You should consider limiting the amount of time you spend there.”

Idhren frowned and looked back down at the book in front of him. “I will consider it, magister,” he lied. Idhren was less certain by the day whether he actually wanted a seat in the magisterium. He no longer entertained the delusion that Canidius would help him get there. If the magister truly wanted him to succeed he would have given Idhren the credit he deserved for the work that was rightfully his. He wondered if Canidius was actually stupid enough to think that Idhren still believed his lies.

“I suppose that will do for now,” Canidius replied. “There is one other thing, before you get back to work,” he added. Idhren raised his head again. “I’m certain you’re aware that the new legislative session begins in the autumn, so I must return to Minrathous for a time.” Idhren nodded. He was well aware of the magister’s schedule. He generally spent a few months in the capital at the start of the session, staying through to the end only if there was a bill that he was personally invested in. “I was thinking it might be beneficial if you come with me this time. You have never been to the capital, indeed you have never been out of Vyrantium. Your academic pursuits are admirable, but we must begin your lessons in politics. It will be good for you to visit the Senate, to see how things are run.”

It had been a long time since Canidius was able to surprise Idhren in a good way. A trip to Minrathous to visit the Senate? That was good, that was something Idhren still dreamed about when he dared allow himself to dream.

And yet Idhren could not bring himself to be happy about it. In the back of his mind he could not help wondering what Canidius’ ulterior motive was. There had to be one. There always was.

“I would be honored,” the words slipped out of Idhren’s mouth automatically, the empty niceties that were so familiar on his lips.

The magister’s face twisted in a nauseating smile as he looked down his nose at Idhren. “We still have quite some time before we must depart. Several weeks at the least. That should be sufficient time for you to wrap up your work here enough for it to be put on hold. I will ensure that you are kept informed of the travel plans.”

“Yes, magister,” Idhren nodded.

Of course Idhren had no intention of reducing the amount of time he spent with his remaining family. Already he could only spend a matter of hours every week catching up with and checking in on them. Less with Sahren, depending on how frequently his brother was required at the colosseum.

However, very suddenly Canidius had extra work for Idhren. A salon held on the day Idhren usually spent with his family that he was required to attend. A stack of books on political history and theory that Idhren was required to read by that time next week, forcing him to spend all his free time studying.
It didn’t take long for Idhren to figure out what was happening. Canidius was an idiot academically, but he was incredibly clever when it came to politics and manipulation. He was purposely keeping Idhren away from his family. The question was why? Had he realized that Idhren was no longer as easily controlled as he had been before?

Their departure to Minrathous came before Idhren could find the answer. He had only managed to wrangle in two brief visits to his family in the five intervening weeks. After the death of his father he was loath to leave the estate for any significant period of time, in case anything else happened, but there was no avoiding this trip. His mother and brother had both been encouraging when he told them about it and in front of them Idhren had smiled and been enthusiastic about the opportunity. He was, to an extent. Idhren was excited to see Minrathous and the Senate, to learn first hand how the Magisterium worked instead of simply reading books and watching Canidius court favor at his various salons in the off season.

He also knew that it was another one of the magister’s attempts to keep him on a leash as though he were still a slave.

Minrathous, Tevinter Imperium, 9:35 Dragon

They arrived in the capitol with the turn of the season. Further north, Minrathous should have been warmer than Vyrantium, but the summer humidity had passed and a cool breeze blew off the ocean, turning the weather bearable rather than sweltering.

To shorten the journey Canidius always insisted on traveling by ship. Idhren had arranged the magister’s passage for the past two years as well as this one, but the elf had never set foot on a dock himself, let alone a ship. He spent the better part of the first day of their two day voyage curled up on his cot in the cabin fighting back nausea. He was only mostly successful. So when they finally stepped off onto the docks in Minrathous it was a blessed relief.

The city itself was breathtaking. Even from the docks Idhren could see that it was even larger and more impressive than Vyrantium. Beyond the line of warehouses along the waterfront buildings towered into the skyline. There were people everywhere. Dockworkers and merchants and travelers and slaves. Canidius had brought along two slaves for the sole purpose of carrying his things. At least that was all they had been doing so far. The magister’s luggage for such a brief journey was still a trunk so large it took two to carry. Idhren had refused the offer to use one of the house slaves for himself. He had few enough things, and was more than capable of dragging his own luggage the distance between the ship and the carriage waiting just beyond the bustling crowd. Besides, he knew from experience that when Canidius was away from the estate it was a respite for the house slaves – no meals to prepare, no parties to decorate for or serve at. The only person he would have considered bringing along was Valora, but she deserved the break this would offer.

Canidius’ home in Minrathous was only small in comparison to the sprawling Vyrantium estate that Idhren had called home his entire life. The mansion sat along a street of homes all of similar size and architectural style – the homes of other magisters, Idhren assumed – surrounded on all sides by dark stone walls. Within the walls, paved paths lead through meticulously manicured gardens. The mansion itself may have been smaller than the one in Vyrantium, but it was far more richly decorated, and far darker, it seemed to Idhren. Idhren was used to Vyrantium’s whitewashed walls,
wide halls and large windows. In contrast, the architect of this home seemed to have tried to fit the same number of rooms – and twice the décor – in half the space.

A slave that Idhren had never met before showed Idhren to the room that would be his for the duration of their stay. It was a guest room, and the appointments were notably nicer than those in Idhren’s usual quarters. Either there had been no servants’ quarters available, or Canidius was trying to impress Idhren somehow. He didn’t know which possibility was worse.

It did not take Idhren long to unpack the few possessions he had brought along, mostly clothes. All the nicest robes he owned, and a new set bought specifically for this trip, were carefully unfolded and hung in the wardrobe. However Idhren felt about this trip as a whole, he knew that it was his best opportunity to make an impression on the most powerful people in the country. He needed to look like a magister’s apprentice, not a slave.

Without thinking about it, Idhren found himself staring into the mirror on the dressing table and trying to tie his hair back in a way that obscured his ears. When he realized what he was doing he immediately turned away from the mirror. There was nothing wrong with his ears, he told himself not for the first time in his life, the problem was with the humans who thought they made him lesser.

The first several days in Minrathous were a whirlwind of new sights and sounds and faces. Idhren had thought that Canidius entertained frequently at his Vyrantium estate, but the number of parties and meetings attended here made left little time for anything else. And of course Idhren was dragged along to every single one.

Mornings were spent in casual meetings with Canidius’ political allies, which would occasionally carry over into lunch. Serious work was done in the afternoon, and in the evening it was a soiree or formal dinner with one or another magister, friend and rival alike.

Idhren, unused to the sheer volume of socializing, was having difficulty keeping up.

There were so many new faces, and to forget a name would be beyond social suicide. More likely it would be actual suicide.

The very least he could manage was not to make himself look like a complete idiot.

For all that he was dragged along to every social or political event Canidius attended Idhren did not feel particularly included. Of course it was fascinating to finally see the senate for himself, to see the city for himself, but beyond initial introductions barely anyone made an effort to include Idhren in conversation. Once again the elven mage was relegated to standing just slightly behind his patron, to smile and nod and be ever so polite and well mannered; a pretty little trophy, a display of charity to gain favor with the more moderate members of the Magisterium.

Idhren was supposed to be here to learn politics. How could he do that if he was constantly ignored? At least being paid barely more attention than a slave made it easy to slip away from the crowd without being noticed.

It was exhausting, smiling and playing dumb for so long. Only two weeks into their stay in the capitol and Idhren had already worked out a routine. After an hour or two of following Canidius around like a well trained dog he took the first opportunity to excuse himself and find a more secluded place to spend the evening.

Tonight’s particular excursion was hosted by one of the academics that Canidius had been courting favor with since the publication of Idhren’s research. Listening to the magister recite Idhren’s words
like a trained parrot would have been entertaining if it weren’t so infuriating. There were several people here – magisters and scholars alike – who produced work that Idhren greatly admired. He wanted nothing more than to speak to any of them about their research, and about his own, but that was not possible. If a magister would even deign to speak with him there was no way Idhren could discuss his work without giving away that Canidius had done none of it. Or worse, appearing the plagiarist himself.

Either way, he could only imagine how Canidius would respond. What would he do if Idhren stopped playing nice? Idhren was already doing the bare minimum required of him. How much longer could he push the boundaries of Canidius’ patience?

He was worried about his family. Idhren had worried about his family every day since his father’s death, and even more so now that he was away from them. Work would be light in the kitchens while they were away, a rest that his mother desperately needed. She stooped even when she stood now, unable to straighten fully, and Idhren’s magic could only temporarily dull the aches in her joints. Now he wasn’t there to do that. It seemed like Sahren had a new scar every time Idhren saw him, a new injury. Eight years now he had been fighting for the entertainment of men and women who saw him as little more than an animal. The only thing that Idhren still bothered praying for was that Sahren would survive his next fight.

Such thoughts made it impossible to enjoy anything about the soiree. Not that there was much to enjoy in the first place. If they were at Canidius’ mansion he could have at least exchanged sympathetic eye rolls with the servants, but he didn’t know the slaves here.

So instead Idhren had slipped away from the festivities, through an open veranda door and out into the garden. It was just as meticulously manicured as Canidius’, and there were a few people out on the grounds, seeking some fresh air or somewhere private for a conversation. Idhren ignored them and leaned back against the wall of the house, thankful for the slight breeze that night.

“It figures that I would find you holding up a wall somewhere,” a maddeningly familiar voice commented from Idhren’s left. The elf whipped around, embarrassed to have been caught by surprise. Standing there just outside the door, glass of wine held elegantly in one hand as he smirked at Idhren, was Dorian Pavus. “I saw Canidius in there, he’s difficult to miss, but you’re rather harder to find.”

Of course Dorian was here. Idhren wasn’t at all surprised. He was the son of a magister; of course he would be here in the capitol during the legislative session. So it had only been a matter of time before their paths crossed. “Do you expect me to believe you were actually looking for me?” Idhren asked.

“Not actively,” Dorian answered quickly. A little too quickly. “But after I saw Canidius I couldn’t help wondering if you were still wandering about in his shadow. Apparently I was correct.”

“And you came over here to gloat about it?” Idhren shot back resentfully.

“I can if you’d like,” Dorian offered. He leaned against a pillar across from Idhren, all artfully arranged limbs and practiced nonchalance, one arm folded loosely across his chest the other still holding that glass of wine. “I notice Canidius hasn’t published any further research on that marvelous theory.”

“Perhaps he hasn’t had much to work with,” Idhren replied carefully, well aware of how easily they might be overheard.

Dorian arched an eyebrow curiously in response. “This isn’t the most discreet place for a conversation,” he commented, glancing back toward the dining hall. They could be easily seen by
anyone who bothered to look, and they were not the only ones to have stepped out for a breath of fresh air. “But I happen to have it on good authority that Magister Alexius has a rather impressive library. Perhaps you’d like to see?”

The offer was tempting. Very tempting. But why was Dorian making it? “I’m not certain the magister would appreciate us poking around his estate uninvited.”

“Uninvited?” Dorian asked, a moment of confusion before he let out an amused laugh. “You really must keep up with the gossip, Idhren. Alexius is my patron. I can hardly be unwelcome in my own workspace, can I?”

Idhren was startled to hear that. Was he really so out of touch? No, why would news that one magister had taken up a new apprentice have reached him all the way in Vyramantium? This certainly wasn’t the circle in which Canidius usually ran. “That’s hardly gossip worthy news, don’t you think?” he returned, perhaps a little defensive.

“Isn’t it?” Dorian asked in surprise. “It certainly was here. Although that perhaps had more to do with the manner in which I came into his employ,” he murmured thoughtfully, then shrugged. “You really must pay more attention at these events. Put those ears to good use.”

Bristling defensively, Idhren had to resist the urge to bring his hands up and cover the points of his ears. “What do my ears have to do with anything?” he snapped.

Dorian tensed. He seemed to realize that he had overstepped, and hesitated for a moment before speaking again. “Never mind, forget I said anything,” he said, brushing the issue aside easily. “Do come along, I’ll show you to the library. It’s bound to be more interesting than standing out here staring at the sky. And I can fill you in on all the gossip you’ve missed.” In one smooth motion Dorian pushed himself off the pillar and downed the last of his wine before sweeping back into the dining hall, depositing his empty glass on the tray of a passing slave on his way.

Idhren hesitated only a moment before following.

As Dorian lead Idhren to the library – down two halls and up a flight of stairs – he prattled on cheerfully about any and all inane things that had happened in the past year or so. Idhren was only half paying attention. Although he’d come along, he was not certain why Dorian had invited him. They had neither seen nor spoken to each other in a year, and their last brief conversation had not exactly been friendly.

Still, it was nice that anyone wanted to talk to him, and ultimately that was why Idhren had followed. When they arrived at the library – larger than the one in Canidius’ Minrathous home and clearly well used, tables piled with books and notes – Dorian began talking about the research he was doing with Alexius. It was fascinating, but as much as Idhren wanted to focus he couldn’t shake the nagging question at the back of his mind.

“Dorian,” Idhren interrupted, his burning curiosity getting the better of his patience and his manners, “Why did you bring me here?”

The man broke off mid sentence and looked over at Idhren. He hesitated, words on the tip of his tongue that he bit back and swallowed down. “You obviously didn’t realize it,” he began instead,
“But I was working for Alexius the last time we saw each other as well, though not for long. I may have…” he paused, considering his next words carefully, “Mentioned the idea that Canidius’ work was not entirely his own.”

“What?” Idhren exclaimed in muted panic. Such a claim, even made by someone else, could mean the absolute end of Idhren’s academic pursuits. If Alexius had taken offense, if he told Canidius, if they thought Idhren was trying to rise above his station. “You—!”

“Now, now, no need to get so upset. Let me explain.” Dorian cut him off and held up a placating hand. Idhren reluctantly fell silent. “I know you don’t have a high opinion of me, but I’m not a complete fool. I didn’t tell him that you put the idea into my head, only that I knew you from the circle and this paper sounded like exactly the sort of thing you’d been studying at the time.”

Idhren relaxed somewhat. That was a small relief, but it still begged the question, “Why?”

Dorian paused thoughtfully before answering, “Everyone was terribly surprised when Canidius published a scientific work. He is not a scholar. Anyone will tell you that, but I’m certain you already know. He’s barely a politician, to be honest. He’s a shrewd businessman, I suppose, but he only has his seat in the Magisterium because it was inherited and he’s unimportant enough that no one’s bothered to oust him.”

“Get to the point,” Idhren complained. He knew all of that, likely better than anyone else, he didn’t need a lecture on the magister’s sub-par career.

“The point is,” Dorian finished petulantly, “People already suspect that he’s not the sole author behind that paper. Well, anyone with half a brain, at least.”

That wasn’t at all surprising. Canidius could barely articulate some of the ideas in Idhren’s paper. Anyone with a working knowledge of the field would be able to tell that he was reciting a script or making things up when asked questions. But no one had done anything about it. No one confronted him, no one defamed the paper. Everyone kept inviting him to these parties. They didn’t care.

“There’s still no proof,” Idhren pointed out, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning against the end of the table. “Or are you here to tell me you’re actually going to do something about it?”

“I-,” Dorian began confidently, then paused and visibly deflated, “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I know that Alexius believes me. If you want to leave Canidius’ employ I could--.”

“I won’t,” Idhren said immediately, starting Dorian into silence. “I won’t leave his service. Not while he still owns my family.”

Dorian sighed in annoyance, “Then you’re happy letting him use you like this?”

“I never asked you to get involved,” Idhren snapped. It was always like this with Dorian. Every time. Why couldn’t the man leave well enough alone? “Mind your own business.”

“Idhren,” Dorian protested, “You’re better than this.”

“Don’t pretend you know anything about my life,” the elf stood up straight, as tall as he could make himself, and glared up at the taller man. “I never asked for your help, and I’ve no interest in being your charity case. Leave me alone.”

“You are impossibly stubborn, do you know that?” Dorian complained, exasperated. “I’m trying to help, or are you too daft to see that?”

“I don’t want your help,” Idhren snapped back. “How many times do I have to say it before you
listen? What reason could you have to help me other than to stroke your own ego? So you can go to bed at night telling yourself what a good person you are?"

Dorian was taken aback by both the venom in Idhren’s words and the accusations themselves. “You really think I’m that shallow?”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t?” Idhren asked in return. “You made it perfectly clear in the Circle that I was simply too pathetic for you to ignore. I was an inconvenience, or perhaps a curiosity. I bet I still am. That’s all your lot ever see when they look at me.”

Dorian had said some things along those lines back then. And now it was coming back to bite him in the ass. All of his attempts at being a good person backfired. Perhaps he should give up. But maybe he could still salvage this relationship. “That’s not why—,” Dorian cut himself off with a frustrated sigh. “I read your paper,” he said curtly. “It was good. If you would continue working on it, if you could put that theory into practice, it would be astounding.”

Idhren had to bite his lip, swallowing back the sudden lump in his throat and looking away. To hear a compliment like that from someone who actually understood the material was more than he’d dreamed of in a long time. That it came from Dorian, who had been there in the Circle when it was only a fledgling thought, meant so much more. But Idhren was learning not to let his feelings show. Canidius always used them against him. And Dorian had now made it clear what he was after. “I’m not working on it anymore,” Idhren muttered. “I won’t give him anything else. I won’t let him take anything else.”

“You can’t honestly be happy with that,” Dorian said, and his voice was frustrated, but he also sounded genuinely concerned. Idhren had such a hard time believing that anyone genuinely cared about him.

He leaned heavily against the edge of a table, defenses falling away regardless of how he tried to cling to them. He wasn’t happy in Vyrantium, with Canidius, with letting his dreams slowly crumble to dust. He was miserable and frightened and angry. “I hate him,” Idhren fumed quietly, and then louder, daring to think they were far enough removed from the party that no one would hear him as he let years of bottled up emotions bubble to the surface. “I hate him. I hate him! I want to strangle him with my bare hands for everything he’s done to me! My freedom is a joke,” the elf scoffed in disgust, pushing himself away from the table again to pace the width of the room. The air in the library gradually began to buzz with static, like the moments before a lightning strike, making the hairs on Dorian’s arms stand on end. “He holds my leash as easily as if I were still his property. Do you think he would just let me walk away? Can’t you see, Dorian?” Idhren stopped and turned to the man. “For all my supposed freedom I’m still his slave. And he knows it and he gloats and there’s nothing I can do!”

His eyes glistened with unshed tears in the dim light of the library, years of frustration boiling to the surface. Finally allowed outlet there was no stemming the flood. So much anger in such a tiny body. So much desperation. “My life will never be my own,” the elf continued, voice thick with emotion. “My work will never be my own. He gave me my freedom, but he took everything else from me.” Idhren fell back into a chair beside the table as the crackle of static slowly dissipated. “And to think I used to be proud to be his apprentice,” he muttered bitterly.

Dorian liked to think he knew a little bit of how that felt, but surely Idhren wouldn’t agree. Idhren had always made it clear that he thought the Altus class lived perfectly carefree lives. Compared to a slave, perhaps that was the case. Dorian knew what Idhren had been through at the circle, and it was certainly more hardship than Dorian himself had ever faced. Perhaps he had no right to complain. “You really think he would hurt your family if you tried to leave?”
“They’re slaves,” Idhren said bitterly. “He doesn’t see them as people, just tools. Tools he can use to manipulate me, make me behave so he can keep using me. He’s already…” Idhren cut himself off, wondering if he should mention anyone he had lost. Would Dorian even care? Perhaps he wouldn’t, but it might make him understand. “My father is dead,” he said flatly.

A hissed gasp from Dorian, but Idhren didn’t look up to see the man’s face. “I’m sorry.”

Idhren shrugged slightly. He had grieved all that he could already. “He worked in the orchard. One day he just… collapsed. Exhaustion. But he couldn’t get back up, so the overseer killed him. Dumped his body in a ditch somewhere. There’s no use for a slave that can’t work.”

“That’s horrible,” Dorian breathed.

“It is,” Idhren confirmed. “But it’s the best that any slave can expect. It would be no great loss if my mother and brother died. They would be easily replaced. If I left Canidius’ employ I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he had them killed simply out of spite.”

Dorian didn’t know what to say to that. He had never actually considered what happened to slaves that got too old or sick to work. He didn’t think much about slaves outside of his own household period. They were so easy to ignore, always hovering quietly on the outskirts of his world. He knew that some people treated their slaves badly, abused them, used them for blood magic, but that had never happened in the Pavus household and it wasn’t something that was done in public. As such he had never personally witnessed that sort of cruelty. Except what had happened to Idhren in the Circle.

If slaves were so easy to ignore when they were in the same room, it was easier even to ignore them when they were out of sight. When they disappeared.

With a great sigh, Idhren pushed himself up out of the chair once more. “I should return to the festivities before Canidius notices that I’m gone.” He took a moment to compose himself, smoothing down his hair and straightening his robes needlessly, before heading for the library door. If he was lucky, Canidius would be nearly finished pandering for favor. If not, well, at least the wine was good.

But in the doorway he stopped, hand on the doorframe, and glanced back at Dorian. The man was still standing there by the table looking mildly conflicted. Idhren felt his heart clench in his chest, and he wondered how different his life might be if he’d been born Dorian’s equal. Or if there were more people like Dorian in the world, who for some inexplicable reason didn’t see him as lesser. “I… appreciate that you want to help,” he said carefully. An understatement, but all he could bring himself to voice. “But there’s nothing you can do.”

As he watched, Dorian’s expression closed off. Gone was the concern, the sympathy, the hint of frustration, all replaced by the same perfect polite smile that every Altus mage wore with ease. All emotion hidden behind a well crafted façade. “Well, I apologize if I’ve been an inconvenience,” he said, as though this had been a mere friendly chat and not an emotional hurricane. “Perhaps we’ll meet at another of these affairs and have a more pleasant conversation.”

Idhren managed a wry smile. It would be a miracle if he and Dorian could ever manage a pleasant conversation. “I wouldn’t want to sully your reputation by letting people think you’re friends with an elf.”

“My reputation has survived worse,” Dorian assured him flippantly. “You really should catch up on the gossip, Idhren, I’m certain you’ll find it entertaining.”
It was only because Dorian had mentioned rumors and gossip so many times during the course of the evening that Idhren gave it any thought whatsoever following that night’s soiree. Not right away, of course. First he had had to sleep off those last few terribly ill advised glasses of wine – drunk while playing the wallflower again and watching Dorian move through the crowd as though he were born to it, which he was. By the time Canidius bid his farewells and collected Idhren like a stray pet the elf was just drunk and miserable enough to consider going to find a lyrium den. The thought didn’t last long. Nice as it might be to mute out everything except the hum of lyrium through his veins the experience wouldn’t be the same without Varius. Instead he’d merely collapsed into bed and slept until late the following morning.

Luckily that morning dawned a rare meeting-free day for the magister, and when Idhren felt well enough to face the day he was able to beg off any further duties for a chance to finally explore the city on his own.

He was determined to make a few good memories on this trip.

The Minrathous Circle library was practically legendary; even larger than Vyrantium’s and open to all mages. It was full of books that Idhren had been yearning to get his hands on and, most important of all, he didn’t have to worry about Canidius reading over his shoulder.

It was also full of elven servants much more willing to speak to him than any of the people Canidius mingled with. Between the shelves, searching out obscure texts, that was where Idhren picked up all his gossip. Servants heard different gossip than the nobility, and they were the best source of it in Idhren’s opinion. He knew from personal experience how easily elves were ignored and how easy it was for them to listen in on supposedly private conversations.

Libraries were not a terribly good place to pick up relevant gossip, however. Someone had borrowed all the books on the pre-Andrastian Imperium. Mildly scandalous, a bit excessive, but nothing to write home about. Some people were still terribly worked up about the Qunari situation in some Free Marches city, even a year after the fact. Idhren didn’t need the rumor mill to tell him that. A quarter of the Magisterium was demanding a full invasion, but that was typical, it was just that the arguments had new substance.

Nothing of particular note came out of his hunt for gossip, but it was nice to be in a library again. Well, a library away from Canidius’ influence. Idhren had always liked libraries. It was a pity Canidius’ had been poisoned for him; a gilded cage, an aviary where exotic birds could fly and sing, but only for the entertainment of their captors. This library felt like freedom. No materials denied to him, no pressure for results, just books. As many books as he could read, as many pages of parchment as he could fill with notes.

Idhren stayed until the sun was dipping low in the sky and the servants politely ushered him out, a folio of notes tucked under one arm.

It was a nice reprieve, visiting the library. Between Canidius’ machinations, the politics, and being showed off like a prized animal, Idhren had almost forgotten what it was like to enjoy his work. To remember why he’d once wanted this.

It was a pity the feeling would not last more than a day.
Another month of politics and parties passed in a blur before Idhren crossed paths with Dorian again. The elf performed his requisite socializing before, predictably, retiring to the edges of the crowd. Though he had been trying to pay more attention to the goings on at these events, he still hadn’t picked up any particularly noteworthy rumors. Maybe this wasn’t the right scene for rumor mongering, everyone was too concerned with political matters. Except himself and Dorian, it would seem.

The man found him as the evening dragged on. Idhren was halfway through his third glass of wine when Dorian sidled up and leaned against the wall beside him. “You are the life of the party, as usual,” the man commented.

“You know how I adore being the center of attention,” Idhren shot back dryly.

The comment made Dorian’s lips quirk up in a small, amused smile. “I hope you’re at least able to appreciate Magister Aurarius’ taste in wine?” he asked, a glance at Idhren’s cup before raising his own to his lips.

Idhren looked down at the deep red liquid in his glass, swirled it once in his hand. “It seems I have picked up some of the Altus class’ less offensive habits over the years,” he replied. “And I might as well get something good out of being dragged to these things.”

“Indeed,” Dorian agreed, “The food is sometimes the only redeeming quality to these displays. And of course I never pass up a good opportunity to get drunk.”

“And just when I thought you were learning a bit of discretion,” Idhren said, sighing with disappointment that was almost entirely false. He would be a hypocrite to hold that against Dorian now. Idhren’s usual escapes were worse than mere alcohol these days; though he had been lyrium free this entire trip, which was surprising.

The sigh that Dorian returned was suitably melodramatic, “Alas, it never has been my strong suit. I’m certain my parents would be more than happy to expound upon my many failures in that field. Or the local gossip.”

There it was again. What was Dorian’s obsession with rumor? Was he trying to hint at something? Idhren wished he would just come out and say what he meant. “You’ll be surprised to know that I have heeded your advice on that front.”

“Which front?” Dorian asked.

“About putting my ears to good use,” Idhren told him, but shot the man a pointed look. Even though his perfect Altus mask Dorian winced slightly. “But they haven’t uncovered anything particularly shocking. I suppose everyone is too concerned with politics this time of year. Even the slaves don’t have much interesting to share, unless you care about who is sleeping with whom.”

Dorian raised an eyebrow curiously. “Some people would care about that very much, depending on the people involved.”

“No one I care about, at least,” Idhren shrugged. “Anything interesting that I’ve missed?”

“Magister Danarius has picked himself up a Liberati apprentice as well,” Dorian commented, “Who knew Canidius was starting a trend. Maybe you can be friends.”

“That I did hear about. I’d tell her to get out while she can,” Idhren muttered in reply. “You know what he does to his slaves.”
“I know what he did to the one,” Dorian agreed. “That was before my time, thankfully.”

Before Idhren’s time as well. They were both still in school then. For all the complaints that Idhren had about Canidius, at least he wasn’t a blood mage. Small blessings.

“Do you know how much longer you’ll be staying in the city?” Dorian asked, a very sudden change of topic, but a welcome one. Idhren didn’t want to talk about slaves and magisters, or think about another unfortunate, impressionable Liberati pressured into the same situation as he. “Through Satinalia, I should hope. The festival here is magnificent, it would be a pity for you to miss it.”

“We would have to leave within the week to miss that,” Idhren pointed out, “But perhaps not through First Day. I’m not certain,” Idhren replied honestly. Canidius sometimes changed his plans at the drop of a hat, occasionally just to watch the slaves clamor to keep up with his demands. “There are no bills put forward that he is personally invested in. If it doesn’t make or save him money Canidius has little interest.”

“Of course,” Dorian sighed faintly, “And why bother being involved if it doesn’t personally affect you?”

Idhren glanced up at Dorian. If he didn’t know better, he would think the man was just as annoyed by the state of Tevinter politics as he was. Dorian would be one of them some day: a magister. Would he be any different from all the rest? He was kind to Idhren; considered the elf a friend, if his words were to be believed. And despite all his slip ups the Altus actually hadn’t done anything to make Idhren doubt that sentiment, but it was still difficult to believe anyone of Dorian’s standing would care about him at all.

That Dorian would admit to friendship was a massive step forward from their relationship in the circle, when the man couldn’t even give a compliment without covering it up with an excuse. Idhren should be happy that they could hold a civil, even pleasant, conversation as friends. As equals. Yet some part of him was still disappointed.

The man had turned his attention back toward the people milling about, sipping at the wine in his hand. Friendship was really all that he could ever hope for. That Dorian could see him that way was a miracle in itself, but they would never be more.

Tearing his eyes away from the man’s profile Idhren downed the last of his wine in one gulp. “Don’t let me hold you back from enjoying the rest of the party,” he commented, staring down at his still empty glass. “Go enjoy yourself. Some of the people here aren’t actually terrible.”

When Dorian glanced down at him again Idhren did not look up, though he felt the gaze on him. “Getting bored of me already?” he asked, a teasing note to his voice. “Very well. Though I hope we’ll see each other again before Canidius drags you back down south.”

“As do I,” Idhren replied without looking up. A moment later Dorian swept away, back into the limelight where he belonged. And left Idhren on the sidelines, where he belonged.
A dog might slink back to the hand it has bitten
And be forgiven, but a slave never.
If you would live, and live without fear, you must fight.

- Canticle of Shartan 9:7

Vyrantium, Tevinter Imperium, 9:36 Dragon

Only days after the turn of the year Idhren arrived back in Vyrantium at Canidius’ side. The trip to Minrathous had been a mixed blessing. While the political side of things hadn’t been nearly as interesting as Idhren had hoped, he had a sheaf of research notes stashed in the bottom of his luggage away from Canidius’ prying eyes and a few fond memories to look back on. His fledgling friendship with Dorian was chief among those memories. He had seen the man only a handful of times, but each time they traded gossip and sarcastic barbs. And each time Idhren watched the man leave with a longing in his gut that he didn’t want to acknowledge.

On Satinalia, while Canidius entertained guests at his mansion, Idhren ran free through the city, exploring side streets and admiring decorations as he enjoyed the festivities. The common folk were out in force, mingling with the upper classes as though such a thing were normal. He was pulled briefly into the celebrations of the local elven Liberati community on the edges of the slums, and for perhaps the first time in his life, Idhren did not feel out of place. They shared their food and drink as though he was family, and in return he performed magic tricks for the children. Real magic tricks; colored fire and flowers made of ice that made their eyes light up with wonder.

But nothing good lasts for long. Inevitably he had to return to Canidius’ home, and from there to Vyrantium. And now that he had returned to his childhood home it was back to the usual routine.

At least he could see his family again. For months he’d been away, the longest since his time in the Circle. Two days after their return saw Idhren running down from the mansion like an excitable child, only to find his mother waiting at the gates of the compound. At first, the sight set Idhren running faster, but as he grew nearer something began to feel terribly wrong. Ashara was seated on an old stump just inside the gate, hunched and weary, her face drawn with concern. When she spotted her son the woman stood, slowly, hands on her knees as she pushed herself upright. Idhren came to a stop at the gate, hand on the latch but suddenly nervous to open it.

“It’s your brother,” she said without preamble. “It’s not good.”

She said nothing more as Idhren passed through the gate and took her arm to help her walk. The short trip to the hovel he had been born in seemed to take an age. Idhren’s heart thundered in his chest; he could barely think except to imagine every possible worse case scenario.

The inside of the hovel was dim, and it reeked of blood. Sahren was laid out on one of the small cots,
very nearly too tall for it, and for one horrible moment Idhren thought he was already dead. But his chest slowly rose and fell in shallow breaths, and when Idhren broke away from his mother’s arm to approach the bedside Sahren’s eyes flickered open. A threadbare blanket was pulled up over him, but all it did was cover any obvious sign of injury. Sahren was pale, even despite his sun tanned skin, with dark circles around his eyes and sunken cheeks. When his eyes finally focused on Idhren a faint smile tugged at his cracked lips. “You’re back,” he said, and his voice was as weak as he looked. Very briefly, Sahren made an effort to sit up, but hissed in pain and gave up after moving barely an inch. “Sorry I can’t give you a hug. How was the capitol?”

At first Idhren could not form words to answer him. He sat down timidly on the edge of the cot, trying not to jostle his brother in any way. “Sahren…” It was the first word he could make his lips form. “What happened?”

“Ah, you know… The usual,” his brother replied with what was probably meant to be a shrug, but instead was only the barest shifting of one shoulder.

It was not unusual for Sahren to shrug off his injuries, and this was not the first time Idhren had seen him injured. He frequently came back from the colosseum with cuts and bruises or, on a few rare occasions, a broken bone. His skin was littered with scars that told of the long, hard years he’d spent there. Sahren had always cheerfully downplayed any injury, but this was clearly not a typical wound. “Sahren,” Idhren said again, pleading, although he didn’t know what for.

Sahren sighed, but that weak smile stayed plastered across his face. “Don’t make that sad face, Idhren,” he beseeched.

“What happened?” Idhren asked once more.

“Had a bad match,” Sahren said, as though it were that simple. “I won, though.” As though that was all that mattered.

“That was a week ago,” their mother cut in. She was sitting now on the cot beside Sahren’s, but Idhren hadn’t even noticed her come in. “They brought him back here day before yesterday.”

The same day that Idhren had returned. Yet no one had bothered to tell him that his brother lay here dying. “Has there been a healer?” Idhren asked, already rolling up his sleeves. He still struggled with healing magic, but this was his brother. He had to try.

“They patched me up at the colosseum,” Sahren answered with another attempted shrug.

That meant bandages and elfroot, just enough to stop the bleeding. Obviously this injury was beyond such simple remedies. Without asking, Idhren pulled back the blanket. He regretted it immediately. Sahren’s entire torso was wrapped in bandages so caked in blood it was clear they hadn’t been changed in days. Since he had been brought here. And of course not, his mother didn’t have anything to replace them with; no one here did. They had brought Sahren here to die.

“Idhren,” Sahren’s voice made him realize he was staring, hands trembling as they hovered over his brother’s broken body. “Don’t worry about me.”

Idhren shook his head, “You’re… I can…” He pulled at the Fade instinctively and let the magic pool in his hands as his scattered mind struggled to remember everything that Galene had struggled to teach him. Something. Anything.

“Idhren,” his brother interrupted again. He reached up and took one of Idhren’s trembling hands in his own, weak though it was. Idhren lost hold of the fragile thread of healing magic and it dissipated
immediately. “It’s alright.” Idhren shook his head again and swallowed past the lump in his throat. It wasn’t alright. It was far from alright. “Hey…” he paused to take a deep laborious breath, “Tell me about the capitol.”

Idhren let out a single sob before he managed to restrain himself again. Quickly wiping away the wetness on his cheeks, he began talking.

Eventually Ashara fell asleep on the other cot, but Idhren remained. Even when he’d run out of stories to tell about Minrathous, he remained. “Is mother asleep?” Sahren asked quietly. His breathing had been getting more ragged, and though Idhren kept conjuring ice to help his fever it wasn’t getting any better.

“Yes,” Idhren confirmed.

“Good… Now you can tell me about that boy you like.”

“What?” Idhren asked in surprise, too loud. For a moment he was afraid he would wake their mother, but she did not stir.

“She thinks you’re sweet on that maid… What’s her name?” Sahren murmured.

“Valora?”

“That’s the one,” Sahren let out a weak chuckle. “I know you better than that.”

Idhren bit his lip and stared down at his hands, still clasped around one of Sahren’s. For a moment he considered denying it, but what would be the point? “He’s Altus,” he said quietly. “We met in the Circle. He was kind to me. Is kind to me. He’s smart and he treats me like an equal, but he doesn’t… He doesn’t like me back.”

“I’m sorry,” Sahren breathed. “You’re too good for him. You’re too good for this fucking place. Idhren…” he was cut off by a wet cough and Idhren hurried to press a cup of water to his lips and help him drink. When the fit passed Sahren spoke again, voice thick with emotion, “I’m so proud that you’re my brother. I want you to be happy.” Idhren wanted to assure him that he was happy, but he knew it would be a lie. He hadn’t been happy in years. “You should… leave this place. Find somewhere… they’ll appreciate you.”

“Like where?” Idhren asked, although he couldn’t even entertain the idea right now.

“I don’t know… You’re the smart one,” Sahren teased weakly. “You’ll think of something.”

Idhren returned his weak smile with a watery one of his own. “I’m proud that you’re my brother, too,” he whispered, not trusting his voice with more.

Sahren’s weak smile turned a bit brighter. “Hey, Idhren… I think… I’m gonna take a nap,” he murmured, gaze turned toward the ceiling and eyes unfocused. “Thanks for staying with me.”

“Oh course,” Idhren replied. He watched his brother’s eyes drift closed, clung to his hand so hard it had to be painful, but Sahren didn’t even flinch. Gradually his breathing grew slower, shallower, until it stopped entirely. And Idhren stopped holding back his tears.

In the morning, while his mother was forced to continue her work as though nothing had happened, Idhren saw to it that Sahren’s body was properly tended. He was shrouded and burned while Idhren mumbled verses of the Chant that felt hollow on his lips. He buried the ashes beneath a tree in Canidius’ garden. Somewhere peaceful and beautiful. Somewhere unlike the life that his brother had
been forced to live. Then he returned to his own room and slept through the rest of the day.

Two weeks later his mother died. It was as though after Sahren passed she simply gave up. He got the news from Valora one morning in the library. “I’m so sorry,” she breathed, and hugged him tightly even though it was highly improper. Idhren didn’t care. He hugged her back and cried quietly onto her shoulder.

When night fell Idhren slipped out of the estate. He found himself at the door of *Magister’s Mercy* with no memory of the long walk to get there. Already he could smell the lyrium and herbs, the promise of an escape like metal on his tongue as he stepped through the door. He lost himself in a haze of smoke and alcohol until he could barely remember his own name. Then let Varius fuck him because it was the only thing that felt real.

In the pre-dawn hours Idhren staggered back through the city, back into the estate. The vast, cold mansion felt more like a prison now than it ever had before. Still numb, he collapsed face down in his bed, curled up beneath the blankets without getting undressed, and pulled the sheets up over his head to shut out the rest of the world.

His life was spiraling out of control as he slowly lost hold of everything that had ever given it meaning. First his research, now his family. There was nothing left for him.

There was also nothing left that could hurt him.

---

Vyrantium was hottest just before autumn. Not at the height of summer, but just before it ended, like one final hurrah before the rains came and the wind began to blow from the south. Not the ideal time to be visiting, but not the worst, either.

The city hadn’t changed much over the years, but Dorian’s familiarity with it had. It was strange to think that he had once lived here. For two full years, even. Streets that he had once navigated while blind drunk were now unfamiliar, landmarks long forgotten. But parts of it were still familiar. The Circle, obviously, still loomed unchanged in the heart of the city; no doubt filled to the brim with a new batch of prideful teenage mages.

He recognized a handful of other places; the establishments that Dorian had frequented during his brief life here. Most of them had been the sort of seedy taverns that did not care who you were so long as you could pay. Most of them Dorian no longer knew how to find, and besides, his tastes had become rather more discerning in the intervening years.

He had a room at an inn – one of the nicer establishments in the city, suitable for someone of his status – but Dorian had little intention of staying there tonight. He was rather in the mood for some company or, at the very least, a drink. But not somewhere respectable, not somewhere he might be recognized. So he left the gilded avenues that were familiar in style even if they were no longer as intimately familiar as they had once been and found himself a friendly pair of blue and red lanterns hung outside a respectably nondescript establishment.

*Magister’s Mercy*, the sign above the door read in simple but clean script. The name was such a cliché there was probably a lyrium den or brothel in every major city with the same moniker.

It was perfect.

Dorian stepped up to the door and then crossed the threshold into the dim, smoky interior. He paused a moment while his eyes adjusted from the late afternoon sun and surveyed the décor. It was fairly standard, from Dorian’s experience. Nothing to set it apart from a hundred other lyrium dens. The
shuttered windows cut out most of the sunlight and the heat of the day, and the room was lit instead by magefire sconces on the walls and dimly glowing lanterns. Scattered incense burners filled the air with a thin haze of smoke and a musky scent that, for now, masked the smell of lyrium.

There were two elves lounging on a sofa not far from where Dorian stood. He noticed first the one seated upright, head tipped back onto the cushions, baring the sooth dark skin of his neck while ebony locks cascaded down the back of the seat. The other lay with his head in the first’s lap, feet propped up on the armrest. As Dorian watched, the one lying down took a long drag from a pipe and then passed it off to his companion as he breathed out a slow stream of smoke.

Dorian thought at first that they were both whores, until he noticed that the second elf’s clothing was both far too fine and far too modest for a prostitute. And then as if on cue both elves opened their eyes and looked his way. In the dim light of the brothel those eyes glinted in a way that some people found unnerving, but as the one lying down lifted his head to get a better look Dorian recognized those eyes. Large and violet, surrounded by a waterfall of hair the color of rich mahogany.

“Dorian Pavus,” a smirk spread across familiar lips and slowly Idhren pushed himself upright. So much for not being recognized. At least Idhren was unlikely to go tattling to his father. “Fancy meeting you here. I suppose this means the rumors are true.”

“What rumors are those?” Dorian asked without truly registering the words. He knew full well which rumors, but he was still trying to process the scene in front of him. Idhren was the last person he had ever expected to find in a lyrium den or a brothel.

“That Dorian Pavus has an elf fetish,” Idhren leered, all half lidded eyes and knowing smirk. Behind him, the whore giggled. “Working his way through every seedy whorehouse in Minrathous.” He had finally figured out what Dorian had been hinting at nearly a year ago. From the mouth of the whores themselves: Dorian liked elves. Male elves, in particular. “What are you doing in Vyrantium, though?”

“Merely passing through,” Dorian replied. “I unfortunately am required to visit my family for Satinalia.”

“Then what a happy coincidence that our paths should cross,” Idhren murmured with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Eyes that, now that his own had adjusted to the dark, Dorian could see were rimmed red and pupils blown wide. Idhren was high as a kite.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” the whore chimed in, a slight whine in his voice like a neglected and jealous lover. When he sat up he was obviously taller than Idhren – though most people were taller than Idhren – but draped his arms over the elven mage’s shoulders all the same and leaned against him like a living blanket.

“Oh, how rude of me,” Idhren spoke as though they were at some Magister’s soiree instead of the common room of a whorehouse, the air thick with lyrium smoke. “Dorian, this is my dear friend Varius,” he began, inclining his head slightly to indicate the elf currently plastered to his back. “And Varius, may I present Dorian of House Pavus, an old classmate from the Circle.”

The whore – Varius – let out an appreciative hum as his eyes ran up and down Dorian’s form. “He’s very pretty,” the elf commented as Dorian stood there, uncertain how to respond. He had found himself around plenty of whores in his lifetime, but this was the first time one had eyed him like a piece of meat.

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Idhren picked up the pipe again and took another long drag. “Shall I invite him to join us?”
“Oh, definitely,” Varius purred. “Do come join us, handsome. There’s enough to share.”

It was probably a bad idea, but Dorian did join them. He sank down onto the sofa beside Idhren as Varius peeled himself off of the smaller elf’s back and busied himself for a moment with the lyrium pipe. “This isn’t the sort of place I would have expected to find you,” Dorian commented, purposefully watching Varius fill and prime the lyrium pipe instead of looking at Idhren.

“Is it?” Idhren leaned back against the arm of the sofa and watched Dorian’s profile while Dorian watched Varius. “Why? You think I’m still that shy, scared little boy from the Circle?”

Dorian’s eyes flicked back over to him, ran over Idhren’s figure. That shy, scared boy with fire in his heart was certainly the Idhren that Dorian knew best and remembered most vividly. Obviously the years had changed him, and Dorian hadn’t been around very often to see those changes. “You’re still little,” he commented.

Idhren let out a bark of laughter. “A joke about my height,” he laughed, “How clever. The pride of the Imperium, you are.”

Dorian rolled his eyes, “Such sarcasm,” he complained. “But why are you here?”

“Why is anyone here?” Idhren asked in return, with a tone of voice as though he was asking for the meaning of life.

“We’re celebrating!” Varius supplied. He had finished with the pipe, it seemed, and pressed one of the mouthpieces into Idhren’s hand, then another into Dorian’s. “And now that we have enough people for a party I’ll find us some drinks. What’ll it be, handsome?” he winked at Dorian as he stood, silken robe open to his stomach and barely clinging to his shoulders. It was a rather distracting view.

“Whatever goes best with this, I suppose,” Dorian replied, looking down at the pipe in his hand.

Idhren already had the pipe in his mouth, breathing in deeply and then out through his teeth. “It’ll have to be the cheap wine,” he spoke through the smoke, “Unless Dorian’s buying.”

They both looked at Dorian expectantly until he sighed and relented, “Very well, if we’re going to do this we might as well do it properly. Bring the good stuff.”

Varius smiled like the cat that got the cream, then turned quickly and strode away in a swirl of crimson silk and ebony hair. On any other night Dorian would have bought him in a heartbeat, but tonight there were extenuating circumstances. Getting drunk and high with a prostitute and the subject of his teenage infatuation was very likely a bad decision, but Dorian wasn’t known for making good decisions. He raised the pipe to his lips and breathed in. It had been a long time since he had done this, but the smoke hit his tongue, settled in his lungs, and it felt familiar. “So,” Dorian murmured as he exhaled. “What exactly are we meant to be celebrating?”

Idhren took another long draw from the pipe in his hand, then relaxed back into the plush sofa cushions, sighing out through his nose. “I’m leaving Tevinter,” he said flatly.

The news came as a shock to Dorian, and to his surprise the feeling was also accompanied by disappointment. “What?” he asked stupidly.

“I’ve been saving up what little wages Canidius pays me and I’ve finally secured passage with a caravan headed south,” Idhren elaborated. “I’ll be leaving in a month’s time.”

Dorian stared. “You’re really leaving?” he breathed. It seemed so out of the blue. Less than a year
ago Idhren had been adamant that he would not leave Canidius. Something must have happened. “But where are you going to go? You know how the south treats their mages. They’ll throw you in one of their prison Circles, or worse!” Dorian had heard stories, everyone had, of how the southern Chantry oppressed mages for no reason other than their Maker-given talents. A mage as powerful and clever as Idhren, especially Tevinter trained, would terrify the people of the south. If he wasn’t killed for suspicion of blood magic, would they make him tranquil?

“That’s a possibility, yes,” Idhren confirmed, “And it’s a risk I’m willing to take.” He paused and took a drag from the lyrium pipe, blowing out the smoke slowly before he continued speaking. Dorian was still too stunned to argue. “This is the one situation where my ears will be useful, though.”

It took a moment for Dorian to realize what Idhren meant. “You’re planning to find one of those wandering tribes? And what, live in the forest like a savage?”

Idhren shrugged one shoulder. “At this point it’s preferable to staying here,” he commented. “My family is gone; everything I’ve ever worked for has been stolen from me. Even if I leave Canidius’ estate and try to find employ somewhere else, do you think anyone in this blighted country will ever respect me?”

“Perhaps not,” Dorian was forced to agree. “You think it’s more likely that a random group of homeless elves will accept you with open arms?”

“Perhaps not with open arms,” Idhren said, “But I have to try. If I don’t, I’ll only be miserable here for the rest of my life. If there’s even a chance that I could find a better life in the south I’m willing to take it.”

He was really serious about this. Absolutely serious. “Why now?” Dorian asked.

Idhren looked down at the pipe in his hand, rolled it between his fingers and frowned. He was silent for a long moment, wondering how much he should tell Dorian, and not wanting to ruin the carefree mood. He had come here to celebrate, to have one last fun night, one last good memory before he left the country for good. He didn’t want to talk about what had driven him to this point, all the things he had lost. But this was Dorian. Ironically, coincidentally, here in Vyrantium, in this establishment, on the eve of his departure. And after tonight it was almost certain that Idhren would never see him again. So he might as well bare all; perhaps it would help him find some closure.

“My family is dead,” Idhren told him. “There’s nothing tying me to Canidius anymore.”

Dorian had known about the elf’s father, but now his mother, and he’d had a sibling as well, hadn’t he? “I’m sorry,” he said. Idhren had clearly cared about his family, to have stayed under Canidius’ thumb for their sake.

“It’s not your fault,” Idhren murmured, and fell silent. It had effectively killed the celebratory mood, and Idhren set down his pipe before he could lose himself completely in the smoke.

Thankfully, Varius returned moments later, three small glasses held precariously in one hand, and in the other an open bottle of something amber colored. He quickly took in the scene, and the newly somber mood. “What happened while I was gone?” he asked with forced cheer, “Did you have a fight?” He seated himself beside Dorian, effectively penning the man between the pair of elves, and carefully set the glasses he carried on the table. “That won’t do at all. We’re supposed to be celebrating. Here, is this up to your standards, handsome?” With a flourish he presented the bottle to Dorian for inspection.
The gesture forced Dorian to tear his attention away from Idhren, though he cast barely a glance at
the bottle before he nodded. “Yes, I suppose that will do.” Not that he needed to look at it; the stuff
was strong enough that he could smell it already.

“Perfect,” Varius smiled as he filled each of the small cups with a more than generous serving. “And
we must have a toast. It’s that sort of occasion.”

“What to?” Idhren asked, reaching across Dorian to take a glass.

“To you, of course,” Varius purred, “For taking control of your own life. And to the grand adventure
that I’m sure awaits you; I pray your journey is easy and that you find what you seek.”

“A fine sentiment,” Dorian agreed, and raised his glass in acknowledgement before taking a sip of
the drink. Brandy, he identified immediately, and very good. It probably cost more than he had
intended to spend tonight. Well, it was the occasion for it, he supposed.

“Fine, indeed,” Idhren agreed, “Thank you.” He smiled as he raised his own glass to his lips, the
softest expression that Dorian had ever seen on his face. Then he threw his head back and downed
the entire glass of brandy in two swallows, a display that Dorian found wildly attractive.

“What is the point of buying such quality spirits if you’re going to drink it so fast you can’t even taste
it?” Dorian complained.

Laughing softly, Idhren reached across Dorian again, holding his glass out to Varius for a refill.
”That’s less fun,” he commented, “But I’ll savor this glass, if it’ll make you feel better.”

Were they doing this on purpose? Penning him in, sitting too close, leaning in close enough that
Dorian could feel the warmth of Idhren’s body through his clothes, would probably be able to smell
him if not for the smoke. From an actual whore – from Varius – the signals were obvious and
expected; meant to entice him into purchasing something more than just a drink. From Idhren it was
completely bewildering. It couldn’t possibly be intentional; not with his history.

“Considering how much I’m likely paying for this, I’d appreciate if that money didn’t go to waste,”
Dorian commented blithely, but his next drink was decidedly more than a sip. “And before I’m too
drunk to remember: how much, exactly, is this costing me?”

“Well that would depend entirely on where the night leads us,” Varius purred.

If it were just Varius then the night would almost definitely lead in that direction, but it wasn’t just
Varius. Dorian glanced over at Idhren, but the elf had momentarily distracted himself with the lyrium
pipe once more. There were so many reasons that would be a bad idea, too many for even Dorian to
ignore. Idhren was damn attractive, and not just physically, but that was also part of the problem. He
couldn’t go letting himself get too attached again. Especially not with Idhren leaving.

“Let’s just stay with the drinks for now,” Dorian replied, fishing a few gold coins out of his purse
and handing them over to Varius. The whore arched a curious eyebrow at him, but took the coins
with a shrug, tucking them into the folds of his robes. Dorian found himself in need of another drink.

“When did you become such a stick in the mud?” Idhren rejoined the conversation. He listed to the
side slightly, propping himself up with an elbow on the sofa’s armrest and holding his glass of
brandy in the other. “What happened to the Dorian Pavus who came stumbling back into the Circle
dormitories at all hours of the night? Or the one who’s apparently bedded half the men in
Minrathous?”

“That is a gross exaggeration,” Dorian complained, but he knew full well that wasn’t the point
Idhren was trying to make. “And I thought you didn’t care about that sort of thing.”

Idhren shrugged, “I suppose that depends entirely on the people involved,” he replied.

Dorian regretted ever putting the idea of rumor mongering into Idhren’s mind. It had been a bad idea in the first place, brought on by a bit too much wine and Idhren’s too-pretty eyes. It was how he’d found most of the bed partners he didn’t pay, but Idhren didn’t play those games the way an Altus did. Now the elf was being less than subtle, but he was also less than sober. “Should I be flattered to be worthy of your interest?” Dorian asked, halfway between flirting and uncertainty.

“Not many people are,” Varius answered for him.

“I am unfortunately surrounded by some absolutely shit examples of humanity most of the time,” Idhren replied. “You’re decidedly less so, when you want to be.”

“You certainly know how to compliment someone,” Dorian replied dryly. Did Idhren always swear this much? Dorian supposed he’d never actually seen him outside of a social function before (excluding the Circle, of course, but they were both practically children back then). Maybe that’s what was making him feel so off-center about this. Was it the alcohol and lyrium making him act like this? Or just being away from easily offended nobles and having the freedom to speak his mind?

“I can, when the occasion calls for it,” Idhren replied. He pushed himself off the armrest, sat upright as he finished his drink, but began listing towards Dorian as he reached over to put the empty glass on the table in front of them. He was so wasted he couldn’t even sit up straight. It was a miracle he could hold a conversation.

Somehow Dorian was on his third glass of brandy. And he was quickly losing what small threads of self control he possessed.

Then Idhren listed far enough to the side that he was leaning against Dorian’s shoulder.

“I should go.” Dorian was breathless, face flushed as he pulled away from Idhren. The movement only sent him backwards into Varius’ chest, but Dorian barely noticed. He was too distracted by the look in Idhren’s eyes. In the space of a breath his expression had gone from sultry to absolute dejection.

Dorian Pavus was not a brave man. He was quite good at pretending to be, but deep down he was a coward. He rose to his feet quickly, too quickly to appear casual, too quickly for the amount he’d had to drink and smoke. “I…” he stammered, at an uncharacteristic loss for words. “Good luck. In the south,” he said, and meant every word of it. Idhren deserved better than what this country had done to him; deserved better than what Dorian could give him. He hoped the elf would find it.

Idhren had not taken his eyes off the man, but his expression made it impossible for Dorian to look at his face. “Thank you,” the elf whispered. He sounded just as crestfallen as he looked.

Without another word Dorian turned on his heel and left.

As soon as the Altus was gone Idhren fell back against the plush cushions of the sofa and swallowed back the lump in his throat. Beside him Varius’ manner changed drastically. The dark-skinned elf moved closer, stroked Idhren’s hair and murmured sympathetic noises as he pulled the smaller elf into his arms.

“Why doesn’t he want me?” Idhren asked miserably. “Why am I not good enough?” And why did it hurt so much?
“Shh,” Varius sighed and kissed the crown of Idhren’s head. “He’s the one who’s not good enough for you.”

Idhren sighed and turned his face toward Varius, laying his head on the other elf’s shoulder. “Why do I care?” he breathed, voice choked. “He’s such an ass. I should hate him. Why can’t I hate him?”

“The heart wants what it wants,” Varius murmured understandingly. “Though life would be much easier if we could control it.” Idhren could only nod morosely in agreement. For another long moment they sat there in silence, Varius stroking his hair and rubbing his back gently. Then, in a slow, smooth motion, the whore pulled away from Idhren and stood up, “Come on,” he murmured, holding his hands out to the mage, “Let me show you a good time before you leave. A good memory to take with you into the south.”

Idhren barely hesitated before reaching out to take Varius’ hands and letting the whore pull him to his feet. And then toward the back rooms. He wasn’t what Idhren wanted – who Idhren wanted – but it was time for Idhren to accept the facts. Time to get over this childish crush and move on with his life.

Varius’ skin was too dark, his hair too long, his body too slim. But if Idhren closed his eyes he could still pretend.

And in the morning, he could forget.

Chapter End Notes

It’s time to gtfo Tevinter!
That ‘slow burn’ tag is there for a reason. Put on your seat belts it’s gonna be a long ride.

Also, the lovely @sharkrunaway on tumblr drew some gorgeous fanart of Idhren, which you should check out!
And Shartan looked upon the Prophet Andraste
And said: “The People will set ourselves free.
Your host from the South may march
Alongside us.”
- Canticle of Shartan 9:27

Free Marches, 9:37 Dragon

Three months Idhren had been on the road, and he was beginning to regret his decision to leave Tevinter. He had known that wandering the countryside in search of wild elves would not be easy, but he had not anticipated exactly how difficult it would be. Despite his lowly birth, Idhren had spent most of his life among Tevinter’s elite. He was not used to sleeping on the ground, or cooking his own food, or walking long distances and carrying everything he owned on his back. Not that Idhren had left Tevinter with much in the way of personal possessions. He had only two sets of clothes, not robes but leather breeches and tunics that were more suitable for travel and did not immediately label him a mage. A week in he had detached the blade from the end of his staff to better use and disguise the thing as a walking stick. It now hung from his belt like some sort of odd dagger and was actually proving itself quite useful as a utility knife.

What concerned Idhren most, however, was not running out of food or coin. What concerned Idhren the most was that he had only packed three months worth of the potion that stopped his body from becoming any more feminine. The potion that he had been downing a swallow of every day for the past eight years. A week ago Idhren began carefully rationing it, taking only half a dose each day to stretch it out as long as possible and hoping that it would be enough. But what would happen when it ran out and the effects wore off?

It was a reality that Idhren had been forced to acknowledge during his packing. He could only carry so much of the stuff before it became a burden. The ingredients were not particularly rare in Tevinter, but he had no idea how easy they would be to obtain in the south. Running out and not being able to mix more was always a possibility. But in reality, with the end looming before him, the anxiety was nearly enough to send him into a panic.

At the moment Idhren was somewhere in the middle of the Free Marches, provided he was reading this map correctly. Having left the main roads under the assumption that the elusive Dalish elves wouldn’t be found close to human settlements or major thoroughfares, he had been following rough dirt tracks through the wilderness for days now without actually knowing what to look for. He knew only what he had read about Dalish elves in books written by human scholars and through the rumors and legends whispered among elves in Tevinter. According to his pedigree his grandmother had been Dalish, but Idhren had never had the chance to ask his mother about her. He doubted the validity of anything that made its way into a published book, and he knew how badly rumors and
legends could be distorted over time.

Maybe this had been a bad idea from the start. Maybe Dorian had been right.

Idhren couldn’t survive out here on his own forever. In another few months summer would be passed and winter would begin to arrive. Was he far enough south that it would snow? Idhren knew he would not survive the winter alone in the woods. He had to find a clan by then or else return to the city.

Moving into one of these southern cities would be admitting defeat.

And potentially even less safe than he had anticipated when leaving Tevinter, if the rumors he heard on the road were to be believed. Apparently the southern Circles were in rebellion, or about to rebel; the stories were sometimes contradictory. Either way something was happening with the southern Circles and Idhren was certain he did not want to be involved.

The sun was setting on another day of aimless wandering that had brought Idhren no closer to his goal. As the shadows lengthened around him Idhren wrapped his cloak tighter around his shoulders to stave off the evening chill. He needed to find somewhere to shelter for the night, which was easier said than done.

The hollow that Idhren eventually settled himself in well after sundown was not an ideal campsite, but it was not the worst place he had spent the night since this whole thing began.

A haphazard pile of sticks and moss caught fire easily, but without his magic Idhren doubted he would be able to build even the most meager of campfires. And his was certainly meager. With his cloak wrapped tightly around himself Idhren huddled close to the paltry flame for what little warmth it provided. The days had been mild so far, but it was much cooler here at night than in Tevinter.

The forest at night was a frightening place, full of foreign sounds and sights. His first night alone on the road Idhren had been too frightened to sleep, concerned that some animal would come upon him while he was unconscious. He was less concerned about that now, but the darkness still set him on edge.

The sudden snap of a twig mere feet from where he sat nearly had Idhren jumping out of his skin. Instantly one hand moved to his staff as he turned in the direction of the noise. He saw first a pair of eyes, glinting yellow as they reflected the firelight. Then the owner of those eyes took a step forward and Idhren could make out the shape of a man. No, an elf. An elf dressed all in leathers, thick hair woven into messy braids and knotted at the back of their head. In one hand they carried an intricately carved longbow, an arrow nocked to the string but pointed at the ground. Most interesting, though, were the markings on the elf’s face. Thick green lines inked across brow and cheeks.

“Bit late for a picnic isn’t it?” the elf asked curiously. Idhren could only stare stupidly, mouth hanging open and eyes wide. “That’s not a very good campfire,” they added, gesturing to the flame with the bow. “I doubt it’ll keep any animals at bay.”

Idhren’s mouth opened and closed once ineffectively before he managed to speak. “You’re Dalish,” he blurted out.

The elf arched an eyebrow at him, tightened their grip on the bow. “I am,” they confirmed.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Idhren said eagerly. In his excitement it did not occur to him that he might be in danger, or that admitting this might be a bad idea. “For the Dalish.”

The Dalish elf regarded him suspiciously for a moment, eyes darting to the staff that Idhren was still
“Are you another runaway from the Circles?”

“No,” Idhren answered. Not from the southern Circles, at least. He hesitated a moment before adding, “I’m from Tevinter.”

The elf’s eyes went wide in surprise. “A slave?”

“I’m not a slave,” Idhren snapped defensively, although he could see why this elf would think that.

“No,” the elf’s lips quirked up in a small smile, “No, you’re not.” In one smooth motion they pulled the arrow from their bow and stowed it in the quiver at their waist. Idhren immediately released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “Might I share your fire?”

It was probably dangerous to let some stranger share his campsite for the night, but Idhren was growing rather desperate in his search for the Dalish. He wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass him by. “Of course,” he said, taking his hand off his staff.

“Ma serannas,” the elf replied, and came to take a seat across the fire from Idhren. The bow was set at their side, along with a small pack. “This fire will never last the night, you know,” they commented.

Idhren looked down at the fire, and even he recognized that it was a poor attempt. It wasn’t as though he had much experience, however, and everything out here was much harder than it had seemed while reading about it. Despite its weak appearance, however, Idhren knew he could keep the flame going all night. “It’s magic.”

The Dalish elf arched an eyebrow curiously, looking from the fire to Idhren and then back again. “Doesn’t it take energy to sustain something like that? Can you do it while you’re asleep?”

“I don’t have to if I set a ward around it before going to sleep,” Idhren said. This elf didn’t seem to be a mage, however, so it was strange to him that they would know anything of magic, or be interested in it.

The elf hummed thoughtfully and fell silent. Idhren tried his best not to stare, but it was difficult. He had to hold himself back from asking where the rest of this elf’s tribe was and if they might consider taking him in. This was his chance, but he did not want to blow it by seeming too eager. If he could manage to make a good impression on this elf, maybe they would be inclined to lead him to the rest of their group. “I’m Idhren,” he said carefully. “What’s your name?”

Tainan nodded, “I’m hunting. The rest of my clan is camped two days’ journey from here,” they explained. “What are you doing out here? You look better suited to city life.”

“I’ve been looking for the Dalish,” Idhren replied vaguely, trying to decide if that had been meant as an insult or not. He had already said that much already. Was Tainan looking for a different answer?

“So you’ve said,” Tainan mused. “Why, though?”

“I… I left Tevinter,” Idhren said, uncertain how much of his story he should give away. “But I’m a mage. I don’t want to be put in one of those Circles. I heard that the Dalish like mages more than the Chantry does.”
“If you mean we don’t lock them in towers or never allow them to have contact with their families then, yes,” Tainan confirmed. “In that sense we do like mages more than the Chantry.” It was a relief for Idhren to know that at least a portion of the rumors had been true. “Are you under the impression that we are some sort of refuge for elven mages? That we’ll take in anyone with pointed ears who stumbles across our camp?”

Idhren frowned. Was this a test? Or was this a roundabout way of saying that Idhren would never be accepted by these wild elves? “No…” he answered slowly. “But I… I had to try. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life being pushed around and belittled by magisters. I’m a great mage, but no one there will ever recognize it.”

“So you’re looking for recognition?” Tainan asked. “Someone to tell you how great you are? Someone to be in awe of your talents?”

“No,” Idhren said, quickly shaking his head. He wanted someone to appreciate his skills, but he did not want anyone to treat him the way magisters demanded to be treated. Most of all, he wanted to be somewhere that he didn’t have to pretend to be someone he was not. He did not want to pretend to be stupid, or polite, or incompetent. “I just want… Somewhere that I can be myself. Where no one will judge me by the way I look.”

Tainan stared at him for a moment longer, and then smiled brightly and nodded. “Then, if you like, I can take you back to the clan when I go and introduce you to the Keeper. It’ll be her decision, ultimately, whether you can stay or not, but you seem nice enough.”

The change in this strange elf’s demeanor was so quick and so extreme that Idhren was momentarily confused before he realized what must have been happening. “That was… some sort of test?”

“Sorry,” Tainan shrugged sheepishly. “There are so many stray mages running around these days you can’t be too careful. A lot of the elves running from the shemlen cities - regular people, not just mages – only want to be more powerful than the shemlen who hurt them. That’s not what we’re about.”

Logically, Idhren had to admit that the other elf had a point, so he couldn’t be offended. But he had no desire to be more powerful than Canidius or any other magister. He just wanted to get away from them. “You’ll really take me with you?” he asked. Despite the fact that he had been wandering aimlessly through the wilderness for the past month, this seemed too easy. Actually, after traveling for so long it was rather anticlimactic.

“I will,” Tainan confirmed. “I can’t go back until I find some game, though,” they commented. “Can’t go back empty handed.”

“How long will that take?” Idhren asked, trying not to sound too eager.

Tainan shrugged, “Hopefully not long. I set a few snares today, so with luck we will have something in the morning. The game around here is starting to get scarce; the clan will have to move on soon,” they murmured thoughtfully.

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing you found me when you did,” Idhren replied.

Tainan’s face lit up with a bright smile, “I suppose it is.”
Idhren was awoken by a hand roughly shaking his shoulder. For one half-asleep moment Idhren tried to shrug it away and go back to sleep. Then he remembered that he was not back in his room in Vyrantium but lying on the forest floor miles from civilization and woke with a start, eyes flying open. Crouched above him was Tainan, hair a bit messier than the night before but otherwise looking exactly the same. “How long are you going to sleep?” the Dalish elf asked.

“What time is it?” Idhren asked, rubbing at his eyes as he sat up slowly.

“Daytime,” Tainan answered, as though it was obvious.

It wasn’t wrong, though. It was light, and when Idhren looked up he could see the sunrise fading away through the trees. Sunrise. Idhren used to wake up at this hour every day, and yet now he wished he could sleep another few hours. He had let himself grow lazy after leaving the Circle, where there were no longer strict schedules to keep. Not to mention sleeping on the cold, hard ground with only his cloak to protect him from the elements was not terribly restful.

“Come on,” Tainan gave him one last shake before standing and going to collect their pack and bow. “We’re losing daylight already.”

“The sun isn’t even fully up,” Idhren protested even as he sat up and reached for his pack as well. As he did, Idhren noticed that the fire had already been put out and the ashes scattered skillfully until there was hardly any trace of the blaze at all.

“I realize you city folk usually sleep until midday, but out here we’ve got work to do,” Tainan complained good naturedly.

“Nobody sleeps until midday,” Idhren protested weakly. He pulled open his pack and began digging through it for what little remained of his food and potion.

“You looked well on your way,” Tainan replied. “Now what are you doing? Time is wasting.”

“It’s barely dawn,” Idhren disputed. “Let me have something to eat at least.” He finally managed to find the last bottle of potion at the bottom of his bag and pulled it out. Within the bottle the murky liquid was nearly half gone. It would last only a few days more no matter how he rationed it, and that concerned Idhren greatly. There was no time to worry about that now, however. Not while the Dalish elf was impatiently prowling the tree line, bow in hand and fiddling with the feathers on the arrows in the quiver at their waist. Idhren took a quick swallow of the medicine and stuffed the bottle back into his pack.

Suddenly, at the tree line Tainan tensed like an animal sensing a threat. “Alright, enough dawdling,” they said curtly, “Time to go, city boy.”

Their voice was urgent, their body language tense and frightened. This wasn’t just impatience, something was wrong. Idhren forgot all about breakfast and slung his pack over his shoulder, snatching up his staff as he rose to his feet. “What’s wrong?”

Idhren was answered by the sound of a branch snapping. It drew Tainan’s attention like a startled deer. The hunter whipped around, messy auburn braids flying into their face and then shook aside impatiently. In that moment Idhren became suddenly aware that the ambient sounds of the forest were not the wind rustling in the leaves, but of something moving through the brush in their direction. And Idhren had the distinct impression that if he were not here Tainan would be long gone already.

He tightened his grip on the staff and hurried to meet Tainan at the edge of the small clearing. The
Dalish elf was frozen in place, eyes wide and darting everywhere. Even Idhren was now acutely aware of the sound of something moving toward them through the forest, and just as he reached the hunter’s side there was a shout.

From out of the tree line burst three men, all bearing swords and in full plate armor; armor that bore the insignia of a flaming sword. Idhren had never seen a southern Templar, did not know much about them, but he knew that symbol and what it meant. Templars in the south rounded up mages and kept them in Circles that were more like prisons than schools, or so everyone in Tevinter said. Idhren had no intention of being put under lock and key again, not when he had finally broken free.

What idiots they were, though, to run around in metal suits hunting mages. They might as well be walking lightning rods. Idhren took hold of the Fade and pulled, felt the familiar crackling of static at his fingertips. He got off one shot of lightning before his connection to the Fade was severed so abruptly that it made his head spin. He felt nauseous, dizzy, stumbled and fell over backwards, landing hard on his backside. The next thing he was aware of was a Templar bearing down on him, metal clad fingers grasping at the front of his tunic. Idhren reached for the Fade but found nothing within his grasp. The Templar shoved him down to the ground and all of a sudden the only thing Idhren could think of was the last time his magic had been stripped away, the last time he had been held down, hands pulling at his clothes and shoving at his limbs.

Idhren screamed.

He struggled and pushed ineffectively against a man whose armor weighed almost as much as Idhren’s entire person, growing more panicked by the second. His staff lay completely forgotten on the ground beside him.

An arrow appeared as though out of nowhere, lodging in the Templar’s neck just below his jaw and sending a spray of blood onto Idhren. In shock, the Templar raised a hand to his throat, gurgled once in an attempt to speak, and then collapsed limp on top of Idhren. Heart thundering and breathing rapid, Idhren shoved at the body above him, scrambling out from under it and backward. It was a long moment before he could tear his eyes away from the corpse and take in the scene in the rest of the clearing. Of the three Templars that had attacked, all of them now lay dead on the ground. The one spell Idhren had been able to get off had fried the first inside his armor, the second lay on their back with three arrows protruding from their chest, and the final in a growing pool of blood not far from Idhren’s feet. In the middle of it all Tainan stood with an arrow knocked to their bow, shoulders tense and eyes wide as they scanned the area for any further threat. Eventually the hunter relaxed, returned the arrow to its quiver and turned to face Idhren.

“Are you alright?” Tainan asked, voice gentle, approaching Idhren slowly.

“He…” the mage stammered in response, not quite able to put his jumbled, panicked thoughts into words yet. “I can’t…”

Tainan crouched down in front of him. “Have you ever faced a Templar before?” they asked. Idhren shook his head. “They can do that, take away your magic,” Tainan explained. Carefully they took Idhren’s hands in their own and began rubbing the warmth back into them. “It should come back in a little while, as I understand. Are you alright? You’re not hurt?”

Idhren swallowed heavily and shook his head again. Tainan’s hands were warm and comforting around his own, and up close he realized the hunter had the most beautiful blue-green eyes that Idhren had ever seen.

“Good,” Tainan murmured, and stood up. They pulled Idhren to his feet and then released his hands, bending to pick up the mage’s staff off the ground. “We should hurry back to the clan. It’s not safe
Idhren only nodded again mutely and took his staff when Tainan handed it to him. He was still shaken and felt uncomfortably vulnerable without the use of his magic. He watched as Tainan pulled arrows one by one out of the corpses and stuffed them back into their quiver, then fell into step behind the hunter as they headed into the forest.

Idhren was more alert now, more on edge. The slightest noise from within the trees startled him, and he stayed as close to Tainan as he could manage without being too obvious about it. The hunter moved quickly, following paths that Idhren could barely recognize and never once tripping over rocks or roots. Idhren struggled to keep up, but didn’t complain. If there were any more Templars in the area he did not want to meet them, not with his magic trickling back at a snail’s pace. Within an hour he could get static to spark at his fingertips again, but still couldn’t pull enough mana for a proper spell. If they were attacked he would be useless again.

When the sun started to go down Tainan stopped them in a secluded copse of trees beside a small stream. Idhren’s magic had finally returned in full, but he was tired from stumbling through the woods all day, so when Tainan declared the campsite suitable Idhren practically collapsed onto the ground.

“You have your magic back yet?” Tainan asked, unshouldering their pack and letting it drop to the ground.

“Yes,” Idhren answered, nodding and conjuring a small fireball in his palm. It was incredibly comforting to feel the Fade all around him again.

“Good, I’ll get some firewood,” Tainan said. “You stay here, I shouldn’t be gone long.” They slipped away into the trees, leaving Idhren alone. The mage pulled his knees up to his chest and kept holding the flame between his hands for the small amount of comfort it offered. He hadn’t been so nervous alone in the woods before, but he hadn’t realized that Templars in the south could do that. It was not an experience he was eager to repeat.

Tainan returned less than an hour later with an armful of sticks and a dead rabbit hanging from their belt. Within minutes there was a fire burning and the meat was cooking slowly above it. Idhren had barely moved. “You still alright over there?” Tainan asked, looking across the fire at him. “You’ve barely said a word all day.”

“Yes,” Idhren replied quietly. The attack had shaken him, not just being stripped of his magic, but the sudden return of memories he had thought dead and buried.

Tainan hummed thoughtfully, “You were pretty good - the little bit of magic you got off before they… You know. Do any fighting back in Tevinter?”

“Not really,” Idhren shrugged. “For the Harrowing you have to fight a demon, otherwise it was just training. I was more interested in theory.”

“Well, that one spell was enough to take down a trained mage hunter,” Tainan said. “I think that’s pretty impressive. I’d like to see what you could do if they hadn’t knocked you out.”

“But they did,” Idhren murmured, “If you hadn’t been there…” He would be dead for certain.

“Good thing I was, then,” Tainan interrupted cheerfully. “And tomorrow we’ll meet up with the rest of the clan, and then we can get the fuck out of here.”
They reached the rest of Tainan’s clan shortly after noon the following day. Idhren was not certain what he had expected a Dalish camp to look like, but he found it to be far more quaint and cheerful than he had expected. The first sight through the trees was the wagons, or rather the sail-like structures atop them - swatches of bright cloth fluttering in the wind. They were greeted outside the camp by two elves who, judging by their hardened leather armor and the swords they carried, were some sort of guard. Each regarded Idhren with mild suspicion, but with a quick word from Tainan they allowed him to pass.

The bulk of the camp was seated within a small vale, sheltered on one side by a steep embankment and bounded on another by a wide stream. People bustled about the camp, all of them elves and all of them with tattoos painted across their faces. As Tainan and Idhren passed through the camp they gathered numerous curious stares, some more blatant than others, and Idhren could already hear the curious whispers in their wake. He stayed close to Tainan and kept his gaze firmly ahead, afraid of getting left behind when he had no idea where the hunter was leading him.

“Keeper,” Tainan called out as they approached a small group of elves gathered near one of the strange ship-like wagons. Every one of them turned to look when Tainan spoke, but it was a woman – perhaps forty, with pale blue tattoos branching across her forehead and cheeks like the limbs of a tree – who stepped forward, dismissing the others with a curt nod and a wave of her hand.

“Tainan,” the woman greeted, “You’ve returned. And with company,” she added, casting a curious gaze at Idhren. Her eyes lingered on the blood on his shirt, then the staff in his hand.

“This is Idhren,” Tainan introduced. “I found him in the woods two days from here.”

“And you thought to bring him here?” the woman asked, frowning.

“Yesterday morning we were attacked by Templars,” Tainan reported. “I didn’t want to leave him.”

“He is a mage. It seems likely the Templars were chasing him; another runaway from the shemlen Circles. If there are more, you may have led them to our doorstep.”

“There were no more,” Tainan argued confidently. “And he says he’s from Tevinter.”

The woman’s eyes turned to him again with a spark of surprise and she swept another, far more scrutinizing, look over his figure. Idhren’s clothes were weather beaten and dirty from weeks on the road, but they had been new when he left. His staff was very well made, if not particularly fancy, bought shortly after he left the Circle. “You’re quite well equipped for a runaway,” the woman told him.

Idhren pursed his lips to keep from snapping at her. He had to make a good impression. “I’m not a slave,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “I’m Liberati. I’ve been free for ten years.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose as she regarded him curiously. Did anyone down south know what it meant to be Liberati? Had they even heard of it before? “A free elf from Tevinter,” she mused thoughtfully. “And why leave now, when there is such chaos here?”

“I hadn’t heard about the trouble with the Circles here before leaving Tevinter,” Idhren said. It was a recent development, as he understood, and news could only travel as fast as the trading caravans. “But even so, I would have left. I’ve spent the past several years apprenticed to a magister who used me as a prop to make himself look better. And because he owned my family there was nothing I could do against him without risking their safety. But they’re… gone now. There was no reason for
me to stay.” He tried to be brief. They didn’t need all the gory details. It felt strange to spill his life story to a stranger, but he knew it was necessary for these people to trust him.

“So you thought you would come find the wandering Dalish?” the woman mused, lips quirking in an amused smile. “Did you have a backup plan, in case you didn’t find us?”

“Not really,” Idhren was forced to admit. Find a city to hide in for the winter and then keep looking.

“Well you’re brave, I’ll give you that, though perhaps not so wise. What is your name, again?” the woman asked.

“Idhren,” he replied.

“I’m Deshanna Istimaethoriel, the Keeper of this clan,” she introduced herself at last. “I admire the courage that brought you here, Idhren, but if you’d hoped to join us I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed.”

Idhren felt his heart plummet. He hadn’t expected to be welcomed with open arms, but to be rejected so quickly and decisively was crushing.

“Keeper,” Tainan interrupted before Idhren had a chance to reply, “You need a First.”

“I have a First,” the Keeper argued.

“Elera is fifteen,” Tainan argued back, “If anything were to happen to you she wouldn’t be able to lead the clan.”

“And you think an outsider would be a better choice?” Istimaethoriel challenged.

“He could at least help keep us safe. I’ve seen him use magic,” Tainan said, “He killed a Templar with one spell. He kept a spellfire burning while he slept. He’s good.”

Idhren wasn’t certain what was happening, but it seemed like Tainan was defending him, supporting him in his request to stay. He couldn’t understand why, but Idhren wasn’t about to butt in. He would take all the help he could get in this matter, because if this woman – clearly the leader of this Dalish clan – sent him away he had nowhere else to go and no supplies. He wouldn’t last much longer on his own.

“It’s true these are troubled times, but violence only begets more violence,” Istimaethoriel reasoned, “The last thing we need now is to provoke the humans with displays of dangerous magic.” Her tone was stern, and when she turned to Idhren again her expression matched. “Tell me, Idhren, what skills do you have that would aid us? Are you a proficient healer? What manner of magic do they teach in Tevinter?”

Idhren did not know how to answer. What skills did he have that these people would value? “I… am not skilled at healing,” he admitted. Lying about that might help in the moment, but it could easily backfire on him in the long run. “Tevinter teaches all manner of magic. I primarily studied storm magic and the Veil. And alchemy,” he added almost as an afterthought. “But,” he began again with sudden renewed determination. He wouldn’t give up easily. Idhren knew magic, he was good at magic, there had to be some way he could use that to help the people here. “I’m very good at wards. This campsite isn’t too large, I could have the entire perimeter warded against intruders: spells to deter interest or alert you if something comes too close, or even muffle the sounds of the camp significantly.” It would be difficult, such large scale work, but Idhren was beginning to feel desperate. Pure luck had landed him here. If this clan didn’t take him in he might never find another one.
“That’s an impressive claim,” the Keeper replied thoughtfully. “And could indeed prove useful in certain situations. However, this is only our forward camp. What you see here is less than half our number.”

Surprised, Idhren looked around. Now that he took a good look, however, he noticed that there were no children here, and perhaps only fifty elves moving about among the trees and wagons, most of them bearing weapons of some kind. Some sort of hunting camp, he wondered. Where were the rest of them? Idhren had seen no sign of other elves while following Tainan through the forest.

“Keeper,” Tainan broke in again, “You can’t just send him back out there for the Templars to find again.”

“I can,” the woman said sternly, frowning pointedly at Tainan. Then her face softened, her posture relaxed, “But I won’t.” Idhren released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “I don’t know if it was luck that led you to us, or if Ghilan’nain guided your steps. The fact is that Tainan is correct. It is not safe for anyone to be wandering the land alone these days, and my current apprentice is still too young to take over my responsibilities should the worst happen. Though you are an outsider, I would rather rest assured in the knowledge that my people will be protected. And I presume, since you have gone to such effort to find us, that you are willing to learn our ways.”

“Yes, of course,” Idhren assured her quickly. It would be vastly different from what he was used to, but he had known that coming in. ‘Live in the forest like a savage,’ Dorian had said what felt like ages ago. But Idhren had been through worse, he was sure he could learn.

“Good,” Istimaethoriel replied. “I won’t tolerate anything less. If you cause any trouble among the clan, any infighting, I’ll send you right back to Tevinter.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Idhren nodded, then quickly corrected himself, “Keeper.” Was that the proper term of address? Was that respectful enough? “Sorry. I understand. I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“Just Keeper is fine,” Istimaethoriel assured him, an amused smile playing on her face. “There is one other thing you must understand if you are to remain with us. A Dalish clan will never have more than two or three mages as a rule: the Keeper,” she gestured to herself, “And their apprentices,” she gestured to Idhren. “My current apprentice is still a child, and that is the reason I am willing to accept you into our midst. Should you stay, you will serve as my First. Clearly you don’t need training to use your magic, but I’ll teach you our history and our culture.”

It wasn’t exactly the sort of role Idhren had expected to find among these people. He knew very little about the Dalish, but he thought that Istimaethoriel was the leader of this group – this clan – and she was offering to take him on as an apprentice. An heir, maybe? It was a little too familiar for comfort, but Idhren reassured himself with the thought that this was most likely as big a risk for her as it was for him. “I’ll do my best,” Idhren assured, “I promise.”

“I admire your determination,” the Keeper mused. “I imagine it will serve you well. You can live with me for now, until we find a more permanent place for you.”

They really were letting him stay. Perhaps provisionally at first, but Idhren would do his very best to make sure they had no reason to throw him out. “Thank you,” he said earnestly, hopeful that this would be the better life he was longing for. He turned back to Tainan. Without the hunter he never would have made it this far. In fact, those Templars probably would have killed him. “And thank you,” he told them.

Tainan flashed him a grin, “You’re welcome,” they replied. “I guess this means we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other. I look forward to it. Keeper,” with a respectful nod to Istimaethoriel, Tainan
turned and left, striding off across the camp.

“Come along,” Istimaethoriel pulled his attention back to her. “Let’s get you cleaned up, then I will introduce you to the rest of the clan.”

Within days of living with Clan Lavellan Idhren drank the last of his medicinal potion. Three weeks after that he woke up with blood between his thighs. Istimaethoriel woke to find him fearfully trying to hide the truth, nearly panicking when he realized that there would be no hiding it from her. After her initial surprise abated, however, Istimaethoriel helped him clean up the mess and held him like a child when he cried.

“I’m not a girl,” Idhren repeated over and over as he sobbed into her shoulder, no longer certain who he was trying to convince.

“No, of course you’re not,” Istimaethoriel stroked his hair and rubbed his back until his tears dried up. “Has this never happened before?” she asked gently.

Idhren shook his head and wiped the tears from his cheeks, “I had… I had a potion,” he said, voice still thick with emotion. “Since I was fifteen. But I ran out.”

“If you know the ingredients then surely we could make more,” the Keeper murmured, “I, or one of the hunters, can teach you where to find herbs.”

“Some don’t grow this far south,” Idhren mumbled dejectedly.

“Then we’ll find others,” Istimaethoriel assured him confidently.

Idhren could only hope that she was right as he crawled back into the pile of blankets and furs that made up his bed, unwilling to face the day. His stomach clenched and his back ached. He was starving but nauseous at the same time. It was miserable. Did women have to deal with this all the time? Or was it worse because he’d been forcibly preventing it for so long?

There was a knock at the door but Idhren ignored it. He curled up tighter on the pile of furs and pulled a blanket up over his head. The knock sounded again after a moment, but again Idhren ignored it. Then he heard someone fiddling with the latch before the door creaked open.

“Are you alive in here?”

That voice was familiar. Idhren didn’t want anyone to see him like this, but he was curious. Cautiously, he lifted the blanket just enough to peek out. Sunlight flooded into the dim aravel through the open door, backlighting the figure crouched there and turning the cascade of hair about their shoulders into a halo of fire. Tainan. “Keeper said you were sick. I came to check on you. And bring you food. Can I come in?”

Idhren hesitated. He felt disgusting. Even though Istimaethoriel had showed him what to do so that the blood wouldn’t leak it was terribly uncomfortable and he imagined sitting up would only make it worse. Besides, he felt like he might throw up any second and the mere thought of eating only made it worse. “I don’t think I can eat anything,” he muttered weakly.

It wasn’t a ‘no’, and it wasn’t enough of a protest to keep Tainan out, apparently. The hunter climbed
in through the doorway, carefully balancing a bowl in one hand, and crawled over to Idhren’s side.
“Food is important,” they said as they sat down. “Even more important if you’re sick.”

Whatever was in that bowl Idhren could smell it even from where he lay. His stomach grumbled, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten a thing that day and it had to be past noon already. Still, he shook his head.

“Come on,” Tainan beseeched gently, as though talking to a stubborn child, “I made it special for you. There aren’t even any bugs in it.”

Idhren grimaced at the memory. That had been an embarrassing shock, being served a meal that included insects only a few days after his joining the clan. For the Dalish it was apparently normal, but Idhren hadn’t been able to bring himself to eat any of it. He wasn’t sure he ever would. “You made it?” Idhren asked, pulling the blanket down a little further so he could look at Tainan properly. “For me?”

The hunter grinned and nodded, holding the bowl out toward Idhren. “Just for you.”

“Why?” Idhren asked.

Tainan’s smile faltered into an expression of confusion. “Because you’re sick,” they answered uncertainly. “And I want you to get better.”

Was it really that simple? It was such a foreign concept to Idhren that anyone would help him for no reason, with no ulterior motives. Just to be nice. “Why is everyone here so nice?”

Now Tainan looked even more confused than before. “You haven’t given us a reason not to be. I think it’s obvious by now you’re not going to sacrifice the whole clan to demons or something.”

“No one’s ever been nice to me unless they got something out of it,” Idhren muttered, mostly to himself.

The confusion on Tainan’s face turned almost instantly to sympathy, which was then quickly replaced by a smile. “Well, I get the pleasure of your company,” they pointed out, “So it’s a little selfish.”

For all that it seemed impossible, Idhren actually believed them. Because what could Tainan possibly gain from being nice to him? Idhren had nothing of value to these people, save his magic. If anything, he was a liability to them; an unknown variable that could just as easily bring their downfall as prove useful. Yet he had been welcomed with mostly open arms. Slowly, Idhren pushed himself up into a sitting position, letting the blanket puddle around his hips. It was more uncomfortable, but Tainan had gone to the trouble for him, the least Idhren could do was try. He held out his hands and accepted the bowl of food. It smelled good, if he ignored the roiling of his stomach, though it didn’t look like much. It appeared to be mostly a variety of stewed vegetables and greens interspersed with chunks of an unidentifiable meat; what Idhren was coming to understand as typical Dalish fare.

The meal tasted better than it looked and, shockingly, after a few bites Idhren’s stomach calmed. He no longer felt like he would throw up any minute. Actually, he was ravenous, and downed the rest of the food at a speed that would have scandalized anyone back in Tevinter. When finished, Idhren had to restrain himself from scraping even the dredges out of the bottom of the bowl, pointedly setting it aside.

“Feel better?” Tainan asked, amusement in their voice that set Idhren flushing with embarrassment.
“Yes,” he replied softly. For now, at least. “Thank you.”

“Good, I’m glad,” Tainan smiled and picked up the now empty bowl. “I’ll let you get some more rest, then. And I’ll bring you dinner, too, if you’d like.”

“You will?” Idhren asked.

Tainan nodded, “So long as you don’t mind eating more of this,” they held up the empty bowl to show, “I’m not good at cooking anything except soup and roasted meat.”

Idhren had never had to cook before leaving Tevinter, so all of it was better than he could manage. “I’d like that, thank you,” he said again. All this kindness the people here were showing him, Idhren didn’t know how to react to it.

He especially didn’t know how to react when Tainan beamed in response, as though Idhren had just given them a spectacular gift instead of merely agreeing to eat their cooking again. “Perfect, then I’ll come back later tonight. I won’t bother you until then,” they promised, getting up and heading for the door.

“Wait,” Idhren blurted, stopping the hunter in their tracks. Tainan turned back to him, blue eyes wide and curious. There was one thing he’d wanted to ask since coming to live with this clan, but it felt like too much to ask. “Can I ask you a favor? You don’t have to accept.”

“What is it?” Tainan asked.

“Would you teach me how to fight?” Idhren asked hesitantly. “When… When those Templars came I realized without my magic I’m sort of… useless. I want to be able to defend myself if something like that happens again.”

Tainan thought about it for a moment. “I’m just a hunter, I don’t know if I’m the best choice,” they said. “But I’ll teach you what I can, if you really want me to.”

Now Idhren couldn’t help smiling. He had thought it a long shot, that surely Tainan wouldn’t agree, and he was happy to be proven wrong. The terror and helplessness he had felt when that Templar stripped him of his magic was not a feeling that Idhren wanted to relive. He knew he was small, not strong enough to ever pose much of a threat to a human in full armor, but if he learned how to fight without magic he could at least escape. “Thank you,” he said for a third time that day. “And, please, don’t go easy on me just because I’m short.”

Tainan’s lips quirked up in a smirk and they let out a short, quiet laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” they promised. “We’ll start as soon as you’re feeling up to it.”

Idhren nodded his consent and watched as Tainan clambered out of the aravel once more, shutting the door after themselves. When he was alone Idhren lay down again, finding the most comfortable position he could manage. It seemed he had made a friend already. Perhaps this day wasn’t completely terrible after all.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all love Tainan as much as I love Tainan.
Now We Fly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The path we beat is the path that we walked
To flee the Tevinter slums
Now we fly on wheels and wings
And hoofbeats are our drums
- from Passing By, a Dalish traveling song

Free Marches, 9:38 Dragon

The first time it snowed the year that Idhren came south he was in awe. He emerged from the aravel in the morning to find the ground dusted with white and flakes slowly falling from above. It was far more beautiful than he would have expected. He couldn’t help but stare, eyes trained up at the grey sky.

“What, you never seen snow before?” Tainan teased upon finding him standing there like a giddy child.

“Not real snow,” Idhren replied. And never as calm and beautiful as this. Frost spells were always harsh, nothing like this gentle snowfall. The flakes that fell were soft when they landed on his hands, melting the moment they touched his fingertips.

A sudden weight on his shoulders pulled Idhren’s thoughts back to the present. Tainan had draped a cloak over his shoulders – their own cloak, Idhren realized - and was smiling in amusement at Idhren’s confusion. “You were shivering, city boy.”

Idhren hadn’t even realized he was cold until he was warm again, heat coming back into his limbs slowly from where Tainan’s cloak sat heavy on his shoulders. His hands clasped around the edges of the thick fabric and pulled it closer around him. “Won’t you be cold now?”

“It isn’t that cold,” Tainan said flippantly, “But if you’re really concerned we could always share,” they suggested with a smirk and a waggle of their eyebrows that made Idhren blush. That blush in turn set Tainan into a fit of giggling.

For the past several months Tainan had been teaching Idhren how to fight, just as they had promised. At least once every few days the pair would make time to practice on the outskirts of the camp, first technique, and then sparring. Despite being knocked on his ass more often than not in those sessions, Idhren had come to enjoy the time he spent with Tainan. The other elf had always been friendly and sympathetic. However, recently their flirting had become more and more overt until it was impossible for even Idhren to miss.

When Tainan’s laughter subsided, they sidled up to Idhren, right into his personal space, bright eyes
alight with mischief. “Or maybe I’ll go hunt a bear and bring back its pelt to make a cloak for you,” they said in a low voice, “One that would keep a northern flower from wilting in even the coldest winter. Would that be alright with you?”

“Yes,” Idhren breathed in reply, heart leaping in his chest. Tainan grinned and even blushed a little bit as well before scampering away. Idhren clutched tighter at the fabric around his shoulders. It was rough and heavy, nothing like what he was used to wearing back in Tevinter, and as he pulled it up over his cold nose it smelled like Tainan; like leather and resin and the forest after a rain.

At the time Idhren had not been well versed enough in Dalish customs to understand the depth of meaning behind Tainan’s proposal. During that first winter he forgot completely about the offer. His first southern winter had been difficult. Even though the clan moved northeast toward the Antivan border they never traveled far enough north to completely avoid the snow. There were points at which Idhren thought he might never be warm again.

Now, however, after over a year living among Clan Lavellan and learning all he could of Dalish lore and customs from Keeper Istimaeathriel, Idhren understood exactly what Tainan was offering.

He understood exactly what it meant when Tainan returned from a hunt, still covered in mud, leaves stuck in their hair, dragging the corpse of a not-quite-mature bear with the help of two other hunters and laid the prize down at Idhren’s feet there where the entire clan could see it.

A bear was above and beyond a suitable courtship gift, even for the Keeper’s First, but perhaps even more so given that Idhren was still somewhat of an outsider.

“I told you I would get you a bear, didn’t I?” Tainan was grinning from ear to ear, practically vibrating in excitement.

Idhren was too stunned to say anything except, “You did.”

“I wanted to give you just the cloak,” Tainan continued. “Because I thought, city boy’s still a bit squeamish about all the blood and guts, but then I realized it would be too hard to keep it hidden. So,” Tainan stepped around the body of the bear and up to Idhren, eyes alight with hope and joy as they slipped their arms around his waist, “Do you like it?”

Idhren glanced down at the corpse only feet away from him. It was disgusting, bloody and dirty and all around distasteful. But knowing what Tainan must have gone through to track and kill the creature, then drag it back here, the danger that the hunter had put themselves in just to impress Idhren overshadowed all of that. He looked back up again, into Tainan’s impossibly blue eyes, full of their never ending confidence and optimism, and couldn’t help grinning as well. “I love it.”

Tainan laughed aloud and tightened their hold around Idhren’s waist, sweeping the petite mage off his feet and into a crushing embrace that Idhren had no choice but to return. They had an audience by now, nearly half the clan had born witness to Tainan’s gift thanks to the incredibly public way in which it was delivered, but Idhren had eyes only for Tainan. The hunter’s enthusiasm was infectious. Even after Tainan set him back on the ground he kept his arms looped loosely around the hunter’s taller, broader shoulders. “I’ll make you whatever you want,” Tainan gushed. “A cloak? A new staff? Boots? No… I don’t know how to make boots…” they corrected thoughtfuly.

Idhren was unable to contain the giggle that escaped him. Tainan was always energetic, but even for them this was a bit excessive. “I’m sure I’ll love whatever you make,” he replied. Already Tainan had done more than anyone else ever had, Idhren wouldn’t have dreamed for more. “But could you please deal with that thing before it starts to smell?” he asked, gesturing to the carcass still lying on the ground. It did nothing to enhance the mood.
In the end Idhren did not get a bearskin cloak or a new staff or a new pair of boots. Tainan was not a craftsman, so their ambition was sadly tempered by the limits of their skill – which was apparently limited to crafting archery supplies. The bear’s pelt was tanned and made into a blanket, more than adequate to keep Idhren warm on cold winter nights. The rest was given to the clan, and the abundance of fresh meat meant a veritable feast was held that night, celebrating both the successful hunt and Idhren and Tainan’s now official courtship.

It was hardly traditional, but nothing about their courtship was traditional.

Least of all the fact that Idhren was a man and that Tainan was also technically a man. Back in Tevinter they could never have been so open about any of this; it would have been a source of ridicule and abuse. Here, Istimaethoriel gave them her blessing and joked about having her aravel to herself again. Here, their gender was not an issue. Unusual, yes, but simply another item in the long list of Tainan’s eccentricities, a peculiarity of Idhren’s ‘shemlen upbringing’. Instead, the problem was that Idhren’s face was bare.

“According to Dalish tradition you are not an adult until you have vallaslin,” Istimaethoriel informed him, “Therefore, you cannot be properly courted and you certainly cannot be bonded. I’ve allowed the courtship because yours is clearly a unique situation. If you were raised Dalish you would have gone through the ritual years ago. And Tainan is clearly besotted,” she said fondly, “When they asked permission I couldn’t bear to say no.”

Idhren flushed slightly and ducked his head. It still felt somewhat surreal, that anyone would feel so strongly for him. It made him happy, of course, but also nervous.

“I know it’s much too early to be entertaining wedding plans, but the vallaslin ritual is not something that can be put off to the last minute,” the Keeper continued. “That is assuming you want to be bonded someday.”

“I… don’t know,” Idhren admitted shyly. The courtship had only been official for a matter of days, Idhren had barely accepted that it was real, let alone what it meant for the future. “I’m still having a hard time believing any of this is actually happening.”

Istimaethoriel smiled at him in understanding. “You had a difficult life before coming to us,” she murmured, “I imagine it is not easy to trust after some of the things you have been through.” Idhren nodded mutely. There were times he still found himself fearing that any show of kindness was false or was hiding ulterior motives. “You are a remarkable person, Idhren, and Tainan saw that even before I did. I love the both of you as though you were my own children, although only Tainan came to me as a babe, and I would be overjoyed to see the two of you find happiness together. Ultimately, however, that is your decision. If you haven’t, you should talk to them. You will have to trust them if you want to pursue this relationship. If you can’t, then best to let them down now, it will be less painful that way.”

She was right, of course. Idhren knew that. Tainan deserved to know, Tainan needed to know. Idhren could not, in good conscience, continue courting them while keeping secrets. “I’ve never talked about it before,” he said quietly. Even Istimaethoriel didn’t know everything that Idhren had suffered in Tevinter. She knew his anatomy, and that he had been hurt because of it, but not to what extent. That was something Idhren had never spoken of to anyone. “What if… What if they don’t like me anymore?”

“You know Tainan better than that, I would hope,” was the only reply that the Keeper offered.

Logically, Idhren knew that very little bothered Tainan to the point of anger or disgust. Nothing fazed them save an actual physical threat. At least, that was how the hunter seemed to Idhren. But
logic had nothing to do with the emotions swirling in his chest and the butterflies in his stomach. Idhren had never spoken of what happened to him at the Circle. He hid the scars on his arms with long sleeves no matter the heat. He’d never willingly let anyone except Varius see him naked. This was a part of himself that he had spent his entire life denying.

Logically, Idhren knew it would not destroy the fledgling relationship he had with Tainan.

It still took him two more days to work up the courage.

It was mid afternoon when Idhren sought them out, nervous as he had not been since he was a child. He found Tainan seated near one of the campfires burning low between the aravels, a pile of half made arrows at their feet, thin straight sticks in need of tips or feathers. Glancing up as Idhren approached, Tainan’s face immediately lit up upon seeing him.

“Hey,” Idhren greeted hesitantly. “Can I talk to you?”

“Of course,” Tainan replied cheerfully.

“In private,” Idhren added after a moment of hesitation.

“Oh,” Idhren nodded and immediately began gathering their things. “We can talk in my aravel, if that’s alright.”

“That’s fine,” Idhren assured. He waited until Tainan had gathered all their things before following the hunter toward the edge of camp. Each step made Idhren exponentially more nervous. In his mind he could picture the look of disgust on Tainan’s face when they learned the truth, learned that Idhren was not who he was pretending to be.

When they arrived Tainan knocked the door open with a foot and crawled inside. An armful of arrows and fletching tools was deposited unceremoniously at the back of the space before Tainan turned back to Idhren. “What do you want to talk about?”

“It’s… There are some things about my life in Tevinter that you should know,” Idhren said quietly. He sat down across from Tainan, hands folded in his lap and fisted in the fabric of his pants to keep from fidgeting. “If you’re serious about this,” he gestured between them.

“Of course I’m serious,” Tainan insisted, “I wouldn’t have hunted the bear otherwise. Was the bear not good enough?”

“No, the bear was plenty good,” Idhren was quick to assure. “But you… You might not feel the same after I tell you.”

Tainan sobered quickly. “That won’t happen,” they said confidently.

“You say that now,” Idhren couldn’t help being hesitant. “I’ve never talked about some of this before. Promise you won’t interrupt… Just let me finish.”

“Alright,” Tainan agreed apprehensively.

Idhren took a deep breath to try and calm his nerves. It wasn’t terribly effective, but there was no turning back now. “I was born a slave,” he began, “My entire family were slaves.”

He told Tainan everything: How Canidius used his family to control him, and how they died. The abuse at the Circle; the first time he had ever put voice to what happened there. He spoke about Varius, even though so much of that time was a blur of lyrium smoke and liquor. He spoke of
Dorian, and realized with surprise that it was the first time he’d thought of the man in at least a year. Through it all Tainan remained quiet. There were times the hunter looked as though they wanted to interrupt, but managed to restrain themselves. Last of all Idhren spoke of himself; explained his usual anatomy to the best of his ability. And as he did so he was unable to keep his voice and his hands from trembling. It was terrifying. Acknowledging this part of himself had never been easy, but this time was even more difficult. Never had he wanted someone to accept him as much as he wanted Tainan. Never had he wanted something as much as what Tainan offered.

By the time he finished, Idhren’s voice was thick with emotion, choking back tears of remembered grief and pain as well as the terror of Tainan’s reaction. His gaze was firmly fixed on his knees, unable to look up into Tainan’s face for fear of what he would find there.

A long moment the pair sat in silence, Idhren’s anxiety mounting by the second, until finally Tainan spoke up. “Idhren,” their voice was calm, gentle, not disgusted or angry. Still Idhren didn’t look up. “Idhren,” the hunter said again after a moment, reached out to cup Idhren’s jaw and tilt his head up until Idhren nervously met their gaze. Tainan’s brow was creased with concern, the expression emphasized further by how it warped the tattoos on their face. “What those people did to you is not your fault. It doesn’t make you worth any less.” Idhren bit his lip to keep from letting out the sort of pathetic whimper that wanted to escape his throat. Tainan smiled very faintly, let their hand drop from Idhren’s face to take his hands between their own. “I don’t care about any of that. My past isn’t exactly spotless, either. No one's perfect. But all of those things, they made you who you are today. And I love who you are today, nothing else matters.”

Idhren could hardly believe his ears. His eyes went wide, mouth agape. Everything forgotten except that one small phrase. "Say it again," he breathed.

"What?" Tainan asked in confusion.

"You... love me?" Idhren asked, hopeful and hesitant.

Tainan's lips quirked in a smile, bright and honest. "I love you."

And Idhren believed them. Without conscious thought he surged forward and pressed his lips against Tainan's. It wasn't a very good kiss, awkward and misaligned. Tainan laughed against his mouth and reached up to cup Idhren's face once more between their own. "I love you," they said again, and kissed him again; properly this time.

Idhren let out a shuddering sigh. All the pent up fear and worry washed away in an instant, like a dam bursting inside of him. Tainan didn't care. And for a moment everything was perfect. For a moment Idhren felt like nothing in the world could ever go wrong. "I love you," Idhren breathed, barely a whisper as he tested the words that he had never before had the courage to say to anyone. Tainan grinned and Idhren felt it against his lips, the expression echoed on his own face. "I love you," he repeated, louder, more confident. Tainan kissed him again.

They fell onto the pile of blankets that made up Tainan’s bed in a breathless tangle of limbs. Idhren’s heart raced with sudden desire, although his hands shook with trepidation. Though Tainan professed love and acceptance deep down Idhren still feared revealing his body to another person. But Tainan’s hands were gentle and tentative as they moved over his body, asking permission for every article of clothing that was removed, encouraging but not demanding. And when Idhren faltered they kissed him again until his head spun.

Tainan mapped his body with hands and mouth, they looked at Idhren with nothing but adoration, murmuring praise against each newly-revealed patch of skin until Idhren forgot to be nervous. He burned with need, his entire body flushed as he ran his own hands over Tainan’s firm chest and
broad shoulders. “Tainan,” he sighed, half a moan and half a plea, tilting his hips in invitation, “Please.”

The hunter’s eyes were dark with want as they looked down at Idhren. “You’re sure?” they asked breathlessly, even as they slid a hand between Idhren’s legs.

A moan escaped Idhren’s lips as he instinctively bucked his hips up against Tainan’s hand, seeking further contact. “Tainan,” he breathed out a stuttering sigh. “If you’re not inside me in the next minute I may light you on fire.”

For one startled moment Tainan could do nothing but stare at Idhren in surprise. For one horrified moment Idhren thought he had crossed a line in his impatience. Then a slow smirk spread over the hunter’s face, “Oh, is that how it is?” they asked with a low chuckle. Hands grasped Idhren’s hips and hauled him bodily up onto Tainan’s lap. “I’d hate to disappoint.”

The next morning Idhren woke surrounded by warmth. In that hazy state between dreaming and being awake, he was aware of little else. Warmth and comfort and the smell of the forest. As awareness slowly worked its way into him, Idhren became conscious of the world around him. Heard the flutter and creak of aravel sails in the morning breeze, the rough fur of the deer hide on which he slept, and a pair of strong arms wrapped around his waist. Cracking his eyes open, Idhren blinked in the dim light that streamed in through the aravel’s cracks, then turned slowly to look at the person lying next to him.

Tainan's face was relaxed in sleep, auburn hair spread about them in a disheveled mess. The night before Idhren had freed it from all the braids and knots that held it in place, buried his fingers and his nose in the silken strands as he explored every inch of Tainan's body and was explored in turn. He reached out now and brushed a lock away from Tainan’s forehead, allowing him a better look at the hunter's face. Cautiously, careful not to wake his bed partner, he shifted until he lay facing the other, then raised a hand up to trace the thick green lines tattooed across Tainan's brow, cheeks, and nose. He’d thought they were strange at first, the tattoos – vallaslin – that the Dalish wore. Now that he was used to seeing them on every face he thought they were beautiful. Every one was unique. Even if the patterns were the same, the colors, the way they changed with the contour of each face, made them different.

Beside him Tainan stirred and Idhren pulled his hand away, embarrassed. The hunter’s eyes blinked open, stared at the ceiling for a moment, then turned toward him. Then a slow lazy smile spread across Tainan’s face. “Hey.”

It was such a casual thing to say. Not ‘good morning’ or ‘why are you staring at me?’ or anything that Idhren might have been expecting. He didn’t know what he had been expecting. He had never woken up in someone else’s bed before, but Tainan so easily made it feel normal, as though they woke up like this every day. “Hi,” Idhren replied, unable to keep a smile from pulling at his lips, too. He liked this about Tainan; how easy it was simply to exist together.

“Sleep good?” Tainan asked. Their voice was still rough from sleep, eyes half lidded and hair a tangled mess, and they were beautiful.

“Yes,” Idhren replied.
Tainan smiled lazily and leaned forward to steal a quick kiss from Idhren’s lips. It was as slow and lazy as everything else so far that morning, and when Tainan pulled back they turned away to yawn widely. Idhren barely repressed the urge to laugh. “You have plans today?” the hunter asked.

“Not specifically,” Idhren replied. “I need to talk to the Keeper.”

“About magic things?” Tainan asked.

Idhren shook his head. “She thinks I should get vallaslin,” he murmured.

Tainan made a curious sound and studied Idhren’s face for a moment. “You should.”

“You don’t think it’s too soon?” Idhren asked. “I’ve only been here a little over a year. I’m not proper Dalish.”

“Proper Dalish?” Tainan repeated incredulously. “What does that mean? If the Keeper thinks you’re ready then you are. Unless you can’t sit through the ritual, then you’re not.”

Idhren wasn’t sure if Istimaethoriel did think he was ready, or if she was only suggesting it for Tainan’s sake. So that whatever this was between them could be properly recognized some day. But Tainan made it sound so simple. Maybe it was and Idhren was only over thinking again. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tainan confirmed. No point lying about it. “That’s the test. You’re supposed to bear the pain in silence to prove your readiness or your devotion to the gods. Something like that.”

That was another problem. “I don’t know if I believe in your gods,” Idhren admitted. And that made it feel wrong, blasphemous, to mark himself with their symbols.

“I don’t think that matters so much anymore,” Tainan mused, “They’re not around to get offended by it.”

“Do you believe in them?” Idhren asked.

Tainan considered for a moment before answering. “Most of the time.”

Idhren understood that. “I was raised with the Chantry,” he said. “They only have one god.”

“That sounds boring,” Tainan commented, “Do you think he’d mind if you had more?”

“I think He would,” Idhren replied. “But I’m not sure I care what He thinks. He’s never done anything to help me. I don’t think He likes me very much. Or elves at all, for that matter.” He sighed and burrowed deeper under the blankets and furs. It was too early in the morning for such heavy conversation, he didn’t like it. Beside him Tainan was silent, uncertain what to say. Eventually Idhren looked over at him again. “I don’t think I know your gods well enough to tattoo one of their names on my face.”

Tainan let out a small huff of amusement, “I thought the Keeper was teaching you all the stories.”

“She has,” Idhren murmured. “But they’re just stories.” Good stories, full of lessons and morals, but still only fairytales. Idhren didn’t feel any connection with the people in them the way he had learning the Chant as a child. “Can you tell me about them?”

“Me?” Tainan asked in surprise. “I don’t know the stories half as well as the Keeper does. You should ask her. Or Hahren Datishan, he knows the stories better than anyone.”
“I know the stories,” Idhren replied, “I want to know what you think… how you feel about them.” He reached a hand up and brushed his fingertips lightly over the lines inked on Tainan’s chin, “Yours is… Andruil,” he recognized. “The hunter. Is that why you chose it?”

“Not all hunters have Andruil’s vallaslin, and not everyone with it is a hunter. That’s a stereotype,” Tainan protested.

“Then why did you choose it?” Idhren asked, equal parts curious and amused.

Tainan’s face screwed up in concentration. “It’s complicated,” they said. “Andruil was a great hunter, and she was always seeking the next challenge, but she also taught us to respect the world and the creatures in it. We hunt because we need to, and we hunt only as much as we need to survive. To take any more would upset the balance of nature.”

“So you’re saying you didn’t hunt that bear just to impress me?” Idhren teased.

“Oh, well,” Tainan chuckled sheepishly, “Maybe I did, a little bit. But the clan benefitted, and will prosper because of it. And I don’t make a habit. This was a special occasion. I don’t think Andruil would be mad at me for showing off one time. She liked to show off, too.”

“It was very impressive,” Idhren replied. “Is that why you chose Andruil, then? Because she taught respect for nature?”

“No, not really,” Tainan said thoughtfully. “I don’t know how to describe it. I don’t have all the fancy words that you do. But Andruil is about… Courage and strength… You know the Vir Tanaadal, right?” they asked, and at Idhren’s affirmative nod continued. “Fly straight, don’t waver. Bend, but don’t break. Together we’re stronger than alone. When my father explained it to me as a child he said it meant: be true to yourself, but be understanding of others; compromise if you have to, but don’t sacrifice your own morals to make other people happy. We’re stronger together as a clan, as a family, as a People, than if we’re divided.”

“I think I like the sound of that,” Idhren murmured. The Dalish really seemed to value their sense of community. Living with the clan, Idhren had always felt like they were a very tight knit family. Maybe the religion had something to do with that.

“Does that mean you’ll get Andruil’s vallaslin also?” Tainan joked.

“No just yet,” Idhren answered, rolling his eyes. “I have to think about it some more.”

“Well, you don’t have to think about it today,” Tainan replied, voice a low rumble in their chest. “Today we should just relax, have fun.”

“Oh?” Idhren asked, intrigued as much by the hunter’s tone as their words. “Did you have something in mind?”

“I do,” Tainan replied. In one smooth motion they rolled over, pushing Idhren onto his back and pinning him against the bedding. “First I’m going to kiss you,” they said, and did just that, claiming Idhren’s lips in a long slow kiss that left Idhren breathless and flushed when they finally parted.

“Then,” Tainan continued, leaning back enough to let their gaze rake over Idhren’s body in a way that should have made him uncomfortable, but instead set him quivering with anticipation. “I want to taste every part of you, touch every part of you, until I know your body as well as I know my own.”

“Venhedis …” Idhren let out a trembling sigh that was almost a moan. He reached up and ran his fingers through Tainan’s hair once more, pulling the hunter down for a heated kiss before they could make good on that promise. “Yes, please.”
It was midday by the time either Idhren or Tainan emerged from the aravel, Tainan in search of food and Idhren a clean change of clothes. Idhren had hoped to slip into the Keeper’s aravel unnoticed, change, and then leave again before anyone was the wiser. He wasn’t so lucky. Istimaethoriel was seated just outside the wagon tying freshly gathered herbs into bundles for drying. She watched Idhren approach with a knowing smile on her face. “Am I going to be getting my privacy back earlier than expected?” she asked.

Idhren’s cheeks burned, “Not yet,” he mumbled in reply.

“Ah, too bad,” the woman shrugged. “But I take it your discussion went better than you’d expected.”

“Yes,” Idhren didn’t bother to deny it. The results were fairly obvious. “Much better.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Istimaethoriel smiled softly, a little proudly. “Should I expect you back tonight?”

Idhren didn’t honestly know. It would depend entirely on where the day led them. Tainan had always been good company, but now Idhren found himself wanting to spend every possible moment with them. The hunter’s easy acceptance and carefree optimism made Idhren feel comfortable enough to let down his defenses. He had been more at ease in Tainan’s presence this morning than he ever remembered being before – without the aid of alcohol or drugs, at least. He wanted to feel that way all the time. And yet he feared rejection if he pushed too hard too fast. “For now, yes,” he answered eventually and pulled open the aravel’s door.

“Very well,” Istimaethoriel replied, turning back to her work. “While you’re in there you might want to put some ice on your neck,” she commented blithely, “Or consider a scarf.”

Idhren’s cheeks burned even hotter and he scrambled into the aravel to avoid having to reply. Once inside he quickly changed clothes, then stared at himself in the piece of polished metal that served as a mirror until he located the bruise on his neck and iced it with frost on his fingertips for as long as he could bear, but the color barely faded. Eventually he gave up and wrapped a thin scarf around his neck instead, then snatched up the simple, unbladed staff he’d made since joining the clan and left the aravel again. “I’m going training,” he called quickly to Istimaethoriel as he rushed away.

He met Tainan in a clearing just out of sight of the main camp but still within earshot if someone shouted. Over the years he’d been getting significantly better at fighting without his magic, and could generally hold his own with a weapon in his hand. Without a weapon he was still not strong enough to do much damage, but at least he could get away if someone were to attack him, and that was the whole point. This was a fallback plan in case he ever found himself unable to use magic again. Or that was how it had started, but the longer this arrangement went on the more Idhren found himself enjoying the sparring sessions. And not just because of the company.

Today, however, the pair did less fighting than they did kissing, until they gave up the pretense entirely to lounge together on the mossy ground, enjoying the fading warmth of the autumn sun.

Tainan’s eyes were closed, splayed out like a cat in the patch of sunlight that they had claimed. The hunter’s hair was once more tied back in the careless knot of braids that usually kept it under control and it shone like fire in the sun. The air was filled with the sounds of the forest: wind in the trees, birds and animals, the distant sounds of the Dalish camp occasionally breaking through. Idhren lay
with his head pillowed on Tainan’s chest, staring up at the blue-grey sky through the branches.

“Tainan,” Idhren said softly, hesitant to break the calm silence between them. The hunter hummed a response that Idhren felt more than heard. But he didn’t continue right away. After another long moment he finally dared to ask, “Why do you like me?”

“What?” Tainan’s voice was mumbled, confused.

“Why do you like me?” Idhren repeated. It sounded selfish, asking again, as though he was fishing for compliments, but that was not the case. He genuinely wanted to know what Tainan saw in him.

“No one’s ever liked me before.”

“That’s not true,” Tainan scoffed in disbelief.

“It is,” Idhren insisted. Not the way Tainan liked him, at least. “Everyone in Tevinter thought I was useless… except the slaves. My family barely even knew me by the end, I never told them about… about the abuse, or the lyrium. Kaffas,” he swore, swallowing the lump in his throat, “I had to pay someone to love me.”

“Idhren, you’re not useless,” Tainan insisted, wrapping an arm around Idhren’s shoulders and giving a comforting squeeze. “I think you’re amazing.”

It helped, hearing things like that. Every moment spent with Tainan helped, but there were still some times when Idhren felt unlovable, worthless, broken – all the things Canidius and Tevinter had wanted him to think. “Why?” he asked again, and hated himself for it.

“Well…” Tainan frowned thoughtfully. “Because you’re you.”

“What does that mean?” Idhren asked. It was so vague an answer, and right now he needed more concrete reassurance.

“Well, you’re…” Tainan fumbled for the right words. They always had difficulty articulating abstract concepts like this. They didn’t know all the fancy words that Idhren did to explain their feelings. “You’re smart,” they began, “The smartest person I’ve ever met. And… You’re brave, and determined. And you work hard, and you’re really confident – most of the time anyway.” Idhren began to smile. Despite the simplicity of Tainan’s words he could hear the emotion in their voice, how earnestly they meant each small compliment. “And you’re beautiful,” Tainan added at the end, smiling and leaning down to kiss Idhren’s forehead.

But that last one made the smile slip off Idhren’s face. “I don’t want to be beautiful.”

“Handsome, then,” Tainan corrected.

“I don’t…” Idhren began, and then cut himself off. The word wasn’t the problem. “I just want to be normal.” And he had such a bizarre, uncomfortable and contradictory relationship with his appearance, needing and hating compliments at the same time.

“What’s wrong?” Tainan asked.

“I…” Idhren hesitated. “I never told anyone this, but… If I weren’t a mage it’s very likely Canidius would have sold me to a whorehouse.”

Tainan gasped audibly and held Idhren even tighter, so tight it was nearly painful. “I’m sorry. Did he ever…”
“No,” Idhren insisted quickly, “No. He never touched me.” He shuddered at the mere thought, and sent a silent prayer of thanks up to whatever god had saved him from that particular nightmare.

“Good,” Tainan murmured, “Otherwise I would be forced to go into Tevinter and kill him.”

Idhren snorted in amusement. “That’s either very brave or very stupid.”

“Probably both,” Tainan admitted.

It probably was, Idhren thought, nodding in agreement. “It’s also the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me,” he mumbled. That Tainan would even consider putting himself in such danger for his sake was touching. No one had ever – no, that was wrong. Sahren had once expressed such a desire. And Dorian. Dorian had actually done it. Idhren shook his head and pushed himself upright to look down at Tainan. The hunter looked up at him, gentle smile on their features and eyes full of affection.

Idhren hated how much Tevinter still haunted his thoughts, still clouded his perceptions. All those years of torment, of being looked down on, talked down to, used, abused, belittled. He had finally escaped, finally found somewhere that he could be happy, but still he couldn’t put all that behind him.

“What’s wrong?” Tainan asked. Idhren’s feelings much have shown on his face.

“Will you cut my hair?” the mage asked without giving himself time to think about it.

“What?” Tainan startled. “But I like your hair,” they protested, reaching up to tuck a loose strand behind Idhren’s ear. “Why would you want to cut it off?”

“I used to use it to try and hide my ears,” Idhren admitted in shame. “As though that would make me human and then people would respect me. I don’t want to be that person anymore. I want… I want to get rid of everything that reminds me of Tevinter. I don’t want to think about it ever again.”

Tainan stared up at him, frowning a moment, and then nodded. “Alright.” They sat up, reached out to lace their fingers through Idhren’s hair one more time. “But not too short, surely. It’s so nice. Besides, you’d look awful without any hair. I’d still love you, though,” they added quickly.

Idhren’s lips quirked in a small smile. Trust Tainan to make him smile at even his worst moments, taking all of Idhren’s insecurities so easily in stride. “We’ll see,” Idhren replied. He’d had long hair for most of his life, it would be strange to cut it off, but he wanted to. He needed a change. He still looked like he had in Tevinter, maybe changing that would stop him from feeling like he had in Tevinter. “It’ll grow back, anyway.”

“I guess so,” Tainan was forced to agree. The hunter pushed themselves up then climbed to their feet. “I’ll need a good knife.”

They sat just outside Tainan’s aravel, Idhren cross-legged on the ground and Tainan sitting on the step up to the door. Tainan owned a number of knives for a number of purposes, but Idhren doubted any of them were intended for cutting hair. Tainan looked as though they cut their hair once a year. But the hunter was careful, sharpening a straight knife and holding Idhren’s hair straight to cut off the merest inch at a time. Every few inches they would stop, ask Idhren what he thought, if he wanted to
continue. Idhren shook his head, ran his hand through the strands, and told them to continue.

Finally, with a puddle of hair on the ground about his feet, he told Tainan to stop.

Idhren’s hair had not been this short since he was a child, since before his magic manifested, when it had been an unruly, jagged cut mop of brown atop his head. Slaves didn’t need to look nice unless they were seen by nobles. Tainan had done a nice job, however, neatening up the cut by scraping the edge of the blade along the back of Idhren’s neck to shave off any stray hairs.

It felt light. And a little cold. Everything below his ears had been trimmed nearly to the scalp. As Idhren ran his hands through his hair again it felt strange. But it also felt freeing. “How’s it look?” he asked curiously. Of course there were no mirrors here. He would never be able to see it properly himself, only know how it felt.

Tainan was silent for a moment as they brushed stray hairs off of Idhren’s shoulders. “It looks good,” they answered eventually, ruffling their hands through Idhren’s now-short hair and messing it up. “I like it.” Idhren laughed and swatted at the hunter’s hands, dodging away from the assault. “Do you like it?”

“It’s very different,” Idhren answered, turning around so he could face Tainan. “It’ll take some getting used to, but I do like it. Thank you.”

Tainan smiled and leaned forward, stealing a kiss from Idhren’s lips. “You’re welcome.”

They ate dinner together, and then Idhren reluctantly returned to the aravel he still shared with Istimaethoriel for the night. When the Keeper saw him her eyebrows rose in surprise. Idhren could only imagine how different he must look now. “You must have had an eventful day,” she commented, “What brought this on?”

Idhren shrugged and ran a hand through his hair for the umpteenth time that day. “I just... felt like a change. What do you think?”

Istimaethoriel eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, and then smiled. “I actually think it suits you much better than long hair,” she replied. “You sometimes used to look like you were trying to hide behind it.”

By now Idhren should not have been surprised by the Keeper’s keen observational skills. He was, though. They had not known each other long, but she knew him better than his own mother had. “Now I can’t,” he said.

Istimaethoriel’s smile widened. “No, you can’t,” she agreed. “Have you eaten yet, or were you too distracted?”

Idhren flushed immediately. “We ate,” he insisted, and stormed past her to climb into the aravel.

Chapter End Notes

Nice things for Idhren because he deserves nice things. Like warm clothes and nice mother figures and cute boys to kiss.

Also, I collected all the little drabbles/headcanons/memes/etc. I've written about Idhren on tumblr into one masterpost. There's a lot, so go check it out. I'll probably do one for
Tainan later, but they don't have as much content yet.
One More Day

Chapter Notes

Months ago I asked all of my wonderful tumblr followers to tell me about their Dalish OCs and I might give them a little cameo in this fic. And also because I love hearing about everyone's elves. But here is the result of that offer and I hope everyone is pleased with it. Credits are at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We sing, rejoice

We tell the tales

We laugh and cry

We love one more day

- from In Uthenera, a traditional Elvhen song

Free Marches, 9:39 Dragon

Idhren and Tainan had been living together for only a few weeks and were still working out the finer details of the situation. The aravel was a mess. Neither of them had very many possessions, but it was still proving a struggle to get them all sorted in a way both of them could agree on. Everywhere that Idhren looked there were arrowheads and bits of fletching, bundles of sticks and lengths of bowstring. His attempts at compiling it all into a single location were met with confused stares, as though Tainan didn’t understand why it was necessary. One of the herbs that Idhren needed for his potions made Tainan sneeze when they were around it too frequently and they were still trying to figure out which one. Their clothes kept getting mixed up, which Idhren could not figure out for the life of him considering they were so different in size and style.

It was while hunting through all the mess that Tainan stumbled upon the very few remnants of Tevinter that Idhren still clung to.

“Hello, what’s this?” they asked, plucking a thin leather bound book from one of the small cabinets that lined the aravel’s wall. Before Idhren could even look to see what they were talking about Tainan flipped the book open and began leafing through the pages.

“Be careful with that!” Idhren snapped, lunging forward to snatch the book out of his lover’s hands.

Tainan was so startled for a moment that they didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry,” they murmured eventually.

Idhren looked down at the book, smoothed his hands over the cover. How stupid that he was still so attached to this thing. “No, I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“That book must be pretty important,” Tainan observed, and didn’t seem at all offended by Idhren’s
outburst.

Not really. Not in the grand scheme of things. By now Idhren should have just thrown it away and gotten on with his life, instead of continuing to let the wound fester. “It’s stupid,” he said. Tainan didn’t reply, but flopped backward onto the pile of furs and blankets that constituted their bed, expression unreadable. Idhren was never able to tell what went on in Tainan’s head (neither, apparently, could anyone else) and wondered if he ever would. The hunter always acted so different from what Idhren expected, so different from what he was used to. The silence stretched between them, not awkward or uncomfortable, but weighted with expectation. When Idhren finally couldn’t stand it anymore he spoke. “I wrote it.”

Tainan’s head shot up, eyes wide and bright. “You wrote it?” They scrambled upright into a sitting position again, “You wrote a book?”

Idhren felt even more embarrassed in the face of Tainan’s boundless enthusiasm. How did he explain what the book meant to him, though? How it was both his greatest pride and his greatest shame. A picture of the naïve idiot he had been back then. “I wrote it,” he confirmed quietly. “But he… the magister I worked for stole it.”

“Stole it?” Tainan asked in confusion. “But it’s right there. You stole it back?”

Of course Tainan didn’t understand, couldn’t understand. Intellectual property was not a concept that existed in their world. Frustrated with himself and filled with the renewed bitterness of old wounds, Idhren held the book out to Tainan delicately, torn, as always, between destroying the thing and keeping it safe. “Look at the name on the cover.”

Tainan took the book with great care, holding it almost reverently, and stared down at the cover, face twisted in concentration. It was a cruel thing to ask. Tainan could barely write their own name, but Idhren couldn’t bear to look at that cover. “L—Lih… Lin-us,” the hunter sounded out slowly, working over each letter. "Sa—Ka! Kan-id-… Canid-ee… Canidius! Linus Canidius!” they finished triumphantly, momentarily proud before remembering what this was about and sobering again. “That’s the magister, isn’t it?”

Idhren nodded, “I wrote it, but everyone thinks he did.”

“Because his name is on it?” Tainan asked.

Again Idhren nodded. “I should just get rid of it,” he mumbled. “It’s stupid that I’m still holding onto it.”

“No it’s not,” Tainan protested. “Idhren, you wrote a book! That’s amazing! You should be proud of it.”

“I am,” Idhren argued. “I am proud, but I also hate it. I hate looking at it and having to be reminded every time of what a naïve idiot I was back then. I hate having to see his name instead of my own.”

For a moment, Tainan was silent. Their expression shifted into one Idhren recognized as meaning they were in deep concentration. Lips pursed and brow furrowed, but Idhren couldn’t tell what the hunter was thinking so hard about.

“I know how to fix it,” Tainan said finally. Turning quickly, they rummaged through another drawer, digging around through the junk inside, then slammed that drawer closed and pulled open another one. “Ah-ha!” the hunter exclaimed happily, and pulled from within that drawer a thin bladed knife. Idhren immediately recognized it as the one Tainan used for fletching arrows. Smiling, Tainan turned
back to Idhren and held the book carefully in his off hand. “Do you trust me?”

Idhren looked at Tainan’s hands, at the knife and the book. “What are you going to do?” he asked nervously.

“I’m going to take his name off the cover,” Tainan explained, “And then we can put yours there instead.”

Idhren continued to stare at the book and the knife. Take his name off. Idhren was against defacing books on principle but this left him feeling conflicted. The printing on the cover was embossed into the leather binding; the only way to take it off would be to cut it away. Could Idhren live with that? More importantly, could he continue living with this shadow hanging over him? “Alright,” he agreed, still hesitant.

Tainan flashed him a reassuring smile and set to work. Setting the book down on the floor, they hunched over it and held the knife delicately. Idhren watched with bated breath as his lover pressed the blade into the leather binding. Tainan carved carefully around the magister’s name and then picked at the underside of the leather until it all lifted away, a thin rectangle of scratched cardstock the only thing that was left behind. “There,” Tainan smiled in satisfaction. They admired their handiwork for a moment, and then handed the book over to Idhren. “Now you can write your own name in the space there and we can pretend it always said that.”

Except that it would forever be blatantly obvious that it hadn’t always said that. Despite that, it did feel better, not having to see Canidius’ name attached to his work anymore. “You always know what to do to make me feel better,” Idhren murmured. “I wish I knew how to repay you.”

“You don’t have to repay me,” Tainan assured him. “I like seeing you happy.”

“It can’t really be that simple,” Idhren looked up from the book again and met his lover’s gaze, “Can it?”

“Why shouldn’t it be?” Tainan asked. “I know that Tevinter fucked you up,” they commented, tapping their forehead to elaborate, “And that sometimes you’re still figuring out how to be you, not the person Tevinter wanted you to be. I want to help. Because I like the real you.”

Idhren smiled, “I like him, too.”

“You should,” Tainan nodded sagely, “He’s much more fun than the other guy.”

“Is that so?” Idhren laughed. “In what way?”

Tainan hummed thoughtfully. “The real Idhren laughs more,” they pointed out. “And he likes to fight. And he likes to curse. And he’s smarter than everyone else and not afraid to show it. I like that part best.”

Tainan knew him well, Idhren realized, though that wasn’t a surprise. “You like it when I mouth off?”

“I like everything you do with your mouth,” Tainan smirked.

Idhren flushed, “Shut up,” he muttered, shoving the hunter away from him. He turned away to find something to write with.

“That’s Tevinter Idhren talking, I know it,” Tainan teased, crawling across the floor after him. “I think real Idhren likes using his mouth as much as I do.”
“You incorrigible degenerate,” Idhren complained, face burning hotter.

“Oh, big words,” Tainan chuckled. The hunter rested their chin on Idhren’s shoulder, watching him dig through their belongings for quill and ink. “Tell me more.”

“Insufferable,” Idhren added. He finally managed to find a serviceable quill and a half-empty jar of ink. “And please at least try to keep this place organized. It’s not that difficult.”

“Waste of time,” Tainan muttered.

Idhren rolled his eyes. “Spending ten minutes looking for everything because you moved it is a waste of time,” he complained. Very carefully he set the inkpot on the floor and unscrewed the lid. Now that he thought about it, his initial concern about defacing the book was unfounded. The inside was already full of annotations and scribbled notes, corrections and thoughts about his theories over time. The one place that Canidius couldn’t get at his work.

“Idhren Lavellan,” Tainan said quietly as they watched Idhren sharpen the quill and dip it in the ink. “No, that’s not good enough. What’s your father’s name?”

“Cyrus, why?” Idhren asked with a curious frown.

“Idhren Cyrus Lavellan,” Tainan tested the name on their tongue, and then smiled. “Yeah, I like that. Sounds much more fancy.”

It did, Idhren had to agree. Nobles loved to give their children multiple names. The Dalish generally did not, but used a parent’s name and the clan name to identify with when the need arose. Idhren Cyrus Lavellan. He had never been very close with his father, but he liked the idea of holding on to some small part of his family. “You’ve still never told me your proper name,” Idhren commented as he began very carefully to write his name into the now-empty square on the cover.

Tainan sighed a long suffering sigh. “Because it’s so embarrassing.”

“Tell me,” Idhren pleaded teasingly. “I know Tainan is short for something, tell me what it is.”

Tainan groaned. “Just ask the Keeper.”

“I want to hear it from you,” Idhren protested. “Besides, that’s rude.”

“Ugh, fine,” Tainan huffed like a petulant teenager. “If you really must know, my full and proper given name is Tarasyl’inan.”

“Tarasyl’inan,” Idhren repeated, rolling the sound around on his tongue and smiling to himself. “It’s pretty.”

“It’s long,” Tainan complained.

“Does it mean something?” Idhren asked curiously. He thought he recognized the words used, but his grasp on Elvhen was still somewhat shaky and translated literally it didn’t make much sense.

“Eyes like the sky,” Tainan recited by rote, and then shrugged. “Or something like that. It’s very poetic but not very creative.”

It was accurate, at least. Tainan’s eyes were an incredibly vivid blue-green, enhanced by the deep green vallaslin on their cheeks. “I think it’s very nice. My name doesn’t mean anything.”

“So what?” Tainan shrugged, “Who cares if anyone’s name means anything? It means you, and that
should be good enough."

The thought gave Idhren pause. Not that he had ever disliked his name, but it wasn’t something he’d ever considered before. ‘It means you’. Completely unique to him alone. “You say some very wise things sometimes,” he mused.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Tainan replied. “Wait,” they frowned, watching as Idhren finished writing his name on the book. “Is that how you spell your name? Why does it have a ‘D’? That’s not how that sounds. Your name is ITH-ren, not ID-ren.”

Idhren actually laughed as he waited for the ink to dry. Tainan’s confusion was genuine, and understandable, but their reaction more than a little over the top. “When in front of an ‘H’,” Idhren explained patiently, “’D’ can sometimes sound like that, too.”

“Well that’s stupid,” Tainan complained. “Letters should only make one sound.”

“Then we would need a lot more letters,” Idhren replied.

Tainan groaned and pulled away from Idhren, “No, that’s just as bad,” they sighed. “There’s no winning.”

Idhren set the book aside carefully so the ink wouldn’t smudge and turned around to face Tainan. “Reading isn’t so difficult if you have a lot of practice,” he said. “If you wanted, I could help you.” It was the least he could do after all that Tainan had done for him.

“What use to I have for reading?” Tainan asked in reply. “You’re the smart one.”

“You never know,” Idhren shrugged, “Someday you might want to read a book. We could read one together.” And actually that sounded really nice, now that the idea occurred to him. To curl up with Tainan somewhere warm and comfortable and read. But Idhren had only brought a few books from Tevinter and all of them were academic. “Next time we’re near a city I could go pick up something. Something easy and that you’d like. Like an adventure story?”

Curiously, Tainan watched Idhren’s eager expression as he spoke. “You’d really like that, wouldn’t you?” they asked. Idhren was a little embarrassed to admit it, but nodded. “Alright then,” Tainan agreed, “Next time we’re near a city you can go find a book. Just make sure it’s a good one.”

Idhren beamed, excited despite himself. “I wouldn’t bring you anything but the best.”

Idhren never ended up having a chance to buy a book.

Winter hit the Free Marches early and hard.

Idhren imagined that all southern winters were bad winters compared to what he was used to, but everyone kept saying this one was even worse than normal. And Idhren was inclined to believe them. Because when the first snow had fallen that year it was no gentle, beautiful dusting of white like his first had been. No, this year it buried the camp almost overnight in a layer of snow that reached nearly to Idhren’s knees.

As soon as they were able the clan moved north-west toward Nevarra. A stone’s throw from the
border; as though national borders meant anything to the Dalish. But also, Idhren was uncomfortably aware, only a few days travel from Tevinter. Here the weather was still cooler than Idhren was used to, but they were unlikely to be threatened by another sudden blizzard.

The campsite that Istimathoriel had deemed acceptable for long-term stay was on the north banks of the Minanter River. It was the closest Idhren had been to his homeland since leaving. Too close for comfort. He distracted himself from that fact by assisting the clan in any way he could. There were aravels that needed repair after so long on the road, supplies to be replenished, children to be comforted.

The clan easily fell into a familiar, peaceful rhythm after settling in. But they had been there only a week when that peace was shattered.

“Keeper!”

The scream pierced through the camp, high and panicked. It drew both Istimathoriel and Idhren’s attention immediately, as well as anyone else within earshot. A pair of hunters came running through the camp. One of them was Tainan. And they were both spattered with blood.

“What’s happened?” the keeper asked before Idhren could even process the sight. His eyes ran over every patch of blood on Tainan’s leathers, searching for an injury and, blessedly, finding none.

“Slavers.”

That got Idhren’s attention. His gaze whipped away from Tainan and settled on the other hunter; Falos was a young man, vallaslin only a year old.

“I don’t know how they snuck up on us,” Tainan explained urgently, but Idhren was having difficulty concentrating. Slave traders. Here. Deep in Idhren’s chest a familiar twinge of bitter, quiet fury sparked to life. That familiar slow, smoldering rage began to boil up, that feeling he had thought he’d left behind in Tevinter.

“They took Aeryth,” Falos blurted out. He was obviously distressed, and with good reason. Idhren had seen the slave markets in Tevinter. The captured elves chained or caged like animals. He heard what Valora had been through.

“There were too many of them,” Tainan continued, ignoring the interruption, “We had to run, but they’ll find our trail eventually.”

“We have to go back for her,” Falos argued.

“First we must ensure the clan’s safety,” Istimathoriel interjected. Falos made to argue again, but she cut him off with a gesture. “You are injured,” she observed, and for the first time Idhren noticed the way that Falos was awkwardly holding his left arm, cradling it close to his body, “Go find Elera, she will tend to you.” Falos looked ready to argue, but the stern expression on the Keeper’s face held him back. Pursing his lips, the hunter nodded and brushed past her. “Tainan,” she continued once the other hunter was gone, “How many did you see?”

“Five men attacked us,” Tainan answered easily.

Istimathoriel frowned in concern. “They will have trackers. Idhren, we need to move the clan immediately. The children and the halla must be protected. Leave the aravels if we must, they can be rebuilt.”

“Of course,” Idhren agreed. People were more important than things. He didn’t want to see any of
the people here subjected to the sort of depravity he knew Tevinter was capable of.

“Good, then you will go with them, take all those who cannot fight and the watchmen and follow the river east.”

“You’re sending me away?” Idhren interrupted in shock.

It broke Istimaethoriel’s concentration and she looked down at him, frowning. “The clan must be protected,” she reasoned.

“And who will go after the slavers? Who will rescue Aeryth?” Idhren asked. He did not know the girl well, only in passing, but no one deserved what those men would do to her. Or what Tevinter would do to her.

“Several of the scouts will stay behind to ensure we are not followed,” the Keeper assured him.

“Let me stay with them,” Idhren said urgently. “Please. Let me fight.”

Istimaethoriel’s face was stern, closed off, her posture stiff and tense. So unlike the calm, openness that she usually wore. “That is not your place.”

“I thought a Keeper’s place was to protect the clan,” Idhren argued. “You and Elera can go with the People. Let me stay and fight. We can save Aeryth. We can stop these people from taking anyone else!”

“Is that truly your only intention?” Istimaethoriel asked slowly, “Or are you seeking revenge?”

The question gave Idhren pause. This group of slavers, they were undoubtedly all strangers. None of them had hurt Idhren personally. But they contributed to the system. Tevinter was broken, corrupt. A cesspit of power mongering and egotism driven by men and women so secure and proud in their power they would never honestly consider changing. The meritocracy was a joke. How you were born was how you lived and died. Idhren would always be a slave. He did not need personal revenge on these slave traders, but he loathed what they represented with every fiber of his being: the system that had done its damndest to see Idhren’s will broken and ground into the dust. The system that had watched his family die and cast them away as though they were nothing, that took Valora from her home through lies and fear mongering and got away with it because even here in the south no one cared about elves.

Idhren did not want revenge for himself. He wanted revenge for every elf these slavers had taken in the past; every child torn from its mother, every woman raped, every man beaten. And he wanted salvation for all those that would be taken in the future if the slavers were not stopped now.

“You don’t know what they’re capable of,” Idhren seethed, fists clenched at his sides. “You don’t know what it’s like, any of you. To be looked at like you’re less than an animal, like you’re worthless, stupid. To be expendable. I couldn’t save my family from that, but I could save her. And I can stop them from hurting anyone else!” He was practically shouting by the end; shaking, static crackling at his fingertips.

“Idhren,” Istimaethoriel said, her tone equal parts warning and sympathetic. She knew what he had been through, how could she deny him this?

“They deserve to die!” Idhren exploded before she could continue. “If we don’t stop them now they’ll just find another clan to destroy! I have to stop them. And I’ll do it alone if I have to!”

“No you won’t,” Tainan interrupted.
Idhren wheeled on them, furious, “How dare you--!”

“If you go, I go,” Tainan said firmly, cutting off Idhren’s argument before it even started. And Idhren was stunned into silence. Tainan was on his side? He shouldn’t be surprised, Tainan always stood up for him, and yet every time it happened it was still a shock.

“Tainan,” Istimaethoriel warned.

“Keeper, he’s right,” the hunter continued. “If we get away, they’ll just find some other clan or some village. They won’t stop until they get what they came for.”

The Keeper’s face was hard and stern. She looked at the pair of them as though they were unruly children. Idhren feared she would continue to deny his request, and that Tainan would eventually cave under her authority. Instead, Istimaethoriel’s resolve crumbled. She sighed heavily and her expression softened. “I cannot say that I don’t want the same,” she admitted. “And if you are so determined then it would be foolish to send you off alone.

“You will take with you Junnar, Ionna, Rowan, and Tallan,” Istimaethoriel continued without waiting for either of them to reply, “Our most skilled hunters. I will take the rest of the clan east along the river. If you cannot defeat the slavers you are to lead them away and return to the clan only when you are certain they will not follow. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” Idhren assured her.

Tainan fetched the rest of the hunters while Idhren collected his Tevinter-made staff, pulling it out of storage for the first time in over a year. It was a bit dusty, the blade a little dulled with time, but otherwise still in perfectly serviceable condition, and much stronger than the rough, wooden one he used here. By the time their small rescue party was ready to leave Istimaethoriel had the rest of the clan gathered and ready to move. The Dalish were always prepared for a quick departure, but there was a tenseness that hung over the camp as the people gathered up only their most necessary possessions and made to flee.

“I’ll take us to where we were attacked,” Tainan said as their small rescue party gathered. “From there we should be able to pick up the trail, though we might run into them before that.”

Idhren felt slightly out of place among these people who knew the forest like the back of their hand, who could move through it without making a sound. But he would do his best not to get in the way, and to follow their lead. He stuck close to Tainan as they moved beyond the camp and into the surrounding woods, doing his best to emulate the hunter’s soft, sure footsteps through the undergrowth.

They found the sight of the ambush easy enough, and the signs of fighting were clear even to Idhren’s untrained eye. An arrow lodged in a tree, spatters of blood on the ground. From there, Rowan easily spotted a trail leading further into the woods. And most likely straight to the slavers’ camp.

Over a dozen men and women milled about the clearing in which the slavers had made their base. A campfire stood in the middle, surrounded by tents and – Idhren sneered at the sight – cages. All of the slavers were armed to some extent, but the most obvious threats were three men standing guard around the edge of the camp. Thankfully, the elves had not yet been noticed as they crouched in the
“There’s Aeryth,” Tainan whispered at his side, nodding in the direction of one of the cages. Idhren followed their gaze and spotted her as well. The young woman was bound and gagged, there was blood in her hair and on her clothing, but she was sitting upright against the cage bars and that was a good sign. “What’s the plan?”

Were they asking him? Oh, he was sort of in charge, wasn’t he? Idhren floundered. He’d never been in any kind of real battle before.

“Archers in the trees,” Tallan supplied for him, voice barely audible. “Take out as many as we can before they know what’s happening, then Ionna and I will move in.”

That was a good plan. Idhren nodded in agreement. Then an idea occurred to him. “Wait,” he said, stopping them all before they could move. “Do that, but… Let me talk to them first.”

“What signal?”

Idhren hesitated a moment before answering, “When I start killing people.”

The hunters were swift to get into position, three archers in the trees and two rogues on the ground with Idhren, all six of them spread around the outside of the camp. Idhren took a deep breath to steel himself and stepped into the clearing, comfortably aware of Tainan’s presence in the trees at his back.

“Salve,” he greeted in Tevene, drawing the attention of the entire camp with a single word. The greeting was returned with surprise, cursing, and a number of weapons pointed in his direction. Idhren did his best to remain calm, and to appear unfazed.

“Where’d you come from, elf?” a man asked, pointing a long knife in Idhren’s direction as he approached slowly. “Here to join your friend?”

“Qui habet aures audiendi audiat,” Idhren continued, to the great confusion of the slavers. He expected they had never met an elf who spoke Tevene. He held one hand up in a placating gesture. The other remained firm on his staff. “I’m here to negotiate.”

“Negotiate?” the same man scoffed and sneered at Idhren. “We don’t negotiate with elves. Unless you’re gonna tell us where the rest of you lot are?”

“If you release my clansman I’ll let you go peacefully,” Idhren lied smoothly. It was unnerving how easily the act he had worn in Tevinter came back to him. How easy it could be to ignore the anger burning in his gut and lie with a blank face and a pleasant smile even as he wanted to rip the man apart with his bare hands.

“Will you, now?” the slaver let his eyes run up and down Idhren’s form. Idhren was well aware of how unthreatening he probably looked, and he was hoping to use that to his advantage. “Bet a pretty thing like you’d fetch a nice price at the markets,” the man leered, “Sell you for some magister’s pet.”

The tone of his voice made Idhren’s skin crawl, and set the smoldering rage in his gut into an inferno. The threads of his self control snapped in an instant. “Wrong answer.” Faster than any of the slavers could react, Idhren swung his staff and sent a barrage of lightning skittering outwards, arcing
across the ground and hitting the three men closest to him. They fell seizing to the ground. Seconds later an arrow sprouted from the chest of another man, who could only stare at the feathered shaft in confusion before collapsing dead as another lodged into his skull. There was a scream from the edge of camp, and from the corner of his eye Idhren saw Ionna streak into the clearing, a blade in each hand and already bloody.

Idhren lost track of the others almost immediately. They were still outnumbered, though the sudden attack from all sides threw the slavers into confusion. Idhren was quick to take advantage of their disorder. He sent fire and lightning into their midst, sparking panic in several as their clothes and the tents caught fire. A woman rushed at him from the side and Idhren saw her too soon to fire off spell. The shout on her lips died in a bloody gurgle as the bladed end of his staff cut easily through her leather jerkin and into her chest. A pulse of electricity through the metal staff finished her, her lifeless corpse slipping off the blade to crumple at his feet.

Idhren’s heart thundered with adrenaline, with the power flowing through him. The first time in years he hadn’t been forced to hold back. And he lost himself in it; in the power, the adrenaline, and the rage, at times expending far more mana than was necessary for a spell just to watch the lightning arc farther, a barrier shine brighter, a sigil explode higher.

It was over all too soon.

Idhren found himself standing, winded, palms sweaty, not far from the center of the slaver camp with no one else to fight. Still tensed and ready, Idhren’s eyes scanned the scene in search for another threat, but there was none. Most of the slavers were dead, the rest unconscious or bleeding out. The camp was in ruins, a scorched, smoldering wreck. Idhren’s flames had licked even at the tree line before he remembered to smother them. At some point someone had gotten Aeryth out of that cage because it now stood empty. A moment of panic as Idhren feared the slavers had taken revenge on her during the confusion. But then he saw her, huddled in the treeline with Rowan and Ionna, and allowed himself to relax.

“Idhren!”

The shout startled him like a spooked halla, but it was only Tainan. The hunter dropped down from a tree to Idhren’s left and raced across the blackened ground to his side. “Are you alright?”

“I’m alright,” Idhren assured them. Not injured at least. “The others?”

“Not sure yet, but everyone’s on their feet,” Tainan replied.

“Good,” Idhren breathed a sigh of relief. “We should… We should get out of here.” He tried to take a step away from the carnage, but as soon as he did a wave of dizziness overcame him. Stumbling, Idhren almost fell, saved only by Tainan’s quick reflexes, a hand catching his arm and lowering him gently to the ground. As the adrenaline wore off Idhren realized he was exhausted. He had expended far too much mana. It had been so long since he’d done magic like that. He was out of shape. No, he had been reckless.

“Are you alright?” Tainan asked in concern, crouching before him.

“Yes,” Idhren assured them again. “Just tired. Too much magic.” He felt like he could barely catch his breath. “Some lyrium would be nice right now.”

“Sorry, we don’t have any,” Tainan said, “Doubt they did, either.”

“I just need to rest for a bit,” Idhren said, and tried to offer Tainan a reassuring smile. He was certain
it showed just how exhausted he was, though. “I think I got a little carried away,” he joked weakly.

Tainan chuckled softly. “Maybe,” they agreed. “But it was amazing. I’ve never seen anyone do magic like that. You could have taken them all by yourself, don’t think you needed us at all.”

“I’m not that good,” Idhren argued, feeling his face heat up in embarrassment. He knew he was good, but people in Tevinter didn’t spare time to compliment elves. In fact, any properly trained mage would probably scold him for his lack of control. To have overextended himself like this was a childish mistake.

“Well, I was impressed,” Tainan said. When Idhren met their eyes there was a heat behind them that made him blush all the more and look away again. So Tainan liked magic. Or maybe they just liked showing off. Either way: good to know.

Filing that information away for later investigation, Idhren took in the scene around them one more time. He watched as Junnar slit the throat of the last surviving slaver, wiped the blood from his knife, and then approach where Idhren and Tainan were seated. “They’re all dead,” he reported.

“Good,” Idhren replied. And he meant it. Good riddance. The world was better off without their kind. It wouldn’t end slavery as a whole, but it would save dozens of elves from a life in chains. And that had to be good enough for him. “See if they have anything worth taking, then we should go rendezvous with the clan.”

Junnar nodded curtly and left them alone again, heading off to riffle through the slavers’ belongings. “Rendezvous…” Tainan tried out the word on their tongue curiously.

“It means ‘meet’,” Idhren sighed.

“Well why not just say that?” Tainan complained good naturedly.

That night it rained.

The small rescue party was forced to make camp alone, with little shelter other than the trees and a couple blankets scavenged from the slaver encampment. Those were tied to branches to form a weak shelter from the downpour, under which Aeryth huddled. Her ankle had been badly wretched when she was captured, and despite Istimaethoriel’s additional tutelage Idhren could do no more than ease the pain and provide ice to lessen the swelling.

His magic was at least useful in building a fire, though. Drying out the wood and getting a spark to catch was not difficult, and a simple barrier arched over the flames kept the rain from putting them out.

Idhren sat beside the campfire, knees pulled up to his chest, cloak bundled around himself, and face turned up toward the sky. With his eyes closed Idhren let the raindrops fall heavy on his face, plastering his hair to his skull and numbing the tips of his ears and nose with cold.

“You’ll catch your death like that,” Tainan commented. The hunter was seated at his side, one knee and shoulder pressed up against Idhren’s. “At least that’s what the Keeper told me when I was little.”

Idhren didn’t reply. Didn’t open his eyes. Just continued to let the rain pour down on him, soothing
in its own way. As though it could wash away all the thoughts that clouded his mind.

“Hey,” Tainan’s voice broke through again, softer, gentler. “You alright, city boy?”

Slowly Idhren opened his eyes and tilted his head back down. “I don’t know,” he answered quietly.

“What’s wrong?” Tainan asked.

Stalling for time, Idhren pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head to keep from getting drenched even further. He really was freezing. “In Vyramnia it rains in the summer,” he murmured.

“Thunderstorms.” Tainan raised an eyebrow curiously, but patiently waited for Idhren to get to the point. Endlessly patient. Idhren didn’t deserve them. “I loved them. I used to sit at my window at night to watch the lightning. When I was still a slave I would sneak outside to watch them. Of course I came back drenched and Alvinius knew exactly what I’d been doing. He would scold me, but he never told the magister.”

That was one of very few untainted happy memories from Idhren’s youth. But standing there in the cold rain on a warm summer night watching lightning flash across the sky was one of the only times Idhren ever felt truly free.

“The slavers,” he continued thoughtfully after a long pause. “Just hearing about them made me furious. I haven’t been that angry in… years.” He wasn’t proud of it. Regardless of whether Tainan had been impressed by the display, Idhren knew it had been childish and petty. And selfish. He had put himself, Tainan, and the rest of the hunters in danger because he couldn’t control his emotions. “I… wanted them to suffer. And I wanted them to know a slave did it.”

“You’re not a slave anymore, Idhren,” Tainan said softly.

“I know that,” Idhren replied, a bit more forcefully than necessary. “But in Tevinter… Even when I was free that was all the magisters and their ilk ever saw. Liberati,” he spat, “That’s all I’ll ever be to people like them. I spent so long hating those people I just wanted… I just wanted them to suffer like I suffered.”

“Do you feel better, now they’re dead?” Tainan asked.

“No,” Idhren slumped, defeated, against the hunter’s side. Tainan wrapped an arm around Idhren’s shoulders, bundling both of them in their own cloak. “That’s the worst part,” Idhren mumbled, turning into the warmth of Tainan’s body, “I don’t feel better at all.”

Tainan’s arm tightened around his shoulder briefly. “I’m sorry,” they murmured, “I wish I knew how to help.”

“It’s alright,” Idhren mumbled. He couldn’t expect Tainan to fix all of his problems. Maker knew the hunter had already done more than Idhren could ever repay, and mostly through the simple act of offering sympathy and understanding. Two things that his life had been sorely lacking in Tevinter. “I wish I could put it all behind me,” he said. “I thought I had… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have forced you all to come, I could have gotten us all killed.”

“You didn’t force anyone,” Tainan assured him. “No one wanted to leave Aeryth to those men.”

“I was reckless,” Idhren shook his head. “I put us all in danger. Just for some petty revenge that didn’t even change anything. Canidius always said I was too emotional,” he recalled bitterly.

“Fuck Canidius,” Tainan growled with a ferocity that startled Idhren. “You’re not in Tevinter anymore, Idhren, you don’t have to be who they wanted you to be.”
Idhren knew that. Logically, he knew that. Would he have ever taken up with someone like Tainan in Tevinter? Would he have ever met anyone like Tainan while confined to magisters’ estates and libraries and brothels? Unlikely. Already he was not the same person he had been when he left. The Dalish had given him hope, and a chance to start anew. There was a freedom here that he’d never known before. But the expectations, the pressures he had lived under for his entire life, the lessons ingrained into him since birth, were not so easily brushed off. “I’m not sure I know how to be anyone else.”

“Just be yourself,” Tainan urged gently. “You don’t have to think about it so hard.”

“Be myself,” Idhren repeated slowly. It sounded so simple. Canidius had wanted him to be the perfect, obedient apprentice; perfect manners, perfect diction, polite and demure and non-offensive. A pretty, mindless doll to parade around in front of his peers. And Idhren had played the part as perfectly as was demanded. He had always held back until his control was pulled so tight it finally snapped. Like today. “You think I should simply… stop caring what other people think?” Stop trying to be the perfect apprentice for Istimaethoriel, the perfect First for the clan, the perfect mage, the perfect lover. So that everyone would like him, accept him, love him.

Tevinter still held him more tightly than he was willing to admit.

“If caring makes you miserable, then yes,” Tainan replied.

“How do I do that?” Idhren asked, partly to himself.

Tainan shrugged, and Idhren felt it where their bodies touched. “Not sure,” the hunter admitted. “But I’ll help.”

Chapter End Notes

All the Dalish hunters in this scene belong to my lovely tumblr followers who graciously offered them up to me.

Credits:
Aeryth & Ionna - @aeradae
Falos - @runningwolf62
Junnar - @somepeoplethinkimgoodatthings
Rowan - @stupendousbadasses
Tallan - @dirtyhecker
But the Lady took my hands from my eyes,
Saying, "Remember the fire. You must pass
Through it alone to be forged anew."

- Canticle of Exaltations 1:10

Free Marches, 9:40 Dragon

Idhren got his vallaslin on a dreary Wintermarch day after weeks of contemplation, deliberation, and meditation. Istimaethoriel explained the ritual to him in almost nauseating detail, Tainan in vague expressions and remembered feelings.

It hurt less than Idhren had been expecting, but it still hurt significantly. Idhren bore it in silence, as was required, but only just barely. What made it worse was the sheer duration of the ritual. Thousands of pinpricks into the flesh of his face over the course of hours. And Idhren had a relatively simple design tattooed onto his face, whereas many in the clan had much more elaborate designs. Tainan had ink on their lips and around their eyes. Idhren didn’t think he could have borne that.

In the immediate aftermath he could do little more than lie in bed and try to ignore the pain. Istimaethoriel has smeared his face with some sort of ointment that smelled strongly of elfroot and embrium that had been soothingly cool when she put it on, but its effects were slowly wearing off. And Idhren didn’t even know what it looked like. The polished metal mirror wasn’t clear enough to make out details. Although it probably didn’t look very flattering right now anyway. The tattoos were across his forehead, down his nose, and onto his chin. Idhren was certain the area was now red and swollen. It certainly felt that way. Not attractive in the slightest. So he would just hide in here until the swelling went down in a day or two.

No such luck.

It was probably only hours after Idhren had crawled into bed that he heard the aravel door creak open. At first Idhren thought it was Istimethoriel returning and ignored it, and then a quiet voice asked hesitantly, “Are you awake?”

No. No. Tainan was the absolute last person he wanted to see him looking like this. “Go away,” Idhren said, and rolled onto his side to face the wall. It was less comfortable than lying on his back, but he’d been through worse.

“Don’t be like that,” Tainan sighed sympathetically, “I brought food and this stuff for your face.”

Oh, that sounded nice, actually. Idhren hadn’t eaten a thing since lunch the day before – part of the ritual tradition – and he was starving. And more of that ointment might make his face feel better. “Just leave it at the door.”
“Oh, come on,” Tainan beseeched, ignoring Idhren’s request entirely and climbing into the aravel. “I know you’re probably just grouchy because it hurts, right?” Maybe. It did hurt, and Idhren felt even less attractive than he usually did – his face was the one part of his appearance that he actually liked. “It’s really… it just hurts,” Tainan mused, coming to sit behind where Idhren was curled up, “I remember that much. Come here, let me put more of this herb stuff on, that’ll help.”

It probably would help, but that would entail turning around and letting Tainan look at him. Idhren hadn’t felt this self-conscious in front of Tainan since the first time they’d had sex. “No,” he mumbled.

“No?” Tainan repeated in confusion. Slowly, they began to catch on that it wasn’t just the pain making Idhren temperamental. “What’s wrong? Do you… Do you regret doing it?”

“No,” Idhren said quickly. Getting his vallaslin was a sign that Idhren was finally being accepted as a true member of the clan. Idhren had longed for that, and even put off the ritual once before for fear some members of the clan wouldn’t like it. Some probably wouldn’t, but Istimaethoriel and Tainan and so many others accepted him despite his upbringing, so he didn’t care about the rest. So of course he was proud, but he was also self-conscious. “What if it doesn’t look good?” he asked quietly.

“I’m sure it’ll look fine,” Tainan assured. “I know it’s probably all red and uncomfortable right now, but when it’s healed it’ll look fine. The Keeper knows what she’s doing.”

“But it looks bad now,” Idhren mumbled.

“Is that the problem?” Tainan asked as understanding dawned on them. Idhren heard the hunter put down whatever they were holding and move even closer to him, until they were leaning over him to try and see his face. “Idhren, I’m not going to stop liking you just because your face is kinda swollen right now. I helped last winter when you ran out of herbs, didn’t I?”

That was true. Only the third time in Idhren’s life that he’d bled, and he’d been just as much an emotional wreck as the first two. But where Tainan could have left or ignored it and made Idhren deal with it on his own, they had instead done everything in their power to make Idhren feel better. Compared to how unpleasant that must have been, this was nothing.

“Please let me see?” Tainan beseeched softly. They bent to press a kiss to the tip of Idhren’s ear, and that was what finally broke his resolve.

He was tired and hungry and his face hurt and despite the pride he felt Idhren was ultimately rather miserable at the moment. He rolled over onto his back and looked up at Tainan, pouting as much as the discomfort would allow.

The hunter smiled down at him, “There you are,” they murmured. Tainan’s eyes ran over his face, taking in the newly inked lines. “Dirthamen,” they recognized, “I’m not at all surprised.” They bent down again and pressed a feather-light kiss to Idhren’s cheek. The one part of his face that didn’t sting. “And it looks perfect.”

“Even red and swollen?” Idhren asked.

“Even red and swollen,” Tainan confirmed. “But I can help with that,” they offered, and snatched up a small pot of ointment. Idhren recognized the strong smell of elfroot and embrium as the same Istimaethoriel had slathered on his face when the procedure was done. “Do you want medicine or food first?”
“Medicine,” Idhren answered after a moment of thought.

“Good choice.” Tainan’s fingers dipped into the ointment, then unceremoniously smoothed it across Idhren’s forehead, a swipe down the bridge of his nose, and a dallop on his chin. Idhren squeezed his eyes shut and even attempted to hold his breath – an attempt that didn’t last long. Although the mixture immediately eased the stinging, it smelled so strong that it blocked out everything else to an almost nauseating level. “There,” Tainan announced when finished, capping the pot of ointment again and setting it aside. “Feel better?”

“A little,” Idhren replied.

Tainan smiled, and as they did Idhren couldn’t help but stare at the lines inked on their face. Tainan’s vallaslin was more complex than the one Idhren had eventually chosen. Thick lines framed their face, a stylized depiction of bow and arrow that was so perfectly fitting. In comparison, the thin lines and dots along Idhren’s brow and nose were barely anything. And yet he was complaining.

“Now food,” Tainan said cheerfully, oblivious to Idhren’s thoughts. Ointment set aside, they picked up the other bowl and held it out to Idhren. “You’ve been in here all day, you must be starving.”

Idhren was, as his stomach was happy to remind him as soon as he set eyes on the food. He couldn’t smell it, of course, but his stomach still rumbled embarrassingly loud to remind him just how long he’d been without food. The bowl was filled with an assortment of roasted root vegetables topped with a hearty dollop of halla butter, as well as several strips of dried meat. It was about all the clan had to offer in the dead of winter, and Idhren dug in eagerly.

“You know,” Tainan commented thoughtfully. “This means we can get married now.”

Idhren choked on his food. Tainan laughed and rubbed his back through the coughing fit.

It took three weeks for the tattoos on Idhren’s face to heal completely. He had eventually been obligated to leave the aravel and be seen in public. But at least he’d managed to delay it until the swelling and redness were less pronounced. It was a silly thing to be self-conscious about. Every adult in the clan had gone through the same thing and knew exactly how much it hurt and how long it took to heal.

He felt as though he had finally put all of Tevinter behind him. He was properly Dalish now. For better or for worse.

And life went on as usual. What, over the past few years, Idhren had grown to consider ‘normal’.

Normal was, of course, by no means easy. Life with the Dalish never had been, even after Idhren got used to living outdoors, and the strange food, and the lack of a proper bed or regular baths. And the lack of alcohol or lyrium. But recently it seemed as though the clan couldn’t set up camp for more than a week without running into some trouble.

It was worse close to settlements. Idhren made the mistake of venturing into a small village with a couple of the clan’s craftsmen to trade for supplies. Passing the small ramshackle Chantry, one of the sisters had recognized his staff for more than just a walking stick and screamed. She shouted warnings about the ‘dangers of magic’, cursed him a sinner, and incited enough of the townsfolk to fear that the elves were driven from the village before completing their business.
It was the first time Idhren had truly been faced with the full force of southern prejudices against magic. He was only lucky the village’s few templars had apparently deserted months ago; gone south to ‘suppress the mage rebellion’.

That night he curled up in Tainan’s arms and swore he’d never set foot in a human town again.

Istimaethoriel kept the clan away from humans as much as possible, but eventually they were forced to attempt contact again. They camped within sight of the city of Wycome. They hadn’t been so close to a major city in several months. Idhren did his best to ignore the city as he went about his daily chores, but it loomed on the horizon, a constant potential threat, an unpleasant reminder.

The craftsmen were gone for two days, returning with sacks of grain, salt, and herbs. And news from the human world.

Bad news.

Istimaethoriel sought out Idhren after a long, hushed discussion with the men who had gone into the city. “The news they brought is concerning,” she explained, leading him to the edges of camp so they would not be overheard. “We know that there have been more mages fleeing the Chantry’s Circles since the trouble in Kirkwall, and more Templars on the roads seeking them.” The Keeper seemed troubled as she spoke. Her gaze did not meet Idhren’s eyes, but stared into the middle distance, brow furrowed and expression dark. “It seems the mages have now officially left the Chantry, the Circles are disbanded.”

“Good for them,” Idhren couldn’t suppress a small smile. Though he had never seen a southern Circle, save from afar, he had seen what southerners thought of mages in general. And he had heard stories. There were rumors in Tevinter about what the southern Circles were like – prisons rather than schools, mages locked up and guarded and never allowed outside. Then, since coming south, and when he still dared venture into cities, Idhren had only heard those rumors confirmed. Whispers of children stolen from their homes, and of what had happened in Kirkwall. It reminded Idhren far too much of slavery, and if the mages here had managed to escape that then he was happy for them.

“I would agree with you,” Istimaethoriel said doubtfully, “Except they are saying that the Templars have broken from the Chantry as well, and intend to bring the mages to heel however possible.”

That was not good. The smile faded from Idhren’s face immediately. He remembered vividly his first encounter with a southern Templar, how the soldiers had attacked him on sight, tried to kill him, no questions asked merely because they saw he was a mage and outside one of their prison Circles. “They’ll hunt them down like animals,” he breathed in horror.

“And the mages will fight back,” Istimaethoriel added. “And the countryside will burn if no one puts a stop to this.”

War. The reality of it had not sunk in until that moment. A handful of mages running for freedom and a handful of Templars in pursuit was one thing. People had already been calling that a rebellion, but this was the true revolt. Idhren had never seen a slave revolt, there had not been one in Vyrantium in his lifetime, but he had heard of them. They cropped up from time to time, sometimes small and sometimes large, usually several years in between. The stories were always the same. A group of slaves banded together, attacked their keepers and demanded freedom, then the Imperial troops arrived, executed every slave involved and likely some that were not. When the mess was cleaned up life went on as though nothing had happened.

That’s what was happening here.
“What do we do?” Idhren asked. Isolate the clan even further? Wait until it all blew over? Would it ever blow over? If it didn’t, what then?

“We will find a way,” Istimaethoriel said, as though she could sense his fear. Or perhaps it showed on his face. “But that is not all. If the news from the city is correct, the Chantry is already attempting to find a solution. The head of the Chantry; the Divine,” she said the word as though she was uncertain it was the correct one, “Has called for peace talks.”

“Peace talks?” Idhren repeated, incredulous. The southern Chantry certainly did run itself different from what he was used to. In Tevinter rebellions were put down hard and fast and bloody. Although, without their Templar army he supposed the Chantry lacked the strength to do anything by force. “At least they’re trying to do something.”

“Indeed,” Istimaethoriel agreed. “A Conclave has been arranged in the mountains of Ferelden, neutral ground of some significance to their religion, as I understand. Idhren,” she paused and met his eyes, her expression deathly serious. “Whatever decision is reached at this gathering will have profound repercussions,” Istimaethoriel added earnestly. “I would rather not learn of that decision through rumor, or worse. You are my First, but more than that, you are familiar with human culture. I would not trust this task to anyone else.”

It took only a moment to understand what she meant. “You want me to go there,” Idhren finished for her. “This Conclave. You want me to attend.”

“I do,” the Keeper replied solemnly. “Though perhaps ‘attend’ is too strong a word. I doubt they would allow a Dalish elf in to their official proceedings. I want you to go and observe, and listen, and when the shemlen come to a decision about this war I want you to return to us.”

Idhren hesitated; he frowned and looked down at the ground as he considered her request. He had left human society behind, thought himself done with it completely and divested himself of anything that still tied him to that life save a tiny handful of keepsakes. Now she was asking him to return. Idhren’s immediate visceral reaction told him to refuse, to snap at her, to demand why he should care about human politics and be furious that she was sending him away. But logically, he knew exactly why she was asking him and exactly why he could not refuse. This was important. The escalating hostilities had spread across the entire Free Marches, and further south according to rumor. It kept their clan even more isolated than usual. It had been months since they had dared come close enough to a city to gather news and trade for supplies. If the southern Divine was hosting peace talks then the war might finally be over. Or the rebel mages might find themselves on the receiving end of an Exalted March. Either way, the clan needed to know in order to keep themselves safe.

“I’ll do it,” Idhren answered finally, raising his gaze up from the ground again. “I’ll go.”

“That’s great,” Tainan exclaimed when Idhren told them. “I’m happy for you.”

“I’ll do it,” Idhren answered finally, raising his gaze up from the ground again. “I’ll go.”
deserved it more, having been born into this clan, and she’d always been at least a little bitter at him for taking the position from her.

Tainan let out a huff of annoyance. “That’s not the point and you know it.”

“And you know exactly why she’s sending me,” Idhren shot back. “I grew up among humans. I understand Chantry politics and I know how to play their stupid games. I still have a little money left from Tevinter, I can buy myself clothes that are less Dalish and passage across the Waking Sea. Even with my vallaslin I should be able to pass myself off as a Circle mage if I get into any trouble, but I doubt that’ll happen. I used to be very good at being ignored.”

“And you realize you’ll be going to Ferelden, into the mountains. In the middle of winter,” Tainan reminded him. As though Idhren didn’t know.

“So I’ll buy a heavier coat,” Idhren shrugged. “I got myself here on my own, I think I can get to Ferelden and back.”

“Have you forgotten there’s a war going on?” Tainan exclaimed. “And you’ll be walking right into the heart of it.”

Idhren had had enough. Tainan was going to find a reason to argue no matter what Idhren said. It was so unusual for them to be so argumentative and Idhren couldn’t understand it at all. “Tainan,” he stopped and spun to face his lover, hands on his hips as he frowned up at the hunter, “What are you so upset about?”

“The Keeper is sending you alone into a war zone when there are still Templars out there that will kill a mage on sight,” Tainan exclaimed. “How am I supposed to feel about that?”

Tainan’s expression was twisted with such dismay. Idhren had never seen them so upset before and suddenly he realized: they were worried. Tainan was worried about him going alone into potential danger. Tainan was worried for his safety. Even after years here, years with Tainan, Idhren still sometimes struggled with the idea that anyone genuinely cared about him. “Carus,” Idhren sighed, all the annoyance bled out of him, leaving him visibly deflated. “I have to do this. I want to do this,” he stressed. “Yes, it will be dangerous, but this is the world I know. These politics and power struggles. I’ll understand it better than anyone else.”

“What do you care about shemlen politics?” Tainan asked. “You don’t live there anymore.”

“Whatever is decided at this meeting could affect the entire world,” Idhren tried to explain. “If they reinstate the Circles, or if they disband them forever, it’ll affect us, too.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Tainan grumbled.

“Now you’re just being childish,” Idhren sighed. “What do you want from me?”

“I don’t want you to go,” Tainan said earnestly.

“Well the Keeper asked and I agreed,” Idhren replied stubbornly. “There’s nothing you can do about it now.”

“You didn’t even ask me before you made that decision,” Tainan argued back.

“Well I didn’t realize you were going to be so irrational about it,” Idhren snapped. He understood that Tainan was worried, but they were being so childish, so hypocritical. Tainan went off on their own frequently, sometimes gone for days on a hunting trip, and Idhren worried about them every
single time, but he never demanded Tainan stop.

“How am I being irrational?” Tainan demanded.

“You’re being a fucking hypocrite,” Idhren shot back.

Tainan tensed, “I’m not a – whatever that is,” they argued. Idhren saw the flash of confusion and hurt in Tainan’s eyes and knew he had crossed a line. “Fine, take your fancy Tevinter words and go to Ferelden, see if I care.” The Tainan whirled around and stalked away, leaving Idhren standing forlornly between the aravels, apologies dying on the tip of his tongue.

Tainan disappeared into the forest and was gone all night. Idhren barely slept. He sat at the door wrapped up in blankets waiting for Tainan to return until well past midnight. His mind kept going over and over what he should say to apologize. How could he make this right? The last thing that Idhren wanted was to leave with Tainan angry at him. But he would have to leave soon – a matter of days – because it would take weeks to reach the remote town where the peace talks were being held.

Pure exhaustion eventually drove him inside and into bed, where he slept restlessly, mind still plagued with worries, until the sound of the door creaking open woke him. It was barely dawn. The light outside the door was still dim, the forest around the camp still and quiet as Tainan came crawling in.

Idhren sat up, letting the blankets pool around his waist. He said nothing, uncertain what he could say. Was Tainan still angry? But he had spent all night worrying, and it was good to at least see his lover home and unharmed.

Tainan said nothing, either, as they came inside. Their bow was hung on its wall pegs, quiver stashed in the corner by the door, and then Tainan sat cross legged before Idhren, gaze fixed on the floor between them. For a long moment the pair of them sat in silence, neither knowing what to say or how to bridge the gap that had formed between them. They had never argued before. Not about something serious.

Finally, with a small frustrated noise, Tainan reached into a small pouch on their belt and pulled something out. For a breath they did nothing but clasp it in their fist, a brief hesitation, and then held out their hand to Idhren. "Here."

Uncertain, Idhren slowly reached out to take whatever it was that Tainan offered, holding out his hands silently. The item that Tainan dropped onto his waiting palms was small, weighing barely anything. Idhren blinked at it, studying what he soon realized was an arrowhead. It was carved of bone, he thought, with a length of leather cord wrapped around the divots that would usually hold it to an arrow. It was a necklace, he realized with some surprise.

"It's supposed to be for good luck," Tainan explained, voice mumbled and eyes still fixed firmly on the floor. "I carved it from halla horn, for Ghilan’naín. And the arrowhead is for Andruil. And because it's the only thing I'm good at making. I know Mythal would be better but I couldn't make a dragon or a tree, I’d just mess it up."

Idhren stared down at the necklace in his hands. For good luck, Tainan had said. Ghilan’naín was prayed to for a safe journey.
"I thought about it," Tainan continued. "I thought about it a long time. And I'm still not happy about it, I still don't want you to go, but I know why the Keeper wants you to go. I only... I don't want you to get hurt. And I'm scared... I know living here is so much different from what you were used to. I know you still don't like it sometimes. I'm scared that if you go, maybe you won't want to come back."

Idhren was struck speechless. He could not believe what he was hearing. His chest felt tight and his throat caught as he opened his mouth and nothing came out. His first two attempts to speak were aborted before they could even produce sound. What was he supposed to say to that? "Tainan," he managed finally, "Carus," the Tevene endearment slipped off his tongue and suddenly it felt so ill-fitting Idhren wished he'd never started using it. "I..." But he still didn't know what to say. Reassurance that he would come back? That he would be safe? Idhren could not promise that, because there was always the possibility that something horrible would happen. Something beyond his control. So instead he merely said, “Thank you,” and wrapped his fingers around the necklace.

Tainan simply nodded and the silence stretched between them, awkward and painful.

“You know I’ll be careful, right?” Idhren asked when the silence became unbearable.

Tainan nodded again, but remained silent.

It was maddening. Far more upsetting than an actual argument. To see his usually cheerful lover sitting there slumped, defeated, unwilling to meet his eyes. Locks of Tainan’s hair had come free from their plaits overnight and obscured his view of their face. “Tainan, please,” Idhren’s voice was tight. He clutched the necklace in one hand and left the bed, crawling over to where Tainan sat. “I’ll be careful, I promise. I can keep my head down, I won’t cause any trouble or give anyone a reason to hurt me.”

“I know you won’t,” Tainan mumbled, and it was such a relief to hear them say anything. “I know you’ll do everything you can, I still... I just don’t like that you’ll be going off alone and I’ll be stuck sitting here worrying about you for weeks and not knowing what’s going on or if you’re safe or anything.” Tainan’s voice cracked on the last word and they immediately went silent again, swallowing back the lump in their throat.

Tainan was on the verge of tears, but Idhren hadn’t noticed because he couldn’t see their face. He felt his heart break, realizing just how much this was upsetting them. “Tainan,” he breathed, and cautiously moved even closer, crouching before them. He was hesitant to reach out, but did so anyway, wrapping slender arms around the hunter’s broad shoulders. “Tai, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Tainan mumbled. Their arms came up and wrapped around Idhren’s waist, fisting in the fabric of his shirt and pulling him closer, closer, until Idhren was all but sitting in their lap. Then the hunter hid their face against his neck.

It was, a little bit. Idhren had agreed so easily, he could have put up more of a fight. He should have thought about Tainan before answering. And it wasn’t like he actually wanted to go off to some frozen mountaintop full of Chantry fanatics. “I don’t really want to go, you know,” he said quietly. “I do, because it’s important, but... I wanted to get away from all that, from all the politics and stupid arguments and people calling me ‘knife-ear’. But I’m a mage, and I was a slave and this... They just want freedom, Tai. That’s important to me.”

And it was, more than he’d realized before. Even though he’d never been in a southern Circle, he cared about the mages who were. They wanted freedom, to live life on their own terms. Idhren wanted the same thing.
“The same as you,” Tainan murmured. Idhren could feel their breath against his neck.

“Yeah,” Idhren replied. “I wanted freedom, and I found it. I found you. And I’m happy here. For the first time in my life, I’m really happy.”

“Because of me?” Tainan’s voice was still thick with emotion, but it was more hopeful now. They were beginning to sound more like themselves.

“Because of you,” Idhren confirmed, turning his face into Tainan’s hair. “I don’t want to leave you.” He truly didn’t. Even though he hadn’t loved it at first, Idhren considered the clan his home. This was where he wanted to be, and he had no desire to leave, especially on his own.

If he was being perfectly honest with himself, he was afraid. It had been a long time since he was truly immersed in human society, and he had worked so hard to get over all the things it had taught him. What would happen when he was in the thick of it again? Would all those buried habits come back to the front? Would he be able to be invisible again? Listen to people insult him without showing how much it hurt? Pretend to be demure and polite to keep himself safe?

Could he keep that promise of keeping his head down and not causing trouble?

Could he do it alone?

Did he have to do it alone?

“Tainan,” Idhren said, pulling away from the hunter’s tight embrace to try and look at their face. “The Keeper… She never said I had to go alone,” he realized.

Tainan looked up for the first time since coming into the aravel. Their eyes were wide, rimmed in red and lashes damp, but cheeks dry. “You don’t have to go alone?” they asked, and Idhren could practically see their mind process this information before reaching the inevitable conclusion: “I could go with you!”

“I would have to ask,” Idhren said quickly. He didn’t want to get Tainan’s hopes up. “I will ask.”

Tainan was smiling already, though. It was too late. “And that would be alright with you?”

“Of course,” Idhren replied. He didn’t want to go alone any more than Tainan wanted him to.

The smile broke into a grin. “Then I will. No matter what the Keeper says, I’m going with you.”

Istimaethoriel had no problem whatsoever with Tainan accompanying Idhren on his mission. In fact, she seemed almost amused that they had bothered to ask. Perhaps she had assumed it would happen regardless of her wishes, or perhaps she had planned to send the hunter along as well. Either way, it seemed the pair had caused themselves a lot of grief for no reason. Still, Idhren was glad it had worked out in the end, and he still wore Tainan’s good luck charm, tied around his neck and tucked safely under his shirt.

It was nearly the turning of the year, by Chantry reckoning, when they departed the clan and headed into Wycome to begin their journey. Istimaethoriel promised to keep the clan in the area, so long as it was safe, until their return. Idhren hoped they would not be gone long.
They packed what supplies would be necessary for the trip, minus what Tainan would be able to
hunt and gather on the road, as well as all the money and valuables Idhren had left from Tevinter. It
was not much. Idhren had already spent the majority of his money simply leaving the country, and
small expenditures over the years had further depleted his funds. The clan also offered up what they
could, small trinkets that might be sold in the market for a few extra coppers. With this, and Idhren’s
incredibly rusty negotiating skills, the pair was eventually able to book passage on a ship headed for
Ferelden.

It was a cargo ship, not intended for passengers. Idhren and Tainan were put up in the cargo hold
along with crates and barrels, with no proper beds and only bread and water to sustain them. It was
not ideal. But there were very few captains willing to take two practically penniless Dalish elves
onboard for the five day voyage to Denerim.

Idhren spent the first two days of that voyage curled up on the bedroll he and Tainan shared trying
not to lose the contents of his stomach. It was only the second time in his life he had been on a ship,
and his stomach didn’t agree with it any more than the first time. Tainan stayed by his side, wary of
the human crew and of leaving Idhren alone. So when they finally docked and set foot on solid
ground again it was a relief.

From Denerim they headed westward along the old Imperial highway. In the dead of winter the
roads were largely abandoned. But they were not the only ones headed for Haven, the tiny mountain
town where the Divine’s Conclave would be held. They passed pilgrims on the road. Mages,
Templars, anyone with an interest in stopping the fighting. Sometimes they shared a campfire and
offered news, but not often. Idhren was wary to trust even the mages, and Tainan was
overprotective, shuffling them off the road any time a Templar passed.

‘Keep your head down. Don’t cause trouble.
Just like Tevinter.

Idhren hated this already.

The air grew colder as they roads began to climb upward into the mountains. Idhren was glad he had
invested in new boots the year before. He wished he had been able to coerce Tainan to do the same
as they trudged along dirt tracks turned to mud and slush by the snow.

Haven was small. Tiny, even. But it was crowded with pilgrims of all sorts. Mages, Templars,
Chantry priests, nobility, commoners, soldiers, merchants. By human standards it wasn’t even a dot
on most maps. Compared to the Dalish clan’s camp, however, it was massive.

That first night Tainan pitched their tent outside the town, away from the bustle, where they could
stay out of the way and unnoticed. Avoid being mistaken for servants. That had already happened
once on the road.

‘There’s so many people here,’” Tainan mused, awe in their voice. Sitting beside the campfire, they
stared out toward the village below them. There were people milling about between the buildings
even as the sun went down over the mountains. “You know, I think I saw a Qunari.”

“If they’re here, they’re probably not a proper Qunari,” Idhren replied, though stranger things had
been known to happen.

“That’s not the point,” Tainan argued. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many different people all in
one place. Have you?”
“I don’t think so,” Idhren said. He wished he could be as excited about it as Tainan, instead all these people just made him nervous.

“So where do you think all the talking is happening?” Tainan asked, eyes sweeping over the village. “That building’s really big,” they said, pointing out the Chantry hall.

Actually a fairly small Chantry, as far as Idhren was concerned. And not large or ostentatious enough for anything as official as these peace talks. “Further up the mountain, I think,” Idhren said thoughtfully. He had been watching the town, trying to figure out exactly that since they’d arrived. “There have been people coming up and down that path all day.” He pointed toward a path on the opposite side of town that wound up into the hills. “Tomorrow I want to go up there and see what’s happening. I don’t think we’ll learn much just sitting around here.”

Tainan followed where Idhren was pointing and hummed thoughtfully. “You’re probably right. Much more secret up there, without all these people around. Good idea.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Idhren decided.

End Act I

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the end of Act I of this fic. Next month we'll venture into Act II, and I'm certain you all know what that will entail. I'm working on this fic again for NaNoWriMo, so if you're also participating feel free to add me as a writing buddy or find me on the DA Fanfiction thread. Same username as here.
The Air Rent Asunder

Chapter Summary

Idhren thought he'd finally found everything he longed for his whole life. True freedom. A home, a community, happiness, love. But in the blink of an eye it is all torn away.

Thrust unwillingly back into the world of human politics and human religion that he had been so desperate to escape, Idhren finds himself at the center of a war that will decide the fate of the world. A figurehead, a leader, some say a prophet.

More likely, he was simply the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time. But he has no choice except to play along. Until a face from his past walks unexpectedly back into his life, forcing Idhren to acknowledge both his grief and emotions he'd thought long buried.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Act II: Lux in Tenebris

Light in the Darkness

The air itself rent asunder,
Spilling light unearthly from the
Waters of the Fade
- Canticle of Exaltations 1:2

Codex Entry: Idhren Lavellan

Lightning can be dangerous, even deadly - one need only witness a single lightning storm to understand this. It is not easily contained, nor controlled, and behaves erratically in nature. For this reason many scholars and practical mages have written off most forms of storm magic as unworthy of further examination or refinement. However, is something deemed useless simply because it is difficult to understand? How many forms of magic that we now consider commonplace were once deemed impossible or unworthy of study? There is great potential in the untapped resources of storm magic, if only we would take the time to find them.

- Excerpt from a dog-eared volume titled Potentia Tempestatis. The author's name has been carved off the cover and replaced by 'Idhren Cyrus Lavellan' written in neat script.
Haven, Ferelden, Guardian 9:41 Dragon

When the door opened the light that it let in was blinding. Idhren winced and tried to bring his hands up to shield his eyes, only to be stopped by the manacles that held him. He heard the heavy falls of booted feet, the clink of armor and the distinctive hiss of weapons being drawn. When his eyes finally adjusted to the light he saw a woman standing above him. Her face was set in a glower, eyes hard and a hand on the sword at her side. The chest plate of her armor was emblazoned with a crest of an eye wreathed in flames. Idhren did not recognize this particular icon, but he recognized what it meant. Templar.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you now,” the woman sneered.

Templar. And he a mage, shackled in such a way that he could not cast, could not defend himself. Not that being able to use his magic would be of much use against a southern Templar. Idhren’s mind kicked into a panic, trying to remember everything Keeper Istimaethoriel had told him about southern Templars and their laws. “I am a harrowed mage,” he blurted out, attempting to sound as confident and self-assured as possible. “Member of the Circle of Vyrantium. You don’t have the right.” Although with the southern Circles in rebellion he wasn’t certain how much any of that would help.

The woman’s frown deepened, as much as Idhren had not thought it possible, and she stepped closer. “The Conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except you.”

Everyone?

The air left Idhren’s lungs in a rush, his chest clenching in horror.

Tainan.

Tainan had been with him in the temple.

If everyone there was dead, then that meant... Tainan could not be dead, though. It was impossible. If Idhren had survived then surely--

Roughly, the templar woman grasped one of his shackled wrists and held it up, revealing the strange spitting green mark that had appeared there. “Explain this,” she snapped.

Pulled roughly from his own thoughts, mind still trying to comprehend what she had told him, Idhren stared blankly at the glow. But he had no explanation. It felt like magic, but not like his own. It was like feeling someone else casting in close proximity, almost like holding the Fade itself in his hand. But he had no idea what it was or how it got there. “I can’t.”

The woman scoffed and threw his hand back down painfully. “What do you mean you can’t?” she demanded.

“I can’t,” Idhren repeated insistently. “It’s not my magic; I don’t know what it is or how it got there.”

“You’re lying,” the woman snarled and lunged at him, only to be quickly pulled back again by another.

“We need him, Cassandra,” the second one spoke in a thick Orlesian accent. She wore the hood of her cloak pulled up over her head, and in the dim light of the prison Idhren could not clearly make out her face even when she turned toward him. “What happened at the Conclave?”
Idhren's memory of everything after entering the temple with Tainan and before waking up in this cell was hazy at best. When he thought back the best he got were rough images of grotesque creatures and a woman reaching out to him. Hardly anything worth mentioning. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember?” the Orlesian woman repeated doubtfully.

Idhren remained stubbornly silent. He saw no reason to cooperate with these women. They accused him of something he had not done, and they had apparently decided his guilt already. It was typical, though, and Idhren was hardly surprised. Something bad happened, so blame the first elf you can find.

When it became obvious that he did not intend to say anything further, the first woman – Cassandra – sighed. “Go to the forward camp, Leliana,” she said to her companion. “I will take him to the rift.”

Idhren saw it as soon as he stepped outside, blinking against the sudden brightness of the sun. It was impossible to miss.

“We are calling it the Breach,” Cassandra explained. “A massive hole in the Veil that appeared following the explosion at the Conclave.”

The clouds in the sky glowed an unnatural green. Sickly, pulsating. A column of light stretch up from the ground somewhere beyond the nearest ridge, a pillar of green flame connecting their world to the Fade. The mark on Idhren’s hand seared in his palm as though reacting to the sight of it, and as he stared speechless and horrified into the sky the Breach glowed brighter, it pulsed and then belched forth a ball of green flame, a meteor crashing down to the mountaintop. And the matching mark in Idhren’s flesh responded in kind. Pain shot up from his hand, through his arm and into his chest unlike any pain that he’d ever felt before. His vision went white, and he heard himself scream but could feel nothing save the gruesome tearing stabbing mind-numbing pain.

When it passed and his senses returned to him, he was on the ground, on his knees and hunched over so far that his hair brushed the snow. Still gasping and trembling Cassandra hauled him forcefully back to his feet, her grip on his arm so strong it would likely bruise. “As the Breach grows so does the mark on you hand,” she said gruffly. “It is killing you.”

All the air left Idhren’s lungs in a rush.

“Come,” the woman ordered. While Idhren was still processing the situation she removed the manacles from his still-numb hands and then shoved him forward. “We will see what you can do to fix it.”

They had barely been walking long enough for Cassandra to explain the situation before the first demons appeared. It was far from the first time Idhren had faced down a demon, although it was the first time he had done so outside of the Fade. They were even uglier in real life. Amidst the rubble of a collapsed bridge were the remains of a supply cart, and the remains of several unfortunate bystanders. There was no time to consider the morbidity of the situation, however. Among the splintered crates and splatters of blood lay a crudely made, chipped, but still serviceable staff. Idhren snatched it up without a second thought for its previous owner. It felt unwieldy and awkward in his hand, not balanced correctly, the focus crystal was imperfect and the wrong element for him entirely, but this wasn’t the time to be nitpicking.
Idhren spun the staff in his hands to get a feel for it, let his mana flow through it as he took hold of the Fade. The shade that had been advancing on him met its end in a fiery blaze before it got close enough to even scratch his protective barrier. The mark on his hand throbbed in response to each spell he cast, weakening his grip on the shoddy staff as he dropped a barrier over Cassandra as well. She dispatched the demon before her handily, apparently not requiring Idhren’s assistance, and then rounded on the elf, sword drawn and eyes ablaze. “Drop your weapon,” she demanded immediately, shield up and sword aimed at his chest.

“I’m a mage, I don’t need a staff to be dangerous,” Idhren pointed out dryly. He would be far less dangerous without one, but Idhren could still light the Seeker on fire if he wanted to. Whether he would be strong enough to face any more demons, the mage was uncertain, and that was what worried him.

Cassandra didn’t seem to appreciate this being pointed out, judging by the way her eyes narrowed as she glared at him. However, she did relax her stance and sheath her sword again. “You are correct, and it will only be more dangerous in the valley. I cannot expect you to face demons unarmed,” she relented, but Idhren only relaxed slightly as the woman turned away and began walking again. “Before, in the cell, you said you were from the Circle of Vyrantium,” Cassandra said. Her eyes were suspicious as she watched him fall into step with her, as suspicious as Idhren’s own gaze. “That is in Tevinter.”

“I see you have a firm grasp of geography,” the elf replied. “It is, in fact, in Tevinter.”

“And yet the markings on your face, they are Dalish, are they not?” Cassandra asked.

“They are,” Idhren confirmed. “Are you trying to figure out exactly what sort of heretic I am, Seeker? Shall I be hanged for being an elf, or for being a blood mage? Perhaps both? After all, who knows what the Dalish get up to in the woods, away from your Chantry’s prying eyes.”

“I am wondering if you aren’t merely a pawn in someone else’s plan,” Cassandra speculated, “If you are a slave.”

“I am not a slave!” Idhren spat ferociously.

Cassandra was taken aback by the fire in his eyes, the venom in his words. The passion and fury with which he denied the accusation was convincing enough for her. “Then you were acting alone.”

“I already told you I didn’t do anything!” Idhren snapped. “I’m cooperating with you, aren’t I?” And he intended to continue cooperating. After seeing the destruction that had been wrought how could he not? Besides, it seemed the only chance he had to prove his innocence. “If this was what I wanted why would I still be here? I could have let that demon finish you off, or I could have finished you myself while you were distracted.”


“I’ve long since stopped caring what self-serving humans think of me,” Idhren replied. “There is a reason I left Tevinter, and it has nothing to do with whatever the fuck this is,” he gestured angrily toward the hole in the sky with his marked hand. “Whatever sort of insanity caused this I want nothing to do with it!”
From over the next rise the sounds of fighting echoed through the mountain pass, reaching Idhren and Cassandra well before they laid eyes on the battle itself. More demons, and soldiers standing against them, but in the midst of the fight the air glowed green. Since stepping outside Idhren had been able to see the Breach in the sky, and this sight was horrifyingly similar. A hole in the air, in the fabric of reality itself, like a window into another world.

As soon as he drew close the mark on Idhren’s hand roared and burned furiously, staggering him. But before he could fall to his knees someone caught his arm by the wrist and hauled him upright. That someone was an elf, bald and face free of vallaslin, but a mage, Idhren recognized by the staff he carried and the way the Veil warped around him.

“Hurry,” the man ordered, pulling Idhren’s marked hand toward the tear in the sky, “Before more demons come through.”

The mark on his hand could be used to seal the tears after all, but it was definitely not Idhren’s magic that was doing it. The Fade pulled through him, channeling through the mark like the focus of a staff. He could feel the threads of the veil pulling and stitching back together like healing an open wound, but he had no control over it. And it hurt. It pulsed and burned and ached in a way his own magic never had, even when pushed to its absolute limits, and afterwards left his arm stinging all the way up to the elbow.

The elven mage - who introduced himself as an apostate called Solas - seemed to know something about it, but then he had apparently had quite a while to study the mark while Idhren was unconscious. That was an unnerving thought. Idhren did not want strangers poking and prodding his body – even just his hand – while he was not awake. What if they had decided that his hand wasn’t the only cause for concern?

Idhren tried not to think about that as he followed the Seeker and the others through the valley. Solas had joined them now, as had a beardless dwarf claiming to be the famous author Varric Tethras. Given the strangeness of the situation Idhren was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, and didn’t think about why a serial novelist would be on the side of a mountain fighting demons. There were a lot of things that he was trying not to think about, but as he stepped into the charred ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes the sight nearly sent him to his knees.

The destruction was absolute and devastating.

There was no way anyone could have survived this.

Tainan.

On the outskirts of the blast zone lay corpses, mangled, charred, frozen forever in their death throes. Idhren raised a hand to cover his mouth, suddenly nauseous. His grip on the second-hand staff felt like the only thing keeping him upright.

Tainan.

Was one of those bodies, unrecognizable yet twisted in agony, Tainan?

“There is the rift,” Cassandra’s voice interrupted Idhren’s thoughts. The Seeker was ahead of him, pointing deeper into the ruins and moving quickly through the wreckage. “We must hurry.”

Idhren couldn’t make his legs move.

“You alright there?” the dwarf was standing next to him, reaching up to pat Idhren on the back. His
tone was light, but his expression was dark. “Not very pretty, is it?”

“No,” Idhren breathed.

“Come on, kid,” the dwarf said. His hand fell away from Idhren’s back and he hefted the crossbow in his arms. “Let’s clean up this mess before anyone else gets hurt.”

The nod that Idhren responded with was stiff and mechanical, as were his steps when he finally managed to make his legs cooperate enough to fall in line after the others.

The sky burned green as veilfire. Pulsing and swirling, the clouds roiling around the rift like the eye of a hurricane. Idhren could smell the Fade, thick on his tongue and static in his ears, making the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end. The wound on his hand pulsed and flared, spitting green sparks and flame the closer they came to the rift. It ached. It burned. Idhren clenched his staff into that hand and clutched it tighter in an attempt to distract himself from the pain, but it was only a momentary effort. He needed that hand, that scar, to close this, to end the chaos here. To stop anyone else getting hurt.

Voices echoed through the ruins, memories that Idhren could not recall, though apparently they were his own. The Fade was bleeding, as Solas had so aptly put it, the Veil a bandage holding back the flood - now torn asunder and reality was beginning to fracture. Idhren had never felt the Fade this vividly while awake. The tear here was closed, despite its size and appearance; scabbed over and Idhren had to rip the scab away in order to stitch the wound together properly.

Just like healing.

Idhren was never very good at healing.

Regardless, he thrust his hand upward, gasping in pain as the green scar flared to life, pulling through him and tearing the rift open with a roar. When the magic from the mark disconnected from the now opened tear Idhren staggered back, pulling his hand to his chest instinctively as it burned and ached.

Deep breath. Grit your teeth and bear it. Just once more, close it quickly before anything can come through.

Easier said than done. As Idhren struggled to regain enough composure to seal the rift for good it crackled and wavered and then belched forth a pride demon. Because the Maker hated him that much.

The demon roared. Cassandra charged, Solas launched a blast of ice toward it, and for a moment Idhren stood frozen, unable to do anything. Pride demons were resistant to electricity. He’d read that in a book somewhere, and for some reason it was the only thing he could think of at this moment. The staff in his hand was fire-aligned, but it was weak, brittle.

The demon roared again and swiped at Cassandra. She blocked its arm with her shield, but the sheer strength of the creature sent her stumbling backward. An arrow whizzed past Idhren’s ear, close enough to ruffle his hair and startle him into looking away. A few paces behind him Varric braced that crossbow contraption against his shoulder and launched a volley of arrows toward the demon. “Now’s not really a great time to be daydreaming, kid,” the dwarf quipped.
“I’m not a kid,” Idhren protested, but the comment had served to knock him out of his stupor. Idhren shook himself physically and forced his brain to think. The air crackled with electricity as the demon summoned power around itself. Idhren gripped the staff tighter and swung into a fighting stance. The crackle of static in the air was familiar, almost comforting despite the circumstances. And standing below the Breach like this the Veil was practically non-existent. The Fade was stronger than ever.

He was going to do something incredibly stupid.

When the demon lashed out toward Cassandra with a whip of lightning, Idhren reached out, grabbed hold of the tattered Veil, and pulled as hard as he could. The bolt redirected, skittering away from Cassandra, with her metal armor and shield, what should have been the obvious target, and instead struck a boulder with enough force to shatter the stone practically to dust. The attack should have killed the woman in an instant.

"I can't believe that worked," Idhren breathed to himself. He'd never used that trick on anything but his own conjured lightning. He felt a little flicker of pride in his chest. And that was his downfall, because it drew the demon’s attention like a shark to blood.

Behind him, Varric swore when the demon turned toward them, its numerous eyes settling on Idhren. Without thinking, Idhren pulled a barrier up around himself and Varric, for what little good it would do, and began summoning a fireball that would really test the limits of what this shoddy staff could take. Before he could fully form the spell however, his concentration was broken by another scream across the ruins. Cassandra, back on her feet after the demon’s missed attack, screamed with all her might, and it was enough to draw the demon’s attention back to her. At the same time, Solas used the momentary distraction to lay a glyph at the demon’s feet. The mine exploded in seconds, spires of ice jutting up from the ground and knocking the massive thing off its feet.

“Close the rift!” the apostate yelled over the sounds of battle. “Do it now!”

The spell at Idhren’s fingertips fizzled out. He turned and looked up at the rift with dread, remembering the pain of opening it, and of every rift he had closed since waking up and being dragged from that cell. But there was really no choice. He couldn't leave it open, spilling demons into their world. So he ran towards it, only a few steps closer, just to get further away from the demon, and held up his hand.

The mark on his palm lit up like wildfire. Pain lanced through his hand, down his arm and into his chest. The rift screamed in protest. Idhren opened his mouth and screamed as well. It hurt so much worse than anything before. The staff in his other hand felt from limp fingers and he instinctively tried to pull his hand away from the source of the pain. But the mark held him there, the force of its magic pulling on the rift stronger than his small body could counter. He grasped onto his wrist with his other hand and pulled again. It felt like he was ripping the skin off his palm, but with one final shriek and a sound like thunder the rift snapped closed. The pain became too much, tearing, burning, shooting from the mark on his palm and into every fiber of his being. Idhren collapsed onto the ground and everything went black.

When he woke it was warm, comfortable, quiet.

For a moment, Idhren thought he was back with clan Lavellan in the Free Marches. In the aravel he shared with Tainan, and the past day had been nothing more than a nightmare. A trick of the Fade.
And when he opened his eyes Tainan would be there, laying beside him half asleep, or getting ready
to go out hunting.

But when he did open his eyes that illusion shattered in an instant.

The room was unfamiliar, the bed as well, and his left hand ached like it had been stabbed.

This was no dream.

Sitting up slowly, Idhren took in his surroundings. He had no memory of leaving the temple ruins
after closing the rift there. Someone must have moved him. Was he back in Haven? That seemed
most likely. The room he was in seemed to be part of a cabin, rough wooden walls and simple
furnishings. He had been stripped out of his boots and coat, but they were placed neatly on a nearby
chair. Someone had even picked up that useless second hand staff and propped it up in the corner.
Although sparsely furnished the cabin was surprisingly cozy. In the grate across the room a small fire
had burned down to embers, and the shutters on the window had cracked open letting in a cool
breeze and the smell of fresh mountain air. It was surprising to find himself in such accommodations.
Did they no longer think him responsible for the Breach? He was no longer in chains, nor even
locked in a cell.

He could be locked in this room, though.

Climbing out of bed, Idhren pulled on his boots and coat, he even grabbed the staff before cautiously
making his way to the door. He needed answers, and he wasn't going to get them sitting here. But he
didn't know where he was, who had brought him here, or what was going on outside. He faltered
with a hand on the doorknob and looked down at his left hand.

The mark was still there. It glowed a faint green light from a jagged scar across the center of his
palm. More than anything, he needed to know what this thing was and how he could get rid of it.
Because whatever was going on here, whatever had happened at the Conclave that he couldn't
remember, he wanted nothing to do with it. He wanted to find Tainan and go home.

Tainan.

Idhren's breath caught in his throat even as his hand moved on the latch and found it unlocked.

He'd almost forgotten. Tainan.

Tainan was gone. The explosion had killed everyone except him. That was what Cassandra said.

No. He shook his head forcefully. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. She was lying. To frighten him.
To get him to cooperate. Tainan was alive. Tainan had to be alive. He would find Cassandra and he
would make her tell him the truth.

With renewed determination Idhren wrenched the door open and stepped outside.

Idhren didn’t get the news he wanted. If anything, it just kept getting worse.

At least they no longer thought he had caused the Breach.

Instead they all thought him some manner of prophet. Herald of Andraste, the people in Haven were
saying. Chosen by the Maker. What a laugh. The Maker had never done anything but give him misery, and this was just one more way for Him to spit on Idhren’s life. One last indignation.

And no one could explain this thing on his hand, not even other mages. No one knew what it was, or where it came from, or how to get rid of it. Idhren might have been fascinated by the phenomena if it were attached to anyone else. Right now he just wanted it gone. Gone so that these people, these Chantry shemlen, would leave him alone. He didn’t want to be a part of this, an unwilling prophet at the head of their reborn Inquisition. A puppet to earn them favor with the people.

This was exactly what he’d run away from.

He felt as much a prisoner now as he had in chains. Whatever this thing on his hand was, it was apparently the only way to fix the rifts in the Veil. Idhren could not, in good conscience, run off no matter how much he wanted to. And Maker, did he want nothing more than to run away.

And standing there outside the Chantry hall flanked by the right and left hands of the Divine, watching a Templar – former Templar – nail a proclamation to the doors declaring their newly formed Inquisition, Idhren wanted nothing more than to run. To go back to the forests of the Free Marches, find his clan, lick his wounds, and try to move on. If that was at all possible without Tainan.

He felt numb, almost, in the face of everything that had happened in the past day. At least, for him it had only been a day. Apparently several had passed since the explosion, but Idhren had been unconscious for most of it. Maybe that was why it was so difficult to process. Or maybe it was because this was all too familiar. He had learned how to be the perfect apprentice, then the perfect First, and then he had finally learned how to be himself. Now he had to learn how to be a prophet because fighting against it would be useless. He’d already tried.

A Dalish elf, a former slave, a mage. He had argued at length and futilely with the ranking heads of this new rebel organization. Andraste had been a slave, Cassandra reminded him- he knew her now as the right hand of Divine Justinia. Alongside her was the Divine’s left hand, the Orlesian woman from Idhren’s prison cell introduced now as Leliana. She happily reminded him also that Andraste allied with Shartan, an elf, to fight against Tevinter. In Tevinter they said Andraste was a mage. Idhren was exactly the sort of person she would have picked, and Josephine - their appointed ambassador - was already eager to use that argument against anyone who protested that a heretical elven mage could be the Herald of Andraste. Ready to drag out all the demons of his past and parade them in front of the world to prove his divinity.

Outside the Chantry doors the crowd eventually began to disperse as the people went back to their duties after laying eyes on the Herald of Andraste. The heads of the newly reformed Inquisition turned to return to their duties as well.

“Cassandra,” Idhren interrupted before the woman could disappear back into the Chantry. “May I speak with you?” The formal speech that Tevinter had trained into him and that Idhren hadn’t used in years came flowing out so effortlessly, and Idhren hated himself for it.

“Of course,” the woman replied. She waved the others on ahead and turned back to face him.

Idhren didn’t want to ask again. He felt like he’d asked a hundred times already. Some tiny part of him kept hoping that it wasn’t true. “Were there truly no other survivors from the temple?” He already knew the answer, and he feared it. He wanted someone to tell him they were wrong. There was a mistake.

“There weren’t,” Cassandra confirmed. “Only those well away from the temple were unharmed.”
And Tainan had been right there with him in the epicenter of it all. The knowledge settled like a lead weight in Idhren’s gut. The last shred of hope frayed and tore. He swallowed heavily and looked down at the floor. His eyes swam with tears that he hurried to blink back. “Thank you,” he managed to say without his voice giving away any weakness. Then he turned away stiffly, intent on returning to his quarters as quickly as possible.

“Was there someone with you? At the Conclave?” Cassandra asked before Idhren had time to flee. She was more perceptive than he gave her credit for.

He considered answering. Would anyone here care? They were all so obsessed with the loss of their Divine what would they care about one Dalish elf? But what would be the point in lying? “Yes,” Idhren answered eventually. He continued to stare at the ground, unable to look anywhere else for fear of losing what little composure he had left. “There was,” he said stiffly, and fled before the woman could ask any further questions.

Somehow he managed to make it back to the cabin before the tears began to fall. Slamming the door shut after him, Idhren collapsed back against it. His hand shook, his throat was so tight he could barely breathe. A broken sob escaped his lips and he clapped both hands over his mouth, feeling the wetness on his cheeks as the tears began to fall in earnest. With another sob his knees gave out, sending him sliding down to the floor, where he finally the final threads of self control and let himself cry.

He cried harder than he had in years. Harder than he had since the loss of his innocence. His whole body shook with the force of his sobs. Wet, ugly, sniveling things; barely contained screams that left him feeling even more miserable than before.

The tears ran out eventually, leaving him exhausted and trembling all over. For several long moments he remained where he was, sitting with his back to the door, knees pulled up to his chest and arms wrapped around himself. Then he pulled off his boots with fumbling fingers and pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. He staggered to the bed and collapsed onto it face down. With barely had enough energy or motivation to shrug out of his coat, he crawled under the covers. It wasn’t even late afternoon, but he wrapped himself in blankets and curled up into a ball, wrapped his arms around himself, squeezed his eyes shut, and prayed that when he woke this really would be a dream.

Not that the Maker had ever answered any of his prayers.

The Breach swirled in the sky above Haven; green, angry, and sickening to look at for too long. The whole situation still felt surreal. But his hand still hurt, and that was what told Idhren it was real. Besides, no demon could drag out an illusion this long without messing something up.

Gravel crunched under Idhren’s feet as he walked the winding dirt paths through Haven. People passed him, running here and there as they went about their duties, but none paid him any attention other than offering a polite nod or bow in greeting. That in itself was unnerving, but at least no one spoke to him.

He trudged his way up the hillside outside of town to where he and Tainan had made camp. The tent had blown over in the days since anyone had been there, and an animal appeared to have gone through the few things they left unattended. But their packs were still there, contents spilled out over the ground, all of it damp with dew and melted snow. The food was unsalvageable, the tent and
bedroll unnecessary now, but Idhren dug through the contents of their packs with a slow desperation. His potions were smashed. All but one glass vial shattered and the contents soaked into the ground. Idhren clutched that one last vial like a lifeline, pried out the cork and downed it in a single swallow. The familiar taste soaked his tongue, comforting in its bitterness. But he would need to find more, and soon. Already days without it the damage might have already been done.

There was nothing more of use at the small campsite. Everything of value had been with them, all now lost in whatever had happened at the temple. Still Idhren lingered, though. This was the last place that he and Tainan had been at peace together. The last place they had lain together. Where Tainan had asked him one last time to marry them, and Idhren had still shied away from answering. His last happy memory. It was difficult to pull himself away. Unbidden, his hand sought out the arrowhead that hung against his chest, feeling it through his shirt, clasping it tight in his grasp. Tainan's good luck charm had worked. They should have kept it for themselves. But now it was all that he had left. The last physical remnants of his lover.

He would have to write to the clan and hope that someone could get a letter to them. Istimaethoriel needed to know what had happened at the Conclave. At the very least Idhren had to finish the mission he had been sent on. They also needed to know about Tainan.

Eventually he tore himself away from the ruined campsite and trudged back down into Haven. What was he meant to say in a letter? He still couldn't remember what had happened in the temple. He wasn't certain he wanted to.

The last clear memory that Idhren had was on the mountainside. Just after dawn he and Tainan had climbed the mountain path. He recalled seeing the temple that stood at the summit and being momentarily struck speechless. It was beautiful; for all that the years had worn away at the stones and dulled the stained glass windows. He recalled asking another pilgrim why someone would build a Chantry way up here on a mountaintop, so far removed from civilization and so difficult to reach. The Temple of Sacred Ashes, the pilgrim had explained - clearly assuming that this pair of Dalish elves knew nothing of Andrastianism - was where Andraste's followers had brought her remains following her death.

The final resting place of the Maker's Bride.

It was the first time since he was a child that Idhren could remember feeling anything akin to religious inspiration.

Tainan had urged them to go inside, get a closer look at the proceedings, and still in awe of where they were standing, Idhren had agreed. In hindsight, he shouldn't have. Should have insisted they stay outside, go back down the mountain and wait for news. If he had, Tainan might still be alive. Hindsight was cruel like that, but thinking about it wouldn’t change things. He needed to focus on the present; it was the only way to keep himself from spiraling into despair.

When he reached Haven again Idhren wound his way through the village until he located an apothecary. He knew he had no right to request the herbs he needed for his potion, but he was desperate and frightened.

"I can make a list," he explained to the grumpy, stern-faced man inside the small cabin, "And if it's possible to get even a small supply I'd be very grateful. I can mix the potion myself if you'll let me use your tools. I won't be in the way."

"We're low on supplies as it is," the apothecary - Adan - grumbled, "But I suppose it'd be bad form to deny the Herald of Andraste." He didn't sound as though he believed that were true, and honestly
Idhren didn't either. "Give me the list and I'll see what I can do."

On a scrap of parchment Idhren listed every herb that he had ever used in his potions, in Tevinter and with the Dalish, and handed it over. "I don't need all of them," he assured, "But anything that you could spare would be useful." Idhren had never gone without for more than a couple weeks, and he had never had to deal with the fallout on his own. He dreaded what might happen this time.

Adan looked over the list and a frown creased his features even more than usual. "That’s strange. These are all herbs women use to keep from getting pregnant. Why would you need these?" Then the confusion turned to understanding as he cast a look over at Idhren, took in his short stature, the shape of his face, the way his clothes were all slightly too large.

Horror lodged in Idhren’s gut. It felt as though his heart stopped for a brief moment. The man knew. Of course he would know just by looking. “Please don’t tell anyone,” the words were out of Idhren’s mouth before he could think them, and he was certain his mortification showed.

The apothecary studied him for a moment, and the entire time Idhren could not meet his eyes.

“Alright,” the man said eventually, as though it were a moot question. “Like I said, supplies are low, but I’ll put aside what I can.”

Idhren breathed out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. ‘Thank you,” he said, the words like a prayer on his lips.

From the apothecary Idhren returned to the small cabin on the edge of town that was apparently his now. It was strange to think that someone had simply given him a home, an entire furnished cabin for his use alone. He supposed it was the one good thing to have come out of all this. For all its humbleness, the cabin was probably the nicest place that he had ever lived. The furnishing in his room at Canidius’ estate had been finer, but there was a lack of privacy there. This felt less like a cage.

Whomever had furnished this cabin had stocked it with a small amount of food and drink and healing potions, a stack of firewood by the grate, and a small sheaf of parchment, a quill, and a pot of ink on the desk.

It had been a long time since Idhren last sat at a desk. So long that it felt strange now to be sitting in a chair and not hunched over a pile of papers on the ground. He tried to ignore that feeling as he opened the jar of ink and tested the quill on a corner of parchment. Then he set himself to the task of writing a letter to Keeper Istimaethoriel.

It took the greater part of the afternoon.

The first draft of his letter had been long and rambling, a stream of emotions and thoughts that, when he read it over afterwards made no sense. He crumpled the parchment and threw it into the fireplace before starting anew. The second draft was stained with tears, his penmanship horrid from where his hand trembled, spots and blots of ink where he faltered writing words that he still did not want to believe. It joined the first in the fireplace. It took five attempts before Idhren produced something that was both legible and coherent, and by that point he was exhausted.

Leaving the letter out so the ink could dry, Idhren crawled into bed and curled up once more. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Tomorrow, he promised himself. Tomorrow he would put all this behind him and move on. If he could just push everything down and away. Not think about Tainan, or his body, or anything else he had lost. If he could just focus on today - the Inquisition, the Breach, then he could begin to function like a person again.
Better to not feel anything at all than to feel like this.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry.
Please accept this gift as my apology.
Though Darkness Comes, I Shall Endure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maker, though the darkness comes upon me,

I shall embrace the Light. I shall weather the storm.

I shall endure.

- Canticle of Trials 1:10

Fallow Mire, Ferelden, Drakonis 9:41 Dragon

Three weeks Idhren had officially been a part of the newly formed Inquisition. So far he had spent the better part of two on the road, several days dodging bears and rogue templars in the Hinterlands, and now this.

Scout Harding had called it the Fallow Mire. It wasn’t on any map that Idhren had ever seen before arriving in Ferelden, and why would it be? It was the most miserable stretch of land Idhren had ever seen. And he’d crossed the Silent Plains.

A swamp. Fetid and damp. The handful of structures that they passed were barely standing; the frames of houses long abandoned. But who in their right mind had ever considered settling here in the first place? The place stank of mildew and decay and death, the only current inhabitants appeared to be wisps and demons, which had possessed the frightening number of corpses in the bog, dragging them to life at the slightest provocation. And why were there so many corpses? Did the people here not burn their dead?

It had also been raining for the past two days. Just to make this excursion that much worse.

Idhren was soaked to the bone. Even his feet were wet inside the boots that he had been promised were weather resistant. And it was absolutely impossible to get warm. His fingers were half numb, stiff on the grip of his staff and making it that much harder to aim his spells. It was a miracle he hadn’t hit one of his companions at any point. The rain and the wet made fire spells next to useless, which was unfortunate considering how effective they usually were against reanimated corpses, and made his lightning even harder to control than usual. Solas had been sticking to ice spells and focusing on keeping a barrier around Cassandra as she rushed into each fray. Idhren threw lighting at anything far enough away to avoid misfiring onto one of the others and threw away anything that got too close with bursts of raw force magic.

“Why were our scouts even here in the first place?” Idhren complained as loudly as he dared after they had decimated the latest batch of shambling corpses.

The one good thing about this constant movement and misery was that it allowed Idhren no time to think about anything else. It was the perfect distraction if he was constantly on the move, doing whatever work the Inquisition set him out to do. Of course, that didn’t mean he had to enjoy it.

“The scouts were looking for rifts,” Cassandra answered, sheathing her sword when she was certain there was no further threat.
“The better question is: why are the Avvar here?” Varric put in.

“Why would anyone be here?” Idhren grumbled. He made a futile attempt at drying his staff – brand new and built exactly to his specifications, though it was still not as nice as the one he’d had in Tevinter. Iron was all they had to work with, and it conducted electricity easily even if it was not as strong as other metals. At least the thing was sturdy and properly weighted and sized for his small stature. “This place is a shithole.”

“We should continue moving,” Cassandra said. As ever, attempting to keep them on task. Idhren was still mildly afraid of her, even after learning the difference between the Seekers and the Templars – it wasn’t a big difference, she could still block Idhren’s connection to the Fade and cut off his magic on a whim. But one thing he had figured out over the past few weeks was that the Inquisition needed him. Well, they needed the mark on his hand, but given that it was attached to him he was part of the package. They wanted to manipulate him into some sort of idealized religious symbol, but they were not nearly as good at it as Canidius had been. Or they lacked the leverage over him that Canidius had. The Inquisition needed the Herald of Andraste, and they needed the mark on his hand. They needed Idhren far more than he needed them. And that put them on equal footing.

“Can’t we rest for a moment?” Idhren protested, whining a little bit. He was testing the limits of the leash they tried to hold on him. Idhren was positive that Cassandra was meant to be that leash, at least in part. “There, that house still has most of a roof,” he pointed a short ways off the muddy path they had been following through the bog. “Give us a chance to try and dry off a little. I’m not sure you can fully understand how difficult it is not to electrocute all of you in weather like this.”

“It is not a bad idea,” Solas added, “Especially if we continue to find more demons, as I expect we will in this place.”

“Very well,” Cassandra scoffed as though she didn’t fully believe him, but Idhren knew that he had played the right card. She didn’t understand magic enough to call him out, and it hadn’t been a complete lie anyway. He was tired and wet and cold and would very much appreciate even a few minutes out of the rain.

They made their way carefully across the sodden ground, avoiding any body of water larger than a puddle. The house was slightly more rickety when viewed up close, the walls all leaning rather precariously to the left, but the roof was mostly intact and it seemed sturdy enough for the moment. Inside it smelted strongly of mold and mildew, but it was probably the driest place Idhren had been all day, so he would bear the smell for now.

Whomever had abandoned this building had done so in a hurry. There were still crates and barrels around the edges of the room, some broken and some intact. Idhren walked over to one of the sturdier looking ones and tapped on it with the end of his staff to test the strength of the wood. It didn’t crumble on contact, so he dusted off the top and gingerly took a seat. Only when it seemed to be holding his weight did he relax.

Sighing, Idhren closed his eyes and rested his elbows on his knees to drop his head into his hands. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be here – helping the Inquisition – it was just that he didn’t want to be here, in a swamp full of corpses. He scrubbed his hands over his face, then through his hair, trying to bring some sense of order to his appearance before finally opening his eyes again. Upon opening his eyes he happened to notice the crate beside him, its top half rotted away, and the glint of something shiny inside. Curious, he reached over and delicately pulled out a glass bottle.

“What’cha got there?” Varric asked from a crate on the opposite side of the tiny ramshackle cabin. He had his crossbow laid out over his knees, likely checking it over for signs of water damage. The glint of light off the glass must have caught his attention too.
“Label’s rotted off,” Idhren said, squinting at the bottle. The seal was still intact, though, and he could feel liquid sloshing about inside. So he picked at the wax around the top of the bottle until it came free, pried the cork out with cracked fingernails, and sniffed tentatively at the opening. Strong. Very strong. But who knew how long it had been sitting here aging in the cold damp. It didn’t smell rotted or sour, though. Just very strong.

“You’re not going to drink it?” Cassandra exclaimed, appalled as he held the bottle up to his mouth.

“That was the idea,” Idhren replied. “It’s sort of what alcohol is for.”

“No offense here, Sparky,” Varric tried diplomatically, “But won’t that make it harder to avoid electrocuting us?”

“You think I can’t hold my liquor?” Idhren asked, mildly offended. Sure, he’d barely had a drop of alcohol living with the Dalish, but he’d had plenty before that. “At this point, it’s about the only thing that’ll keep me from electrocuting myself out of sheer frustration.” He reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out a small vial of lyrium. It was a small dose, one swallow, just enough to keep someone going in the heat of battle. He pried the cork out with his teeth.

“I don’t think it’s advisable to mix lyrium and alcohol,” Solas argued when he saw what Idhren intended, and he actually sounded a bit concerned. That was a surprise, but Idhren still didn’t care.

“Please,” the mage rolled his eyes, “I’m from Tevinter.” And while he didn’t exactly want the entire world to know all the sordid details of his past, there was no point in denying where he came from. “You know they make lyrium wine? Mixing it with alcohol is practically a national pastime.” And then he upended the vial, pouring its entire contents into the liquor bottle. A few swirls to mix the two liquids properly, and he raised the bottle to his lips.

The lyrium surged through his veins like fire, sending all of his senses into overdrive at the same time that the alcohol muted everything around him. The resulting effect was so beautifully familiar. It left Idhren feeling not entirely real. There was still quite a bit of liquor left in the bottle, so Idhren recorked it with numb fingers and used it to replace an empty elfroot potion on his belt. Then he shook himself, enjoying the way his limbs felt like they were floating, and grabbed up his staff again.

“Alright. Let’s go fight some Avvar.”

“You’re a little terrifying sometimes, you know that?” Varric asked, eyeing him with mixed concern and fascination.

Idhren grinned in response. That was possibly one of the best compliments he had ever received. The way he looked, it wasn’t often anyone was frightened of him. “Well, I was apprenticed to a magister, after all. I learned from the best.”

---

**Haven, Ferelden, Bloomingtide 9:41 Dragon**

They returned from Val Royeaux still lacking support or acceptance from the southern Chantry. The whole thing was a shit show from start to finish. A perfect reminder of everything Idhren hated about human society. However, the trip was not a complete waste. They returned to Haven with an invitation to meet with the rebel mages in Redcliffe and with two new, potentially valuable, allies.
The first was an elven girl of questionable sanity but with a hatred of nobility equal to Idhren’s own – quickly proven during their first meeting. Sera didn’t mince words, though her train of thought was sometimes difficult to follow. Idhren respected that. Preferred it, even, over false sincerity and veiled meanings. Time would tell whether she and her network of troublemakers would be of any use, but she at least seemed genuinely invested in the task at hand. Tentatively, Idhren liked her.

The other was a completely different story. Vivienne de Fer was the first southern Circle mage that Idhren had ever met long enough to hold a decent conversation with. So far he was not a fan. The salon she had invited him to in order to meet was far too reminiscent of Tevinter for Idhren’s liking. Complete with duels in the middle of the foyer, although lacking in blood magic. Madame de Fer herself practically stank of wealth and privilege. Her clothes were nicer than anything that Idhren had ever owned. She reminded him of every Altus mage he had ever met.

She was not at all what he had expected. What he had heard of the Circles down here was horrific. All the mages were supposed to be miserable, trapped in their towers like prisoners, treated constantly with fear and hate. That was supposed to be why they had rebelled, after all. The picture Vivienne painted was far kinder, full of idealized visions of young mages mastering their talents in a safe and nurturing environment.

The hoards of rebel mages in the Hinterlands attacking him with deficient spells and malformed sigils told a completely different story. Those mages were not well educated in the use of their gift, and Idhren doubted they would have fled into the woods without good reason.

Idhren understood how they felt.

Idhren did not understand why Vivienne was still trying to convince him that there had been nothing amiss in the southern Circles. No real reason for the rebellion.

But it was one thing to listen to the woman wax poetic about what little good the Circles could do – training that was obviously substandard, protection from lynch mobs that were themselves a product of Chantry propaganda – and realize that Vivienne was as brainwashed into fearing her own power as any other southern mage. It was entirely different when she turned that haughty, judgmental gaze toward him and asked “You’ve never been to a Circle, as far as I can tell, yet you’re remarkably skilled. Are you self-taught?”

“What makes you think I’ve never been to a Circle?” Idhren asked with a frown.

“Well, the tattoos on your face, for one,” the woman replied, as though it were obvious. “You don’t see Dalish elves in the Circle, my dear, unless they arrived as children. There is also the manner of your casting. The techniques you use to warp the veil around your spells are unlike any I have seen in a Circle.”

“And I would appreciate if you judged me solely by my skills rather than the markings on my face or the size of my ears, Madame de Fer.” Idhren replied coolly. He stood up a little straighter, presenting himself as tall as possible, and declared proudly, “I was trained at the Circle of Vyrantium, one of the most highly regarded schools in the Tevinter Imperium.” Because for all the misery that Tevinter had handed him, he was well aware that he’d had one of the best educations the country could provide.

To her credit, Vivienne only looked mildly surprised by his declaration. “You are from Tevinter?” she asked, voice tinted with curiosity for the briefest of moments before she reigned her emotions in once more. “Yet clearly you left. Then you must understand better than anyone the danger that mages can pose when left unchecked.”

Idhren clenched his teeth and dredged up every shred of decorum he could, all of those lessons on
proper speaking and behavior, propriety and politeness even in the face of direct insult. Things he had happily left behind when he first came south. “Have you ever been to the Imperium, First Enchanter?” he asked tightly.

“No, I have not,” Vivienne replied.

“Then kindly do not make assumptions about the reasons I left,” Idhren was unable to keep all of the irritation out of his voice. People made so many assumptions about his life in Tevinter when they found out about it. None of them were the least bit correct. “I understand the danger that power-hungry shemlen – mages or otherwise – pose when left unchecked. Despite what stories you may have heard, the Magisterium is not awash with blood magic and abominations. I have no complaint about the education I received at the Circle there. The reasons I left the Imperium were due entirely to my treatment as an elf – not a mage – and I daresay it’s been scarcely better here.”

Vivienne pursed her lips briefly, but to her credit she remained far more composed than Idhren. He’d never been as good as the nobility at concealing his feelings, as Canidius had always been so eager to point out. “Then you believe the Imperium is an example that we should follow? You’ll forgive me if I fail to see how allowing mages to use their power to rule over others through fear is a preferable system.”

“That’s not at all what I believe,” Idhren protested. “But you’ll forgive me for not seeing how the exact opposite is the correct solution, either. Mages are people, first and foremost, and they deserve the ability to live a normal life if that is what they desire, not to be locked away from the rest of the world, denied family, companionship, or the freedom to decide their own fate. I know what slavery is, Madam de Fer, and from what I’ve heard about your Circles they are slavery in all but name.”

The First Enchanter frowned, then opened her mouth to reply, but Idhren turned quickly on his heel and left, ignoring the protest that followed after him. He was not in the mood for debating political or moral issues, even less so when being talked down to by another privileged human mage. That was something he’d had more than enough of in Tevinter, and something he’d vowed never to put up with again. Vivienne was a talented mage, of that he was certain, and she understood the intricacies of Orlesian politics better than Idhren. That was the reason he had accepted her request to join the Inquisition. She could be a valuable ally; she had connections in Orlais that could be beneficial to their organization. That didn’t mean that Idhren had to like her or get along with her. Josephine could deal with her; Idhren had already had his fill of politics.

He stalked out of the Chantry hall and made a b-line for the tavern. The stress and frustration of the past few months were sometimes more than he could handle, and he was falling back into the same self-destructive habits he’d developed in Tevinter. Years he had gone without as much as a sip of alcohol or lyrium. Now they were as readily accessible as water and Idhren had more reason than ever to indulge. The world was ending, after all. This thing on his hand still might kill him. And sometimes he wished it would, because he didn’t have the courage to do it himself.

The tavern was becoming a familiar setting for him. Even the woman at the bar no longer looked shocked to set eyes on the Herald of Andraste. Didn’t even ask what he wanted anymore, just reached under the bar and pulled out a bottle and a glass, smiling as she handed them over. He didn’t really think she should be smiling, but he returned the gesture as best he was able before retreating to an empty table in the corner.

The table was also becoming familiar. Small, out of the way, easily overlooked. As easily overlooked as Idhren himself, hunched over in his chair and nursing the bottle. He wondered who was paying for reigniting his drinking problem, because it certainly wasn’t him. So far the Inquisition had provided him with everything he needed to live and go off on various missions, diplomatic and
otherwise, but no one had given him any actual money. And while the house, food, armor, and new staff were much appreciated, they wouldn’t help him get away from here any time soon.

What was he supposed to do when they closed the Breach? Sell this mark on his hand in order to buy passage back to the Free Marches? Would they even let him leave when it was over? He was their newest prophet, chosen by the Maker’s bride herself. Would he ever be able to have a normal life after this, even if he went back to the Dalish?

Idhren downed his next glass in one swallow, shaking his head as the alcohol burned down his throat. Why couldn’t he stop thinking? He filled the next glass nearly to the brim and then downed that one as well.

He just wanted to forget that he was here, that this was happening. Just for a little while he wanted to feel nothing at all.

The sun shone warm and bright through the branches above, dappling the leaf-strewn forest floor with a patchwork of light and shadow. The air was filled with the sounds and smells of springtime. Birds flitted and chirped among the branches. In the distance a halla brayed once and then fell silent. Everything smelled fresh and clean and warm; the forest suffused with new life.

“Hey, did you fall asleep on me?”

Idhren’s eyes snapped open. He was acutely aware of everything around him. The bark of a tree trunk cool and rough against his back, the patch of sunlight on his bare toes warming his entire body from bottom to top. Tainan’s eyes were even greener than usual in the honey-yellow light.

“You did fall asleep!” the hunter complained. Idhren stard. He took in the way the bits of sunlight shone like fire off Tainan’s hair and the bits of metal on their clothes. “What?” they asked after a moment. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Tainan…” Idhren breathed, the name a prayer on his lips.

“Yeah?” Tainan asked hesitantly, lips quirked in amusement.

“I had the strangest dream,” Idhren replied. He must have still been half asleep. Other than the sharp points of focus around him everything else seemed oddly muted.

“A bad dream?” Tainan asked, tilting their head to the side as they watched Idhren.


“Do you want to tell me about it?” Tainan asked.

Idhren swallowed heavily and turned his face toward the sky. “It was after the conclave. Only, something went wrong. There was an explosion and… You died.” Tears pricked at his eyes at the mere thought of it. He blinked them away quickly.

“That’s a very bad dream,” Tainan murmured. They scooted closer to Idhren, sitting shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip. “But it was only a dream. I’m right here, see? I’m fine.”

Idhren opened his eyes again and turned to look at Tainan. The hunter really was stunning in this
light, hair like fire and eyes like the sky. "Yeah," he agreed softly. "Only a dream."

Tainan smiled, and everything was right with the world. "I am still annoyed that you fell asleep, though. I was talking."

"Sorry," Idhren laughed sheepishly. "I didn't mean to. What were you saying?"

"About the wedding," Tainan stressed, and leaned their head back against the trunk of the tree against which they sat. "You know, if you still don't want to we can call it off."

"No," Idhren was quick to insist, "I do want to." And he did, he really did. There was nothing else in the world he wanted more. But he couldn't blame Tainan for doubting him. Idhren had put off and put off giving them a definite answer to their proposal for years now. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Tainan assured. They reached out, took Idhren's hand in their own and twined their fingers together. "I just want to make you happy. I don't want to pressure you into something you don't want."

Idhren looked down at their entwined hands, then back up to Tainan's face and deep into their eyes. "I do want to. I love you."

Tainan's face lit up like it was Satinalia morning - only Tainan had never celebrated Satinalia. "I love you, too," they replied, and leaned forward to capture Idhren's lips in a kiss, which Idhren gladly returned. Tainan's lips were warm and soft against his own, and they tasted very faintly of berries and wine.

Wine?

Idhren pulled away from the kiss, all mirth suddenly gone. Why did Tainan taste of wine? The Dalish had no wine. No alcohol at all, for that matter.

Tainan noticed. "What's wrong?" they asked in concern.

Idhren tried to pinpoint the exact thing that felt off, but he couldn't, so he shook off the feeling. "Nothing," he assured. "Just... remembering that dream again."

Tainan frowned in concern. "It's really bothering you," they commented.

Idhren shook his head, trying to put it from his mind. "It just seemed so real. You were... gone, and something ripped a hole in the veil so large it was like there was a hole in the sky itself."

"That sounds terrible," Tainan murmured, "But look," they pointed up through the leaves toward the sky above them. It was clear and blue, not a cloud in sight. "Nothing wrong at all. The conclave was a success, there's peace between the mages and templars and you finally agreed to marry me. Everything's perfect. You remember that, right?"

Idhren hesitated for only the briefest of moments. "I do," he replied, though he was not certain. He thought back to the conclave, but he couldn't remember exactly what had happened. He supposed it didn't matter. That was dealt with now; he didn't need to think about it anymore.

"Of course you do," Tainan smiled and leaned forward to steal another quick kiss from Idhren's lips. "And tomorrow we'll be married."

Tomorrow? Idhren didn't remember that it would be so soon. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember giving Tainan an answer to their latest proposal, on the hillside above Haven the night
before the conclave. And he couldn't remember returning from the conclave either. The journey
would have taken weeks; surely he would remember such a long stretch of time, no matter how
miserable. He pulled away from Tainan suddenly, scrambling to the side and then to his feet.

“Idhren? What’s wrong?” Tainan asked in concern. “You’re acting strange.”

“I don’t...” Idhren stammered. He looked around quickly. Beyond Tainan and the immediate area
everything was hazy, like he couldn’t focus properly, like a dream.

A dream.

“This is a dream,” he realized aloud.

“What are you talking about?” Tainan asked. Their brow furrowed as they watched Idhren, sitting
up straighter and reaching out to him. “Come sit back down.”

“No,” Idhren shook his head. He wanted this to be real. He wanted so very much for this to be real,
but he knew now that it wasn’t. “This isn’t real,” he breathed, and felt his heart break all over
again. “You’re not real.”

He couldn’t tear his eyes away as Tainan rose to their feet. The birds still chirruped and flew in the
trees, the sun still shone brightly, and Tainan looked more beautiful than ever. And even standing in
that bright sunlight Idhren felt cold. “Idhren please, you’re starting to scare me,” Tainan beseeched.
So earnest, so caring, so perfect, his Tainan.

But this wasn’t Tainan.

“Get away from me, demon!”

Around them the woods went silent, the sun dimmed as though behind a cloud, and without its light
everything lost its vibrancy except Tainan themself. The expression of twisted concern melted off
Tainan’s face, replaced by a sad sort of pity. “Why do you fight so hard when it is clear you don’t
want to?” the thing wearing Tainan’s appearance asked. “This is what you want, is it not?”

“This isn’t real,” Idhren protested. “You’re not Tainan.”

“I can be,” the demon replied. It took a step toward Idhren, reaching a hand out toward him. It took
every ounce of strength Idhren had not to run into their arms. “They wanted you to be happy, didn’t
they? So do I. This is what you want. I can give it to you.”

Idhren shook his head and forced himself to step back, keeping distance between himself and the
demon. “I don’t want this,” he argued, knowing all along that it was a lie.

“You don’t need to lie to me,” the demon practically purred. “I can see what is in your heart. You
want love. You want happiness. You want a family. I can give you all of those things. Why deny
yourself? Why live in a world that has brought you nothing but misery? If you stay here with me, I
can give you everything you’ve ever wanted.” Then it smiled Tainan’s familiar smile, cocked its
head at just the right angle and said, “Come on, city boy.”

The nickname pierced his heart like an arrow. But it had the exact opposite effect that the demon
had intended. Instead of weakening his resolve and drawing him in, hearing this thing wearing
Tainan’s face use those words made Idhren furious. “How dare you,” he growled, hands clenching
into fists at his sides. “How dare you wear their face! Use their voice!” Static crackled at Idhren’s
fingertips and the smile on the demon’s face – Tainan’s face – faltered for a fraction of a second.
“You could never be like them. You could never understand. No matter how hard you pretend it will
always be a lie.” The smile disappeared entirely now and the demon – Tainan – actually took a step backwards away from Idhren. “Get out,” Idhren spat. A bolt of lightning struck the ground only a few feet from where the demon – Tainan – stood, and it jolted in surprise. “Get out of my head!”

Idhren woke with a start, his heart racing and head throbbing and drenched in a cold sweat. Sitting up slowly, he swung his legs out of bed, hating the way only his toes reached the floor. He pushed sweat-damp hair from his forehead and looked out across the room. Moonlight flooded in through the cabin’s windows. The fire had burned itself out. A light draft sent a shiver down his spine. With a flick of his wrist he brought the fireplace embers back to life and watched them dance merrily as they slowly brought warmth back to the room. Idhren took in all the tiny details of the room and mouthed verses from the Chant of Light until he was positive that he was no longer dreaming.

This was not the first time he had ever faced a demon in the Fade. Not even the first time one had come for him wearing Tainan’s face. But this time was the hardest to resist. Because the demon was right. He wanted that life more than he had been willing to admit at the time. And now it was out of reach. He’d hesitated one too many times and the Maker took away his last chance at happiness.

And what was keeping him here anyway? Some sense of morality or purpose?

It also wasn’t the first time he thought it would have been better if he died. If he were dead at least he would still be with Tainan in the Beyond. But Idhren was too much a coward for that. Unbidden, his gaze drifted down to where his arms rested in his lap. He knew that if he pulled up his sleeves he would still see those thin white scars, barely visible now but still present. And for the first time in ten years he felt the urge to rip them open once more. But he knew the pain wouldn’t help, not really. A temporary patch over the pain in his heart, but not worth the lingering reminder of his own cowardice.

Idhren growled and clenched his hands into fists so tight he could feel his nails digging crescent marks into his palm. The magic on his left hand guttered in response.

Startled, because the thing had never responded to his emotions before, Idhren uncurled that hand and stared at it. When he had woken up in that cell the mark had been afire almost constantly, a steady pain that flared and burned, spreading across his palm like a tear in threadbare fabric every time the Breach expanded in the sky above. Now it was quiet most of the time, roaring to life and searing pain only when encountering a rift, and then it had a mind of its own. Nothing Idhren did could control the thing, and he had definitely tried.

He would get no more sleep tonight, of that Idhren was certain. Too dangerous to risk it even if he could fall back asleep. But he was wide awake, his mind already kicked into overdrive, and he had been curious about the mark for a long time.

It was the researcher in him, he supposed. To be fascinated by something even if it was very likely still killing him. Just because the thing seemed dormant now did not mean it would remain that way. And it certainly felt like it was trying to kill him every time the magic surged to life.

Unclenching his right hand, Idhren cautiously pressed his first two fingers to the line of luminous green scar tissue across his left palm. It felt warm and slightly electric, magic humming just below his skin. But his skin was just skin, nothing about it felt any different. Only the magic felt different. The magic felt unlike anything Idhren had encountered before. Powerful and raw, like holding a piece of
the Fade itself in his hand. If he could figure out how to control the thing maybe he wouldn’t hate it so much.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Idhren held both hands out before him and reached for his own magic. It came as easily as ever, and static sparked at his fingertips, jumping from one to the other, and then across to the other hand. Then, cautiously, he sent a tiny spark of electricity directly into the mark.

The reaction was immediate. The mark flared and spit, discharging its own small bolt of green lightning, which hit Idhren’s opposite hand and hurt, making him pull it away in alarm.

“Alright,” he breathed to himself, watching as the mark gradually calmed down and went dormant again. “You don’t like that.”

Or maybe it did like it, but it had hurt, so Idhren was disinclined to try again at the moment. Instead, he focused on the feeling of the mark, the hum of magic. The feeling was similar to holding an enchanted object, like his staff. Only far more intense. So Idhren let his magic flow down his arm and toward the mark, channeling through it the same way he would the focus of a staff.

The reaction was not as immediate this time, but it was quite similar. The mark spit and flared and rumbled, sparking out little tendrils of lightning. Only this time it did not hurt quite as much. It hurt like closing a rift.

He had only fed the mark with the tiniest slivers of magic, yet its reaction in both cases was far stronger than the magic that had charged it.

Interesting.

Idhren hopped down from the bed. He grabbed the blanket off the top to wrap around his shoulders against the chill. Because it was always drafty in this cabin and it was always freezing at night. He padded over to the desk on the other side of the room and sat down. It was still stocked with parchment, quill and ink. Perhaps someone expected him to be writing letters. Other than informing his clan that he was alive, what reason did he have to write? He had reason now, and it was far more interesting than a letter home.

He smoothed out a sheet of parchment on the desk, pinning one corner with the pot of ink to hold it in place, ensured that the quill was well sharpened, and then began writing.

Magic was something that Idhren understood on an intimate level. Science was something that was familiar to him. Thaumaturgy had been his life's work, his sole purpose in Tevinter. Living with the Dalish allowed little opportunity for experiment and study. He had missed it, but there were many other things to learn while living with the Dalish. Their religion and their language and their culture. But fascinating as that had been, magic had always been his greatest passion.

Now he had brand new, never before seen, magic scarred onto his person. He hated it. He feared it. He wanted it gone. But he couldn’t have any of those things. He could, however, try and find some shred of happiness in this dismal, miserable situation. He could study the mark. If he could understand what it was, how it worked, where it came from, then maybe he could figure out how to get rid of it. Give it to someone who would want to be the Herald of Andraste. Someone who wanted to be here, saving the world and talking politics.

And if he was thinking about magic and theory and experimentation then Idhren couldn’t think about anything else.
Nighttime was always the hardest. Sitting alone in Haven with no distractions his mind tended to wander – and recently always the same paths. He knew that he had to stop thinking about the past, but it was difficult. Even more difficult when demons taunted him with it in his sleep.

He'd stayed up long hours before. He had often stayed up all night reading something from Canidius' library, or the Circle's library before that. He didn't need nearly as much sleep as he had living with the Dalish. So he would dredge up one more of his old habits. Alcohol, lyrium, and research. Those were the things that had defined his life before, and they could be so again.

He could find himself a purpose here, perhaps. A purpose beyond closing rifts and being the Herald of Andraste for the masses to worship. And maybe he still had no choice in the matter, but he'd had little choice in working for Canidius, either. This was the same. He had dealt with it before, he could deal with it again.

Anything to keep him from thinking about the past. Anything to stop his mind from wandering down those dark, miserable paths anymore. At this point, that was the only thing he could ask for. The only thing he could hope for.

He was stuck here, whether he liked it or not.

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays and happy new year, all! This chapter feels a little like filler, but we'll be back to plot next time, and I'm very much looking forward to that.

If you didn't already notice, this is now part of a series! Currently, the only other work is my gift to you guys last chapter (scenes from the au where Tainan survives!) which will probably see a few more additions as we reach the corresponding parts of this fic (so there's no spoilers). I've also considered throwing up some deleted scenes from this fic. So much happens in DAI that I can't possibly fit everything I'd like into this without making it even more impossibly long (my word document is currently 170k, rip me). So if that's something you'd be interested in reading here let me know, otherwise it'll probably stay hidden on tumblr forever.
In Hushed Whispers

*And the men of Tevinter heard and raised altars*

*To the pretender-gods once more,*

*And in return were given, in hushed whispers,*

*The secrets of darkest magic.*

- Canticle of Threnodies 5:11

**Redcliffe, Ferelden, Justinian 9:41 Dragon**

“I take back every decent thought I’ve ever had about your southern mages,” Idhren snapped as the tavern door slammed behind them. “If that’s their leader, then I shudder to think what naïve fools the rest of them are. Indentured to a magister?” he asked incredulously, “In what possible world would that ever be a good idea?”

“Many mages in the Circle look to Tevinter as an example of the freedoms they might have,” Solas commented. “A land where mages are not forced away from their families and confined to their towers.”

Idhren scoffed. “I know what it is to be indentured to a magister, and it is no boon. It is not the freedom these people seek. They will be little better than slaves. And what does anyone need with so many indentured servants?” he wondered aloud, “Alexius can’t look after this many people alone, he’ll have to pawn them off on the Magisterium. And then any mage fit enough would be shipped off to Seheron to fight in the war. And likely a few who are not fit enough. Actually, they’ll probably just send the lot of them, because the Magisterium won’t care. They’re expendable.”

“This Alexius,” Cassandra spoke up, interrupting Idhren’s rant, “Do you know him?”

“I know of him,” Idhren said, and rested his hands on his hips as he glared out at the lake. They had been introduced on at least one occasion, but it was clear from this meeting that Alexius did not recognize him. Unsurprising. “An academic, mostly.” And that was the only reason Idhren had given the man enough thought to commit to memory. Alexius produced great work, but Idhren had been more interested in the publications of his wife, whose research on the Veil inspired much of his own. But Alexius had been Dorian’s patron, Idhren remembered suddenly, the first time he had thought of the man in years. Was Dorian here, then? Idhren shook the thought from his mind and continued, “Tried once to pass a bill in the senate that would provide more funding for the Circles and less for the war. It went about as well as you would expect. I always thought he was more interested in academics than politics.” Apparently he had always been a poor judge of character.

“And the son?” Cassandra asked.

Idhren shrugged. “Didn’t know he had one, actually. Odd, considering how much that lot usually likes to show off their heirs like prized horses.”

“Do you think he can be trusted?” Cassandra pressed.

“I don’t know,” Idhren replied honestly. “I generally have a policy of not trusting Altus mages, but
there are a few that aren’t absolute piles of shit. If we’re lucky, Felix is one. If we’re not, then at least we know we’re walking into a trap and can prepare accordingly.”

There was someone waiting for them in the Chantry, and it certainly wasn’t Felix, but beyond that Idhren did not notice. He was rather distracted by the large rift that dominated the room, flooding it with eerie green light. Even as Idhren stepped forward and raised his hand toward the tear it spat out another batch of demons, forcing him to fall back or else be gored by a terror. For the moment at least the stranger seemed to be on their side, but the demons were not discriminating in who they chose to attack. As Cassandra plunged her sword through the last shade Idhren rushed past her and thrust his hand upward toward the rift. It still hurt, tearing apart the skin of his hand even as the foreign magic stitched together the hole in the veil, but Idhren was beginning to get used to that pain. Gritting his teeth, Idhren pushed against that feeling as though it were an uncooperative spell, attempting to control it at least somewhat. The more rifts he closed the more Idhren thought he was beginning to understand how this mark worked, he could feel it pulling together the veil, knitting it together like healing a wound, but the mark still reacted independently.

The rift closed with a resounding crack that echoed off the chantry’s vaulted ceiling and Idhren let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding as he lowered his hand.

“Fascinating,” the stranger mused as Idhren shook the lingering numbness and ache from his arm. “How does that work, exactly? You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers and boom! rift closes,” the man laughed.

There was something familiar about that voice. Intrigued, Idhren turned his full attention toward the man who had been waiting in the Chantry, then froze as he laid eyes on the last person he had ever expected to cross paths with again.

His hair was styled differently than Idhren remembered, and he had grown the most ridiculous mustache, but it was definitely him; standing in the middle of a rundown Chantry in some backwater town in Ferelden like he belonged there.

“Dorian?”

The man was startled to hear his name. “I’m sorry, have we--,” he started asking, but stopped when he got a good look at the Herald’s face. “Idhren?” The elf looked so different that Dorian hardly recognized him. For one, his face was covered in tattoos, which was shocking in itself, but he had also cut off all his hair. Everything below his ears had been lopped off, and one side was shorn down to the scalp. The result was that his long ears were quite obvious, a style that no elf in Tevinter would have dared. Maybe that was the point. It made him look older. Or maybe he just was older, because it had been years since Dorian had last seen him. Those eyes, though – deep violet and luminous in the dim light of the chantry – he would recognize those anywhere.

“You two know each other?” asked the stern-faced woman behind him, sounding incredulous and somehow annoyed at the same time.

“We were… acquainted,” the elf said carefully, his violet eyes – exactly the same as Dorian remembered them – never leaving Dorian’s face. “In Tevinter.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” the Altus agreed wryly. “Dorian Pavus, most recently of Minrathous,” he introduced himself to the others before turning his attention back to Idhren. “You’re certainly the last person I expected to see here.”

“I would say the same of you, except that I’ve just seen Magister Alexius in the tavern. I’m more surprised that you weren’t with him,” Idhren replied, trying to ignore the way his heart fluttered in his
chest at the mere sound of Dorian’s voice. Now was neither the time nor the place to be remembering a childhood crush. They had more important things to worry about.

“Alexius doesn’t know I’m here, and I’d rather like to keep it that way,” Dorian replied. “You’re probably wondering how he managed to steal the allegiance of the mages out from under you. As if by magic, yes?”

Idhren frowned. “Is that what he did?” he asked, “Grand Enchanter Fiona had no memory of meeting us in Val Royeaux. Did Alexius use blood magic to alter her memory?”

“Nothing quite so obviously nefarious, no,” Dorian assured. “You saw the rift here; how it altered time around itself? Sped some things up and slowed others down. In order to reach Redcliffe before you Alexius distorted time itself.”

“That’s not possible,” Idhren protested. “The laws of magic–.”

“Don’t apply anymore,” Dorian interrupted. “Not since someone ripped a hole in the Veil the size of a small town. I know what I’m talking about. I helped develop this magic. Back in Tevinter we were never able to make it work, and even now it’s wildly unstable. What I don’t understand is why he’s doing it,” Dorian mused thoughtfully. “Ripping time to shreds for a few hundred lackeys?”

“He isn’t doing it for them.”

Idhren whipped around as another voice interrupted the conversation. The battle and his own shock at seeing Dorian again must have kept him from noticing the Chantry doors open once more.

“Kind of you to finally join us,” Dorian quipped as Felix crossed the floor to join them, “What took so long? Your father isn’t getting suspicious, is he?”

“I don’t think so,” Felix assured, “But I shouldn’t have played the illness card, I thought he would be fussing over me all day.”

“Will someone tell me what is going on?” Idhren asked impatiently, interrupting the two.

Felix turned to him, expression solemn, and explained. “My father has joined a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves the Venatori.”

This situation just kept getting worse and worse. As though a gaping hole in the Veil wasn’t bad enough, now there were power hungry magisters ripping holes in time as well. And insane Tevinter cults were the last thing the world needed. Idhren couldn’t help wondering, however, if the Venatori and their so-called Elder One were behind the Breach in the first place. If that was the case, he had to stop them from getting control of the rebel mages at all costs. With that much magic at their disposal Idhren shuddered to think what sort of new chaos they could unleash.

“This mage, are you certain we can trust him?” Cassandra asked after they left the Chantry. Felix had returned to the castle and his father, while Dorian had agreed to meet them on the road out of town to avoid being seen.

Idhren sighed faintly. Logically, he knew he should be at least a little more wary, but despite the unusual circumstances he found he did still trust Dorian. “I am,” he replied. “I’ve known Dorian since I was fourteen. We studied at the same Circle, for a time. He’s a narcissistic, egotistical, spoiled, selfish ass, but he’s a good man. And that’s more than I can say for anyone else from Tevinter.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re really bad at compliments?” Varric asked.
Idhren shrugged, “I’ve already spent too much of my life pretending to like people.”

“I can imagine that,” Varric sympathized. “I suppose all Tevinter elves are this prickly, then?”

“Elves in Tevinter can’t afford to be prickly,” Idhren pointed out.

“The ones that get out, I mean,” Varric elaborated.

“I wouldn’t know,” Idhren shrugged, “I haven’t met any others.”

“Oh, I’ll have to introduce you to Fenris someday. I think you two would get along swimmingly. You could, I don’t know, talk about how much you hate magisters.”

They found Dorian just around a bend in the road, out of sight of Redcliffe’s main gates. He had the same air of practiced nonchalance about him that Idhren was all too familiar with, but it was slightly jarring to see him – picture of Altus poise and sophistication – out in the wilderness.

“You look different,” Dorian commented as the small party made their way back across the countryside to the Inquisition’s main camp in the Hinterlands. “I hardly recognized you. It’s the tattoos.”

“Yes, they were rather a surprise for me as well,” Idhren replied.

“Surprise tattoos?” Dorian let out a short laugh, “What, did you just wake up one morning and there they were? Is that what the Dalish do? Hold you down and tattoo you in your sleep?”

“Not exactly, no,” Idhren replied a little uncomfortably, and quickly changed the subject. “The mustache is new.”

Dorian perked up immediately, as always more than happy to talk about himself. “Do you like it? I’ve grown rather fond of it myself. I think it makes me look dashing.”

“I think it makes you look like a slut,” Idhren replied flatly. Ahead of him on the road Cassandra visibly startled and looked over her shoulder at him before looking away again quickly. Varric’s shoulders shook with barely contained laughter.

Dorian laughed aloud. “Now I like it even more,” he mused, and raised a hand up to stroke the mustache thoughtfully. “So, ‘Herald of Andraste’. You’re certainly moving up in the world. Pity it hasn’t done anything for your height.”

“You, of all people, should be well aware of the less fortunate aspects of elven physiology,” Idhren groused, “There’s nothing I can do about my size, however I see you still haven’t bothered to fix that horrid personality.”

“You wound me,” Dorian said, but the smile on his face belied the seriousness of his tone, “I am an absolute delight to be around, you should consider yourself lucky to be graced by my illustrious presence.”

“I see you still suffer from delusions of grandeur as well.”

“I see you are still willfully blind to my charm. You’re fooling no one, Herald.”
“The only thing I am willfully blind to is that atrocious outfit. Is that what Tevinter fashion has done while I was away?”

“You wouldn’t know fashion if it came up and bit you in the ass,” Dorian scoffed, “What is this get-up supposed to be? It’s hideous.”

Idhren looked down at the Inquisition issue armor he was wearing and shrugged. It was not the nicest thing he had ever worn, but it was not the worst, either.

“Are you certain the two of you are friends?” Cassandra asked incredulously, interrupting their banter.

“Of course,” Idhren assured her easily, though the statement felt half a lie. His relationship with Dorian was complicated, to say the least. “Dorian once fought a duel for my honor.”

“That is a lie and a fabrication,” the man immediately protested. “I did no such thing.”

“Oh?” Idhren smirked a little as he looked over at the man. “Then what do you think happened?”

“I attempted to instruct our fellow students in proper manners and decorum, as befits a mage of Tevinter,” Dorian explained. “The shameful way they were carrying on was an embarrassment to the entire Imperium. Honestly, I was doing them a favor, the First Enchanter completely overreacted.”

Idhren huffed out a scoff of laughter, unsurprised by the answer, but it was so typical of Dorian. The man would probably take the truth of that duel to his grave rather than admit he’d been protective of the lonely, bleeding heart that Idhren had been back then. “You’re a terrible liar, Dorian.”

It was nice, this careless trading of insults, familiar and comforting in a strange way. It reminded Idhren of Tevinter. The parts of Tevinter that he liked, at least; the few good memories he had of that place. And it took his mind off everything terrible that had happened recently, everything he had lost and the sudden weight on his shoulders. He felt more like himself than he had since waking up in that cell in Haven. The feeling wouldn’t last, Idhren knew, but he would enjoy it while he could.

The momentary peace lasted even shorter than expected.

While the plan to infiltrate Redcliffe Castle had succeeded, everything afterward had gone immediately downhill. Cornered, caught, Alexius had panicked and attempted some spell. It so startled Idhren that he didn’t have the time to react. If not for Dorian’s quick thinking Alexius may have succeeded in whatever he was attempting, but as it was, Idhren was only aware of a nauseating sense of vertigo, the feeling of falling, and of then suddenly sitting in waist high water in the dark.

“Dorian?” Idhren called out, looking around and trying to figure out where he was. As his eyes adjusted to the dark he could see stone walls closed in around him and a faint red light suffused the room, but he couldn’t tell where it was coming from. He fished around in the murky water for his staff, located it, and used it to pull himself to his feet. “Dorian?” he called again, growing more concerned.

“I’m alright,” the man’s voice came from the other side of the room, and in the dark Idhren could make out his form against the far wall. He seemed to have been set just as off-kilter as Idhren.
As the elf began to make his way through the water towards him Dorian summoned a small wisp to light the room. It offset the eerie red glow somewhat, and allowed Idhren to get a clearer picture of where they were. Unfortunately, the view was less than comforting. It was a dungeon. “Where are we?”

“Fascinating,” Dorian mused, righting himself and slogging through the water to join Idhren at the center of the room – the cell. “Displacement? Alexius’ spell must have sent us to… what? The closest confluence of arcane energies?”

Idhren would have argued about the impossibility of it all. Displacement should not have been possible, the laws of magic were finite outside of the Fade. Except that they had already been broken. Idhren had already seen evidence of time manipulation, so there was no reason this should not be possible now as well. “We were in the hall,” he said thoughtfully, trying to recall exactly what had occurred in hopes of discerning what sort of spell Alexius had used. “Are we still in the castle?”

Dorian paused and looked around, taking in their surroundings once more, “It would appear so, although I don’t remember any part of the castle looking like this,” he said. “Oh, of course!” he interrupted himself, “It’s not just where, but when! Alexius must have sent us through time.”

“Oh of course,” Idhren groaned in frustration. “Because the time magic went so well last time he tried it.”

“It did work,” Dorian pointed out.

“Yes, and damaged the Veil even more in the process,” Idhren griped. “So let’s do it again. Typical magister,” he spat, “I once admired his work, but this is insanity.”

“I couldn’t agree more;” Dorian sighed.

Idhren scrubbed a hand over his face and through his hair, taking a deep breath to try and focus himself. “Alright,” he breathed, “you’ve said you helped develop this magic. Do you know how to reverse it?”

“Theoretically, yes,” Dorian replied confidently, “Although we’ll first need to find out when, exactly, he sent us. The amulet that he used for the spell, it looked like the same one I helped him make in Minrathous. If I could get my hands on it reversing the spell would be rather simple, actually.”

“Fenhedis lasa,” Idhren swore, sighing in frustration. “That’s assuming the amulet even exists where we are now.” And assuming they could get their hands on it if it did. He shifted his grip on his staff and began slogging his way toward the cell door, which was thankfully standing open and unlocked. “Nothing here is ever simple. It was easier living in the woods eating insects.”

“You ate insects?” Dorian asked in alarm, turning to follow him.

“You know, they’re not so bad once you get used to them,” Idhren shrugged. At the door of the cell he stopped and looked cautiously outside, but there was no sign of any guards or soldiers, or even other prisoners. Just more of that eerie red glow. Only now Idhren could see where it was coming from.

“I can’t believe you ate insects,” Dorian still sounded horrified as he stopped behind Idhren.

“To be fair,” Idhren replied, because this was nicer to think about than the fact that Redcliffe Castle was now rife with massive red lyrium crystals, even more than there had been at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. “Sometimes there’s not much else. You’d eat bugs too if the other option was starving
to death.”

“You know, I’m really not certain that I would,” Dorian protested. But when they stepped out of the cell he noticed the same problem as Idhren had, and all the mirth dropped from his voice. “Is this… What is this?”


“Maker,” Dorian breathed, but he followed Idhren down the center of the hall and kept a wide berth of the crystals, “Why is it coming out of the walls?”

"I’d rather not think about it," Idhren said honestly. But they found out soon enough. The further they went trying to find a way out of these dungeons the more red lyrium they encountered. Worse that that was when they began to find people. The dungeons were still mostly deserted, but not entirely.

They found Fiona first, behind a locked cell door that seemed useless in the face of what she had become. It was horrific. What Varric had been able to tell him about red lyrium was nothing compared to this. But she was able to confirm Dorian’s hypothesis. Harvestmere, 9:42 Dragon. A full year in the future.

They found Cassandra and Varric next, their condition less horrifying but no less dire. What had Alexius done to them?

"We have to find Alexius," Idhren said firmly. "Dorian, you have to reverse the spell. We have to fix this." For the first time he was actually glad that Tainan had not lived to see this day. He shook that thought firmly from his head. This was not the time. He needed to focus. Think only about the present. He needed to get out of here. "Tell me everything you can about this magic, Dorian," he ordered as they moved through the halls.

"I don't see how that could help," the man argued.

"I can help," Idhren snapped back. He hadn't the patience for the man's flippant attitude at the moment. "Didn't you once call me the most talented mage in Vyrantium?"

"I did," Dorian was forced to admit. To say otherwise would be a lie. And so, between fighting guards and demons and closing rifts, he explained as much as he could as quickly as he could about the theories and mechanics that backed the use of Alexius' amulet.

At least until they stepped outside.

Since they had fallen into the future Idhren had felt the Fade was stronger, but he thought little of it until he saw the sky. "Dread Wolf shit on my corpse," he swore, coming to a stop in the castle courtyard as he looked up the Breach. It had taken over the entire sky, like there was nothing at all between their world and the Fade.

“Well that’s something you don’t see every day,” Dorian quipped, though the flippant tone of his voice was belayed by the horrified expression on his face as he looked up at the sky. But when they had dealt with the rift in their immediate vicinity he continued right on talking about magic.

Strange, how easily he and Dorian fell back into familiar rapport. As though they had not been apart for five long years. As though the world was not falling apart around them. As though Idhren was not a fundamentally different person from the bitter, jaded Liberati mage he had been the last time they met.
No, that last part was not true. Maybe if Tainan were here it would be the case. Maybe if the Maker hadn’t once again taken away everything Idhren ever cared about.

But it was easy to talk to Dorian despite the years that stood between them. Arguing magical theory and trading casual insults kept Idhren from putting too much thought into the hellscape they had been thrown into. Between fighting demons and trying to wrap his head around the theories of chronomancy there was nothing else. No time for emotion. And for that, Idhren was grateful.

When the whole sordid mess was over – the timeline set right and Alexius and the rebel mages dealt with – Idhren collapsed onto the steps before the throne and hung his head in his hands. As the excitement died down and the adrenaline faded away, he felt exhausted. His hand ached. His head ached. Everything ached. He imagined he would have nightmares about that terrible almost-future for weeks. But it made him even more certain that he needed to stay with the Inquisition until this was all sorted. Alexius was dealt with, but some of what they had seen might still come to pass if he did not close the Breach. There was also the Venatori and their so-called ‘Elder One’. They must be the ones responsible for the Breach, and he doubted they would give up their plans so easily.

“Well, that was a disaster from start to finish,” Dorian seated himself on the step beside Idhren with far more grace than the elf had managed. Idhren was a bit surprised that the man could still look every inch a magister’s son while splattered head to toe in mud and blood and ichor. “Your people are arguing amongst themselves,” he added when Idhren gave no reply. “You may want to stop them.”

“They’re not my people,” Idhren protested. Although he was aware it looked that way.

“Really?” Dorian asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “You could have fooled me.”

“They can’t be seen disagreeing with the Herald of Andraste,” Idhren muttered, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw spots. “Bad for public image. I’m sure I’ll be scolded later.”

Dorian hummed thoughtfully and picked at the dirt beneath his nails. “No, I can’t imagine they’re very happy to have even more mages running amok around here,” he murmured. “You’ve given them license to… Well, to be like mages back home. For what it’s worth, though, I think you made the right choice.”

Idhren frowned. He didn’t like how good it felt to have Dorian’s approval. “I wasn’t about to save them from one kind of slavery just to throw them into another,” he explained. “I know how easy it is to fall for a magister’s lies, and I’m willing to give them a second chance at freedom. Hopefully this time they won’t fuck it up.”

“Quite,” Dorian agreed, and fell silent.

The silence was not awkward, as Idhren might have expected, but comfortable, and comforting in a way that Idhren wasn’t aware he needed. Even years later he still considered Dorian a friend. To have met him again on the other side of the world was nothing short of a miracle. And given how much an outsider he still felt in the Inquisition it was nice to have someone who understood him. “I suppose you’ll be going back to Tevinter now,” he mused, looking down at the mud on his boots and trying to ignore the way his heart twisted in his chest.

Beside him, Dorian shrugged. "Actually, I thought I might stay on for a while, see that Breach of yours up close."

Idhren sat up straighter and looked over at him, eyes wide. "You want to stay?" he asked. What in the world would make him want to stay here?
"Haven't I mentioned?" Dorian offered him a wry smile. "The south is so charming and rustic. I adore it to little pieces."

Idhren laughed. The sound burst out of his lips like the ringing of bells. An actual genuine laugh. And after all they had been through that Dorian could make him laugh was astounding. "Well, I'd be happy to have you."

"You're really staying, then?" a voice interrupted, and Idhren craned his neck up to see. It was Alexius' son, and the man slowly lowered himself down to the step on Dorian's other side. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"What can I say," Dorian shrugged. "I do so love a hopeless cause."

"I don't know that I would call it hopeless," Felix replied. "From what I've seen, I think you have a fair shot."

"That makes one of us," Idhren scoffed, but he appreciated the thought all the same.

"Oh, I don't believe you two were ever properly introduced," Dorian scolded himself. "How negligent of me. Well, there were rather more important things to think about at the time. Felix Alexius, as I'm certain you're already aware," he gestured to the other man while looking at Idhren, "And may I introduce to you Idhren..." he hesitated, brow furrowing, "I suppose you don't use Canidius' name anymore, do you?"

"No, I don't," Idhren was more than happy to confirm. "Idhren of Clan Lavellan," he supplied, and held his hand out to Felix, "Formerly of Vyrantium."

"Oh," Felix's eyebrows rose in surprise as he took Idhren's hand and shook it. His grip was not exactly firm, but it was confident. "Then you're..." he glanced over at Dorian and whatever he saw in the other man's face made him stop. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Vyrantium, you say?"

"And you," Idhren replied, releasing the man's hand. "I was Liberati, apprenticed to magister Linus Canidius. Though it's been years now since I was in Tevinter."

"I'm not at all surprised you left," Felix replied honestly. "Can't say that I know much about Canidius, however."

"Lucky for you," Idhren said earnestly. He wanted to ask why he had never known that Alexius had a son, but he knew that would be rude, so he kept his mouth shut. Even though Felix seemed a well-meaning down-to-earth sort right now, he was still Altus. They could be touchy. "What will you do now?" he asked instead. "I couldn't blame you for not joining the Inquisition, but I'll put in a good word for you if you want."

"Thank you, but no," Felix offered a smile as he shook his head. "Someone needs to go back to Tevinter and let them know what's happening here. The Imperium has always had people like the Venatori, but what they're doing here, what my father tried to do... It's unconscionable. If we're lucky, some people will agree."

"I hope they do," Idhren agreed. But he wasn't going to hold his breath waiting for it to happen. "And for what it's worth," he added hesitantly, "I'm sorry about your father." He wasn't certain how well the sentiment would be received, considering Idhren was responsible for seeing Alexius dragged off in shackles. Not that the magister had put up much of a fight in the end.

Felix offered him a melancholy smile in return. "Me too," he replied.
That was probably the best response that Idhren could have hoped for. Idhren wasn’t certain he could fully sympathize with the man’s situation. He’d seen Alexius in that future, and what he had done to his son. So Idhren knew that on some level the magister was just trying to save someone he loved. Idhren understood that feeling. But the way he’d gone about it, the lengths he had gone to, and the result. Felix in that future had been a mindless husk of the man that sat with him now. Worse than Tranquil.

Idhren shook his head and gripped his staff, using it to lever himself to his feet. “Suppose I should go see what Varric and Cassandra are arguing about this time,” he sighed. Maybe give them something else to argue about. Cassandra had already made it clear that she was unhappy with his offer to ally with the rebel mages. "And we should get on the road sooner rather than later. I wouldn't want to piss of the local royalty more than we already have. I'll make certain we don't leave without you, Dorian."

"Thank you," the man replied, "I won't be long. Just allow me to see Felix off before we go."

"Of course," Idhren said. As though he would deny such a simple request. Especially given what they had all just been through. He turned to Felix again and attempted to smile, but he found he’d rather lost the energy to fake it or the emotion to manage a real one. "Have a safe journey," he said, and went to join the rest of the Inquisition by the castle gates.

As predicted, Cassandra was less than happy with the results of their mission. Not that he had ever expected her to approve of free mages. She was, surprisingly, not lecturing him about making poor decisions. That was what Idhren had expected. He was relieved to avoid such a scolding, however, and happy to point out that they had what they came for. The mission was a success, however much a mess it had been in the end. For the most part, however, everyone was keeping quiet about his impulsive undermining of authority in favor of figuring out what to actually do with several hundred free mages now that they had them. Idhren listened with only one ear as Cassandra, Leliana, and Varric bickered about logistics and ideals, glancing back toward the main hall to where Dorian and Felix were still on the steps.

The two men stood side by side, heads bowed together as they spoke in hushed voices. They were clearly very close, Idhren could see that by the ease with which Dorian held himself while speaking to Felix. He could also see the concern that lined Dorian's face as they spoke. Actual concern, not veiled behind jokes and half-truths and flippant comments.

Idhren forced himself to look away, to give the pair their privacy, and tried not to acknowledge the strange feeling in his gut. Jealousy was not something he was worthy of feeling. Not for Dorian. Not that he should be feeling jealous at all, except that Dorian had someone when he did not. He tried to tell himself that was the only reason that feeling had lodged itself like a stone in his stomach. Dorian had what he had lost, and what he would never have back. There was nothing more to it.

The journey back to Haven was long and exhausting. Progress up the mountain roads was slow, as always, even if the pass was more well traveled these days. Idhren's horse picked its way carefully along behind Cassandra's. He had never ridden a horse before, but with all the traveling that he had been doing over the past few months it wasn't surprising that he had picked it up quickly. He was not an expert, by any means, but felt confident enough to lead his mount - a mellow gelding picked out by horsemaster Dennet himself - along the winding roads up to their mountain village. And he no longer worried about the long distance between himself and the ground.
Idhren was incredibly relieved when they finally arrived back at that little mountaintop village. The one that seemed to be larger every time Idhren returned from some mission or another. More tents around the outskirts, more soldiers training just outside the walls. And now they came trailing a long, straggling line of mages. Not all of those mages would be useful to their purpose, there were children among their numbers, and it would likely take several days before the last of the stragglers came in, but he could already imagine how much more crowded the tiny mountain valley would become.

More of a crowd for him to get lost in.

Or more people to call him the Herald of Andraste. And that title was really starting to get annoying.

If the Maker or Andraste really had chosen him for something, he wished they would tell him more clearly.

The first thing that Idhren did after returning his horse to the stables and to Dennet’s exemplary care was to collapse onto the bed in his small cabin and fall asleep. Although the journey back to Haven had been peaceful, travel didn’t allow very much time to simply rest. And Idhren was exhausted. Tired down to his bones in a way that he couldn’t recall ever feeling before. Trying to save the world was exhausting. But finally the end was within sight. With the alliance of the rebel mages, they finally had the strength necessary to attempt to close the Breach once and for all. And then, Maker willing, this would all be over.

But it was not that simple. It was never that simple. There were plans to be made. The mages needed time to settle in and be briefed on the situation with the Breach, and that would likely take days. That lecture Idhren had been waiting for came, expectedly, from Cullen. Of course the templar – former templar, as though it made much difference – was upset about mages being allowed to police themselves. Idhren may have snapped at him more than was necessary. But the rebel mages had been without templar supervision for the better part of a year and had seen no increase of blood magic or abominations in that time. Aside from Fiona’s disastrous decision to ally with Tevinter, the rebels had done nothing to warrant suspicion or further oppression.

So while the war council bickered among themselves about what to do about the mages, Idhren returned to his usual haunt in the tavern to wait for a decision.

He was halfway into his first glass and planning on a perfectly lonely evening of mind-numbing alcoholism when someone very rudely pulled a chair up beside him and thumped down into it.

“What is the Herald of Andraste doing drinking alone in a corner?” Dorian asked as he pulled a chair away from a nearby table and sat down across from him.

Idhren stared down into the cup before him and wondered whether he should say anything. Ultimately, however, all the walls he had built up over the years held firm, prevented him from opening himself to anyone else. Even Dorian. Especially Dorian. The last time he had allowed himself to open up to the man it had not ended well, and Idhren could not bear another heartbreak atop the one he already suffered. When he raised his eyes up to look at Dorian again, it was with suspicion, and carefully guarded. It was one thing to trade harmless insults on the road, or clever quips while running for your life, and quite another to sit here and express genuine concern. Idhren was too far into his cups to play that game right now. “Why do you care?”

“I know a bit about drinking alone in the corner,” Dorian replied. “It’s not usually done for good reason.”

Idhren thought he had very good reason. “It’s none of your business,” he muttered, “If you’ve only come to tell me once again what a terrible disappointment I am, then leave. I don’t have the patience
for it tonight."

“That’s not what I intended,” Dorian protested weakly. “I only meant to ask… if you’re alright. All
this is…” he gestured vaguely, “Well it’s something.”

Idhren let out a bitter laugh. “It definitely is something,” he had to agree.

“Of all the things I expected to find when I came south,” Dorian said thoughtfully, “A hole in the sky
and you at the head of a heretical religious movement was not among them. It does get me
wondering, though. I’ve heard plenty of rumors, of course, but I thought why not ask the man
himself?”

Idhren narrowed his eyes at Dorian, not certain where he was going with this. “Ask me what?”

“Are you the Herald of Andraste?” Dorian asked.

It was something Idhren wondered himself, actually. His memory of the Conclave was fragmented
and hazy. He did not remember the explosion, and he could not recollect the face of the woman who
had reached out to him in the Fade. “Am I not the spitting image of our Maker’s bride?” he asked,
rather than give an answer one way or the other.

Now it was Dorian’s turn to laugh. “Not exactly,” he replied, “Assuming all those paintings and
statues are even remotely accurate. For one, she had bigger tits.”

The laugh that escaped Idhren then was far from bitter, though the smile that crossed his face
afterwards was wry. “Well, that part’s probably my fault.” Without all those medications would his
body have continued to mature like a woman? He shuddered at the mere thought of it.

“It’s for the better, really,” Dorian said, “They wouldn’t suit you at all.”

Idhren started suddenly and stared across the table at Dorian, only barely managing to hide his
confusion. Was Dorian flirting with him? Idhren did not have much experience flirting. Varius and
Tainan had both been incredibly overt in making their desires known. And he had seen Dorian with
Felix in Redcliffe; he had seen how close they were. Dorian stared right back, and seemed unaware
to Idhren’s confusion. “So,” the man said after a moment of awkward silence, “How much longer do
I have to make small talk before you decide to share that bottle?”

And just like every time before, Dorian worked Idhren’s hopes up only to dash them to pieces a
moment later. “Ah, so that’s really why you’re here, then?” he asked, any inkling of cheer that
Dorian had managed to bring gone in an instant. “To steal my drinks?”

“In part,” Dorian admitted, “You do seem to be the only person in this place with anything remotely
drinkable. The woman at the bar wouldn’t give me anything but that piss they call ale. Believe me, I
tried. You also looked terribly lonely and miserable over here by yourself.”

Some things never changed. “I’m sorry to have burdened you with my pathetic self once again,” he
muttered. “I’ll go find somewhere to be lonely and miserable where you won’t be forced to look at
me.”

“What?” Dorian asked, clearly confused, “What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t that what this has always been about?” Idhren asked. He took hold of the bottle in one hand
and his cup in the other and wondered if he was still sober enough to make a dignified exit. “You’ve
never actually been interested in me. I’m just so sad and pathetic that you can’t help yourself. I’m
some sort of tool to make you feel better about yourself.”
Dorian looked incredibly confused, and mildly horrified. “You can’t possibly think that,” he protested. “Even after everything that’s happened?”

“After what?” Idhren asked. He wished that Dorian would just admit it, then it he could stop having all these conflicting feelings about the man. Feelings he shouldn’t even be having at this point. “After you pretended not to know me in the Circle? After you looked down on me for putting my family before my ambition? For passing time with a whore? Even now you’ll pretend to care about me just to get yourself a better drink.”

“That’s not…” Dorian protested, “I do care about you, Idhren. I’ve always cared about you.”

Idhren scoffed. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you. Only one person outside my family ever truly cared about me, and they’re dead thanks to this fucking thing.” He released his hold on the bottle and slammed his marked hand down on the table.

Dorian looked at the mark in surprise and confusion for a moment before he realized what Idhren meant. Everyone at the Conclave was killed, except the Herald. “What happened?” he asked in concern.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Idhren replied curtly, snatching up the bottle again and pushing himself to his feet. Regardless of whether he could manage a dignified exit, Idhren needed to get out of here.

“Idhren.” Something in Dorian’s voice made him stop, half a step away from the table, and turn back around. “You’re right,” Dorian said very carefully. “I was an ass to you before. I apologize.”

For a long moment Idhren stared at him, trying to find some hint at a lie in his face, but he found nothing. Suddenly he wasn’t so angry anymore. It had been a long time, maybe Dorian had changed. “I’ll tell you,” he found himself saying, “If you really want to know. But not here.” He didn’t think he could talk about Tainan without tears, and that wasn’t something he wanted the whole of Haven to know about.

“Very well,” Dorian agreed easily, and stood up. “Lead the way.”

Still not certain if this was a good idea, Idhren left the cup on the table but took the bottle of liquor with him as he left the tavern. He led Dorian through the paths, turned muddy by snow and the constant foot traffic. The man was surprisingly quiet as they walked, which was unlike him, but Idhren was grateful. They reached the Herald’s cabin shortly, kicking the mud from their boots as they entered. Idhren lit a fire in the grate with a short wave of his hand and sat down on the edge of the bed. After taking a moment to glance around the small cabin Dorian took a seat in the single chair available, pulling it over to the side of the bed.

Idhren took a swig directly from the bottle and then held it out to Dorian. “I didn’t go to the Conclave alone,” he said, unsurprised by the way his voice choked at the mere thought of Tainan. Though they had only been together for a short time it was still strange going to bed and waking up alone. All those nights tangled together under a pile of furs in the aravel or squeezed into a single bedroll, those mornings waking up with a face full of red hair or roused by soft kisses had been the happiest of his life.

“Who was with you?” Dorian asked curiously, completely oblivious to Idhren’s strife as he took the bottle from him and had a drink as well.

“A hunter from the clan,” Idhren replied, and swallowed heavily. “Tainan. We... We were lovers.”
Dorian fell silent for a moment as though he wasn’t certain what to say. “I’m sorry,” he said eventually, quiet and earnest, and offered the bottle to Idhren once more. “Like… that elf from the lyrium den?” he asked cautiously.

The elf accepted the bottle back and took a long swig. When he lowered the bottle from his lips he shook his head. “No. Varius was my friend, a very dear friend, but I didn’t love him.”

“You loved this hunter?” Dorian asked softly.

“Yes,” Idhren admitted painfully. “More than anything.” Tainan had been everything Idhren wished he could be: confident, strong, genuine, free and open with their affections. And being with them had made Idhren feel like he could become all those things. All the hurts of his past seemed to wash away when Tainan smiled at him. “Do you know what they said to me? When we got to Haven, before the Conclave, before everything went to shit? ‘When we get home we should get married’. ‘When we get home we should get married’.”

Idhren choked on the last word, barely getting it out past the lump in his throat. “I never gave an answer.”

“Why not?” Dorian asked.

“I was scared,” Idhren choked out. “I thought it was all too good to be true. And I was right, wasn’t I? Fenhedis … I was right.”

Slowly Dorian moved to sit beside Idhren on the bed and eased the bottle of liquor out of his lax hands. The elf was on the verge of tears, choking back his emotions. Dorian had no idea what to say that could make this easier for him, so he just put the bottle aside and placed a hand awkwardly on Idhren’s shoulder in hopes of being even a little bit comforting.

“There’s not even anything to bury,” Idhren hiccupped as the tears finally began to fall. “There’s nothing left. I don’t have anything.” He hung his head and swiped ineffectively at the tears on his cheeks. “It’s not fair,” he sobbed, “Tainan was… Tainan was so much better than me. It should’ve been them. It should’ve been them here instead of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Dorian murmured. It felt so inadequate, but what else could he say? What else could he do?

Idhren shook his head as he wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled thickly. “You didn’t come here for this,” he sniffled.

Dorian hadn’t expected the crying, but he had known Idhren was upset. He just hadn’t known it was quite this serious. “Does anyone else know?” he asked. The way Idhren had been drinking alone in the tavern suggested otherwise.

“I’m sure they do,” Idhren struggled to get his voice back under control. “They read my mail. I had to write to the clan… I had to tell them. I’m sure Leliana read it. It’s just like fucking Canidius all over again,” he bit out. “Let me think I’m free, think I’m important, special. Keep me happy so I won’t run off with the only thing that can seal the Breach.”

Dorian may have only been in Haven for a few days, but he didn’t get the impression that Idhren was as much a prisoner as he claimed. Of course, he’d never felt that way about Idhren’s situation in Tevinter, either. He was apparently a poor judge. Whether it was true or not, it was clear that Idhren was unhappy here, miserable even, and Dorian’s heart ached for him. “You really think you’re no more important to them than the mark on your hand?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Idhren sighed. “They send me off to be the face of the Inquisition, let me attend their
war councils and make decisions, but it could just as easily have been someone else. I’m only here because of this mark.”

“It’s not someone else, though,” Dorian commented. “It’s you. And I, at least, am glad that it’s you.”

“That makes one of us,” Idhren mumbled. He wiped at his eyes once more and leaned over to pick up the bottle of liquor from where Dorian had set it on the floor. He raised the bottle to his lips and took a large swig. “I just want to end this and go home.” Although he doubted it would be that easy. There was still this thing on his hand that no one understood, still the Venatori and their Elder One. Closing the Breach wouldn’t be the end. And going home might not be any comfort without Tainan.

“How much longer, then?” Dorian asked, watching as Idhren took another swig from the bottle. It was nearly empty now.

“A few days, at least, no more than a week,” Idhren replied. “Time to organize the mages, but the Breach needs to be dealt with soon. After that… I don’t know.” No one knew, really, but they could worry about that after the immediate problem was dealt with.

“Well, here’s hoping the world doesn’t end before then,” Dorian took the bottle back from Idhren and finished it off. “And that the tavern has significantly more of whatever this is,” he eyed the label on the bottle, but it was no vintage he recognized. “I think we’re going to need it.”
In Your Heart Shall Burn

In your heart shall burn

An unquenchable flame,

All consuming and never satisfied.

- Canticle of Threnodies 5:5

Haven, Ferelden, Solace 9:41 Dragon

The sky was calm for the first time in months. Above Haven the clouds no longer roiled in an angry green vortex. The sky was gray, as clouds were meant to be, with the promise of rain or snow in the near future, but for now calm and peaceful.

Below, all of Haven was in celebration.

The Breach was closed; the Herald of Andraste had delivered them from the end of the world. The town was full to the brim with cheer; laughter and music and the roar of bonfires outside the walls. Idhren watched it all from a distance. He was glad that it was over - the Breach and all the trouble it had brought - but he could not bring himself to join the celebration. He should. People invited him whenever they passed, or at least paused to give their thanks. But Idhren was not in the mood for celebration. He was fresh out of good cheer.

The sky was calm, the world was saved, but what did that mean for him? He could leave the Inquisition, presumably. They no longer required the mark on his hand to fulfill their duties. He wondered if the Breach had closed all the other small rifts as well, or if they still lingered. Likely they would find out in a few days when scouting reports began to flow in.

But if Idhren could leave, where would he go? Clan Lavellan awaited his return. He had fulfilled the mission they set him on, and then some. He had fulfilled his obligations to the Inquisition. They could find some other way to seal any remaining rifts; they could find whoever had started this and see them brought to justice. They didn't need Idhren for that. Could he really go home? Did he even want to?

What awaited him in the Free Marches except an even more glaring reminder of what he had lost? The rest of the clan would grieve along with him, of course, but would that make it any easier?

It wasn't the first time that Idhren wondered how things would have been different if Tainan were here. They befriended others so easily. Far more easily than Idhren ever had. Would they have gotten along with the devout Andrastians that ran the Inquisition? Or would they be just as annoyed as Idhren. Would they have been more willing to help, would they feel less trapped? Idhren would feel less trapped if Tainan were here, he thought.

In the village streets people were dancing and singing, praise and raucous laughter filled the air.

Idhren was as miserable as he could ever remember being. He could return to the Free Marches, to the clan, but it would not be the same. It would never be the same. He could stay here, and let these people continue to parade him about as a prophet to a god that Idhren still wasn't certain he believed in. Neither option was very good. Either way Idhren would be miserable. At the moment he could
not foresee a future in which he was happy again.

Watching the people celebrate was painful. So many of them had lost something because of the Breach or because of the war, and still they were able to be happy. Why couldn't Idhren be happy? He was jealous. He wanted to be able to put this grief aside and join them, but it gnawed at his heart and the back of his mind and would not let him go.

He still didn't know who or what had caused the explosion. He didn't know why Tainan had died. The Maker was not giving answers. Idhren had tried asking. The Maker never gave him any answers. Then again, neither had the elvhen gods. It seemed he was forsaken by all higher powers, if they even existed.

Idhren shook his head and turned, intending to leave the sidelines of celebration and hole himself up in his room, drown himself in alcohol and forget.

He had taken no more than two steps when the alarm sounded.

Haven was lost. There was no other way to interpret the situation. The army that had swarmed down on them from the mountains had overrun the lands surrounding the town walls even before the dragon - archdemon, whatever it was - appeared. It was a miracle that anyone had made it to the Chantry hall safely, and now the women and children of the Inquisition were cowering in the basement somewhere awaiting another miracle.

And everyone was looking toward the Herald of Andraste to perform it.

But Idhren was not a miracle worker. He wasn't certain he was even a prophet. But the Elder One and his army of corrupted templars wanted him. Maybe if they had him everyone else would have a chance to get away.

Dorian watched the small party by the chantry doors as he paced back and forth across the floor. Behind him he could hear the crowds gathering at the back of the Chantry, ready to make their desperate escape as soon as the enemy's attention was pulled elsewhere. Beyond the walls he could still hear sounds of fighting, occasionally broken by an explosion or the earsplitting screech of a dragon. And by the front doors four members of the Inquisition readied themselves for a suicide mission.

Idhren stood just before the door, staff upturned in his hand as he inspected the blade for chips and dull spots. His coat was spattered with blood, his boots caked in mud, his gloves singed slightly from casting barely controlled spells. Not far from him Cassandra checked over her equipment as well, Varric fiddled with his crossbow, and Blackwall shifted from foot to foot in agitation. Everyone else was being ushered toward the back of the hall and out toward the path that Roderick said would lead them to safety. An uncomfortable, tense silence loomed over the small group at the Chantry doors as they prepared to face the enemy one more time. One last time.

Dorian couldn't stand it. With quick steps he walked up to Idhren, right up into his personal space. "You can't possibly think this is a good idea," he protested in a hushed voice.

“It’s not a good idea,” Idhren agreed. His voice was hard and he didn’t take his eyes off the blade of his staff as he wiped it clean of blood. “But it's the only one we have.”
“It’s suicide,” Dorian argued, trying to keep his voice low enough that he wouldn’t be overheard.

For a brief moment Idhren’s hand stilled, then he tucked the cloth into his belt and righted the staff again, testing its weight in his hand as he checked the focus at the top. “Maybe,” he agreed again. His face was blank, his voice emotionless and resigned.

“You can’t do this,” Dorian hissed.

Only then did Idhren take his eyes off the staff and look up at Dorian. Though his expression was neutral those eyes held such a resigned despair that Dorian had difficulty meeting his gaze. “Someone has to. Might as well be me.”

“Idhren,” Dorian protested.

“Go with the others,” the elf interrupted, nodding toward the back of the hall.

“Idhren,” Dorian said again, this time it came out sounding more like a plea.

“I won’t let anyone else die on my watch,” Idhren said firmly, but that despair was still in his eyes. “I’ve already lost too much.”

Dorian suddenly realized what was happening. This was a suicide mission, and that was exactly why Idhren had agreed. He wanted to die. “You don’t have to do this,” Dorian begged.

“Someone has to,” Idhren said again, “So everyone else can escape. No one else has to die. Nothing else matters.”

“You matter,” Dorian insisted. “You’re the Herald of Andraste.” And so much more, but Dorian couldn’t bring himself to say it. Too many years in Tevinter spent hiding the truth, too many people hurt when he didn’t hide it well enough. And people hurt when he hid it too well, a little voice in the back of his mind pointed out, chief among them standing in front of him walking willingly to his death.

“I don’t want to be the Herald of Andraste,” Idhren said wearily. “I just want…” He never finished the sentence, but Dorian knew what he meant: his Dalish lover, his family, everything the world had stolen from him so senselessly. He looked up at Dorian with such anguish, and Dorian couldn’t let him leave thinking that no one in the world cared for him, wouldn’t be able to live with himself if Idhren died without knowing the truth. He clamped down the panic that clawed at his heart, ignored a lifetime of conditioning, grabbed Idhren by the collar of his shirt, leaned down and kissed him square on the mouth.

It was not a good kiss. It was hard and awkward, all lips and teeth and bumping noses. Idhren smelled like blood and lyrium and ozone. When Dorian pulled away the elf’s violet eyes were shot wide, his mouth agape. He was shocked, confused, a little bit scared, and at the very bottom of it all the tiniest bit happy. “If you don’t make it through this,” Dorian told him, “I’ll kill you myself.”

And Dorian was gone before he managed to come up with any sort of response.

They watched from afar as the dragon descended upon Haven. Dorian stood amidst crowds of soldiers and civilian alike, lining the ridge above the town as they watched it burn. And then watched
as the Herald of Andraste buried it in snow. The avalanche roared down the mountainside and consumed the town like a tidal wave. The Herald along with it.

There were shouts of horror and dismay as the remnants of the Inquisition watched their base and their hope swallowed by the snow.

The wind began to pick up.

Cullen shouted orders to the soldiers that were still well enough to walk and fight, rounding up their scattered numbers, regrouping. Got them all moving further into the mountains.

The Herald’s sacrifice would be in vain if they did not live to fight another day.

An hour later a scout shouted up from the back of the line and Cassandra, Blackwall and Varric came staggering up the mountain path after them. For a moment hope bloomed in Dorian’s chest, but it died just as quickly. There was no sign of the Herald of Andraste.

Idhren was under all that rubble somewhere.

It began to snow.

They made camp on the other side of the ridge to take stock of what little they had managed to save in the midst of their flight. What bits of food and herbs had been stored in the Chantry, a few things that people had managed to grab on their way out. Not enough tents. Not enough blankets. Not enough anything.

Dorian spent the rest of the night huddled beside a campfire along with numerous others trying not to think about how damned cold it was. Trying not to think how much colder Idhren would have been under all that snow.

It was still snowing when dawn broke.

A group of scouts went down to look for signs of the enemy. They returned with more tents, a couple of pack horses that had spooked and run before the fighting began and wandered back when it was calm again, hungry and tense, and more blankets and firewood scavenged from the Chantry. They brought no news of the Herald.

The pain woke him. It started in his left arm and then seeped out through the rest of his body. His hand felt like someone had tried to rip it off, his shoulder burned like fire. Mind blurry, Idhren struggled to open his eyes and figure out where he was, what had happened. He was cold and everything hurt.

Finally getting his eyes open he realized first that he was lying on the ground, in a puddle of melted snow and mud in some sort of cave. He raised his head and looked around, but could make out very little in the gloom. Then he tried to move, and immediately regretted the decision. The slightest jostling of his left arm left his shoulder screaming in pain and him gasping for breath on the ground. When the pain finally subsided enough that he could think straight, Idhren used his other arm to roll himself over onto his back. It still sent waves of agony shooting through him, but the position was at least more comfortable than lying face down in the dirt. With trembling fingers he reached over to touch his shoulder, wincing and gasping as he tried to assess the damage. Dislocated? He hoped that
was all.

But he couldn't move like this. He couldn't move his arm, he couldn't get up. Gritting his teeth, Idhren laid his right hand over the injured shoulder and pulled what little shreds of healing magic he could manage. He was weak, exhausted, his skill at healing was weak to begin with, and he was scraping the dregs of his mana reserves now.

What he wouldn't give for some lyrium.

He focused on numbing the pain, fully aware that he would never be able to heal the shoulder with magic. Not in his current condition. Probably not ever. It worked, though. The pain subsided slowly, draining away from his shoulder until it was only a dull ache. It still hurt, but if he could just... How was this meant to work?

He grabbed onto his arm just below the shoulder and pulled. Even with the numbing effect of his magic still suffusing the area the pain was almost blinding. But he grit his teeth, whimpering, and continued until he felt the joint pop back into place. Letting out a relieved sob, he collapsed back onto the ground to catch his breath.

Idhren had no idea how long he lay there. He stayed long after his breathing had returned to mostly even. His arm hurt less now, but it still ached fiercely. And his hand was the same as ever. When he tried to lift his arm it felt weak, his hand shook uncontrollably. The mark was alight with an angry green glow. He remembered vividly the agony of that thing trying to rip it off him. Like it was trying to rip Idhren's heart out through his arm.

He never thought he would be happy to see this thing on his hand, but he was.

And that creature. Idhren squeezed his eyes shut as he remembered, finally, what had lead him to this situation.

Magister.

His mind kept repeating the word over and over; it was the only thing that he could focus on.

Corypheus, the monster had called itself. A darkspawn monstrosity from ages past. One of the magisters out of Chantry legend who had crossed the Veil and breached the Maker's Golden City, unleashing darkness upon the world.

Idhren could have almost laughed at the irony of it all. Here he was on the other side of the world, as far from Tevinter as it was possible to be, and he was still being tortured by a magister.

But he didn’t feel much like laughing right now. It would probably hurt too much if he tried, anyway.

With the pain subsiding now gradually the cold began to seep in. It started where his back lay against the frozen ground, melted snow slowly soaking through the leather and cloth of his bloodstained armor. He realized that beyond the shaking his fingers were stiff and frozen, his hair damp and icy. If he stayed here he would very likely freeze to death.

Funny, how hours ago he had willingly walked to his death, welcomed it. Now he lay here fearing that inevitability. He really was a coward.

He also needed to tell the Inquisition what they were up against.

With a deep breath that made his ribs protest, Idhren began the arduous process of getting himself
upright. He made it to a sitting position before having to stop, arm wrapped around his ribs. Before, the pain in his arm had drowned out everything else, but now all his other hurts were making themselves known. At least one rib broken, he expected. Breathing hurt, but he could breathe, so there was no immediate danger from that. His left arm was still weak; moving it still hurt something fierce. He expected the damage to his shoulder was more than just dislocation.

After catching his breath he struggled to his feet, wavered for a moment, lightheaded, and paused to catch his breath again. His legs, at least, seemed to be no more than bruised.

He was in a cave of some sort. Or perhaps one of the old mining tunnels that ran through the mountains around Haven. There was only one way to go. Wherever he’d fallen through had been sealed up once more by falling rocks and snow, but the rest of the cavern seemed intact. So he started forward on unsteady legs.

Thankfully, though the ground was not exactly even it was clear. From somewhere ahead he could feel the tiniest hint of a breeze, so there must be an opening somewhere. What he would encounter once outside was another question entirely. The last thing he remembered Haven had been overrun with those monstrous things. Templars corrupted by red lyrium. Just like the people he had seen in that horrid future in Redcliffe. He had no way of knowing if any had escaped the avalanche that last trebuchet had brought down onto the village, he could only hope that he'd buried all of them.

Just walking left him winded. He clutched his left arm against the side of his body, and it helped somewhat to brace his ribs but everything ached so much it was little relief. And he had no energy to attempt any more healing magic. His staff had been lost in the confusion somewhere, likely now lying under a ton of snow and lost forever.

But any prayer he sent out that his progress would be unhindered went unanswered. The Veil in Haven was now even weaker than with the Breach. After so much death and destruction it was unlikely to be otherwise. So it was little wonder that there in the old mining tunnels, which had likely seen their own share of grief, Idhren encountered a pair of wandering spirits. Barely more than wisps, they floated aimlessly in a larger cavern and did not yet notice his presence. They would the moment he tried to pass them, however, and Idhren was in no shape to fight even the weakest of spirits, should they prove hostile. Hostile was very likely.

The mark on his left hand throbbed, as it had been doing since he woke, and Idhren suddenly remembered the small experiments he had been doing with it's power every time his mind began to wander and alcohol did not seem the answer. Even the tiniest bit of magic fed into the mark resulted in an explosion exponentially more powerful.

Said explosion always hurt like mad, and it was uncontrollable at best.

Well, his options were to face these two wisps with nothing but a hope and a prayer, or to do something incredibly stupid and reckless.

He went with the latter.

Gathering what little mana was left in his flagging body, Idhren struggled to lift his arm just enough to point his hand vaguely in the spirits' direction. Then he channeled his power down into the mark and braced himself.

The resulting explosion was like ripping a hole in the veil anew. It knocked Idhren off his feet and left him lying on the ground staring in horror at what he had done. It was as though he had created a new rift in the air, only it was smaller than those created by the Breach and, as he watched, it sucked the wisps back through before slamming itself closed with a deafening crack.
Idhren sat on the ground and stared at the empty space in the air where that miniature rift had appeared and disappeared all in a matter of seconds, and at the now empty cavern before him. His arm was on fire from the exertion, but in his shock he barely noticed it.

That trick might come in very handy, if he could learn how to control it better. Or at least do it without rendering himself practically crippled in the process.

At least he had some manner of defense should he encounter anything else.

Not that Idhren knew where he was going. He only knew that if he stayed here he would freeze to death. If he continued onward he might freeze to death anyway, but at least this way he was trying. If he could just get outside to see the situation. Maybe the Inquisition had left some sign for him to follow. Maybe they had sent people back to look for him. They had to know. He had to tell them.

Another fucking magister.

The breeze grew stronger the farther Idhren walked, until by the time he found an exit to this tunnel it was nearly gale force winds. And one look outside told him why. However long he had been lying there unconscious had been long enough for the light snow that had been falling before to turn into a raging blizzard. Even standing in the relative shelter of the cave mouth the wind bit through the tears and gaps in Idhren's armor, piercing into his already frozen body and practically down to the bone. He wrapped both arms around himself against the chill, but it did little.

He would freeze to death if he stayed here, but now it seemed just as likely he would freeze to death no matter what.

That was not at all how Idhren had expected to die. Not the way he wanted to die. But he did not have enough energy left for any more magic, even the tiniest of warming spells. In desperation he might make the mark explode again, but he did not want to risk tapping the very bottom of his reserves unless he had no other choice.

Staring out into the wall of white before him Idhren wasn't certain what he should do. He still hurt all over. He was so cold his teeth were starting to chatter no matter how hard he tried to clench them shut. He was so exhausted he could barely see straight. He could barely think of anything beyond his immediate survival. How was he supposed to find what was left of the Inquisition like this? Why had the Maker saved him from the Breach just to let him die here? Why save him from the avalanche just to let him die here?

Because the Maker hadn't done anything, Idhren's mind supplied easily. The Maker had nothing to do with any of this, no matter what people like Cassandra said.

Was there even anything outside of this cave to find? What choice did he have? Freeze to death here, or freeze to death somewhere else? Neither of those options were any good. So maybe he should just lie down here. Fall asleep, maybe. At least then he wouldn't be aware of his end when it came.

Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled. The wind shrieked down the tunnel.

If he stayed here he would die. If he left he might die.

If he stayed here the magister won.

Idhren took one step forward, and then another. He wasn't even certain why he was bothering. Dead here or somewhere else, Corypheus wouldn't care about the specifics. But somewhere in the very back of his mind there was still the tiniest shred of hope. Hope that someone was looking for him, waiting for him. And the niggling determination that if he somehow managed not to die he could find
Corypheus wherever the magister was hiding and kill him with his own two hands if he had to.

Pure spite drove him onward. Magisters had done enough to him already. Idhren would not let them win again; he would not let them torment him anymore. He had sworn that to himself when he left Tevinter, and he would not go back on that promise.

What Corypheus wanted was wrong. Pure evil, maybe. But more than Idhren wanted to stop him from tearing open the Veil once more, he wanted revenge for himself. Everything that he had suffered since the conclave was Corypheus' fault. Tainan's death. Idhren had never had anything to blame before, but now he did. And his grief turned to anger in his stomach, boiling and burning hot as fire, driving him onward through the snow, though the wind nearly knocked him down and the drifts reached sometimes above his knees.

He struggled on through the blizzard even when he could no longer feel his fingers or his toes or the tips of his ears; when the snow, melted by his body heat, soaked through the layers of armor and even into his gloves and boots. The wind snuck through any gaps in his clothing and stung his eyes but turned tears to frost on his eyelashes. Everything around him was white and howling wind and freezing cold. Cold. So cold.

Even when the snow stopped falling and the wind began to calm Idhren was so frigid it was barely a relief.

A slick patch of ice and Idhren’s body was too sluggish to react. He fell hard to his knees, tried to get his arms out to catch himself, but couldn’t move fast enough and instead landed jarringly on his shoulder. Pain spiked through him, drawing a cry from his chapped lips.

For a moment all he could do was lay there, shivering and gritting his teeth. Then he struggled back to his feet, only to fall again after taking only a few steps. It wretched another pained shout from his throat, followed by a ragged sob.

He was so tired. Everything hurt so much.

He didn’t even know where he was anymore, he could have been walking in circles this entire time for all the good it had done.

The next attempt to get to his feet was even less successful than the last. He managed only to get to his hands and knees before his left arm buckled under his weight. He landed straight onto his injured shoulder and the side of his face.

He couldn’t go on anymore. His body was too exhausted. The pain was too much. So he just lay there, in the mud and the snow. He could barely keep his eyes open, and eventually gave up trying. He had no idea how long he’d been walking, it felt like a lifetime of nothing but cold and pain. So when darkness finally enveloped him, Idhren welcomed it.

___________________________

Pain woke Idhren again. The pain of blood rushing back into his frozen extremities like knives in his veins. A higher part of his mind would have realized it was warmth coming back to his body, but Idhren was half delirious with exhaustion still and his mind ran on pure instinct. He gasped, and immediately tried to pull himself away from the source of the pain, which was of course impossible.

A hand gently touched his brow, brushing strands of damp hair off his face. Idhren flinched and
whimpered. “Hush, my dear,” someone murmured from above him, voice gentle and soft, “You are among friends.”

Idhren opened his eyes, but found it nearly impossible to focus on anything. The world around him seemed a blur of light and sound. He opened his mouth to try and speak, but could not form words. The only sound that escaped his lips was a ragged groan.

“You need to rest,” the voice continued. The hand moved to stroke his hair softly, and he was vaguely aware of the warm tingle of healing magic beginning to flow through him. “I’m sorry, my dear, it will be easier for all of us if you are asleep for this.” Idhren struggled to keep his eyes open, but it was impossible to fight against the magic in his condition, and in moments he was unconscious again.

He was vaguely aware of someone singing. A soft, gentle tune. Slightly sad.

He was burning up. Too hot and too cold at the same time. Something was weighing him down. He moved to try and push it away but his arms felt like leaden weights at his sides, his legs, too. But it was too hot, he felt trapped.

The singing stopped.

Idhren’s eyes struggled to open. Someone moved to stand over him. Red hair in the firelight.

"Tai...?" the word croaked from his chapped lips, hurting his throat in the process. The sound did not even reach his own ears.

The figure above him made a soothing sound, but if there were words involved Idhren did not understand them. He blinked slowly, trying to bring the figure into focus, but his mind was swimming and everything was somewhat surreal. Too bright, hyper focused and yet indistinct at the same time.

"Tai..." he tried again, managed more than a whisper, though his voice was rough and painful. He was too hot, struggling again against whatever was covering him. A low, keening moan escaped his lips as he squeezed his eyes shut again. "Carus..." this time the word came out as a plea, a whine. He couldn't focus, he couldn't think.

Something cool and damp on his forehead, soothing the heat in his body, but only slightly. He tried once more to move his arms or his legs, but managed nothing. Why was he being restrained? He was scared. "Tainan," he gasped again, once more opening his eyes to try and see the figure beside him.

Red hair, gentle hands.

"I'm sorry." A soft voice, but the voice wasn't Tainan's. A woman. An accent.

Where was he? "Tainan?"

"I'm so sorry," the voice said again. The coolness on his forehead disappeared, and he whined at the loss of the only comfortingly cool thing in his world at that moment. But it returned a moment later, cold and damp and soothing, drawing a relieved sigh from his lips. "Rest," the voice urged softly. Careful fingers ran through his hair briefly, a hand rested on his shoulder.
Idhren fought once more to bring his vision into focus, but he could not. His vision blurred even more, blinking sent a tear rolling down the side of his face. "Please." He didn't even know what he was asking for. Comfort. Anything.

"Rest," the voice urged again. Idhren found it hard to ignore. He was tired. He was confused.

The singing started again. His eyelids were as heavy as his limbs. He couldn't move them. Couldn't move anything. Couldn't think.

Eventually, he knew only blackness again.

The next time that Idhren woke he was no longer cold or hot, and the pain had dulled to an ache that suffused his entire person, but could be ignored. He was aware of lying on something soft, and of a heavy, rough blanket laid over him. Somewhere nearby a fire burned, crackling softly and filling the air with the smell of smoke. Slowly, he cracked his eyes open, squinting in the dim light for a moment before he was able to focus. He was in a tent, laid out on some sort of cot. His fingers and toes no longer hurt, and when he tried to move them there was still a lingering stiffness in his joints, but they seemed functional. His shoulder, likewise, ached but a slow attempt at shrugging left him no more pained than if he had overworked the muscles there.

Where was he?

Idhren turned his head to try and get a better look at his surroundings. The tent he was in was surprisingly large, with space for the cot he lay on, a chair, and a tiny fire burning in a ring of stones on the ground. No wonder it was so warm in here.

"Oh, you're finally awake." A voice sounded from the end of the tent, drawing Idhren's attention, and he strained to lift his head to see who it was. The chantry woman he had met with in the Hinterlands - Mother Giselle, he thought her name was - let drop the tent flap after she entered. "I'm glad to see you awake, and I'm certain that the others will be happy for the news as well. You have been asleep the past three days. First Enchanter Vivienne is a remarkably skilled healer, but you were in quite a state when they found you."

Idhren's mind was slow to comprehend the words, still muddled by sleep. Three days? "Where...?" he tried to ask, only for his voice to crack as his throat, dry and rough with disuse, seized up.

"Careful, child," the Mother murmured, coming quickly to his bedside. She took up a pitcher from the floor beside Idhren's cot and poured water into a small bowl. With her help, Idhren was able to drink down half the contents before his throat stuttered and sent him coughing again. "There we are," she murmured, setting the bowl aside for now. "You are with the Inquisition, you awake, and I'm certain that the others will be happy for the news as well. You have been asleep the past three days. First Enchanter Vivienne is a remarkably skilled healer, but you were in quite a state when they found you."

Idhren wasn't so certain about that, himself. He still remembered the pain and the cold and the exhaustion, and thought it was not at all a blessing. If the Maker were watching over him, He should have saved Idhren from that suffering in the first place. "I..." Idhren tried to talk again and found it slightly easier this time. "I need to tell..." he stuttered. He needed to talk to the others. They needed to know what they were up against, what the enemy was planning.
"Hush, child," Giselle soothed, laying a hand on his forehead. "There will be plenty of time for talking later. You need your rest."

Idhren shook his head, dislodging her comforting hand in the process. "No," he protested weakly. Somehow, he managed to get an elbow under himself and made an attempt at getting upright. "I need to... the magister..." He was having trouble getting his thoughts in order. He only knew that he needed to tell someone – Cassandra – about Corypheus, about what he was and what he wanted.

"You are hardly in any shape for that right now," Giselle said, her tone equal parts scolding and sympathetic. She placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back down onto the cot. Idhren tried to resist, but he was too weak. "I will tell the others that you are awake," she offered, rising from the chair when she was certain he would not attempt to rise again. "But for now, you need rest."

Idhren wanted to argue. It was too important to let this wait for too long. But if he couldn’t even fight back against an old woman he really was in no shape to be getting up and walking around. So he stayed where he was as she left his bedside and disappeared through the tent flaps again.

He relaxed back onto the cot, but he doubted he would get much rest. He was not tired, per say. His body was still weak, but he had apparently been asleep for at least three days. His mind was restless. So much had happened. Tainan was gone. Now Haven was gone. All because of one man’s hubris and greed.

The tent flap pulled open again, letting in a draft of cold mountain air. Idhren lifted his head from the pillow. He expected to see Mother Giselle again, so was quite surprised when Dorian's silhouette filled the entrance instead.

The man looked a little worse for the wear. Rather like he had after Redcliffe. His hair was no longer perfectly coifed, though it was clear he had made an attempt. His clothing was dirty as well, mud around the bottom edge of his robe and caked onto his boots. After letting the flap fall shut again he merely stared at Idhren for a long moment. And Idhren stared back.

"You are alive," he said eventually, and sighed in relief. "I almost didn't believe it when they said they found you."

Idhren could hardly believe it himself, if he were being honest. "You..." he tried, but his voice was still rough. He could barely manage more than a whisper.

"They wouldn't let anyone in here except that Revered Mother, the First Enchanter, and a couple other healers," Dorian said as he made his way over to the bed. "The rest of us just had to take their word for it that you were still alive. I think some people had started to doubt." He stopped by the bedside and looked down at Idhren. So small and vulnerable, lying there practically drowned in blankets. "And aren't you a sight," he breathed, falling into the chair that Giselle had occupied not long before. "They haven't really bothered to clean you up, have they?" he asked. With one hand he reached out toward Idhren, and then stopped himself. "Do you mind?" he asked hesitantly.

Idhren wasn't certain what the man intended, but he shook his head, not trusting himself to speak just yet.

Dorian gave the tiniest quirk of a smile as he reached out. His fingers laced through Idhren's hair, combing it gently and smoothing it all to one side, revealing the fuzz of stubble on the other. "There, much better," he nodded to himself, withdrawing his hand. "Can't have the Herald of Andraste looking a mess, even on his sickbed."
It was such a silly thing to be concerned about, but Idhren appreciated the gesture all the same. "Thanks," he managed to croak out.

"You're welcome," Dorian replied. "You sound awful, by the way," he commented, and looked around a moment before spotting the pitcher of water on the floor. He picked up the same bowl Mother Giselle had used and topped it off. "I'm certain you're entirely aware," he said, leaning forward to help Idhren sit up enough to drink some more. "And given what it must have taken to get here I can't be at all surprised. I am very glad to see you alive, though. I thought..." the man cut himself off as Idhren pushed the bowl away from his lips weakly. He had drunk all that he thought he was able at the moment, and the cold water continued to do wonders soothing his throat.

"What... happened?" he asked weakly, voice trembling as he lay back down.

"You dropped half a mountain on Haven," Dorian replied, "You might remember that part. We all thought you'd buried yourself along with it."

"I did," Idhren confirmed. "Fell... cave, or... something."

Dorian raised his eyebrows as he looked down at Idhren. "Well, you're just full of miracles, aren't you? I couldn't imagine someone with greater luck."

Idhren frowned. He didn't believe that. Not entirely. He was lucky to be alive, certainly, but terribly bad luck had put him in this situation in the first place. He shook his head and looked away from Dorian. He didn't feel lucky at all. He never had.

"Sorry," Dorian murmured in the silence between them. At least he seemed to realize that he had said something wrong. "I suppose it doesn’t feel that way for you."

"No," Idhren confirmed. He had lost everything except his life. That felt the opposite of lucky. "Don’t think... Maker likes me."

"Well don’t tell the Inquisition that, the whole thing will crumble," Dorian chuckled.

Idhren frowned. The sentiment was not as comforting as Dorian probably meant. He was a symbol to them, his own feelings on the matter were unimportant. “Not true,” he protested weakly, though the longer he was awake the more he could feel his voice returning. Hopefully the rest of his body would follow suit.

“Well, you haven’t been out there the past few days watching everyone run about like chickens with their heads cut off,” Dorian slumped back in the chair. "No one can agree on what to do now. They can’t even agree on whom to put in charge."

The sound that escaped Idhren’s throat couldn’t exactly be called a laugh, but it was trying. “You think... I’m in charge?” he couldn’t believe that.

Dorian shrugged one shoulder. “I think you’ve got more influence than you realize,” he replied.

Idhren didn’t know if he believed that. But he had decided, somewhere in the blizzard between the grief and the rage, that he would be whatever the Inquisition needed him to be. He would do whatever he could to help.

“I...” Dorian started, and then cut himself off, hesitating a moment before he began again. “I cannot think of a tactful way to put this, so you will have to forgive me. It’s only... That is to say...” Dorian Pavus stammering, at a loss for words. Idhren never thought he would see the day. “Before you left on that suicide mission...”
Idhren remembered suddenly. He had been so focused on what came after that he had forgotten. The feel of Dorian’s lips against his, and the shock of it. “You kissed me,” Idhren said weakly.

To his surprise, Dorian actually flushed. “I did,” he confirmed, “That is… Yes. Yes, I did do that.”

“What?” Idhren asked.

“Venhedis, do I have to spell it out for you?” Dorian said in exasperation. It had taken all of Dorian’s courage just to do the thing, and that was with the pair of them facing imminent death.

“Please,” Idhren replied. He had not meant for it to sound so much like a plea. But his life was falling out from under him and he was tired of playing these games with Dorian. His entire life had been one big disappointment, a tale of getting his hopes up only to have them ripped asunder. He couldn’t deal with that anymore.

“I realize it was completely inappropriate,” Dorian said, dodging the question again, “And for that I apologize. I don’t entirely know what I was thinking,” he said, “Except that, well… The situation was quite dire and you… You looked like you wanted to die,” he said painfully.

Now Idhren had to look away. He had wanted to die, part of him still did. He had lost everything good in his life. And for what? If he was, in fact, the Maker’s chosen, then Idhren didn’t want to believe in Him anymore. All the Maker had ever given him was pain and suffering. Tainan was a child of the Creators, a gift to the world, and the Maker had taken them away.

“I just…” Idhren’s voice quivered when he managed to make it work, “Wanted to see them again… I wanted to be happy again.” Everything since the Conclave had been a nightmare. Part of him had wanted to go find Alexius and make him turn back time – against his own better judgment. A greater part of him had simply wanted it to be over, so he could pick up the pieces of his life and try to move on. His heart ached that even after all these years Dorian still couldn’t give a straight answer, still dodged away from every opportunity Idhren gave him. Even though he wasn’t in any shape to be returning those affections.

After all these years, after finding Tainan and forgetting about Dorian completely in the interim, Idhren still wanted the man to want him. Even though Idhren wasn’t certain he wanted Dorian himself anymore. Pathetic.

“What changed?” Dorian asked quietly, pulling Idhren back out of his spiraling thoughts, and forcibly pulling the conversation away from his own feelings. “Why go through all the effort to get here?”

Idhren didn’t have to think about that. Blinking away tears the wetness in his eyes he focused instead on the bitter rage bubbling low in his gut. “It’s a magister.”

“What?” Dorian asked, not comprehending.

“The Elder One,” Idhren explained, and let out a weak, disillusioned laugh. “He’s a fucking magister.”

Dorian’s expression twisted into one of confused horror. “That creature?” he asked. He had only seen the thing from afar, but it certainly hadn’t appeared human. “Vishante kaffas, what did he do to
himself?”

“I’m not sure even he knows,” Idhren murmured. “He was… raving like a madman about… about becoming a god, and the Golden City. I think…” he had to stop because it was too absurd. Except he had seen the creature, listened to its ravings and seen its power. “He was a Magister Sidereal.”

"That's impossible," Dorian breathed, shaking his head.

"It's what he believes," Idhren replied, and turned his gaze to the fabric of the tent above his head. Whether it was true mattered less. The creature believed himself one of the magisters who had broken into the Golden City thousands of years ago and brought the Blight to the land. Idhren hoped it wasn't true, but he could not discount the possibility. The creature was unlike anything he had ever seen or heard about.

Dorian fell silent.

Outside someone pulled the tent flap aside, letting in a burst of cold air as they stepped inside. Idhren lifted his head again to see Vivienne de Fer standing at the entrance and looking as though she hadn't been stranded on a mountainside for the better part of a week. There was no mud or dirt on her clothing, save her shoes, which was unavoidable, and her appearance was perfectly coifed as always. How she managed it, Idhren would never know. Her eyes landed first on Idhren, and then narrowed when set on Dorian. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Keeping our dear Herald company," Dorian replied, sitting up a little straighter in his chair. "And assuring myself that a very old, very dear friend is actually alive after everything he's been through."

The words had bite, but if Vivienne was affected she did not show it. "Well, now you've seen him," she said curtly, "but his condition is still fragile, and it would not do to excite him so much."

"Excite him?" Dorian asked, "We were having a perfectly civil conversation. He's well enough to do that, I should think."

"Let him stay," Idhren said from the bed. He didn't like how they were speaking to each other. He didn't like the way that nobility spoke to each other in veiled insults. He much preferred blatant insults. And he still didn't fully trust the First Enchanter.

"My dear," Vivienne sighed, coming over to the side of the bed. She towered over Idhren even when he was standing, and did so even more now. "It was quite touchy with you for a long while. A miracle that you survived at all, I should say. You still need quite a bit of rest, I wouldn't advise company."

Idhren frowned. He tried to glare up at her but the effect was lessened by the fact he still couldn't even sit up. "Don't talk to me like I'm a child," he protested. "Mother Giselle said I was asleep for three days. That's enough rest for me. I want to know what's going on. I need to talk to Cassandra."

Those were words he had never expected to say out loud.

"There will be plenty of time for that when you are well," Vivienne tried to console him.

"There's no time," Idhren snapped with as much force as he could summon. "You don't understand. That thing... They need to know. We need to plan." It was too much for his body to handle at the moment, and set him into a weak coughing fit.

Vivienne reached out to him, but Dorian beat her, laying a hand on Idhren's shoulder. A gentle, comforting gesture. Without even thinking it, Idhren turned his face toward the man's hand. His eyes trailed from Dorian's fingers - nails cracked and dirty - up his arm until finally finding his face again.
and meeting the man's eyes. Dorian understood why this was so important, why he couldn't wait until he was well again. "I have to tell them."

"I agree," Dorian replied. He tore his gaze away from Idhren's to look at Vivienne, "He's well enough for a conversation now, and this news really shouldn't wait. Unless you think it unimportant to find out who opened the Breach and why? If you would be so kind as to fetch Cassandra for us, it would be much appreciated."

Telling Vivienne to fetch someone else, as though she was a servant, would be the height of insult to any nobility. Indeed, the First Enchanter's mouth hardened to a firm line and she spoke. "Mother Giselle has already gone to inform the Herald's advisors that he is awake. I am here to check on the state of his health, which I have been tending to since he was found, as you well know."

"Do I know that?" Dorian asked in surprise. "I haven't been allowed within ten feet of this tent since he was brought here. It's almost as though you people don't trust me."

"The Herald's health was fragile," Vivienne defended. "He was close to death when he was brought to me. It was of utmost importance that the other healers and myself attend to him."

"Don't fight," Idhren interrupted, before Vivienne could continue or Dorian could find a comeback. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Dorian's face, even when the man was turned away from him. It wasn't the first time that Dorian had stood up for him, or tended to him when he was hurt, and it really should stop surprising Idhren at this point. "Dorian stays."

Vivienne looked down at him. She looked as though she didn't entirely trust his judgment, but eventually she nodded. "Very well, if that is what you wish. I would very much like to check on the state of your health, however."

"I won't get in your way," Dorian said with a roll of his eyes. He took his hand from Idhren's shoulder, and the elf was unsurprised at the loss he felt when it was gone. He tried to ignore it. Dorian stood from the chair and retreated to the far side of the tent, where he crossed his arms and watched as Vivienne took up the same seat and began her examination.

Another day passed before Idhren was well enough to walk and leave the tent. Someone found a cloak that would fit him - a bit small actually, and Idhren suspected morbidly that it belonged to a child who no longer needed it - and he wrapped it tightly around his shoulders against the chill as he took his first steps outside the tent and into the Inquisition's make-shift camp.

It wasn't much. Tents and other makeshift shelters dotted the area. It wasn't any larger than any of Clan Lavellan's camps, though far less organized. These were not people used to living on the road. Idhren spoke in depth with all the heads of the Inquisition about what had happened at Haven. About Corypheus and what he intended. There was still little plan on what to do next other than get out of the mountains.

Haven was lost. They needed to find somewhere new for the Inquisition to call home. Somewhere safer and more defensible. Solas, apparently, knew of such a place.

The Inquisition was little more than a long, winding trail of refugees working their way through the mountains, avoiding the easy route where the enemy might think to look for them. The Herald of Andraste was meant to be leading them, but Idhren took many days to recover from everything he had been through at Haven and afterward. The first day on the road he couldn't even walk an hour without needing to rest. He had pushed his body past its limits to get through the blizzard. Although Vivienne and the other healers had been able to mend his broken bones, the soreness in his joints and muscles lingered. But Idhren did lead them for all the time that he was able, walking near the head of
the line for an hour at a time. Always just behind Cassandra or Cullen or The Iron Bull, anyone whose greater strength and bulk broke through the virgin snow to ease his passing.

The Maker should have chosen someone taller. Idhren was ill suited for this role. No matter which way he looked at it he was a bad choice. Bound to be the most disappointing prophet the world had ever known.

When he could walk no further Idhren stopped, caught his breath as he looked back at the long line of refugees and watched it stream past him until Mother Giselle, or Vivienne, or Josephine showed up to take his arm, feigning fatigue themselves so they might support him without arousing suspicion. The Herald of Andraste needed to look strong for his followers. So they would not lose hope. Because hope was all that was keeping them going at this point.

For days they wound through the mountains, following no known road as they headed northward. Each morning saw Idhren stronger, able to walk on his own for longer.

A week in Idhren was hopelessly lost, and he was beginning to wonder whether Solas actually knew where they were going or not. But then he crested a ridge and there it was, sitting on an outcropping amidst the snow-capped peaks in a patch of sunlight as though it had been placed there by some divine hand.

Skyhold.
Within My Creation, None Are Alone

“Heart that is broken, beats still unceasing,
An ocean of sorrow does nobody drown.
You have forgotten, spear-maid of Alamarr.
Within My creation, none are alone.”

- Canticle of Andraste 1:5

Skyhold, Ferelden, Solace 9:41 Dragon

When the Inquisition arrived in Skyhold the fortress was little better than a ruin, but Idhren could feel the magic that suffused the very stones beneath his feet. Exhausted, the people of Haven made camp within the courtyards and the crumbling structures and felt safe for the first time in weeks. Repairs began almost immediately. Everyone remembered the attack, and no one wanted to be caught unawares a second time.

Within days the grounds were cleared of rubble, the buildings surveyed and a schedule established for reconstruction of the most important areas. Quarters were assigned, guards were posted, and everyone had a task to perform.

Idhren was named Inquisitor. And was apparently the only one surprised by this decision.

Inquisitor.

The title would take getting used to. As would the respect and power that came with it. Idhren was prepared to be a religious symbol, not a leader. Although he couldn’t say that he disliked the situation.

How many times in Tevinter had he dreamed of telling off the people who were rude to him? How often had he stood on the sidelines imagining what he could do if he stood on equal footing with the people around him? He had long ago given up hope of ever being respected by humans, and now he was practically drowning in it.

But this was what he had been groomed for from a young age. All those lessons on etiquette and decorum that he had suffered as a child, the books on politics, the meetings, the parties – Canidius may have never intended to make Idhren his heir, but he had ensured the elf was well enough educated for it. Then with the Dalish, with Keeper Istimaethoriel showing him that leadership was not about issuing orders and hoarding power, but could be found just as easily through community. A Dalish keeper led by example, with friendship and respect for everyone in the clan. Different strategies for different situations, Idhren had once read in an unimaginably dry book about political strategy. He would have to find which was more suited to his new role.

Within only a few days enough of the keep was cleared out that people could begin moving inside without fear of a roof collapsing on them in their sleep. The main hall looked like a refugee camp. It was a refugee camp. But the Inquisitor and his advisors had finally managed to wrangle together some semblance of order throughout the Inquisition. So Idhren called together everyone he thought of as most important or most beneficial to their situation.
They gathered in what had almost immediately been dubbed the War Room. Idhren, the Inquisitor himself, along with his advisors, Josephine, Leliana, and Cullen. Cassandra had pulled back from being an official presence, but he included her none-the-less. Solas, for his knowledge of obscure ancient magic like what had caused the Breach. Varric, for his past dealings with red lyrium and Corypheus. Vivienne knew the Orlesian Imperial Court like the back of her hand, even if Idhren still did not like her very much. And while Vivienne dealt with the nobility, Sera’s contacts were the common folk; Idhren knew from experience how easily servants were overlooked and how much they overheard. Idhren was still hoping that the Grey Wardens were not mixed up in this, but he couldn’t discount it yet, and that made Blackwall’s knowledge of the order useful as well as his military knowledge. The Iron Bull being a Qunari spy still made Idhren wary, but the Chargers were the only fighting force not directly under Cullen’s command and they deserved to know what they were facing. Cole showed up even though no one recalled seeing him for several days or informing him of this meeting; in fact, Idhren had completely forgotten about him until that very moment. And Dorian, because Idhren needed someone familiar while he figured out what to do with all this power suddenly handed to him. And ostensibly because Idhren had not been in Tevinter for five years and knew no one there. Dorian, at least, was familiar with recent politics.

“I don’t remember hearing anything about the Venatori last I was in Tevinter,” he commented, when the discussions reached that point.

“They’ve only fairly recently gained any sort of influence,” Dorian replied. “Supremacist cults like them are a copper a dozen in Tevinter, as you know. I imagine it’s Corypheus’ influence that’s helped them gain so much support.”

“Wait,” Sera interrupted. Idhren hadn’t had much opportunity to get to know her yet. She confused him a little, but he liked what he’d seen of her so far. “You been to Tevinter? Why’d you wanna do that?”

“I’m from Tevinter,” Idhren replied. Apparently the few people who knew were better at keeping secrets than he’d realized.

“You were… Shite,” Sera cursed, “Does that mean you were… You know?”

A slave. It didn’t have to be spoken for Idhren to know what she meant. It was the first thing anyone asked. “Alright, can we do this once for everyone so that I don’t have to keep repeating myself?” Idhren asked in exasperation. “Yes, I’m from Tevinter. I was born a slave, but was freed as a child. That makes me Liberati. I trained at a circle, I apprenticed to a magister, and I left because Tevinter is a shithole. Since then I’ve been living with the Dalish, that’s why I have the tattoos. Any questions? Can we move on now?”

“Well why didn’t you say nothin’?” Sera asked. Rhetorical questions were apparently not something she was familiar with.

“Because it’s no one’s business but my own,” Idhren snapped. “Can we please focus on the task at hand?”

Sera was visibly cowed by the venom in his voice. “Don’t need to get all upset, I’m just askin’,” she grumbled. “Everyone’s thinkin’ it.”

Which was exactly why Idhren didn’t like telling people he was from Tevinter. They always assumed the worst.

“Let’s move on,” Josephine was quick to attempt and diffuse the situation. She had far more patience than Idhren, something he imagined he’d be grateful for in the coming months. “We know from your
experience in Redcliffe that the Venatori intend to assassinate Empress Celine.”

“Yes,” Idhren confirmed, “We need to warn her.”

“With the civil war, she must already be expecting attempts on her life,” Leliana pointed out.

“Tevinter doesn’t play the game the same way as Orlais,” Idhren argued. “And the Venatori have blood magic on their side. Her bodyguards won’t be prepared to deal with that. I also don’t expect she’ll believe a simple warning, a letter or a messenger won’t suffice. We need to speak with her in person.”

“That will be difficult,” Josephine frowned. “But not impossible. The Inquisition has been gaining influence in Orlais since your visit to Val Royeaux. And news has already begun to spread of what happened at Haven. Even the most fervent doubters can no longer question the legitimacy of our cause.”

“Good,” Idhren nodded, “Keep doing all you can to get us an audience.” He leaned his hands against the sturdy wood of the war table and stared down at the map, with its various markers for troops and spies. “In the mean time, I suppose there’s little more we can do until Varric’s contact arrives with more information about Corypheus.”

“There is one other matter,” Josephine spoke up, drawing Idhren’s attention back to her. “We lost many at Haven, and at the Conclave,” she said carefully. “And as All Souls Day is soon Mother Giselle has expressed interest in holding some sort of memorial service.”

“All Souls Day?” Idhren repeated in confusion.


“Oh,” Idhren felt terribly stupid for not realizing. “Sorry, it’s been some time since I last recognized any of the Chantry holidays. I didn’t realize it was that time of the year,” he quickly apologized. “But I see no reason why she shouldn’t.”

“She would like the Herald of Andraste to preside,” Josephine added uncertainly.

That made Idhren freeze. He hadn’t celebrated any holidays in years. In fact, he had barely kept track of the days. Even before leaving Tevinter he hadn’t been devout in any way, and now he even wore the markings of another god on his face. “No,” he said, perhaps a bit too sternly. “No, that’s a terrible idea. Mother Giselle can hold whatever type of service she likes, we can even find a room to turn into a Chantry if she wants – I’m certain some people would appreciate that – but I’m not at all suited.”

“Perhaps if you just assisted her in the service?” Josephine suggested diplomatically, “Just seeing you present would bring comfort to many people.”

“I’ve said no,” Idhren snapped, startling even himself with the force of his words. But bringing this up had brought back to the fore so many things he had been trying not to think about. Dorian was still the only person he had told about Tainan, though he was certain Leliana knew from reading his letters. “She can have her memorial service, and I will consider attending, but I will not be involved. That’s final.” Unwittingly, he caught Dorian’s eyes across the table, and behind his carefully neutral expression there was sympathy. Idhren looked away again quickly.

“Very well,” Josephine’s voice was nothing but carefully cultivated politeness. It was impossible for Idhren to tell whether or not he had offended her. Or anyone else, for that matter. “I will let her know.”
“Thank you,” Idhren tried to sound as earnest and apologetic as he could in just those two words. “If that is all for now?”

“It is, Inquisitor,” the ambassador informed him.

“Then I think that’s enough for today,” Idhren said. They had gone over everything of immediate importance. Those with contacts outside Skyhold knew what was needed of them; everything else was dedicated to making the fortress livable and defensible once more. While the others gradually filed out of the war room Idhren lingered, leaning against the edge of the table and staring down at the maps laid out atop it. But as the room emptied he became aware of someone else lingering as well, and turned around. Stopped halfway to the door but staring back at him was Dorian. “Is there something else you needed?” Idhren asked.

Dorian frowned as he watched the elf. He waited until the door shut after the last person before asking, “Are you alright?”

Idhren pursed his lips and turned his back on the man. “I’m fine,” he said curtly. He waited for Dorian to say something more, but it did not come. Silence hung between them for a long moment, then he heard Dorian’s footsteps retreat, the door open and close heavily, and then Idhren was alone.

It was just after Idhren had recovered from the avalanche enough to walk on his own that he realized how long he had been without medication. He had been unconscious for days, and then it took them another week to reach Skyhold. Days after their arrival Adan had approached him, pressed a small bottle into Idhren’s hand, and said "I owe you my life; I’ll make sure you don’t run out again." It was all Idhren could do to keep from crying until he was behind closed doors, but by then it was too late.

Maybe that was why he had been so crabby in the war room. Because the next day his stomach began cramping and then he changed clothes that night to find spots of blood in his undergarments.

The first two days he refused to leave his bed, miserable and cranky, feigning illness, stealing bits of bandage from the healers and feeling horribly guilty about it. Given all that he had been through, no one really disbelieved him when he claimed a cold. The hardest part was keeping the healers away.

On the day of the memorial service he knew it was nearly over, but still was reluctant to be seen in public for more than an hour.

He attended the service, lingering in the back of the courtyard where Mother Giselle presided over more people than could squeeze into the storage room they had quickly converted into a small chapel. Among them were many familiar faces. Cassandra and Leliana, Cullen, Josephine, Vivienne, even Sera had showed up for a short time before slinking out the back. So many had lost loved ones in the past year. In the war, in the Conclave, or at Haven. And seeing them all in once place was difficult, even as it was a tiny comfort. He was not the only one grieving someone they had lost.

He left before it finished, before anyone could come up and speak to him. He didn't know what any of the people would say. Thank him for what little he had done to protect them? He couldn't bear it. Not when he'd failed to save the only person that mattered.

After night fell and most of Skyhold was asleep, he wound his way through the courtyard, still a sea of tents and refugees, through the great hall and into the garden. At the far end stood the small chapel, lit with candles and a space already cleared to house religious symbols. Right now they had
only a handful of small figurines of Andraste that pilgrims had brought with them or had been smuggled out of Haven in pockets. They stood on an upturned crate surrounded by candles and offering bowls.

As he stepped inside Idhren shut the door behind him. He stared at the small make-shift altar uncertainly. Moonlight filtered in through the high windows at the back of the room, and one patch of pale bluish light had landed perfectly on the altar. As though intentionally.

With slow steps, Idhren approached the display, stared down at it for a long moment, and then slowly bent down to kneel on the floor. His parents and his brother had all been Andristian. It was the only religion they knew. His grandmother, apparently, had never passed down any of her Dalish heritage to her daughter. Probably to protect her in a world where heresy was the least that could get an elf killed. In Tevinter he had prayed for his father in the years after his death, and his mother and brother shortly before he left the country. Since then, however, he had done nothing.

So he prayed for them now. The suitable verses of the Chant fell of his tongue by rote, but the words felt hollow and emotionless. Empty platitudes that no longer offered the comfort they had in his youth. Prayers to a god he no longer wanted to believe in. So he stopped praying and instead merely spoke.

It was as though he were merely catching up with his family, wishing them well and telling them of all that had happened since the last time they spoke. And so much had happened. He spoke of leaving Tevinter, the long trip south across the Silent Plains and into the wilderness of the Free Marches, wandering aimlessly through the woods until finally stumbling across the Dalish. It was not as painful as he had expected, remembering how happy he had been during those few short years. Sitting there on the floor, cross legged in a pool of moonlight before a statue of Andriste no larger than his hand, Idhren looked out the window at the clear night sky and told anyone who might be listening “I fell in love.” And he knew that no one was listening. Logically. The Maker had turned away from his creation, the Elvhen Creators had been locked away in the Beyond. There was no one out there, truly. Still, he could not stop himself now that the words had begun to flow.

“Tainan was marvelous,” he breathed. “They’re… Not what you were expecting, probably. But I want to think you would have liked them. Sahren would have liked them.” He paused, wondering how different his life would be if everyone he loved were still alive. But it was too painful to consider. “We were supposed to get married,” he said into the silence that surrounded him. “But they’re gone now.

“I don’t even know why,” he continued, already feeling his throat begin to choke up. “I survived. Everyone says it was a miracle; that Andriste chose me to be her voice so the Maker saved me. Why couldn’t He have saved Tainan, too?” Idhren stopped and squeezed his eyes closed when he began to feel the tears coming. He had cried enough over Tainan, it was time he learned to get over it.

“I just don’t understand,” the words came out without conscious thought. He spent so much of his time holding all of his emotions in that it was impossible to stem the flood once it had started. “Why me? Why me and not them? It’s not fair.” The tears began to fall no matter how hard he tried to hold them back. “I prayed to you every night as a child. I prayed and I begged for help and you did nothing! You gave me this fucking body and you made me a slave and you let them hurt me! Is this supposed to make up for it? Herald of Andriste?” he spit the title like a curse, “Inquisitor? All I’ve ever asked for is happiness, and all you’ve ever done is take it away!”

Very suddenly Idhren was aware that he was no longer alone. Like an itching at the back of his mind, that feeling of being watched settled over him. He spun about, still half kneeling on the floor, and looked back toward the doorway. It was still closed, and he had never heard it open, but there
was indeed someone standing there just a step inside the chapel. It was Cole, standing hunched over, wringing his hands in front of himself and head tilted to the side like a dog listening to someone speak.

Wiping furiously at the tears on his cheeks Idhren scrambled to his feet. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, angry and embarrassed at having been caught in such a moment of weakness.

“The hurt was so loud,” Cole said quietly. “The mark makes it hard to see, but you were so loud. I want to help.”

Idhren was still uncertain what to make of the strange boy. He was definitely more than human, but he was unlike any spirit or demon Idhren had encountered either in the Fade or out of it. A completely unique creature. “You can’t,” he said bitterly. Unless Cole could bring the dead back to life, but that was impossible.

The boy was silent at first. His head was bowed so that Idhren could not see his face under the brim of that ridiculous hat. “Damaged, deformed, disgusting,” he murmured, almost too soft for Idhren to hear. “You think the Maker built you wrong.”

Idhren tensed and wrapped his arms around himself protectively. “He did,” he spat. “Either He built me wrong or He doesn’t exist. Either way I’m a mistake.”

Cole made a soft keening sound low in his throat. He continued wringing his hands in front of him and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Not a mistake,” he said again, just as quietly. “Eyes like the sky and hair like fire. My body is one but my mind is both. His body is both but his mind is one. I understand. You think no one will understand, but they do.”

Idhren bit his lip and hugged himself tighter. He had seen Cole do this thing to other people, where he reached into their heads and picked out memories. It unnerved him even then, and it was worse when turned on him. “Don’t,” he said quietly, begging.

Cole finally tilted his head up enough that Idhren could see his face. Under the brim of his hat and the fringe of his hair the boy looked concerned. “But that’s not why you were here,” the boy continued. “Eyes like the sky and hair like fire,” he repeated. “Everything’s all tangled up in them. Tainan. It’s supposed to be for good luck, but they forgot to make one for themselves. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have made them stay with the clan,” Idhren choked out. One hand came up to clutch at the halla horn arrowhead that still hung around his neck, protectively tucked under his shirt all this time. “I never should have let them come.”

“They would have come anyway. They would have followed. It wasn’t your fault,” Cole repeated.

Idhren sobbed and swiped at his eyes with the hand that wasn’t still clutching the necklace under his shirt. He knew that it wasn’t his fault, logically, but that didn’t make it easier to bear. Tainan’s death had been so senseless, so unnecessary. And there were so many things he had never said.

“You would have said yes,” Cole continued. Idhren collapsed to his knees. “They knew. They didn’t mind waiting.”

Idhren couldn’t stop crying. Distantly, he was aware of Cole coming over to sit beside him. The boy did not say anything further, just sat there while Idhren cried. A silent and unmoving presence until the tears finally tapered off and then stopped entirely.

“Thank you,” Idhren whispered, voice hoarse when he regained control over it. The last time he had
cried like this it had left him exhausted and even more miserable than before. Whatever Cole did to help people it was more than just words. Idhren’s heart felt lighter than it had in months.

“The hurt is still there, but it’s quieter now,” Cole said almost to himself. “I’m glad I could help.”

Idhren just nodded as he wiped the tears from his cheeks. Outside the moon had moved across the sky so that Idhren and the figurine of Andraste no longer sat in its light. When he felt himself composed enough to leave the chapel Idhren pulled himself to his feet and straightened his clothes. Even though it was the middle of the night there was always a chance he might run across someone. Most of the Inquisition’s people were still sleeping in tents and make-shift dormitories in the few habitable structures.

He turned to thank Cole again, but the boy was gone. There was no trace of him, and again Idhren had not been aware of the door opening. That was unnerving. He might have to talk to him later about how doors were meant to work. For now, he returned quietly to his quarters and enjoyed his first peaceful night’s sleep since the Conclave.

---

Even after weeks Idhren was still discovering new parts of Skyhold as rubble was cleared and halls were reinforced. At times it seemed the castle was endless. New areas were continually uncovered in the bowels of the keep. One in particular had caught Idhren’s attention. When the work crew showed him while asking what to do about it, Idhren told them to leave it as was, do only enough to ensure it was safe to occupy, and then he rushed upstairs to share the news with the only other person he felt might understand his sudden giddiness.

"Dorian, are you busy?" he burst into the main library like a child coming downstairs on Satinalia morning. The library was beginning to look like an actual library. It was cleaned now, and some semblance of order was being given to the volumes that kept showing up. Dorian was standing in an alcove, reading a letter by the sunlight that filtered in through a slim window, but he looked up when Idhren called his name. The smile that crossed his face when he turned to face the Inquisitor was slightly forced. Only someone who knew Dorian as long as Idhren had would have been able to see the mask for what it was. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Not at all," Dorian assured him, that plastic smile still in place. "You have some need of me, Inquisitor?"

"I wanted to show you something," Idhren replied. "But it can wait if you have other things to attend."

"Lead away," Dorian offered, folding up the letter and tucking it into his shirt.

Idhren wasn’t certain if he should push the subject. But if Dorian was avoiding his questions it was unlikely that pushing would do anything other than upset him, so Idhren decided to ignore it for now. And maybe this would help cheer him up a bit. "This way," he gestured for the man to follow him and headed back down the stairs. He led Dorian down through the depths of Skyhold until they reached an unassuming wooden door off a store room under the main hall. "I think you’re the only one who will truly appreciate this as much as I do," he said, and pushed the door open.

The room was still full of dust and cobwebs, but faint light shone in through slotted windows near the ceiling, illuminating the bookshelves that lined every wall, and the numerous tomes that filled...
those shelves. And at the far end of the room stood a writing desk with a massive spell book still sitting open on top of it.

Idhren grinned from ear to ear as he turned back to Dorian after the big reveal, and was rewarded by the man's wide-eyed stare. "Fasta vass," he swore softly, stepping past Idhren and into the room. “This is… This is incredible.”

"Isn’t it?" Idhren replied. "I’ve only looked around a little bit, but some of the books here are ancient. Whatever wards have kept the keep from crumbling over the years seem to be strongest in here. Whoever used this library wanted it to last. These books should be dust, but they’re not."

"They’re not exactly in mint condition, either," Dorian observed. He ran his fingers along the spines on one shelf and his hand came away thick with dust. Pulling a face, he attempted to shake the dust off, but eventually was forced to pull a handkerchief from inside his clothes to wipe them.

"No," Idhren agreed. He wandered into the room, eyes running over the shelves from top to bottom. "But that they’ve survived this long at all is a miracle."

"That’s true," Dorian murmured. With the handkerchief he lifted a book from the shelf and wiped off its cover carefully. He frowned at the cover and then opened it delicately, well aware of how the binding had begun to rot and come loose. "This is written in the Trade Tongue, but the dialect isn’t any I’ve seen before. How old do you think some of these are?"

“Centuries,” Idhren said.

“Astounding,” Dorian breathed. He put the book back onto its shelf as carefully as he could.

“It’s going to need a lot of cleaning before I can even begin going through the books.” Idhren said eagerly. He remembered the excitement that cataloging Canidius’ library had once inspired in him, and this feeling was not dissimilar. “But I’d like to keep this separate from the main library for now.”

“Oh, hoarding it all for yourself, are you?” Dorian teased. “The perks of being Inquisitor, I suppose.”

“I’m not hoarding it, per se,” Idhren protested, wandering up to the enormous spell book laid out on the table and brushing off a thick layer of dust. “I’m just… keeping it away from the general public. Access only to people I trust with centuries old magic.”

“People like me?” Dorian asked.

“So long as you’re not going to try time travel again,” Idhren leveled him with a teasing stare. “Or rip any more holes in reality. We have enough as it is.”

“Do you have so little faith in me, Inquisitor?” Dorian clapped a hand to his chest in mock offense. “I am shocked and offended.”

“Oh, don’t take it so personally, Dorian,” Idhren replied. “I feel the same way about all Altus, you know that. Besides, I am letting you have your run of this place on only one condition.”

“And what condition is that?” Dorian asked.

“That you help me clean it,” Idhren stated.

Dorian’s lip pulled up in a sneer as he looked again at the bookshelves, so thick with dust they were nearly gray. Then to the cobwebs that lined the rafters. Then to the handwritten spell book. “You drive a hard bargain,” he said. “Though I fear I’ve little choice but to accept.”
Idhren smiled brightly. “I was hoping you would,” he said. He scampered behind the desk and emerged again with a bucket full of cleaning supplies, which he set on the floor in the middle of the room before looking at Dorian again, hands on his hips and a smirk on his lips. “You can do the top shelves.”

Dorian stared at the bucket, filled with dusters and cleaning rags and scrub brushes and two lumps of soap. This was all a very cleverly laid trap and he had fallen right into it. “Ah, I see how it is. You lured me down here with your honeyed words and the promise of uncovering long-forgotten secrets when really you just needed someone tall to do your dirty work. Why couldn’t you have asked Solas?”

“Because your company is infinitely better,” Idhren replied smoothly. “As is your conversation.”

“I would have thought you and he had quite a lot to talk about,” Dorian mused as he reluctantly stepped over to the bucket of cleaning supplies and looked down at it skeptically. “Pro-elf, anti-magister and all that.”

Idhren’s smile faded. “Yes, well Solas also is of the opinion that the Dalish are backwards xenophobic children who are ‘mangling’ the history of our people,” he spat. “But I don’t see him and all his superior wisdom doing anything to help.” And never mind that the Dalish were the first people to ever accept Idhren for who he was.

Dorian was a bit startled by the sudden venom in Idhren’s voice. But he now knew that was a subject not to broach in the future. “I always knew he was such a charming individual,” he replied dryly.

“A regular ray of sunshine,” Idhren muttered. He crouched down to reach into the bucket, pulling out duster and holding it out to Dorian. “I assume you have cleaned something at some point in your life and therefore know how this works?”

Rolling his eyes, Dorian reached down and snatched the duster out of Idhren's hands. "I am perfectly capable of tidying a room," he sniffed. "Even one as filthy as this. Only, I'm afraid I'm not exactly dressed for the endeavor. Nor are you, for that matter," he added with a pointed look at Idhren's wardrobe.

Everything that Idhren had owned had been lost at Haven except the clothes on his back. And those were in no real shape to be worn again after the avalanche and their trek to Skyhold. What he was wearing now as brand new, but everything he had was brand new. He imagined that was the case for Dorian as well. "They have already dedicated a room to the laundry," he informed the man, rising to his feet once more and going to fetch a broom from where he'd hidden it behind the door. "Or are you worried about getting cobwebs in your hair?"

"Well I am now," Dorian frowned and looked up at the rafters. At least he couldn't see any spiders living in those cobwebs at the moment. "But I suppose if the option is going to change clothes now or going to change clothes later I might as well do it later," he shrugged.

Idhren actually laughed a little bit at that. "Ah, we'll make a laborer out of you yet," he teased.

They worked together in comfortable silence for the most part, broken by the occasional complaint from Dorian or a sneeze as too much dust was lifted at once. In no time at all Idhren had the floor cleared of the worst of its layers of dust, all swept out into the corridor beyond where someone else could deal with it. Dorian continued to raise disgusted complaints about the state of the room, and about how Idhren had roped him into this.
"Why can't you have the workers clear this out?" Dorian asked. His hands were by now quite thoroughly dusty, his fingertips grey beyond what his handkerchief could clean off. He looked down at them miserably after he shook the latest batch of cobwebs off his dust cloth. "Why is the Inquisitor doing the menial labor in his own castle?"

"Because the workers have enough to do already," Idhren said. "Priority is living spaces and the walls. I can't take people away from reconstruction for dusting."

"So you're doing it yourself. How very noble of you," Dorian sighed.

"I like to think so, yes," Idhren quipped. He paused a moment to lean on the broom and look down at the floor, eyeing it for any patches of missed dirt. "I also want to look at these books, but I'm not about to sit around in a place like this doing it."

"I suppose that's a good point," Dorian reasoned. "But have you considered just taking the books somewhere else?"

Idhren shrugged. He leaned the broom against a bookshelf that had already been dusted and grabbed a rag from the bucket before setting to work on the shelves. "I like this room," he replied. "Or, I think I will when it's clean. It's quiet down here. Peaceful. And there aren’t a lot of people passing by, so it's private. I was almost always on my own in Canidius' library. He rarely bothered with me unless he needed something. One of the maids assisted me sometimes, when I needed another pair of hands, but for the most part I worked alone. I suppose I'm more used to that."

Dorian had a sudden memory of Idhren as he had been at the Circle. Easily a head shorter than all the other apprentices his age, brown hair tied back into a loose half ponytail to keep it out of his face, sitting at a table in the library surrounded by a pile of books that was more like a fortress wall. Always alone. It was a stark contrast to the person standing before him now, with tattoos and half his head shaved, practically radiating an aura of confidence. Only his voracious appetite for knowledge seemed unchanged. "You really were almost entirely self-taught, weren't you?" he asked.

"Only because I'm smarter than everyone who tried to teach me," Idhren replied. "We're not all lucky enough to get picked up for an apprenticeship by a famous academic."

Dorian winced slightly, because it really was luck that had landed him with Alexius.

"Sorry," Idhren said, catching the man's expression. "That was rude of me."

"No, no," Dorian assured, "It was quite true, honestly."

Idhren bit his lip. The atmosphere between them had turned awkward. How long had they been down here already? He turned away from Dorian and busied himself starting to collect the stacks of books on the floor and moving them to the table and chair. Dorian no longer complained as he swatted down the last of the cobwebs. Because apparently he was no longer cleaning. When Idhren turned back to him, suggesting they stop for the day, he saw that Dorian had taken that letter back out of his shirt and was staring down at the parchment. The expression on his face was more than solemn, it was genuinely sad.

"Are you alright?" the words were out before he could think better of it.

Dorian startled. He looked up quickly, tried for a moment to affect an air of nonchalance, but one look at Idhren’s concerned face and he gave up. With a sigh, he held the letter out toward the elf. "This arrived for me this morning," he explained. "It's about Felix."

Dusting off his hands on his pants, Idhren hesitantly reached out to take the letter. He regretted
asking now, even though it was clearly bothering Dorian. Idhren’s eyes scanned over the words on
the parchment quickly. It was all written in that flowery, convoluted way that all nobles wrote: twice
as many words as necessary and endless rambling before they got to the point. The point here was
that Felix had gone to the Magisterium in his father’s place and spoken before the senate in favor of
the Inquisition and against the Venatori. And had died several days after – succumbed to the Blight.

He remembered the way Dorian and Felix spoke. The familiarity and intimacy as they said their
goodbyes. “I’m sorry,” Idhren breathed, his heart aching with sympathy as he handed the letter back
to Dorian. “He seemed a good man.”

“He was,” Dorian confirmed. He took the letter and folded it carefully before tucking it back into his
shirt. “The Imperium could use more men like him.”

It could. Especially in positions of power. “Hopefully the Magisterium will listen to him,” Idhren
said.

“Indeed,” Dorian agreed. “An official stance against the Venatori won’t do much for us down here,
but it could help prevent them gaining even more influence back home.”

While true, that wasn’t what Idhren really wanted to talk about. He could tell Dorian was deflecting,
avoiding talking about Felix specifically by allowing Idhren to steer the conversation elsewhere.
Idhren had done the same whenever conversation dipped too close to his clan, he knew now that it
didn’t help to avoid the subject. “Are you alright?” he asked, forcibly pulling the topic back.

Dorian looked a little taken aback by the question. He turned his face away from Idhren, looking at
the bookshelves behind the elf instead. “He was sick,” the man commented, “And thus on borrowed
time anyway.”

So maybe it wasn’t quite as much of a shock as Idhren’s loss had been, but it was still a loss. “That
doesn’t mean you can’t be sad.”

Dorian hesitated a moment before he seemed to deflate a little. “I know,” he sighed. “Felix used to
sneak me treats when I was working late in Alexius’ study. ‘Don’t get in trouble on my account’, I’d
tell him. ‘I like trouble,’ he’d say.” A small, wistful smile crossed Dorian’s lips as he spoke, one that
Idhren couldn’t help mirroring.

It sounded like exactly the sort of thing Dorian would do. He still fondly remembered sitting with
Dorian in the dormitory halls at all hours of the morning discussing everything from magical theory
to the latest Circle gossip. Those were some of his only fond memories of that time. Some of his
fondest memories of Dorian. And the source of that stupid childhood crush that he somehow could
not leave behind. But the genuine affection in Dorian’s voice when he spoke of Felix had a thread of
jealousy knotting in Idhren’s stomach. “Were the two of you…?” he asked uncertainly.

“Felix and I?” Dorian startled and finally met Idhren’s eyes once more. Idhren didn’t know what sort
of answer he expected, but it would explain a lot. Why Dorian had suddenly stopped being such a
rampant source of gossip. Why he had turned Idhren down the last time they saw each other in
Tevinter. “What an insane question. No,” Dorian replied. And the fact that he sounded absolutely
baffled that Idhren would even ask assured him that it was the truth. “Felix was like a brother, I
suppose. And besides I had no intention of abusing Alexius’ hospitality by seducing his son. Even in
illness Felix was the best the Imperium had to offer.”

The jealousy in Idhren’s gut uncoiled, but it was only replaced by an odd mixture of relief and
bitterness. Both feelings that the elf did his best to ignore. “You make it sound like he was a better
person than you,” he commented.
Dorian let out a small huff of laughter. “You sound so surprised. And here I thought you had such a low opinion of me.”

“I don’t,” Idhren frowned. “You were the only human in Tevinter who was ever kind to me. Altus or otherwise. But you can be an absolute ass when you want to be.”

This time Dorian laughed aloud. “That’s what I’m used to hearing from you,” he replied. “Felix was a better person than me, clearly. Although not nearly as handsome.”

“And that’s what I’m used to hearing from you,” Idhren chuckled. “I suppose we’ve done our share of manual labor for the day. I hear they’re installing a wine cellar down the hall. Would you like to investigate?”

“You have read my mind,” Dorian smiled, “Lead the way.”

The wine cellar wasn’t so much a cellar at the moment as it was a closet full of crates and barrels. The crates were full of carefully packaged and inventoried bottles of wine. Idhren didn't know where they came from - the Inquisition had hardly been there long enough to set up major trade routes - but at the moment he didn't much care.

He plucked one bottle out of the sawdust meant to cushion it for the trip up the mountain and began picking at the paper seal around the top. He didn’t bother reading the label, as there weren’t exactly many choices, and let the shreds fall to the dusty stone floor. A tiny, perfectly aimed bit of force magic applied to the bottom of the bottle knocked the cork out enough for Idhren to get his fingers on and pry it out the rest of the way. Curiously, he sniffed at the opening, then passed it over to Dorian for judgment.

“You’re rather good at that,” Dorian commented as he took the bottle from Idhren's fingers. He sniffed experimentally at the opening as well, before raising the bottle to his lips.

"Sometimes, when I was feeling very rebellious, I would sneak drinks from Canidius’ stores. Not the quality stuff that he would miss, usually just the cooking wine. Not the best taste, but it gets the job done. And when you don't have access to a corkscrew - because Maker knows I never learned to navigate that kitchen - you learn to improvise." Idhren replied. As he spoke he watched Dorian take an experimental sip, eyes following the bob of his throat as he swallowed. “Any good?”

Dorian considered the taste for a moment as it spread across his tongue. It was hardly the finest vintage he had ever tasted, but neither was it vinegar. "Well, I wouldn't serve it to any heads of state, but it will do," he replied, then took a much larger drink.

"I'll be certain to tell Josephine this isn't up to snuff for parties, then," Idhren replied. He snatched the bottle back from Dorian and lowered himself onto the floor before raising the bottle to his lips. The liquid slid over his tongue with the familiar dry taste and mild burn of red wine. Dorian may not have thought of it as high quality, but it was the finest thing that had touched his tongue in years. Even in Haven he hadn't dared steal from stores meant for visiting dignitaries.

A moment later Dorian sat beside him, though not without first frowning down at the dusty floor. As though this were any filthier than the library they had just been cleaning. Idhren passed the bottle back to him.
"Are you going to get in trouble for nicking the supplies?" Dorian asked curiously. "Surely these are intended for some important function. The wooing of nobility? Negotiation for donations?"

Idhren shrugged. "I'm not certain of much of anything anymore," he admitted. "Least of all what I'm likely to get scolded for." He was still getting used to the concept of being in charge. All these people now apparently worked for him, instead of the other way around. Idhren had never had so much power. Did that mean the wine was technically his to start with? Probably not. He wasn't royalty, just leader of an organization. He would have to ask Josephine for a look at the accounts, figure out how much he was being paid for this. Surely the Inquisitor got a rather significant stipend. Or was it all going to be paid in room and boarding, as Canidius had often tried to do?

"Suppose we'll find out, then," Dorian replied thoughtfully.

For a long while they sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts as they passed the bottle back and forth. Idhren was glad for the silence, surprisingly. And of the solitude - save for Dorian's company. Inquisitor was not, apparently, a token position. He was actually in charge. Making decisions about everything from where their troops should be housed to the decorations in the main hall; all a little silly at the moment. With the fortress still in ruins and the Inquisition itself still a skeleton of what it had been or could be most time and effort was spent building up the infrastructure to support themselves. But there was still so much that demanded his personal attention.

"Have you seen Alexius?" Idhren asked suddenly, surprised that he had spoken it aloud and not merely thought the question. The wine had loosened his tongue more than he realized.

Dorian was clearly startled as well. When Idhren glanced over the man had stopped with the nearly-empty bottle halfway to his mouth. Very slowly, he lowered it down to his lap, frowned at the label and turned the bottle around in his hands as he considered his answer. "I haven't spoken to him, if that is what you mean," he replied quietly. "I certainly saw him as they pulled him out of Haven and dragged him here. Not entirely certain why they bothered, to be honest."

"You would have preferred he be left behind to be buried alive or worse?" Idhren asked. Though he couldn't imagine much worse. The memory of his own near-death was still painfully fresh. Parts of him still had bruises.

"No," Dorian relented, and slumped back against the wall. "I wouldn't want that," he sighed. "I am glad that he survived. He was a good man… Perhaps he still is, I don't know." Dorian fell silent, and Idhren did not know how to respond. He had some idea of what the man must be feeling, and he doubted there was anything he could say. "I should tell him about Felix. He deserves to know."

"I can tell him," Idhren offered. "Or have someone else do it."

Dorian shook his head. He scowled down at the bottle in his hands, then took another drink before speaking again. "No, it should be me. I knew him."

"If you don't want to talk to him, though…” Idhren said. And he completely understood why Dorian wouldn't want to talk to the magister after everything Alexius had done. Idhren didn't much want to talk to him, either, but he knew he would have to eventually.

"I haven't spoken to him since he told me he'd joined the Venatori," Dorian said, unusually subdued. Idhren had never seen him this serious or solemn before. "Not really. We did not part on the best of terms. What happened to Felix and Livia… It drove him a little mad, I think. I'd rather remember the man he was before. Before he gave up everything he believed in chasing a fool's hope."

On that subject, Idhren sympathized with the magister, much as he did not want to. "Grief can do
strange things to people,” he murmured.

The man’s grey eyes flicked over to him and studied Idhren’s face. “Yes,” he agreed, “I imagine you know that all too well.”

Idhren looked away and pulled his knees up, wrapping his arms around them. This wasn’t the direction he’d wanted this conversation to go. Not now that the pain of Tainan’s memory was just starting to abate. But the fact remained that he and Dorian had both lost someone dear to them, so maybe Dorian understood how much it hurt. “I would be lying to say I haven’t thought of using that amulet again,” he said quietly. There were so many things he would do differently if given the chance. “But it’s… Not what Tainan would have wanted…”

“It’s not what Felix wanted, either,” Dorian sighed.

Idhren remembered how talking to Dorian about Tainan had helped all those weeks ago. And how Cole had helped him much more recently. Each time his heart ached less when he thought of them. Each time it became easier to wake up the next morning to an empty bed. Maybe it would be easier the next morning as well. “You should talk to Alexius,” he said. “Maybe he realizes that now, too.”

“Maybe he does,” Dorian mused. “I suppose there’s only one way to know for certain. Have you decided what’s to be done with him?”

“Not entirely,” Idhren replied. It was a decision that loomed over him and weighed on his mind. He could not in good conscious let the magister rot in a dungeon without a proper trial. That would make Idhren no better than a magister himself. “He has been nothing but cooperative since we captured him. Didn’t even try to escape when Haven was attacked, or afterward. And also, I… used to greatly admire him. His work – your work –,” he acknowledged with a nod in Dorian’s direction, “And Livia’s, was always incredible. It would be a pity for the world to lose a mind like that. I’m not about to set him loose on the world again, but neither do I want to see him rot in a cell forever.” He plucked the bottle of wine from Dorian’s lax fingers and raised it to his lips.

“I don’t envy you the decision,” Dorian commented as he watched Idhren finish off the bottle in two swallows. He was feeling pleasantly tipsy, though not the blackout drunk that he felt would be preferable at the moment. How many more bottles of wine would that take, though? “Do you have anything stronger in there?” he asked, nodding toward the stacks of crates and barrels beside where they sat.

Idhren shook his head as he leaned forward to set the empty bottle aside. Then he stopped and reconsidered. “There’s the bottle that I found on the side of the road down the mountain from here,” he said. It had been half buried in the snow, but the glint of sunlight off the glass had drawn his attention and he’d brought it along out of some mixture of curiosity and desperation. “I don’t know what’s in it, the label’s rotted off. It may be several hundred years old and priceless, or it may kill us.”

Dorian considered the option. “I think that’s a gamble I’m willing to take,” he answered eventually.

Idhren replied with a lopsided grin and used the wall to pull himself to his feet. “We’ll have to relocate, then. It’s still with my own things.”

Dorian raised an eyebrow, but levered himself to his feet as well. “Drinking with the Inquisitor in his private quarters? What will people say?” he asked, only half joking.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” Idhren replied, grin turning sly before he turned his back on Dorian and strode out of the room as though he weren’t drunk in the slightest. Impressive. Dorian took a moment
to compose himself before he followed.
We Are Alike In Sorrow

You have grieved as I have.
You, who made worlds out of nothing.
We are alike in sorrow, sculptor and clay,
Comforting each other in our art.

- Canticle of Trials 1:8

Crestwood, Ferelden, Kingsway 9:41 Dragon

“Why is it always raining in Ferelden?” Idhren asked nobody in particular. Or perhaps the world at large. Or any god who was listening. “And why are there so many corpses? Why do people live here?”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing,” Dorian commented miserably. “I regret letting you drag me out here. I should have stayed in Skyhold.”

It wasn’t actually raining at the moment, but that did nothing to stop their complaining. The rain had let up sometime after dawn, after they had been awake all night fighting possessed corpses, demons, and bandits. With all the rifts in this area now sealed – Idhren’s hand still stung from the effort – there was finally a moment to breathe, but it was little comfort. Their small party was soaked to the bone. Idhren was exhausted and filthy and he wanted nothing more than to get dry and crawl into a bed and sleep. Except they still had urgent business. So instead he trudged on down the muddy road with a water-stained map in hand, companions trailing behind him, as he tried to locate the smuggler’s cave where they were supposed to meet this contact.

And even more bad news.

It kept getting worse. First the Breach, then a Tevinter cult and a darkspawn magister out of Chantry legend, now brainwashed Grey Wardens. Idhren dared not think what could possibly go wrong next. And somehow it was Idhren’s job to fix it all.

They trudged their way back to the village of Crestwood, and from there to their camp. Idhren could have killed for a proper bed or a hot meal, but there were none to be had. So instead he accepted the field rations offered to him by a scout in Inquisition livery and ducked into his tent to at least get out of these sodden clothes.

Peeling off his wet armor was a relief; for all that it was still uncomfortable. Idhren stripped down to his smallclothes and undershirt as he carefully hung the various pieces of his outfit over the various poles and ropes that held up the tent. He had to stand on his toes just to reach the highest points, but eventually all his clothing was hanging neatly and dripping slowly onto the dirt ground. Then, shivering, he pulled open his pack to dig out anything dry. Although he had new armor – the old ones had been practically useless after Haven – he only had the one set, and could only pray that the leather coat and boots would dry overnight before he had to wear them again. Thankfully he did have a spare shirt and pants. These he pulled from his pack and lay out across his bedroll. He dried himself as much as he could without a towel, and then stripped out of his damp undershirt and smallclothes as quickly as possible before practically leaping into fresh ones and into his dry clothes.
Only after he was fully dressed and dry everywhere except his hair – which would take time without a towel – did Idhren finally allow himself to sit down on his bedroll and relax.

It was barely past noon and he was already exhausted. Of course he had been up all night trekking through the hills in the rain and fighting, so it wasn’t surprising. Gnawing on a strip of dried meat to silence the growling of his stomach, Idhren lay back on his bedroll. He was exhausted enough that he considered trying to grab a nap before seeing what could be scrounged up for dinner. But he should send a raven back to Leliana to warn that Hawke and Stroud would be en-route to the fortress. So when he finished eating he pushed himself upright again and reached for his pack. Digging through his few belongings he found the small pot of ink first, then a simple nib pen, but in his search for the journal that he knew he had packed – the one already half-full with notes about the Anchor – Idhren’s hand first encountered the crinkle of parchment. A letter that he had completely forgotten about.

Idhren held the parchment carefully as he withdrew it from his pack. It had gotten a little wrinkled over the course of several days, but the wax seal still clung to one end, the sigil stamped into it still easily discernable. House Pavus. Idhren had once been made to memorize the crests of every Altus house in the Imperium. Canidius and Pavus had always been the most familiar, the easiest remembered. Now it stared at him in accusation as he opened the letter once more.

A horrible breach of privacy to have read it, more so to have kept it secret for so long. In his defense, however, Dorian’s father was the one writing to unknown Chantry mothers rather than his own son. And asking Dorian be kept in the dark about it, brought to a meeting against his will. The whole affaire was terribly suspicious. But Idhren had read the letter a dozen times now and been unable to discover any nefarious subtext. He did not know much about Magister Pavus, nor his relationship with his son. For all he knew the letter was as innocuous as it seemed.

He had to tell Dorian. He had put it off too long already. Soon they would be heading back to Skyhold, and it would be their only chance to stop in Redcliffe for the foreseeable future.

Idhren folded the letter up again and exited the tent. Outside the scouts were struggling to get a fire started, but although the rain had stopped there was too little dry tinder to burn. Happy for another minor distraction, Idhren headed over to help. The magic that Keeper Istimaethoriel taught was not flashy or powerful, but it could mean the difference between life and death for a Dalish clan. A carefully modified heating spell dried the wood and kindling before he set it alight and pulled the flames to a healthy roar. And a small ward, just to keep it burning should the rain start up again. The scouts thanked him profusely. Somewhere down the line they would tell others about the Inquisitor’s random act of kindness, Idhren imagined. As though this was some huge chore and not a handful of spells even a child could learn.

Then he had nothing to keep him from speaking to Dorian. No reason to put it off any longer. He turned toward the tent the man was ostensibly sharing with Cole, but Idhren wasn’t entirely certain the spirit boy even slept. At the moment he was standing at the edge of camp staring out across the sodden ruins of Old Crestwood without seeming to actually see any of it. It was unsettling, but the kid was proving himself useful so far. And trustworthy. That was the entire reason Idhren had wanted him along on this mission – the first since Haven – to see if the boy was all that he claimed. So far he had done nothing more concerning than tell Cassandra to kill him if he turned into a demon. Which actually wasn’t concerning at all.

Idhren could go over there and talk to him now. Try to learn more about what Cole was and how he worked.

But no, he needed to show this letter to Dorian before they left Crestwood, and putting it off would
only make things worse. "Dorian?" he called from just outside the tent. He didn't know if humans had any sort of etiquette for campsites. Unlikely, as they usually spent very little time in camps. But if so they had never told him. So he just went by Dalish standards, where tents were more common than any sort of structure and therefore knocking on doors was rare. "Can I come in? I need to talk to you."

There was some rustling from inside the tent as Dorian moved around, and then the opening pulled aside and Dorian looked out at him. The man had changed into something dry, although he looked to be still in the process of drying and fixing his hair. "Something I can help you with, Inquisitor?" he asked.

Idhren thought this would go better if they were in the relative privacy of a tent. "Can I come in?" he asked again, and tried not to sound too ominous.

Dorian glanced back over his shoulder a moment, and then replied, "Very well. Though I feel I should apologize for the mess."

Idhren ducked past him into the tent and stopped just inside. "I'm used to camping, Dorian," he assured, "And mess. You should have seen our aravel back with the clan." He never had managed to get Tainan to keep anything organized. And as far as messes went, this was hardly worth mentioning. Dorian had had the same idea as Idhren, and his wet clothes hung from the wooden support that ran down the center of the tent, dripping slowly onto the ground as they dried.

"What's an aravel?" Dorian asked curiously.

"A landship," Idhren replied. "The wagons the Dalish use. They're really only meant for storage, but they've got just enough space to sleep in if you don't mind being a little cramped."

Dorian made a small thoughtful noise. "You said there was something you wanted to talk about?" he asked.

"I did," Idhren confirmed. He could still make up a lie about travel routes or anything, but he didn't. Instead he reached into his shirt, where he had tucked the letter while helping the scouts, and withdrew the folded parchment. "There's a letter you need to see."

"A letter?" Dorian asked, eyebrows raised curiously. "Are you receiving mail all the way out here? The Inquisition's mail carriers are quite impressive, if that's the case." he joked.

"No," Idhren was forced to admit. "I've had this since we left Skyhold, it's... It's from your father."

Any sense of mirth immediately left Dorian's face and his expression shuttered off, gone carefully blank the way that Idhren often saw Altus do. "My father? Why is my father writing to you?" he asked in clipped tones.

"He's not," Idhren quickly assured him. "He wrote to Mother Giselle, and she passed it on to me. She didn't want me to tell you, but I think you deserve to see it for yourself." he held the parchment out to Dorian and the man snatched it out of his fingers.

He practically tore the thing open in his haste to read it, eyes scanning over the lines once, and then twice. "I know my son," he scoffed, looking away from the letter after reading it a second time. "What my father knows about me could barely fill a thimble," he complained. "How long have you been keeping this from me?"

"Mother Giselle gave it to me just before we left," Idhren answered. He recognized that it was wrong, but it had been difficult to bring himself to say anything. "Then I... I couldn’t find a good
time to tell you. I’m sorry.”

Dorian scoffed and began to pace the length of the tent, small though it was. With the man’s long strides it was only three steps across. “I’m willing to bet this ‘retainer’ of his is a henchman, hired to knock me on the head and drag me back to Tevinter,” he ranted.

“Would your father do that?” Idhren asked in alarm. He knew that Dorian’s father was a magister, and magisters were capable of some terrible things. But he never imagined they would bring violence against their own family. No, that was wrong. He was quite aware now, in hindsight, that Canidius had most likely killed his own father to obtain his magisterial seat. Such machinations were not uncommon in Tevinter, but what reason would a magister have to harm their heir?

“I don’t know,” Dorian replied. He paused in his pacing, seemed to think about it for a moment, and then shook his head. “I wouldn’t put it past him, however.”

Idhren couldn’t help wondering what sort of relationship Dorian had with his father. Idhren had never been introduced to Magister Pavus. He did not run in the same circles as Canidius had, nor the ones Canidius had wanted. So Idhren knew little about the man save that he was Dorian's father. And Dorian was a good man, so he had always assumed that the magister would be as well. Perhaps that was not the case. Obviously, Idhren knew that Dorian had been the height of scandal in his youth. Was that a point of contention between his family? Did they see his coming south as a blight on the family's reputation? Was Dorian's father in the Venatori?

"We don't have to go," Idhren said, even as he was near insane with curiosity. "If you don't want to, we don't have to go. Redcliffe is out of the way, it's much faster to take the north road back to Skyhold. But if you do want to hear what this retainer has to say it also wouldn't put us terribly behind schedule to take the southern route."

Dorian stopped his pacing, frowned, and looked back down at the letter again. "Let's go, then," he decided firmly. "I want to see what this retainer has to say, though I doubt I'll like it. If it's a trap, we'll escape and kill everyone," he turned and offered a slightly wry smile at Idhren, "You're good at that."

Idhren rolled his eyes, but he returned the smile. "Certainly," he replied. "I'll tell the others. We'll leave in the morning. I hope it's not a trap, though."

"As do I," Dorian agreed, though he wasn't optimistic about it. "I'll keep this, if you don't mind," he added, holding up the letter. "Some rather incriminating evidence against his character, should it be needed."

"Of course," Idhren replied. The letter should have gone to Dorian in the first place. Idhren should have given it to him long ago. "I'll let you finish cleaning up," he said, casting a glance to the wet clothes hanging on the tent pole, and allowing himself another moment to take in what Dorian looked like dressed down. "We finally got a fire going outside, so I expect someone will manage to whip up something warm for dinner."

"Warm but tasteless, I'll expect," Dorian sighed. He looked down at the letter again, then very pointedly folded it back up and went to stash it in the bottom of his pack. "These Fereldens have no sense of taste. It's astounding the things they'll try to pass off as food. Although," he looked back over his shoulder at Idhren, "At least they don't eat insects."

Idhren quirked a half smile. "I'm certain I could find some, whip up a proper Dalish meal for you, if you'd prefer."
"No," Dorian answered far too quickly, blanching and looking just the slightest bit nauseous. "No, that's quite alright. I'm sure whatever the scouts manage will suffice."

Idhren laughed. He quite enjoyed teasing Dorian. "Well, I'll see you at dinner then," he said.

"And you, Inquisitor," the man replied.

He still wasn’t used to the title, though he heard it more often than his own name now. It was even stranger hearing it from Dorian's lips. And depressing, somewhat. Dorian was his oldest friend, without a doubt, no matter how rocky their relationship had been at times. But he couldn't help wondering if Dorian still saw him as a friend, or if he was nothing but the Inquisitor now. "You don't have to call me that."

“What? ‘Inquisitor’?" Dorian asked. “And what else should I call you, then?”

“My name,” Idhren said flatly.

For the barest moment Dorian seemed at a loss, but he recovered quickly. “That would be grossly unprofessional, don’t you think?”

“Dorian, I’ve known you since I was fourteen years old,” Idhren replied. “If anyone is entitled to call me by name, it’s you.”

“Well when you put it that way it does seem a bit ridiculous,” Dorian admitted. Perhaps even a little sheepish. “I will endeavor to do better in the future.”

“Thank you,” Idhren replied. That was all he could ask, though he wondered whether it was as strange for Dorian to call him by a title as it was to hear it. Dorian had always been higher ranking than him before now. The role-reversal was more jarring than he could have expected. “Well,” he forced a wry smile and turned back toward the tent entrance. “I still have a raven to send back to Skyhold. Let them know to expect company. We’ll leave for Redcliffe in the morning.”

The village of Redcliffe looked exactly as Idhren remembered. Although less crowded now that most of the rebel mages had relocated to Skyhold along with the rest of the Inquisition. The tavern where Dorian’s family retainer was meant to meet them was as unassuming from the outside as the first time Idhren had been here.

Dorian paced just outside the door. Idhren watched him walk back and forth and back and forth. Cassandra and Cole were waiting for them elsewhere, though it had taken no small amount of convincing on Idhren’s part to get them to leave. Cassandra was even more protective of the Inquisitor than she had been when Idhren was merely Herald of Andraste. But what could possibly happen to them here? Nothing worse than their last visit, at least.

“Do you want me to go in with you?” Idhren asked as he watched Dorian continue to pace. The man had grown more and more nervous the closer they came to town, though he did his best to hide it. He realized this was probably a private affair, but a little moral support could go far.

At long last Dorian stopped pacing. He took a deep breath and sighed it out, “I think that goes without saying, don’t you?” he asked. “I would appreciate a little backup in case things go south.”
And Dorian seemed so confident that they would. Just what had happened between Dorian and his father? Had their relationship always been this strained? If so, how had Idhren never noticed? Because he’d never bothered to ask, the elf scolded himself. He’d never really bothered to ask Dorian about his life while spilling his own troubles on the man. In retrospect, perhaps that had been unfair. “I’ll be right behind you,” he promised.

Dorian offered him a rather weak smile before squaring his shoulders and turning toward the tavern. One more deep breath and he stepped up to the door and pulled it open.

Right away something felt wrong. Opening the tavern door revealed a silent, empty room, dark save the sunlight coming in through the windows and a minimum of candles set on the walls. “This doesn’t bode well,” Dorian said, stopping only a few steps inside and already looking ready to flee.

“Dorian.”

The voice came from the stairwell up to the tavern’s second floor. Idhren saw Dorian tense, but to the man’s credit he did not jump, and he reigned in his expression before slowly, mechanically, turning around to face the man that stepped into the small circle of candlelight. It felt almost surreal, seeing him in a place like this. “Father.”

Now Idhren tensed as well. Magister, his mind screamed in warning. The last time he had been surprised by a magister in this very tavern it had all gone downhill very quickly. And Idhren didn’t have a high opinion of their type to begin with.

“So the whole story about the ‘family retainer’ was just… what? Smokescreen?” Dorian asked, bitterness and distrust twisting his words.

“Then you were told,” the magister surmised. “I apologize, Inquisitor,” he intoned, turning to Idhren with a solemn expression. “I never meant for you to be involved.”

Idhren arched an eyebrow curiously, but before he could reply Dorian interrupted. “Have you two never met?” he asked, glancing at Idhren. From the man’s expression it was clear he was trying to restrain his emotions and doing a poor job of it. His usual cheek was a fragile façade, veiling the fear and anger in his eyes. “Or perhaps you simply don’t remember Magister Canidius’ apprentice?” he turned back to his father, “Not worth committing the Liberati to memory, father?”

For a brief moment Magister Pavus looked genuinely surprised. “Liberati?” he repeated curiously. Idhren felt a tiny flash of pleasure at noticing that. “I hear I look quite different now, to be fair,” the elf replied. “And I don’t think any of Canidius’ associates bothered giving me a second glance. You should have come to Skyhold. It’s in a bit of disrepair at the moment, but we would have found somewhere suitable for a magister to stay.”

The magister’s eyes narrowed, his lips pursed. “This is a family matter,” he insisted. “I would not want to impose, Inquisitor.”

“No, of course not,” Dorian scoffed. “Magister Pavus couldn’t come to Skyhold and be seen with the dread Inquisitor. What would people think?” he sighed melodramatically. “What was this meant to be, father? Ambush? Kidnapping? Warm family reunion?” he bit out the last words with an amount of venom that Idhren had never heard in his voice before. Every line of his body was hard and tense, a deer that had sensed a hunter and was ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.

Magister Pavus sighed the long-suffering sigh of a parent attempting to reign in an unruly child. Never mind that Dorian was a grown man. “This is how it has always been,” he shook his head.
“You lied to get us here, Magister Pavus,” Idhren pointed out. He didn’t know what had happened between Dorian and his father, but this was uncalled for in any situation. “You tricked us.” The manipulation was blatant, not as refined as Canidius’ had been, but still familiar enough to turn Idhren’s stomach. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared across the room at the magister. “I think Dorian has every right to be furious.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Dorian bit out.

“Dorian—,” his father warned.

“You’re well aware of the reputation I had back in Tevinter,” Dorian cut him off. He looked over his shoulder at Idhren and very pointedly did not turn his back on his father. “What was it you said that last time in Vyrantium? Something rather poetic about every whorehouse in Minrathous.”

“I was very drunk then,” Idhren reminded him.

“No, you don’t say,” Dorian replied. The sarcasm was biting, might have been offensive if Idhren didn’t see it for the shield that it was. “Of course, my father disapproves. You know how it is in Tevinter. An Altus must be perfect. Any ‘shameful deviation’ must be hidden away.”

“I should have known that’s what this was about,” the magister sighed again. “Chasing some Liberati into the south.” The word ‘Liberati’ rolled off his tongue like a curse. The respect that he had shown Idhren as Inquisitor melted away in an instant, and so did what little respect Idhren might have had for him.

Dorian’s whole body tensed once more as he furiously rounded on his father. “You don’t get to make those assumptions,” he snapped. “You know nothing about him. Or me, it seems.”

Idhren was startled less that the magister would jump to that conclusion, and more that Dorian would defend him. Although he shouldn’t have been. It wasn’t the first time Dorian had jumped to his defense. Then again, maybe Dorian was only defending himself to his father. Obviously Dorian hadn’t chased him into the south; Dorian hadn’t even known he was here, except in the vaguest sense. It shouldn’t hurt that Dorian denied any involvement with him, because it was true.

“This is not what I wanted,” Magister Pavus’ exasperation was beginning to shift toward anger, or at least annoyance.

Dorian was also having a harder time keeping a handle on his own emotions. “I’m never what you wanted, father,” he spat.

That was a feeling that Idhren knew all too well. “We don’t have to stay here, Dorian,” he said, stepping forward and reaching out to the man before stopping himself. Dorian might not appreciate that right now.

“No,” Dorian agreed, turning his back on his father, “And perhaps we shouldn’t.”

“Dorian, please,” his father beseeched. The anger melted away to be replaced by something that was probably meant to be empathy. Idhren wondered if the man had ever felt empathy in his entire life. “If you’ll only listen to me.”

“Why?” Dorian demanded. He spun on his heel, glaring daggers at his father and Idhren felt the room heat up noticeably. “So you can spout more convenient lies? He taught me to hate blood magic,” he practically snarled, “‘The resort of a weak mind’. Those were his words. But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to… change me.” His voice cracked on the last words as he finally lost the battle against his
own emotions, and the sound made Idhren’s heart clench in his chest.

At the same time all the pieces fell together in Idhren’s mind. Dorian’s reputation. His father’s disapproval. ‘Convenient lies’. ‘Play pretend’.

“I only wanted what was best for you,” the magister protested.

Too familiar words. Something inside Idhren snapped. “With all due respect, Magister Pavus,” Idhren stepped between the two, his stance almost aggressive – no, protective. As though his tiny body could actually serve the purpose of shielding Dorian from an attack. In any other situation the notion would have been ridiculous. Now Dorian found it strangely comforting. “Which is none,” the Inquisitor continued, hands on his hips and standing as tall and proud as he was able – not very tall, but exceedingly proud, “Go fuck yourself.”

The surprise was obvious on his father’s face. Unused to being spoken to in such a manner, and certainly not by an elf, the magister was struck momentarily speechless. Idhren used the moment of shock to his advantage, turning his back on the magister and looking up at Dorian with barely restrained fury in his gaze. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Dorian could only nod mutely, but his feet moved as though of their own accord as he made for the door. Through it all Idhren stayed between him and his father like the world’s smallest attack dog, and just as they reached the threshold turned around and flashed Magister Pavus the rudest hand gesture he knew before letting the door slam shut behind him.

Still slightly shaken from the encounter, Dorian wandered several paces away from the tavern before stopping and staring out toward the lake. He was glad to be out of there, to be away from his father’s poisonous lies and half-hearted apologies. At least, he wanted to believe they were insincere. It was easier to hate the man than to think he had done this out of some form of misguided love. He felt more than heard Idhren come up and stand beside him, and the elf’s small presence was surprisingly reassuring. He wondered if he had been honest with Idhren from the beginning if it would have saved both of them a lot of suffering, or if it would have just made things worse.

“No offense, Dorian,” Idhren said softly after a long moment, “But your father is a cunt.” Dorian let out a bark of bitter laughter. The elf wasn’t wrong. “And Tevinter is a shit hole,” Idhren added, “The entire place can fall into the sea for all I care.” And Dorian couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. Right now he felt the same. After another moment of silence Idhren shifted at his side and asked gently, “Are you alright?”

Dorian considered lying. He considered brushing it all off with a sarcastic remark and going about his life as though nothing were amiss, but when he opened his mouth what came out instead was, “No, not really.” Maybe it was because only Idhren was there to hear it, and Idhren had to understand at least a part of what Dorian was feeling – the betrayal, the fear, the anger, and somewhere in there still a tiny shred of love and the desperate, childish need to be accepted.

“Well, I didn’t think you were here,” Idhren said softly after a long moment, “But your father is a cunt.” Dorian let out a bark of bitter laughter. The elf wasn’t wrong. “And Tevinter is a shit hole,” Idhren added, “The entire place can fall into the sea for all I care.” And Dorian couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. Right now he felt the same. After another moment of silence Idhren shifted at his side and asked gently, “Are you alright?”

Dorian considered lying. He considered brushing it all off with a sarcastic remark and going about his life as though nothing were amiss, but when he opened his mouth what came out instead was, “No, not really.” Maybe it was because only Idhren was there to hear it, and Idhren had to understand at least a part of what Dorian was feeling – the betrayal, the fear, the anger, and somewhere in there still a tiny shred of love and the desperate, childish need to be accepted.

“Did he really try to...?” Idhren began hesitantly. There was no easy way to broach this subject, but he wanted to understand so that he could help. “Was it blood magic?”

“He never actually got the chance,” Dorian replied. “I found the plans for the ritual in his study. I left immediately. Ran off with barely more than the clothes on my back. I’d like to think he wouldn’t have actually gone through with it, but I suppose now we’ll never know.”

Idhren cursed in elvhen, words Dorian didn’t know but the tone was telling enough. “Fucking magisters,” he grumbled, mostly to himself, “They’re all the same.”
“It is starting to look that way, isn’t it?” Dorian was forced to admit. No, he knew some back in Tevinter who were still decent. Although he’d once thought his father decent. More than decent. Alexius, too. And look where they were now.

“I’m sorry,” Idhren said, whether for his words or just out of sympathy Dorian wasn’t certain. Either was fine. Who better to understand this crushing feeling of betrayal, grief, and rage? “Is there anything I can do?” he offered. “Find some Venatori to kill? Buy out all the liquor in town?”

“No,” Dorian answered slowly. “Thank you, though.” He sighed and turned away from the picturesque view before them, finally looking down at Idhren. The elf had his arms crossed over his chest, still in a defensive posture but less tense than he had been in the tavern, but his face was turned up toward Dorian, brows knitted upward in concern. Those damn calf eyes had been Dorian’s downfall from the beginning. He tore his gaze away once more. “Maker knows what you must think of me now.”

“I’d be a hypocrite to think any less of you,” Idhren said gently, “After all we’ve been through. I think…” he paused a moment, hesitating. He understood what Dorian must be feeling, but emotional conversations had never been their forte. “I think you’re very brave.”

“Brave?” Dorian repeated incredulously.

“I know how much it hurts to find out someone you admired is not what they seemed. And I know the sort of courage it takes to leave everything you know behind,” Idhren said earnestly.

“I suppose you do,” Dorian huffed in agreement. He was likely the only person Dorian knew who could even come close to understanding; truly understanding.

“I… should apologize,” Idhren added hesitantly, “For some of the things I said to you in Tevinter. And since then. It seems you understood my problems better than I realized and I… I’m sorry I was so dismissive.”

The words were unexpected, although greatly appreciated. Dorian swallowed back a lump in his throat and said tightly, “Apology accepted.”

“So…” Idhren began again after a moment of silence. “Drinks? Murder? Shopping?” he suggested, “I think I have money now. The Inquisition has money. A little. I’m fairly certain I’m entitled to use at least a bit of it for myself.”

That Idhren would be willing to spend money to cheer him up meant quite a lot, but he wasn’t in the right frame of mind to truly appreciate the gesture. “Much as I would enjoy drinking myself into a stupor – it’s been that sort of day,” Dorian sighed and risked looking back at the tavern. “My father appears to have rented out the only place in town.”

Idhren hummed thoughtfully, following Dorian’s gaze to the closed door and the dark windows. Magister Pavus was still inside, probably fuming to himself at this moment about how his perfect plans had all backfired. Idhren had no sympathy. But it did put a wrench in his own plans. He turned back to Dorian as he shook away thoughts of setting fire to the building while the magister was still inside and placed a hand hesitantly on Dorian’s arm. “Tell me what I can do, then,” he requested. “I would very much like to help.”

Dorian arched an eyebrow as he looked down at Idhren, fingertips lingering on Dorian’s sleeve but looking as though he was ready to pull his hand away at a moment’s notice. Those wide violet eyes stared up at him full of sympathy, brows knitted together in concern. Dorian was struck by the sudden very strong urge to kiss him. So strong that he very nearly leaned down and did it, only to
stop himself. Idhren wouldn’t welcome his affections now. The elf had found someone else to love. And even if Idhren’s hunter was dead, it was clear that Idhren clung to their memory. Dorian had squandered his chance. He’d already taken advantage of Idhren’s heartbreak once; he didn’t intend to do it again. “Let’s return to Skyhold,” he said, tearing his eyes away from Idhren’s before his emotions could get the better of him. “I would like to put all this behind me as quickly as possible. In both the literal and figurative sense.”

Idhren’s hand fell away from his arm and he turned away from Dorian. “Alright,” he said, carefully monotone. That was probably the smart decision, anyway. “Let’s go fetch the others, then.”

“Yes, let’s,” Dorian agreed.

The return to Skyhold was a relief. When the fortress towers appeared between the surrounding mountain peeks as the Inquisitor’s party wound their way up the mountain road that lead up to the front gates Idhren couldn’t help smiling a little, even as a cold mountain breeze crept through the seams of his clothes and made him shiver. He had grown used to the cooler temperatures in the Free Marches, but would he ever get used to living on a perpetually snow-capped mountain? At the moment it seemed unlikely. The fortress itself was much improved from when Idhren had left weeks ago. Gone were the piles of rubble in the courtyard, the obvious holes in the wall, and the small village of tents that had been set up in lieu of any actual quarters for most of the Inquisition’s people. Scaffolding still climbed the walls, masons at work repairing or reinforcing as Idhren rode in under a brand new portcullis.

Idhren would have killed for a hot bath and a warm bed, and was rather shocked when both were offered to him almost immediately upon his arrival. As Dennet took their horses to a newly constructed stable Josephine lead Idhren through a cleaned and furnished main hall - still scaffolding along the sides, but a carpet ran down the center and sconces burned merrily along the walls even as light flooded in through now-clean stained glass windows - and through a doorway toward the back of the hall. Idhren’s eyes lingered over a throne set on a dais at the head of the hall, but he didn’t question it yet as he followed Josephine through that door, down a hall, and up so no fewer than four flights of stairs before she held open one last door, unable to contain her smile as she announced, "Your quarters, Inquisitor."

The room was flooded with afternoon light. High windows on three sides let in daylight and fresh mountain air. The high, vaulted ceiling allowed for a mural on the last wall. The room was furnished with plush carpeting, a sturdy wooden bed frame, a plush sofa, and in one corner even a desk and several bookshelves. A fireplace stood across from the bed, a fire already burning on the stones and filling the room with warmth even as a cold breeze blew in through an open balcony door.

In its entirety the room was four times the size of the mud-walled hut that Idhren had been born in. It was easily twice as large as any room he had lived in during his entire life. The entirely of clan Lavellan could have slept in here and not been uncomfortable.

"This is mine?" he asked in amazement. At the head of the stairs that lead into the room someone had thoughtfully placed an armor stand and a weapons rack. He put his staff on the rack without even really thinking about it.

"Of course," Josephine replied. "You are the Inquisitor, it is only fitting that you have quarters that properly reflect your status."
That didn't make it any easier to take in. There were probably nobles who did not have living quarters as nice as this. The furnishings were rustic, which Idhren appreciated, but the size was something else. And the view was second to none. Idhren's feet moved of their own accord as he crossed the room, stepping out onto one of the balconies - and there were two. This room commanded a view of the entirety of Skyhold, both courtyard and the castle garden, as well as the road leading up to the fortress and the surrounding countryside. It was magnificent. Breath-taking. And they were giving it to him. As though he deserved it.

He was struck with a sudden sense of homesickness. Which was ridiculous, because Idhren never felt at home in any specific place. But he wished his family were alive to see him now, to see how far he had risen above his lowly birth. They had always been proud of him, even though they didn’t even understand his life. He wondered what Keeper Istimaethoriel would think. What anyone back at the clan would think. He should write to them, see how they were faring in the midst of this war. He hadn’t written since this all began.

“I’ll leave you to settle in,” Josephine said, standing in the doorway behind him. “And I’ll send someone up with a bath. When you’re ready, meet me in the war room. Hawke and Stroud arrived two days ago, I think everyone would like to go over our plans.”

Idhren nodded, tearing his gaze away from the view and turning back to her. “I’ll come down as soon as I’m changed,” he replied. He imagined there would be plenty of time for getting used to his new quarters. He wondered idly where everyone else had been shuffled off to, and realized he would have to tour the keep again in order to see all the repairs. “And you only need to send up a tub, I can handle the water myself.”

Josephine looked ready to protest for a moment, before a look of understanding dawned on her face and she nodded. Had she just forgotten that he was a mage? Were they really so repressed down here that no one thought to use magic for everyday tasks? “I’m certain the maids will appreciate that,” Josephine said. “I will be in my office, when you are ready.” She dropped the tiniest of curtsies and then turned, disappearing down the stairs a moment later.

Bathing had never been relaxing for Idhren. He didn't enjoy it as much as most people seemed to, but he enjoyed very few things that required him to bare his body or think about what was under his clothes. But as he sank into the warm water and scrubbed sweet scented soap over his skin and hair, he realized just how stiff he had been after so many weeks on the road, and how much he had needed this. With the dirt and the sweat washed away and his muscles unwinding to the scent of lavender and rosemary, Idhren relaxed in the bath for the first time in his recollection. And his mind wandered. He wondered again where his companions - slowly becoming friends - had been housed now that the keep had suitable rooms. And he thought about Dorian. The man had been unusually quiet on the road back from Redcliffe. Idhren couldn’t blame him, but he was concerned.

He knew what Dorian must be feeling. At least he thought he did. And his heart went out to the man, his heart ached. He wanted nothing more than to embrace him, to say that he understood and that he would do whatever he could to make things right. He had that power now. Maybe.

He also wanted to apologize. Because he realized now that everything in Dorian's life was not as easy as he'd once thought. An Altus had expectations to live up to as well. Idhren had been unfair to him in Tevinter. He didn't know if he could make up for that. But he wanted to try. He also realized that Dorian might have understood Idhren's own pain better than he'd realized back then. He had been unfair, all those years ago, to write off Dorian's concern. He'd been unfair to do it at Haven.

Even now, was Dorian finding Skyhold's wine cellar and getting himself blackout drunk as he'd wanted to immediately after seeing his father? It was definitely possible.
Idhren climbed out of the bath after longer than usual and dried himself quickly. As much as he wanted to go find Dorian now and ask if he was alright, there was business to attend to. War was more important than his feelings, and what they had learned in Crestwood was more than a little concerning.

He found the wardrobe in the room stocked with clothing. They had taken his measurements back in Haven, for new armor and boots to replace what had barely survived the Fade. Then again upon arriving in Skyhold, to replace what had barely survived an avalanche. And while he had been gone the tailor had apparently been busy. He selected a pair of simple black pants and a dark blue shirt, slipping them on easily. These were far more fitted than Idhren was used to wearing. He wasn't entirely certain he was comfortable in such form-fitting clothing. Idhren usually went to great lengths to hide the curves of his body. And while this outfit did not emphasize them, he still couldn't help but feel uncomfortably exposed. Maybe he could ask the tailor to remake everything just a little bit bigger. But no, that would be rude. Selfish. And Skyhold was short of resources as it was. He would simply have to learn to deal with it. So long as nobody noticed.

Clean, dressed, hair combed and styled. Idhren left the room again and descended the many flights of stairs until he once more reached the main hall. Again his eyes lingered over the throne standing below the stained glass windows, and again he pulled his attention away from it. That was a matter for another time. For now, he needed to discuss what they’d learned from Hawke and Stroud, and decide what the Inquisition should do next.

The war council ended up dragging late into the evening, until Idhren could barely keep his eyes open and was at risk of falling asleep at the war table. Only then did his advisors finally agree to stop for the day. As such, he was unable to seek out anyone or anything else until the next morning. Even then, the Inquisitor’s duties came before social calls.

It took the better part of that morning to see all the repair work that had been done while he was away. The speed with which the work crews had cleared the rubble and repaired the worst of the structural damage was astounding. Even with the scaffolding that still dotted the walls Skyhold no longer even remotely looked like a ruin.

He dawdled too long with everyone that he met. And he tried to ignore the little flutters of happiness in his chest every time he realized that maybe he could consider some of these people friends. Not during a war. Not when they all might die. Still it was difficult to pull himself away sometimes, and so it was already late afternoon when he finally made his way to the library in search of Dorian – he’d put off too long checking on the man after what had happened in Redcliffe.

He wasn’t even halfway up the stairs when he first heard the argument. Dorian’s voice was instantly recognizable; the other took him longer to place – Mother Giselle. They were two of the last people Idhren had expected to find arguing. The Mother had always seemed kind – motherly – even when she was critical of Chantry doctrine. She had cared for Idhren while he recovered from Haven. And yet as he reached the top of the stairs and stepped into the library he found her trading barbs with Dorian.

“Is there a problem here?” Idhren asked as he approached the pair, confused.

“Ah, there you are,” Dorian commented. He had his arms folded across his chest, body language defensive even as his tone was flippant. It only made Idhren more curious about what was going on. “The man of the hour. The good Revered Mother here is merely concerned about my ‘undue influence’ over you.”

“Your Worship,” the Mother beseeched. And that form of address would take even longer to get used to than ‘Inquisitor’. “This man is of Tevinter, as are our enemies. You must know how this
Idhren frowned. That did not answer any of his questions; it only made him more confused. “Mother Giselle, has it somehow escaped your notice that I am also from Tevinter?” he asked.

“That is precisely what concerns me, Your Worship,” the woman replied.

Oh, Idhren could see where this was going. The same place it went whenever someone learned where he was born. “Revered Mother,” he interrupted before she could continue. “If you are about to imply what I think you are, then I suggest you choose your words very carefully.”

That did seem to give the woman pause, and Idhren gave her credit for actually considering her wording. “Most in the Inquisition are aware of your birthplace, however the exact circumstances of your life in Tevinter are not common knowledge. You must realize how it looks.”

“You might need to spell it out for him,” Dorian quipped, tone impatient.

“Yes, if you would,” Idhren agreed, crossing his arms over his chest as well. He was very unhappy with where this conversation was going.

“There have been rumors, Your Worship,” the woman replied. “The people are concerned.”

“What sort of rumors?” Idhren asked. He did not want to make his life’s story common knowledge, but he would proclaim from the rooftops how long he had been free if that was necessary.

“I could not dare repeat them, Your Worship,” Mother Giselle cowed.

“In that case,” Idhren replied irritably, “The next time you hear one of these rumors, Mother Giselle, kindly inform the perpetrator that I have not been a slave for fifteen years, that I have never known Dorian while I was a slave, and I’ve known him for the majority of my life so they can kindly keep their damn mouths shut about our personal business. And if they have a problem with either of us being from Tevinter they should bring it to me personally or they can leave.”

Dorian was as startled by the force of Idhren’s ire as the poor Mother clearly was. She looked absolutely flabbergasted to be spoken to with such venom. But she quickly picked her jaw up off the floor and made an attempt at regaining her composure. “I see,” she replied stiffly. She looked about to say something else, then thought better of it, offered Idhren a respectful nod and a farewell, then disappeared back down the stairs.

Idhren fumed silently as he watched her go, furious that she or anyone else would be jumping to such horrid conclusions about his life in Tevinter or his relationship with Dorian. When she had disappeared around the curve of the staircase he glanced back at Dorian, took in the man’s still defensive posture, and asked, “She didn’t get to you, did she?”

Dorian let out the tiniest scoff of a laugh and his posture relaxed somewhat. “You should know it takes more than thinly veiled insults to get to me,” he replied.

“I suppose I do know that,” Idhren agreed. Their friendship would never have survived this long otherwise. “Still, she shouldn’t be talking to you like that.”

“Oh, getting protective, are you?” Dorian teased, and his posture relaxed somewhat. “Is that an official decree from the Inquisitor? People will talk,” he drawled.

“Apparently they already are,” Idhren grumbled. “As though there aren’t more important things to worry about than mindless gossip.”
“I’m not certain you’re aware,” Dorian commented, glancing at Idhren out of the corner of his eye, “But some of those rumors are that we are… intimate.”

“Is that all?” Idhren asked, surprised, and some of his anger faded. No rumors that they were performing blood magic rituals in the dead of night? Nor that Idhren was a slave, a thrall and a puppet at Dorian’s command? That the pair of Tevinter mages were simply waiting for the opportune moment to wreak even more havoc on southern Thedas? “You never struck me as the sort to be overly concerned about that sort of rumor.” He couldn’t help himself from searching Dorian’s face for some reaction, some glimpse at his true feelings, but the man’s expression offered nothing.

“My reputation among your followers is poor enough without adding debauching the Herald of Andraste to my list of sins,” Dorian commented. “Not to mention the damage it would do to your own reputation.”

“I’ve already been thoroughly debauched,” Idhren pointed out, “Or have you forgotten about the time you found me in a lyrium den getting drunk with a whore?”

“No, I haven’t quite forgotten about that,” Dorian admitted with a short laugh. “I do recall that you were higher than the moons, and your whore friend tried to proposition me.”

“He did more than try,” Idhren replied.

“Very well, he did proposition me. And you. Both of us,” Dorian relented.

“And you ran away like a blushing virgin,” Idhren recalled, and surprised himself at the feeling of remembered bitterness that welled up inside him. But it was happening all over again. For all his professions of fondness, the months of flirting, Dorian didn’t actually want him. Not the way that Idhren wanted him. “Are you going to do it this time as well?”

Guilt flashed across Dorian’s face and Idhren immediately pulled away from the man, taking a step back. It was happening again. He still wasn’t good enough. He would never be good enough for Dorian. “What of your hunter?” the man asked softly.

Idhren swallowed and looked away. His feelings for Dorian were as complicated as they had ever been, and made even more complicated by Tainan’s memory. Was it too soon? But Idhren had no control over the machinations of his heart. “Tainan is dead,” he said painfully.

“But you still love them,” Dorian said. It was not a question. It didn’t need to be.

“I do,” Idhren confirmed anyway. “I probably always will.”

“Then what are you doing here with me?” Dorian asked. “Using me as some sort of replacement? Or a distraction?”

The man almost sounded hurt, but it wasn’t like that at all. Idhren had loved Dorian since he was a teenager, though he had been too stupid and afraid to recognize his feelings for what they were until it was too late, until he was already leaving. Tainan had eclipsed that, for a time, and maybe if Tainan were here now Idhren wouldn’t be feeling like this again. Or maybe he would. Dorian and Tainan were as different as two people could possibly be, and Idhren didn’t love them each the same way or for the same reasons. And that was what it boiled down to - that he had loved them both in equal measure and probably still would if they were both standing here before him now. His love for Tainan had never diminished his feelings for Dorian, and the same was true now in reverse. Couldn’t he love them both at the same time if there was enough room in his heart?

It was all terribly complicated, but it didn’t have to be. It could be simple if they would let it. And
Idhren was so tired of dancing around his feelings in fear of upsetting someone else. Would Tainan
be upset if they were here? Possibly, but Idhren had a difficult time convincing himself of that. Very
little could truly upset Tainan. They were not here, anyway, and wherever his betrothed was now
Idhren felt certain that Tainan would want him to be happy, not to torture himself with what-ifs and
could-have-beens.

“It’s not like that,” Idhren insisted.

“Then what is it?” Dorian asked in return.

“I’m in love with you!”

The words tore from Idhren’s throat with far more force and volume than he had intended. The
silence the followed after was deafening in its completeness. Even the birds up above seemed to have
gone quiet to listen. Dorian’s eyes were round as saucers, mouth agape as he stared at Idhren,
completely speechless. But the elf couldn’t appreciate the achievement of rendering Dorian
speechless as panic and shame welled up in his chest.

“I have to go,” Idhren said quickly, quietly, the words running together in his haste to escape what he
felt was inevitable: rejection. Turning on the ball of his foot, he fled down the stairs as quickly as he
could without breaking into a sprint, eyes trained on the floor and cheeks burning. He made it out of
the rotunda and through the main hall without seeing or acknowledging a single person there, even
the few nobles who tried to get his attention. His entire face and even the tips of his ears burned in
embarrassment as he flung open the door to his quarters and let it slam behind him. Finally away
from prying eyes, he collapsed back against the door and covered his face with both hands.

His legs were shaking, and slowly he slid down the door until he was sitting on the floor, face still
buried in his hands. He felt absolutely mortified. This was the most embarrassing moment of his
entire life. If the sky opened up again at this very moment and swallowed him, he wouldn’t mind.
Idhren had blurted out his feelings loud enough for all of Skyhold to hear. So much for staunching
rumors that they were more than friends. What would the gossip mill make of this?

Worst of all, Idhren felt positive that he would now have to face Dorian’s pity when the man turned
him down. As though this moment could not get any worse. Soon the news would travel through the
entire castle: the Inquisitor is in love with that Tevinter mage. And then the pity would come, the
sympathetic apologies. He doesn’t love you back.

And why would he? Dorian was the son of a magister. Nobility born and bred. What was Idhren
except some former slave playing at politics. An elf risen above his station because of an accident of
fate. For years Idhren had pined after him in Tevinter, deluding himself that the difference in their
social standing was the only thing keeping them apart. Now that difference was gone and still Dorian
shied away. Idhren was still nothing more than a friend.

Idhren must have sat there for the better part of an hour, wallowing in his embarrassment and self-
loathing. So when someone knocked at the door behind him it was startling enough to make him
actually leap away. He stumbled forward, and then righted himself, heart thundering from the
surprise. The knock sounded again and this time his heart stopped in his chest. Was that Dorian come
chasing after him already? “Y-yes?” he called through the door, hating the way his voice shook.

The handle turned. Idhren held his breath. The hinges creaked softly as the door pushed open and
Josephine peeked inside. Idhren visibly deflated in relief. “Inquisitor?” she asked, taking in the way
he slumped against the wall the moment he saw her. His ears were still burning and he hoped it
wasn’t too obvious. “Is everything alright?”
“Yes,” Idhren replied quickly, forcing himself upright again and trying to regain his composure. “Did you need something?”

“If you’re not busy, I was hoping we might discuss plans for the empress’ ball,” Josephine said. If she could see how flustered Idhren was she made no comment. Thank the Maker for her perfect manners.

“No, not busy at all,” Idhren replied. “Let’s do that. Right now. Let’s do that right now.” He could bury himself in work and then Dorian would have no chance to talk to him about today. No one would. And maybe if he did that long enough he could eventually pretend it had never happened.

He succeeded in avoiding Dorian for all of three days. It wasn’t terribly difficult, actually. The Inquisitor had thus far spent less time at Skyhold than on the road, and the paperwork piled up. Josephine did a fine job of handling any dealings with diplomats or nobles while he was away, running the daily affairs of Skyhold in the Inquisitor’s absence, but she could not do everything. There was still a war to plan, after all. And Idhren had requisitioned any book on military strategy that their agents could find. Politics, history, and magic Idhren understood. He could hold his own in a fight, but he knew absolutely nothing about leading armies. Cullen would be doing the actual leading, of course, and he had advisors for a reason, but Idhren wanted to do more than just nod and agree to suggestions. He wanted to understand.

So when he wasn’t locked in a real strategy session in the war room, or sorting through reports, Idhren pulled out one of those strategy books and read. The bookshelves in his room were filling quickly.

And it was during one such rare downtime that Idhren was ambushed.

When he heard the knock on the door he assumed it was a runner, bringing more reports, or perhaps one of his advisors. So he called a quick “Come in,” and remained where he was, propped up against the arm of the sofa with a book laid out across his knees and a bottle of wine on the floor next to him. He listened to the door open without looking away from his reading, and then the footsteps climbing the stairs.

“You know,” Dorian’s voice was friendly, but it still made Idhren’s blood run cold. “It’s very rude to confess something the way you did and then disappear for days.”

Idhren’s heart skipped a beat, and then began working overtime. He sat up suddenly, fumbling the book in his hands and nearly dropping it before he managed to set it aside. Then when he swung his legs off the sofa he nearly kicked over the bottle of wine, but he managed to snatch it up before it could stain the carpet and set it safely on the side table. He had never been this clumsy in his life. But Dorian was at the top of the stairs now, watching him with one eyebrow raised and a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Careful there,” Dorian teased. “Wouldn’t want to ruin these lovely new carpets.”

Idhren tried to come up with a clever reply, but his mind had ground to a halt. He opened his mouth but nothing came out, so he closed it again. Dorian was here, and he was talking about that, and how could he look so pleased with himself when he was going to rip Idhren’s heart out?

“Speechless?” Dorian asked. “That’s unusual for you. Though I do have that effect on people.”
“What are you doing here?” Idhren finally managed to get his voice to work, though he could barely hear himself over the blood rushing in his ears.

“Well you can’t just make a declaration like that and expect me to let you forget about it,” Dorian said, some of the flippancy leaving his tone at last. “Or pretend it never happened. People are talking, you know. More than they already were.”

Idhren did know. No one said anything to his face, of course, but elven ears were sharp in more than just appearance. He heard people tittering every time he crossed the great hall, but he’d been trying to ignore it. Trying to pretend it hadn’t happened. “I’ve been busy,” he said, trying to avoid the subject.

“Evidently,” Dorian replied. He took a step toward Idhren, passed him while the elf was still frozen in place, and picked up the book Idhren had left sitting on the sofa. “A Meditation upon the Use of Blades,” he read, and then dropped it back onto the sofa. “Required reading, I presume? Or are you still a closet overachiever?”

Both, really. But that was hardly the point. Dorian obviously hadn’t come here to critique his choice of reading material. The shock of his arrival was beginning to wear off, however, leaving Idhren only flustered, frustrated, and afraid. “Dorian. Why are you here?” he asked again.

The man paused a moment, still looking at the book cover, before he straightened and faced Idhren fully. “No more beating around the bush, then,” he sighed, almost as though it was a chore. “What you said in the library, did you mean it?”

Idhren swallowed thickly and tried to prepare himself for what was sure to come. “I’m sorry,” he began, “I shouldn’t have. I don’t know what came over me. The stress of... all this, I suppose. You can forget I ever said anything if you’d prefer.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Dorian said.

Idhren could not meet his eyes but he could hear the frown in Dorian’s voice. Why was he drawing this out? “Do you enjoy tormenting me?” he asked, frustration mounting and voice thick. “Don’t drag this out longer than it needs. I know you’ve come to let me down, so just get it over with.”

“Let you down?” Dorian asked. “Is that what you think?”

“You don’t want me,” Idhren said. It was a fact his mind had accepted even if his heart could not. “You’ve never wanted me. Why would you?” Saying it out loud was far more painful than Idhren could have imagined.

Dorian was silent for so long that Idhren became certain the man really was going to do it: let Idhren down gently. The flirting is fun, but I only like you as a friend. “For someone so clever,” Dorian said instead. “You can be incredibly dense sometimes.”

A strange mix of emotions flowed through him. Anger at the insult, and defensiveness, hurt that Dorian was still trying to make light of the situation, and a tiny bit of hope, so small it was barely noticeable. Idhren’s head whipped up from where he’d been staring at the floor, “What are you-?” he began to demand, but cut himself off. When had Dorian gotten so close? The man was only a step away. Idhren could reach out and touch him if he were so inclined. He was so inclined, but he was too frightened to actually do it.

"You honestly think that?" Dorian asked. He was frowning as he looked down at Idhren. "That I shouldn't like you?"

"You made it perfectly clear in Tevinter that you have no interest in me as anything other than a
friend,” Idhren mumbled, looking away once more. The room suddenly felt very hot. He tried to take a step away from Dorian, but as he did so the man followed, catching up to him and even closing the distance between them further.

“Yes, because you did such a marvelous job yourself,” Dorian rolled his eyes.

“That’s not at all the same,” Idhren argued. “You’re Altus.”

“That never stopped you cursing me and everything I stood for,” Dorian pointed out.

“That’s different,” Idhren protested.

“Is it?” Dorian countered. “And I suppose in your mind we would have had the most fairytale of romances, should we have had this conversation years ago?”

“I tried to have this conversation years ago,” Idhren snapped.

“When was that?” Dorian asked. “When I tried to help in the Circle and you threw it all back in my face? Or the time I offered help on your terms and you threw that in my face as well? Or perhaps the night I found you in a brothel drunk off your ass and about the leave the country?”

Idhren hated being called out like that, shown that he really had done no better than Dorian in this regard. He pursed his lips and clenched his fists, but would never admit the man was right. “Well if you weren’t always such a self obsessed ass-,” he began.

“Perhaps if you didn’t try to bite my head off at any given chance,” Dorian cut him off.

Idhren fumed in indignation. “If you have a problem with my temper then say what you came for and leave me be!” he snapped.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do?” Dorian shot back. “If you would cease jumping to conclusions for once in your life perhaps we could actually get somewhere.” He threw his hands in the air and turned away from Idhren in an effort to control his own temper. “Your fiancé must have been made of sterner stuff than I if they managed to get through to you.”

“Don’t you dare talk about them!” Idhren bit out.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Dorian rounded on him again. “Mere weeks ago you cried your eyes out to me about how much you loved this person, and now you say you’re in love with me. I think I’m entitled to ask whether your words were genuine or whether you’re just looking for a pity fuck.”

“How dare you,” Idhren seethed. Angrier still because Dorian was correct and the man did have every right to question Idhren’s intentions. “Tainan has nothing to do with this,” he protested. “I loved you,” he exclaimed, shocked at how easily the words came now. As though, having been torn free once, they could no longer ever be contained. But despite the ease with which it was spoken, the admission was still terrifying without knowing for certain how Dorian would respond. “I loved you for years,” Idhren could not name when it had started, or even when he realized it, “And you never looked at me that way, so I gave up. I left and I forgot about you and everything was fine and I was happy for the first time in my entire life. But then…” he cut himself off and swallowed heavily before continuing, “Then you showed up again and… And I’m still in love with you and it terrifies me and I hate it! Because you’ll never --”

Idhren’s rant was cut off as suddenly Dorian’s hand was at the back of his head and the man’s lips were pressed against his, firm but undemanding. Idhren’s breath caught in his throat and he froze,
mind racing to catch up with what was happening. And the kiss lingered, not the rushed and desperate panic-driven kiss Dorian had given him in Haven, but gentle and searching. When Dorian nipped at his lower lip Idhren opened to him willingly and without conscious thought. His hand came up to clutch at the man’s arm for support as he felt his knees go weak. And then, all too soon for Idhren’s liking, Dorian pulled away, leaving him breathless and yearning for more. “Was that clear enough for you?” Dorian asked in a low voice.

In response, Idhren grabbed the man by his collar and pulled him in again. Lips crashed together, all heat and clashing teeth and years’ worth of pent up desire. Idhren’s hands clutched at the back of Dorian’s neck and shoulders, dragging the taller man down to his level even as he rose up onto the balls of his feet to meet him. One of Dorian’s arms wrapped around his waist, pulling Idhren up against him so that the elf could feel the heat of his body. The buckles on his clothes pressed into Idhren’s stomach rather uncomfortably, but he couldn’t bring himself to mind. How many nights in his youth had Idhren dreamed of this moment? Too many to count. The reality put all those dreams to shame. Dorian’s mouth tasted of wine, his mustache scratched against Idhren's upper lip in a way that was more pleasant than he would have expected. He smelled of leather and musk and hair wax. And Idhren was drowning in it. He pulled himself up as close as he could get, toes barely touching the ground as he clung to Dorian’s shoulders. They barely parted to breathe.

Then Dorian’s hands - one on his waist and the other between his shoulder blades against his back - began to wander. Sliding down until they both settled on Idhren's waist, supporting him as he stood on tip-toe to reach Dorian's lips, and then lower still, fingers ghosting over his waistline, hips, and one moving down to settle on his ass. Idhren gasped softly against Dorian's mouth, but the pleasurable sensation was offset by the warning bells that went off in his mind.

He pulled away from the kiss, which was difficult as Dorian chased his lips for more - wet, broken, sloppy, until Idhren managed, "Wait." Breathless, it took Dorian a moment to react. "Wait, wait," Idhren said again, no longer pulling the man closer but actually pushing him away.

Dorian's hands moved back to Idhren's waist as he pulled back from the kiss, letting the elf settle back on his feet. Idhren pulled away from him, taking a step backwards as he tried to catch his breath and calm his racing heart. "What's the matter?” Dorian asked. His expression was confused and a little concerned.

"I..." Idhren gasped out, and he took a moment to straighten his clothes in order to buy time. "I can't... I can't..."

"Can't what?” Dorian was only even more confused now.

Dorian liked him as more than a friend, and Idhren's heart sang with the knowledge, but Dorian didn't know about Idhren's body, and he might feel differently when he did. Falling into bed with someone had never been a simple matter for Idhren, though clearly it was for Dorian. "I can't... this."

"This?” Dorian asked, gesturing between them. "I thought this was what you wanted.”

“I want more than just sex, Dorian,” Idhren protested. Although he did want that, too. Very much. Just maybe not right this second. He had to work up the courage for that.

“Yes, I think all the emotional confessions made that rather clear,” Dorian replied.

“And you… want that as well?” Idhren asked uncertainly. “A relationship?”

“I was hoping we might worry about that part a little bit later,” Dorian said.
Of course, that was how things went in Tevinter wasn’t it? “I’d rather worry about it now,” Idhren replied.

Dorian crossed his arms and shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, which did nothing to sooth Idhren’s nerves. “To be perfectly honest I haven’t the slightest idea what that actually entails,” he admitted. “In Tevinter anything between two men is… Well, surely you know how it is.”

Unacceptable. At least for someone of Dorian’s station. “Tainan used to say that Tevinter fucked me up,” Idhren mused quietly. “I spent so long trying to be the person Canidius wanted me to be, that Tevinter society wanted me to be, that I forgot how to be myself.”

“How very poetic,” Dorian commented.

“It was,” Idhren agreed. “They were surprisingly wise at times. The point is they were right. And I think it might have done the same to you. But we’re not in Tevinter anymore,” he reminded. “No one here cares who you sleep with. At least, no one that matters. And if your father tries anything again he’ll have to go through me,” he swore.

Dorian laughed softly, “I don’t doubt that,” he said. “And I would so enjoy watching you take him apart.” Idhren smiled a little. He would very much enjoy doing so, as well. “Very well,” he sighed, “We’ll do this your way, then.”

“Well there’s no need to sound so pleased about it,” Idhren said dryly, although the thought had him feeling equal parts giddy and terrified.

“Apologies, I suppose the whole matter just still seems somewhat surreal to me,” Dorian admitted. It was much the same for Idhren, so he couldn’t quite blame the man. “Perhaps you could help on that front,” he suggested, eyes falling half lidded as he reached out for Idhren’s hand to draw him close again.

Idhren’s body moved on instinct, closing the distance between them and rising up on his toes as Dorian leaned down to kiss him again. The passion between them had lessened now, and the kiss held none of the desperate heat of their last one. Instead Dorian’s hand cupped the back of Idhren’s head and kissed him with a quiet intensity that left Idhren’s entire body feeling flushed and warm. The kiss ended just as easily as Idhren’s heels returned to the floor. Everyone was taller than Idhren, but Dorian was taller than anyone else Idhren had kissed. It would take getting used to, needing to strain himself that much farther upward to meet his lips. But he found himself looking forward to the challenge. “Did that help?” he asked breathlessly.

The Cadence of my Heart

Who knows me as You do?

You have been there since before my first breath.

You have seen me when no other would recognize my face.

You composed the cadence of my heart.

- Canticle of Trials 1:11

The Western Approach, Orlais, Firstfall 9:41 Dragon

The Western Approach was a hell hole. Idhren had no kind way to describe it, and he was suspicious of anyone who did. The land was blighted; dead and desolate. Red-gold sand as far as the eye could see, dotted with outcrops of red sandstone and bisected by the Abyssal Rift, that near-bottomless chasm which Idhren had been able to see as a black line across the horizon for the past day. But it was still doing better than the Silent Plains. Here there was life amidst the desert. No much, but a few species of hearty plant and animal had returned to the region since the Second Blight nine hundred years ago. Of course, Ferelden had faced a Blight only ten years ago and most of the country now barely showed it. So perhaps there was hope for this place after all.

Not that such thoughts made the present any easier to bear. Idhren had grown up with Tevinter’s oppressive, muggy summers, which certainly got hotter than this. Yet somehow this heat was worse. Maybe because his armor did not breathe nearly as well as even the most conservative of Tevinter summer fashion. Or because his boots filled with sand no matter how frequently he stopped to clean it out. But as the sun beat down relentlessly on the back of his neck Idhren felt certain his skin would burn. As though the sand in his boots wasn’t bad enough.

“Did you ever figure out how to make that marvelous redirection trick of yours work in an arid environment?” Dorian asked, shocking Idhren by remembering a conversation from over a decade ago.

He wished he could say yes. Brag about his flawless technique. But Idhren had never had the opportunity to test that skill in a climate like this, where the air felt like sandpaper on the back of his throat. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well, best get on that, then,” Dorian advised flippantly. “Wouldn’t want you to electrocute any of us on accident.”

If Idhren hadn’t electrocuted anyone on accident in the Fallow Mire then he wasn’t about to do it here. And he resented the implication that he would ever endanger anyone in that way. “Dorian, know that if I electrocute you there’s at least a fifty percent chance that I did it on purpose,” Idhren told him.

“Oh really?” Dorian chuckled. “I had no idea that was the sort of thing you were into. Varric, be sure to put that in your book.”

“I don’t think the printed word could ever do justice to your flirting,” the dwarf replied.
“Who’s flirting?” Idhren asked defensively, even as his cheeks turned red. “I’m making death threats. Although I suppose a necromancer would consider that a turn on.”

“Denial is useless, Inquisitor,” Dorian drawled. “We all know where you stand.”

“I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” Idhren protested.

“Then why are you blushing?” Dorian smirked.

Idhren’s cheeks burned even hotter at being caught. “That’s a sunburn. We weren’t all blessed with your complexion.”

“No, few people are,” Dorian agreed. He raised a hand to his forehead and let his eyes fall shut, “It’s a pity what this horrid desert is doing to it, though. I would kill for some humidity.”

"And here I thought you despised blood magic," Idhren quipped.

From behind them, Blackwall groaned audibly, "Maker, do the two of you never stop?"

"They really don't," Varric chuckled. "It was like this even before Sparky here was shouting declarations of love for all of Skyhold to hear. You sort of get used to it."

Idhren was glad that his face was already red, because remembering the highly public nature of his confession still made him want to crawl into a hole and die. No matter how well things had turned out in the end. He looked back over his shoulder at the other two members of his party and shrugged. "You have to find some way to pass the time," he commented. "Insulting Dorian is as good a way as any."

"Glad to be of service," Dorian said with a roll of his eyes.

"Well if you two are done, I think that's the tower we're looking for," Blackwall commented, pointing ahead of them.

Idhren turned back around and raised a hand to shade his eyes as he peered into the distance. He squinted against the harsh sunlight, glinting off something metallic but also clearly man made in the near distance. "I think you’re right. Hawke and Stroud should be around here somewhere."

They did not have to walk for much longer before the two men in question appeared from behind an outcropping of rock, just out of sight of the ritual tower. Harding had mentioned that it was an old Tevinter ruin, but it was still slightly jarring seeing such architecture this far south. It was definitely Tevinter; all harsh angles and dark, metal spires with pointed tops piercing into the sky and the perfect symmetry that spoke of magical construction.

"So what are we looking at here?" Idhren asked, slipping into the shade of the outcropping while they assessed the situation. Not that it helped much with the heat, but at least his skin might not blister so badly.

"Demons, blood magic, the usual," Hawke informed him.

"From Grey Wardens?" Idhren asked in surprise, and frowned. "I thought they were above such tactics."

"Grey Wardens will use any means necessary to end a Blight," Stroud replied. "For the greater good."
"Greater good," Idhren replied skeptically. "But we're not in a Blight right now. They just ended a Blight, we shouldn't be due for another one for centuries. So what would they need with blood magic and demons right now?"

"We could go and find out," Dorian suggested.

Idhren cast him a sideways glance and then smirked. "I think we should," he agreed. Reluctantly, he stepped out of the shade and peered around the outcropping. Squinting against the sunlight again, he peered toward the tower. They were still too far to see what was happening atop the structure, but he could feel the tingle of magic in the air. Something was happening up there, and it was something big.

Gesturing for the others to follow him, Idhren pulled his staff free of the straps that held it onto his back when unneeded and slipped free of their cover. He moved quickly across the sandy ground, trying to avoid being noticed as the six of them approached the tower. Although tower was perhaps a misnomer, as it stood only a flight of stairs off the ground, perched precariously on the edge of the rift in the earth, and commanding a view of the country around it. Thankfully, the current occupants seemed too distracted to bother keeping a proper watch on their surroundings. When certain that his companions were still with him and ready to face whatever they might find inside, Idhren mounted those stairs.

The feel of recently cast magic grew stronger, and the metallic smell of blood lingered in the air. Idhren reached the top of the stairs just in time to watch a Grey Warden mage slit the throat of another and use the blood as fuel to summon a demon. And presiding above it all a man not in Warden colors, and whom Idhren found rather uncomfortably familiar. He had seen this man before, but could not place his face.

"Inquisitor!" their arrival had not gone unnoticed, but stealth had never really been an option in a location like this. The presiding mage grinned as he looked down at the new arrivals. "We’ve been expecting you. Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium, at your service."

Vyrantium.

Erimond.

No wonder he looked so familiar. This man had been at nearly every one of Canidius’ parties, another Altus mage, son of another local magister and always eager to schmooze his way into influence even before inheriting a magisterial seat. Either Livius was still no magister, or his elderly father had finally died. Or been killed. Either was just as likely.

"Of course Tevinter would be involved in blood magic rituals and demon summoning," Idhren spat. "Wardens, whatever this man has told you is a lie! He answers to a Tevinter magister who wants to unleash a Blight!"

"Serious accusation, Inquisitor," Erimond tutted in that infuriatingly condescending way that all Altus apparently knew from birth. "But I think you’ll find they are past caring. Wardens, arms up," he ordered.

Idhren watched in horror as he controlled the pair of Warden mages before them as though they were puppets on a string. "What have you done to them?" he demanded furiously. This went so far beyond summoning demons. This was full mind control, they were worse than Tranquil.

"They did this to themselves," Erimond argued haughtily. "They were so frightened by the Calling they looked everywhere for help. And of course since it was my master that put the Calling into their
He laid out his entire plan, bragging about the way he had manipulated the Warden Commander into agreeing to such insane measures. But it explained where Corypheus had gotten that demon army he and Dorian had seen in the future Redcliffe. The Wardens didn’t understand blood magic rituals well enough, and they didn’t foresee the side effect Erimond had cleverly hidden in this one.

It was the most horrific thing Idhren had ever seen. He had to put a stop to it.

Gripping his staff in one hand, Idhren began summoning the mana for a spell, hoping that Erimond’s boasting would distract him from what Idhren was trying. But the veil here was thin, from the blight and the blood magic, and that made it easy to feel when Idhren pulled at it. He knew he was caught even before the spell formed, but that didn’t stop him.

Unfortunately, Erimond had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Whatever spell Corypheus had used to try and remove the Anchor from Idhren’s hand in Haven he had shared with Erimond. It grabbed at the anchor suddenly, yanking and tearing. Idhren’s spell evaporated and the sudden pain sent him to his knees with a gasp of pain.

But Idhren had tricks of his own. The pain had only caught him by surprise, when he recovered his wits it was no more painful than closing a rift, and that was a pain he was well acquainted with.

He was not about to let some self important, brown-nosing magister’s brat get the best of him.

When he sent a surge of magic into the Anchor it exploded, predictably, and the effect ricocheted along the path of Erimond’s spell, knocking the man off his feet. The way that it winded him so easily told Idhren that Erimond was clearly unused to anyone fighting back; as did the way he cowered back, shouting at the Wardens to protect him as he fled.

On command, a rage demon surged into Idhren’s path, cutting off his attempts to follow the magister. He swore in frustration and threw an ice spell in its direction as he fell back. The demons and puppet mages that had been lulling at the edges of the tower like so many lifeless dolls came alert at Erimond’s command and threw themselves heedlessly at the Inquisitor’s party.

By the time they had been dealt with there was no sign of Erimond.

“Bastard coward,” Idhren swore, jamming his staff blade into the cracks between the stones in frustration and wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hands. He understood the Wardens’ fear, and how easy it was to fall prey to a magister’s lies. But none of it justified this. Murdering their own to summon a demon army? How could anyone think that was a good idea? How could anyone not see the hundreds of ways that could go horribly wrong?

Winded and overheated as he was, though, Idhren still shaded his eyes and squinted into the distance once more. “Erimond fled that way,” he said, lowering his hand to point out across the desert. “If we hurry we may still catch him.”

“The only thing out that way is an old Grey Warden fortress,” Stroud commented, looking in the direction Idhren was pointing. “That must be where the Wardens are amassing.”

Not a good idea to run off after him on their own, then. Idhren frowned. The moment Erimond got there he was likely to pressure the other Wardens into continuing this ritual, building Corypheus’ demon army before the Inquisition could catch up with him. “Erimond must be stopped. We cannot let Corypheus gain an army of demons,” he said firmly.
“I agree,” Hawke replied, arms crossed over his chest. “Stroud and I will go scout out this fortress, see what we’re dealing with. We can meet you back at Skyhold.”

Idhren didn’t like how long that would clearly take. Just the journey back to Skyhold from here would be weeks. But a fortress full of the most skilled warriors in the world and unknown amounts of demons was not something to run into blind. It would take careful planning to get in and stop the rituals. “Do it,” he agreed. “We’ll meet you back at Skyhold.”

Idhren ransacked the ritual tower in search of anything useful, or that might provide more information about Erimond’s plan, but came up frustratingly short. There was nothing here now but corpses and ichor and sand. Exhausted from the heat and the fighting, Idhren decided to call it a day, and slogged with his companions back to camp.

He and Dorian were sharing a tent, which made Idhren feel simultaneously nervous and giddy. This meant less privacy than Idhren would have liked – he was still concerned with how Dorian would feel about his body when the man found out – but logistically it made more sense. Idhren didn’t need a tent to himself, and it was one less thing for them to drag around.

At least Dorian was respecting his desire to wash up and change clothes in private at the end of each day. And any romantic activities remained chaste. Not that either of them had the energy for anything else after slogging through the desert in the heat all day.

And Idhren definitely had a sunburn.

He was stripped down to shirtsleeves and breeches after scrubbing as much sand off himself as possible without a proper bath, and was prodding gently at the reddened skin on the back of his neck and on his cheeks when Dorian ducked into the tent. The man was also stripped out of his outer armor and his hair was mussed and damp, evidencing that he had also made some attempt at washing. “Maker,” Dorian grumbled, tossing his things down onto the ground beside their bedrolls, “At this rate I’m going to be finding sand in unmentionable places long after we finally leave this bloody desert. Why I let you drag me along to all the worst places in Thedas I may never understand.”

“And Idhren definitely had a sunburn.”

The words fell off Idhren’s tongue easily and without conscious thought. He wasn’t even fully aware of speaking them until they echoed in the heavy silence that followed. A silence that spoke volumes more than Dorian ever could to say he had overstepped his bounds. “I’m sorry,” he said instinctively, turning his back on Dorian and busying himself with preparing his bedroll. “I’m very tired, I don’t know what I’m saying. Just ignore me.”

“I’m sorry,” Idhren said again. He knew that wasn’t what Dorian was used to. Maybe it made him uncomfortable. Maybe Dorian didn’t really feel the same. “It’s just a habit.” Because Tainan had worn their emotions so openly and professed their affection at every possibly opportunity. So of course Idhren had learned to do so as well. “I’ll try to stop.”

“Now, I never said that,” came Dorian’s reply, perhaps a little too quickly. “No need to stop on my
account, especially if you end up showering me in compliments.”

"It doesn’t make you uncomfortable?" Idhren asked. He knew that relationships based on more than just sex were unfamiliar territory for Dorian, and he was afraid of moving too quickly, doing something that made him uncomfortable.

"What? Being showered in compliments?" Dorian asked in return. "I have so many fine qualities; I would be offended if you didn't, to be perfectly honest. Why should that make me uncomfortable?"

Typical flippancy. "Because I mean it," Idhren replied. Although honestly the conversation was now starting to make him rather uncomfortable. Maybe he shouldn't be second-guessing a good thing, but he couldn't help it. He had spent so long thinking there was no possible way Dorian could ever like him back. Some flirting and kissing was hardly going to undo his anxiety overnight.

"You're blushing again," Dorian pointed out, rather than give an actual answer. That was another problem. The man accepted all of Idhren's affections, even seemed to reciprocate the more physical displays, but still danced around saying anything meaningful himself. So how could Idhren know whether or not the man's feelings were true? "Or are you still trying to pass it off as a sunburn?"

"It really is a sunburn," Idhren grumbled.

"Is it really?" Dorian asked, and maybe this time he actually believed it. "I never recall you getting sunburned in Tevinter," he commented.

"I did, sometimes," Idhren muttered. "But I also spent most of my time indoors."

"Well come over here and let me look at it, then," Dorian offered with a put-upon sigh. "There must be some amount of healing I can do for it."

Idhren hesitated, but he was uncomfortable enough that he relented quickly. It would be stupid to refuse. Slowly he shifted, crawling the short distance over to Dorian's bedroll and sitting down again on the dirt floor beside it. He hadn't yet seen what his face looked like, but he imagined it must be bad. His cheeks, nose, ears, and neck all felt unnaturally warm and stung whenever he touched them.

Dorian's eyes moved over his face, taking in the elf's features carefully. "Is it quite painful?" he asked, and raised a hand up to cup Idhren's chin, holding his head steady.

"The ears are the worst," Idhren mumbled, trying not to move much as Dorian studied him. Having the man's attention on him so fully, so focused, made his heart flutter embarrassingly in his chest.

With a tiny movement of his hand Dorian turned Idhren's head to the side so he could see the elf's ears more clearly. Sure enough, the top edge and pointed tips of each were alarmingly red. Gently, he reached up with one hand and trailed a finger along the length of one. Idhren sucked in a breath, half of pain and half of pleasure. Dorian did not appear to notice the latter, and only murmured a small apology before running his finger along Idhren's ear again from base to tip. This time Idhren felt the familiar warm tickle of healing magic seep into the flesh, and in its wake the stinging disappeared. The process was repeated on his other ear and Idhren’s eyes fell shut as a sigh escaped his lips. The combined feeling of Dorian’s fingers on the sensitive skin of his ears and the soothing hum of healing magic seeping into him left Idhren feeling relaxed and slightly breathless. Not to mention they were sitting close enough together that their knees brushed every time Idhren shifted.

After soothing the burn on Idhren’s ears Dorian’s fingers moved to his face, fingertips brushing over his cheeks and down the bridge of his nose. Dorian was so close that Idhren could smell him – the lingering sweat and dust on his skin mingled with the perfume of soap and hair wax. His fingers
trailed down further, over Idhren's jaw and onto his neck. Unbidden, a sigh escaped the elf's lips. The healing magic and the smell of Dorian, the feel of his fingers gentle and rough on Idhren's skin, was an intoxicating combination. It was so easy to forget about everything outside of this tent.

When the last of the sunburn had been soothed so that not an inkling of pain remained Dorian's fingers lingered on the back of Idhren's neck. For a moment Idhren merely enjoyed the sensation, before his mind returned to itself and he remembered where they were. Slowly, he opened his eyes, and upon doing so realized that he had leaned in toward Dorian during the course of his healing - which could not have lasted more than a minute in reality and yet had felt like a perfect eternity.

"Maker," Dorian breathed, still so focused on Idhren, eyes half lidded and full of an emotion that Idhren was afraid to identify. "You are a sight, do you know that?"

It took a long time for Idhren to find his voice in order to reply, and when he did speak it was in a voice barely more than a sigh. "A good one, I hope?"

"Oh," a smile quirked the corner of Dorian's mouth, drawing Idhren's attention away from his eyes and then he could not tear his gaze away from the man's lips. He remembered how they felt against his, how they tasted and how the mustache tickled against his face. "The very best," Dorian answered.

Tired from the day's exertions and intoxicated by Dorian's closeness Idhren could not fight the urge to kiss him, so he did not bother. Leaning forward, he closed the last few inches between them and pressed his lips against Dorian's.

The reaction was immediate. Dorian's lips opened under his own to allow Idhren to deepen the kiss, which he did eagerly. Idhren leaned into him further, bracing a hand against Dorian's thigh. He felt the man's hand tense around the back of his neck, pulling him in even closer. Someone groaned softly and Idhren wasn't certain which of them it was, nor did he particularly care. The only things that mattered in his mind at that moment were the taste of Dorian's lips, the smell of him, and the heat between their bodies.

When at long last they parted Idhren was breathless and nearly dizzy with sensation. As he opened his eyes to look at Dorian the expression on the man's face told that he was feeling much the same.

“I'm afraid I don't have the energy tonight to continue this much further,” the man said softly.

Idhren’s face burned now without the sunburn too blame. Honestly he didn’t have the energy, either, physically or emotionally. But that didn’t stop him from wanting it. He still had to talk to Dorian about that, but it was a conversation he was dreading. “I suppose we should just go to sleep, then,” he replied.

“A rain check,” Dorian murmured. His hand slid down Idhren’s neck and off his shoulder as he pulled away and Idhren felt the loss far too keenly. But he drew away as well, returning to his own bedroll and lying down.

He needed to have that conversation with Dorian. Sooner, rather than later. But Maker was he terrified.

Of course they were all stuck in the Western Approach for another several days. Because the
Venatori had already made themselves quite at home among the various ancient ruins that dotted the region, and that simply couldn’t be permitted.

They routed the cultists out of another old Grey Warden keep in the area. And as much as Idhren enjoyed slaughtering large groups of people who would rather see him in chains – and freeing a handful of slaves in the process – all of that paled in comparison to the ruins they found hidden in a canyon.

Whatever they had expected to find inside a crumbling Tevinter ruin guarded by Venatori it was not this.

Within the ruins the air was almost impossibly still, without even the hint of a breeze. In the center of the main hall a rift hung in the air, that familiar greenish glow echoing the one set in Idhren’s hand. But more shocking than all of that were the figures, demons and men, surrounding the rift still as statues. Bits of crumbling architecture had been frozen in mid-air, demons and men stopped dead in the midst of battle.

“Well that’s something you don’t see every day,” Dorian commented.

Still on edge despite the fact that nothing in here was moving, even the air, Idhren walked up to one of the frozen men and studied him in fascination. “Fascinating,” he mumbled to himself. “They’re definitely Tevinter, but their clothes… This style is ancient. These aren’t Venatori.”

“No,” Dorian agreed, peering curiously at a terror demon, “I’m guessing some ancient Tevinter decided to alter time. I’m surprised it didn’t go better.”

“Then the Venatori must still be trying to figure out Alexius’ research,” Idhren assumed. “Or another way to turn back time to before the Breach.”

“Yes, because that plan went so well the last time,” Dorian rolled his eyes and stepped away from the demon.

“I doubt they actually know how badly it went,” Idhren commented. No one outside the Inquisition knew about their little jaunt into the future. He stepped up to the rift at the center of the room, but the Anchor didn’t respond to it, not even when he held his hand directly up to it. Usually the mark began aching before they even saw one, and then flared to life of its own volition when they got close. Now it was as dead and dormant as it ever was. “This rift is caught in the spell, I think,” he commented as he lowered his hand once more. “The Anchor isn’t working.” Thoughtful, he glanced around the room, at the demons and men frozen in eternal combat. He didn’t really want to throw them all into the middle of that. “Dorian, do you think we could disrupt the time displacement in just the area around the rift?”

Dorian stepped up to Idhren’s side and examined the rift. It was a rare opportunity to get a good look at one while it wasn’t spitting out demons, but the thing wasn’t really much to look at. Green and ephemeral, it hung in the center of the room like a sort of strange statue, a bit of stained glass on strings. “For the spell to have held this long there must be a focus somewhere holding it. Even if these people are somehow still alive, I doubt any mage could have worked something this powerful on their own.”

Idhren frowned and stared into the unnerving tear in reality before them, as though somewhere in that sickly green shimmer laid all the knowledge in the universe. “What if…” he theorized, talking mostly to himself, “The combination of a mana shield and… A slightly tweaked version of my particle isolation to cut off the area from the rest of the spell…”
“That’s a lot of very delicate magic with no room for error,” Dorian replied dubiously. “Over a very large area. Not that I’m doubting your abilities,” he added quickly, “But the time it would take to ensure the stability of such a shield, and the potential for disastrous results with one slip up. Well… I wouldn’t be nearly as attractive as a red stain upon the floor. And neither would you.”

Idhren huffed an annoyed sigh and crossed his arms over his chest as he continued to stare up at the rift. He didn’t want to undo the entire spell and throw them into the middle of a fight, but Dorian was right. They had neither the time nor the security to attempt a wildly theoretical technique. “So the only way to disrupt the spell is to find the focus and undo the whole thing,” Idhren concluded. That’s what he’d been hoping to avoid.

“I expect so,” Dorian replied. “Although this is different from the magic Alexius and I developed. For one, they managed to make it work without the Breach.”

“Blood magic, probably,” Idhren muttered distastefully.

“But of course,” Dorian agreed. “It wouldn’t be an insane Tevinter experiment without it. Alexius and I never tried that angle, of course, but we ran the numbers. Even theoretically, blood magic doesn’t have enough power for time travel. Not without enough of it to rip open the veil anyway.”

“Well that might have been their goal,” Idhren wondered, “They did manage to tear the veil. I don’t think this rift is from the Breach. If it was, it wouldn’t be caught in their spell, just like we’re not caught in it. Still, they don’t seem to have traveled through time so much as stopped it completely.”

“We may find more answers further in,” Dorian said, “I suppose you want to undo this mess, do you?”

Idhren nodded curtly and stepped away from the rift. “The spell will decay eventually. Whatever is holding it can’t last forever. Or the Venatori will come back, and I’d rather they only find an empty ruin.” He turned back to Varric and Blackwall, who had hung back and kept glancing warily at the demons as though expecting them to come to life at any moment. Which was a distinct possibility. “Any objections?” he asked, drawing their attention again.

The two men stared at him, and then Varric gave a small, sheepish shrug and said, “To be perfectly honest, Sparky. I stopped listening after ‘time displacement’. You’ll have to explain it again for us normal people.”

“Stopped listening?” Dorian repeated, mildly offended. “I thought you were meant to be writing a book about all this. How can you do that if you’re not paying attention?”

“No one wants to read all the technical mumbo-jumbo,” Varric replied flippantly, “They want action! Adventure! Romance! Honestly, it’s like you’ve never even read one of my books.”

“Sometimes I wish I hadn’t,” Dorian sniffed.

“I was saying,” Idhren interrupted impatiently. “That in order to get to this rift we’ll have to find whatever is holding the spell in place and undo it from there. And we might find ourselves ass deep in demons as a result.”

“So a regular Tuesday, then,” Blackwall commented.

Idhren cracked a half-smile. “Yes, exactly,” he confirmed.

Ass deep in demons turned out to be an understatement, as new ones poured through the rift in addition to those that had already been locked in the spell as soon as its effects were dissipated. By
now, however, all of them had so much experience cutting through the swaths of demons that surrounded each tear in the Veil that clearing them out was an exhausting but fairly routine task.

The rift closed with a resounding crack as the Anchor pulled the frayed edges of the Veil forcefully back together. And as soon as it was sealed once more Idhren slumped, hands on his knees as he caught his breath. The palm of his left hand stung like a fresh burn, as it always did after any use of the mark, but it was a sensation Idhren was quickly learning to ignore.

“Well, that was bracing,” Dorian commented cheerfully. As though they’d just been out for a brisk stroll rather than fighting for their lives.

Idhren looked over his shoulder at the man, standing well back from where the rift had been – a position Idhren was rather jealous of, because he was not at all fond of getting up close and personal with tears in the Veil. Especially not while they were actively spewing demons. Dorian looked as though he hadn’t even broken a sweat. They had fought through dozens of Venatori and demons after spending half the day tromping through the desert and Dorian’s absurd mustache wasn’t even askew. It wasn’t fair.

“I think that’s enough demons for today, don’t you?” Blackwall muttered. The Warden looked as worn down as Idhren felt, puffing for breath and literally dripping with sweat thanks to fighting in such heat.

“If I don’t see another demon as long as I live I’ll be happy,” Varric replied. He plopped himself down on a chunk of fallen architecture and began examining Bianca. “But somehow I don’t think we’ll be that lucky.”

“If only,” Idhren muttered under his breath. What had he done to earn such rotten luck in his life? Pushing himself upright again, he shook the lingering numbness from his left hand and strapped his staff across his back again. “I say we collect anything of interest here and call it a day,” he announced.

“An excellent choice,” Dorian said. “And maybe we can find out what happened here.”

When they finally left the ruins Idhren had an armful of parchment and a rather weighty tome on dragons stuffed into a satchel on his belt. He leafed through the parchment as the party made their way back toward the old fortress now under Inquisition control, so focused that he nearly tripped over his own feet several times.

The fifth time he nearly lost his footing on the unstable desert sands, Varric piped up from behind him, “As interesting as I’m sure those notes are, maybe you wanna leave it until we get back? I don’t want to be the one to tell people the Inquisitor died because he was reading and walked off a cliff.”

“This dialect of Tevene is so old I can barely understand it,” Idhren commented, as though he hadn’t even heard Varric’s words.

“I suppose that’s a personal insult, then?” Dorian quipped. He walked a few paces ahead of Idhren and it was the heels of his boots in the elf’s peripheral vision that kept Idhren on track.

“I suspect no one’s seen this research since it was written,” Idhren continued without looking up.
“If it’s blood magic maybe it should have stayed lost,” Blackwall grumbled from the head of their group.

Idhren sighed and shifted the papers in his arms. “Blood is just the fuel,” he explained patiently. “Stronger than a mage’s natural mana and more readily accessible than lyrium. But outside of affecting a person’s mind or summoning demons, blood itself isn’t actually necessary. The same results could potentially be achieved with a sufficient amount of lyrium or a number of mages working together – like closing the Breach.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Varric interrupted, “Are you trying to tell me that you think blood mages are just lazy?”

“Some of them,” Idhren shrugged. “Or not very powerful on their own. Or just stupid, but I think that goes without saying.”

“I think that’s the most Tevinter thing I’ve ever heard you say,” Varric mused. “Is that how you feel about it, Sparkler?”

“Oh, we’re having this conversation, are we?” Dorian sighed. It was enough to make Idhren glance up from the papers in his hands to try and catch the man’s expression. He couldn’t, of course, because Dorian was walking before him. “I suppose you will all be dreadfully shocked to learn that not everyone in Tevinter practices blood magic. Or approves of it. I wish I could say I was as surprised by the south, but so far it’s exactly as dreadful as I’d expected.”

“Dorian, don’t be an ass,” Idhren scolded, but couldn’t quite get the usual amount of venom into his voice. He imagined this was still a very touchy subject for Dorian, and couldn’t be too angry at him for wanting to avoid it.

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you,” the man scoffed in reply.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Idhren asked.

“You can’t pretend that you don’t delight in insulting people,” Dorian replied.

“Only if they deserve it,” Idhren protested.

“And,” Dorian continued as though Idhren had not spoken, “You just wrote off all blood mages as imbeciles, and yet there you are completely engrossed in their work. How much a hypocrite can you be?”

Idhren opened his mouth to reply, but could not for the life of him think of a counter argument. And that only made him more furious. He shut his mouth again so hard he heard his teeth clack and sped up his steps. Clutching the pilfered notes against his chest, he pushed past Dorian and stalked to the head of the group.

“Trouble in paradise already?” he heard Varric ask from further back.

“Oh shut it,” Dorian snapped.

Idhren made a valiant attempt to outpace them that was largely unsuccessful. Only Varric had shorter legs and Idhren didn’t actually want to be on his own in the desert. Thankfully either fatigue or compassion meant the rest of the hike back to Griffon Wing Fortress passed in silence – Idhren expected the former. Stopping only long enough to report that the last of the Venatori they knew of had been cleared out, Idhren retreated into his tent. The tent he shared with Dorian, he remembered bitterly. And with his abysmal luck Dorian would show up any moment to gloat or to continue their
argument. An argument Idhren had neither the energy nor the desire to continue. This was not their usual trading of insults, he’d heard real derision in Dorian’s tone when the man called him a hypocrite. Was that what he truly thought?

Swallowing down a lump in his throat, Idhren stuffed his pilfered notes into a saddle bag with as much care as he could muster. Still, some of the edges of pages crumbled and cracked slightly. That hurt to watch almost as much as Dorian's words had hurt.

Then he set about stripping out of his armor. After so long in the desert and so many days spent hiking or fighting the leather was now most likely permanently stained with blood, ichor, and sweat. Idhren certainly felt as though the smell would never wash out, and it was a relief to be free of it at last. Sand fell from his hair when he scraped a hand through it and shook his head, showering down onto the ground before him. Lovely. A bucket of water had been left just inside the door, and Idhren used this and a cloth rag to try and wash the sweat and the rest of the sand off himself. It wasn’t entirely effective, and he wouldn’t really feel clean again until he could have a proper bath, but it still left him feeling much better than before.

Just as Idhren had finished and was plucking a slightly more clean set of clothes from his pack the tent flap opened and Dorian stepped inside. The man came in with hair damp and unstyled, holding his robes bundled under one arm and stripped down to his usual clothes. Freshly washed, from the looks of him, and in something more effective than a bucket of lukewarm water.

“They’ve set up something of a rudimentary wash room downstairs,” Dorian explained when he saw Idhren’s curious expression. “The well water might not be suitable for drinking, but it’s apparently good enough for laundry and getting off the sand. Hardly pleasant, I’ll admit, but an improvement from what we’ve been forced to endure thus far,” he spoke as he stepped into the tent and began packing up his travel stained robes. “You should go see for yourself.”

Idhren doubted that whatever they had managed to set up had any sort of privacy, which made it out of the question for him. “I’ll pass,” he grumbled, turning his back on Dorian.

“Are you still cross?” Dorian asked, disbelief obvious in his voice.

“You called me a hypocrite,” Idhren reminded him curtly.

“You call me significantly worse things on a regular basis,” Dorian pointed out. “In fact, I believe just this morning I was a bastard merely for waking you up.”

“Yes, but I don’t mean them!” Idhren snapped. “And you know damn well why I want those notes.”

Dorian sighed, long and weary. They were both worn out after a long day and neither really wanted to continue this fight. “I apologize for calling you a hypocrite,” Dorian’s words were careful and patient, like he was talking to a stubborn child.

The part of Idhren that hated being wrong wanted to stay angry at him. But he was tired and sore and real arguments weren’t nearly as fun as fake ones. “I’m sorry for calling you an ass. And anything else I’ve called you,” he added.

“What, everything ever?” Dorian asked, surprised and amused.

Idhren looked over his shoulder and scowled at Dorian, “No, some of them you deserved,” he said matter-of-factly. “But... Everything in the past week, at least.” Because they had been out here in this wretched desert that long – tired and hot and sometimes bloody – and maybe Idhren had unfairly taken out some of his frustrations on Dorian during that time.
The amused expression lingered on Dorian’s face. “Well, I’ll take what I can get,” he said, “Apology accepted.”

“Thank you,” Idhren replied quietly. Though Dorian’s smugness was a little annoying, he had given up being angry at the man. Teasing aside, the apology had been genuine. “Yours as well.”

“Of course,” Dorian replied. “I knew you couldn’t stay angry at me for long. I’m ever so charming and likable, after all.”

“Don’t push your luck,” Idhren drawled, to which Dorian only laughed.

The man turned to put away his things and the pair enjoyed a comfortable silence for a time before Dorian spoke again. “How is that sunburn of yours doing?” he asked. “Staying out here in this desert can’t be helping it any.”

It wasn’t. The heat and the constant sun were unavoidable out here, and his armor chafed at the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Not as bad as it was,” he answered. “The surgeon here gave me some ointment meant to prevent them and it’s helped some.” Added to the small healing Dorian had been offering him each night to ease the pain the burn had become more of an annoyance than a real concern.

“That’s good,” Dorian nodded to himself. “It looked terribly uncomfortable.”

“It is,” Idhren confirmed.

“Is it bad now?” Dorian asked. “I could fix you up again.”

“That’s not necessary. It’s bearable,” Idhren assured him.

“Bearable,” Dorian scoffed. He crossed the tent and sat down beside Idhren. “Come here then.”

“It’s fine, really,” Idhren protested, trying to wave away Dorian’s attentions.

“You said it was ‘bearable’,” Dorian corrected him. “That’s not ‘fine’. It’s no trouble. Honestly if you had an ounce of creation magic in your body you’d be able to do it yourself.”

“I’m not completely useless,” Idhren complained, but he turned toward Dorian all the same until they sat cross-legged before each other, knees brushing.

Easily, Dorian reached up and cupped Idhren’s chin with one hand as he examined the faint spreading of red across the elf’s face and ears. “Yes, you can heal your papercuts and such; very useful in your current line of work, I’m sure.” Idhren huffed indignantly but didn’t honor the comment with a response. “The sun has given you a remarkable amount of freckles,” he informed, “It’s rather adorable.”

“I’m not adorable,” Idhren complained.

“I have always wondered,” Dorian commented thoughtfully. He ignored the complaint entirely as he reached up and ran fingertips over the planes of Idhren’s face, each touch trailing soothing healing magic in its wake. “You are remarkably pale for someone from Tevinter. Not that I’ve never seen anyone with your complexion up north, but it’s rather uncommon.”

“My grandmother was Dalish,” Idhren informed him, eyes falling shut as Dorian’s magic washed over his skin. “From Ferelden. Apparently I’m the spitting image.”
“Are you?” Dorian asked in surprise. “Well, she must have been quite stunning if that’s the case.”

Now the red on Idhren’s cheeks could not be blamed on the sun. As though having Dorian this close to him, hands so gentle against his skin, wasn’t bad enough. “Why the compliments all of a sudden?” Adorable? Stunning? What had brought this on?

“I’m merely making an observation,” Dorian replied flippantly.

“What man wants to be called ‘adorable’ and compared to his grandmother?” Idhren groused.

Dorian’s hands fell away from Idhren’s face, and he was disappointed by the loss of contact. “I suppose I wouldn’t,” the man agreed. “But if you’d met my grandmother you’d know why. Dreadful woman. Well, you’re all fixed up now, what do you say we try to find something edible? Preferably something better than the slop they’re serving your soldiers.”

Whatever had brought on the sudden display of affection, it seemed clear Dorian didn’t want to talk about it, so Idhren did not push the subject. He shouldn’t be complaining, anyway, when such displays were so rare coming from Dorian. Idhren had grown used to Tainan’s constant outpouring of love, and was starved now in comparison. Maybe that was why even the smallest touch or tiniest compliment from Dorian enflamed him.

Shaking those thoughts from his mind, Idhren replied, “I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Let me finish getting dressed.” He was still in nothing but breeches and undershirt and there was no way he was leaving this tent anything short of fully clothed.

“Ah well,” Dorian sighed in disappointment as Idhren dug through his things for a shirt that wasn’t completely filthy. “I will simply look forward to our eventual return to civilization.” Then he scoffed slightly in disgust. “And now I consider Ferelden to be civilized. Look how far I’ve fallen. This is entirely your fault, you know, for dragging me out here.”

“I didn’t drag you anywhere,” Idhren replied, pulling a shirt over his head and grabbing his boots.

“No,” Dorian admitted, “I suppose you couldn’t even if you wanted to. You’re much too short.”

Now fully dressed, Idhren turned to scowl at Dorian as he rose to his feet. “And you wonder why I insult you,” he said dryly.

“But you are so easily riled up,” Dorian said, playing coy as he fixed his hair to the best of his ability, “How could I possibly resist?”

Idhren scoffed and rolled his eyes. “You’re horrid,” he groused. “I’m leaving without you.”

As he turned toward the tent entrance Idhren heard Dorian laugh behind him, and by the time he had stepped out into the open air of the keep the man was already on his heels again. Idhren spared him a sideways glance, and then began walking. “We will most likely be heading back to Skyhold tomorrow,” he commented, “So we should be back to civilization in another week or so. Shorter, if we can find some inns along the road.”

“Marvelous,” Dorian breathed a sigh of relief. “I am aquiver with anticipation.”

Idhren would also be happy to wash his hands of this place, though he doubted it would be the last any of them saw of this particular desert. The Wardens were out here somewhere, so likely they would have only a short respite in Skyhold while scouting reports came in and plans were made. Still, that respite was well earned, in his opinion, and more than welcome.
“Someone, help me!”

The chamber doors were suddenly thrown open wide and two elves burst into the room. They were clearly trespassing, but given the circumstances it was unlikely anyone would care. The foremost elf held a bow in one hand, arrow already nocked to the string, and the staff which the other carried clearly marked him a mage.

“What’s going on?” the mage asked as his eyes took in the scene in front of them.

The air was thick with the thrum of magic. A spell held Divine Justinia suspended in the air before a creature that could not be called human, twisted and misshapen as it was, with stone-like growths protruding from its skin.

“Run while you can! Warn them!” the Divine shouted in alarm.

“We have intruders,” the creature spoke. In one hand it held aloft some sort of magical artifact, an orb pulsing with green light, with the other it gestured to the two soldiers at its side, “Slay the elves.”

The twang of a bowstring as the elf’s arrow was released, only to clatter off a magical barrier and fall harmlessly to the ground. It was enough of a distraction, however, for the Divine to struggle free of the magic that bound her and strike out at the creature. She succeeded in knocking the artifact from its hand, and it fell to the floor with a dull thud, rolling toward the door. Without thinking the elven mage rushed forward to grab the object and keep it away from that monster, but the moment his hand touched the glowing orb he howled in pain.

The archer released another arrow, but their shot went wide as they whipped around, “Idhren?” they cried in concern, at the exact same time as the monster at the center of the room let out a scream of rage.

"Idhren. Idhren." The urgent voice and shaking jarred Idhren back into consciousness. He didn't
know where he was or what had happened. His hand felt like he'd just burned it and his arm ached all the way to the elbow.

"Idhren, get up," Tainan urged again, pulling at his shoulder.

Idhren shook the cobwebs from his mind and slowly pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, and then Tainan hauled him the rest of the way to his feet. It was only then Idhren got a good look at their surroundings. Rocks and ruins, as though they were somewhere in the mountains, but the Frostbacks around Haven had been snowcapped, and there was no snow here. It was dark, as though night time, but when Idhren raised his eyes to the sky there were no stars, no moons, no clouds. Nothing above except endless black and spires of stone hanging in midair, defying every law of nature that Idhren knew.

"What...?" he gaped at their surroundings. "Where...?"

"I don't know," Tainan said, one hand still on Idhren's arm and the other clasping their bow in a white knuckled grip. "We have to go, Idhren."

Before he could ask anything further Idhren heard the shriek. Inhuman and spine chilling. Tainan's eyes went wide with terror, their hand left Idhren's arm and they had an arrow knocked to their bowstring almost faster than Idhren could see. Idhren himself whipped around in the direction of the scream. He reached for the staff that should have been strapped to his back, but it was gone. In the distance he heard another scream, the skittering of spiders, saw the creatures - twisted and monstrous unlike any spider he'd seen before. "My staff," he looked around desperately on the ground, but there was no sign of it.

"You need to run," Tainan urged, leveling an arrow at the spiders and letting it fly. It struck the foremost in the eye and the creature fell with a pained shriek.

"What?" Idhren exclaimed in shock.

"Run, get out of here. I'll hold them back," Tainan knocked another arrow and pulled back the string.

"I'm not leaving you," Idhren protested. Even without a staff he could still do magic. He could still fight.

"We don't have time for this, Idhren, you need to run!" The arrow flew, took out another spider, but there were too many. More than Tainan had arrows.

"I'm not leaving you!" Idhren cried in dismay.

Tainan spun toward him, wide eyes full of fear and determination, hair falling free from its braids. "Idhren," they practically growled, grabbed him by the arm and forcibly shoved him in the opposite direction of the spiders. Ahead of him now Idhren could see a crumbling staircase, near vertical, and at the top of it another figure. Behind that figure glowed a portal like a hole in the very air. He looked back and met Tainan's panicked eyes once more. "Run!" the hunter screamed, and this time Idhren did. Heart beating wildly in his chest, tears stinging at his eyes he made for that staircase, moving as fast as his legs would carry him.

Stumbling and clawing his away upward, Idhren once more saw the figure at the top of the steps and this time he recognized her. Divine Justinia. There was another inhuman scream from below and he chanced a glance back over his shoulders. The spiders were gaining on him. There was no sign of Tainan.
“Hurry! The demons!” the Divine called out to him.

Idhren faltered only a second before turning his attention back to her and continuing his flight. She grasped his hand as he reached the top of the steps - now certainly a cliff - and helped haul him up over the top. Idhren rose to his feet panting and looked back the way he had come. “Tainan?” he called out in horror.

“You must go!” the Divine attempted to shove him toward the glowing portal behind them.

“No, Tainan!” Idhren screamed in protest, even as he knew it was too late to go back.

“Go!” the Divine, strong despite her age, pushed him again toward the portal, “Warn them!”

Then the first of the demons reached the top of the cliff. Its clawed leg reached out for the woman, and she was gone in an instant. Idhren screamed in horror, then turned and fled.

The Fade, Haring 9:41 Dragon

When the vision cleared from his eyes, Idhren found himself on the ground. At some point his legs had given out and he collapsed. Now he sat kneeling in the mud staring into the empty green sky. And he was crying. Tears streaming down his cheeks.

Tainan had not died in the blast. They had been pulled along with Idhren and the Divine into the Fade. And then…

Suddenly Idhren was scrambling to his feet. “Tainan was here. They were in the Fade,” he spoke aloud, though he was barely aware of his own voice or the people around him. “Tainan was… They could still be alive!”

“Idhren.”

He ignored the calm voice and looked around frantically. “We have to look for them!”

“Idhren.” This time the voice was accompanied by a hand on his shoulder. Idhren whipped around and looked up to meet Dorian’s storm grey eyes. The man’s expression was solemn and sad. “They’re gone.”

Idhren shook his head. “They could have survived!” he protested. “They could still--,” he had to stop as his throat choked up.

“It’s been months,” Dorian said softly.

Idhren knew it was true, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept. He shook his head again as the tears began to fall once more.

“I’m sorry,” Dorian said. “They’re gone.”

The sound that escaped Idhren’s throat was more a whimper than a sob, and he threw himself against Dorian’s chest, pressing his face into the fabric of his robes and clenching at the man’s waist to stop from shaking. Reliving the memory had torn the wound open again and it hurt as much as it had the first time. But this time he wasn’t alone. Dorian’s arms wrapped around his shoulders, squeezing
tight as Idhren sobbed. After a while the tears slowed, and then stopped entirely, leaving Idhren feeling worn out. Still he slumped against Dorian’s chest, hands still clinging to the man for what comfort it gave. The man’s hands rubbed comforting circles on his back until the elf fell still and silent in his arms, then he leaned down to press a kiss to his hair.

“Are you alright to continue?” Dorian asked against his scalp, voice soft enough that Idhren could barely hear it.

Honestly, Idhren wasn’t certain. But he knew that they couldn’t stay here. “Yes,” he breathed, and forced his hands to release Dorian’s robes and return to his own sides. The man held him for a moment longer, then released him, pulling a half a step away but letting one hand remain on Idhren’s shoulder. Idhren wiped his eyes with the heel of his palm, then his nose on his sleeve. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly, then reluctantly took a step back, putting more space in between himself and Dorian. “I’m sorry,” he repeated again, loud enough for the others to hear, and went to retrieve his staff from where he’d dropped it to the ground in the midst of that memory.

As he straightened Idhren realized that Justinia was still standing there, watching him with an expression of studious concern. “It wasn’t Andraste that people saw with me in the Fade, it was you,” he said as he turned toward her. “Or Divine Justinia. But you’re not really her, are you? She’s dead. You’re just a spirit, then? Taking her form?”

“Does it matter what I am?” the woman asked, voice as calm as ever.

Idhren frowned at her as he considered the question. He did not like that she had deceived them, purposefully or not, but so far the spirit had given him no reason to distrust it. “So long as you continue helping us, I suppose it doesn’t,” he admitted reluctantly.

“I am sorry if I disappoint you,” the spirit spoke, and as it did so the visage of Divine Justinia faded away, replaced by the golden glowing specter that was the spirit’s true form. And then it disappeared.

“Divine Justinia I recognized, but who was that elf?” Hawke asked after a moment of silence, “The one with you in the Fade?”

Idhren attempted to wipe some of the mud off his staff’s grip. He almost wished Dorian would answer for him, but the man remained silent. It wasn’t his story to tell. “Tainan was my fiancé,” Idhren said quietly. He had never wanted anyone to know, though it was such a pointless thing to keep secret.

“Well, shit,” Varric breathed into the uncomfortable silence that followed Idhren’s revelation.

“I would appreciate it if none of that made it into your book,” Idhren added, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears.

“Yeah,” the dwarf sighed. “Yeah, sure thing, Sparky.”

Idhren had expected a bit more pushback, but then even Varric knew when not to cross a line. Or maybe the dwarf understood more than he let on. He wondered exactly how much had been left out of Hawke’s story. “Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he said, turning purposefully away from the others and looking toward the rift in the distance.

They did not make it far before the demons began to appear, drawn to the presence of mortal minds like moths to a flame. By now Idhren knew they were demons despite the shape they took. But the longer they remained in the Fade the farther into his subconscious the Nightmare and its minions
delved in search of fears. Now Idhren found himself longing for the giant spiders and grotesque horrors that had hounded them first, because the demons that descended upon them as they continued took up forms far more personal and far more familiar.

Canidius, in his magisterial robes, exaggeratedly obese in the demon’s warped perception and demeaning Idhren’s intelligence once more. Idhren no longer felt any fear of the man, however, and gleefully watched as he succumbed to one of Dorian’s fireballs.

But the next came in the shape of his brother, bleeding from a dozen cuts, short sword pierced through his abdomen and begging for help as he staggered toward them. He fell to a crossbow bolt in the throat. Idhren had to remind himself that it was not real. His brother had died years ago and was buried beneath a tree in Tevinter.

A flash of red out of the corner of his eye and Idhren turned, staff at the ready for the next attack, only to freeze in place when he laid eyes on the newest apparition. Standing amidst the rubble and jagged rocks was Tainan, bow drawn and arrow aimed straight for Idhren’s heart. All breath left Idhren’s lungs, and all logical thought left his mind. “Tai--,” before he could even finish forming the word Cassandra was standing between them, shield up and sword flashing. He didn’t see what she did, but he saw Tainan crumple at her feet and could not contain the small, breathless shout that escaped his lips.

Cassandra spun, sword still at the ready as though she expected to find him being attacked. Instead, Idhren was merely standing there, eyes wide as saucers and a hand clamped over his mouth to cut off any further noise. “Are you well?” she asked in concern.

It was just a demon, Idhren told himself. He forced his hand away from his face and squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again the illusion had faded from the demon’s corpse, leaving it nothing more than a pile of gore on the ground. “Yes,” he answered, but his voice was weak. “I’m fine.”

Cassandra studied him for a moment, and then nodded as she straightened and turned away from him to face the rest of the demons that approached.

Idhren turned as well, steeling himself for whatever horrid memory the demons would pluck from his mind this time. But there was truly no way to prepare for the tidal wave of emotions that washed over him at the next sight.

Adrian Gallus. Seventeen years old and smug as only a magister’s son could be as he leered down at Idhren.

Idhren saw red. He was no longer the docile, naïve boy he had been in the Circle, too afraid to defend himself. And he had been stewing in quiet rage against his most heinous abuser for years. A scream of pure fury tore from his throat and Idhren was moving, running. Lightning flew from his fingertips, and then fire, and then he was within range. The blade on the end of his staff flashed green in the Fade’s strange light as it swung upward, cutting a perfect line across Gallus’ chest as the man – a boy, really – was still reeling from the barrage of spells Idhren had struck him with. Blood spurted from the wound and the figure fell backward, clutching at the gaping wound as it collapsed onto the ground.

“Fucking demon sack of shit!” Idhren snarled, slamming the bladed end of his staff down through the creature’s flesh again. And then again. Repeatedly and with all the force his small body could muster, “Bastard motherfucking cunt! Venhedis! Stay out of my fucking head!”

“Inquisitor,” Cassandra said in alarm.
Idhren didn’t hear her. He continued his tirade. He continued mutilating the corpse at his feet.

“Idhren, stop,” Dorian tried, approaching him. Again the words went ignored, so Dorian put a hand on the elf’s arm, stopping him, “Idhren, it’s dead,” he said, pulling him away from the demon. The Inquisitor stumbled back as he was pulled, but snapped back to the present, breathing heavily. “It’s dead,” Dorian said one last time.

“Kaffas,” Idhren swore one last time, then slumped slightly and raked a hand through his hair.

“Are you alright?” Dorian asked in concern.

Idhren shook his head, but he pulled his arm away from Dorian and said, “I’ll be better when we get out of here. I’m going to feed this demon its own ass.”

“That’s an image,” Dorian commented.

“Do demons even have asses?” Varric asked with a weak laugh.

“Let’s move on,” Idhren said, and cast one last venomous look at the demon at his feet before striding past it without another word. The others fell in behind him.

They had been walking for a while before Dorian worked up the courage to ask, quietly so they would not be overheard, “What did it look like? That demon? You didn’t react that badly to any of the others.”

Idhren’s shoulders tensed, and for a moment Dorian thought he was not going to answer, and he was deciding whether or not he should press the subject when the elf finally responded. “One of those bastards from the Circle,” he said, his voice quiet but fierce. Dorian suddenly understood why his reaction had been so violent. “Called me a girl. He was… bragging about it.” His grip tightened around his staff hard enough to turn his knuckles white. “They probably don’t even remember it anymore. Probably back in Tevinter living it up, drinking and whoring, no consequences for anything they do. Bastards.”

Dorian didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t even remember the names of the boys who had tortured Idhren back then, but it was obviously fresh in the elf’s mind despite the decade that had passed. And why shouldn’t it be? They had practically ruined his life. Practically driven him to suicide. “I don’t know,” he said in an effort to lighten the mood, “Perhaps they’re all married by now to horrible controlling women who spend all their money on terribly ugly clothes. What if they have gaggles of spoiled children always demanding attention and presents?”

“Children like you?” Idhren asked, and when Dorian looked over he was glad to see that some of the tension had released from the elf’s shoulders and arms. If he was able to tease then it couldn’t be too upset.

“I’ll have you know that I was a perfectly behaved child. A paragon of manners and decorum,” Dorian protested.

“What happened to turn you into such an ass?” Idhren asked innocently.

“Yes, very funny,” Dorian groused. But if Idhren was able to insult him then the elf had to be in a better mood. “I’m still a delight or you wouldn’t bother keeping me around.”

“Perhaps I only keep you around to stand there and look pretty,” Idhren suggested.

“Well, I am very pretty,” Dorian agreed, “You have excellent taste.”
Idhren scoffed and turned away from the man, although he couldn’t disagree. And impossible though it was in the current circumstance he was grateful for the attempt to lighten the mood. Idhren did not think he would be capable of smiling or laughing until they were free of this place, however.

The fearlings had failed to waylay their party, though not for lack of trying, and for a long while they walked on through the eerie landscape unchallenged.

Then came the voice in the back of his head.

_Who is this little girl come into my domain?_

Idhren tripped on nothing but managed to catch himself before doing more than stumble.

_Do you truly think you can face me, Inquisitor? Your entire existence is a mistake._

Idhren sucked in a breath and tried to calm the sudden racing of his heart. He had dealt with demons before. He knew that they were selfish, power hungry creatures not to be trusted. But that did not make it easy to ignore the Nightmare’s words.

_Dorian will never love you. Not after seeing what you truly are. Deformed and disgusting._

Idhren bit his lip and clenched his hands into fists.

_Who could ever love someone so deformed?_

Tainan. Tainan had loved him. He was different, but he was not unworthy of love. Tainan had taught him that.

_Ah, yes, the hunter. Loved you so much that it killed them._

_Your affections will lead to his death as well. Just like everyone else you’ve ever loved. You are a mistake that your Maker attempts to erase, but you foil him, foisting your own demise on those you profess to care about._

Idhren shook his head and began walking faster. Ignore it, he told himself over and over, trying to think of anything except that voice.

“Is anyone else hearing that?” Hawke’s voice cut through, helping to draw Idhren back to reality for a moment.

“If you mean the demon, then yes,” Idhren bit out.

“Oh good, I’m glad I’m not the only one,” the man replied with forced cheer.

“Ignore it,” Dorian advised. “It’s trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Easier said than done,” Idhren grumbled.

“We’re nearly there,” Cassandra interrupted. Her face was an impassive mask, set in an ever present scowl the entire time they had been here, and Idhren couldn’t help wondering if this fazed her at all. Of course it must, she was just much better at hiding it than the rest of them. The woman pointed ahead of them. Sure enough the rift loomed ever larger before them, now taking up most of the sky.

Idhren could not be free of this place soon enough.
After so long in the Fade it was the real world that seemed slightly off. Or maybe Idhren was simply so exhausted he could not see straight. How long had they been in there? Hours? Days? There had been no indication or feeling of time passing while in that sickening dream world, but by the time the Inquisitor's party emerged - short one Grey Warden - the battle had long-since ended.

Still not entirely believing what he had been through, and that he was free from it, Idhren gave a shaky and vague report to his advisors. Physically in the Fade - again - it wasn't Andraste that saved him, but the Divine, and Stroud had likely died holding back the Nightmare long enough for the rest of them to escape. Or maybe he had managed to land the killing blow, only to be stranded there until some other demon came along or he starved to death. Idhren preferred the former.

He staggered out of the ruined fortress and into the fresh, cold evening air of the desert that surrounded it. There he simply stood, eyes closed and face turned toward the sky, and breathed. Everything that had happened, everything that had been revealed and remembered, weighed heavily on him still. And he could still hear the Nightmare's voice in the back of his mind.


Idhren swallowed heavily and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes until he saw spots. Distantly, he was aware of someone coming up to stand beside him. The muffled crunch of footsteps through sand, coming to a stop just to his left, and the vague subconscious feeling of another person nearby. Idhren lowered his hands from his eyes, but waited several more moments before he bothered to open them and see who had come to join him. He was half expecting Cole, this was the sort of time the spirit boy would show up, but to his mild surprise Dorian stood there. The man had his arms crossed over his chest as he stared out over the desert, brows furrowed. The silver moonlight shone off the white of his robes - the silk spattered now with blood, mud, and ichor and very likely ruined - and was a stark difference from the sickly green that had suffused the Fade. A welcome difference.

The man remained silent beside him, and Idhren turned away, allowing his gaze to wander over the desert landscape. They were not far enough from the fortress to be out of earshot. Inside Adamant the Inquisition's soldiers were still bustling, rounding up the injured and dead, collecting any stray Wardens who had survived and surrendered. There would be time later to tell whether or not they were free of Corypheus' influence. Off to the right Idhren could see the camp from which they had launched the assault. A few of the trebuchets had not survived the night, but others still stood. Campfires burned amidst a handful of tents and people bustled about to and fro. They would have set up a field hospital by now to tend the wounded. Perhaps that's where Cole was, bringing comfort to soldiers in their final moments.

In time his gaze drifted back to Dorian. The man was still standing there, silent as ever and expression inscrutable. He appeared to be deep in thought, though about what Idhren hadn't the faintest idea. What had the Nightmare said to him? What fears had it used to taunt and goad him? His father? The blood ritual? Idhren himself? He didn't dare consider that.

As though sensing Idhren's gaze on him, Dorian turned his head. Their eyes met and Idhren felt the immediate urge to turn away when caught staring, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He was exhausted, haunted by lingering fear, and this silent companionship was a comfort.

"Are you alright?" Dorian asked suddenly. His voice was soft but still cut jarringly through the
stillness of the night.

Idhren finally tore his gaze away, looked down at the sand beneath his feet and then out at the horizon. "No," he whispered. Then he glanced over at Dorian again. "Are you?"

"No," the man replied. He looked away once more, staring out across the dunes. "I'm very cross with you, actually."

A sigh escaped Idhren's lips. "Now is not the time," he muttered. Though what Dorian had to be cross about he hadn't the faintest clue. It wasn't as though he'd gotten them stuck in the Fade on purpose. And the alternative was falling to their death in the near-bottomless Abyssal Rift.

"I suppose not," Dorian agreed. But the statement now loomed over them such that the silence that fell after was awkward and uncomfortable.

If Dorian was angry then why was he here? But Idhren didn't actually want him to leave. He wanted Dorian closer. Close enough to touch, to hold. He wanted reassurances that he was cared for, that he was loved, to drive away the memory of the demon's voice. And to drive away the memory of that last desperate expression on Tainan's face. "They died protecting me." He wasn't conscious of speaking the words out loud, but Dorian turned to look at him, so that must have been the case. "They stayed to get me out. If they'd just run, then..." His voice caught on the lump in his throat and he squeezed his eyes shut to hold back the tears. He had done so much crying already.

"I'm sorry," Dorian's voice was soft and gentle.

Idhren wanted nothing more than for the man to hold him, but he didn't dare ask for it or move toward him. Instead he wrapped his arms tightly around himself, but it was a shallow comfort. "Why do people think I'm worth dying for? First Tainan, now Stroud... I'm not worth that."

Footsteps in the sand again, and when Idhren opened his eyes Dorian was standing in front of him. Close enough that if Idhren just leaned forward he might be in the man's arms. "Of course you are," he said, quiet and insistent.

Idhren shook his head. "I'm not. And I'm tired of people dying because of me. Loving me is a death sentence. You should get away while you can."

"Is that what you want?" Dorian asked.

Idhren tried to say yes. To warn him away. But he couldn't. "No," he answered miserably. "But I'm frightened. I don't want to lose anyone else."

Gently, Dorian's arms came up and wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him in. And it was heaven. Idhren folded against him, tension flowing out of his body. He realized that Dorian's hands were shaking. "I'm not going anywhere," the man murmured, pressing his nose into Idhren's hair. "And neither are you."

Idhren pressed his face into the collar of Dorian's robes and wrapped his arms around the man's waist. He breathed in the familiar aroma of lyrium and musk, tainted at the moment with the metallic scent of blood, and allowed himself, for just a moment, to feel at peace. They stayed standing there, holding each other, until Idhren felt about ready to fall asleep on his feet. Then they picked their way carefully through the sand and the rubble to the Inquisition's camp, to the Inquisitor's tent, and barely managed to remove the outermost layers of their armor before falling asleep in each others' arms.
The cleaning out of Adamant Fortress continued long after the battle was done, but the Inquisitor and most of the Inquisition’s forces soon began the long trek back to the Frostback Mountains and Skyhold. There would be new worries when Idhren returned, new missions to plan, dozens of reports to read. But for now, the journey was a welcome respite from Inquisitorial duties and thoughts of war.

It was their third day on the road before Idhren asked Dorian over the embers of the previous night’s campfire as they ate breakfast, “Are you still cross at me?”

The man glanced up from his meal – a bowl of porridge he had described as ‘indeterminate tasteless mush’ and was only eating because the other option was hardtack – and then back down as he pushed the porridge around with a spoon. “I am,” he replied curtly.

“Why?” Idhren asked. Because days on he still couldn’t figure out what Dorian had to be angry about and it had been gnawing at the back of his mind this entire time. “It’s not as though I got us stuck in the Fade on purpose.”

Dorian scoffed out a sigh, “And here I thought you were meant to be smart,” he muttered.

Idhren tensed defensively. “I can’t read your fucking mind,” he snapped. “What could you possibly be mad at me for?”

“For making me think you were dead!” Dorian exclaimed with enough force to make Idhren jump in alarm. But he was still confused, and it must have shown on his face. Dorian sighed again and frowned down at his food. “You sent us through the rift and then you didn’t follow,” he elaborated, quieter now but no less emotional. “I thought… This is it. This time I’m going to lose him for good.”

Dorian wasn’t angry, then, but worried. Frightened. “This time?” Idhren asked.

"It's hardly the first time you've tried to sacrifice yourself for the greater good," Dorian muttered bitterly. "After Haven..." But he trailed off and didn't finish the thought.

"You think I still want to die?" Idhren asked.

Dorian shrugged and looked up at him again. "You tell me."

"I don't," Idhren assured him. "Before I was... Not in my right mind," he tried to explain. Back in Haven, immediately after Tainan's death, he had felt like he would never be happy again. But although he still missed them, now the future did not feel quite so dire.

"Well," Dorian sighed, "That's something of a relief."

"I'm sorry," Idhren added. "I never meant to frighten you or anyone."

"I know," Dorian replied. "I suppose you think I'm being dreadfully irrational."

"Not at all," Idhren insisted. He understood better than anyone how fear and grief could twist your thoughts. And it was actually somewhat comforting - validating - to think that Dorian had been so concerned about him. "After everything the demon said," Idhren cut himself off. He didn't actually know what it had said to Dorian. Maybe it hadn't taunted him with Idhren's death or abandonment the way it had him.

"I am just very glad it’s over," Dorian breathed.
"As am I," Idhren agreed, and turned his attention back to eating.

"It has had me thinking, however," Dorian continued. And he began pushing the porridge around his bowl with his spoon again, clearly not eager to continue eating. "No one has walked physically in the Fade since... Well since Corypheus and his contemporaries."

"I'm well aware of that," Idhren said.

"Of course you are," Dorian replied. "My point is maybe we should keep that bit of this little adventure hushed up. Some people might get ideas. The last thing we need is another power hungry mage mucking up the Veil even worse. And just because you were lucky enough not to bring another Blight down upon us doesn't mean someone else will."

Idhren nodded slowly. He hadn't bothered to think too much about the possible ramifications of their journey through the Fade. He was trying not to think about the excursion at all, to be perfectly honest. But Dorian had a point. "I agree," he murmured.

"Ah, so there is something clever about you after all," Dorian teased.

"Fuck off," Idhren complained, though not unkindly. "I'm a genius and you know it."

Dorian laughed. "Do I?" he asked.

Idhren rolled his eyes, unamused, and flicked a tiny spark of static electricity toward the man. Dorian jolted as it hit him, not harmed so much as startled.

"That was completely uncalled for," the man complained.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Idhren replied. He clasped his now-empty bowl of porridge in his hands and rose from his seat on the ground. "Finish eating so we can leave."

The return to Skyhold was met with a not insignificant amount of fanfare from the non-combatants left behind. It was something that Idhren still wasn't used to, and wasn't certain he would ever get used to after spending the majority of his life being summarily ignored. But the Inquisition - and the Inquisitor specifically, although Idhren didn't feel as though he had done all that much - had struck a major blow against Corypheus by wresting the Grey Wardens from his hands, and that was something worthy of celebration. The news of their victory at Adamant would have arrived by raven days before the Inquisitor himself stepped through the gates once more, but the cheers and adulations that he was met with were not tempered by time.

It was only with the return of the Inquisition's forces that any sort of celebration began, but Idhren felt little urge to join in.

It was a victory, yes. And a significant one, at that. But the cost had been heavy, and the trials that Idhren had been through still weighed heavily on his mind.

Still, after a trip to the war room to give a full preliminary report to Leliana and Josephine, who had not been present at the siege to see anything first hand, and a much overdue bath and change of wardrobe, Idhren dared to venture out into his adoring public. The nobles in the great hall were polite and mild as they sipped wine and praised his feats as though they knew anything of what he had
done. Idhren hadn't even led the army. His smile as he accepted their compliments felt as fake as an Orlesian mask. And he drank too much wine in an effort to drown out the oppressively familiar feeling of being little more than a puppet on a string.

As soon as was polite, he fled.

Fled from the hall and out into the cool mountain air of the courtyard. Beyond Skyhold's walls the sun was just beginning to set over the mountains, painting the sky in purple and gold.

Dorian would tease him, he couldn't help thinking, for still being such a wallflower when he was finally the center of attention. Wasn't that sort of reception exactly what he had wanted in Tevinter? That respect, that praise?

Idhren shook his head. He was just drunk enough to be moody, but not drunk enough to stop caring. It was easy to make the decision that sent him trotting down the stairs from the keep and across the courtyard to the tavern. Herald's Rest they'd named it, and the sign depicted Andraste carrying the limp form of someone who only resembled Idhren in the vaguest of ways - a dark-haired man with a glowing hand. The light that spilled from the windows was warm and yellow, the sound of song and voices raised in cheer drifted from the open door. Idhren felt far more at ease as he stepped into the crowded, noisy, and brightly lit room than he had in the finery of the great hall.

He made his way over to the bar, which was really just a long table, and asked for the strongest thing on offer. He'd had several glasses of wine already, it was time to move on to the main course. What he got was a mug half filled with dwarven whiskey. No fancy goblets or delicate glasses filled with barely a drizzle of liquid here. Idhren downed the drink in two swallows, barely tasting anything past the burn as it went down his throat, and obtained a refill before he turned away from the bar to survey the crowd.

Several familiar faces stood out to him among the soldiers and common folk who crowded around wooden tables. One, in particular, he had been meaning to speak to again for some time. And with the fears that the Nightmare had brought to the forefront of his mind, Idhren did not want to put it off any longer. Downing his second drink, Idhren left the empty mug on the bar before making his unsteady way across the room.

“Krem!” Idhren slurred and slung an arm around the mercenary’s shoulders – a significant effort given his current state of inebriation and the fact that Krem was inches taller than him. “Krem,” he repeated again, “Cremisius. I need to talk to you. It’s very important.”

It was only because Krem was so used to The Iron Bull’s antics that he was completely unfazed by having a clearly very drunk Herald of Andraste hanging off his shoulder. “How much have you had to drink, boss?” he asked.

“Enough,” the Inquisitor replied. “Maybe. Not important. I need to talk to you. I need… advice. One ‘Vint to another.”

“Enough,” the Inquisitor replied. “Maybe. Not important. I need to talk to you. I need… advice. One ‘Vint to another.”

“Krem!” Idhren slurred and slung an arm around the mercenary’s shoulders – a significant effort given his current state of inebriation and the fact that Krem was inches taller than him. “Krem,” he repeated again, “Cremisius. I need to talk to you. It’s very important.”

It was only because Krem was so used to The Iron Bull’s antics that he was completely unfazed by having a clearly very drunk Herald of Andraste hanging off his shoulder. “How much have you had to drink, boss?” he asked.

“Enough,” the Inquisitor replied. “Maybe. Not important. I need to talk to you. I need… advice. One ‘Vint to another.”

“This about your Altus?” Krem asked, only half serious.

Idhren whined like a petulant child, eyes closed and chin falling to his chest. He put more of his weight on Krem’s shoulder, hemmed and hawed until finally admitting “Yes.”

“Dunno why you’d come to me for relationship advice,” Krem mused, watching as Idhren fought to put his feet under himself again.

“You’re the only one,” the elf declared. Finally righting himself he removed his arm from Krem’s
shoulders and instead latched onto his arm like a noblewoman to her escort. “You have to help me.” And he looked up at Krem with the most anguished calf eyes the man had ever seen.

“Alright,” Krem agreed. “What’s the problem, then?”

“Not here,” Idhren hissed, and he began pulling Krem toward a table in the corner. It was a small table, far from the bustle and easily overlooked. Almost private. As soon as they reached it Idhren released Krem’s arm and slumped down in a chair.

Krem took up the seat across from him and waited. Idhren leaned both elbows on the table and stared down at the wood grain. He remained silent. Krem waiting so long that the silence became awkward before prompting, “You gonna tell me what this is about?”

In response, Idhren let out the most long suffering sigh that had probably ever been uttered. Still staring down at the table, and still slurring his words slightly, he asked, “When there’s someone you want to sleep with,” he began carefully, “How do you tell them that you… might not look like they were expecting?”

“You mean Dorian doesn’t know?” Krem asked, “Thought you two had known each other forever.”

“My pedigree says male,” Idhren informed him, glaring down at the table. “Nobody knows.” That was a lie. Some people had figured it out – Adan from making his medication, possibly Vivienne, who had been in charge of his care after the avalanche – but he was almost positive that Dorian had no idea.

“You have a pedigree?” Krem asked.

“I was a very expensive slave, thank you,” The elf whined again and slumped down until his forehead was resting on his arms. “That’s not the point.”

“Right, right,” Krem sighed, wondering how he had gotten dragged into this. Did he look like the sort of person who gave good advice? “But you must have gone through this before, right?” The elf’s only response was an indeterminate grumble. “Are you a virgin?” he asked in horrified realization.

“Fuck no,” Idhren spat, lifting his head enough to glare across the table at Krem.

The mercenary raised his hands defensively and shrugged. “Then what do you need my advice for?”

The glare faded off Idhren’s face, replaced with those calf eyes again. “Because Dorian is… Dorian!” he insisted, laying his head down once more. “He’s different.” Varius and Tainan had both been the sort of person who didn’t care about gender, but Dorian wasn’t the same. “What if he doesn’t like me anymore?” he asked miserably. He wasn’t certain he could bear that kind of rejection.

Across the table, Krem slumped back in his chair and sighed as he crossed his arms over his chest. He really wasn’t qualified for this. He was here to bash skulls, not fix the Inquisitor’s relationship problems. Though he could sympathize. He understood the elf’s insecurities and fears far more than most others could, and he supposed that was why Idhren had come to him. “Listen,” he said, sighing again. “I don’t know anything about relationships, and I don’t know Dorian very well, but it seems like you’ve got two options: you keep trying to hide it or you tell it to him straight. What happens if you hide it?”

“I never have sex again,” Idhren bemoaned. “And he gets tired of me and leaves.”

“Right,” Krem nodded sagely. “And what happens if you tell him?”
“Maybe he’s disgusted and he doesn’t want me anymore and he still leaves,” Idhren mumbled.

“Or maybe he’s not,” Krem corrected, shrugging. “And you live nauseatingly happily forever like a bad romance novel.”

A small smile tugged at Idhren’s lips as he imagined that. Krem made it sound easy. Maybe it was. He’d given himself a lot of unnecessary grief before telling Tainan. Was he doing the same now? “You really think he might not care?”

Krem shrugged again. “He may be a spoiled Altus prick, but he’s not all bad,” he admitted reluctantly. “And he must have some redeeming qualities if you like him so much.”

More redeeming qualities than Idhren was often willing to admit. He nodded to himself, feeling a sudden flood of determination and confidence. Or maybe that was the alcohol. “You’re right,” he said, and then again more firmly, “You’re right. I’m going to talk to him. Right now. I’ll talk to him right now.” He pushed himself up from his seat and wavered unsteadily on his feet for a moment.

“You should wait until you’re a little more sober?” Krem suggested.

Idhren shook his head. “I’ll lose my nerve,” he protested. He turned to leave, then stopped and looked back at Krem. “Thank you,” he said earnestly. “You’re my favorite Soporati.”

“Thanks,” Krem replied uncertainly, “I think.”

Idhren rushed from the tavern, but upon stepping out into the cold night air he realized he wasn’t certain where to find Dorian at this hour. And he wasn’t keen on going back into the main hall when he was this drunk. Although the cold breeze that blew through the courtyard was doing wonders to sober him up.

The first place to look for Dorian was always the library – either library – and if he wasn’t there then he might have joined the nobility in the hall if they were still celebrating. Idhren hoped for the former, and he took the long way around the ramparts to reach the atrium. Solas was asleep already as he snuck past, but that was no surprise. He mounted the stairs quickly, before the last of his liquid courage could leave him, and emerged into the library itself as his eyes finished adjusting to the torchlight. A quick glance around the room found it abandoned save for Helisma, ever diligent in her research on the other side of the room, and one other figure, backlit by the moonlight streaming in through a window as he perused the books on a shelf.

“I thought you were the one of us that liked parties?” Idhren asked as he stepped into the alcove that Dorian had made his own.

His arrival drew the man’s attention and Dorian turned to look at him. A smile tugged at his lips as he took in Idhren’s appearance, cheeks flushed from drink and cold. “Seems one of us has been enjoying it, at least,” he said in amusement. “Something I can do for you?”

“I need to talk to you,” Idhren blurted out, not giving himself enough time to think about it.

Dorian arched an eyebrow curiously and turned his full attention to Idhren. “I’m at your disposal.”

“In private,” Idhren elaborated, eyes flitting over to Helisma’s quiet presence. Though it was unlikely she would pay attention to them or repeat anything she happened to overhear, he didn’t want to risk it.

The smile on Dorian’s lips turned into a smirk. “I need to talk to you,” he says,” he chuckled. “Lead the way, then, Inquisitor.”
Idhren swallowed back a stomach full of butterflies as he nodded. He took Dorian’s hand and pulled him out the side door and across the balcony above the great hall. Unfortunately Skyhold was built without servants’ passages to sneak through and they were forced to slip through the great hall from Josephine’s office to the Inquisitor’s quarters. Thankfully, by then the festivities were dying down and with the way their fingers were entwined the pair went politely ignored.

They had barely reached the top of the stairs when Dorian slipped his hand from Idhren’s grasp and instead looped an arm around the elf’s waist, pulling him in as he leaned down to claim Idhren’s lips in a fierce kiss.

It seemed Idhren had not been the only one drinking that evening. He could taste a hint of wine on Dorian’s tongue. It was intoxicating, and it took all of Idhren’s strength to break the kiss and gently push the man away. “Wait. This… I really do need to tell you something,” Idhren breathed. He pulled away from Dorian, purposefully putting space between them. “It’s important.”

“Is now really the time?” Dorian asked.

“It is, actually,” Idhren said. It was the only time. He’d put this off long enough because of fear, but he didn’t want to. He couldn’t keep living with this anticipation. “You have to promise not to tell anyone else.”

Dorian frowned, but he sobered immediately. He finally seemed to realize that this was, in fact, a serious matter. “You’re starting to concern me a little, but alright,” he agreed.

Idhren took a deep breath to steel himself, telling himself that Dorian would not be disgusted, or at least would not be rude about it. Still, it took every bit of courage he had to spit out the words, “When I was born the midwife couldn’t tell if I was a boy or a girl.”

Dorian’s expression turned confused, “Doesn’t sound like a very good midwife to me.”

“Please don’t make light of this,” Idhren snapped. His hands were trembling so he wrapped his arms around himself to hide it.

“I’m sorry,” Dorian said immediately. “Continue.”

Idhren took another breath to regain his composure before he spoke again. “I read nearly every book in the Circle library and only one of them said anything remotely helpful. Androgynous,” he murmured. “Some Enchanter ages ago was the same and she wrote a whole treatise on it. Never published, of course, just a folio hidden away on a back shelf somewhere. Collecting dust. I… Physically I’m not strictly a man or a woman. I am a man, though,” he insisted, almost desperate, “But my body is… I guess it was more pronounced when I was a child. And I’m definitely a man, no matter what I look like I just look…” he trailed off pitifully.

By now he had become incapable of looking at Dorian. This was no easier than it had been with Tainan. And even though Tainan had loved him regardless of his body – no, Tainan had loved his body as much as they had loved every other part of Idhren – it was so difficult to imagine that anyone else would. Tainan hadn’t thought there was anything wrong with him, but surely Tainan was an outlier.

“It took me a very long time to accept that this is what I look like,” Idhren continued in the face of Dorian’s continued silence. “And there’s nothing I can do about it. I don’t even hate myself anymore most days, but I know I’m not… normal, and I just… want you to like me.” It was so much more than Idhren had ever planned to say, but that was always the case when he talked about this. No matter how many times he rehearsed a speech in his head it always disappeared as soon as he opened
his mouth. He became too emotional to think straight and simply rambled on uncontrollably.

“Are you quite finished?” Dorian asked. He didn’t sound impatient or annoyed, but Idhren still winced slightly at his words. But he nodded and kept his eyes trained on the floor. “Idhren,” Dorian’s voice was the most gentle that Idhren had ever heard it. Comforting and reassuring enough that he dared to look up. “I know.”

“What?” Idhren asked, uncomprehending.

“Or, I suspected,” Dorian amended, shrugging. He was smiling very faintly and he reached out toward Idhren before stopping himself as though uncertain the gesture would be accepted.

“How?” Idhren breathed.

“The Circle,” Dorian replied. “That… disgusting excuse for a person that hurt you… When he was bragging about it he called you a girl.” Even Dorian seemed uncomfortable talking about it. “He must have had a reason to do that.”

Idhren didn’t like the reminder, but part of him was actually relieved that Dorian had been prepared for this. It made all his anxiety seem a little pointless, however. “You’ve known all this time?” he asked in disbelief.

“I don’t think it occurred to me right away,” Dorian replied. “But in hindsight. And you’ve always been exceptionally short and pretty for a man. Even an elf.”

“You don’t need to bring my height into this,” Idhren complained, even as relief flooded his chest.

“Still touchy about that, are you?” Dorian teased, smirking. “I’m surprised you haven’t found a way to magic yourself taller yet.”

“You know I’m rubbish at healing,” Idhren reminded him. “But,” he sobered again, “It truly doesn’t bother you?”

“Not precisely,” Dorian shrugged. “I won’t pretend it’s not… different from what I’m used to. You may need to provide some instruction when we get to that point.”

Then Dorian still wanted him. And Dorian hadn’t even been surprised to learn his deepest, darkest secret. All this time, the man had already known. In hindsight, Idhren really should have expected that. “Instruction,” he repeated as the reality of the situation solidified in his mind, and then smiled faintly. “I can definitely do that.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Dorian replied, “You are exceptionally bossy.” With a hand on Idhren’s waist he pulled the elf close again, and this time when their bodies pressed together Idhren did not feel even an inkling of fear. “Shall we get started?”

Idhren reached up to wrap an arm around Dorian’s shoulders, steadying himself and also pulling the man down enough to reach his lips. “You don’t waste any time, do you?” he asked in amusement and relief.

“I think we’ve wasted enough time already, don’t you?” Dorian asked in return.

They had. Years and years, apparently. Though Idhren did not regret the way things had turned out - he wouldn’t trade the years he’d had with Tainan. Their lips met again, heated and hungry. Hands clutched at clothes, each pulling the other closer, closer, but not close enough. Too many clothes in the way. And this position was starting to get uncomfortable.
Idhren broke the kiss by falling back to his heels on the floor. “Then we had better start making up for it,” he breathed.

With a hand on the back of Dorian’s neck and the other fisted in the collar of his shirt, Idhren pulled the man backwards toward the bed. It didn’t take long for him to catch on to what Idhren wanted, and the pair of them stumbled across the room until Idhren’s legs hit the edge of the bed and he fell backwards. Hands still grasping at Dorian, the man had little choice but to go down with him.

On the mattress, Idhren’s hands were already pulling at the buckles on Dorian’s clothes as their lips met again, freeing straps and tugging at fabric until the shirt came free of his pants. Only then did the kiss break for more than the space of a breath.

Idhren had seen Dorian shirtless before - they had shared enough tents – but this was the first time he could stare with abandon, the first time he could reach out and touch.

His first attempt at pushing Dorian over onto his back was not successful and met only by an amused smirk. The second, backed by a tiny burst of force magic against the man's shoulders, had Dorian falling back into the pillows with a startled gasp. He stared up at Idhren, straddling his waist and grinning down at him triumphantly, and slowly a heated smile spread across his features. "Oh, is that how it's going to be?"

"Is that an objection?" Idhren asked. His hands spread over Dorian’s chest, skin hot under Idhren’s fingers and dusted with a thin layer of hair. He’d never been with a human before. Dorian was larger than anyone Idhren had been with before - taller, broader - and that was rather exciting.

"Not at all," Dorian murmured against his lips. "Certainly a view I could get used to." His hands moved up Idhren's waist and worked open the buttons of his overshirt. The fabric slid off his shoulders easily, the garment tossed aside onto the floor. But when Dorian reached for the hem of his undershirt, Idhren balked.

"Wait," he breathed, hands coming up to grasp Dorian's own and stop him.

"What?" the man asked, frowning. "Something wrong?"

It was stupid, but Idhren could not control the anxiety that gripped at his heart and settled heavy in his stomach. This should be easy. Surely for anyone else in the world this was easy. He had desired Dorian for so long, and now the man was here in his bed just like he’d dreamed of so many nights in his youth. He wanted this so much that it hurt, that it was hard to think with Dorian's hands on him, and yet he could not shake the nagging fear in the back of his mind. “Do you want to stop?” Dorian asked when Idhren remained silent. He sounded confused, a bit disappointed, but also concerned.

“No,” Idhren insisted immediately, and with more force than was probably necessary. He wanted this. He wanted Dorian. And knowing that Dorian wanted him back only made that feeling stronger.

Dorian shook away Idhren’s now loose grip on his hands and sat up, one arm sliding around the elf’s waist to keep him on his lap. “I doubt there’s anything I could find in your shirt that will drive me away at this point,” he murmured, breath hot against Idhren’s face.

With Dorian so close to him - the heat of his skin, the taste of his mouth, the smell of him flooding Idhren’s senses, and proof of his arousal pressing against the inside of Idhren’s thigh - the last of his defenses crumbled away. So he offered no further resistance as the shirt was peeled off over his head, though he couldn’t help the way his eyes fell shut so he would not have to see Dorian’s immediate reaction. He didn’t know what reaction he was expecting, but it was not being suddenly bowled over onto his back, narrowly missing knocking his head on the footboard, and feeling
Dorian’s lips press hungrily against his own. And it occurred to him in that moment that maybe
Dorian had wanted this just as long and as badly as he had.

When Dorian pulled back from the kiss Idhren reached out to pull him back in. It drew a breathless,
amused laugh from the man. “Not so nervous now, are you?” he teased.

“Shut up,” Idhren sighed against his mouth. Dorian laughed again. Then he kissed Idhren again with
enough force that all other thoughts left his mind completely.

In the aftermath they lay in bed wrapped around each other and tangled in the sheets. As soon as he
felt able to move again, Idhren had leaned off the bed to grab the first article of clothing he could find
- Dorian's shirt - and pulled it on. If the man found his desire to be covered again as quickly as
possible odd he did not say anything. Nor did he complain about Idhren wearing his clothing, which
was almost comically large on the elf’s petite frame.

They lay together in comfortable silence. Idhren's body felt loose-limbed and relaxed. He was
already half-asleep in the stillness of the night. A cool breeze drifted in through a window left
carelessly open and raised gooseflesh on still sweat-damp skin. He burrowed closer to Dorian and
pulled the blankets all the way up to his ears.

“Tell me about them?” Dorian asked into the hush that dominated the room. Even his low whisper
sounded impossibly loud as it cut through the stillness.

The elf cracked one eye open and peered up at his lover. “What?” he asked, half asleep.

“Your Dalish fiancé,” Dorian elaborated, “Tell me about them.”

Idhren frowned and lifted his head, propping himself up on one elbow so that he could properly see
Dorian’s face. “You’re asking me this now? After we just had sex?” he asked incredulously.

“Not the best time, you’re right,” Dorian agreed. He wasn’t even certain why he’d asked, it had just
sort of come out. But after everything that had happened in the Fade, witnessing for himself Idhren’s
last memories of his former betrothed, Dorian had been curious. “Never mind, forget I asked.”

But Idhren didn’t move, just kept staring down at him, equal parts disapproving and confused. “Why
do you want to know?” he asked eventually.


“Oh. Of course. My apologies,” Dorian replied. A momentary slip up. Though the distinction
seemed odd to him it obviously mattered to Idhren. The last thing he wanted was to make Idhren
more upset. Besides, it was uncouth to disrespect the dead. “They seemed very brave,” he corrected.
“To take on Corypheus like that… Even not knowing what he was.”

“They were,” Idhren murmured. Slowly he lay down again, but beside Dorian this time rather than
on top of him. “Tainan… Never let anything get to them. As long as the clan was safe and fed and
cared for everything else was inconsequential in the long run, so they never bothered to worry about
it.”
“Would that we could all be so carefree,” Dorian commented wistfully.

Idhren hummed in agreement. “It was infectious, that optimism. I really felt like… like it didn’t matter. Not my past, not my… my anatomy. They would have liked you, I think.”

“Would they?” Dorian asked in surprise. “They wouldn’t have been jealous? Afraid that I would steal you away?”

“I don’t think so,” Idhren murmured. “It would depend on how much you flirted with me, and if you flirted with them in equal measure.”

Dorian chuckled softly. “It’s possible I may have done just that,” he admitted. “And would you have fallen in love with me if they were here distracting you from all my charms?”

“What charms?” Idhren asked wryly, and laughed at the glare he received in return. But he sobered quickly: reaching out to brush a hand through the man’s mussed hair. “Dorian, I fell in love with you years ago. Only you never looked at me the same. I was convinced that a lowly elf like me would never be good enough for you, and I hated you and I loved you. And I never stopped. Maybe I forgot for a while, with Tainan, but I never stopped loving you.”

Swallowing the sudden lump in his throat, Dorian could do nothing but stare at Idhren for a long moment. “The things you say,” he managed, when he felt his voice wouldn’t crack.

Idhren offered him a wry, lopsided smile in return. “It’s probably selfish,” he murmured, “But I wish I could have both of you.”

“My goodness, you do have a dirty mind,” Dorian smirked.

Idhren rolled his eyes and swatted at Dorian, “Not like that!” he protested, then flushed and relented sheepishly, “Maybe a little bit like that.”

Dorian laughed aloud. “Well, I don’t think I would complain.”

Idhren grinned and leaned forward to steal a soft kiss from Dorian’s lips. “You know that I love you, right?” he asked softly.

“How could I possibly forget? You’ve told me at least a dozen times in the past hour,” Dorian teased.

Idhren’s cheeks heated up embarrassingly, because that was not at all an exaggeration. “I just don’t want you to think you’re a replacement or anything like that,” he mumbled.

“I don’t think that,” Dorian assured him. “Though the way you talk I’m not certain I could ever compete,” he let out a breathy laugh.

“Well, I’ve been proposed to at least half a dozen times, and they did kill a bear just to impress me,” Idhren pointed out. “So you may have some catching up to do.”

“A bear?” Dorian asked, slightly impressed.

Idhren nodded against his shoulder. “That one,” he added, and pointed across Dorian’s chest. After the last message he had sent to his clan Istimaethoriel had forwarded a small chest of his personal possessions, among them his dog-eared book and the bearskin blanket, which was folded and laid carefully across the back of the sofa.
Dorian raised his head to look at it for a moment before lying back again. “I’ve killed lots of things,” he commented. “Shall I dedicate the next to you? Is that the sort of thing you find romantic?”

“No, thank you,” Idhren actually grimaced at the idea. He hadn’t been wild about the bear, either, but it was fitting with Dalish custom and within Tainan’s abilities to give. “I’ve no desire for a demon’s skin to decorate my room even if you could find a way to preserve it.”

“You’re right, that would be terribly unattractive,” Dorian agreed. “And it would clash with the rest of the décor.”

Idhren huffed a soft laugh. “I’m glad that’s settled then,” he murmured, letting his eyes fall shut again as a yawn escaped his mouth. “Goodnight, Dorian.”

“Goodnight,” the man replied after a beat.

Chapter End Notes

I did a project recently where I made playlists for each of my Dragon Age OCs from their POV. There's one for Idhren and Tainan, and you can find links to the playlists here.
I Am Not Alone

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains torture and mentions of past rape and self harm.

I am not alone. Even
As I stumble on the path
With my eyes closed, yet I see
The Light is here.
- Canticle of Trials 1:15

Exalted Plains, Orlais, Guardian 9:42 Dragon

Idhren was used to receiving reports from Leliana that included lists of names of known Venatori agents and their locations. He was even used to some of those names being familiar.

Some of those names were more familiar than others.

Kaeso Fidelis had never bragged about violating Idhren, he was never as crude or attention seeking as Gallus, but he had caused just as much pain over the course of those last two horrible years in the Circle. When Idhren had been alone, without even Dorian's awkward attempts at friendship to brighten his days. But the Laetan mage would always be second fiddle to an Altus, and maybe that was why he had seized upon Idhren - the power trip.

No surprise he was now a member of the Venatori. Not even a ranking one, either. A glorified scout, ordering about a troupe of slaves and Soporati soldiers. How that must rankle, to always be not quite good enough.

The Exalted Plains were a mess. Two sides of the civil war locked in a standoff. Holed up in their respective forts and staring at each other across the ruin they had made of this region. And in the middle of it Venatori mages sewing further chaos in their midst.

But the ceasing of hostilities was incidental in the face of revenge Idhren had been waiting ten years to exact.

It frightened him a little how much the wound still burned whenever he thought about that part of his life. No matter how much time passed or how much he tried to forget, the scars remained - on his arms and on his soul.

His hands shook on the grip of his staff as he peered around an outcropping of rock at the Venatori encampment that lay on the hillside below. Anticipation set his blood humming in his veins and his
heart pounding in his chest.

In the near distance the fortified camp sat nestled between two hills with a rocky cliff to its back. Perfectly situated for defense. But also boxed in. Behind those hideous metal barriers the Venatori erected wherever they went were set up a handful of tents in a rough circle. Occasionally a figure emerged from or disappeared into one of those tents. Idhren didn’t know how many people those tents could be hiding, but even so he knew they were outnumbered. He had with him only Dorian, Cassandra, and Cole. The Inquisition was spread out across the Plains dealing with this mess of a war so that it could be sorted quickly. And he didn’t want more people involved in his personal issues than necessary.

"Cole, can you tell how many there are?" Idhren asked. The boy had been staring at him unnervingly for the past several hours looking for all the world like he wanted to say something but wasn't certain how. For all Idhren knew he had said something, it wasn't the right thing, and so none of them remembered it. He hated that Cole probably knew exactly what thoughts were plaguing him right now.

Cole looked momentarily dismayed, before his expression turned thoughtful, head cocked to the side like a Mabari listening to orders. "Seven, I think," he answered eventually.

Idhren nodded, narrowing his eyes at the camp below them as he tried to make out all the figures there. At this distance he couldn't make out any specific features. There were three archers posted on the perimeter of the camp, keeping watch, and he had seen at least one man in gladiatorial armor walking among the tents. "How many mages?"

"Only one," Cole replied with only the shortest pause.

Only one. That made things easy for Idhren. "Good," he said, mostly to himself. "Cole, we'll need those archers dealt with. The closest one first, so the rest of us can get down there unnoticed. Dorian, Cassandra, take care of the other soldiers." His eyes narrowed as he finally spotted a figure in typical Tevinter traveling robes, as most of the Venatori mages wore. "The mage is mine."

"That seems ill advised," Cassandra commented, and she was probably right. Tactically, the order made no sense. But tactics and logic had nothing at all to do with this decision.

Idhren turned and fixed her with a gaze as cold and hard as stone. "The mage is mine," he repeated firmly, and turned away before he could see the expressions of shock and confusion on any of his companion's faces. "Cole, if you please. We'll head in as soon as that archer is down."

"Alright," the boy answered, and was gone in the blink of an eye, as though he had never been there in the first place. As Idhren watched, he reappeared behind the archer nearest their hiding spot just long enough to slit a throat, and then he was gone again.

Slipping from cover Idhren moved with a single-minded purpose. With no perimeter guard to shout a warning they came upon the Venatori encampment by surprise. His eyes locked on the Venatori mage as he reached for the Fade, wrenched a small boulder from the ground beside his feet and slammed it into the unsuspecting man's side. He went flying, staff knocked free from his hand as he tumbled to the ground several feet away. Idhren reached for the Fade again, grasped the Veil directly above the prone man and formed it into something nearly solid which he slammed down, pinning the mage in place on the ground.

Behind him something exploded and an unfamiliar voice screamed in terror. Idhren ignored it. His blood pounded in his ears so loud he could barely hear anything else.
He was close enough now to make out the mage's face. It was changed by time, lost all the lingering signs of youth, but Idhren still recognized him.

Kaeso Fidelis. Laetan. Son of a minor bureaucrat. Not a magister, but aspirations toward a brighter future for his family. A future earned by stepping on the backs of everyone below him.

Releasing his spell, Idhren placed a booted foot on Fidelis' chest. The man was winded, but still he grunted at the weight. He took one look up at Idhren, and even winded and shocked as he was the man reacted immediately by reaching for his staff. A tug on the Veil; Fidelis attempting to form a spell to defend himself, to throw Idhren off his chest so he could actually reach his staff. With a quick gesture and a tug of his own, Idhren dispelled the effect before it could fully form. Then he drove the blade of his staff through the flesh of Fidelis’ outstretched hand.

The man screamed. Blood welled from the wound, staining the grass red. His fingers twitched and spazemed. Idhren pushed the staff further into the soft ground below them. Far enough to hold it upright.

The screaming continued, gradually quieting from an earsplitting hollar to a hysterical litany of curses. Idhren crouched down and slapped his marked hand over Fidelis' mouth and jaw, muffling his cries as he forced the man to look into his face.

"Remember me?" Idhren growled, grinning in perverse joy as he stared down at the man below him. “Or is the Liberati slut not worthy of your thought?” He watched as the mix of anger and pain on Fidelis’ face turned to confusion, and then, very slowly, to recognition.

Another explosion, this one to Idhren’s right and far closer than the previous - close enough that he could feel the sudden blast of warm air and smell the smoke and charred flesh. It still went ignored.

“You do remember me,” Idhren smirked. Tiny sparks of static discharged at his fingertips, making the man in his grasp flinch, but not enough to hurt him. “Good. Then you know exactly what you did to deserve this.”

The man began struggling again in earnest. His free hand came up to grasp Idhren’s arm and try to pull it away from his face, to shove the elf off of him. Idhren was not physically very strong, nor did he weigh very much. Fidelis was still significantly larger than him in both height and mass. But Idhren was determined to make this man hurt as much as he had hurt Idhren. He put more of his weight on Fidelis’ chest. Felt something under his foot crack. The man gasped and cried out in pain, muffled against Idhren’s hand.

In the months since the conclave, Idhren had had plenty of time and opportunity to experiment with the Anchor’s abilities. He had filled journals with notes and diagrams, run experiments with Dagna and Your Trainer. He could almost control its abilities now. Or at least understand how it reacted to certain stimuli.

The tiniest thread of mana fed into the mark could be magnified tenfold. Idhren reached within himself and directed a trickle of power down his arm and into the glowing, pulsing foreign thing set in his palm.

Fidelis’ eyes went wide. He tried to pull away from Idhren but was pinned with nowhere to turn. His hand scrabbled at Idhren’s wrist and very nearly succeeded in dislodging him. The glow around Idhren’s hand intensified, and then the man began to scream.

The sound echoed across the now silent battlefield. Idhren watched in horrible satisfaction, unable to tear his eyes away even when he began to feel sick to his stomach from the stench of burning flesh.
His heart thundered and he could hear little else but that scream and the blood rushing in his ears. He felt almost disconnected from himself as the screaming eventually died. Fidelis writhed, twitched, and then fell limp. The corpse below him now was barely recognizable, charred and bloodied – burned from the inside out.

Hands grabbed at the back of Idhren’s armor, pulling at him, ripping his arm away from the remains of Fidelis’ face and yanking him away from the corpse.

Panic and rage sparked in equal measure. Idhren cried out in alarm and fought against the hands holding him. The grasping hands were too familiar. His skin crawled and he felt sick to his stomach. “No! Let go of me! Don’t touch me!” Idhren screamed, fighting against the hold until he was released. Then he stumbled a few steps away before stopping, hunched in on himself and breathing heavily.

“What has gotten into you?” Dorian demanded, expression drawn in horror when Idhren managed to look. Idhren did not reply. He could barely think, let alone articulate what was going on inside of him right now. “This is…” he gestured helplessly at the charred and mutilated corpse, uncharacteristically speechless. “Excessive, to say the least,” he managed eventually.

“He deserved it.” The words slipped free from Cole’s mouth in a pained whisper. He had his head bowed so that the brim of his hat completely obscured his face, but his hands fidgeted in front of him as he rocked back and forth. “Deserved to suffer like he made me suffer. How many others did he ruin? Torn robes and bruises on pale skin. Hurts too much to walk.”

“Stay out of my head!” Idhren snapped at him.

“Deserved it?” Cassandra sounded equal parts horrified and disgusted. “How could anyone possibly deserve this?”

“He raped me!” The words tore from Idhren’s throat, voice raw and broken. Tears were already streaming down his cheeks when he rounded on them, face twisted in rage and grief and shaking all over. “I was fifteen years old!” he exclaimed. “He took everything from me! And they did nothing!” His eyes were drawn to Dorian’s face, slack now with shocked understanding. Idhren couldn’t bear it. “He deserved this a thousand times over,” he snarled.

“Idhren--,” Dorian began, taking a cautious step toward him.

“Don’t,” Idhren bit out. “You weren’t there. You left. You were the only thing I had and you left me alone!” And that had been the worst of it. Not only had Idhren been left broken, used and worthless. He had been alone with that pain, reminded of his place as an elf in the Imperium with not a single sympathetic shoulder to cry on. Vulnerable, unprotected, and with a target painted on his back.

“I’m sorry.” In the silence that followed Idhren’s outburst Dorian’s soft voice was near deafening. Idhren tried desperately to cling to the fury, the rage, that had boiled in him and driven his violent attack. But it was bleeding away all too quickly as the adrenaline wore off, leaving him trembling, sobbing, feeling exactly like that broken child once more. “I’m sorry,” the man said again. “I was stupid.”

The last of the anger bled away, leaving Idhren full of nothing but grief. Grief for the innocence that had been stolen from him, for all the years of suffering it had brought, the broken trust and sleepless nights, the bitterness that followed. He hated himself still. For letting it happen – though how could he have stopped it? For letting it destroy him. For letting it haunt him still. He wanted to move on. He thought he had moved on.
Dorian took a step closer and tentatively reached out to him, and Idhren collapsed into his arms. The sobs that escaped him were loud, ugly things that wracked his entire body. He had cried so much over this already it was shocking that he could still feel anything at all, but the emotional wounds felt as fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

Dorian’s arms were gentle but firm around his shoulders as he held Idhren’s shaking form, one hand rubbing gentle circles on his back. “I’m so sorry,” he said again, barely a whisper against Idhren’s hair. “I should have been there for you. I was selfish. I never meant-,” the man cut himself off. It didn’t matter what he’d meant to do, only what had happened. His arms tightened around the elf’s trembling shoulders. He’d never before understood the madness that drove Alexius to tamper with time magic, but in this moment, watching Idhren break down in his arms, he’d never wanted to turn back time more and save him from this anguish. “I know better now,” he murmured. The words all came out without really thinking about them. “And I will never leave you alone again. I promise.”

A particularly loud sob escaped Idhren’s throat. His arms came up to wrap around Dorian’s chest, hands fisting in the fabric of his robes. How many times would he cry in front of this man, and yet Dorian was still here, comforting him and promising to stay. Even when he had seen Idhren in all of his worst moments. He pressed his face against the soft fabric of Dorian’s collar. Silk smooth and cool against the heated skin of his cheeks. He was certain he was getting tears and snot all over him, but Dorian never pushed him away.

Very gradually the force of his sobs lessened. The tears slowed and then stopped entirely. In the aftermath he felt burnt out. Throat raw, eyes stinging, and nose still stuffed. With deliberate thought he unclenched one hand from Dorian’s robes and brought it up to wipe the tear tracks from his cheeks. He must look an absolute fright at the moment, and was a little scared to look up into Dorian’s face. When he felt Dorian’s hand move off his back he half expected the man to step away, put distance between himself and the sniveling, pathetic mess that Idhren currently was. Instead, Dorian pushed Idhren’s disheveled hair out of his face, fingers carding through the thick strands as he smoothed them all back into place. Sniffling unattractively, Idhren turned his face up toward him.

"Feeling better?" Dorian asked, voice light though his brow was furrowed in concern.

Idhren opened his mouth to speak but his throat was still too tight to try and form sounds, so he closed it again.

The lines of concern on Dorian’s face deepened. "I’ll take that as a no," he murmured. With the same hand that had carded through Idhren’s hair he dug into the folds of his robe and produced a handkerchief. This he pressed into Idhren’s lax hand and nudged meaningfully toward his face. With movements still somewhat mechanical, Idhren wiped at his cheeks and nose until he felt like he was mostly clean and presentable again. When he offered the handkerchief back Dorian turned it down, "Keep it for now," he said softly. So Idhren tucked it into his armor.

"I think it’s time we got back to camp, don’t you?" the man asked.

Idhren nodded mutely, but he didn’t move. He couldn't bring himself to release Dorian quite yet. He still felt unsteady and out of sorts. Dorian’s presence was grounding and comforting.

"Come along, then," Dorian pivoted away from him, forcing Idhren to give up his death grip on the man. The loss was painful, but a moment later he felt Dorian’s arm wrap securely around his shoulders a split second before the man began walking, causing Idhren to nearly stumble before he fell into step.

Walking forced Idhren to take notice of the rest of the world once more. He realized that Cassandra and Cole were quite a ways away now. Not out of sight or out of earshot, but far enough away to
give Dorian and Idhren a sense of privacy while the elf broke down. He hadn't even been aware of them leaving.

Dorian led him out of the wreckage of the Venatori camp and toward where their friends waited. Cole was still rocking and fidgeting uncomfortable. He glanced over at Idhren as they approached. He opened his mouth, but Dorian cut him off before he could say anything. "Cole, now is not the time."

The boy cowed back shyly. "I just want to help," he said plaintively.

"Idhren, do you want his help?" Dorian asked.

Idhren shook his head. He knew that Cole might be able to help, as he had when Idhren was grieving for Tainan. But he didn't want it right now. He was not certain he could bear it right now, not while he was so raw.

"But it's so loud," Cole protested in dismay.

"If it's bothering you, then perhaps you should go ahead to the camp without us. Let everyone know we're on our way," Dorian suggested.

Cole shifted from foot to foot and wrung his hands in front of himself. He looked decidedly conflicted, but eventually he said, "Alright," and then disappeared.

Cassandra's expression was set in stone. She cast an inscrutable but studious glance at Dorian and Idhren, then looked off in the direction of the Inquisition's main camp in the area. "I suppose one of us should go keep an eye on him," she muttered, and began tromping across the fields without so much as a glance backward.

She wouldn't be able to get very far ahead of them no matter how sluggish Idhren felt at the moment. Still, he and Dorian waited a moment before the man nudged his shoulders and started them walking again. "She's quite a bit softer than she lets on, isn't she?" Dorian asked quietly. Idhren managed to crack half a smile and shrug with one shoulder. "Don't tell her I said that, though," Dorian added quickly.

By the time they made it back to camp Idhren no longer looked like he had been crying, but he was noticeably subdued. At least, Harding noticed and asked if he was alright. Idhren, still feeling emotionally exhausted, froze on the spot. The last thing he wanted was for his dirty laundry to be aired in front of the entire Inquisition. Harding might keep quiet, Cassandra and Cole as well, but there were so many people here, scouts and soldiers, who might overhear.

"I fear we got a bit careless this afternoon," Dorian answered before Idhren could even attempt to form words. "The Inquisitor accidentally got caught in our dear Seeker's spell purge while we were taking out that Venatori camp over the ridge. I'm certain you can imagine what a terribly unnerving sensation that can be. Rather like suddenly losing the ability to use your arms and being struck blind at the same time. But it will wear off in a bit and he'll be right as rain by morning, don't you worry."

It was a brilliant cover story, actually. Even non-mages knew that such abilities could all but cripple a mage. Idhren was familiar with the sensation, and Dorian's description was not at all exaggerated. Dorian would know as well. When it became clear that Corypheus had control of the Templar Order Idhren had ordered Cullen to ensure every mage they had in the field - Dorian included - was familiar with the feeling and capable of fighting through it. Because he still remembered vividly how terrified he had been the first time - completely unprepared and unable to fight without his magic. He would rather the Inquisition's agents learn the purge's nauseating effects in a controlled environment -
provided they hadn't dealt with it before.

And Harding bought the story hook, line, and sinker. Her eyes widened at Dorian's description and she even paled a little bit. "That sounds horrible," she said, and turned a sympathetic gaze on Idhren. "I'll tell everyone not to bother you unless it’s urgent," she said. "You get some rest, Inquisitor."

Idhren could only nod mutely. He tried to offer her a small smile of thanks, but wasn’t certain how well he managed it. Then he let Dorian lead him into their tent. Their bedrolls were already laid out, his pack and things sitting beside it untouched since they left this morning. And his staff lay on the ground beside that. Who had picked up his staff? Cassandra? Cole? Idhren hadn’t even been aware of it, his mind elsewhere. But he was grateful for whoever had remembered.

“Let’s get you out of this armor,” Dorian murmured, turning Idhren to face him. His fingers worked quickly, pulling off Idhren’s gloves, working buckles and belts until each piece was removed and set on the ground by the entrance. Then he gently pushed Idhren down onto the ground. The elf sat heavily on the end of his bedroll and let Dorian unlace and remove his boots, setting them aside with the rest of his clothing. Stripped down to nothing but his shirt and pants, Idhren lay down on his side, arms wrapped around himself and knees pulled up to his chest.

“I’m going to find us something to eat,” Dorian deposited his own staff on the ground beside his pack and rose to his feet once more. “I’ll be right back.”

Idhren just nodded and let his eyes fall shut. He felt the hesitation in Dorian’s stillness before eventually his footsteps led to the entrance of the tent and the rustling of fabric told of his departure. Now left alone with his thoughts, Idhren curled up even tighter and pulled his blanket over his shoulders. He tried to think of anything other than what had happened today, or what had happened so many years ago in the Circle. He wanted so badly to put all of that behind him, to forget it had happened and go through life like a normal person. Someone who hadn’t been ground up and spit out by a society that saw him as little more than a piece of meat.

The effort was not entirely successful. Because the aches of Idhren’s body reminded him of what he’d done only hours before. Every time he used the Anchor it made his hand hurt for the rest of the day. This was no different.

He wasn’t certain how long he lay there, lost in the silence of the camp and the whirlwind of his own thoughts. But eventually he heard the rustle of fabric and the sound of footsteps that signaled someone coming into the tent.

"Are you awake?" Dorian asked quietly. In response Idhren opened his eyes. He turned his head just enough to look up to where the man was crouched beside his bedroll. He had two bowls in hand, and he set one down beside Idhren’s head. "Feeling any better?" the man asked.

"No," Idhren mumbled. He watched the hopefulness slide off of Dorian's face and looked away from him. "I should feel better, shouldn't I?" he asked, not expecting any real answer. "He hurt me, and now he's dead. I should be happy or... or relieved, or anything. But I'm not."

He heard more than saw Dorian take a seat beside where he was laying. The man didn't say anything, just began eating, but Idhren could tell he was still listening.

"Maker knows how many other people he's hurt since me," Idhren continued quietly. "Now he can't hurt anyone else. I should be glad, so why don't I feel... anything?"

"I don't know," Dorian replied. He couldn't possibly begin to imagine what was going through Idhren's head right now. “Eat something,” he urged, nudging the bowl beside Idhren meaningfully.
“Maybe it will help.”

Idhren sighed. He raked a hand through his hair and rubbed it down over his face before forcing himself to sit up. With still trembling hands he took up the offered bowl and stared down into it. Stew, made of whatever could be foraged and hunted in the area. Dalish comfort food. Not that anyone had made this on purpose to soothe him; it was standard fare for a camp that had been here weeks already. Still, it was familiar and warm, and as Idhren spooned a bite into his mouth it began to wash away some of the hollow numbness in his chest. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess," he murmured, food forgotten after only a few bites. "I should be over this by now."

"I don't know that there's a time limit for recovering from something like that," Dorian commented quietly.

"It's been over ten years, Dorian," Idhren bit out. "But I still..." He stopped, unable to find the words to describe what he was feeling.

"You saw him in the Fade, didn't you?" Dorian asked. "The fear demons took his form."

Idhren shook his head. He didn't like remembering that experience, either. "The demon looked like... It looked like Gallus." It took conscious effort to get the words out. "His parents pulled him from the Circle after your duel. But Fidelis..." Gallus' words had stung the most, the way he'd bragged and belittled Idhren. "He stayed. And he liked having someone to push around."

"The... scars on your arm," Dorian began cautiously. "Did he do that?"

Of course he had seen them. He'd probably noticed the first time they slept together. Idhren appreciated that the man hadn't said anything then. "No," he could have lied, but what was the point? "Not directly, at least."

Dorian frowned, but did not ask for further explanation, and Idhren was grateful for that. "I'm sorry," he said for the umpteenth time that day.

"It's not your fault," Idhren replied. It was the fault of his attackers, of the society that told them their actions were acceptable, of a culture that saw him and his people as lesser, of the instructors who had seen fit not to punish them. Idhren used to hate every single human in Tevinter, but he knew they weren't all the same. Dorian had grown up in that same society, but he had turned out so differently.

Idhren stared down at the bowl of stew in his hands. He knew he should eat. He knew that he should probably feel hungry, but he had no appetite. He had no motivation to do anything except lie on the ground and feel sorry for himself. But he didn't want to do that, either. "I'm tired of feeling like this," he said suddenly. "I'm tired of it haunting me. I don't want it to effect me like this. I don't want to be this person anymore."

"I suppose it may have escaped your notice," Dorian said carefully. "But I'm actually rather fond of the person you are."

Idhren scoffed. He found that difficult to believe at the moment. "Look at me," he muttered bitterly. "I'm a wreck."

"You've had a bad day," Dorian reasoned.

"I've had a bad life," Idhren sighed.

And it felt, at times, as though he would never know anything else. Every time he thought he was close to finally having a life he could be happy with it was ripped away. He had lost everything and
everyone he had ever cared about. Everyone except Dorian, he realized. In fact, Dorian remained in his life despite Idhren's best effort at getting rid of him on multiple occasions. He'd told Dorian off, yelled at him, insulted him, argued with him, traveled to the other side of the world, and yet Dorian always showed up again. Always at exactly the best and worst time. And no matter how cruel Idhren had been to him on occasion, Dorian was still his friend. More than his friend. "Did you mean what you said before?"

"I've said a lot of things in my life, you'll have to be more specific," Dorian replied.

Idhren hesitated, suddenly shy. He feared coming off as too needy, too pathetic. That Dorian would realize what a mess he was, realize what a mistake it was to get involved with him, and break his heart all over again. But he needed to know. Because Dorian had never said 'I love you', he'd never made the promises Tainan had, or asked for the same commitment. Every step forward in their relationship was something that Idhren initiated, and a part of him still worried that Dorian didn't actually want to be with him. Not the way that Idhren wanted. Not forever. So he forced the words out of his mouth, quiet and nervous, "You won't leave me alone again?" He didn't want to be alone again.

"Oh, that," Dorian replied. His voice was carefully measured so as not to let out too much emotion. For one horrible moment Idhren thought the man was going to deny it, take back the promise, call it a lapse of judgment. "Yes, I did."

The admission shocked Idhren more than he had expected. And it made him happy for the first time since reading Fidelis' name on that list. "Really?" he couldn't stop himself from asking.

"Are you doubting me?" Dorian's voice was light, joking. Idhren knew that was how Dorian dealt with his emotions, but it wasn't what he needed to hear right now.

"Everyone I love dies." The words slipped out barely audible. Idhren slumped where he was sitting, gaze falling to the floor as his chin fell to his chest. "My family... Tainan... I don't want to lose anyone else."

He heard Dorian shift, move closer, and then he was easing the bowl of stew out of Idhren's hands and setting it aside. Still the elf did not look up. "Idhren," all the humor was gone from Dorian's voice when he spoke again, seated so close to Idhren now that their knees brushed. When Idhren dared to look up into his face he found Dorian looking uncharacteristically nervous, even shy. "I'm not terribly good at these sort of emotional conversations," the man said carefully, "As I'm certain you've realized by now. I haven't the faintest idea what I'm meant to say at times like this. It's not something they teach in Tevinter, evidently, and every time I try to help you I seem to do everything wrong. It's the one thing in life at which I don't excel."

"Not that you're wrong," Idhren said quietly, "But is there a point to this speech?"

"I'm getting to it," Dorian said curtly. "Be patient, this is not easy for me."

"Sorry," Idhren mumbled.

"No, no," Dorian sighed. "You've done nothing wrong. My point is: that no matter how badly I've mucked it all up in the past, I have always tried to do right by you."

Idhren remembered all of the times that Dorian had tried to help him in Tevinter. In the Circle, healing his bruises and offering friendship, but only where no one could see them. He had not looked at Idhren differently after what had been done to him. Idhren hadn't been able to appreciate it at the time, too traumatized and scared and angry to look past the surface of Dorian's actions. And Dorian
had done the same, unthinking of the consequences, the retaliation that Idhren had suffered on his behalf. They had both been such different people back then. Idhren used to hate him, for not having done more, or for having done too much, for not understanding the reality of Idhren's situation. But how could Dorian truly know anything about Idhren's life? They came from such different worlds, neither had been able to understand the other. But Idhren understood now, in hindsight, that despite his fumbling Dorian's intentions had been pure and good. He had tried, and Idhren was grateful that anyone had cared enough to do even that.

"You... once said you thought I was brave, for leaving Tevinter the way I did," Dorian continued carefully. It seemed to take conscious effort for him to talk about anything emotional without joking. "I don't know if that's true, but if so, then you must be even braver than I. You are the smartest and the strongest person that I have ever met and you deserve far better than what the world has put you through."

Idhren swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. He wasn't certain he could speak now even if he wanted to.

"The point I am trying to make," Dorian said finally. "Is that I care about you. Deeply. And though I may not always be very good at showing it, please do not doubt that. I want nothing more than for you to be happy, and I will stay by your side for as long as you'll have me," he finished with conviction. And then suddenly he looked dismayed, "But I've said something wrong. Why are you crying?" And Idhren was crying, just a few tears rolling down his face, but not because he was upset. "I'm sorry," Dorian said quickly, "I take everything back, you're terrible and I hate you."

Wiping the tears from his cheeks with the heel of his hand, Idhren laughed. The sound was so unexpectedly joyful it stopped Dorian's words in his throat. Shaking his head, Idhren looked up and offered him a watery smile. "I am happy," he said, though his voice was still somewhat choked by tears.

"Really?" Dorian asked in disbelief. "The crying would indicate otherwise."

Idhren laughed again, though more subdued this time. "I am," he assured, wiping at his eyes once more. He hadn't been a short while before, but Dorian's words, awkward and rambling though they had been, changed that. Dorian wasn't good at talking about his feelings, that was clearly evident, but Idhren found it oddly endearing. Perhaps it was watching the man stumble over his words when he was usually so eloquent, or simply knowing that the stumbling meant he was being truly honest for once. "I love you." The words broke free of Idhren's lips so easily. He held them back so often for fear the declaration made Dorian uncomfortable.

It still flustered the man. He chuckled nervously and Idhren liked to think he was blushing a little, but in the dim light of the tent and with Dorian's darker skin it was difficult to tell. "Well," he said without meeting Idhren's eyes, "That's good. I'm glad."

So he still couldn't say it back. That was disappointing, even if it was expected. Idhren could wait, he could be patient with Dorian the way that Tainan had been patient with him. And if words made him uncomfortable there were other ways to show how he felt. Leaning forward, Idhren wrapped his arms around Dorian's shoulders and pulled the man into a hug. "Thank you," he murmured.

Dorian's arms wrapped around his waist, pulling Idhren closer to him until Idhren was practically sitting in his lap. "I'm not entirely certain what I've done," he admitted, "But I'm glad it helped. You are feeling better now, I assume?"

"Yes," Idhren sighed. Not completely better, but less miserable than he had been. "I'm glad you're here. Thank you... For loving me even though I'm so fucked up."
Dorian's arms tightened around his waist, almost painfully tight but comforting in their security. In
the reassurance that Dorian did not find him unlovable no matter what he'd been through. "I like you
fine just the way you are," the man said, barely loud enough for Idhren to hear. "I wouldn't have you
any other way, amatus."

The final word was barely more than a whisper. So soft that Idhren wasn’t entirely certain he’d heard
it correctly. But his heart skipped a beat in his chest and his arms tightened around Dorian’s
shoulders. “Amatus,” he repeated, unable to keep from smiling.
Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts

The Old Gods will call to you,
From their ancient prisons they will sing.
Dragons with wicked eyes and wicked hearts,
On blacken'd wings does deceit take flight,
The first of My children, lost to night.
- Canticle of Silence 3:6

Halamshiral, Orlais, Guardian, 9:42 Dragon

The finery of the Winter Palace was nauseatingly familiar. Oh, the styles and colors were different, all white and gold and delicate lace and filigree where Tevinter had been all dark colors and harsh angles, but the message was the same. A display of wealth and power like only human nobility could manage.

Their invitation came at the offer of the Grand Duke, himself the instigator of this conflict and likely attempting to curry favor with the newest power in hopes the Inquisition would back his bid for the throne. Idhren had no particular interest in doing so. He didn’t trust the man as far as he could throw him – and he was twice Idhren’s size - but neither did he trust Celene. They were both typical power-hungry nobility, as far as he was concerned. Their power squabbles didn’t concern him so long as they did not unwittingly walk right into Corypheus’ trap.

It rankled, somewhat, to be thrust back into this arena after all that Idhren had done to escape it. And even in this starched formal wear he had already once been mistaken for a servant simply for the shape of his ears. It was exactly the same. They dressed it up prettier, fake smiles hidden behind even faker masks, hid their words behind hands and a language that Idhren did not speak, but it was the same. All human nobles were the same.

"The Game is like Wicked Grace played to the death," Josephine had warned before they arrived. A sentiment to which Idhren could only reply with a wry smile.

"I'm from Tevinter, Josephine," he reminded. "I doubt anything Orlais tries to throw at me will compare to the Magisterium."

And so far, Idhren had been correct.

Polite to his face, Idhren was still aware of the whispers behind his back.

"That's the Inquisitor? A knife-eared savage?"

"Why would Andraste send an elf in our hour of need?"

"I expected he would be taller."

The last one rankled all the more because someone had had the bright idea to tell the cobbler to pad the inside of these boots and he was, at current, a good two inches taller than usual.

Back in Tevinter, Idhren would have stayed at an event like this no more than a handful of hours, most of them spent 'holding up a wall', as Dorian had so frequently teased him of doing. But he had none of the anonymity he'd had back then to allow him to slip away unnoticed. In fact, the attention
he was garnering simply for existing was making it difficult to do what he had come here to do. Namely, to find and stop a Tevinter assassin – a difficult enough task in the first place.

Even gathering information was proving difficult. Everyone in attendance was wrapped up in their own politics – the civil war, the Inquisition – or the even more petty squabbles in their personal lives – the amount of gossip that Idhren had heard about clothes was astounding. Yet somehow Idhren had managed to make all the rounds, greet everyone of note, provide both small talk and serious conversation, without ever once dropping the polite smile plastered on his face. He stood tall and proud, impeccable posture in his impeccable uniform, nodded respectfully but did not bow, was polite and witty and never once spoke even a veiled insult.

It made him want to vomit.

Dorian joked about the grand ball resembling any similar event in Tevinter so closely that it only lacked for blood magic and sacrificial slaves, but Idhren saw more blood and death that evening than he ever had in Tevinter. Especially in the servants’ quarters.

“Friggin’ poncy noble shites,” Sera swore furiously when they discovered the first body lying cold and bloodied on the floor. No one involved in conspiracy, not a guard, just an elven servant in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Idhren agreed.

In hindsight, he should have suspected the Grand Duchess much earlier. But in his defense everyone he spoke to was absolutely horrid. Even Briala, whom Idhren had wanted so much to admire and sympathize with, was only interested in her own power and her scandalous affair with the empress. And by the end of the evening he was exhausted enough that he very nearly laughed in Celene’s face when she railed against Gaspard. As though she was any better.

The only reason she was still in power was because she was a known variable. Corypheus wanted the empress dead and chaos in her wake. Idhren had done nothing except maintain the status quo.

Let them go back to their petty bickering and power squabbles when the world was not ending. Idhren had more pressing concerns.

Pressing concerns that could not be dealt with while he was being paraded about like a show dog.

He still felt the want to vomit. To hit something. To set the whole palace ablaze and watch it collapse into dust.

Instead he fled. Escaped from the oppressive atmosphere of the ballroom; the glare of torchlight on gold filigree and the stench of too much perfume. The cold night air was a welcome balm as he stepped out onto an abandoned balcony. The sounds of the ballroom still drifted out to him as he stood at the railing looking out across the manicured gardens stretched out below, muffled voices and faint music. Now that he was removed from those sounds himself they were vaguely comforting.

“Ah, I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist impersonating the architecture indefinitely,” Dorian’s voice floated out from the balcony door, soon followed by the man himself.

Idhren looked over his shoulder and watched as the man crossed the balcony and came to a stop beside him at the railing. “Old habits die hard, it seems,” he commented.

“Evidently,” Dorian replied. “And even when you’re the hero of the hour,” he teased, “You should be celebrating while you can! Although perhaps it’s for the better. There was an ancient dowager looking for you. Said she had twelve daughters. I told her you’d left already.”
“Thank you for that,” Idhren replied, though the news shocked him. Yes, the rank of Inquisitor made for fine marriage prospects, but otherwise Idhren was hardly anything a human noblewoman should want for even the youngest of her daughters. He was a mage, an elf, and shorter than even most human women to boot.

“No smart comeback?” Dorian asked in surprise. “You must be more tired than I thought.”

Idhren hung his head and sighed. “This is exactly what I hated most about Tevinter,” he muttered. “Politics. All these people with their fancy clothes and their empty platitudes, praising me to my face while they call me ‘knife-ear’ behind my back,” he spat. “Getting mistaken for a servant.”

No wonder he had escaped as soon as he was able, then. Dorian was also vividly reminded of any magister’s salon, and Idhren had always disliked those occasions far more. “What you need is a distraction,” he said, quickly changing the subject. This was not the place to be dwelling on unhappy memories. Not now they could finally enjoy the festivities properly. As Idhren watched him curiously, Dorian stepped away from the railing and bent at the waist in a shallow bow as he held one hand out to Idhren. “Let’s dance.”

Tired and disillusioned as he was, Idhren’s heart still fluttered slightly in his chest. He had turned down a small handful of invitations to dance throughout the evening, only accepting the Grand Duchess’ because one doesn’t turn down royalty if they value their health. That had been his first and only experience dancing in public in his entire life. Oh, there had been lessons, of course, as soon as he was officially Canidius’ apprentice – just enough to ensure that he didn’t embarrass the magister should someone inexplicably ask him for a dance. No one in Tevinter ever had, and the women here only asked so that they could be seen with the Inquisitor. He had never expected anyone to actually want to dance with him. “Are you serious?” he asked.

“I never joke,” Dorian replied quite seriously.

Idhren snorted a small laugh at the obvious lie, but he pushed himself upright and away from the railing, taking Dorian’s outstretched hand and letting the man pull him in close. “Honestly, I was hoping you would ask,” he admitted.

“Good thing one of us has a little initiative,” Dorian smiled. He slid a hand around Idhren’s waist as the elf stepped in close, and then began moving them in time to the faint strains of music filtering out from the ballroom.

Idhren fell in easily. If he’d been out of practice before, the week leading up to this event had ensured that he was perfectly confident in his dancing abilities. And it was even easier when he didn’t have to lead. He relaxed in Dorian's arms, tension leaving his shoulders that had been there all night. Finally, after so much politics, so much fighting and arguing, he was able to relax a little and enjoy himself.

"You seem taller than usual," Dorian commented softly after a long moment.

Idhren frowned, what little good mood the dance had brought him gone. "Someone thought it would be funny to have the cobbler pad these boots," he grumbled.

Dorian laughed, because it was ridiculous and barely noticeable, and yet of course Idhren would be furious about it. "With the best of intentions, I'm sure," he tried to sooth.

"That doesn't make it alright," Idhren mumbled. "I know I'm short. They don't need to rub it in."

"You're still dashing," Dorian said. "I don't believe I've had a chance to tell you that yet tonight. But
you look absolutely ravishing in this uniform."

That brought a smile back to the elf's face. "Well thank you," he breathed, looking up through his lashes at Dorian. "You look rather spectacular yourself."

"I always look spectacular," Dorian sniffed.

"Are you saying I don't?" Idhren asked.

"You've made a few questionable wardrobe choices," the man replied. "But I don't hold it against you."

Idhren rolled his eyes. "That mustache is a questionable wardrobe choice," he shot back.

"Honestly," Dorian sighed, "What do you have against my mustache?"

"It's ridiculous," Idhren told him. "Someday I'm going to shave it off in your sleep."

"You wouldn't," Dorian said confidently, turning his nose up. "Secretly, you love it."

"You can continue to think that, I won't stop you," Idhren chuckled. "But I will promise to never shave it off on one condition," he added. Dorian raised an eyebrow curiously. "You dance with me in the ballroom." Dorian's expression turned from curious to surprised, and maybe even a little bit hesitant. "Yes, I would like to dance with the evil magister in full view of the Orlesian court," Idhren confirmed, repeating the same phrase that Dorian had used to turn him down earlier in the evening.

"People will talk." Dorian tried to keep his voice light, but there was still a thread of anxiety lanced through it.

"Let them," Idhren replied. He had had enough of hiding and pretending for the evening. "Didn't you say I should be celebrating?" He felt much better after this small, private dance. It had been a pleasant respite that allowed him to recover from the stress and frustration of the evening. He could be himself around Dorian. He'd always been able to be himself around Dorian.

Over the course of their conversation their movements had slowed until they were barely doing more than swaying back and forth to the rhythm of the music, but now Dorian stopped moving entirely as he looked down at Idhren. As Idhren looked up into his face he tried to figure out what the man was thinking. Dorian had always been concerned about his reputation, and more recently about Idhren's budding notoriety. Idhren understood that, he really did. He knew what sort of things Tevinter must have drummed into the man's head, especially being upper class, and he'd heard his fair share of whispers about the evil magister of the Inquisition. But they were wrong: Tevinter for telling Dorian his attractions were shameful, and the gossips for saying he was a liar and a spy.

"I don't care what people say," Idhren breathed. He slid his hand from Dorian's shoulder to the nape of his neck. "Let them talk. They don't know you. Or me. They don't matter."

The laugh that escaped Dorian's lips was vaguely forced, as though he couldn't quite believe what Idhren was saying. He let their joined hands fall to his side, but kept his hold on Idhren. "You may be the most courageous person I have ever met, do you know that?"

“It’s just dancing, Dorian,” Idhren chuckled. “It’s hardly the end of the world.”

“No,” Dorian agreed. “I imagine we’re safe from that for at least the rest of the evening.” He looked down at Idhren’s hopeful smile, those wide purple eyes staring up at him with such affection. How could he deny such a simple request? “Very well, have it your way,” he relented with a sigh. But
though he acted like it was some great chore his heart thundered in his chest. Rumors about their relationship were one thing; this would be proving them all true.

Idhren grinned as soon as Dorian agreed. He wasn’t thinking about the rumors or the whispers that would follow if they were seen in public together like this. This entire evening he had been miserable and frustrated, and for a brief moment now he was happy. He wanted to stay that way for as long as possible. He wanted to be himself with the man he loved. “Come on, then,” he smiled, stepping away from Dorian but keeping their hands clasped together. Tugging gently on their joined hands, Idhren was pleased when Dorian easily followed him back into the ballroom.

The atmosphere changed almost immediately after stepping indoors. But it felt slightly less oppressive with Dorian standing beside him. Within the ballroom people were carrying on as though there had not been an assassination attempt an hour earlier, as though the servants’ quarters were not painted red with blood, as though the Grand Duchess were not currently locked in chains and under heavy Inquisition guard. He would have expected more disquiet, more lingering fear, hushed whispers about what had nearly happened. Was Orlesian nobility really so carelessly insipid? Or were they all just incredible actors, pretending they were unfazed by the events of the evening?

Not for the first time in his life Idhren wished he were that good an actor. It didn’t matter, however. That courtly need to be seen as perpetually pleasant and emotionless was not a strength. How much of tonight’s trouble could have been avoided if people were honest with each other?

“You’re really certain about this?” Dorian asked as they paused at the bottom of the stairs leading down to the dance floor. Before them, couples in bright colors and wide dresses spun to the ending strains of a waltz.

Idhren turned his face up toward Dorian and offered him a confident smile that felt like the first true thing to cross his lips that evening. “Of course I am,” he replied smoothly. And then, to soothe Dorian’s nerves, he added “And think of how jealous everyone will be of you, dancing with the Inquisitor.”

Dorian’s lips quirked up in a smile. “You know exactly what I like to hear,” he replied.

The last notes of music trailed off and dancing couples slowly began to file off the floor. A moment later a new tune started up. Another waltz, unsurprisingly. Some of the original dancers remained on the floor, others stepped in and Idhren offered his hand to Dorian. “Would you care to lead?” he asked.

“I suppose that’s easier,” Dorian replied. He accepted Idhren’s hand and led him onto the dance floor where he smoothly pulled the elf into the familiar steps of the dance. “With you being so much shorter,” he teased.

“You’re an ass,” Idhren glared up at him playfully, but the expression wouldn’t stick. He could barely stop himself from grinning now, a stark contrast to how he had felt only a short time ago.

“And yet here you are,” Dorian chuckled.

“I never said I had very high standards,” Idhren teased.

“You wound me!” Dorian gasped in mock offense, but his hand squeezed Idhren’s tighter as they moved across the floor.

Idhren laughed. “I’ll make it up to you,” he promised in a low voice. “Tonight.”

Dorian raised an eyebrow and smiled slyly. “Promises, promises, Inquisitor,” he murmured. “I’ll hold
The empress offered the Inquisition rooms in the Winter Palace for the night as thanks for their aid in saving her life. But Idhren had spent too much time that evening running through those same halls chasing assassins and trying not to imagine how many of the bloodstains on the floor belonged to innocents. He thanked her politely, but refused the offer. They had perfectly suitable accommodations already arranged in town - one of Josephine’s connections had graciously offered use of their own mansion for a few days – and Idhren was eager to put the excessive finery of the palace behind him.

The various members of the Inquisition slowly streamed back over the course of the night when they lost interest in the festivities at the Winter Palace now the business had concluded, festivities which might well continue on until morning if they went anything like similar parties in Tevinter. Idhren made his escape shortly after that shared dance in the main ballroom. Of course, Dorian left with him.

Although he had been prepared for the whispers that had inevitably followed such a public display, they were still difficult to bear. Idhren had heard enough whispers behind his back that evening, and he had no desire to subject himself to more. Or to subject Dorian to them when it was something that obviously upset him.

So they remained only long enough to have another glass of wine, steal a few hors d'oeuvres for the road, and let their few remaining companions know of their departure before slipping out the main gates with minimal fanfare.

Dorian suggested a coach, but Idhren insisted on walking. Even exhausted as he was, the fresh air was far preferable at the moment to even the interior of a carriage. And their borrowed house was not terribly far. They walked mostly in silence, fingers entwined as they passed down deserted streets.

The mansion was dark and quiet when they arrived. A servant awaited in the front hall, dozing in a chair beside the door at this late hour but up and alert as soon as there was movement nearby. With an understanding smile Idhren waved off their attentions and pulled Dorian deeper into the house. Although positive they weren't the only ones to have retired back to the mansion already - Cassandra and Cullen hadn't been able to get out fast enough - they did not encounter anyone in the halls. Still, something about sneaking about after dark and trying not to alert anyone to their presence made Idhren feel a bit like a giddy schoolboy. Perhaps because he'd never had this experience as a child.

"Where are you leading me, Inquisitor?" Dorian asked, voice an exaggerated whisper as they moved through the quiet halls. "The guest wing is the other way."

Idhren chuckled under his breath. Looking back over his shoulder he smirked at Dorian. "The Herald of Andraste doesn't stay in a guest room like you plebeians," he teased. And while this was a large mansion it wasn't large enough to house the Inquisitor's entire inner circle in only the guest rooms. So the highest ranked members had been given use of the family's own quarters.

Dorian gasped melodramatically. "Don't tell me you're staying in our magnanimous host's own quarters. How scandalous!"

"Scandalous?" Idhren asked. "No. Think of the honor, the prestige, of telling everyone that the Lord
Inquisitor stayed in your winter home!" They rounded a corner and there at the end of the hall was their destination. Idhren's footsteps quickened eagerly. "On the night he saved the empress! Ah, they will brag for years!"

Dorian laughed as Idhren pulled open the large, filigreed door that admitted them to the mansion's master suite. "So you are doing this out of the goodness of your heart, then?" he teased.

"A favor for a favor, Dorian," Idhren tsked. "Isn't that what politics is all about?"

"I never thought I would accuse you of being politically astute," Dorian said. As soon as they were inside the room he shut the door behind them, then he pulled Idhren to him, easily spinning the elf and pressing his smaller body up against the door. Idhren's breath hitched a moment and he felt his pulse quicken. "But speaking of favors," he purred, "I believe you promised me something earlier tonight."

"Oh, and I fully intend to deliver," Idhren assured him. He slid a hand around the back of Dorian's neck and used that to anchor himself as he rose up on his toes to capture the man's lips in a brief kiss. "Just let me get out of these fancy clothes first. It would be a shame to get them dirty, don't you think?"

Dorian's eyes ran down Idhren's form, taking in how he looked in the crisp uniform once more. "I suppose it would be," he agreed, if only so that he could see Idhren in the uniform again in the future.

With a smile full of lurid promise, Idhren dropped his heels back to the floor. He slipped under Dorian's arm and past him into the room, discarding articles of clothing as he crossed the floor toward the bed. Gloves, belt, sash, and he paused at the bedside as he unbuttoned the jacket. "Is it rude to have sex on a borrowed bed?" Dorian wondered aloud.

Idhren laughed as he dropped his jacket to the floor and fell back onto the plush mattress. "You say that as though you've never done it before."

"And what would you know about that?" Dorian asked.

"Servants talk, Dor-i-an," Idhren sing-songed. "And slaves have all the best gossip. Not that they would share it with you." He lifted his leg and attempted to pull off a boot without sitting up, without much luck.

"I feel as though I should be offended," Dorian complained. He'd crossed over to the bed as well and began depositing his clothing atop the trunk that sat at the foot rather than all over the floor as Idhren seemed perfectly content doing. "Why shouldn't they share it with me?"

Idhren took one look at him and burst out laughing. He succeeded finally in getting one boot off and tossed it onto the floor. "Oh, my poor, spoiled Altus," he cooed, beginning the process again on his second boot. "How little you understand."

"So you know the dirty secrets of everyone in the magisterium, then?" Dorian asked. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Not everyone," Idhren huffed, continuing to struggle with his boot. "Only you."

Undressed from the waist up, Dorian slipped out of his own boots with far more ease than Idhren was having and walked over to help yank the elf's remaining boot off. It was heavier than expected, hitting the ground with a surprising thud when he let it drop. Maybe they really had put extra lifts in
the soles like Idhren claimed. "Only me?" he asked. Now that Idhren was stripped down to his undershirt and breeches Dorian let his eyes rake over the elf's form once more, laid out across the bedding as he was. "I don't know if I should be scandalized or flattered."

"Both?" Idhren suggested, grinning up at him.

"Well I suppose you're the only dirty secret I'm keeping these days," Dorian mused. "Though it's hardly secret anymore."

"It never was, really," Idhren replied. He stretched like a cat against the silk covers, undershirt riding up to show a glimpse of a flat stomach. "Now," he purred, looking up at Dorian through half-lidded eyes as his legs fell apart invitingly. "Are you going to come ravish me or not? I'm waiting."

"So demanding," Dorian complained, but he did not need to be told twice. With a hand on Idhren's hip he climbed onto the bed. Moments later Idhren's hands were on his shoulders, pulling him down impatiently into a heated kiss.

As Idhren's sweat-damp skin cooled in the aftermath he shifted, slowly pulling away from Dorian. Sliding out from under the man's arm he moved to the edge of the bed and sat up.

"Where are you going?" the man grumbled, reaching out for him.

"Clothes," Idhren replied simply. He surveyed the pile on the floor as he swung his legs off the mattress.

Behind him, Dorian sighed. "Leave it," the man said. "I don't understand why you insist on getting dressed again right away. Honestly, you act like I don't want to see you naked."

"Maybe I don't want to see me naked," Idhren mumbled. He spotted his smallclothes on the floor and stood up, retrieving and pulling them on quickly. His undershirt came next, pulled on over his head. When he turned back toward the bed it was to find Dorian watching him, hair beautifully mussed and expression inscrutable. "What?" he asked uncomfortably.

"You're really that uncomfortable with how you look?" the man asked. He held up the covers invitingly and Idhren slowly climbed back into bed.

He lay down beside Dorian without touching him. "You wouldn't understand," he mumbled, "You're..." he gestured to the man's body, "Perfect."

"I am, yes," Dorian agreed. "But you must know that I like you just the way you are."

"I don't want to talk about it," Idhren grumbled, burying his face in the plush pillows so he wouldn't have to look at Dorian. It wasn't about Dorian or knowing that the man was still attracted to him regardless of his anatomy. It was knowing that his body would never look the way he wanted it to, the way a man's body was supposed to look. He may have accepted that this was what he would look like for the rest of his life, but he didn't have to be happy about it.

"Very well," Dorian sighed. "I apologize for ruining the mood," he added, then wrapped an arm around Idhren's waist and pulled the elf's petite body closer to him once more.
Idhren allowed himself to be manhandled until Dorian was pressed up against his back so close Idhren could feel the warmth of his body through his clothes. He relaxed back into the embrace of secure, protective arms around his waist and lips against the back of his head. "It’s fine," he whispered into the darkness of the room.

Dorian's arms tightened briefly around his waist. The man bent his head and pressed a single open mouthed kiss against Idhren's neck before settling comfortably again. "For what it’s worth," he murmured against Idhren’s hair, "I think you’re perfect."

Smiling softly, Idhren lay a hand over Dorian’s where it rested against his stomach and squeezed gently. "Thank you, amatus," he said quietly.

Dorian just hummed in acknowledgement, his breath ruffling Idhren’s hair slightly and tickling the tip of his ear. The elf let his eyes fall closed. Outside the sky was already beginning to lighten with the first rays of dawn as they both finally fell asleep.

The following morning saw preparations for the Inquisition's return to Skyhold. Although it was nearly afternoon by the time Idhren and Dorian crawled out of bed. After a quick bath to wash off the excess of the night before, Idhren dressed and began collecting the various pieces of his uniform to pack away for the trip. It was while he was folding up his jacket that he rediscovered the weight in the inside pocket and remembered the one thing he’d forgotten to do the night before. The reminder stopped him in the middle of his task, fingers feeling the edges of the object through the fabric. He glanced over at Dorian, who appeared to be nearly finished fixing his hair.

This was something Idhen had waffled over significantly before deciding he should do it the night of the ball, only to have it slip his mind entirely in the midst of everything. Did he admit he’d forgotten and do it now? Or wait for another opportune meaningful moment? What if one never came?

"Dorian," he said, not allowing himself to feel anxious about this any longer than necessary.

"Yes?" The man didn't look away from the mirror he was using to ensure the ends of his mustache were even.

"I have something for you," Idhren replied, withdrawing the small object from the jacket and letting the garment fall into the open trunk at his feet. "I meant to give it to you last night but it slipped my mind."

That drew Dorian's attention. He turned away from the mirror and looked across the room at Idhren curiously. "Something for me?" he asked. "A gift? What have I done to deserve such treatment?"

"Well, it was sort of yours to begin with," Idhren replied. He crossed quickly over to the vanity that Dorian was using and held out his hand. The amulet took up most of his palm, gold glinting in the early afternoon sun that streamed in through the windows. The Pavus house crest was only one of many that Idhren had been forced to memorize as Canidius' apprentice, but one of very few that he actually remembered to this day.

Dorian stared at the object in his hand for a long moment, stunned into speechlessness. "That’s..." he began, then cut himself off. "How did you...? I never told you about this."

"Leliana," Idhren answered, as though that explained everything.
"Of course," Dorian scoffed. But he stood up and carefully plucked the amulet out of Idhren's palm and held it in his own hands as delicately as though it were some priceless artifact. In a way, it was. "There's not a single thing that woman doesn't know. But why did she tell you?" he asked, then shook his head and continued before Idhren could answer, "No, never mind, I suppose it doesn't matter," he huffed.

"You don't sound very happy," Idhren said hesitantly. He knew he'd gone behind Dorian's back about this, but he'd wanted it to be a surprise. A good surprise. Dorian had wanted this back, hadn't he? Idhren hadn't completely misread the situation?

"I never wanted you to find out about this," Dorian sighed in frustration. "I got myself into this mess, I wanted to get it back on my own."

"Why did you sell it in the first place?" Idhren asked. The question had been nagging at him since he'd learned of the situation. "You know what someone could do with an Altus birthright."

"Of course I know," Dorian said peevishly. "I'm not an idiot. But when I left Tevinter I was desperate, and angry. I wanted nothing more than to divest myself of anything related to my family. It was foolish to sell it, childish, even. I know you think Tevinter should all fall into the sea, but it's still my home and this is... Well it's likely all I've got left. You must think I'm foolish and sentimental."

"There's nothing wrong with being foolish and sentimental," Idhren argued.

The expression on Dorian's face seemed to say that he didn't entirely believe that. "And you went and got it for me," he huffed. "Now I'm in your debt."

Idhren frowned. In his debt? That wasn't his intention at all. "Dorian you don't owe me anything," he protested. "I was trying to help."

"Oh that's rich coming from you," Dorian sneered.

Idhren's mouth fell open in shock. He'd been uncertain how the gift would be received, but this was going far worse than he'd ever feared. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"You went behind my back to get this," Dorian accused, gesturing with a fist clutched around the Birthright. "What did you have to do to get it, anyway? That merchant wouldn't take my coin I doubt he'd take yours either."

"I wanted it to be a surprise!" Idhren exclaimed. "I wanted to do something nice! What's the fucking point in having all this power if I can’t use it to do one good thing for the only person in the whole damn world that I care about?"

"That's exactly the problem," Dorian snapped back. "Anyone intelligent would cozy up to the Inquisitor, it would be foolish not to. He'll open doors, get you whatever you want, shower you with gifts and power. That's what they'll say, you know. I'm the evil magister who's using you."

"Fuck them, then," Idhren snarled. "They don’t know anything." But he wasn't going to stay here and argue if Dorian was only going to be stubborn and ungrateful. He turned on his heel and began heading for the door. "I'm leaving," he said curtly, although he hadn't finished packing. "I'll see you downstairs."

"Idhren," Dorian called after him. The elf didn’t stop, so Dorian was forced to chase after him. "Amatus, wait," he called, reaching out to grab Idhren’s arm when he got close enough. It worked to stop him, but if anything it only made him that much angrier. Tugging his arm free of Dorian’s grasp
Idhren rounded on the man and scowled up at him. “Forgive me,” the man said quickly, before Idhren could shout at him or run away again. “I’m apparently an ass at accepting gifts.”

“You’re an ass at a lot of things,” Idhren sniped.

“So you are constantly reminding me,” Dorian quipped in return, and then fell serious once more. “I am grateful. And I will repay you for this.”

Idhren calmed gradually, though he couldn’t help still feeling a little bitter that the gift wasn’t better received. “You don’t owe me,” he said reticently. “If anything, it’s the opposite. I wanted to do something for you,” he admitted. “Because I know I’m… difficult to deal with sometimes. But you’ve always been there for me, even when I’ve been cruel to you.”

“An admission that you aren’t infallible?” Dorian laughed softly. “Are you feeling well? Still drunk from last night? Should we stay here another day?”

“Yes, very funny,” Idhren grumbled. “And you’re welcome,” he added, “But don’t go losing it again, it wasn’t easy to get back.”

“What did you have to do to get your hands on it?” Dorian asked curiously.

Idhren sighed and pulled a disgusted face. “Influence mongering. He wanted me to pull the right strings to get him into a merchant’s guild. But don’t worry,” he suddenly smirked deviously, “I convinced him to change his mind.”

“What did you do?” Dorian asked with mild concern.

“Nothing,” Idhren declared innocently. “I simply suggested that I could destroy his social standing with a single word, that’s all. Honestly, I’ve seen slaves who are better at blackmail.”

For a brief moment Dorian stared at him, then he threw back his head and laughed. “Oh, you are glorious,” he said when the laughter subsided. “I almost wish I had been there to see the look on his face. They never expect that from an elf.”

“Destroying the low opinions that pompous shemlen have of me and my people is one of very few joys left in my life,” Idhren replied.

“Then I shan’t deprive you of it,” Dorian chuckled.
**His Heart Was Strong**

Though stung with a hundred arrows,

Though suffering from ailments both great and small,

His Heart was strong, and he moved on.

- Unknown Verse, Chant of Light

**Skyhold, Drakonis, 9:42 Dragon**

The return to Skyhold following the grand ball was a relief. And a respite following the many weeks of travel and fighting that had come before.

But they had exhausted everything of Corypheus’ plans Idhren and Dorian had learned in Redcliffe. His next move was a mystery, and that left Idhren feeling uncomfortable and on edge. Idhren did realize that they had managed to thwart the would-be god’s plans largely be being one step ahead of him at both Adamant and the Winter Palace. They had no such advantage now.

There was nothing to act on save the vague suppositions and unsubstantiated theories brought by the Inquisition’s newest addition – Empress Celene’s arcane advisor. The Lady Morrigan – although Idhren doubted she was nobility in any sense – claimed to know why Corypheus was having his people plunder Elven ruins across the Dales.

She pointed them to the uncharted wilderness of the Arbor Wilds in the south, and spoke of an Elvhen temple within. Perhaps one of the only ruins left unspoiled by human hands.

Idhren sent scouts to investigate her claim, and to track the movements of Corypheus’ troops in the area. But it would take weeks for those scouts to find anything and report back to Skyhold, and in the mean time Idhren had nothing to do wait and try to distract himself from the anticipation.

Thankfully, there was much to distract himself with.

Following the ball at the Winter Palace all of Orlais was apparently now of the opinion that the Inquisition was deserving of their full support. Because apparently being the only person around who was not completely inept made the Inquisitor a hero. This wouldn’t necessarily be a problem except that every Orlesian noble who hadn’t openly pledged their support beforehand was now scrambling to make up for the perceived failure. And as such, Skyhold was being inundated with gifts and diplomats at a rate he hadn’t seen since the Inquisition first arrived here.

Josephine’s desk was piled high with correspondence going momentarily ignored in favor of dealing with the not insignificant pile of material gifts currently taking up a corner of her office.

“How many representations of Andraste do people think we need?” Idhren asked. He was looking down at three separate paintings of scenes from the Chant of Light currently propped up against the wall. There were also two statues, each as tall as Idhren himself, and a work of stained glass that seemed to be missing at least two thirds of it’s original self.
From his seat lounging in a chair usually occupied by ambassadors and nobility, Dorian commented, “I imagine for some people there will never be enough. And the one on the left is hideous, it should be burned.”

“I am tempted to agree,” Josephine admitted. Even she could not quite hide her distaste for the painting in question. “It is, however, the work of Lord Battier’s youngest daughter.”

Idhren groaned. He didn’t know who that was, but anyone with ‘lord’ in front of their name tended to be touchy. “And he’ll be terribly offended if we happen to misplace it, I suppose?”

“Quite,” Josephine confirmed.

“Are we not equally offended that he’d force us to look at it?” Dorian asked. “That’s certainly the sort of painting I would give if I wanted to insult someone.”

“Can we donate it all somewhere?” Idhren asked. Because he wasn’t about to hang it in the main hall, or even hide it in a little-used guestroom. “A small chantry, perhaps? Somewhere still recovering from the war, or the Blight? If anyone asks, the gifts were put toward restoration efforts.”

A brief moment of consideration before Josephine nodded. “I can think of a few towns whose chantries might appreciate such a gift. I will reach out to them.”

“Fantastic,” Idhren breathed a sigh of relief, then turned the offending painting around so that it faced the wall. “What’s next?”

A brief pause while Josephine made a note on her ever-present writing board before replying, “All that remains are the books, per your request.”

His request that he be allowed to go through any donations of literature or magical items personally, rather than merely shuffling them immediately to the library or mage tower. Josephine had learned quickly to hide such items until all business was concluded, lest the Inquisitor become distracted.

“Oh good!” Dorian perked up, getting out of his seat. “At last. I was beginning to think I would die of boredom.”

“Then leave,” Idhren groused at him.

“And let you hoard all the best things to yourself?” the man asked. By this he clearly meant books. “They’re gifts to the Inquisition, not you personally.”

“Perks of the job,” Idhren countered.

From behind her desk Josephine retrieved a short stack of leather-bound tomes. “We were also gifted an illuminated copy of the abridged Chant,” she commented, setting the stack down on the seat Dorian had recently vacated. “I took the liberty of sending that one to Mother Giselle.”

“That’s perfectly fine, she can have it,” Idhren assured. He certainly wasn’t ever going to use it. His interests lay in other subjects. Not that they received very many donations that were actually interesting. Chantry histories were popular, particularly if they mentioned the original Inquisition or Divine Justinia.

Before Idhren had a chance, Dorian snatched up the first book on the stack and flipped it open to the title page. “Ah, Genetivi,” Idhren could practically hear the roll of his eyes in his voice. “Because we certainly needed more of him.”
“Which one?” Idhren asked, more from curiosity than because he was actually interested.

“Tales of the Destruction of Thedas,” Dorian recited, and winced slightly before snapping the book shut. “Someone hoping we’ll find some helpful advice, maybe?”

“I doubt there’s anything Genetivi could say that we don’t already know. You can deliver that one to the library, someone might be interested.” Idhren picked up the next book in the stack, but before he could even open the cover there was a knocking at the door, pulling his attention away.

Josephine called out permission to enter. A moment later the door creaked open, heavy wood scraping along the stone floor, revealing a runner in Inquisition livery. “Apologies for the interruption, Ambassador, Your Worship.” The uniform belayed the messenger’s age, but when she spoke Idhren thought she couldn’t be more than eighteen, if that. So many of Skyhold’s workers were young – too young to send out into the field in good conscious, but full of a youthful enthusiasm that made it impossible to turn them away.

“You aren’t interrupting anything,” Idhren assured the girl. This was hardly vital or sensitive work. “What is it?”

She made a motion that was somewhere between a nod and a bow. “Master Dennet has requested that you come to the stables at your earliest convenience, Your Worship. There is something that you need to see.”

“Well that’s not ominous,” Dorian commented. “Care to be a little more specific?”

“It’s…” the runner hesitated for a moment. Uncertain how much she should say, or uncertain how to say it? “A group arrived this morning with what they claim is a gift for you, Inquisitor. Master Dennet would like to know what you want to do with it.”

That really didn’t make the request sound any less ominous. Idhren sighed and set down the book in his hand. “I’ll come right away,” he informed the runner, “Thank you.” She did that strange little nod-bow again, and then left, closing the door after herself. “I’ll look through the rest of these later, Josephine, just leave them out for me.”

“Perhaps I should come down to the stables with you,” Josephine suggested, though she looked a bit wary. “To see this gift myself.”

“I’ll let you know if it’s anything we need to worry about,” Idhren assured. “Hopefully it’s only like the time with the undead horse.” To her credit Josephine managed not to grimace too obviously at the reminder.

Dorian tossed the book he’d been holding back down onto the stack with the others with little care for where or how it fell. “That animal is magnificent,” he protested. “A stunning example of necromancy if I’ve ever seen one.”

“It made the entire stable stink of death,” Idhren argued. “You’re welcome to fawn over it all you like outside of Skyhold, but it’s never setting foot inside the walls again. And I’m hoping this is not a repeat performance.” He bid farewell to Josephine and left her office with Dorian hot on his heels, equally curious about this new development.

Down at the stables they found Dennet waiting outside, a scowl on his face and his arms folded across his chest, and all of the stable hands hovering nervously in the yard. It was not a terribly optimistic sight.

“Inquisition,” Dennet greeted when he spotted Idhren approaching. His expression did not change,
and in fact he barely glanced away from the stable. “I’m glad you came quickly.”

“What’s going on?” Idhren asked. “The messenger said something about a gift, but no more than that. It’s not another undead horse, is it?”

The horsemaster let out a small huff that was probably the closest he ever came to laughing. “No, thank the Maker. Although I’m not sure this thing is much better, it’s making all the horses nervous.”

“And most of the people, too, from the looks of it,” Dorian commented.

“What arrived, exactly?” Idhren asked. He tried to imagine something that was just as bad as a partly decaying, and yet still remarkably animated, horse with a sword lodged through its skull, and came up blank.

“Better to show you, I think,” Dennet sighed.

He led Idhren toward the stable, where the door to the line of stalls was standing open. Even before setting foot inside he was assaulted by the smell of hay, sweat, and manure hanging heavy in the air. This was not his favorite place to be, and Idhren knew little about horses, but even he could see how many of the creatures in the stalls they passed seemed to be on edge. They stood with their ears alert, flicking quickly toward any sound, stamping and snorting occasionally in agitation. They were nervous, but he didn’t see the outright fear that the undead creature had inspired.

Dennet led them down the line of stalls toward the very end. Whatever was waiting it was clear he had housed it as far from the other mounts as possible. Several empty stalls stood between the last mount and the one the horsemaster stopped before. "Here she is."

The stall was also blocked off from the others, sides boarded up and only the front open to allow the creature to stretch its head and for food to be brought in. Hiding it visually might be helping to keep the horses more calm, but it was clear they could still smell it. As soon as Dennet stepped into visual range of the creature inside that stall a jarring shriek echoed through the stables.

Then a head emerged, thrust out over the stall door to look up and down the hall.

Idhren gasped audibly. "It's a dracolisk!" he exclaimed, lighting up like Satinalia morning.

Following the sound of his voice the creature swung its head toward Idhren, looking at him with bright, calculating eyes. In the thin shafts of sunlight that filtered through the stable roof its scales glinted and glittered, sapphire and gold with spines of ebony horn jutting out along the animal’s nose and down the length of its spine. Far more striking than any of the horses standing in the stalls alongside it.

"Aye," Dennet replied with a sigh. "Group of trappers brought her in this morning."

A female, Idhren registered, still staring wide eyed at the creature standing before him. In horses that often meant a more mellow mount, but in dracolisks, as with their dragon cousins, it was the females you had to look out for. He had seen dracolisks before, on a few rare occasions. They were more popular in Tevinter than here in the south, a bit of a status symbol for the skill it took to tame them.

"She's magnificent," Idhren breathed. He had always thought the creatures rather stunning, though he had never been able to see one up close before. This one appeared to be in very good health, judging by the way her scales shone in the sun.

"If you were hoping he'd tell you to get rid of it," Dorian drawled from behind Idhren, "I think you're going to be disappointed."
"Evidently," Dennet was forced to agree. "Inquisitor," he began to protest, "These animals can be extremely dangerous, even tamed. Don't think I'd advise getting too friendly with it."

The words did give Idhren pause. He was not a skilled horseman. In fact he'd never ridden so much as a halla before the Inquisition, and his current mount was still as mellow as a warhorse could be. A dracolisk would be the exact opposite.

He tried to remember everything he knew about dracolisks and their temperament, but that had never been his field of interest so he knew no more than the average person in Tevinter. Which was: don't get close to a strange one if you want to keep all your fingers. The one eyeing him from within the narrow stall looked calm and happy enough, but they were temperamental creatures easily provoked and prone to sudden changes in mood. It was so gorgeous, though. Those glittering scales and smart eyes. Even the spikes and fangs just made it that much more attractive to him. "I'll just have to earn its trust, then," he decided. "Do we have anything that it can eat?"

"Weren't really prepared for something like this arriving," Dennet admitted. "But I've talked with Ser Morris about getting proper feed for her. For now I've had to take from the kitchen stores."

"That's fine, we wouldn't want her to go hungry," Idhren replied. "Would you be terribly offended if I took care of all her feeding when I'm here?" he asked.

Dennet looked uncertain, but he shrugged. "It'll save me the trouble," he replied. "Can't get anyone else to go near her."

"Oh no, don't tell me you intend to actually keep the thing?" Dorian complained.

Idhren was finally able to tear his eyes off the creature and turned to look over his shoulder at Dorian. The man didn't look as nervous or on edge as the stable hands all had been, or as wary as Dennet seemed to be, but he was still keeping a notably wide berth of the animal's stall. "Don't tell me you're scared of it," he teased. "I would have expected your family to have one or two, if only for show."

"Oh, of course we did," Dorian assured. "A lovely pair. Very suitable for showing off at parties and pulling carriages. As tame as these beasts come, I think. I'm not afraid she'll snap my head off without provocation like all your servants, but I'm not fool enough to think her harmless, either."

"Of course she's not harmless," Idhren agreed. One look at the creature was enough to tell that. "But that's half the charm, isn't it? Dennet," he turned his attention back to the horsemaster, looking now as weary and resigned as ever, "Can you see about commissioning some suitable tack for her, then? She'll need training as well as food. And a name, I suppose," he added thoughtfully.

"I'll see what I can do," Dennet assured.

That evening, and then twice a day for the next two weeks, saw Idhren tromping down to the stables with a bucket of meat scraps from the kitchens. He had taken to his new responsibility quickly and with devotion, despite the doubts and concerns of most of his friends and advisors. But he was determined to at least make the creature like him, even if she never submitted to a saddle. After all, Dennet was correct that this particular specimen of the breed was wild and had little experience with humans. Nevertheless, he was still drawn to her like a moth to a flame.
With his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, Idhren set the bucket down against the wall across from the dracolisk's stall. It smelled pungently of blood, and the scent drew her attention immediately. Poking her head over the stall door, she let out a sound somewhere between a purr and a growl.

"Good morning to you, too," Idhren greeted. "Are you hungry?" The dracolisk squawked in reply and stretched out her neck, scenting at the bucket with nose and tongue, but it was too far away for her to reach. "I'll take that as a yes."

Very carefully, Idhren plucked an unidentifiable hunk of bloodied meat from the bucket and held it out to the animal. She scented it again now that it was within her reach, and then carefully snapped it out of his hand, throwing her head back as she swallowed it whole. Idhren was surprised by the amount of care she took in eating, it wasn't exactly delicate, but it wasn't at all the sort of ferocity he had originally anticipated. At first he had been afraid to feed her by hand lest he lose a few fingers, but now he had no such qualms. She had never put so much as a scratch on him.

"Good girl, Bella," Idhren praised as he reached for a second piece of meat. "Have you been behaving for Dennet?" he asked. Much as he would like to, Idhren didn't actually have the time or the skills to train a wild dracolisk, so that task was left to their horsemaster. Earning her trust and affection through food was the best he could do. "I saw he got you into a halter yesterday."

The second bite of meat was snatched up as quickly as the first, and the dracolisk stuck out her head toward him eager for another one.

"You know," Idhren continued, as though she could actually understand what he was saying, "The tack we commissioned should be finished soon. Then we'll see how you feel about the saddle and reins." A gurgle as she swallowed her next bite was the only response that Idhren received, but he continued on regardless. "If you take to them maybe I'll take you out on our next excursion. I know you must be getting tired of being cooped up in here."

She couldn't yet be trusted to run free in the yard with the horses. They were too skittish and tended to panic if she got too close. So she was only able to exercise outside the stall for an hour or so each day. The edges of her stall were beginning to show the results of her boredom. After she nearly chewed through a wall, they and the door had been quickly reinforced with iron covers, which did nothing to deter her from attacking them in her boredom but did seem to be holding up better.

She snapped another piece of food out of Idhren's hand, swallowing it whole, and then stopped, scenting the air with nose and tongue, and turned her head toward the stable doors. Curious, Idhren followed her line of sight. He hadn't heard the door open, and he was used to being alone while feeding her because most of the stable hands still found her intimidating. But it wasn't a stable hand that had sauntered in, much to Idhren's surprise. It was Dorian.

"What are you doing here?" Idhren asked in surprise. Dorian never set foot in the stables unless they were leaving for a mission, and sometimes not even then. "Should I be concerned? Is the world ending?"

"No moreso than usual," Dorian replied sardonically. "I half expected you were lying, you know, but I see you're still fixated on this thing. I'm not certain whether to be impressed or mortified. We took out bets, you know, about when you would give up. I'm going to lose quite a bit of coin."

"You bet against me?" Idhren asked in disbelief.

"Now, now, don't be so offended," Dorian sighed, "It's only because I thought you had more sense."
Idhren huffed and turned away from Dorian. He held out another piece of meat for the dracolisk, who had decided Dorian was not nearly as interesting as food. “I’ll have you know that she’s been perfectly well behaved,” he sniffed, watching her pull the meat from his hands, “Haven’t you, Bella?”

“Bella?” Dorian repeated, arching an eyebrow as he watched elf and beast interact. As he watched Idhren allowed the animal to lick the droplets of blood from his fingers, then patted her nose before reaching for the bucket again. “Maker’s arse,” he realized, “You’re completely smitten, aren’t you?”

“Well look at her,” Idhren practically cooed. As though she were a kitten and not a large carnivorous lizard who could take off his hand with a single bite if she felt like it. "She's gorgeous isn't she? And much more friendly than I'd expected.”

Dorian let out a long suffering sigh. The elf was smitten; there would be no getting rid of the beast now. But while Dorian had seen Idhren’s softer side before, he’d never seen it quite like this. “But you’re not planning on taking her out into the field with us, certainly. She’d send all the horses into a panic, and then where would we be.”

“Nonsense,” Idhren scoffed. “They’re already getting used to her. And it wouldn’t be at all fair to keep her locked up in here forever. Especially not when she’s been so well behaved. Last one,” he pulled another cut of meat from his bucket and held it in an outstretched palm. As the dracolisk swallowed her food he wiped the bloodstains from his hands, then picked up his bucket once more and made to leave.

As he turned away Bella gave a small cry of protest. Idhren turned back to her and showed the empty bucket. “All gone, I’m afraid. You’ll have to wait for morning.” Bella sniffed at him, then at the bucket, then thrust her nose into the empty container like she was checking to be certain. At last she pulled her head back and snorted in disappointment. “Sorry,” Idhren smiled in amusement at her antics. “But if you take well to the saddle you can come along to Redcliffe with me in a few days. Maybe we’ll find a bear.”

“Redcliffe?” Dorian asked curiously. “What business do you have there? And why don’t I know about it?”

“Because it doesn’t concern you,” Idhren replied. “And it was only just planned. That amulet meant to protect Cole from blood magic finally arrived from Nevarra, but it’s not working. He thinks something in that area is blocking it, or affecting him somehow.” Idhren shrugged. For all the books he’d read on magic and spirits and demons he still barely understood what Cole was or how his abilities worked. “You can come if you like, but it’ll probably be uneventful. I thought you’d be happier staying in the library rather than camping for a week. Besides, Solas is coming.”

Dorian winced slightly. “I don’t envy you that company,” he sympathized. “And yes, if you don’t mind I think I’ll sit this one out. But in case you have to murder Solas while you’re there do try and make it look like an accident.”

“Do you have so little faith in my self control?” Idhren asked with mock offense.

“I know your temper,” Dorian said knowingly.

Idhren rolled his eyes. “I’ll show you my temper,” he grumbled, and reached out with one foot to trip Dorian as they walked. The man stumbled, letting out an indignant squawk, and glowered at Idhren, who only laughed and offered an innocent smile in return.
Redcliffe looked much the same as Idhren remembered, if in slightly better repair now that the people of the area weren't quite as bad off as they had been when struggling to house a veritable army of rebel mages and with the roads protected by regular Inquisition patrols. Still, it seemed as though every time Idhren came here there was something to fix. First Alexius, then Dorian's father, and now Cole's past come to haunt him.

The whole trip here the boy had been on edge. Nervous and impatient as Idhren had never seen him before. He was still wearing that amulet. Not that it did any good at the moment, but Idhren wasn't about to make him take it off if it offered even a tiny amount of comfort. Solas attempted to calm him, but had little luck. Varric's attempts at distracting him with jokes and stories were only slightly more successful. It made the whole trip incredibly unpleasant, so that Idhren was almost relieved when they finally arrived in town. Almost.

Idhren didn't like templars, even former templars - excepting Cullen - and this was exactly why. Idhren recognized the man for what he was immediately - could practically smell the lyrium on him.

"You killed me!" Cole had barely set eyes on the man before he was upon him, fist grabbing at the templar's collar and dagger pointed at his face. "You locked me away in the dungeon in the Spire, and you forgot, and I died in the dark!" His voice was cracked and thick with emotion. His hand gripped the hilt of the dagger with white knuckles, trembling mere inches before the man's face.

For a moment everyone present stood too startled to react to the spirit's sudden violent display. It was uncharacteristic, worrying. Idhren’s first instinct was to leap forward and pull Cole off the man, templar or not, until the words registered in his mind.

Idhren knew that rage and grief much too intimately. He remembered the way it consumed him, boiling in his gut until it overflowed. He remembered the acrid stench of blood and burned flesh, the sound of screams echoing in his ears. But he also remembered how it always left him feeling after the initial surge of emotion dissipated. Lost, tired, helpless. It did not help. He never felt any better after letting those emotions take control of him.

"Cole." He tried to keep his voice as calm as possible. It was enough distraction that the templar was able to break free of Cole's grasp, ripping himself free and immediately fleeing further into town. Just as quickly the boy moved to follow him, and to Idhren's surprise it was Varric that blocked his path before Idhren could even reach him.

"Just take it easy, kid," Varric placated, as though he were speaking to a skittish animal.

"He killed me," Cole argued furiously. Idhren had never seen the boy get angry before, but given the circumstances he would have been surprised by any other reaction. Whatever sort of spirit Cole had once been, he was now capable of the full range of human emotion. "That's why it doesn't work. He killed me, and I have to kill him back!"

Oh, Idhren knew that feeling far, far too well. He knew how all-consuming it could be, how it blocked all logical thought and drove you on pure instinct. It wasn't a good feeling. It wasn't a feeling that Idhren would wish upon anyone else. "Cole, try to calm down for a moment," he said carefully, approaching the boy. "Let's think about this."

"This man cannot have killed you," Solas tried to reason. As though reason had any bearing on the situation. "You are a spirit, you have not even possessed a body."
But whether it was Idhren's or Solas' words, Cole did manage to regain a little control over himself. Head down and face obscured by that hat, the boy began to mumble, "A broken body, bloody, banged on the stone wall, guts gripping in the dark, a captured apostate. They threw him into the dungeon in the Spire in Val Royeaux. They forgot about him. He starved to death. I came through to help, and I couldn't. So I became him."

Idhren's heart clenched in sympathy even as his mind was piqued by curiosity. He had never heard of anything of the sort happening before, and yet it made perfect sense.

"Let me kill him," Cole all but begged. "I need to."

The boy did so much for others without ever asking anything in return. It was time someone helped him for a change. "Cole, listen to me," Idhren said, stepping in front of him. Although it was clear that Cole - or the original Cole - was younger than him, the boy still practically towered over Idhren. "I agree with you," he said carefully, "He deserves punishment for what he did to you."

"You are not actually suggesting that Cole kills the man," Solas interrupted, outrage clear in his voice.

"I don't think anyone is suggesting that, Chuckles," Varric answered.

"Cole is a spirit," Solas protested. "The death of the real Cole wounded him, turned him from his purpose. To recover that purpose, he must forgive."

"You don't just forgive someone killing you!" Varric argued.

Idhren watched as, while the other two argued, Cole grew more and more distraught. His hands clenched into fists as his eyes searched past Idhren for some sign of the man they'd let escape. "Will you two stop bickering like a married couple? It's not helping," Idhren snapped. "Although I'm tempted to agree with Varric. You don't forgive something like that. Cole," he said, drawing the spirit's attention back to him. "You don't have to forgive, but killing him isn't the answer, either. You were with me in the Plains. You saw what I--," he cut himself off with a hesitant glance toward Varric and Solas. He would rather that lapse in judgment not become common knowledge. "Did killing the man who hurt me make me feel any better?"

Cole was silent for a long time before he finally answered, voice barely a whisper, and bitter but also understanding. "No. Bitterness boiling, burning, eating you up inside. You tried to give back the pain, but it didn’t work. It still hurts. How do you make it stop hurting?"

“I don’t know if you can,” Idhren admitted sympathetically. His pain had dulled over time, and with the help of people who cared for him, but it never went away entirely. He wished he could offer more help to Cole in this moment, something that might actually solve his problem. “There will always be people like the ones who hurt us. We can’t change what happened… Or how they made us feel… But we can stop it from happening to anyone else.”

“By killing them,” Cole said, somewhere between a declaration and a question.

“Sometimes,” Idhren had to admit. If everything could be solved through negotiation they wouldn’t be fighting this war right now. Some people simply needed to be killed. “If you really want to kill that Templar I’m sure he can’t have gotten far. I just don’t think it will help you.”

“Because it didn’t help you?” Cole guessed.

“Exactly,” Idhren replied.
“What am I supposed to do, then?” Cole asked.

“You came into this world to help people, didn’t you?” he asked. “People like… the original Cole.” Cole nodded emphatically in response. “Then you keep doing that. You keep on living in spite of what people like him want. And when another bastard like him hurts someone else, you can be there to help.”

“Inquisitor, I have to object,” Solas interrupted. Idhren had almost forgotten that he and Varric were still nearby, not out of earshot and clearly Solas had no qualms with eavesdropping. “Cole is a spirit. If we turn him from his purpose it will pervert the very essence of his being.”

“Cole is not a spirit,” Idhren argued impatiently.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along,” Varric butted in.

“And he’s not human, either,” Idhren snapped. “He’s… Something in between. Something different and completely unique, and there’s nothing wrong with that. And we certainly don’t have the right to force him to change if he doesn’t want to.”

“The entire purpose of our coming here--,” Solas began to argue, but Idhren interrupted him.

“Was to find out what was blocking that amulet. And we did,” Idhren finished for him. “But Cole is a person, not some science experiment, and its his choice how he wants to work through his feelings, not yours. He doesn’t need you pressuring him to react one way or another. Especially if you can’t even comprehend the sort of pain he’s been through.”

“And you can?” Solas accused.

“I was a slave,” Idhren sneered back. He turned away from the other two, spinning on his heel and looking up at Cole once more. “Come on, Cole, let’s go find your Templar. And whatever you decided to do with him, I’ll support you.”

They found the former Templar just outside of town. He hadn’t had much time to run, and Cole seemed drawn to him almost like a moth to a flame. But the man didn’t die, in the end. Whether that was because of Idhren’s earlier words, or because Cole had calmed down somewhat since his initial furious reaction, Idhren would never know. Cole let him go. Not forgiven, not entirely, but allowed to go on with his life, and perhaps able to do some good in the world without the burden of regret hanging over him.

“Why did you make him forget?” Idhren asked as he and Cole headed back into the village to find Solas and Varric again before heading back to Skyhold.

“It was hurting him,” Cole replied. “A black place in his heart, dark and dangerous, drowning him. He was sorry.”

“He regretted it?” Idhren asked.

“Yes,” Cole replied simply. “He didn’t want to hurt. He knew it was wrong.”

“And you’re alright with that?” Idhren asked. “With him not remembering what he did?”

“Yes,” Cole said again. “I hurt people before, too. I thought I had to. I thought I was helping. I thought it was the only way, but it wasn’t.”

Idhren nodded thoughtfully. It didn’t entirely make sense to him, but it didn’t have to. “Well, as long
as this helped you, then that’s what matters.”

“Do you think the amulet will work now?” Cole asked. There was some hint of fear or apprehension still in his voice. Still afraid that this wasn’t enough to fix the problem. And to be perfectly honest, Idhren wasn’t entirely certain himself.

“I imagine we’ll find out soon enough,” Idhren replied. “We can try it when we make camp tonight, if you’d like.”

“I would like that,” Cole confirmed.

That evening saw them at the crossroads, one of the Inquisition’s first camps established in the Hinterlands, and it made Idhren feel somewhat nostalgic to be here again. It had been only a year since all this had started, and yet it felt much longer. But this part of the world remained little changed. It was calmer now than when Idhren had first arrived, and the scars from the violence that had rampaged over the countryside were now nearly gone. Soon there would be no sign of the war at all, save the Inquisition’s presence keeping an eye on things and continuing the help those whose lives had been turned upside down. And hopefully they would not even need that much longer.

Idhren found Cole sitting atop a rock near the edge of camp, overlooking the valley below and the small farmhouses within it. The boy was fiddling with the amulet that now hung around his neck following its successful activation earlier in the evening. “Do you feel any different?” Idhren asked.

For a long moment Cole was silent. Idhren scrambled up onto the rock to seat himself beside the boy and waited patiently for him to reply. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s good,” Idhren replied. “I like you this way, I wouldn’t want it to change you too much.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of boy’s mouth. “Thank you. Not everyone does.”

“There will always be people that don’t, no matter what you do,” Idhren replied. “They won’t like you because they’re frightened, or because you’re different, or any number of stupid reasons. But you shouldn’t have to change yourself just to make other people happy.”

“You don’t like being different,” Cole said, rather suddenly.

Idhren frowned. He wondered if he would have to put up with more frequent instances of Cole delving into his mind. Well, so long as Cole never pulled out anything too sensitive in public he supposed he could live with that. “No, not all the time,” Idhren replied. “It’s hard, growing up thinking you should be ashamed of what you are or how you look. Or how you feel.”

“Mother said not to be ashamed, but never to tell anyone,” Cole recited as though reading from a book. “But why should you hide something that isn’t shameful? Impossible to hide forever. Scared to tell him the truth. He won’t like me afterward. But he did.” Cole stopped, seemed to cut himself off a little, and then bowed his head. “I’m sorry, I know you don’t like it.”

It was still very unnerving to hear his innermost thoughts and fears voiced so clearly by another person. Idhren swallowed heavily and pushed down the swell of emotions. “It’s alright,” he assured. “I don’t mind if it’s just between us.”
“Oh,” Cole lifted his head again and smile. “That’s good.”

“Well, if you’re doing alright out here, I’m going to bed,” Idhren decided. The boy seemed content enough for the moment, though time would tell how this experience would change him. If it did so at all. He slid down off the rock and dusted off his pants before turning back toward the tents. However he was stopped, after taking only two steps, by a soft voice behind him.

“I like you the way you are, too,” Cole said. “So does Dorian.”

Idhren smiled, and was glad there was no one around to see him blush. “Thank you, Cole. That helps.” But when he looked back over his shoulder the boy was nowhere to be seen.

The small party returned to Skyhold only a few days later, after a relatively uneventful journey up the mountain paths during which Cole had been present only intermittently. That was fairly normal behavior for the spirit boy, however, and other than being perhaps a little bit more cryptic when he spoke, Idhren still had not noticed any significant changes in the boy’s behavior. Nothing that concerned him, at least.

Snow dusted the slopes beside the paths that wound up toward the mountaintop fortress. Paths that were only clear because of the frequent traffic they saw, and the Inquisitor’s party passed several groups of scouts or supply caravans as they made their way upward.

Idhren’s dracolisk – now permanently affixed with the name Bella – had behaved admirably during the short excursion. Idhren’s biggest concern was how she would behave around other mounts and strangers on the road. But despite a few snaps at people who drew too close when the road was crowded, she had been patient and polite. A fact that Idhren reported proudly to Dennet when he turned her over to his care once more.

As he mounted the stairs to the main hall, Idhren made a decision he had been waffling on for days. Instead of heading straight to his quarters to change out of his travel-stained clothes, he made a detour. Slipping through a side floor and up a flight of stairs brought him to the balcony where Vivienne spent most of her days overlooking the bustle of Skyhold as it passed beneath her.

It was no secret to anyone in Skyhold that the Inquisitor and the former First Enchanter did not always see eye to eye. Their interactions, when they interacted at all, had always been strained. He found her manner abrasive and arrogant. She brought up all of Idhren’s defenses and seemed to care so little for his personal feelings or his past. She seemed to have no emotions of her own aside from arrogance and disdain.

Then he watched from the far side of the room as she tried desperately to save the life of the man she loved, only for her efforts to be in vain. He watched her crumble slightly, and then pull herself together, building up walls and masks once more until she stood tall and proud as though nothing at all had happened. And Idhren realized that she was exactly what he would be now if he’d remained in Tevinter.

It was no secret to anyone in Skyhold that the Inquisitor and the former First Enchanter did not always see eye to eye. Their interactions, when they interacted at all, had always been strained. He found her manner abrasive and arrogant. She brought up all of Idhren’s defenses and seemed to care so little for his personal feelings or his past. She seemed to have no emotions of her own aside from arrogance and disdain.

Then he watched from the far side of the room as she tried desperately to save the life of the man she loved, only for her efforts to be in vain. He watched her crumble slightly, and then pull herself together, building up walls and masks once more until she stood tall and proud as though nothing at all had happened. And Idhren realized that she was exactly what he would be now if he’d remained in Tevinter.

She managed her grief with far more poise than Idhren had. He remembered struggling to hold himself together after losing Tainan. And how badly he had broken down behind closed doors. So he had given Vivienne her space for weeks, a hardly noticeable difference from their usual relationship, but the thought gnawed at the back of his mind. Wondering whether she cried behind
And it occurred to him that perhaps they were not so different after all. If that were the case, then maybe it would be worth the effort to try and mend fences.

Showing up still dusty from the road, with dirty boots and his coat hung over one arm probably did not give the best impression, but Vivienne had seen him looking worse. And maybe it would help to communicate how profound his desire to come to an understanding.

When he approached her eyes ran up and down his form, but if she was offended by his current state it did not show. "Inquisitor," she greeted, as pleasant and emotionless as usual. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was hoping I might speak with you," Idhren replied. He recognized that politeness, however much it annoyed him personally, was likely where she felt most comfortable, and now was not the time to purposefully antagonize her.

"But of course, my dear," Vivienne replied carefully. "I was just sitting down for tea, would you care to join me?"

"I don't mean to intrude," Idhren quickly assured. "If this is not a good time I can come back later. It's not urgent."

"Nonsense, darling," the woman brushed off his concerns. "Your time is very important these days, I would not want to waste it. Please sit." She gestured to one of two plush chairs seated on either side of a small table set with a tea service. Hesitantly, Idhren sat down and draped his coat over the arm, but remained perched on the edge of the cushion. He forced himself to remain silent as Vivienne poured two cups of tea and offered one to him, thanking her politely as he took it in hand. "Now," she continued after they were both seated and served. "What can I do for you, Inquisitor?"

"It occurs to me," Idhren said carefully. Speaking to Vivienne always tried his patience, but this particular subject required more finesse than Idhren was used to expressing these days. He knew well how she must be feeling in this moment, and he had no desire to make her pain any worse. "It occurs to me that I have been unfair to you."

"And how is that, my dear?" Vivienne asked in reply, looking at him curiously over the rim of her teacup.

"It's no secret that we did not get off on the best foot," Idhren began. It was an understatement, but one that he thought Vivienne would appreciate. She also valued frankness, so he continued, "I don't like nobility, in general. They do not treat my people well in any country, least of all in Tevinter. When we first met – at your salon – it put me far too much in mind of every other salon I had been forced to attend, to walk around like a trained dog performing tricks. The wonder of an educated elf. I judged you the same as a magister."

"Darling, that's hardly something you need to apologize for," Vivienne said, amused, "You may recall that I judged you an uneducated savage. And in this case I'm quite happy to be proven wrong."

"As am I," Idhren agreed. That moment in Val Royeaux was the first time he had seen a glimpse of the person behind the Iron Lady. Grieving, lonely, but too proud to let anyone see her moment of weakness. The glimpse had been brief, but shocking. Idhren recognized those feelings all too well, and his heart had swelled with sympathy that lasted long after Vivienne regained her composure.
"If I may ask," Vivienne set down her cup and saucer on the table carefully, barely making a sound, "What has brought on this sudden confession?"

Idhren stared down into his own teacup, now empty save for a few stray leaves settled in the bottom. "I realized we are not as different as I once thought," he admitted. "Not many people know this, but I lost someone when the Conclave was destroyed." How was it possible that it still hurt? He set down his cup before his hands could start shaking. "My fiancé"

"Oh, my dear I’m so sorry," Vivienne sighed, and there was genuine empathy in her voice.

That empathy shouldn’t surprise him, given her own recent loss, and yet it did. Because hearing any emotion in Vivienne’s voice was a surprise. But no matter how well she hid it, he knew she must be sad. Idhren had done his damndest to hide his grief as well, but in the end that had only made it worse. "I just wanted you to know that… I understand," he said. "And if you ever needed someone to talk to you know where to find me."

"That is a very kind offer, my dear, and thank you, but it will not be necessary," Vivienne assured.

There were probably others she felt more comfortable opening up to, Idhren assumed. People she had known longer, people who had known the Duke. "Of course," he replied, and then rose to his feet. "That is all I wished to say, so I will let you get back to your work. Thank you for the tea."

"You’re quite welcome," Vivienne replied. "But Inquisitor, if I may?" The words stopped Idhren before he could take more than one step. "This is your private business, of course, and you will forgive me for sounding utterly tactless for a moment, I fear there is no polite way to say this. But some would say you moved on from your late fiancé rather quickly."

Idhren paused and gave the matter some thought. He had considered the same thing before taking up with Dorian. Was it too soon? But he had made peace with his feelings and did not think so. "I have known Dorian since I was a child," he explained. "He has always been very dear to me. My feelings for him do nothing to diminish my feelings for Tainan. I love them both, and would do so even if both were here now."

"My, there’s quiet the romantic hidden inside you isn’t there?" Vivienne observed with a smile.

"I would appreciate if you’d keep that observation to yourself," Idhren replied. "I have a reputation to maintain."

"I’m offended that you should even have to ask, my dear," Vivienne assured him.

Idhren smiled, nodded his final farewell, and took his leave at last. That had been much more pleasant than he had expected. Certainly a step in the right direction.
What Pride Had Wrought

And as the black clouds came upon them,
They looked on what pride had wrought,
And despaired.

- Canticle of Threnodies 7:10

Arbor Wilds, Orlais, Justinian 9:42 Dragon

Of all the wildernesses that Idhren had been to in his life, the Arbor wilds felt the most untamed. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, incomparable even to the Emerald Graves. The plant life was overgrown everywhere he looked, trees so close together their roots entwined and it was often difficult to find a path through the underbrush. Sometimes he could not see the sky through the branches overhead. The place looked as though it had seen nothing but animal life for centuries, with none of the heavy foot traffic that had created wide paths and avenues through places like the Graves. It was magnificent and wild, awesome and terrifying all at once.

But it was not the ideal place for a battle. In fact, quite the opposite.

The paths through the trees were cramped and twisting, frequently only as wide as one or two men walking abreast. It took several hours of tromping through the untamed jungle for Idhren and his companions to reach the army's base camp, and even that was scattered among several small clearings that had likely been enlarged significantly by the scouts who first arrived to set up. How the army could be expected to move effectively through a place like this Idhren had no idea. But it wasn't as though they had much choice.

Even with all the allies they had gained over the past few months the Red Templars held the Inquisition's forces at bay. They had arrived first, easily entrenched themselves before the Inquisition showed up to stop them and paved the way for Corypheus to get exactly what he wanted. It was the first time they had not been one step ahead of the monster and his followers. It was almost a fluke that they had arrived here in time to hinder them at all, as their scouts had first been sent here on a hunch. And that left Idhren feeling incredibly frustrated. He did not like playing catch up.

He also did not like fighting Templars.

Even corrupted as they were - some nothing but mindless, crazed monstrosities more lyrium than human - they retained the skills that made them Templars to begin with. Namely, the ability to sever a mage's connection to the Fade.

The feeling no longer crippled Idhren as it had the first time. He could keep his feet, keep his wits about him, keep fighting. It still made him sick to his stomach, though. It still brought back horrible, painful, fearful memories. But there was a blade on the end of his staff for a reason and it saw plenty of blood.

Idhren was winded by the time they finally fought their way to the front lines and beat down the Red Templars’ attempt at defense. Before them loomed the crumbling and overgrown facade of an ancient elvhen temple, barely visible through the trees and the vines that grew through the cracks in the
stones. Within the clearing that had likely once been an impressive courtyard where a paved road ran up to the temple, it was quiet enough to be almost peaceful, surprisingly easy to forget that there was a war raging at his back. The jungle swallowed up all sound so quickly.

Idhren stared up at the ruin as he caught his breath, leaning against his staff and trying to ignore the ache of fatigue that was already beginning to form in his shoulders. The scouts had spotted Corypheus himself in the area, in addition to his troops. Did the monster that had started this whole mess await them somewhere inside that structure? Is this where he would finally face the thing one last time? That seemed very likely, but Idhren wasn't certain he was prepared for such an eventuality. The underlings that he had taken down so far had been regular people. Not even particularly skilled. Tucked into a pouch on his belt Idhren carried a runed grenade Dagna promised would cripple Samson, and that was small comfort. Whatever strengths he'd been granted, Samson was still a man, and Idhren knew the limits of men. He had not an inkling of the power that Corypheus wielded.

"We'll hold them here, Inquisitor," Cullen was saying, pulling Idhren from his thoughts. The elf pushed himself back upright and turned to the commander. It was the first time he had fought alongside him since Haven, and he was no less impressed. They should have him out in the field more often, he couldn't help thinking, Cullen was far more effective here than in the war room arguing politics and strategy. He was happier out here too, Idhren expected. "You go stop that creature."

Now or never. This is what they had come here for, what everything had been building toward, there was no backing out now. Giving Cullen a curt nod in acknowledgement he pulled his staff free from where the blade had sunk into the soft ground and tested the familiar weight in his hands. Then he turned to the rest of his companions. “Let’s get this over with.”

Passing through an archway the sounds of battle came to Idhren’s ears again quite suddenly, filtered down a dark, narrow passage more resembling a tunnel than entrance to the grandest temple of an ancient empire.

The passage let out onto a shallow balcony overlooking a massive open space the likes of which Idhren could never have expected to find in the middle of this tightly packed jungle. Before them stood the main structure of the temple, seated in the midst of a massive lake. Statues and tiled walls largely covered by centuries of plant growth and disrepair, but here and there sunlight glinted off gold. The sight was breathtaking, or would have been if there were time to take it all in. Instead, Idhren barely stepped foot onto the balcony before he was forced to duck down behind the vine-covered railing to avoid being seen by the people clustered in the space below.

The others crouched behind him, ducking out of view, and thankfully the figures gathered below were too distracted to have noticed their arrival. Peering through the overgrowth, Idhren immediately recognized the monstrous, misshapen form of Corypheus. In the months since Haven fell Idhren had almost been able to convince himself that the fear of the moment had distorted his perception of the magister. But he was just as horrifying as Idhren remembered.

The magister was surrounded by Red Templars, their figures just as grossly distorted as his own, and a handful of figures in familiar blue armor – Grey Wardens. They had not all been at Adamant, then. He had feared as much.

Across from the magister and his brainwashed troops, blocking their way across the bridge that lead to the temple, stood more of those strange elves that had attacked both the Inquisition’s forces and Corypheus’ forces in the jungle. During battle they had moved too quickly for Idhren to make out more than pointed ears and bright green tattoos, but now he could clearly make out their armor. The vallaslin they bore suggested that these elves were Dalish, and it was not unthinkable that some clan
had been living here in complete isolation from the rest of the world since the fall of the Dales. Other than the familiar tattoos, however, their appearance was completely alien. The armor they wore was finely crafted and well maintained but entirely unlike anything Dalish in style – it was too finely crafted, too intricate, almost gaudy. And they stood taller than the Templars that tried to attack them. Idhren himself was hardly representative of the average size of elves, but the People were, on average, slighter than their human counterparts. These were taller than any elf he had ever seen.

And they spoke Elvhen so fluently that Idhren had a hard time understanding. He was hardly fluent himself, with only four years of haphazard instruction from Istimaethoriel, Tainan, and the others of the clan. But he was under the impression that none of the Dalish were completely fluent in their People’s tongue. Too much had been lost over centuries of enslavement; gaps had been filled in with guesswork and loan words. When the elves that stood guard against Corypheus spoke Idhren recognized their words as Elvhen, he recognized most of the words themselves, but it was like listening to a different dialect of the language. Perhaps that was all it was, if these elves had lived in isolation, not venturing to Arlathvhen to share their knowledge with the other clans, it made sense that their reconstruction of the Elvhen language may have developed differently. Not to mention, if they had access to this temple they likely had access to knowledge the other clans lacked.

He wanted to ask them so many questions.

Now was not the time for such thoughts, however. He needed to focus on the task at hand; let neither his fascination with these elves nor his fear of Corypheus prevent him from stopping the magister at all costs.

Maybe if they attacked Corypheus’ forces now, with the element of surprise on their side, they could drive the magister back and show these elves that they were not enemies, but could be allies.

He never had a chance to put that plan into action.

The elves spat one final warning, one that went completely ignored. Corypheus stepped forward undaunted, but the elves stood their ground. Idhren very nearly rose from his hiding spot to strike before the magister had a chance to do so himself. The sudden feeling of an enormous amount of magic collecting froze him on the spot, however. As Corypheus stepped forward onto the bridge two statues that flanked the entrance began to glow and hum.

He could feel the magic building, saw the beams sear into Corypheus' body and realized immediately what was going on. "Get down!" he hissed, grasping at Dorian beside him, but the man was already ducking down behind the railing even as Idhren pulled the man down along with him, apparently having come to the exact same conclusion on his own.

The explosion was blinding and deafening. A wave of magical energy swept out from the epicenter that set all of Idhren's nerves tingling and ears ringing. He had never felt anything like it before, nor seen any enchantment like the one that had struck Corypheus. When his vision cleared he pulled himself up enough to look over the railing. The courtyard below was empty save the corpses of the elven soldiers that had been guarding the temple. There was no sign of Corypheus, not even a corpse. But the Templars that had been by his side were now rushing across the bridge and into the temple as though this had all been part of their plan.

Was Corypheus dead? Idhren pulled himself to his feet, unable to tear his eyes away from the blackened scorch that marred the ground below them. His feet carried him without thought, practically running down the steps into that courtyard. It seemed too easy to be true. Too anticlimactic. And across the bridge the Templars were continuing onward as though they had not a concern in the world. A bad sign. Why were his people continuing on without their leader - their would-be god?
The area around the blast still tingled with magic. The air tasted of burned ozone and charred flesh - a smell that Idhren was entirely too familiar with these days. The statues that had housed whatever sort of enchanted ward guarded the temple were destroyed. It had taken all of their power to stop the magister.

Idhren stared at the charred ashes on the floor, sought out ripples in the Veil that might have signaled something other than what his eyes had seen. A deception. Translocation, invisibility, anything. But all evidence pointed toward the fact that Corypheus was dead.

A sudden sound pulled Idhren’s attention away from his investigation; a low moan and the crunch of bones followed by a horrified “Maker’s breath” from Cassandra. Idhren turned around just in time to watch as a Grey Warden mage who had been slumped unconscious on the floor lurch upright. The Warden’s body shuddered and seized, mouth open in a silent scream as bones cracked and shifted. Bile rose to the back of Idhren’s throat that he forced himself to swallow back as he watched the unfortunate soul before them transform into something horrifyingly familiar. He could not even manage to tear his eyes away from the horror playing out before him until the piercing, ear splitting roar of a dragon broke the shocked stillness that had fallen over the Inquisitor’s party.

Time seemed to speed up again as Idhren’s mind processed what was happening enough to react to it.

“Run.”

The dragon appeared over the top of the trees as Idhren spun on his toes toward the temple. Others passed him easily, Idhren was not a strong sprinter and his short legs did nothing to help the matter. He watched Cole tear past him – or rather just appear ahead of him on the bridge leading up the temple’s great arched doors. Someone caught his arm, and Idhren looked over in alarm before recognizing Dorian running beside him. The man’s eyes were trained ahead but his grip on Idhren’s wrist was firm as he helped drag him toward the relative safety ahead.

“Close the door! Close the door!” Idhren was shouting even before he finished crossing the threshold hot on Dorian’s heels. He threw his shoulder against the immense weight of doors that had likely remained unmoved for centuries. His boots skidded against dusty cobblestones but even as he, Dorian, and Cole set their entire weight against the door it barely budged. Outside the dragon screeched again, sending a chill down his spine. And in a last desperate attempt he shoved with his magic as well, sending a wave of pure force out through his arms and into the door. It worked, as the heavy, gilded wood began to drag across the floor. Beside him he felt Dorian catch on and do the same. Morrigan must have had the same thought as well, because the other door began to move as well, and finally both of them slammed shut, locking out their pursuer and sealing magically.

The force of the dragon’s breath shook the walls of the temple and Idhren could feel the heat of it through the door. But no further assault came, and eventually the entryway fell quiet save the sound of their labored breathing.

"Dread Wolf shit on my corpse," Idhren breathed, voice cutting through the sudden stillness. He slumped against the door, but forced himself to keep to his feet. "You all saw that, yes?" he asked, unable to keep his voice from shaking.

"If you mean, did we all see Corypheus die and then return to life..." When Idhren looked over Dorian appeared as shaken as he felt. "Then yes. We saw that."

"How is that possible?" Idhren asked. And how as he meant to kill something like that?

"It seems," Morrigan posited, sounding almost entirely unaffected by what they had just witnessed,
though Idhren found that hard to believe. "His life force passed on to the nearest blighted creature,
darkspawn or Grey Warden. Like an archdemon."

How was that possible? Perhaps he was still in shock, but Idhren could not wrap his mind around it.
It should be impossible. Then again, everything about Corypheus should have been impossible.
Everything about this whole situation should have been impossible. How was he supposed to kill
something like that?

It was Cassandra, ever present voice of reason, that pulled Idhren out of his stunned panic. "Samson
and his Templars fled further into the temple," she spoke as she stepped away from the door. "They
must still be seeking this eluvian. Our mission remains unchanged, does it not?"

"You're right." Idhren took a deep breath to compose himself and pushed away from the door. They
still had to stop the creature from getting what he'd come for. If they could foil his plans once more it
could give them enough time to figure out how to deal with this newest development. But then, as
the shock faded slowly, something occurred to him. "Corypheus mentioned a 'well of sorrows',," he
pondered aloud. The phrase was completely foreign to him. It had no relation to anything he knew of
eluvians. He turned to Morrigan and loath though he was to do it asked, "Do you know what he was
talking about?"

“I… am uncertain what he referred to,” Morrigan admitted uncomfortably.

Unsurprising, though Idhren couldn’t help being a little annoyed by the answer. “Well, whatever it is
we’ll just have to get to it before he does.”

The interior of the temple was no less majestic than the exterior. Nor less overgrown. If ever this
portion of the temple had had a roof it was now long gone. Golden sunlight filtered down through
the branches of trees that grew up higher than the mosaic walls around them, roots disrupting the tiles
at their feet. Despite what had just happened and what awaited them within, the temple itself was
actually incredibly peaceful. Idhren wished they had the time to appreciate it more, but Corypheus'
people were still ahead of them, and there was no time to linger and admire the scenery.

They emerged from the front entrance of the temple through a crumbling archway into a wide
courtyard, vines draping the walls and pushing through the stonework. The whole area hummed with
lingering magic. Ahead, on the far side of the yard stood a high doorway flanked by two enormous
golden statues seemingly untarnished by time. Though surely centuries worth of dust and grime
should have dulled their sheen, the twin effigies of Mythal shone in the midday sun as though they
had been newly burnished. Perhaps some lingering enchantment ensured their eternal splendor.

In the center of the yard was a raised platform, a dais with two wide pillars set in the middle.
Curiously, Idhren approached and carefully climbed the steps leading up. The platform was as worn
by time as anything else here, stairs crumbling and grass growing between the cracks. And yet the
hum of ambient magic here was stronger than anywhere else he had yet been.

“How, this writing is Elvhen,” Idhren called, and stepped up to the pillars. His Elvhen was rusty,
little used since the Inquisition, and had never been perfect to begin with. But the culture and history
of his people, including their language, had been his primary area of study under Istimaethoriel's
tutelage. But even the Dalish rarely used Elvhen in their daily lives, and even the Keepers did not
have full knowledge of the people's native tongue. Still, Idhren recognized the letters. He reached out
and pushed aside the vines that had grown over the pillars, obscuring most of the text, and brushed accumulated dirt from the time-worn carvings. "Perhaps it says something about this Well."

Footsteps approached, and Idhren looked over to see Morrigan step up beside him. “Abelasan,” the witch read. "The Place of Sorrows. That must mean the well."

It was almost amusing to watch her stumble over the translation. Except that it was completely unnecessary. He focussed his attention on the words carved on the pillar. His hands smoothed over the lettering once more, continuing to brush it clean as his eyes traced the lines.

"The ancient elves were obsessively poetic," he complained. "I feel much less would have been lost if they had written clearly."

"You might say that of any ancient people," Dorian quipped from behind them. He had not followed Idhren and Morrigan up onto the dais, nor had anyone else, but he stood at the bottom of the steps watching curiously and listening to their conversation. "Does is say anything useful, or was the writer merely waxing poetic about the glory of the elves?"

"I highly doubt this was written by Solas," Idhren replied, earning a bark of laughter from Dorian. "It does mention the Well. It's an object, I think. Some kind of artifact, and likely a powerful one if Corypheus wants to get his hands on it."

"It also speaks of a sacrifice," Morrigan added. "Halam'shivanas. The sweet sacrifice of duty."

"A rather poetic translation," Idhren commented, "Though I suppose the ancients would have approved. A sacrifice to gain the power of the artifact, maybe? A price to be paid to use its power?"

"Perhaps," Morrigan agreed. "A price the patrons of this temple clearly thought worthwhile."

It raised more questions than it answered, in truth, and they were wasting time sitting here debating uncertain possibilities. Idhren had to tear himself away from the writing, turning his back on it. "Maybe we'll be able to learn more inside," he said. "We can't let the Templars get too far ahead."

The Well of Sorrows was an actual well. It really should not have surprised him. But so much had happened so far that day that Idhren kept expecting the figurative rug to be pulled out from under him again. So when the Well of Sorrows was exactly what the name implied it was the mundanity that surprised him more than anything. Not that there had been any time to contemplate that situation when it was revealed. There had hardly been time to decide what to do with the Well in order to keep it out of Corypheus' hands.

Sitting now in the Crossroads, the space between eluvians, having drunk from the Well of Sorrows and taken its power into himself, the weight of it all finally hit him.

He still felt dizzy from the effects of the Well, a headache slowly building behind his eyes. He had walked barely a few feet through the eluvian before collapsing to his knees. He was exhausted, aching, mind spinning. Possibly in shock. He wasn't even particularly aware of falling. One minute he was walking, the next he was sitting on the ground.

"Amatus!" Dorian rushed to his side when he saw his lover collapse. "Are you alright?"
"I'm fine," Idhren replied, although it was a blatant lie. He was very much not alright at the moment. And it hadn’t escaped Idhren’s notice how Dorian had been casting nervous looks in his direction since he’d stepped into the Well.

Dorian gave him a look that very clearly said he didn’t believe a word of it. “Yes, because fainting is something that happens to people who are ‘fine’.”

“I didn’t faint,” Idhren protested weakly, although honestly he wasn’t sure. He had absolutely collapsed, blacked out for a heartbeat. Had he fainted? Even for only a split second?

"Just decided to have a sit down, then?" Dorian asked, "In the middle of the road? Because that's perfectly average behavior."

"There's no need for such sarcasm," Idhren complained. Using his staff as leverage, he gathered his legs under himself and hoisted himself back to his feet. But as soon as he was upright he wavered. A wave of dizziness overcame him and his vision went black once more. The only thing that kept him upright this time was Dorian's quick reaction as the man reached out and caught him under the arms before Idhren could collapse to the ground once more.

When his awareness returned he was seated on the ground once more, held up by Dorian's arm around his shoulders and with the full attention of all his companions now directly on him. Idhren did not like to be under such scrutiny, nor did he like appearing so weak in front of anyone else.

"A short rest would not be a bad idea," Cassandra suggested diplomatically, "Provided this place is safe." She glanced nervously at their surroundings, and pointedly at the eluvian still nearby.

"We are perfectly safe here for the time being," Morrigan assured. She was the only one not looking at Idhren with concern, but rather barely concealed annoyance. No doubt she thought she would be handling the effects of the well better than he currently was. She couldn't even truly understand what those effects were, though. Even Idhren wasn't entirely certain what he'd gotten himself into. "The key to this eluvian was the Well of Sorrows itself. With the power of the Well gone it will remain inactive. Corypheus will not be able to follow us here."

"Well that's a relief," Dorian said. He removed his arm from Idhren's shoulders when the elf was able to sit up under his own power, but lingered nearby. "This is the perfect time to catch our breath, then. Even if the scenery leaves something to be desired," he commented, looking about at their surroundings. It was all very monotone and indistinct, as though the area were shrouded in a thick fog. "What is this place anyway?"

"This is the Crossroads," Morrigan answered, and for once Idhren was happy to let her. "The space between eluvians. It is neither our world, nor the Fade."

"Fascinating," Dorian murmured. "I'd always wondered how eluvians were able to facilitate translocation. But it's not actually translocation at all, is it? They all lead here. A sort of... pocket world? You knew about this?" he looked back at Idhren, now sitting cross legged on the path.

Idhren nodded, "She's got one in a storage closet back at Skyhold," he commented.

"And you didn't tell me?" Dorian asked. "I'm offended."

"I've been busy planning a war, in case you didn't notice," Idhren crabbed. His headache was starting to get worse and it was doing nothing to improve his mood.

“Now who’s being sarcastic,” Dorian quipped. He shifted until he was sitting on the ground beside Idhren, setting his staff down beside them but within easy reach should it be needed. Gradually, the
others drifted off to rest themselves and find what small amount of privacy they could at the moment. This place didn't leave much option, wandering out of sight of the group could mean getting lost in this grey featureless landscape forever, or until you found another active eluvian, at least, but there was no telling where any of them led.

Idhren ignored Dorian's words. He propped his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to will away the migraine that was forming. Pressing his fingertips to his temples Idhren eased in what little healing magic he could grasp. But the ache was making it hard to concentrate, and he was exhausted, and he had never been any good at healing in the first place, so the effect was barely noticeable.

"Are you hurt?" Dorian's voice was hushed but it still lanced through Idhren's brain like a dagger, making him wince.

"I'm fine," the elf tried to insist, but his voice came out forced.

"You are absolutely not fine," Dorian snapped, making Idhren wince again and thereby proving Dorian's point for him. Then his voice grew hushed, so they would not be so easily overheard, but lost none of its ferocity. "This is why I didn't want you to use the Well. We have no idea what it's done to you."

This was not an argument Idhren wanted to have at the moment. He could barely think straight let alone focus enough to hold a conversation. "I'm not hurt," Idhren insisted again. Cuts and bruises from all the fighting, and he might have strained something in his shoulder, but nothing serious. Nothing worth mentioning. It was just this headache.

"Alright, I'll grant you that, but you are not 'fine'," Dorian argued back. "You couldn't even stand up a minute ago."

"I have a headache, that's all," Idhren said curtly. And this argument wasn't making it any better.

"Headaches don't usually make people faint," Dorian argued. "You fainted in the temple, too. What did that thing do to you?"

Idhren didn't know, honestly, but he wasn't about to admit it. "Stop fussing," he complained rather than try to come up with any answer that Dorian might believe. "I'm fine."

"Stop saying you're fine!" Dorian snapped, practically shouting. Idhren winced again and clutched tighter at his head. This time the reaction was violent enough that Dorian could not let it go unmentioned. "What's wrong?"

"I told you, I have a headache," Idhren replied impatiently.

An annoyed sigh escaped Dorian's lips. "Here, let me see, maybe I can help." He reached out and Idhren felt his hands trying to gently pry his own away from his head.

"Stop it!" Idhren snapped without thinking about it, knocking Dorian's hands away.

"Now you're just being stubborn," Dorian complained.

"I've told you--,"

"If you say you're fine one more time I am going to knock you out and carry you back to Skyhold myself," Dorian interrupted before Idhren could make any more protests. It worked to shut Idhren up, though, if only to spare himself the indignity. "Let me help," he beseeched, calming somewhat.
"Fine," Idhren grumbled, and let his hands drop away from his head. He forced himself to open his eyes but even the diffuse light of the Crossroads felt extraordinarily bright and painful. It was the first time he'd seen Dorian's face since sitting down, however, and he might have given in sooner had that not been the case. The man looked as exhausted as Idhren felt, and his brow was knit together with concern.

Reaching out, Dorian gently cupped Idhren's face between his hands, and this time Idhren made no attempt to pull away. "How bad is it?" Dorian asked, voice soft but still laced with frustration.

"Bad," Idhren replied vaguely, letting his eyes fall shut again. He felt the familiar warmth and tingle of healing magic seep into his skin from the tips of Dorian's fingers, easing slowly through his skull. As it did the throbbing between his eyes began to lessen somewhat. The slightest sound or shift of light no longer felt as though it were stabbing into him, and he could begin to think more clearly.

"Is that any better?" Dorian asked after a moment.

"A little," Idhren answered. When he opened his eyes this time he felt as though he could see clearly.

Dorian still looked worried. He let one hand drop away from Idhren's face, but left the other gently cupping his cheek. "Good," he said. "What did the Well do?" he asked, soft but urgent.

Idhren still didn't want to admit that he had no idea. That would only make Dorian worry more when there was nothing the man could do. "I'm not sure," he said reluctantly, unable to meet Dorian's eyes. "I heard voices... I asked them for help, but I... I couldn't really understand them."

"Heard voices?" Dorian asked in concern. "That elf said there was some sort of geas on the Well. What was the phrase he used? Bound to the will of Mythal? Was it trying to make you do something?"

"I don't know," Idhren said. His head still hurt enough that he could not think too hard about what had happened.

An annoyed huff was the only response that Dorian gave. "You damned fool," he muttered. "Why did you do it?" the man demanded suddenly. "This could have killed you, it still might. We know nothing about this kind of magic. Why take this risk when she was volunteering?"

Idhren frowned, but even with his head pounding that was something he could answer. Because he didn't need to think about it. "This is my duty, Dorian," he said as firmly as he could, meeting the man's eyes once more.

"Duty?" the man repeated in confusion. "No one was asking you to sacrifice yourself like this. In fact, we all protested it."

"My duty to the People," Idhren clarified. "I'm still First of my clan even if I'm away from them."

Dorian looked even more bewildered by that answer. "I had no idea you actually cared about any of that," he said.

Idhren could barely believe he was hearing that. "Of course I care!" How could Dorian possibly think otherwise? He'd lived with the Dalish for years, become one of them. He'd gotten the tattoos for crying out loud. And he would have been perfectly happy living out the rest of his life with the clan had none of this happened. He pulled himself away from Dorian, "You think I got these tattoos on a whim?"

"Well you never talk about anything Dalish," Dorian said defensively. "What am I meant to think?"
That was true, Idhren realized with some surprise. Not that he was actively trying to hide it – obviously the tattoos gave away that part of his life immediately – but it rarely came up in conversation. At least, not nearly as often as Tevinter came up. Because everything about the Inquisition reminded him of that life. So much so that his few years with Clan Lavellan felt sometimes like a dream. A dream that he might never get back. “They’re my people,” he said with as much conviction as he could summon at the moment, “And I’m the Keeper’s First… Or I was…” Elera had probably gleefully taken the position back as soon as it became apparent he wouldn’t be returning any time soon. That was fine; she’d always been more qualified than him anyway. “Even so, it’s the duty of all Dalish to preserve the history of our People.”

Dorian looked as though he wasn’t entirely happy with that answer. Or maybe he just didn’t entirely understand Idhren’s motivations. It had taken him a long time to feel like he fit in with the clan, to feel like he could actually call himself Dalish, to feel as though he’d earned the tattoos on his face. And he had probably done a poor job representing his people here.

“It doesn’t come up much,” Idhren added, weak excuse though it was. “I guess it’s not easy to talk about. But that clan was my home. And they’re the only family I have left.”

Dorian, it seemed, had no reply for that, for he remained silent in the wake of Idhren’s words. Idhren had no more to say on the matter and fell quiet as well. The headache was coming back as the effects of Dorian’s healing magic dulled. He raised a hand to his head again, squeezing his eyes shut as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Does your head still hurt?" Dorian asked a moment later when he noticed.

"Yes," Idhren replied, seeing no reason to deny it anymore.

"We should get back to Skyhold, then, so a proper healer can have a look at you," Dorian said. "Can you walk? Or will I need to carry you back?"

"You are not carrying me anywhere," Idhren said irritably. This situation was embarrassing enough without adding that particular indignity to it. "I’ll manage." And to prove it, he grabbed his staff to help lever himself up off the ground. It took no small amount of effort to get himself to his feet while fighting the dizziness that had sent him to the ground in the first place, but moving slowly he managed. Dorian was standing up long before, hovering nervously and ready to catch Idhren at a moment’s notice should he fall once more. But Idhren did not fall. He regained his feet and stood firm, feeling embarrassingly proud of the accomplishment. "Morrigan," he called, wincing a little at how jarring even his own voice sounded. "Do you know how to get back to Skyhold?"

"I do," the woman confirmed. "It should not take long to locate the eluvian within Skyhold. Perhaps an hour’s walk," she surmised, and then looked at the way he was still leaning on his staff like a walking stick and squinting against the pain in his head. "Although in your condition--."

"I'm fine," Idhren interrupted curtly. "I'd like to get back so we can send word back to the Arbor Wilds." The troops could pull out now that Corypheus' plans were foiled. Likely the monster would flee to lick his wounds, rebuild his strength, and try to formulate a new plan.

Morrigan looked as though she didn’t believe he was well enough to continue. Everyone looked like that, actually, as they picked themselves up off the ground. It was infuriating to feel so weak, and that made him all the more determined to make it back to Skyhold under his own power.

"Lead the way, then," Idhren invited.

With a curt nod, Morrigan collected her staff and began walking. With one last concerned look back
at Idhren, Cassandra fell in behind her, calling for Cole as they set off. Dorian did not begin walking until Idhren had managed a few steps on his own. The hovering was growing increasingly irritating. Moreso because Dorian wasn't even attempting to be subtle about it. He stayed right by Idhren's side as they walked - the elf still using his staff as a walking stick - and kept glancing over at him, reaching out if Idhren so much as stumbled over his own feet.

"Dorian would you stop fussing," Idhren snapped at him. They had been walking for only a matter of minutes and already he could not stand it. "It's just a headache, I'm fine."

"Stop saying you're fine," Dorian snapped back. "You're obviously not fine, and everyone can tell. We should have rested longer."

"I can walk, I don't need you to baby me all day," Idhren complained.

"And what if you faint again?" Dorian asked pointedly. "The last thing we need is for you to fall and crack your head open."

"I'm not going to faint," Idhren protested.

"You don't know that!" Dorian argued. "We have no idea what that thing did to you! What it could still be doing to you. You could be dying for all I know!"

"Well you hovering like a mother hen isn't doing anything to help," Idhren snapped back. "In fact, you're making it worse." The arguing was doing nothing to improve this headache. Each word lanced into his skull like a knife. He squeezed his eyes shut against a sudden wave of dizziness that caused him to stumble, but thankfully he managed to remain upright. The stumble didn't go unnoticed, though.

Dorian let out a frustrated scoff. "That's it," he said impatiently. "Give me this." The next thing Idhren knew his staff was being wrenched out of his hands. His eyes shot open again in surprise and to try and keep his balance without something to lean on.

"What are you doing?" Idhren demanded. "Give that back!" He reached out, but Dorian held the staff out of his reach and he didn't dare try to walk without it right now.

Dorian ignored him. He took his own staff from his back and held them both out of Idhren's reach. "Cassandra, would you be a dear and carry these for us," he requested, drawing the woman's attention back toward them. "I'm afraid the Inquisitor is more tired than he'd realized."

"What are you doing?" Idhren demanded again, and again went ignored.

As requested, Cassandra came back to join them, quick steps bringing her to Dorian's side, where she accepted the two staffs rather hesitantly, as though she thought touching them might be dangerous. "Is everything alright?" she asked in concern.

"I'm fine," Idhren tried to insist. "Dorian is being stupid and overprotective."

"And you are being an impossible, stubborn fool," Dorian shot back. He turned his back to Idhren and then knelt down on one knee. "Come along, then."

"What?" Idhren stared at his back uncomprehendingly for a moment, then he scowled. "You are not carrying me back to Skyhold."

"It's either me or Cassandra, I'm afraid," Dorian told him. "And I expect my outfit is exceptionally more comfortable than hers." Idhren cast a glance over at Cassandra, but the woman only scoffed
and rolled her eyes before turning away from them and beginning to walk along the path once more. She took their staffs with her, which left Idhren with little option but to accept Dorian’s offer to be carried. “Come on,” Dorian prompted impatiently, looking back over his shoulder. “If talking is making your headache worse then I can’t imagine walking is doing anything to help it, either. Now get on and let’s go.”

Idhren really had little choice other than to go along with this or to stand here and continue arguing. And with the pain in his head getting worse by the minute, arguing was not going to stay an option for much longer. So, reluctant and humiliated, Idhren capitulated. He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Dorian's shoulders, allowed the man to loop his arms around his knees and foist him upward. A moment later Dorian rose to his feet. For a moment Idhren clung tighter to his shoulders, ensuring that he would not fall, before he relaxed against Dorian's back.

"Maker, you weigh nothing at all even in all that armor," Dorian quipped. He shifted Idhren higher up on his back, adjusting his hold on the elf, and then began walking. "But that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Idhren had to admit that this was easier that attempting to walk, but not for his pride. "I hate you," he grumbled, face pressed into the fabric of Dorian's collar.

Dorian huffed a laugh as he walked. "You're certainly in a foul mood today," he commented. "Is it the Well, or lady Morrigan that has made you so disagreeable?" Idhren did not reply. He let his eyes fall shut and rested his forehead against Dorian's shoulder. "Both, perhaps?" the man continued. "She is rather insufferable, isn't she? Imagine if you'd also allowed Solas along. Do you think they would kill each other or kiss first?"

"Dorian," Idhren mumbled into the man's shoulder, interrupting his rambling monologue. "Yes?" the man asked, turning his head just enough that he could see the top of Idhren's.

"Shut up," the elf said.

"Ah, sorry," Dorian said quickly, "The headache, of course." He fell silent then, allowing Idhren a small amount of peace as they made their way through the Crossroads, following a path that Morrigan seemed to know well despite having never walked it before. The silence was broken only by the sound of footsteps and the creaking of armor, and the quiet did much to soothe the aching in Idhren's head. With eyes closed he lay against Dorian's shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of leather and musk and lyrium.

But in the back of his mind there were whispers. Like people talking far away. More than once Idhren lifted his head from Dorian's shoulder and looked around, thinking that one of his companions was trying to speak to him, but all within the Crossroads remained silent and still. It was unnerving and more than a little frightening. An effect of the Well's magic? He could understand the whispers no better than he had after first drinking from the Well.

"Is something wrong?" Dorian asked quietly the third time Idhren raised his head and looked around.

"I thought I heard something," Idhren replied, barely a whisper.

Dorian looked to either side of the path on which they walked, but the landscape was as formless and shrouded as it ever had been. "There's nothing else here," he said. "Perhaps you're just tired. We're nearly there, I think, then you can see a healer and have a proper nap."

It was more than just exhaustion, Idhren thought. The whispers he kept hearing in the back of his
mind were too similar to what he'd heard in the temple. But he was exhausted; too exhausted to think very hard about it. A nap sounded rather fantastic at the moment, actually. A nap and a hot bath and something to eat. Not necessarily in that order. What time was it? They had been fighting and running through the woods since the mid-morning. It must have been close to evening now, though time was impossible to tell in this never-changing place. And he'd been too preoccupied to think about it at the temple.

"Are you feeling any better?" Dorian asked. He adjusted Idhren's weight in his arms and rolled his shoulders back. Idhren realized that the man must be getting tired. Idhren was small but he was not weightless.

"I'm well enough to walk," Idhren said, "You must be tired."

"We're nearly there," Dorian assured. "You keep resting."

"Dorian I'm alright, you can let me down," Idhren protested. What use was it to have both of them exhausted by the time they returned?

"As am I," Dorian insisted. "I know you're short, but are you sure you've been eating enough? Skipping meals in favor of work, maybe? I know how you get when you're reading."

"Now you're being stubborn," Idhren complained. And he ate better in Skyhold than he had ever eaten before. Between the fighting and the fine meals, he half expected he had gained weight since joining the Inquisition. Still, no matter how little he weighed and how much exercise they had been getting over the past year, Dorian was not used to manual labor. He was no warrior. "If you're tired let me down."

"I am telling you that I'm not tired," Dorian replied flippantly. His words were betrayed by the way he shifted Idhren in his arms again, however. How long had they been walking like this? And after fighting all day with very little rest and nothing to eat. "And look there," he nodded ahead of them to where the others were walking. Dorian and Idhren had fallen behind rather significantly, although they were still within sight and earshot of the others. "I think Morrigan has spotted our destination. I told you we're nearly there."

Indeed, Morrigan was pointing ahead as she spoke to Cassandra, and then looked back in their direction. The other three stopped to wait for Dorian to get close enough they would not have to shout before the woman spoke again. "The eluvian that will lead us to Skyhold is within sight," Morrigan informed, pointing ahead of them along the path. They had passed a handful on their long walk and how she could tell them apart Idhren wasn't certain, but it didn't matter. "I will go ahead and activate it so that you might follow."

"Fantastic," Dorian replied. He stopped upon catching up and now that they were standing still Idhren could feel that Dorian's breathing was growing labored. "I'm quite ready to be out of this place."

"You can put me down now," Idhren told him.

"Nonsense," Dorian shrugged. "Lead on, then," he said to Morrigan.

"Dorian I'm serious," Idhren protested. "Put me down."

"You heard the woman, we're nearly there," Dorian said, and began walking again. "We've come this far I might as well carry you the rest of the way. Don't worry, I won't carry you through Skyhold for all your followers to see. This will be our little secret."
"A secret," Cole interrupted. The spirit boy was not looking at them as he spoke, Idhren wondered sometimes if he was even conscious of the words that escaped his mouth. "Silent, safe when unspoken. So much I want to say, but the words stick in my throat. Beautiful, perfect, pure. Shape of his body pressed against mine feels like home."

"Yes, Cole, thank you," Dorian said curtly, cutting the boy off before he could elaborate further. "Secret generally means you don’t tell anyone else about it."

"Oh, right," Cole realized, as though it was something he had forgotten. "Sorry."

Idhren’s cheeks burned red with embarrassment and he hid his face in the high collar of Dorian’s robes. “Why are you thinking about that now?” he asked in a hissed whisper.

“T’m not,” Dorian protested, “Maybe you are.”

“I’m not,” Idhren protested in turn. Though the words matched his own feelings as well. “You think I’m beautiful?” he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“That haircut could be improved,” Dorian commented, shrugging with the shoulder Idhren’s head wasn’t resting on, “But otherwise, yes. It’s probably one of the first things I ever thought about you, to be honest.”

“Really?” Idhren asked in disbelief. Though his memory of their first meeting had grown fuzzy over the years, he was still quite certain that he’d been an absolute mess at the time. Bloody and crying; not even remotely beautiful.


Compliments like that used to make Idhren uncomfortable. Too many comments in his youth about his unusual eyes, or his pretty face. Thoughts about where those features might have landed him if he weren’t blessed with magic, and how they’d been used to hurt him anyway. But it didn’t bother him so much anymore. At least, not coming from Dorian. Face still burning with embarrassment he mumbled, “You’re not half bad yourself, despite the mustache.”

“Not half bad, he says,” Dorian scoffed. “Perhaps we should have the healer take a look at your eyes while we’re at it. Clearly they’re not working very well if you think I’m anything less than stunning. But look, we’ve arrived,” he announced.

Idhren lifted his head from Dorian’s shoulder to look ahead of them. Sure enough, there at the end of the path ahead of them stood an activated eluvian, shedding its strange blue light onto the ground before them. Morrigan stood before it, one hand on the surface as she ushered Cassandra and Cole through. Dorian followed in their wake, stepping through the portal and out into the familiar abandoned storage room beside the courtyard garden.

“Ah, home sweet home,” the man sighed, “As you southerners say.”

“Are you going to put me down now?” Idhren asked.

“Yes, yes, so demanding,” Dorian complained. He crouched down again and released Idhren’s legs, letting the elf get his feet under him before he stood upright once more. He stretched his back and rolled his shoulders and Idhren couldn’t help feeling bad about making him work so hard, even though he’d protested the whole way. “And I’ll take those back, Cassandra,” Dorian said after a moment to set all his bones back in place. He held his hands out and courteously accepted both his and Idhren’s staffs back from her care. “Thank you for your gracious assistance.”
“It was no trouble,” Cassandra replied, though she looked happy to be rid of them. “You should find a healer for him,” she said with a pointed look in Idhren’s direction. “I will send word to Leliana and the others.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Idhren protested.

“It is no trouble,” Cassandra assured. “You are clearly in need of rest. Maker knows what that Well did to you.”

“Indeed,” Morrigan cut in, stepping away from the eluvian after it went inactive. She watched Idhren from the corner of her eye, silently judgmental. “I suppose only time will tell what effects the magic will have on you. And how well you are able to use its gifts.”

Idhren scowled at her, defensive words on the tip of his tongue. But before he could get any of them out, Dorian’s arm was around his shoulders and the man was pulling him toward the door. “Yes, well, for now I think we could all do with a hot meal and a nap. I, for one, am absolutely famished.” And he pulled Idhren out the door on shaky legs, prattling on about how he was hungry or tired or in need of a bath, about the quality of food available in the Frostbacks and the delicacies he missed from back home. Idhren’s head still hurt, but he didn’t make Dorian stop talking this time. Here, in a place that was not quite home but close to it, the nonsensical monologue was rather comforting.

They moved up the stairs to the Inquisitor’s quarters at Idhren’s pace. Even when he had to stop after two flights for fear of falling back down them. And Dorian complained about everything except his own fatigue or the slowness of their pace. If Idhren were in a more coherent frame of mind such a revelation might have him feeling guilty, or touched, or some strange combination of the two. As it was, by the time they reached the top of the tower it was all he could do to stay conscious, and Dorian’s voice was like an anchor in reality.

“A healer should be along shortly,” the man informed him as he deposited Idhren on the bed. Idhren sat on the edge of the mattress staring down at his hands, the blood and dirt under his chipped nails. “Do we have any more lyrium?” he asked. Because it had been the sort of day where he felt the urge to lose himself in a haze of smoke. Except they didn’t smoke it down south; he could only find potions or a Templar’s philter, neither of which gave quite the same result.

“I’m certain I could round some up,” Dorian replied thoughtfully, already beginning to strip out of his bloodied robes. “But what do you need it for now? You can’t still be tired from--,” he cut himself off as he realized what Idhren was asking for. When he cast his gaze back at Idhren the elf was looking up at him with beseeching eyes. That expression was still so hard to deny. “Ask me again after the healer’s seen to you,” he said. “If the elfroot isn’t enough.”

Idhren sighed in disappointment, but did not ask again.
Let Me Be The Vessel

Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable
Of your glory! Let me be the vessel
Which bears the Light of your promise
To the world expectant.

- Canticle of Exaltations 1:1

Skyhold, Justinian 9:42 Dragon

Idhren awoke past noon on the day after his party walked out of the eluvian and back into Skyhold. The curtains had been drawn around the bed - unusual outside of winter, but much appreciated at the moment as they cut off all but the faintest sliver of light. He was alone in bed when he woke with the memory of some of the oddest dreams he'd ever had. However, when he tried to recall their content, he couldn't. The harder he tried to grasp at the fleeting visions the faster they fled his mind. So eventually he gave up trying.

He pushed himself upright, letting the blankets pool around his waist as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Now that he was awake he realized he didn't actually have any memory of getting into bed. Or much memory of even getting up to his room. In fact, everything since drinking from the Well of Sorrows was a little bit hazy.

That was concerning. But he hoped it was only a result of the terrible migraine the Well's magic had caused. Maybe Morrigan had been right about him not being prepared to use the Well. But he doubted she would be faring any better if he'd let her have it.

Pulling back the curtains around the bed let in a flood of afternoon sunlight. Idhren winced at the sudden assault on his eyes and cursed softly.

Maybe that migraine wasn't entirely gone after all.

"Oh, the Inquisitor lives after all," Dorian's voice floated to him from across the room. Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the daylight, Idhren looked in the direction of the voice. Dorian stood by the bookshelves in the corner. Though they'd been empty when Idhren first moved into this room they were now nearly overflowing. But Idhren always had them perfectly organized no matter how cramped the shelves. However, right now there were half a dozen volumes tossed carelessly onto the floor and Dorian had another in hand. "What are you doing?" Idhren asked, climbing out of bed.

"Good morning to you, too," Dorian replied, pointedly ignoring the question. "Feeling any better?"

"Mostly," Idhren replied, because he hadn't been awake long enough to take stock of things. And because he was distracted by the sight in front of him. "Are you stealing my books?"

Dorian glanced down at the book in his hands like he'd forgotten that he was holding it. "Only because you've been hoarding all the best ones for yourself," he replied. "No wonder I can't find
anything worthwhile in the library, they're all here."

"I'm not hoarding anything," Idhren argued. A draft blew in from an open window and made him shiver. Wrapping his arms around himself he quickly went over to the wardrobe to find something more substantial than his underclothes to wear. "Everything there was a gift to me or I bought it myself."

"Well that certainly explains the section of Chantry rubbish," Dorian commented, "I thought it was odd you'd have so much obvious propaganda."

"Is that why they're all over the floor?" Idhren asked irritably.

Dorian looked down, saw the volumes at his feet and then sheepishly bent to pick them up. He mumbled an apology as he deposited those and the one in his hand in a sloppy stack on the corner of Idhren's desk. "But you never answered my question," he continued. "How are you feeling? You've slept through most of the day already."

"I don't know," Idhren answered vaguely. He pulled on a pair of pants first, the most comfortable he could find. He didn't feel much like dressing up today. "I'm still a little tired, I think."

"No more headache, though?" Dorian asked hopefully.

"Not at the moment, no," Idhren confirmed for him. It was a relief, honestly. Although he felt as though it might come back any moment. The sun seemed brighter than usual.

"Well that's a relief," Dorian sighed, and turned his attention back to the bookshelf. "You had a lot of people quite worried with the state you were in last night."

Idhren paused, having taken a shirt from the wardrobe but not yet put it on. He set it back down again. "A lot of people?" he asked, turning around to look at Dorian. A lot of people hadn't seen him the night before. His memory might be clouded by pain and fatigue, but he knew that no more than a dozen people could be aware of the state he was in. "Or just you?"

Dorian froze for a moment, hand hovering over a book on the shelf before he let it drop back to his side. "Alright, you've caught me," he admitted surprisingly easily.

"You haven't done a very good job hiding it," Idhren commented. He abandoned his plans to get dressed and walked over to where Dorian stood. "I'm fine, though, see?" he said with rather forced optimism, holding his arms out to either side.

Dorian looked over his shoulder. His eyes ran up and down Idhren's form and then he frowned. "It's not physical wounds I'm concerned about at the moment. It's that Well, and what it's done inside your head. We haven't the faintest idea how that sort of magic works."

"You were decidedly not fine last night," Dorian said pointedly. "What I really want to know is what that Well did to you. But you have shockingly little here on obscure ancient elven magics."

"I understand your reasoning," Dorian grumbled, "But that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

"What do you want me to say, then?" Idhren asked. "I don't feel any different," he insisted. "I feel fine."

"You were decidedly not fine last night," Dorian said pointedly. "What I really want to know, is what that Well did to you. But you have shockingly little here on obscure ancient elven magics."
Although I'm not even entirely certain what I'm looking for.”

"You act like there are a lot of books on obscure ancient elven magic," Idhren commented. A quick glance as the pile of books Dorian had apparently already rejected as irrelevant showed they were some of his more obscure magical texts. But theory, mostly. But then that was most of what was published in the south, where mages were discouraged from radical experimentation. More than once since moving in to Skyhold Idhren had found himself longing for access to a library like the ones in Tevinter. "The Well of Sorrows was apparently a very well kept secret."

"And yet Corypheus knew about it," Dorian replied, unimpressed. "He must have learned from somewhere."

"Probably some source that disappeared a thousand years ago," Idhren sighed and sidled up to Dorian, placing himself between the man and the bookshelf. "I doubt you'll find anything useful here. And I'm alright now," he beseeched, "You don't need to worry."

Dorian looked down at Idhren, not able to fully believe his assurances. “I find it hard to believe after all that show yesterday that you aren’t noticing any effects whatsoever from your little stunt at the Temple.”

At that point Idhren gave up. This was becoming a circular argument and he did not have the energy to continue it. He didn’t know what else he could do to convince Dorian that he was fine. Or at least mostly fine. “I don’t know what else to tell you,” he sighed, and left the man’s side. He returned to the wardrobe on the other side of the room and resumed getting dressed for the day. Although he had no memory of bathing the night before it must have happened because he was not covered in blood and sweat and dirt, and a quick look around the room showed that someone had removed his armor to be cleaned. How much time had he lost? It was a frightening question that Idhren was not certain he wanted the answer to.

“You could tell me what that thing did to you,” Dorian’s voice followed Idhren across the room. “So I could at least know what I’m looking for here.”

“I don’t know!” Idhren snapped, furious suddenly for no reason that he could understand. He snatched fresh pants out of the dresser and slammed the drawer closed with more force than was actually necessary. “You were there! You heard all the exact same vague, poetic nonsense that I did. If you have any further insights you didn’t offer at the time, please enlighten me, otherwise go talk to Morrigan, I’m certain she’ll be more than happy to make wild guesses and condescend until the Maker’s return.”

“You don’t know?” Dorian asked in disbelief.

“I. Don’t. Know.” Idhren emphasized. He pulled on the pants without turning around to look at Dorian. “Are you happy now?”

“Of course not!” the man snapped. “Wasn’t this supposed to help? You were supposed to gain some sort of knowledge or power that would help us defeat Corypheus. Wasn’t that the whole point of the entire escapade? Are you telling me that you risked your life, perhaps still are, and we didn’t even gain anything from it?”

This time Idhren did turn to face Dorian. His head was beginning to ache again. He was tired despite having slept through most of the day already. “The point of the excursion was to find an eluvian and keep it out of Corypheus’ hands,” he said impatiently. “We did that. And we killed a fuckload of templars in the process. Corypheus has no army, he has no eluvian, he has no Well of Sorrows. He has nothing. That was the point of the mission, and I’d call it a success.”
Dorian stared at him, mouth agape and momentarily speechless. He could not believe what Idhren was saying. “So that whole speech yesterday about ‘preserving the history of your people’ - or whatever it was you said – was that just a load of poetic rubbish, then?”

“Of course not!” Idhren snapped. The headache was growing steadily worse. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to stave it off just long enough to make Dorian shut up. “But I know fuck all about thousand year old elven artifacts. No one has seen or spoken of this thing since the fall of Arlathan. I don’t know how it works. I don’t know what it does. All I know is what Abelas said. I suspect it somehow captured the collective knowledge of all the priests of Mythal.” How that was done, Idhren hadn’t the faintest idea. Nor did he know how to access that knowledge.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Idhren continued before giving Dorian a chance to respond. He grabbed his boots and shoved his feet into them as quickly as possible. “I’m going to find something to eat and see if word has come back from the Wilds yet.”

“Idhren,” Dorian sighed. Idhren ignored him and headed for the door. “Amatus, wait,” the man called, but Idhren refused to indulge the argument any longer. He let the door slam on his way out.

Idhren went first to the kitchens. He hadn’t eaten in over a day – that he could remember, at least – and his stomach was eager to remind him of that fact as soon as the smell of food hit his nose. It was easy to coerce a meal of leftovers from the kitchen staff. He had always gotten on well with servants.

He ate in the garden, so as to be out of the way of servants and also avoid the visiting nobility that tended to congregate in the main hall. Not that there were many visitors at the moment, Josephine had been clear not to schedule any meetings while the bulk of the Inquisition was at the other end of the country. But that had not stopped some people from showing up anyway.

The garden was full of sun. Summer was in full swing and the snowpack on the surrounding mountains was the smallest he could remember seeing it. This time last year they had still been in Haven, and he had thought this was nearly over. It felt like so much longer than a year.

Then it was up to the rookery. Also fairly empty at the moment. Leliana was not in residence, but Charter was handling all reports during her absence. When Idhren asked if word had come back from the Wilds she immediately handed over a slip of paper, the sort Idhren recognized as coming from the cylindrical carrying case attached to a raven’s leg.

The message on the paper was, by necessity, brief and curt. 

Forces returning to Skyhold. –L

So they had received Cassandra’s message and were on their way. Idhren thanked Charter and left the rookery once more.

In the war room Idhren leaned his elbows against the well worn wooden table and stared at the maps laid out on its top. Nearly all the little metal figures were clustered in the south of Orlais. The whole of the Inquisition and its allies shipped out to fight. Without really thinking about it he picked up the little icon representing himself – a little fist clutching a bit of green enamel – and moved it back to Skyhold. A journey that should have taken days, maybe weeks, passed in only a few hours. It would seem miraculous if he hadn’t seen for himself how the eluvians bent the laws of magic to make it
possible.

An army traveled slowly. An army with injured soldiers and potentially captured prisoners traveled even slower. If his advisors and inner circle separated from the main force they could travel faster as a small group on horseback and make it back to Skyhold in - he paused to measure the distance with his fingers – a little over a week. The cumbersome bulk of the army would take at least twice that long on foot.

That was a long time to be left to his own devices.

But it was also a long time in which he could figure out what he was going to say when everyone else got back.

There would be questions. About what happened in the temple. About the Well. About the eluvian. About what to do next.

Idhren didn’t know what to say about any of it. He certainly didn’t know what they were meant to do next. Up until now they had always had a clear goal, a clear next move.

Suddenly Idhren heard something. A voice, soft and indistinct, but so close it was as though someone was whispering in his ear. He startled so badly that he knocked over several of the markers on the table as he spun around.

The room was completely empty, the door closed.

As Idhren’s heart returned to its normal pace he looked around, expecting to find Cole perched on the table or staring out the window, but the room remained empty and still, silent save for the distant sounds of the castle.

Shaking his head, Idhren turned back around to right the markers he had knocked over. It was just the wind, he told himself, and he was still exhausted. His headache had never gone away fully. He just needed to get some more rest.

When Idhren returned to his room, tired even though he had slept most of the day and been awake only a few hours, Dorian was still there. He had relocated to the sofa, a pile of books on the table beside him as he lounged and already halfway through the one in his hand. Idhren paused at the top of the stairs, hesitant, before mumbling a generic greeting and making his way toward the bed. He did not look at Dorian, sat on the edge of the bed facing away from him as he pulled off his boots again.

The silence hanging between them was painfully loud. Idhren hung his head in his hands. The headache had eased somewhat after he ate, but it had never gone away entirely. He squeezed his eyes shut and the darkness helped.

“I owe you an apology,” Dorian’s voice cut through, accented by the snap of a book closing. Idhren did not look up. He heard Dorian set the book aside and rise to his feet, footsteps rounding the side of the bed and coming to a stop in front of him. Still Idhren did not move. The man knelt down in front of him, putting them at the same level. Fingers gentle on Idhren’s chin tilted his head up, making him open his eyes and lower his hands. Dorian met his gaze with one of the most open and vulnerable expressions Idhren had ever seen on his face. “I should not have reacted the way I did.”

Idhren pursed his lips and remained silent. He agreed, and some of his annoyance had faded along with his headache, but he was disinclined to forgive so easily.

Dorian, on the other hand, had seemed to expect that would be enough. He waited in silence for
Idhren to speak. When the silence stretched on he sighed and his shoulders slumped. “I know you would like me significantly more if I were able to speak easily and freely about my feelings,” he said regretfully. He looked away from Idhren’s face in an uncharacteristic display of uncertainty and hesitation. His fingers left Idhren’s chin and his hand came to rest lightly on the elf’s knee. “In the temple,” he spoke slowly, deliberately, “after you drank from the Well you simply… collapsed. I have never been more terrified.”

Idhren swallowed heavily. It had somehow never occurred to him how his choices there might have made Dorian feel, and guilt wracked him at the realization. He had been so wrapped up in his own pride and determination he had completely ignored Dorian’s protests at the time. But had their places been reversed he would probably feel the exact same way.

“It frightens me still,” Dorian continued in the face of Idhren’s continued silence. “Not knowing what the magic did to you. How it might change you.”

“I’m still me,” Idhren said quietly, barely more than a whisper. Dorian looked up into his face once more. Idhren offered him a smile that did not quite reach his eyes. He wanted to reassure, but he was uncertain himself. “And it’s been only a day. I will figure this out.”

“Of course you will,” Dorian said, as though it were obvious. “I’ve never met anyone more clever, I should not have doubted you.”

“I forgive you,” Idhren said without hesitation. He reached out and cupped Dorian’s face between his hands. “It’s alright to be frightened.” He wished that Dorian wouldn’t hide such things from him, but he knew it was not that simple. The man carried with him still a lifetime of conditioning that told him all emotions save pride and arrogance were a sign of weakness, something that would be used against him. Idhren knew how that sort of upbringing wore on someone, and that it could not be overcome in only a few months. He was still fighting his own past; he could not blame Dorian for doing the same.

“I’m frightened, too,” he admitted, almost as an afterthought. It was true, however. He also didn’t know exactly what the Well of Sorrows was capable of. He didn’t know if Morrigan had been right about his ability to use it. Maybe he could learn to wield this power on his own, but how long would it take? Time was not something they had to spare. Time would only allow Corypheus to rebuild his strength and make their victory here pointless.

Dorian searched the elf’s expression for some sign that he was lying, that this was just a ploy to make him feel like less a pathetic fool, but saw nothing but sincerity. He sighed again and let his eyes fall shut. Somehow he didn’t feel particularly better knowing that they were both just as lost and afraid in this moment.

Idhren leaned forward and pressed a feather-light kiss on Dorian’s lips before drawing away again. “The moment that I learn anything new about the Well you will be the first to know,” he promised, and let his hands fall away from Dorian’s face.

“That does make me feel somewhat better,” Dorian murmured. He was still unhappy with the situation, but there didn’t seem to be anything more he could do. “But if you don’t mind, I’m going to continue going through your books in case I can find anything informative.”

“Be my guest,” Idhren said.

Dorian squeezed Idhren’s knee once supportively before rising to his feet once more. “I may have better luck in your basement collection,” he said thoughtfully. “I have also considered going through Solas’ things before he’s back from the Wilds.”
Idhren hummed in agreement. He’d never been able to finish cataloging the books in that hidden library given the limited time he spent in Skyhold. There might well be some ancient elven history buried amidst the tomes, but at least half of them were in languages or ancient dialects that Idhren did not understand. “Will you stay here for a while?” he requested hesitantly, “With me?”

Dorian looked down at him, at Idhren’s beseeching eyes and the dark circles under them. “Are you still feeling unwell?” he asked.


“Do you want me to get you anything? Call the healer again?”

Idhren shook his head and held a hand out toward Dorian. “I just… need a bit more rest, I think. Will you stay with me?”

Dorian stared at him for a moment before he sighed and relented. “Very well, I suppose I can just keep going through your books in the meantime.” He wandered over to the pile of books he’d left beside the sofa and snagged the top two before returning to the bedside. By the time he returned Idhren had taken off his jacket and lay down amidst the pillows. Dorian joined him after taking off his own boots, propped himself up against the headboard and opened the book he had been reading before. Before he could begin reading, however, he felt Idhren shift on the mattress beside him. Then the elf was pushing under his arm, settling against his side and laying his head against Dorian’s shoulder. That wasn’t exactly what Dorian had been expecting. “Is the cuddling strictly necessary?” he asked.

“Yes,” Idhren murmured, getting comfortable against the man’s side.

Dorian sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “Very well,” he relented, and allowed himself to get a little more comfortable as well, slouching and resting an arm around Idhren’s shoulders.

Idhren smiled softly to himself as his eyes fell shut and he relaxed. His head still throbbed, but he felt warm, comfortable, and secure tucked against Dorian’s side like this, like it would be easy to drift off to sleep. Soon that became all that Idhren was aware of. Surrounded by warmth, the safe and comforting weight of Dorian’s arm around him, his scent filling Idhren’s nose, the distant sounds of the castle drifting in through an open window, broken occasionally by the rustle of parchment as Dorian turned a page in his book.

And then a whisper in his ear.

It broke the mindless, almost meditative trance that had fallen over Idhren’s half asleep mind. He opened his eyes. “Did you say something?” Idhren asked quietly.

“No,” Dorian murmured in reply.

Idhren frowned a little. He could have sworn he heard a voice. “Probably just the wind,” he mumbled to himself, letting his eyes fall shut once more. “Don’t let me sleep through dinner,” he added as an afterthought.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Dorian assured him.
Once more Idhren’s dreams were filled with strange visions, disjointed pictures and sounds, voices speaking in a language he only half understood.

He was awoken by a gentle shaking and a soft, familiar voice. “Amatus,” Dorian murmured, shaking his shoulder with a little more force. “You told me to wake you for dinner, so it’s time to get up.”

Idhren blinked slowly as he came back to consciousness. He was cuddled up against Dorian’s side, so comfortable he didn’t really want to move. But the arm he had sandwiched between them was starting to go to sleep. And his stomach was happy to remind him that he’d not eaten much that day. Groggily he rolled off the man and then pushed himself upright, yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Did you enjoy your nap?” Dorian asked, faintly amused.

“I did,” Idhren confirmed. In fact, he felt much better now. Better even than he had the last time he woke up. Maybe he really was just exhausted from everything that had happened the day before. “I feel much better.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” Dorian replied. He was quick to get out of bed when Idhren was no longer lying partly on top of him, stretching his legs and back after sitting for so long. “Though now that you’ve slept the entire day away I hope you won’t be up all night pestering me.”

Although Idhren felt much more rested and alert after sleeping all afternoon, he doubted it would be a problem getting to bed that night. It was like recovering from an illness. Perhaps this was his body adapting to whatever magic the Well had infused in him. “If I can’t sleep I’ll be sure not to bother you, at least,” he offered. “Thank you for staying, though.”

“You didn’t give me much choice,” Dorian quipped. “Lying on top of me, and all.”

“Ah,” Idhren chuckled softly, “You saw through my plot.”

“It was highly transparent,” Dorian replied, shaking his head in disappointment. “Not up to your usual standards.”

“I’ll endeavor not to disappoint you next time,” Idhren promised, finally climbing off the bed and stretching his arms toward the sky. “Now, though, I’m starving. Is dinner being served?”

“It is,” Dorian confirmed. “A servant arrived here moments before I woke you to inform us of such. I took the liberty of requesting our meals be brought up here.”

“You did?” Idhren asked in surprise.

“I thought you might not feel up to joining the masses,” Dorian replied. “Considering the state you were in earlier.”

That was incredibly thoughtful. More so than Idhren was used to getting from Dorian. It also meant a servant had likely seen the two of them lying in bed together. That was equally unusual for Dorian. While they had never made a secret of their relationship – impossible, after the way it began – Dorian still tended to shy away from public displays of affection and kept most romantic moments private. “Thank you,” Idhren said earnestly.

His surprise must have shown on his face. “Well you needn’t act so surprised,” Dorian groused. “I am capable of compassionate gestures, you know.”
“‘Capable of’ and ‘acting on’ are two different things,” Idhren reminded him, smiling playfully.

Dorian huffed, “See if I ever do it again you ungrateful little brat,” he complained, though his tone lacked any sort of heat.

A pair of servants arrived at the door a few short moments later, each bearing a portion of the meal between them. By then Idhren had pulled his jacket back on and gone to open another window. Although the air outside was chill the room felt stuffy to him. He thanked the servants, and joined Dorian to eat.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think while you’ve been sleeping the day away,” Dorian commented after they had sat in silence for a while.

“Have you, now?” Idhren asked.

“Well you trapped me here, so there wasn’t much else to do.”

“Trapped in my bed,” Idhren commented dryly, “How tragic.”

“There are worse places, certainly, but that’s beside the point,” Dorian waved it off and dragged the conversation back on track. ‘The point is, I’ve been thinking. About what happened at the temple. About a lot of things, really.

“I should return to Tevinter, shouldn’t I? When this is all through. Provided we survive, of course.” Idhren froze with his fork halfway to his mouth, then lowered it slowly back to his plate. Suddenly he found he’d lost his appetite. Dorian’s attention was focused on his own plate and Idhren realized he had barely eaten a thing. “All our talk about how terribly wrong things are back home, but what do I do about it? Nothing.”

“I would hardly call this-,” Idhren gestured vaguely to the room, intending to indicate all of Skyhold and indeed the Inquisition at large, “—Nothing.”

“Killing our idiot countrymen is all well and good,” Dorian agreed, “But the Venatori are only a symptom of the greater problem. Even if we wipe out every last one of them a new group will pop up in their place soon enough. And the Magisterium would merely turn their head and ignore it until they become politically inconvenient.

“But that elf at the temple,” Dorian continued, “Abelas, he said Tevinter didn’t destroy the elves. The Imperium would never accept that, it would destroy our legacy, however terrible it might be. But they should accept it. Take our history down a peg. Maybe not all of us want to, but that could be altered. If you can change minds, so can I.”

This was a part of Dorian that Idhren had always been in love with. His passion for everything he cared about. And Idhren did agree, to some extent. If Abelas’ words were true, it changed everything the Imperium built itself on. Tearing down the legacy of a conquering nation was something Idhren would happily see done.

But that did not make Dorian’s words any easier to hear.

“So you would just… leave?” Idhren asked. He was still somewhat in shock. He knew that Dorian didn’t hate Tevinter quite as vehemently as he did, but this was still incredibly unexpected.

“Not right away, obviously,” Dorian scoffed. He seemed completely unaware of the confusion roiling through Idhren, going on as though he had not a care in the world. “I’m going to stay and see this Corypheus thing through, of course. But afterward, if we’re still alive.”
What had brought this on? It was true he and Dorian had never talked about the future of their relationship, but Idhren had always assumed that after everything Dorian would want to stay together. Not go gallivanting back to the other end of the world and leave him behind. Idhren had never had any desire to return to Tevinter. Not to mention he was the Inquisitor now, he couldn’t run off to start a revolution in Tevinter even if he wanted to, which he didn’t.

“And what about us?” Idhren’s voice was quiet as he asked, afraid of the answer.

When Dorian met his gaze the man’s expression softened. He sighed, “Trust me, amatus, it will bring me no pleasure to leave your side.” Then don’t. Idhren’s mind screamed, but he managed to hold the words back, swallowing them down. Let Dorian say his piece. “You showed me everything wrong with our homeland, the corruption and inequality. And now I’ve watched you make decisions effecting the entire world. How could I aspire to do any less?”

Idhren swallowed back the lump in his throat. He hated this. He hated the thought of Dorian leaving, of being separated from him, of being alone again. But what he hated most of all was that he couldn’t think of a single good argument against what the man was planning. If anyone in the world could be capable of changing Tevinter for the better, it was Dorian. And no matter how much Idhren loathed the country, there were still good people there. People like his parents, like his brother, like Varius and Valora, who deserved better. Dorian could help people like them. “You’re right,” he said, but the words sounded strange and distant to his own ears. “If that’s what you want to do, I’ll support you.”

A tense moment of silence followed Idhren’s words. “You don’t really sound like it,” Dorian commented.

Idhren frowned. “How would you rather I react?” he asked. “Should I be thrilled that the man I love wants to go off to the other side of the world? Offer to drop everything I’ve built here and follow you back to a place I swore I would never return? Or do you want me to tell you it’s a horrible idea? Should I fall to my knees and beg you to stay?”

“I did expect rather more opposition,” Dorian admitted. “I know you hold no love for Tevinter.”

“I don’t,” Idhren confirmed. “The whole Maker forsaken place can fall into the sea for all I care.”

“Then why…?” Dorian asked, perplexed.

“Because you’re right.” Idhren hated it even more as he was forced to admit it aloud. “There will always be another cult. Another Corypheus. Another of every fucking bastard who made my life there miserable. Because everyone lets them believe it is their Maker-damned right. And that should change. That needs to change. And I can’t think of a single person better qualified to do it, but that doesn’t meant I have to be happy to watch you go off and leave me behind!”

He was getting emotional now. Swallowing back a thickness in his throat and blinking away the stinging in his eyes. He was so tired of this. Of being so pathetically needy all the time. Though he had eaten less than half of his meal, and very little else that day, Idhren found his appetite completely gone. Palms pressed flat against the table he pushed himself to his feet. “So go,” he said with finality. “Go change Tevinter. If you need me I’ll be downstairs.” Then he turned and headed for the door, barely remembering to grab his boots on the way out.

“Idhren,” Dorian called beseechingly after him.

Idhren heard the scrape of chair legs as the man stood up, but he didn’t look back, and let the door slam shut behind him.
Now alone in their room with nothing but the echoing silence of Idhren’s absence, Dorian sighed and slumped back in his chair. That could have gone better.

Idhren didn’t know how long he spent in the basement library. Hours, maybe. He was aware of his eyes growing tired as he leafed through old tomes, and then the next thing he was aware of was a gentle nudge against his shoulder and a weight being draped across his back.

Blinking awake, Idhren raised his head. For a moment the pages of the book he’d passed out atop stuck to his cheek before falling away.

A blanket. That’s what was on his back, he realized slowly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” Dorian said from behind him. “You were gone quite a while, I started to worry.”

Idhren sat up straight, wincing as his back cracked in protest. Falling asleep across desks was something he had entirely too much experience with, but it was never pleasant. As he straightened the blanket began to slip from his shoulders, but he quickly reached to hold it in place. “What time is it?” he asked, still groggy.

“Near midnight,” Dorian replied. “Do you want to come back to bed, or are you still angry with me?”

Idhren frowned. “I’m not angry at you,” he mumbled. He looked back down at the books spread out before him. Like Dorian, he had been searching for anything related to the Temple of Mythal, either eluvians or the Well of Sorrows. It was a good distraction to keep him from worrying about the future. “I’m angry at myself.”

“Whatever for?” Dorian rounded the chair where Idhren was still sitting and leaned a hip against the table. He looked down at Idhren with confusion and concern in his eyes.

“Because…” Idhren continued to glare down at the books on the desk. Dorian had already seen all of his worst sides, but somehow talking about it was still embarrassing. “Because I’m so abhorrently needy,” he managed eventually. “And the thought of being parted from you – being alone again – feels like the end of the world.”

"It's not as though I'm leaving right away," Dorian reminded him. "And I certainly won't be gone forever. We'll be parted for a time, yes, but I'm not dying." Idhren’s expression turned stricken and Dorian immediately realized that he had made a mistake. That was why Idhren feared being parted. "I apologize, that was... poorly worded," Dorian quickly tried to recover. "I only meant that this will not be permanent. Yes, I want to return to Tevinter and try to change things there, but I will still be able to visit you, and you me - although I suspect the Maker will return to his creation before you set foot in Tevinter again."

Idhren slumped in his chair. "I know that," he muttered. That was what made feeling like this so frustrating. "I know it won't be forever. I know it won't be soon. And I do support what you want to do. Truly, I do. But I... have lost everyone I've ever loved because of that place. I cannot help fearing it will take you from me as well. And it's illogical and stupid, and I hate myself for feeling that way."

Dorian sighed deeply. "I honestly don't know what to say that might comfort you," he admitted. "I
believe you, for what it's worth. I know if you truly hated this idea you wouldn't hesitate to tell me. You've never had qualms about that in the past. But I haven't made certain plans yet," he continued. "It was only a thought."

"It was a good thought," Idhren told him. "There are good people still in Tevinter. You could help them. I would be so proud of you."

"Are you not proud of me already?" Dorian asked, only half joking. "I must work harder, then. This is your fault, you know," he added. "You've inspired me with your marvelous antics and rousing speeches about the injustice of the world."

"I'll see about doing less of that in the future, then," Idhren grumbled. But it was rather flattering to know that, at least in part, he had inspired this change in Dorian. How far he'd come from the selfish, arrogant boy Idhren had met so long ago.

"Now, don't pout," Dorian said. "You've inspired more people than just me, you know. That's a good thing. Now, come to bed, it's entirely too late at night for us to be either awake or sober. And if you sleep on this table you'll be complaining of more than a headache tomorrow."

That much was true. Idhren sat up straight again, stretching his back, and then rose to his feet. The blanket that Dorian had brought still hung about his shoulders, and he pulled it around himself like a cloak. He'd lit no more than a handful of candles to light the room and they did nothing to keep out the night time chill down here in the depths of the castle. "I want you to go to Tevinter," he said, before they could let the subject be forgotten. "I may not enjoy the thought of being parted, but I do think it's a good idea. I believe in you."

"Well," Dorian's cheeks colored ever so faintly, barely noticeable in the dim candlelight, "That makes one of us."

Three full days passed since Idhren drank from the Well of Sorrows, and in all that time he was little closer to understanding its powers. The headaches he had suffered since came and went, lessening in their intensity over time, which was a relief. More concerning, he continued to hear sounds that were not there. At first he'd been able to write off the whispers at the edges of his mind, but as the headaches lessened those whispers became more intense. Like someone speaking to him from very far away, barely loud enough to hear unless there was dead silence. But if he focused on them and truly listened, Idhren could begin to make out words.

The voices spoke in Elvhen, which was something of a problem. Idhren's education in the language was incomplete, and even that had been an education in only what little the Dalish remembered of their people's ancient tongue.

Was this the power of the Well?

Neither he nor Dorian had been able to find anything remotely helpful in any book within Skyhold, and Idhren was beginning to grow frustrated.

With each day that passed his advisors drew closer to Skyhold, and when they arrived there would be questions. Questions he needed to have answers to.

So, with great reluctance, he sought out Morrigan for whatever advice or insight she might offer.
Perhaps all he needed was an outside point of view.

What transpired after he found her in the garden was not what he had expected.

Hours later he mounted the steps to the library with his mind reeling, shaken to the core. "Dorian," his voice sounded dead to his own ears. His hands were shaking.

The man looked away from his own work, but Idhren's distress must have shown on his face. He stood immediately from his seat and gestured for Idhren to take it instead, and Idhren practically collapsed into the familiar armchair. "What happened?" Dorian asked. "You look as though you’ve seen a ghost."

For a moment Idhren had difficulty making his voice work. He stared blankly at the bookshelf across from him. Then he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and hung his head. "I think I've made a horrible mistake."

“You? Make a mistake?” Dorian clapped a hand to his chest in disbelief. “Have nugs sprouted wings and nobody told me?”

His words went completely ignored. Idhren raked his hands through his hair and laced them behind his head. “The Well,” he said slowly after a long moment of silence. “I know what it does.”

“You figured it out?” Dorian asked. He couldn’t quite contain all of his eager curiosity despite Idhren’s concerning reaction. “How?”

Idhren let out a vaguely hysterical laugh, dropped his hands back to his lap, and looked up at Dorian once more. “I met Mythal.”

“I beg your pardon?” Dorian asked.

“I met Mythal,” Idhren repeated. He let out another little breathy laugh. It sounded so insane. Idhren had doubted whether the Maker or the Elvhen gods were real for a long time. And not knowing had actually been something of a comfort. Now, though. Now at least one of them was real, so then logically the others must be, as well. The gods were real and the world was shit anyway.

“Are you speaking figuratively?” Dorian asked, confusion and concern lacing his voice now.

“I wish I were,” Idhren breathed. He collapsed against the plush back of the chair. “She’s real… They’re all real… I should have let Morrigan have it.”

“You know I won’t argue on that point,” Dorian murmured.

Idhren didn’t even have the presence of mind to consider a comeback for that comment. His mind was still reeling from the weight of all he’d learned in the past – how long had he and Morrigan been in the Fade? An hour? More? It hadn’t actually been long at all.

“Do you remember what Abelas said about the Well?” he asked instead. “That whomever drinks from it becomes ‘bound to the will of Mythal’?”

“I do,” Dorian confirmed.

“I thought he was being figurative,” Idhren said. “Poetic in the same way the ancient elves wrote. I thought the geas was just a compulsion to… embody the things Mythal represents. Justice and protection. Something like that. But she…” His hands were still shaking, and he wrapped his arms around himself, fingers tangling in the fabric of his shirt. “I didn’t have control of my own body.”
The words came out as barely a whisper as he hunched in on himself again. “I couldn’t…” He squeezed his eyes shut and further curled in on himself as he tried to drive the feeling from his mind.

Idhren fell silent, and Dorian did not reply for a long moment, struck unexpectedly speechless. When he did speak, it was equally hushed, equally horrified. “Like blood magic?”

“I don’t know,” Idhren bemoaned. “I didn’t see her cast any spell. But the Well is… It’s magic is beyond anything.”

Again Dorian was silent. Idhren heard him start to pace within the confines of this alcove. “This is exactly why I didn’t want--,” he cut himself off, realizing belatedly that such words wouldn’t help anything.

“I’m sorry,” Idhren whimpered.

Dorian’s footsteps stopped. This new revelation was concerning, to say the least. It confirmed his fears about the Well, and he felt somewhat vindicated for that reason. But even he could see that Idhren was having a bit of a crisis. This was not the time to be saying ‘I told you so’. "Do you know what I think?" He asked.

"What?" Idhren asked, slowly raising his head to look at Dorian. He looked dismayed. Scared. Too similar to the frightened, wounded boy Dorian remembered from their first meeting.

"I think you need a drink," Dorian told him. Because if he could say nothing, do nothing, that might help in this situation, he could at least help both of them forget about it for a little while. "Perhaps several."

For a moment Idhren stared at him, and then he dropped his chin to his chest and laughed. Softly. Bitterly. "More than several, I think."

"Come along then," Dorian said. "There are several bottles in the cellar that I have been eyeing for some time, and Josephine is not here to say 'no'."

Two bottles of good wine, another of questionable quality, and the dregs of a bottle Idhren had found... somewhere on the road.

Idhren could no longer sit up straight.

He and Dorian sat on the floor of his quarters, having migrated down from the sofa a bottle and a half ago, and Idhren slumped against the man's shoulder. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was still terrified, but at the moment he couldn't remember why.

"You don't happen to have anything else stashed up here, do you?" Dorian asked, frowning as he discovered their latest bottle run dry. "I don't think I can manage the stairs anymore."

Idhren shook his head. Or tried to. With his cheek pressed against Dorian's shoulder he couldn't move his head very much, nor did he want to. Every time he moved the room spun.

"Damn," Dorian grumbled. He set the bottle aside, rolling it across the floor until it clinked against the others. A nice little pile on the carpet.
Idhren let his eyes fall shut. The only certain way to keep his stomach from churning.

Then he heard a voice.

"What?" he asked, opening his eyes again.

"What?" Dorian asked in return. "I didn't say anything."

Idhren lifted his head off the man's shoulder with great effort and looked at him.

He heard the voice again, someone whispering in his ear. Sure enough, Dorian's mouth did not move. Through the fog in his mind Idhren realized the voice was speaking in Elvhen.

"What?" Dorian asked as Idhren continued to stare at him. "Is there something on my face?"

"Be quiet," Idhren ordered him with as much force as he could muster. "I need to listen."

"Listen to what?" Dorian asked.

"Shhh," Idhren insisted, and he pressed a hand over Dorian's mouth just to be certain.

The voice whispered in his ear once more. Clearer now. It was not the voice of anyone he recognized. In fact it seemed like many voices speaking in unison. And although the voices spoke in Elvhen, he could understand every word as though it were his mother tongue. The words penetrated through the haze of alcohol clear as day, telling him exactly what he needed to know. What he needed to do.

When the voice went silent Idhren dropped his hand away from Dorian’s mouth. He continued to stare, vaguely unfocused, at some point just beyond the man’s shoulder.

At long last Dorian asked, “What was all that about?”

“I know what to do,” Idhren said, still somewhat dazed. Then he blinked back to the present. “I know what to do,” he repeated with more certainty. “We have to go back.” He placed one hand on Dorian’s shoulder and the other on the sofa’s seat and used to them to try and push himself up to his feet. “I have to…” he cut himself off suddenly, on his feet but unsteady and still using the sofa to support himself. “I’m going to be sick.”

After emptying the contents of his stomach into a chamber pot, Idhren collapsed face first onto the bed. Dorian was not in a much better state himself, and after shifting the soiled pot to the head of the stairs – he didn’t trust himself to make it all the way down to the door without breaking his neck – joined Idhren amidst the pillows.

“We have to go back,” Idhren slurred, his voice muffled against the bedding.

“Back where?” Dorian asked. Both men had divested themselves of boots and various articles of clothing throughout the course of their drinking, and Dorian now set about divesting himself of the rest.

“Arbor Wilds,” Idhren replied. Very carefully he rolled onto his side.

Dorian paused with his shirt hanging off one shoulder and asked, “Why?”

“Well said so,” Idhren informed him. His eyes fell shut as gradually the alcohol pulled him into unconsciousness. “Have to find… the altar… It’ll help.”
Dorian let his shirt drop off the side of the bed and flopped back onto the bed beside Idhren. “If you say so.”
And so is the Golden City blackened
With each step you take in my Hall.
Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting.
You have brought Sin to Heaven
And doom upon all the world.

- Threnodies 8:13

Skyhold, Ferelden, August 9:42 Dragon

The Inquisition had an army. They had the support of nearly the entirety of southern Thedas. They had, depending on who you asked, the Maker’s divine blessing upon their cause.

Now they also had a dragon.

Corypheus had nothing.


This was it. They had him.

If only they could find him.

Idhren crumpled up the last scouting report in a hefty stack and threw it onto the floor. Every hand they could spare was out looking for a sign of the magister, and every one of them kept coming up empty.

“How hard could it possibly be to find an ancient, giant darkspawn and his blighted dragon?” Idhren snapped in frustration.

They were so close.

So fucking close. He could end this. Today if he wanted. All they had to do was find their quarry.

“Where could he possibly be hiding?”

“The Deep Roads,” Leliana pointed out unhelpfully. They were both hunched over her desk in the rookery, ready to act the second any word came. But nothing came. “They are vast, and many areas remain unexplored. And it would be reasonable to assume darkspawn are no threat to him.”

That didn’t make Idhren feel any better. “He could hole up down there forever and we might never
find him.” He scowled down at the table and all the papers scattered over it. He really wanted to just thrown them all onto the floor, but somehow he restrained himself. “I hate this!”

As though in response to his mood, the Anchor suddenly flared in his palm, sending a burning spike of pain straight up his arm. Green light sprung from his flesh like fire, flickering and spitting and casting the table in its eerie glow. He couldn’t quite contain the cry of surprise and pain that escaped his throat as a strangled yelp.

“Inquisitor?” Leliana shot to her feet in alarm.

Idhren grit his teeth and pulled himself back under control. This pain was not new to him. He felt it every time he closed a rift, every time he used the mark in any way. But what was causing it to react now? There were no rifts anywhere near Skyhold, and while his innate magic occasionally reacted to heightened emotions, the Anchor had never done such a thing. “I don’t know what’s—,” he started to say, but his words were cut off and drowned out by a sudden booming sound, like thunder echoing through the mountains. The tower shook from the force of it, scattering the papers on the table and rattling candle stands.

The ravens in their cages began to caw and screech. Startled exclamations floated up from the library.

“What in the world?” Leliana exclaimed, her voice muffled by the ringing in Idhren’s ears. And then her eyes caught the window and she froze.

Idhren followed her gaze. And realized that the green glow suffusing the immediate area was not entirely because of the Anchor.

"Shit," he swore under his breath. Moving so quickly that he knocked over his chair, Idhren made for the nearest door out to the parapets. He threw it open and raced out, eyes on the sky as soon as it was visible. Cloudy and green and all too familiar. "Fucking shit," he swore again, racing several paces around the curve of the tower to get a better look.

Leliana’s footsteps followed and came to a stop beside him, but Idhren could not tear his eyes off the sky. "Maker preserve us," she breathed.

"It's Corypheus," Idhren said. There was no other explanation. Because there in the near-distant sky was the same roiling green vortex that had overshadowed Haven. Now overshadowing the ruins of the village once more. "He's reopened the Breach." He still had the orb that gave Idhren the mark on his hand that fateful day over a year ago. Somehow Idhren had thought it no longer had enough power to recreate such a feat. Evidently he had been wrong. Or the Veil in Haven was weak enough now that it did not require so much power to tear asunder.

"He must be growing desperate," Leliana surmised. Her words were reasonable, but there was a faint tremor in her voice. Likely the sight and sound of the Breach being torn open once more brought back painful memories. It certainly did so for Idhren.

But had he not just been hoping to locate the magister? And there he was. Practically on their doorstep.

"We need to leave immediately," Idhren said decisively. He managed at last to tear his gaze away from the distant sky, but made the mistake of glancing down into the castle courtyard below. He could see people milling there, faces turned toward the sky, and more emerging from nearby buildings. Shocked cries of alarm began to drift up to where he and Leliana stood high above.
Not everyone in Skyhold was a soldier. In fact, most in the fortress itself were not. Servants, researchers, merchants, diplomats. Many had survived the attack on Haven.

He turned his back on the sight lest he succumb to panic himself. "Send word to the stables," he said as he began heading back to the door. "I want to be able to leave within the hour. Alert anyone else able to fight to prepare themselves and head to Haven as soon as they are able."

“Our forces haven’t yet returned from the Arbor Wilds,” Leliana protested, or perhaps warned. Only his advisors and inner circle had returned so far, along with their forward scouts. The bulk of their force was still a week or more away. If the Inquisitor moved now he would not have an army at his back.

“He knows that,” Idhren realized. This wasn’t just a last desperate bid to reach his goal. Not entirely. “He’s hoping we won’t get there to stop him. All the more reason I need to leave immediately with anyone else able. I’ll face him alone if I have to.”

Leliana’s expression closed off, lips pursed and brow furrowed in determined understanding. "Of course, Inquisitor," she replied, and she snapped her fingers toward a nearby scout as soon as they stepped through the door.

Idhren did not stay to hear her give instructions, but practically raced down the stairs and through the library. The fear and apprehension here was palpable, people crowded around the few windows with their eyes trained on the sky. "Dorian," he snapped as he passed the man's usual alcove, where he stood practically glued to the window along with another researcher. Hearing his voice pulled Dorian's attention away, but Idhren barely looked at him, "If you're not ready in half an hour I'm leaving without you."

When he continued down the stairs Dorian’s booted footsteps followed after him.

A full day’s hard ride brought the Inquisitor and those few who had managed to keep up to the outskirts of Haven. Or what had once been Haven. By then all their mounts were winded. Most had refused to run for the past several miles. Even Bella, with a dracolisk’s greater stamina, was becoming irritable and unwilling to cooperate. So he left her by the edge of the lake, where she and the horses could drink and rest, and continued up the mountain on foot.

The path up toward the ruins of the temple was overgrown, but still visible. Above their heads the clouds surrounding the Breach swirled like a hurricane, blocking out the sun and casting the mountaintop in an otherworldly shadowed haze.

Idhren was only vaguely aware of the people that ran alongside him as he raced up that path, except that Cassandra and Bull pulled ahead of him easily. The sounds of fighting reached them before Idhren could see the ruins of the temple through the surrounding overgrowth and rubble.

Demons, either summoned by Corypheus or come through the Breach, overran the squadron of soldiers that had been stationed in Haven. First to respond, they had been ill prepared and caught off guard. A miracle any of them had held out this long, but still the Inquisitor had not arrived soon enough to save them.

And there, in the ruined archway that had once been the temple’s entrance, Corypheus waited. “I knew you would come,” the monster sneered. Of course he had waited. Deep at his core he was still
a magister, still clinging to his sense of superiority and melodrama even after so many losses. “We shall prove now, once and for all, which of us is worthy of godhood.”

There was no point in dignifying such a taunt with a reply. Idhren was not trying to prove anything. Certainly not divinity. He was here to end this, once and for all. With a snarl he flung a bolt of lightning toward the magister. It ricocheted harmlessly off a barrier, as expected, but the point was made.

The Inquisition was not here to talk.

Corypheus, evidently, had.

As the battle pulled them deeper into the ruins, Corypheus throwing demons in their path at every opportunity, the magister taunted from afar. “Look at you, wearing slave markings on your face with pride,” he sneered. Idhren cut down a Shade and threw another bolt of lightning toward the magister, only to watch the creature vanish into thin air, appearing again perched atop the ruins of a wall. “You are nothing. A race of sniveling cowards that shrank before Tevinter power.”

A blast of magic slammed across the battlefield so strong it knocked Idhren off his feet. But it did nothing to dampen the fury that burned through his entire body.

“Shut the fuck up!” Idhren screamed into the empty air, pushing himself back up to his feet. “Big fucking god-monster, can’t even fight without insulting us,” he was talking mostly to himself, but he hoped Corypheus could hear over the sounds of battle. “Come down here and fight me!” he hollered. The Inquisitor swung his staff, cleaved the blade through a demon and set a flurry of lightning ricocheting off a recently conjured group of shades.

“You dare to stand against a god?” the monster taunted from afar. It threw a blast of magic down on the small party, and Idhren threw up a barrier instinctively, protecting himself and Dorian while the other mage cast his own over Cassandra.

“Come here and fight me you coward!” Idhren screamed so loud his voice cracked, and rushed forward, up the crumbling ruins in the space now cleared of demons.

He lost himself in the adrenaline of battle, in the single-minded focus of finally putting an end to this monster and all the pain and horror he had wrought. He lost track of those around him, fighting at his side.

The Guardian dragon fell, and for a split second it felt as though Idhren’s heart was being ripped out of his chest. But the other dragon was crippled now. The creature's sacrifice had not been in vain. Idhren had taken on stronger dragons than this, and it fell to sword and arrow and spell just as they all had.

And the magister continued to flee, to throw demons in their path. Until there was nowhere else to run. He was growing desperate now. But Idhren was also growing tired. He could not hold out forever, and in a test of endurance it was quite possible that Corypheus would win. So Idhren pulled a desperate move of his own.

The Anchor burned in his palm more painful than it had been since the Breach first opened. And in Corypheus' hand the orb burned with a matching light. It was the same magic. The Anchor was but a stray piece of that artifact, and logically shouldn't the two pieces want to be reunited? It was very risky. Very stupid, actually. But stupid decisions regarding magic were something that defined his experience since the conclave, and it had worked so far. Besides, he’d had over a year of time to learn how to control this magic. If he could just catch the magister off guard.
Until now Idhren had only ever used the Anchor in an offensive manner, channeling a spell into it so that the effect was magnified to a terrifying degree. This time, he did the opposite. He could feel the magic that the orb was producing flowing off of it like waves, warping and tearing the veil around it. He reached for that feeling and pulled.

The reaction was so immediate and so fast that even Idhren was shocked as the artifact tore from Corypheus' grasp and flew into Idhren's with enough force to send him stumbling a few steps backward. And with the orb came the full force of its power, a hundred times stronger than the Anchor on its own. It washed over Idhren, surged through him like a drug, intoxicating in its intensity.

But he didn't have time to dwell on the feeling, to revel in the immense raw power seeping into his veins through the gash in his palm. He didn't even have time to think about what he did next.

In the sky above the Breach swirled green and angry and growing by the minute. For over a year he had been working towards this. Time to end it once and for all.

The now familiar power of the Anchor channeled through the artifact as Idhren thrust his hand skyward toward the Breach. It hurt, as using the Anchor always hurt, but with the orb it was not the white-hot, searing, mind-numbing pain that Idhren remembered from his first attempts at closing the Breach. The Anchor was the focus, the orb amplification. Where before a dozen mages had channeled their magic through it, through Idhren, to knit the Veil back together, now the orb provided that much power and more.

The Veil pulled. The angry, ragged edges of the Breach sewing themselves back together until finally it closed with a thunderous crash.

Idhren's arm fell back to his side, numb and tingling.

The orb clattered out of his grasp and onto the ground. Cold. Dark. Inactive.

The Veil was healed. Permanently.

Now there was only one more loose end to clean up. Though he could not feel his hand, and his arm still ached all the way to the shoulder from the effort of closing the Breach one final time, Idhren reached out toward Corypheus now. The magister's form was riddled with wounds from the battle leading to this point, his shoulders slumped in exhaustion and defeat. But there could be no chance of his return this time.

"You want into the Fade?" Idhren sneered, and pushed every last scrap of mana he had into mark on his hand. The rift opened exactly where the monster was standing, green glow exploding in his chest, shining through skin and tearing apart all that it touched. Corypheus' scream of rage and pain echoed in Idhren's ears, a sound he would likely never forget, and yet he felt nothing but a sick sense of pride and triumph as he watched the magic consume the creature. When the rift closed there was nothing left. Not even a smudge upon the ground.

It was over.

Then the ground fell out from under his feet.

The sudden jolt sent his stomach up into his throat and a panicked realization settled over him. With Corypheus' magic – augmented by the orb and the Breach – no longer holding aloft the chunks of earth and stone he had ripped from the mountaintop it was all crashing back down to earth.
Instinctively, Idhren used what little mana he had left to cast the strongest barrier possible around himself. There was no time to do anything else other than throw himself to the ground and pray before the mass of stone he was standing on crashed into the mountain top with the force of an earthquake and a deafening crash. The echoes of boulders and rubble hitting the ground sounded all across the mountain top, and Idhren dared not move from where he sheltered until, at long last, silence settled across the battlefield.

Panting and shaken, Idhren let his barrier flicker out of existence and slowly picked himself up off the ground. Dust clogged the air, making him cough, which in turn made his ribs ache worryingly. There was a cut on his lip, making his whole mouth taste of blood though it was barely bleeding at all. Still, he raised a hand to his mouth to wipe away the thin trickle. As his breathing began to even and the air began to clear as the dust settled, he took a moment to look around. The temple had been rubble to begin with, and now it was nearly impossible to tell there had ever been a structure here at all. What hadn't been destroyed in the initial blast or from the force of Corypheus’ magic tearing great chunks of earth from the mountaintop largely hadn't survived the descent back to the ground.

Idhren coughed again and squinted through the haze. He couldn't see anyone else, and that worried him. When had he become separated from his companions?

Slightly dazed and still on edge from the battle, he looked around for his staff, dropped and then forgotten in those last frenzied moments. A few minutes later he found it. Shattered into three pieces and half buried in the rubble. For a moment he held the broken pieces in his hands, not entirely certain how to feel. This was the third staff he’d lost since leaving the Free Marches; the first one Dagna had ever made for him and therefore the finest he had ever owned. It had served him well through so many trials over the past months. He’d grown rather attached to it.

With a heavy sigh he let the shards fall back to the ground and rose back to his feet. He cast another look around. The dust had settled enough now that he could begin to see further down the mountain, and he spotted the shapes of people moving about. Those who had come with him picking their way through the wreckage and others rushing up from lower down the mountain.

“Is everyone alright?” Idhren called, beginning to pick his way down through the rubble as well. The ground was unsteady, mostly gravel and broken bits of architecture and difficult to get his footing on, so Idhren moved slowly. His ribs were beginning to ache more as he moved, reinforcing his thought that he’d broken or cracked something in the fall, so he certainly didn’t want to fall again.

“Hey! We need a healer over here!” The Bull’s booming voice echoed over the rubble and drew Idhren’s attention immediately. The hulking Qunari was covered in so much gore that Idhren couldn’t tell how much of it was actually his or if he was even injured at all. But he was on his feet so the healer had to be for someone else.

Idhren picked his way through the rubble in their direction until he could see the figure lying at Bull’s feet. White silk robes stained and hair matted with blood. His heart stopped in his chest. “Dorian!” In an instant he was running. Stumbling and scrabbling over the uneven ground heedless of his own injuries. “Dorian!” He quite literally fell at the man’s side, skinning his palms on the rocky ground even as Bull tried to reach out to catch him. He let Bull haul him back up to his knees but then wrenched free of his grasp, deaf to the mercenary’s attempts at calming him. There was blood caked in Dorian’s hair at his temple and smeared down the side of his face, and fabric at his shoulder was stained bright red. His chest still moved with shallow breaths, but that was little comfort to Idhren’s panicked mind. “No, no, no,” Idhren breathed in panic. He reached out and cupped Dorian’s face between his hands. His mana reserves were all but dry, and he had already used every lyrium potion that he carried, but still he gathered what shreds he could of healing magic. A faint
green glow formed at his fingertips for a moment. And then it guttered out a moment later.

“No,” Idhren grit his teeth, but he was weak at healing to begin with, and exhausted as he was it simply would not work. “Come on, Dorian,” he shook the man gently, “Wake up. Please.” There was no response. “Dorian, wake up!” he said more forcefully, feeling himself begin to choke up.

“Calm down, darling,” a hand came to rest on Idhren’s shoulder and he looked up to see Vivienne kneeling down beside him. Her voice was calm and she held herself with as much poise as ever. But her appearance did show signs of battle, dirt on her robes. It was the most unkempt he had ever seen. “There’s no need to work yourself into a state. I’m certain it’s not nearly as dire as you think,” she said comfortingly. With surprisingly gentle fingers she eased Idhren’s hands away from Dorian’s face, and then set to work.

Idhren dared not leave Dorian’s side. He moved only enough to give Vivienne enough space to work, and clutched at Dorian's hand so tight his own knuckles were nearly white. It was all he could do to keep his emotions in check while he watched Vivienne examine and then begin healing the man's wounds. It couldn't end like this. After everything they had been through he could not lose Dorian now. Not when all the danger was finally passed. And how had he not realized sooner? How could the man he loved fall in battle and go completely unnoticed? He had been too blinded by purpose. What did victory matter if he was going to be left alone again? Tears blurred his vision and dripped from his eyes as he tried to blink them away, leaving tiny dark spots on the fabric of Dorian's robes.

Vivienne worked in silence, completely focused on her task. No more comforting words to offer. It was unlikely Idhren would have accepted them anyway. He watched the glow about her hands hover over the bloody stain radiating out from Dorian's shoulder, then smooth his disheveled hair back from his forehead. The process seemed to take an eternity, all while Dorian continued to lay on the ground still as the grave.

Then Dorian's hand twitched in his grasp. Idhren sat up straighter, suddenly alert. A low, pained moan escaped Dorian's lips.

"There we are," Vivienne smiled confidently. The healing glow about her hands dimmed until it disappeared entirely. "See, darling?" she looked at Idhren out of the corner of her eye, "Nothing to worry about."

Idhren tried to return her smile but he couldn't even tear his eyes off Dorian's face. The man returned to consciousness slowly, like coming out of a deep sleep. But eventually his eyes fluttered open and he squinted uncertainly up at the cloudy grey sky. Then his eyes focused on Idhren and Vivienne hovering over him. He blinked at them a moment in confusion and then asked, "I take it we won?"

Letting out a sob of relief, Idhren all but threw himself onto Dorian's chest, arms clinging to his shoulders as tightly as he dared and burying his face against the man's neck.

"Did we not win?" Dorian's voice was strained, barely a shadow of his usual mirth and the attempted joke fell flat. Exhaustion and pain were evident in his words. "Why all the dour faces?"

"How dare you scare me like that you absolute bastard!" Idhren tried to sound angry, he really did. But his voice was choked, forced out between sobs, and he could only manage to sound desperate and relieved. "You promised..." He swallowed the thickness in his throat and clung tighter to Dorian's shoulders. "You promised you wouldn't leave me alone."

"Ah," Dorian sighed in understanding. Wearly, he raised one arm and patted Idhren on the back of his head. "But I haven't gone anywhere," he said. "Although if you keep squeezing me like that I
can't make any promises."

Idhren’s grip on him loosened immediately. He pulled back from the embrace and looked down at Dorian with watery eyes. “Sorry,” he said weakly.

“No harm done,” Dorian tried to assure him. “At least, no more than there already was… Help me up, would you? This is… rather undignified.”

Idhren first wiped the tears from his face with the palm of his hands, which did little to help his appearance at the moment. He was caked in dust and dirt and blood and so much filth that he was nearly grey. The tears had painted tracks down his cheeks, and his attempts and cleaning them did nothing except smear the dirt around. Gradually he regained his composure and climbed back to his feet. Dorian sat up, gently prodded at the cut above his temple, winced, and wiped blood out of his eyes. Then he accepted Idhren’s hands so the elf could help pull him to his feet.

The effort of getting Dorian back upright nearly knocked Idhren off his feet, but he managed to retain his footing and avoid sending both of them back to the ground. When he was fully upright Dorian wavered slightly, lightheaded from blood loss and possibly a mild concussion. Idhren wrapped an arm around his waist and settled Dorian’s arm around his shoulders to support him. The arrangement was not ideal, nor particularly effective.

“Maker, sometimes I forget how short you are,” Dorian commented.

Idhren scowled at the man’s boots as they began to slowly make their way through the rubble down the side of the mountain. “I can still drop you,” he grumbled, “And you can crawl back to Skyhold.” The threat was a blatant lie, and both of them knew it.

“In a good way, of course,” Dorian amended quickly. “Perfect armrest height.”

They camped that night in the ruins of Haven. All those who had fought that day were too exhausted to make the full trek back to Skyhold and proper beds. Instead they set up in the shadow of their final battlefield, in the place that had started and ended it all, with the crumbling walls of the chantry hall their only shelter beyond the tents and bedrolls run down from Skyhold by a handful of scouts and field medics.

It was not an ideal location for any number of reasons, not the least of which were the memories that lingered in this place. But Dorian had barely made it this far before collapsing with as much grace as he could manage at the foot of a ruined wall. Idhren called for a healer, a potion, a flask of water, anything, and stayed by his side. Reinforcements had arrived from Skyhold only a few hours after the Inquisitor and those closest to him had reached the mountaintop to face Corypheus this final time, but by then the darkspawn's magic had made it impossible for them to assist in the battle. The soldiers made themselves useful now by trying to make this former battlefield a suitable campsite.

Bodies and valuables had been pulled from the ruins of Haven ages ago. All that remained now was rubble. Every structure except the chantry had been reduced to ashes and splinters, and even the stone hall was nothing but four crumbling walls without a roof.

In time more people arrived from Skyhold. A bloody battle had been anticipated, so they did not have to wait long for even more reinforcements to arrive, this time with medical supplies and, perhaps most importantly, tents and bedding.
After the soldiers had cleared a portion of the chantry and the surrounding area of the worst of the rubble tents began to pop up.

Thankfully there were few injuries, and Dorian's seemed to be the worst of them.

Vivienne’s quick battlefield healing had stabilized him, stopped the bleeding and closed his smaller wounds, but he was still in fairly rough shape. Even the best spirit healer could only do so much, and she had been as exhausted from the battle as the rest of them.

“How do you feel?” Idhren asked softly. He’d been given two flasks of water on their way down the mountain and one was already empty. He now poured the second over a red stained handkerchief and began wiping blood from the side of Dorian’s face.

“Less than spectacular,” Dorian replied wearily. His face still held a concerning pallor, he had lost a lot of blood and that was something magic could not heal. “I usually only feel this way after a night of drinking.”

“If you can make jokes it can’t be that bad,” Idhren breathed in relief.

“A short while ago you were crying your eyes out over me, now it ‘can’t be that bad’? Dorian teased, then immediately winced as Idhren pressed the damp cloth too close to the still-tender wound in his hairline.

Idhren scowled and pressed the cloth harder against the newly closed wound as he scrubbed the blood off Dorian’s skin. “You scared me to death,” he said tersely, “Don’t you dare joke about that.”

“Ouch, kaffas,” Dorian swore, “Yes, alright, I apologize. Stop that.”

Idhren withdrew his hand reluctantly. There was still a small smudge of blood along Dorian’s hairline, tinting the dark strands faintly red, but his skin was clean. His robe was still stained crimson, though, blossoming out from somewhere near his shoulder. “Let’s get this off you, it’s filthy,” he said, setting the handkerchief and flask aside.

With a little difficulty, Idhren helped to peel off the silk robe. Dorian’s movements were stiff and he hissed with pain every time he moved his right arm. But eventually he was free of the garment and Idhren could see the tear in his leathers where he’d been struck, equally bloodstained but not as apparent against the dark leather.

“And that was new,” Dorian bemoaned softly, watching Idhren wad up the ruined silk and set it aside beside his own blood stained coat.

“Why did you wear something brand new?” Idhren asked.

“If I’m going to die I might as well do it looking as good as possible,” Dorian quipped.

“You didn’t die,” Idhren said, taking up the water and cloth again to clean the wound on his shoulder.

“No,” Dorian replied, as though he still didn’t quite believe it. “And neither did you. What a pleasant surprise.”

Idhren doused the handkerchief with the last of their water and wrung it out, squeezing faintly pink droplets onto the ground. He frowned. “I can’t believe you had so little faith in me,” he tried to joke, but could not quite get enough mirth into his voice. Dorian was alive, yes, but had come much too close to death for Idhren’s comfort.
“Now, don’t pout,” Dorian sighed. When Idhren looked back up he was again confronted with how weary and weak the man looked right now. Despite how carelessly he joked he looked as though he could barely keep his eyes open. “It’s over now, yes? We should be celebrating.”

That fact still hadn’t quite settled in. It was over. They won. Idhren turned his gaze up toward the sky, where there was now only a faint iridescent shimmer among the clouds. A scar where the Breach had once been. A reminder. “I’m sure Josephine is already planning something as we speak.”

Dorian laughed weakly, “I don’t doubt it.”

When Idhren looked back the man’s eyes had fallen shut. A sudden spike of remembered panic pierced his heart. “Dorian?” he asked urgently, reaching for the man’s uninjured shoulder.

“What?” Dorian’s eyes flew open and he stared forward, disoriented for a moment before his gaze focused on Idhren. And he fixed the elf with as exasperated an expression as he could manage. “Oh, honestly, I’m fine. There’s no need to fuss.”

“You’ve fussed over me enough times you great hypocrite,” Idhren grumbled.

“That makes hypocrites of the both of us,” Dorian replied. “But truly, the First Enchanter did a marvelous job. I’m merely tired… And sore… And in desperate need of a bath.”

Idhren sighed, forcing himself to relax somewhat. He reminded himself that Vivienne was a highly skilled healer. Dorian would be fine. He set aside the flask again and moved to sit on Dorian’s uninjured side. “You could use a bath,” he agreed, leaning against Dorian’s shoulder. “You smell terrible.”

“You’re not exactly a bed of roses yourself at the moment,” Dorian groused. But he wrapped his good arm around Idhren’s shoulders and pulled him closer. A slight squeeze sent pain shooting through Idhren’s chest and drew a hiss through his teeth. Immediately, Dorian’s grip on him lessened. “Are you hurt?” he asked.

Idhren sucked in another breath and breathed out a sigh as the pain lessened once more. He’d never been able to forget about the pain in his ribs, but his worry for Dorian had temporarily distracted him. “It’s not bad,” he assured. That was the best he could offer. He was injured. The cut on his lip still stung, his muscles ached, and he was certain there were bruises forming in more places than just his ribs. “Bruised a few ribs, I think.”

“You should have a healer look at that,” Dorian said, concern obvious in his voice even through the fatigue.

“Tomorrow,” Idhren mumbled in reply. He ached, yes, but it was an ache he could live with. An ache that proved he was alive.

There was a pause, as though Dorian wanted to protest. But instead he relented, “Very well,” he sighed. His arm stayed around Idhren’s shoulder, but looser this time, a comforting weight.

Toward the center of the chantry ruins a couple of scouts had started a couple of fires burning to light and warm the space. Even in the waning summer the mountains were cold at night, and the wind creeping through the cracks in the stones did nothing to help. More heartening than that, however, was the sight of those scouts setting up a cookpot over the gently flickering flames. The mere sight of it was enough to remind Idhren’s stomach that he hadn’t eaten more than a few bites in over a day, and it rumbled loudly in complaint.

Under Idhren’s head, Dorian’s shoulder shook with quietly controlled amusement. “I’ll be surprised
if they manage to scrounge up anything even remotely edible,” he commented wearily, “But, Maker, I don’t think I’ve been this famished in my entire life.”

A full day without a proper meal, plus the exertion of battle, and for Dorian the added trouble of an injury. “Should be plenty of insects this time of year,” Idhren commented.

“No,” Dorian groaned. “I would rather starve to death.”

This time it was Idhren’s shoulders that shook with silent mirth. “So picky,” he teased lightly, the tail end of his words cut off with a yawn. As the adrenaline of the fight wore off, and his worry for Dorian eased, the full force of his body’s exhaustion hit him. Every ache made itself known, every overworked muscle and tiny scrape. The base of his palms stung where he had skinned them, despite washing the torn skin as best he was able. And now the chill of the night was seeping its way through his clothes and into his bones.

At some point he must have dozed off. A testament to his state of exhaustion given his sheer discomfort.

He woke to the smell of roasting meat and the sound of his stomach growling even more insistently than before. It took some time for his waking mind to register the other discomforts of his body, and for that brief moment Idhren did not know where he was. Then the aches and pains made themselves known again, the cold seeping in through the stones at his back.

His entire body felt stiff, and as he shifted he heard his spine crack. Prying his eyes open, he blinked blearily until the world came into focus.

It looked much the same as when he’d fallen asleep. The sky above was still dark, so he must not have been out for very long. Though upon further inspection it seemed to be lightening around the edges. Dawn approaching. The scent of food that was making his stomach growl and his mouth water came from those same two cookfires, now stoked to a merry blaze.

Beside him Dorian was snoring softly, asleep sitting up. His arm still draped across Idhren’s shoulders felt like the only warm point on Idhren’s entire body. Reluctantly he pulled himself away from that tiny source of warmth, hearing more joints pop in the process, and rose slowly to his feet. Every stiff, sore muscle made itself known, and his ribs all but screamed in protest, leaving Idhren winded by the time he stood upright.

Maybe he should have found a healer before. Or at least some elfroot. Maybe he could find some now, along with the food.

Moving with slow, weary steps, Idhren made his way toward the nearest fire. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he realized there were more than just scouts sitting about it. The Iron Bull’s distinctive silhouette against the flames was the first he recognized, a couple of the Chargers at his side, and then Sera and Varric on the other side of the fire. It was Varric who spotted him approaching first and raised a hand to flag him down, “Sparky,” the dwarf enthused, though weariness laced his tone and his posture, “Come to join the party?”

“Does the party have food?” Idhren asked in reply.

"Wouldn't be much of a party without it,” Bull answered, and gestured toward the fire. Above the flames two spitted rabbits were the source of the smell that had drawn Idhren over, one of them half picked over already.

Idhren was starving, but he cast a hesitant glance back over his shoulder to where Dorian was still
sleeping propped up against the wall.

"Ah, he'll be fine, boss," Bull said, easily able to tell the source of his worry. "Ma'am patched him up good."

Idhren sighed and pulled his gaze away, turning back to the fire once more. Bull was right, and he tried to remind himself of that fact as he found himself a place to sit amidst his friends. It wasn't a moment later that Krem shoved a bowl into his hands with a piece of hardtack, a hunk of cheese, and a leg from one of the rabbits. "Hard to believe someone so damn skinny saved the world," he commented.

Idhren rolled his eyes as the other laughed, but accepted the offered food gratefully. "Thank you, mother," he groused, which only made them laugh harder.

He lost track of time for a while, as he sat around the fire with friends, sharing food and drink and laughter. And for a while he forgot about all but the worst of his aches and pains - the laughter made his ribs hurt fiercely, but it was a good sort of pain that reminded him of what they had overcome to be able to sit and laugh like this. They shared tales of this battle, and remembered old ones, and for the first time in over a year did not fear the ones to come.

But he kept glancing back over at Dorian every few minutes no matter what, just to reassure himself that the man was still there; was still breathing. And he bore the teasing about being a worry-wart and a mother hen with good humor.

Finally the sun began to rise over the mountaintops, casting its red and gold glow into the valley as the campfire burned itself down to embers. That was when Idhren finally pulled himself away. "I should get Dorian to eat something," he said, taking up his empty bowl. He accepted another bit of cheese and hardtack from Sera, and pulled free the remaining bits of meat from the rabbit carcasses before they could grow too cold.

"Sure there'll be a proper grand party waiting back at Skyhold, yeah?" Sera laughed. "Bet Josie's already planning."

"It takes more than a day to plan the sort of party saving the world deserves," Varric told her. "But I give her a week, tops."

Sera blew a raspberry and slumped over, resting her chin in her hands. "We'll have our own party, then. Better than this one, all sore and tired and shite. Probably better than Ambassador Fancybritches wants to have too, for all her fancy nobs. Clean out the tavern, yeah? That's what this deserves, right, Inky?"

Idhren grinned as he forced himself to his feet with slow, aching movements. "Of course," he replied. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Their weary laughter rang out after him as Idhren made his way back across the room. Dorian remained where he’d left him, slumped against the wall and sound asleep. That was a relief in itself. If he was sleeping then he was healing. But Idhren knew that sleeping like this would leave him sore. He should have made the man more comfortable before he left, he thought with no small degree of guilt. He should have been there to keep him from getting injured in the first place.

But there was nothing he could do to change that now.

Easing himself down to the floor again beside Dorian, he reached out to gently shake the man awake by his uninjured shoulder. “Dorian,” he called gently, until the man’s eyes fluttered open.
“Vishante kaffas,” Dorian groaned as he came awake.

“Good morning to you, too,” Idhren replied. “How do you feel?”

“As though I’ve just been trampled by a herd of druffalo,” Dorian complained. He attempted to sit himself up straighter, but grimaced and eventually gave up.

Idhren winced in sympathy. He didn’t know what to say in response to that. A witty retort on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t have the heart to voice it, even if it might make Dorian smile. “You should eat something,” he said instead, holding the bowl out to him.

“Please,” Dorian took the bowl without any complaint, “I’m positively famished.”

“Famished enough to eat bugs?” Idhren asked, the question slipped out before he could think better of it.

This made Dorian freeze and peer more closely into the bowl in his hands. He stared down into it for a moment, then raised his head to scowl at Idhren, “You’re a terrible person,” he complained. “To tease me so while I am on death’s door.”

Idhren ducked his head, “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Dorian gave a long sigh and shifted to try and get himself a bit more comfortable. “You’re not still worrying yourself to death, are you?”

“I… feel guilty,” Idhren admitted. “I shouldn’t have run ahead on my own. I should have been there to watch your back.”

“You did precisely what you should have,” Dorian protested. “Killed that monstrosity and closed the Breach for good. It was my own foolishness that got me hurt, nothing you did.”

“What happened?” Idhren asked, finally raising his head again.

Dorian shrugged with his good shoulder, “An amateur mistake I’m terribly embarrassed about,” he said lightly. He picked the piece of hardtack out of his bowl and frowned distastefully at it. “Did not ration my mana effectively, barrier didn’t hold and a terror got through. I dispatched it, of course, but not before it absolutely ruined my new robes. This bit,” he gestured to his head with the biscuit, “wasn’t until the world fell out from under us. Just bad luck, honestly.”

Amateur mistakes and bad luck had still done plenty of harm. Idhren sighed, “I’m glad you’ll be alright,” he said earnestly.

“All right, you terrible sap,” Dorian rolled his eyes. “Let me eat before I die of starvation, or worse: say something syrupy and sentimental.” He looked down at the food on offer again, hardtack biscuit still in hand, and frowned. “Although this is hardly a suitable victory feast,” he complained before beginning to eat.

“I’m certain Josephine has already begun planning a proper celebration,” Idhren assured him. “Varric expects it will take her less than a week.”

Dorian hummed thoughtfully as he chewed. “That is a bet I may take him up on,” he commented. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she had something waiting by the time we got back.”

“That’s what Sera said,” Idhren said, smiling slightly. “Suppose it depends how long it takes us to get back.” And they had the time for a leisurely trip now, without the end of the world looming on
the horizon and chasing at their backs. Not to mention the injuries that would make their travel that much slower even on horseback. “We’ll head out as soon as you’re feeling up to it.”

“Me?” Dorian asked between bites. “And what about you? You hardly escaped unscathed yourself.”

“Some elfroot and I’ll be alright,” Idhren tried to assure him. He moved to lean against the wall at Dorian’s side. He ached, but his wounds were largely superficial. He would not take resources from those more seriously injured. “I’ll find some soon.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Dorian said. “We can’t have you limping back into Skyhold after your glorious victory. It would rather ruin the moment, don’t you think?”

Idhren actually chuckled softly, though the act made his ribs protest. “No, we wouldn’t want that.”

It was less than a week, and Josephine had worked absolute wonders. If ever there was someone to make Idhren believe in miracles, it was her. How she had managed not only to hire caterers but also have them brought to Skyhold in so little time Idhren would never knew. He would have suspected time magic, were not the Veil finally repaired, making such things merely theoretical once more. She had pulled out all the stops decorating as well. Idhren had watched servants and soldiers alike drafted into her service running about the fortress grounds carrying bolts of cloth and garlands of flowers into the main hall and gardens. From the vaulted ceilings hung thick drapes and banners, all bearing the Inquisition’s heraldry – interlaced with gold thread to make it glow in the torchlight and impossible to ignore. It was a display of power and pride that would have put a great many magisters to shame. The long tables were laden with so much food the kitchens must have been working non-stop since the day before in order to produce it all. Wine and ale flowed freely, as did the people coming and going from the hall.

“Josephine certainly knows how to throw a party,” Idhren commented, “I haven’t been to anything this nice since the Winter Palace, and this is far more enjoyable.”

“Darling, you spent that entire party chasing assassins,” Vivienne commented from his left. “I hardly think you got a proper taste of the empress’ hospitality.”

“Oh, of her hospitality I have no complaint,” Idhren assured. “It was the other guests that rather ruined the evening.”

“The ones trying to kill you, or the ones calling you names behind your back?” Dorian asked.

Idhren paused to consider it. Both had been rather unpleasant. “The ones trying to kill me I at least got to kill instead,” he mused. “So I’d have to say the latter.”

“It truly is quite distasteful the way some people carry on,” Vivienne agreed. An understatement, but Idhren agreed all the same.

“Well, if saving the empress’s life wasn’t enough to shut them up saving the world should certainly do the trick,” Dorian commented optimistically. “And if it doesn’t, you could always kill them.”

“So bloodthirsty, my dear,” Vivienne scolded, though the careful smile playing at the corner of her mouth spoke volumes more than her tone. “I hardly think we need resort to murder for a few ill considered words. Insulting the Inquisitor at this point would be social suicide anyway. No one is
stupid enough to be that ungrateful.”

“You’d be surprised,” Idhren deadpanned. Some people would never be able to look past his pointed ears no matter how much he achieved. “But I don’t think anyone is stupid enough to do that in my own castle, where I might have them thrown off the ramparts.”

This last comment drew an amused smirk from Dorian and a weary sigh from Vivienne. “You Tevinters are always so quick to jump to murder when something doesn’t go your way. Why is that?”

As though Orlesians – or Vivienne herself - were any better, Idhren thought. “Reputation is everything, madame,” he replied easily, “As you know.”

“Well, to each his own, I suppose,” the enchanter replied, and from there deftly turned the conversation back to all the mundanities of a social gathering. A fashion faux pax, an ill timed arrival, a scandalous rumor. As they stood and spoke others came and joined them, chatting for a minute and then going on their way.

Eventually, Vivienne gave her excuses and left their side, going off with another guest and leaving Idhren and Dorian temporarily on their own at the side of the hall. Idhren had done little mingling that evening. He’d made a requisite two rounds of the hall, greeted the most important people there along with his friends, and then camped out near the end of one of the banquet tables, where he’d found Dorian enjoying the wine perhaps a little too much. And now he had no intention of leaving this spot any time soon. He’d never felt entirely comfortable at formal gatherings like this one.

He was glad Dorian seemed content watching the goings on this evening rather than being in the thick of things. In Tevinter, Idhren remembered him being rather the social butterfly. But they weren’t in Tevinter now, and Dorian was still the ‘evil magister’ in the eyes of so many. Even after helping save the world he was still being politely but pointedly shunned. Idhren remembered vividly what that felt like, and he was sorry that Dorian had to go through it now.

No wonder he wanted to leave.

“I suppose you’ll be heading back to Tevinter sometime soon,” Idhren murmured.

Dorian hummed in confirmation. “I wouldn’t want to put it off too long,” he replied. “I’ve already written to Maevaris, although I’m certain the good news of our victory will reach her well before my letter does.”

“I’m sure,” Idhren agreed, “The rumor mill runs much faster than even Leliana’s best couriers. You can have Josephine help arrange your travel plans, if you like. She’ll need something to do now the world’s not ending.”

“I’m certain she’ll find something to occupy herself,” Dorian chuckled, “There are still plenty of people clambering to meet you, after all. Perhaps even more than there were before. Imagine how many dowagers will be pawning off their daughters on you now.”

“Well, they’ll have to be disappointed,” Idhren replied. He stood up on his toes and pressed a kiss to Dorian’s cheek. “I’m already spoken for.”

He watched as Dorian’s cheeks darkened ever so faintly, barely noticeable in the torchlight, and a small smile quirked the corners of his mouth. “So you are,” he replied. “And what about when your devastatingly handsome and charming paramour is halfway across the world?”

“What kind of man do you take me for, Dorian?” Idhren asked, but the smile that he offered the man
was melancholy. The joke wasn’t all that funny anymore.

“A better one than I, clearly,” Dorian replied. “You, at least have nothing to be concerned about. How could anyone possibly compete with the Lord Inquisitor, Herald of Andraste and chosen savior of the world?”

The melodrama with which Dorian spoke drew a soft huff of laughter from Idhren. But however flippant the man’s words, they did help to soothe the worries Idhren hadn’t even been consciously aware of. “Don’t tell me you’re getting sentimental now. What will people say?”

“Me, sentimental? Perish the thought,” Dorian clapped a hand to his chest in mock horror. “I’m only still in shock that we’ve all survived. I half expected to die, you know. Or that you would. That would be the fitting end to this heroic tale. What will the minstrels sing about now?”

“Our glorious victory, I presume,” Idhren replied.

“Yes, well,” Dorian huffed and waved a hand dismissively, “It won’t have nearly the same gravitas.”

As entertaining as it was at times to watch Dorian dodge any attempt at discussing his feelings, Idhren found he wasn’t in the mood for it tonight. This was meant to be a celebration of their victory, but he did not feel particularly celebratory. Not with Dorian’s departure looming, certain and yet vague, on the horizon. Keeping up the polite smiles and cheerful small talk was becoming a strain. “What do you say we get out of here,” he suggested without preamble.

Dorian looked down at him, a little surprised by the sudden change in subject. He met Idhren’s eyes over the rim of the elf’s wine glass as he took another sip – half-lidded and gazing up at him through his lashes. That was an expression he was getting very familiar with. “Not enjoying your party?” he teased.

“Too much small talk,” Idhren replied. And he hadn’t the patience for small talk on the best of days. “I’ve already spoken to anyone who matters.” Anyone who mattered to him, at least. And any of the diplomats or nobles who hadn’t spoken to him by now only had themselves to blame. The party had been going on for hours. Idhren had not been paying close attention to the passage of time, but he guessed it was past midnight. No one could truly fault him for slipping away at this hour.

“You have always been a wallflower, I suppose,” Dorian mused. “I am rather reluctant to leave this wine, however,” he commented, looking down at his half-empty glass. A glass Idhren had seen refilled at least three times this evening.

“I have a key to the cellar, you know,” he pointed out.

“So you do,” Dorian recalled. “Well then, if you insist on leaving the festivities might I suggest we liberate a bottle from the stores and retire for the evening?”

“That sounds perfect,” Idhren agreed. He finished off the last of the wine in his own glass and set it aside on a table, to be cleaned up later by a passing servant. Dorian did the same, and then Idhren took his arm and pulled the man out the nearest side door.

End Act II

Chapter End Notes
That's the end of Act II! Thanks everyone who's been reading this far! I'll see you next month in Act III.
Except You Absence

Chapter Summary

The world has been saved, a war ended, and peace restored to the land, but there is no rest allowed to heroes.

While Dorian returns to Tevinter with aspirations of revolutionizing a homeland that does not see how corrupt it has become, Idhren remains in the south to see the Inquisition’s peacekeeping continued. But peace never lasts, and heroes are easily forgotten when they are no longer needed. As politics threaten to tear the Inquisition apart, Idhren discovers just how thankless heroism can be. And this time it may cost him his life.

Act III: Aut Deus, Aut Lupis

Either a God, or a Wolf

I have faced armies

With You as my shield,

And though I bear scars beyond counting, nothing

Can break me except Your absence.

- Canticle of Trials 1:6

Firstfall, Kingsway, 9:42 Dragon

Six weeks. That was all the time that had passed since the Inquisitor closed the Breach a second time, casting down the ancient darkspawn magister who had sought to make himself a god by crossing the Veil and breaking into the Black City. That war had lasted for over a year, cost many lives, and thrown southern Thedas into chaos. And now it was over. After so long living constantly on edge, always making plans and waiting for the enemy to strike, life was almost dull in comparison. And yet the chance to finally relax, finally put the constant worry and fear aside, was a welcome one.

The Inquisition's work was not done, however.

Almost daily now, Idhren held a meeting with a noble, diplomat, or attaché from Orlais, Ferelden, a Free Marches city, even an ambassador sent from Nevarra. He was heaped with praise and adulation, promises of new or continuing support for the Inquisition's efforts at cleaning up the mess that Corypheus had left behind.

And questions about what the Inquisition would do now that the threat was over.
Clean up the mess was the obvious answer. The Veil was healed once and for all, the would-be god utterly destroyed in the process, but rifts still lingered in places the Inquisition had not yet ventured and Corypheus’ Venatori still roamed the countryside. It was these tasks that Idhren promised to perform, as well as providing support for reconstruction and resettlement for all those whose homes and livelihoods had been destroyed.

The Inquisitor’s schedule was so packed full of meetings and negotiations that six weeks felt a very long time. And yet it also felt like no time at all.

With each day that passed the moment that Idhren had been dreading since the war had ended drew ever closer, inescapable and looming on the horizon no matter how he tried to ignore it.

Dorian was leaving.

The fact had been easy to ignore at first, but grew harder as time dragged on. First came the letter from Magister Tilani, eager to see him again and promising a place to live in Minrathous. Then there was a date, passage booked on a ship out of Jader. And then he started packing.

Idhren hadn’t even realized how many of Dorian’s possessions had migrated to his quarters over the past several months until they started disappearing. The man had once joked about avoiding mutual domesticity, but it seemed they had ended up there regardless. Now every time Idhren returned to the room more and more of those things were gone, packed away in a set of travelers’ trunks near the head of the stairs. Piles of books overflowing from the bookshelves onto the floor or any available surface disappeared, dresser drawers and wardrobes emptied slowly, last to go were Dorian’s cosmetics and the really excessive number of soaps in the bathing room.

Now he arrived back at his quarters after a morning filled with meetings to find the room devoid of every trace of Dorian save the man himself.

He was leaving Skyhold the next morning.

Idhren had less than a day left with him, and that time was running out all too quickly.

“All packed, I see,” he commented, taking in the locked trunks stacked neatly by the stairs. The room felt stark and empty without the little touches Dorian had left without him even realizing it.

“Indeed,” Dorian confirmed. His saddlebags and the same old traveling pack he’d used during the war hung on the banister, his staff propped up beside them. Servants would be along shortly to take the trunks down to the stable; the packs held everything Dorian would need for the journey to Jader. Idhren was traveling with him as far as the port city, but it still felt as though he had only a few hours left with Dorian by his side.

“You’ve been unusually quiet,” Dorian said, “For a few days now. Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” Idhren replied, but it felt like a lie. Nothing was wrong, per se. Politics were fine, the Inquisition was running smoothly, the world was at peace, and he’d been able to sleep in every day that week. “You’re leaving, though.”

“Ah, grieving the loss of my charming company and handsome face already, are you?” Dorian teased. The joke fell flat. And the look that Idhren shot him made Dorian wince. He had hit too close to the truth. “Come now, don’t pout,” he sighed. “It’s not as though we haven’t been separated before.”

A couple of weeks while Idhren went on a mission and Dorian stayed at Skyhold was nothing compared this. Or was he talking about the last time they had had half a continent between them?
Did Dorian think this was even remotely the same? “That was before…” he gestured between the two of them helplessly, “… this.”

“That’s true,” Dorian was forced to admit. “You are aware I won’t be away forever. It’s hardly as though we’ll never see each other again.”

While it was true that visits would be possible, Idhren imagined they would be few and far between. Tevinter was a long ways from here, a trip of weeks on even the fastest ship. “But we won’t see each other often, either.”

There was another sigh as Dorian hesitated, then he crossed the room to where Idhren was still standing at the top of the stairs. “You know it brings me no joy to leave your side, amatus,” he said. “But this is something I need to do.”

“I know that,” Idhren insisted, “I do.” He had encouraged it, even. But knowing that Dorian was doing the right thing did not make it any easier to be parted from him. “I’m sorry. I suppose I’m being selfish.” Of course Dorian would be hurting, too. “It’ll be… difficult having you so far away.”

“Is that your way of saying you’ll miss me?” Dorian teased gently.

“Desperately,” Idhren replied.

The complete honesty in his words, and the openly sad expression on his face, made Dorian falter. “Your calf eyes will be the end of me,” he muttered, and then easily pulled Idhren into his arms. The elf did not resist as he sank into Dorian’s embrace, arms instinctively wrapping around the man’s waist and squeezing tight. As though he could hold Dorian here by force. Dorian returned the embrace just as fiercely. Idhren wasn’t the only one who was dreading their parting. “I have something for you,” Dorian said, loosening his grasp after a moment and carefully prying himself out of Idhren’s arms. “I had planned to give it to you just before I left, but perhaps now is a better time,” the man mused. He stepped over to the railing where his travel bags hung and rifled through one until he retrieved a small, paper wrapped parcel.

“A gift, amatus,” Dorian said, handing over the package.

“For me?” Idhren asked in surprise. “It’s not even my birthday,” he tried to joke but it lacked true mirth. He accepted it all the same, curious as to the package’s contents. Carefully, he unwrapped the paper until he held in his hand a slim book, immaculately bound in leather with the title embossed in gold.

Potentia Tempestatis
On the Theory and Practical Application of Electrical Magic
A Treatise by Lord Idhren Lavellan
Second Edition

“I took the liberty of working in some of the corrections from your personal copy. That’s what makes it a second edition,” Dorian commented flippantly, as though unaware of the whirlwind of emotions running through his lover’s heart. “And a short introduction explaining why the first edition was published under the wrong name.”


“Well the ‘how’ was relatively simple,” Dorian shrugged. “I merely asked Varric to put me in touch with his publisher. Turns out they were more than happy to produce a personal gift for the Inquisitor. And if you’re pleased with the printing they are eager to move forward with a full run and
Idhren could barely tear his eyes off the cover, but he did at the mention of publication. “It’s published?” he asked stupidly. This wasn’t just a token printing for Idhren’s personal sense of closure?

“If you want it to be,” Dorian replied, like it was obvious. “You didn’t think I would go through all the trouble and let no one else see it? Besides, with your southern mages now running amok they could use more quality literature.”

Once more Idhren stared down at the book in his hands, ran his fingers over the embossed words. His work published under his own name. Dorian had done all this for him? It must have taken weeks – months – to re-write the manuscript, and then to convince the publishers to print it. In his entire life, no one had ever gone to such effort for Idhren’s benefit. He tore his gaze from the book once more and looked up to meet Dorian’s eyes, his own already stinging with unshed tears. “Amatus,” he choked out past the lump in his throat, and then threw his arms around Dorian, still clutching the book in one hand as he hugged the man as tight as possible. “Thank you.”

“I thought you might like it,” Dorian chuckled, returning Idhren’s embrace.

“I love it,” Idhren breathed, still overwhelmed and still clinging to Dorian. This was by far one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for him. Even if Dorian had gotten only a token printing for Idhren’s personal collection this would have been a gift greater than anything he could ask for. “How can I ever repay you?”


Idhren sniffled unattractively as he forced back the overwhelming surge of emotions roiling through him. He almost protested that this was not the same, but he realized that wasn’t the point. “That makes us even, then,” he murmured.

“For now, at least,” Dorian confirmed. He pulled away again. Not out of Idhren’s arms, but enough to look down at him and tilt the elf’s chin up until their eyes met. Idhren’s glistened with unshed tears, wide and vivid violet, the first thing that had drawn Dorian to him all those years ago. “Those are happy tears, I hope,” he said.

“For now, at least,” Idhren parroted.

Dorian chuckled and leaned down to kiss him briefly. “Well, I may be going away very soon, but we still have all afternoon to ourselves,” he murmured against Idhren’s lips. “I think we should make the most of it, don’t you?”

All afternoon, all night, and then a few days on the road. It wasn’t nearly long enough for Idhren’s liking, but it would have to do. He tossed the book onto the sofa, he could read through Dorian’s additions after the man was gone, for now he would make use of every last minute they had together. So he leaned up to capture Dorian’s lips again. “Something else to remember you by?” he teased.

“Multiple things, if I have anything to say about it,” Dorian replied.

Idhren’s pulse quickened, “Promises, promises,” he purred, and began pushing the man backwards toward the bed.
The port of Jader was crowded and bustling. As a trade port it was busier even than the capital, facilitating most of the trade with Ferelden and the eastern Free Marches. Even now, in the dead of winter, dockworkers rushed about, calling to each other as they hauled cargo and brought in ships. Nothing would stop the commerce here short of the sea icing over, and Idhren had never heard of that happening. The air was bitter cold and smelled of fish and wet rope. A biting wind swept in off the sea and made Idhren pull the fur lining on the collar of his cloak closer around his face. His nose and the tips of his ears were red from the cold and the stinging wind and he’d given up trying to keep his hair out of his eyes.

“You know,” he commented, fidgeting with the seams on his gloves, “It’s still not too late to put this all on hold until spring.”

Standing beside him, Dorian had his arms wrapped around himself, bundled as tightly into his cloak as he could manage. Before them a ship rocked casually with the ebb and flow of the waves, ropes creaking with each small movement. “Don’t tempt me,” Dorian commented. His carefully coifed hair was already windswept, but for once he didn’t seem to care. Instead he was watching the sailors running about on deck with thinly concealed dread.

“How seasick already?” Idhren asked, teasing but also sympathetic.

“It’s as though my stomach knows what I’m about to put it through and it’s decided to get a jump on things, maybe empty itself before I even leave solid ground,” Dorian complained.

“Do you have those herbs I gave you?” Idhren asked.

“Yes, yes,” Dorian assured, patting a pouch hanging from his belt. “I suppose we’ll see whether your elvish folk remedies are worth anything.”

Idhren sniffed. “I’ll have you know that I’ve scientifically corroborated the beneficial effects of elfroot and mint on nausea. Just because it’s a folk remedy doesn’t make it wrong.”

“You trying it once and it working isn’t scientific and you know it,” Dorian groused. A dockworker pushed past them, a burly, filthy man carrying on his shoulder a basket that smelled pungently of rotting fish. Dorian turned slightly green.

“I performed an experiment,” Idhren argued, bringing a gloved hand up to block his nose and mouth until the smell could dissipate. “If you would like to support my findings with an experiment of your own, now seems like a good time to start.”

“Yes, I think you’ve made your point,” Dorian said, voice stiff and a little choked. He reached again for the pouch on his belt, but before he could open it a sailor came jogging down the dock toward them, fresh off the ship they were waiting for, and waving to catch their attention.

“Ship’s ready to depart, m’lords,” the boy announced. Because up close he was clearly no more than fifteen. “Cap’n says we need to shove off within the hour to catch the tide.”

Dorian pursed his lips a moment and then plastered on a polite smile. “Thank you, I’ll be along shortly,” he assured. The sailor nodded and ran off again on some other last-minute errand. Dorian took another look at the ship and let out a long sigh, herbs and nausea both momentarily forgotten. “This is it, then.”

“You can still turn back,” Idhren reminded him.
Dorian gave him a sideways glance, and Idhren gave him a sheepish shrug in reply. “All my things are already aboard,” Dorian said.

“We can buy you new things,” Idhren replied.

“You are making this exceedingly difficult,” Dorian told him.

Idhren let his gaze drop to the ground, studying the water stained timbers beneath his feet. A wave of guilt washed over him. “I’m sorry.” Then he reached out and grasped Dorian’s hand, tangling their gloved fingers together one last time before they were parted. “Write to me,” Idhren said, looking up again, and it was not a request, “As soon as you arrive. I want to know that you’re safe.”

“Of course,” Dorian promised. “You do the same. Tell me of all the wild adventures you’re having, and how terribly you miss me.”

Idhren laughed softly. “I don’t expect there to be quite so many adventures these days,” he replied, “But the latter I can certainly do.” He reached up to cup Dorian’s face between his hands, then rose up on his toes to press their lips together. Uncaring for the crowded dock on which they stood, or the people that walked past, he kissed Dorian slowly, sweetly, desperately. One last parting kiss that Idhren tried to sear into his memory so that he would not soon forget the feel of Dorian’s lips, the smell and taste of him. When they parted he let his heels fall back to the ground and offered the man a melancholy smile, which Dorian returned with one of his own. “Your turn to change the world now,” he said, letting his arms fall to his sides once more and taking a step back. “Do me proud, amatus.”

“Was there ever a doubt?” Dorian asked in reply. He leaned down to press one last chaste kiss to the corner of Idhren’s mouth. “I will miss you, amatus,” he added, soft enough for only Idhren to hear.

Idhren flushed a little, despite himself. “Go on, then,” he mumbled, gently pushing the man toward the waiting ship. “Before I cry, or do something equally sentimental and pathetic.”

Dorian chuckled softly, said one final farewell, and then headed off down the dock, leaving Idhren standing alone amidst the crowd, watching until the man disappeared onto the ship. He remained standing on the docks a little while longer, breathing in the sea air and staring at the ship. Shortly the sailors began bustling about the deck with even more purpose than before, untying ropes and climbing into the rigging. There was no sign of Dorian among them, likely below deck in his cabin in order to stay out of the way. A part of Idhren wished that were not the case, but another part was glad that he would not be tempted to watch until he was completely out of sight. He turned his back on the boat purposefully, reminded himself that this was not forever, and that Dorian could do more good work in Tevinter than he could here. And he wound his way through the crowds back toward the city stable.

Unsurprisingly, he found Cole already waiting when he arrived. The spirit boy was standing in front of the stall where Dorian’s horse was housed, watching as the animal chewed lazily at the hay at its feet, he didn’t even look up when Idhren arrived and came to stand next to him. “She doesn’t realize he’s gone,” Cole said after a moment. “She doesn’t realize he’s gone,” Cole said after a moment. “She won’t until we leave and he’s not here.”

“You talk to horses now, too?” Idhren asked him.

Cole shrugged. “You don’t like it when I hear you,” he said. “Even though I can’t help it sometimes.”

“I know you can’t help it,” Idhren assured him. And he didn’t mind the boy listening in on his thoughts from time to time; talking with Cole had helped him on several occasions. He just didn’t
like it when the boy announced his innermost thoughts to the world. “I’m glad you decided to come along.”

The boy hummed in acknowledgement, but didn’t respond. He continued to watch the horse eat, shifted from foot to foot. Idhren reached out over the stall door and patted the animal’s neck gently. Dorian had been riding this same horse since before they even reached Skyhold. It was one of the lucky few to have escaped Haven during the fighting and wander back when everything had calmed down. So the mare probably would notice the absence of her usual rider. Whether that made the horse sad Idhren was uncertain. Were they capable of such feelings?

“How is he doing?” Idhren asked, the words slipping from his mouth without really meaning to.

Cole was silent for a while. He tilted his head to the side and looked off into the distance as though he was listening to something very faint that he could barely hear. As far as Idhren knew that was exactly how Cole’s abilities worked. “Leaving is hard,” he said after a while. “Hard like letting him walk away years ago. That was better for him then, is this better now? But I have to try, do the right thing, he taught me that…” Cole trailed off and was quiet again for a brief moment before concluding, “He doesn’t like the sea.”

Idhren laughed despite himself. “No, he doesn’t,” he confirmed. Seasick within an hour. That was tragic and yet predictable. But he felt reassured after hearing Cole’s words. “Shall we find the others, then?” he asked, “And head back to Skyhold?”

“Yes,” Cole replied. “I’d like that.”

The trip back to Skyhold was a little bit lonely, but Idhren had good company to distract him from Dorian’s absence. And he had traveled without the man often enough in the past year that going to sleep in an empty tent was not too difficult, even if he longed for the added warmth Dorian’s presence would provide on winter nights. Dorian’s absence was easily overlooked on the road. But not at Skyhold.

The castle felt as though there was a piece of it missing, a void that Idhren could not pinpoint but felt with every fiber of his being.

The library felt empty and cold and foreign. The tavern’s usual bright cheer seemed muted and dull. The mage tower was less an escape than a prison, even the students could not seem to raise his mood.

His bed was far too large and far too empty.

In order to avoid these familiar haunts and the distressing feelings they now aroused in him, Idhren threw himself into his work. Meetings, diplomats, fake smiles and pleasurants, trade agreements, tithes, scouting reports, training sessions, and an endless amount of paperwork.

He could not feel sad or lonely if he did not allow himself a spare moment to think about the void that had opened up in his life and in his heart.

But he had not felt this lonely since he had left the Circle of Vyrantium.
2 Haring, 9:42 Dragon

Dorian,

This letter may arrive in Minrathous before you do, because I have long suspected Leliana’s couriers to be in possession of time magic.

I hope you’ve survived the journey. I can only imagine the state you must be in after so long at sea. I have to tell you, the image my mind conjures is not a flattering one, but I shall keep it to myself. If, by some horrid twist of fate, the herbs didn’t help at all I can only assume the effect is unique to elven physiology.

Is Minrathous all that you remember? I’ve only been the once and I fear my memory of that trip has grown hazy over time. I recall being rather amazed by the size of it all, and by the Senate. Have you had a chance to visit? Will they even allow you in? I suppose you do have Magister Tilani to vouch for you at the moment, if she’s willing to let a rebellious heretic cling to her skirts, that is.

While I’m eager to hear about everything you’re getting up to, I’m afraid I have some news you may find distressing, but which will explain why I seem so impatient in writing to you: I’m going to be away from Skyhold for a while.

It couldn’t be avoided forever. I did enjoy my brief vacation while it lasted, however.

I’ll be heading off to the rather ominously named Hissing Wastes with the usual lot. Far off in western Orlais, beyond even the Approach and, apparently, an even worse sort of desert. I’m giddy with anticipation, as I’m sure you can imagine.

But this means I likely won’t be able to receive your letters for some time. I’ll be away for a month at the very least, and that is being wildly optimistic about what we’ll find there. The journey alone, even with established camps all the way to the Approach, will take weeks. I won’t receive your letters, and I expect I won’t be able to send anything back from such a remote place, so don’t work yourself into a state if you don’t hear from me for a time. I’m perfectly fine. And if something were to happen, I’m certain Josephine would inform you as fast as humanly possible. Faster, actually.

I am fine, though, and things down here are as they always have been. Save that I miss you terribly.

Don’t stop writing just because I will be away. I look forward to a stack of letters upon my return detailing everything about Minrathous and the work you’re beginning. Don’t be discouraged if it starts off slow. Remember when everyone thought the Inquisition was just a bunch of rebellious, power hungry heretics?

Yours,
Idhren
I hope you guys like letters, because it's time for the epistolary section of the story.

O Maker, hear my cry:
Guide me through the blackest nights.
Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked.
Make me to rest in the warmest places.
- Canticle of Transfigurations 12:1

Hissing Wastes

3 Wintermarch, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

The Hissing Wastes are about as pleasant as their name makes them sound. Worse even than the Western Approach, if you can believe such a claim. We have been here only a matter of days, but already I feel parched down to the core. It’s possible I’ve gone soft in the years since I came south. Or perhaps there is something different about the sun down here. I never burned so badly in Tevinter, no matter how hot it was. Yet now I feel as though all of my skin will peel off before we leave this place.

Given the situation, we’ve decided to travel solely at night, when the temperature is bearable and the sun not out to burn us all into raisins. I’m certain you’ll appreciate my not being a charred husk the next time we meet.

Bella, I think, is the only one not bothered by the climate. And given that she is essentially a very small dragon her opinion is not statistically relevant.

As miserable as this place is, however, there is something rather beautiful about it at night. The air is cool and still, and the stars are the brightest I have ever seen. It’s almost as though we are somehow closer to the sky here. Although I know that to be impossible. There is not much living here, as you would expect. However the animals seem to also go out only at night. It took us several days to realize what they already know. Maybe we’re not as smart as we think.

It is currently just after dawn. We’ve completed our first full night of activity and I am positively exhausted, but I find myself unable to sleep. Although it’s much cooler in the tents it’s still quite hot with the sun up and nowhere near dark enough to sleep properly. So do forgive me if this letter turns to exhausted rambling. Or if I fall asleep in the middle of it.

I imagine you’re settled in at Minrathous now. I expect all the details about your new accommodations, and how Tevinter has changed while we were away. Unfortunately, I don’t imagine I’ll be receiving any of your letters until I return to Skyhold. I don’t imagine I’ll be able to send this one on to you, either. Or any others I pen while out here. If this is merely the first letter in a
large package now you know why. And I won’t apologize. I haven’t your conversation to entertain me and I fear I’ve grown overused to your presence.

But I do look forward to reading your letters upon my return, and I’ll be terribly cross if you don’t write regularly even if I’m not around to receive them. Your company is sorely missed, especially on the road. Blackwall is quite useless for conversation, as you know. Sera and Bull, fond as I am of them, are really only good for lewd jokes and ribald stories. Especially when you put the two of them together. There is no one around to appreciate my magical talent. Tonight I froze two rage demons at once – completely solid with one spell! You would have been very impressed.

I do hope you’re having a better time up north than I’m having here. Although it may just be a different sort of misery. At least you have lavish appointments, fine food, and attractive men to wait on you hand and foot, yes? At least that’s what I’m dreaming of until I get out of this desert.

I’ll leave this now, while I can still write coherently.

Know that I am well, despite the complaining, and I hope that you are also.

Faithfully,

Idhren

Hissing Wastes

8 Wintemarch, 9:43 Dragon

This place is crawling with Venatori. It’s as though they all fled here after we defeated Corypheus. Certainly no one will be looking for them out here. It’s rather a fluke that I found them, as I was really only out here to close rifts.

I say I found them, but truthfully Harding deserves the credit. As with everything. You know how it goes: we show up expecting an easy job and she informs us that everything is ten times more fucked up than anyone anticipated. I should really be expecting that by now, but a man can hope. Someday we’ll go on a pleasant trip. I wonder if you’re having a similar experience in Tevinter? Although I find it hard to imagine how the Imperium could have gotten any worse than it already was short of Corypheus rising from the dead and becoming Archon.

At any rate, I’d expected the Venatori out here to mostly be in hiding. Licking their wounds and lying low, perhaps still expecting their false god to rise again? They’re not just hiding out, however. They’re up to something. What they hope to find out in this wasteland I have no idea. There is nothing out here but wyverns and sand and a handful of old dwarven ruins. (Dwarven ruins on the surface! But I’ll save the boring historical details for another letter.)

Either way, it has at least made this excursion a little more exciting. Bella ate one of them today when a small patrol was unlucky enough to cross paths with us. So she’s in a lovely mood, as you would expect. And The Bull is asking for a dracolisk of his own, now. Krem would likely kill me if I indulged, but if you happen to learn of anyone up there who breeds them on the larger side do let me know. I’d like to see the look on his face.

Unfortunately, I expect this surprise will make the expedition more difficult overall. I may be out
Idhren saw the green glow of the rift before his hand began to ache. That was unusual, but there was absolutely nothing else to see out here. From the top of a dune Idhren could see for miles, and the rifts glowed bright like a beacon against the dark desert skyline. They followed the glow for an hour on horseback – or dracolisk in Idhren’s case – before the Anchor began to react. At first it was barely noticeable. An itch on his palm that got slowly more and more irritating until the magic spluttered and spit once, then it started to hurt. The closer he came to the rift the worse it got.

The Anchor became more active, flaring and spitting like a flame embedded in his flesh, and the pain seeped further up his arm. At some point the horses refused to go forward. They sensed the danger ahead, or smelled the change in the air. Idhren didn’t understand how animals thought, but in this case they were smarter than most people. Even Bella was growing restless, so they dismounted at left their mounts tied in a patch of scrub trees.

Over the next dune they finally came within sight of the rift itself. By now Idhren could not feel his fingertips.

That was worse than usual. It would make it difficult to hold his staff during the fight. But Idhren kept the observation to himself.

The Inquisitor and his companions had so much experience closing rifts in the Veil that they had it down to an art.

Before them the rift hung in the sky like a stray piece of stained glass. The rifts out here at the end of the world were larger than the ones he had closed during the war. Idhren wasn’t certain whether that was a result of them going untended for so long or if they had always been that way. It did not matter much, save that with larger rifts generally came larger demons. About this one there circled already two terrors and a despair demon.

“Well,” Idhren shifted his staff in his hands and tried to ignore how weak the grip on his left felt, “Let’s do this, then.”

His companions, his friends, needed no further instruction. Bull and Blackwall rushed in, a battle cry on each of their lips as Idhren dropped a barrier down over them. An arrow whizzed past Idhren’s head and sank into the closest of the terrors, which screamed out in rage and pain. He watched Cole appear out of nowhere at the demon’s back and sink his knives into its flesh. After that, everything became a blur of action and pain.

Idhren was getting used to being the only mage on the field, being the sole person responsible for holding the barriers around Blackwall, Bull, Cole, Sera and himself. It took more focus, did not allow him to lose himself quite so much in the thrill of a fight. But it was a good distraction from the pain in his hand; and from the fact he could not hold his staff properly.
The battle raged long and exhausting as the rift spat out more demons before they could finish the first batch. But at long last the field stood clear, the last of the creatures faded back into dust as it died. Idhren rushed forward, sliding down the side of a dune in order to get close enough to the rift, arm already outstretched just waiting for the Anchor to react. React it did, exploding to life and sending stabbing, tearing pain straight up Idhren’s arm. The pain left Idhren breathless, barely able to stay upright, and for a moment so intense he couldn’t even think.

This was not normal.

As ever, the Anchor functioned without Idhren’s direct input, and at the moment that was a relief. When the rift closed with that familiar echoing crack he nearly fell to his knees, but managed to catch himself by sinking his staff into the sand and using it to hold him upright. Still he slumped against it, left arm hung limp at his side and burning as though it had just been on fire.

Definitely not normal.

The Anchor had never hurt this much during the war. At least not after closing the Breach that first time.

“Oi, you alright down there?” Sera’s voice rang across the desert, shouts unnecessarily loud as they carried through the still air. She came skidding down the side of a dune from where she’d been perched during the fight.

Idhren took a moment to look around and take stock of everyone. At a quick glance it did not appear anyone was injured beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. “Fine,” he relayed to Sera, though by then she’d arrived to see for herself. “Was it just me,” he asked, pulling himself fully upright again, “Or was that one bigger than usual?”

“It’s not just you,” Blackwall confirmed. Approaching from across the sand, he wiped ichor from his sword before sheathing it again. “Last one did, too.”

Maybe that was why closing it had hurt so much more than usual. Using the Anchor had never been comfortable, but this numbing pain still radiating up his arm was beyond what he’d come to associate with it. “Maybe because they’ve been left for so long.” Idhren mused thoughtfully. It had been well over a year since the Breach first opened, tearing open all of these smaller rifts along with it.

Behind him Sera scoffed in disgust, “All the more reason to finally fix all of it,” she muttered unhappily.

“Absolutely,” Idhren agreed. The feeling was slowly coming back to his hand and he flexed his fingers experimentally. “Everyone good to continue on? We’ve got a few more hours before dawn and I think Harding mentioned some Venatori not far from here.”

—I should have looked closer at the Nightingale’s information about the Venatori agents in this region. Assuming it would even be accurate with the chaos they must be in now that Corypheus is gone.

Hissing Wastes

18 Wintermarch, 9:43 Dragon

I should have looked closer at the Nightingale’s information about the Venatori agents in this region. Assuming it would even be accurate with the chaos they must be in now that Corypheus is gone.
You won’t believe who we crossed paths with today.

Adrian Gallus

Do you even remember him?

I didn’t kill him. Bull got there before me. Before I even knew it was him.

Beautiful burn scar on his arm and neck.

I never did thank you for that. I should. Thank you. Even though it didn’t make them stop, you did help. It helped to know that someone cared.

I don’t know what I should feel now. I should be happy, shouldn’t I? They’re dead now. Both of them. Who knows how many others they hurt like me. Now they can’t hurt anyone.

I should be happy but I’m not

It’s just like before. It doesn’t help. It doesn’t change what happened. What’s the point?

I wish you were here

I miss you I need you

I love you

Idhren fell asleep that night – or rather that morning - aided by a bottle of alcohol he’d found amidst the wreckage of the Venatoris camp and a vial of lyrium he really should not have wasted given how far they were from standard supply lines. Despite that, his sleep was restless, plagued by dreams and demons here at the end of the world where the Veil was thin. He woke before sundown the next day, as the air began to cool with the arrival of the evening winds. The tent was muggy and humid, air stale and oppressive, making his clothing stick to his skin. All attempts at washing were useless enough in this environment that he had given up days ago.

He slept with no blankets, they were too suffocating, trusting the tent and the bedroll on the ground to protect him from the elements and the bugs. He rose slowly from his bedroll as the first beginnings of a breeze crept through the flaps of the tent to circulate the air and cool his skin.

Dressed in nothing but his underclothes, hair unkempt and sticking to the sweat on his brow, Idhren sat up and surveyed the mess he had left the night before. An empty bottle, crinkled parchment and ragged quill. The ink had been left uncapped and he moved first to remedy that, hoping it hadn’t dried out too much to be salvaged. Then he picked up the letter he’d penned before letting the alcohol and lyrium take him out of this world.

His handwriting was atrocious. Shaky lines, uneven and slanted. There were blots of ink where his pen had faltered. Smudges where his tears had fallen.

And the words.

Rambling. Emotional. The deepest scars of his soul laid bare on paper.
Reading those words again, awake and sober and with the hours of sleep, however restless, to separate himself from the anger and pain, Idhren felt sick to his stomach with shame and disgust. Never again would he allow himself to be that person, so easily laid low by a decade old memory.

He ripped the parchment to shreds, set the pieces aflame in his palm and watched them burn down to nothing but ash that he let fall to the hard packed desert floor. Then he wiped his palms off on his sweat stained undershirt and began to get dressed.

---

13 Guardian, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

We have arrived back from the Hissing Wastes unscathed and triumphant.

And if I never set foot in another desert for as long as I live it will be too soon.

Perhaps unscathed was not accurate. Despite our best efforts at being active only at night to avoid the scorching heat, and what would seem an excessive amount of medicinal lotions, I did not escape without burning. I’m actually glad you’re not here to see it because even mostly healed now it’s frightfully unattractive.

I have sitting beside me at this very moment the letters you sent while I was away and I’m eager to read them, but I had to ensure this package was sent off first. I’ve included the letters I was unable to send until now and some of my notes on what we found that I thought you might find interesting or useful.

I’ll write a better letter once I’ve read yours and slept in an actual bed.

I hope you are well,

Idhren

---

Idhren penned the letter before even bathing or stripping off anything but the most cumbersome pieces of his armor, then folded it up in a thin parcel along with everything else he’d written for Dorian while away and handed that off to a courier. He’d wondered, briefly, if sending Dorian every pointless word he’d written over the past month or more would be too much; would make him come across as too lovesick and lonely.

Except that he was lovesick and lonely, and though work for the Inquisition had separated them before, Idhren had grown used to telling Dorian anything and everything that had happened on missions they did not share. This was merely an extension of that practice.

After handing off the packet Idhren shut the door of his quarters firmly and retreated to the alcove that served as his private bathing chamber. The large metal tub was filled and warmed with a pair of simple spells, and after discarding the last pieces of is clothes Idhren slid into the gently steaming
water with a sigh.

The water washed away a week’s worth of sweat and grime from the road and the heat eased so many sore muscles. He sank down into the water, submerging his entire body for a brief moment before emerging again with a soft hiss of pain. The sunburns had been worst on his face and neck, and the skin there was still slightly pink even though he had been away from the desert now for more than a week. So the water stung when he submerged himself too long, too warm against already abused skin. Idhren had never been one to spend an excessive amount of time bathing, however.

Bathed and dressed in clean clothes, and with a proper hot meal on its way up from the kitchens, Idhren finally took up Dorian’s letters and collapsed onto the bed to read.

---

Minrathous

21 Haring, 9:42 Dragon

Idhren,

Imagine my surprise to arrive at my temporary residence here in Minrathous to find a letter from you already waiting for me. You certainly don’t waste any time, do you? How the messenger managed to beat me here traveling overland will remain a mystery for the ages, I believe.

My journey here was miserable in its entirety, although not as horrid as it could have been, I suppose. We had fair weather for this time of year for the majority of the voyage, with only a handful of small squalls once we entered the Nocen. Considering the time of year, it’s probably the best I could have hoped for, but you know how I feel about traveling by sea.

I shan’t tell you whether your folk remedy worked or not because you will be insufferable either way.

As you know, I’ll be relying temporarily upon Maevaris’ generous hospitality, until suitable lodgings can be found for me in the city proper. She has been magnanimous as ever following the arrival of one weary and still somewhat seasick pariah on her doorstep. But I shall have to endeavor to stay on her good side for years to come to ensure the story of my sorry state does not ever become public knowledge. I have seen reputations destroyed by less.

As I’ve only just arrived I haven’t had time to take in the sights of the city yet. My first course of business was of course a bath and a rather lengthy nap, and to read your letter.

I know nothing of the Hissing Wastes, though the name does nothing to endear me, and I find it hard to imagine any desert worse than the Approach. I hope you’ve remembered to prepare for the sun, I remember how easily you burn and I won’t be there to fix you up every night.

I might suggest using this as an opportunity to work on your healing skills. But I won’t, because if you honestly haven’t figured it out by now I think it’s hopeless. Not that I’ll hold it against you, but hopefully you’ve brought Vivienne along in my stead? If not, well, I doubt the sunburn will kill you, just try not to do anything too reckless. Like fighting a dragon for no good reason. I know Bull and Sera will try to talk you into it, but don’t listen to them. They’re both mad.
Just take care of yourself out there. I will be terribly cross if anything happens to you.

You’ve requested that I continue writing even while you are incommunicado, so I shall when I have the time. This way you’ll at least be able to imagine my velvety voice while we’re parted and perhaps that will keep you from pining away. Don’t pretend you’re not. I know exactly what a sentimental sap you are.

I’ll leave this for now. I’d say expect another letter soon, but you’ll receive everything I write in the next month at the same time, won’t you? Don’t let me keep you, then, I’m certain my next letter will be far more exciting.

Dorian

The man was ridiculous and insufferable, even in writing. Still, Idhren could not stop himself from grinning as he read through the letter twice, comforted by that familiar handwriting. And he very nearly could hear Dorian’s voice in his head.

Minrathous

5 Wintermarch, 9:43 Dragon

Idhren,

It’s been quite a busy few weeks here in Minrathous. Between finding suitable living arrangements for myself within the city and being reintroduced to society this is the first moment I’ve had the time to sit down and write the letter I promised in my previous one.

I suppose that does not matter so much, however. I expect that by now you have arrived at your destination and are hard at work bringing peace and order to the land. Or whatever it is you’re doing out there.

Minrathous is much as I remember it. I doubt the city has seen any significant changes any time in the past two ages, however, so that is no surprise. Nevertheless, it remains spectacular. The jewel of the Imperium. No, of all Thedas.

Listen to me wax poetic about architecture. I am horrified with myself, and clearly I have been away from civilization for far too long. I knew that Orlais was but a pale comparison to our homeland’s grandeur, but it seems I was far more homesick than I realized at the time.

The lodgings I’ve found here are a suite of apartments roughly between the central markets and the Senate. It’s not the sort of place I would have even contemplated living when last I was here, but it will do. Having spent most of the past year on the road I find my standards significantly lowered. Not that this place is rundown or anything of the sort, it’s still quite luxurious. But it’s no Winter Palace, either. And small. Though I don’t plan on doing much more than sleep here, so it will serve.
Magnificent as the city is, however, I also find I can no longer overlook its faults. I used to think nothing of the slaves here. How did I manage to ignore them so completely when they are absolutely everywhere? Maevaris employs quite a number of slaves, human and elven, and though I know she sees them very well treated I find their presence now makes me uneasy. This is your influence. I would be cross, but you were right. All these years you have been right about my willful blindness. The south has no slavery, and while I still find alienages little better I can no longer believe the argument that the Imperium would collapse without slavery. Every other country is doing just fine.

But that is part of why I am here, is it not? To help put our homeland back on the right track, to stop us being the bogeymen that mothers use to frighten their children. I used to think our reputation in the south was exaggerated, laughable even. But if all they’ve seen are the cultists and slavers that invade their lands for selfish gain, then how could people think otherwise?

But you know all of this already, and I shouldn’t bore you with such ramblings.

Insinuating myself back into the upper echelons of society has been rather tedious. I had a bit of a reputation for myself even before I went gallivanting off to join your heretic army, and while I still have my family name I have no true position of status beyond my association with you. You said something in your letter about my clinging to Mae’s skirts, and I fear that turn of phrase has been far too accurate so far. I never expected this to be easy, or fast, but it is still frustrating.

It seems all I have done so far is attend parties and make small talk. Is this how you felt, working forever in Canidius’ shadow? If so, I have newfound sympathy.

No one has any interest in talking of politics when they speak to me, they ask only of the Inquisition, and of you. Is it true the southern Chantry believes an elf savage to be Andraste’s Herald? Is it true that I am sleeping with said elf savage?

I have done nothing but share tales of your exploits and defend your honor. You may thank me in whatever way you like. Preferably in person and enthusiastically. But as that is not currently an option, I’ll settle for ribald love letters.

Yours,

Dorian

Two more letters followed and Idhren read each one with rapt attention, savoring every word. And then he read them again. Twice more, until he had their contents nearly memorized and his eyes began to droop from exhaustion. Only then did he set the letters aside and lie down to sleep.

But the empty spot on the other side of the bed did nothing except remind him of the body that should be there. Out in the field it had been easy to ignore Dorian’s absence, because it had happened before. He could pretend that Dorian was merely back at Skyhold, picture him sitting in the library engrossed in a book or in the tavern drinking with their friends. Now, with only letters for company, his absence was much more glaring. And much more painful.

He had to remind himself that Dorian was doing good work.
Skyhold

15 Guardian, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

I am sorry to hear that your efforts are not progressing as quickly as you would like. Do not lose hope, though. Politics are slow and abhorrent. You know how I feel about this so I won’t bore you again. And Tevinter has always been resistant to any change that does not bring immediate personal benefits to the Magisterium. That does not mean you should stop trying.

The going was slow for us at first, you will remember. Although by the time you deigned to join our effort the worst roadblocks had been overcome.

I find that, when faced with political dissent, it helps a great deal to do something highly dramatic and heroic to show everyone you were in the right all along. Thwarting assassination attempts, defeating evil cults, and mending the very fabric of reality are all very good. Although I suspect the latter may be a bit beyond your capabilities at this time. Don’t worry, I shan’t hold it against you.

But think how you must be the topic of gossip throughout the entire country. The rebel pariah returned home at last! I should think you would be terribly pleased to be the first topic on everyone’s tongue. As far as scandals go, I think ours is certainly one of the best. I may be biased, however, as I am personally involved. Have you truly faced so many questions about our relationship? I hope you have confirmed them all.

However frustrating your current situation may feel, it at least sounds more pleasant than what I suffered the past month. I may loath politicking with every fiber of my soul, but I would choose a salon with fine wine and good food over fighting for my life in the desert any day.

Please give my regards to Magister Tilani, and thank her for taking such good care of you in my stead. I hope she’s continuing my efforts at keeping your ego in check. Someone must.

As for the ribald love letters that you requested. I might be persuaded to write such a thing, but I had better receive something equal in return. I have, after all, only the memory of you to keep me warm at night.

Yours,

Idhren

Minrathous

25 Guardian, 9:43 Dragon

Idhren,

What frustrates me the most, at this moment, is not so much that our progress is slow. I never expected change to happen overnight. Especially not change to the extent I am hoping to affect. Even the few magisters I have spoken to that are sympathetic to our cause find some of my proposals
extreme. Perhaps they are, given the current state of the Imperium, but I believe they are necessary.

I told you before that many will talk to me only of the Inquisition and what happened down there in the south. There are so many rumors that are almost laughably false. Those are at least entertaining, but I have also heard so many try to discount what we did. What you did. The magisterium may have condemned the Venatori publically, but that means nothing. Too many seats currently sit vacant or freshly filled. And that is only the ones rabid enough to venture into a war themselves. How many remain, I wonder? How many sent their slaves south to fight for Corypheus while sitting back in their mansions waiting to reap the rewards?

I fear I am growing paranoid.

But I have lost all social standing I once had. I have nothing left save my connection to your Inquisition – which is not always beneficial, unfortunately – and my family name. And to be perfectly honest, sometimes I feel as though I don’t even have that.

I saw my father the other night. It was an event hosted by one of Mae’s political allies. A part of me knew I would not be able to avoid him forever. He is a magister, after all, and one of the more open minded. Of course he is someone we might get on our side in a vote. Somehow I had hoped that particular task could be managed without me. A fool’s hope, that one.

The meeting did not go as ill as it could have. It was not as horrid as our last meeting, at the very least. Perhaps being in public helped with that. We shared polite greetings and mindless small talk for, dare I say, a full five minutes. No mention of the Inquisition, or of you, or of what transpired between us. It was… Well, I can’t say it was pleasant, but it was not nauseating, either. Somewhere in the middle there.

I only wish I knew whether it was merely an attempt at being polite in public, or some awkward attempt at reconciliation. I suppose only time will tell.

I did not intend for this letter to turn so dour, and I apologize. I’m certain you have enough concerns of your own without piling mine on top of them.

Your last excursion sounded absolutely horrid, but you may be comforted in the knowledge that it was at least more exciting than my current endeavors. No one has tried to kill me in months. It’s terribly dull, and I’m mildly offended that no one thinks me of enough importance to attempt an assassination. Such an attempt would fail, obviously, but it’s a matter of courtesy.

Yours,

Dorian

P.S. I am certain I can make the writing of dirty letters worth your time.
From Sky-tearing Peakes to Secret-steep’d Roots

From sky-tearing peakes of the sacred mountain
To secret-steep’d roots of the ancient oak trees
A lonesome choir, I, song falling unanswered,
Voice on wind returning, answered no more.
- Canticle of Andraste 1:4

Skyhold

12 Draconis, 9:43 Dragon

Now you understand how much I have suffered for the past year. Politicians are idiots. And I have little doubt that there are still plenty of Venatori sympathizers in the Magisterium. For that reason I can’t be upset that no one has tried to kill you. Not because I doubt your ability to defend yourself, but because I wish you wouldn’t have to. I wish Tevinter politics were not built on fear mongering and blood magic.

I know you are a better person than that, but if you must play their game in order to make any headway, I will put the Nightingale’s information at your disposal. Should you happen to find one of the remaining Venatori we would be more than happy to provide you with whatever information you need to see them divested of all political and social influence.

If I can help you in any way, even from the other side of the world, you know I would do it in a heartbeat.

And if you need me to come up there and remind your father in no uncertain terms what I think of him, and what I will do to him if he so much as thinks of harming you again, I will. Or I will at least write him a very strongly worded letter. With your permission.

The thought of dropping everything and following you has certainly crossed my mind, but such thoughts are only daydreams. There is too much still to do here.

More bad news on my end, I’m afraid.

Another excursion, although this one is of a very different nature. No rifts, no demons. Hopefully no would-be gods, but I shan’t keep my hopes up. It’s bound to be dismal, regardless.

We’ve received a request for aid from Orzammar. Shocking, I know, that the dwarves would seek help from us surfacers. But they aided us during the war, so I’m obligated to see what we can do to assist.

What I understand from their missive - which is infuriatingly brief and vague about the specific issue – is that an earthquake collapsed one of their lyrium mines. And has potentially weakened or broken some of the seals that hold back darkspawn. So we’ll be sending down a bit of extra manpower to hold the fort while they make necessary repairs.

Personally, I will be helping investigate the source of these earthquakes. Because they have been going on for months, if I understand correctly, damaging mine shafts and tunnels and whatever else
they have down there. I don’t know how common this sort of thing is, but in their shoes I probably
would have considered reaching out for help before the earthquakes got bad enough to tear the
ground itself apart.

But that’s neither here nor there. They’ve asked, we’ve agreed, and I’ll get to spend Maker knows
how long in a dark, dismal cave praying the darkspawn don’t find us.

Do not worry. I will be perfectly safe. As safe as possible, at least. And I will have an escort of
dwarves to ensure I don’t get lost.

Besides, worrying too much will give you grey hair. Or worse, wrinkles!

If that thought won’t deter you from worrying, I can’t think of anything that will.

Yours,

Idhren

Minrathous

30 Draconis, 9:43 Dragon

Amatus,

I admit I am incredibly uncomfortable with the idea of you venturing into the Deep Roads. You’ll
probably already be down there by the time this arrives, but please do be careful. People die down
there regularly. People go there with the express purpose of dying.

I know by the time this letter arrives it will be too late to stop you. I know that nothing I could
conceive of saying would change your mind once you’ve set yourself to something. So I only hope
that you will be safe.

Please be safe.

I will be very cross if I have to go down there and rescue you.

Dorian

Skyhold

15 Cloudreach, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,
I’m sorry if I worried you with any of my past letters. That was never my intention. Nothing has been more dangerous than anything we did during the war, but I know that is probably of small comfort. I suppose I also know that it is fruitless to ask you not to worry, because try as I might I cannot keep myself from worrying about you. And of the two of us you are in the safer position at the moment.

When the war ended I expected that I would have less work to do, but so far that has not been the case. I am still traipsing all across the countryside. And when I am not out in the dirt, Josephine has my time at Skyhold booked with as many meetings as she can schedule.

Today I met with a representative from the University of Orlais, who says they have a man down in the southern Frostbacks researching the disappearance of Inquisitor Ameridan nearly a thousand years ago.

It’s a region we’ve had reports of lingering rifts, so I was bound to head out there eventually. But it’s a remote part of the mountains with no true roads leading through. And Avvar territory, so I’ve been putting it off. I think the University was hoping we’d be interested in finding out what happened to Ameridan and send some soldiers to keep everyone safe. I’m doing that, of course, but I’ll also be joining them.

This is actually making me look forward to the trip.

I’ll be certain to let you know how it goes. I don’t know how long we’ll be there, but Harding is attempting to establish a permanent outpost as we speak, so hopefully I will be able to send and receive letters while I am away. That would certainly be an improvement, wouldn’t you say? Now if only we could find a way for these letters to arrive more quickly, that would really improve the situation. You’re an expert in time magic, perhaps you can come up with something.

I hope things are going better for you up there than they were when last you wrote. Are you still struggling to make progress? Have you and Maevaris found any trustworthy allies, or are you still alone? I wish there were more I could do to help.

Ever yours,

Idhren

Skyhold, Cloudreach 9:43 Dragon

Idhren set the pen down and sighed as he looked over the letter. He’d thought, at first, that this would get easier over time. It was only getting harder. Months and months apart with only a handful of letters was too much to bear.

He had always hated being lonely.

The flood of work was, at times, a blessing. It was a distraction. Being on the road was easier to bear than lying awake at night in an empty bed. Returning to the fortress after an expedition was a cold homecoming.

It was not only Dorian’s absence, although that was the most glaring. Cassandra was gone months
ago. Vivienne as well. Now Varric was leaving. It felt as though the Inquisition was beginning to fracture. Slowly people were drifting back to the lives they’d had before the world almost ended, or to the new lives they hoped to build. Slowly the world was recovering.

The thought should have made him happy.

A knock on the door pulled Idhren out of his thoughts. "Come in," he called down the stairs, rising slowly from his seat at the desk.

He heard the door open and shut, then a moment later Josephine appeared at the top of the stairs. "Inquisitor, I'm sorry to disturb you," she said. Her expression was concerned, grip a little too tight on her ever-present writing board. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"I'd just finished," Idhren assured her. "What do you need?"

"There is a bit of a situation," the ambassador said carefully. "Arl Teagan of Redcliffe arrived earlier this morning. I’ve tried to convince him to wait for a meeting tomorrow, as you’ve only recently returned from the Deep Roads, however he claims it is a matter of importance and cannot wait."

Idhren frowned. He expected such behavior from Orlesian nobles, but his experience with Fereldens had been largely more pleasant. Save the unfortunate business in Redcliffe. "I thought we'd sorted out all the problems in the Hinterlands," Idhren said. "They're not still having problems with mages, are they?"

"I don't believe so," Josephine replied, "But he would not speak his business to anyone but you. He says he's been sent as a representative of the crown."

"That doesn't sound good," Idhren winced slightly. There wasn't anything keeping him from meeting with the man, and if it would prevent a scene in the middle of the great hall he would have to put aside his scant free time and deal with this. "Tell him that I will be down shortly. Can we meet in your office?"

"Of course," Josephine assured. "Thank you, Inquisitor." She looked relieved that he had agreed. Idhren could only wonder how long she had been trying to dissuade the man. Josephine usually had the patience of a saint.

"It's no trouble," Idhren assured her. She bid farewell and then trotted off back down the stairs. Idhren looked down at himself. His clothes were a little rumpled from sitting hunched over his desk most of the day, but he straightened them, smoothed out the worst of the wrinkles, and decided they were good enough. He smoothed down his hair and pulled on his boots, then followed in Josephine's footsteps.

He arrived at her office to find the Arl pacing before the fireplace and Josephine hovering nervously beside her desk. Opening the door drew their attention to Idhren immediately, and he made certain to close it firmly behind himself so they would not be disturbed.

"Your Worship," Teagan greeted as Idhren stepped into the room. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

"Arl Teagan," Idhren greeted in return. "I'm sure you wouldn't be so insistent if this weren't important. You aren't having any trouble with our people near Redcliffe I hope?"

"Not as such, no," the Arl assured. "But that is not entirely unrelated to my business here."

That did not sound good. "Have a seat, then," Idhren offered, gesturing to one of the chairs before
"The fire as he took a seat in the other, "And perhaps you can elaborate."

Teagan took the offered chair and Idhren heard Josephine come over to join them. The ambassador hovered by his shoulder, ready to provide her input or make notes as necessary. The Arl spared her a glance, and then began to speak. "I've come as representative of Ferelden, Your Worship. As we've had dealings before surrounding Redcliffe and its lands it was believed that would make this matter easier. There is... how shall I say... some concern among the people of Ferelden about your soldiers’ continued presence in our lands, especially now the threat of the Breach is no more."

"The Breach may be closed and Corypheus destroyed, but that hardly means our work is done, my lord," Idhren protested. "There is much that must be done to recover from the destruction that Corypheus wreaked across both Ferelden and Orlais. My people are attempting to assist in restoration efforts, much as we did in the Hinterlands when this all began."

"Of course, Your Worship," Teagan nodded in understanding. "And all of Ferelden - all of Thedas - is incredibly grateful for what you have done so far, and what you continue to do. However, you must also understand that Ferelden is still not long free of Orlesian rule. Many live who still remember the war for our independence, and they are made uncomfortable by the presence of another military might in their lands, and on their borders."

Idhren frowned slightly. "The Inquisition has no desire to usurp rule of Ferelden, or any nation for that matter," he replied.

"I did not mean to imply that you would, Your Worship," Teagan defended. "Only that some of my fellow Arls, and their Banns, are uneasy."

"Are my soldiers giving them any trouble?" Idhren asked in concern. While he understood how the presence of a foreign army might make the ruling class uncomfortable, this reaction seemed a little extreme.

"Not yet," Teagan said. "I believe some may see your continued involvement as a judgment on their ability to protect their own lands and people. You can understand, in that case, how your presence might be seen as insulting. And if tensions continue to rise among the nobility it may only be a matter of time."

So Teagan was attempting to prevent any conflict, Idhren could appreciate that. It showed more wisdom than he was used to hearing from the nobility. "The Inquisition is merely attempting to render aid wherever it is needed," Idhren explained patiently, "So that Thedas can recover quickly from this disaster. I'm certain your fellows also want the same. There are also rifts remaining in parts of the countryside that cannot be left untended. Even now we are mounting an expedition into the Frostback Basin to deal with the remaining rifts in that region."

"We certainly understand your motivations," Teagan replied. His tedious apologies were growing somewhat frustrating. "And I am not asking that the Inquisition cease its efforts at restoration at this time. I am merely here to convey the concerns that my people have. And perhaps come to some agreement that might ease minds."

Idhren sighed and glanced up at Josephine. "Ambassador, what do you think of these concerns?" he asked. She worked more closely with the nobility of their neighbors.

"I believe that their unease is understandable, given Ferelden's recent history," Josephine answered carefully. "Perhaps we might do something to assure them our intentions are purely charitable?"

"Such reassurances would be greatly appreciated, I’m certain," Teagan agreed.
Idhren hummed thoughtfully. “We are already attempting to coordinate restoration efforts with the local nobility,” he said, “But we can ensure that the Arls are kept informed of any Inquisition movements through their lands. That way there will at least be no unpleasant surprises.”

“That could certainly be easily managed,” Josephine agreed.

“It is a start,” Arl Teagan nodded after a moment of thought.

———

*Minrathous*

*3 Bloomingtide, 9:43 Dragon*

*Amatus,*

Worried? What in the world would I have to be worried about? Unless you are referring to your reckless disregard for good sense and penchant for wildly dangerous experimentation. Have you and Dagna blown up the Undercroft yet? I knew it was only a matter of time.

I must admit that I also thought you would have less demands on your time these days. I suppose there truly is no rest for the wicked, as they say. The phrase certainly applies in Tevinter.

Scarcely a day goes by that I haven’t attended some sort of social or political function. There is some degree of progress. Certainly Mae and myself have found a handful of people sympathetic to our cause. The one good thing about the number of magisters we killed down south is that some of those empty seats are being filled by young idealists like myself. Not all, of course, but a few.

There are three newly made magisters that we have swayed to our side, in addition to the allies Mae has cultivated throughout her own career. My concern is that these new additions are naive and quite green to politics. They have inherited far too early and aren’t truly prepared for the responsibility or the cut-throat nature of Tevinter politics.

They rather remind me of myself ten years ago, and that is quite a sobering thought. I’m sure it will make you laugh, however.

In addition to all this, I am also attempting to convince Mae to free her slaves. If not all, then most. We must be seen to lead by example, and it is difficult to speak against slavery when the most influential of our number still keeps innumerable slaves herself. She does not quite see this as being a priority. Years ago I was of the same opinion, but I no longer see how political corruption and slavery are not equal stains upon our nation.

One thing at a time, I suppose. At least we are doing something.

This newest excursion of yours does sound rather interesting. I must say I would also be interested in finding out what happened to your predecessor, if only to know what sort of fate you might expect. I hope he wasn’t eaten by a dragon or something equally distasteful. Be wary of the Avvar, and do let me know what you learn.

Yours,
The rift closed with a familiar resounding crash that echoed through woods surrounding it. Idhren was panting, breathless, and collapsed to one knee as he caught his breath. This was the second in one day, a feat he had not been forced to perform since the Veil was first torn asunder nearly two years ago. The pain of using the Anchor had been nearly unbearable without giving his arm enough time to recover, and now he could feel nothing from fingertips to shoulder.

Like the rifts in the Wastes, this one had been larger, older, more difficult to seal than the ones he had dealt with during the war. As had the one he closed this morning. It supported his theory that they continued to grow the longer they remained open.

"You alright, Boss?" Bull's voice pulled Idhren from his thoughts and back to the present. When Idhren raised his eyes from the ground he found the mercenary standing before him, splattered with demonic ichor, and holding out a hand to help him up.

"Your hand's still glowing," Bull pointed out.

Idhren looked down at his left arm, hanging limp at his side and completely numb. Sure enough, the mark on his palm was still spitting green sparks. That was not normal. "Twice in one day is not recommended," he said, rather than admitting his own concern. Bull hadn't been out in the field with him very often during the war, maybe he wouldn't notice.

"Huh," the mercenary said. Idhren couldn't tell whether he believed the lie or not. "Guess you wanna call it a day, then."

"Yes," Idhren replied, still slightly winded. That last fight had been difficult, his hand numb and fingers unable to grip his staff properly. Now he couldn't move his arm at all. He would be useless in a fight. Or worse, a liability to his companions. "It'll start getting dark soon, anyway, and I don't want to be out here at night." He just hoped they wouldn't run into any Avvar on the way back to camp.

He turned away from Bull to check on the others, and spotted Sera poking at the gelatinous remains of some demon with a stick, alternately laughing and making noises of disgust. Blackwall stood nearby; trying very hard to look as though he wasn't highly amused by her antics. "Let's get moving," Idhren called to them, "Unless you plan on bringing that home with us."

"Eaugh, no," Sera exclaimed, and tossed away the stick she had been using. "It's gross, that is. Who'd want that?"

"Come on, then," Idhren said. He took a moment to regain his bearings after the fight, and then headed off down the path with the other three at his back.
An hour’s hike brought them back to the nearest camp, and by then most of the feeling had returned to Idhren’s arm. His fingers still twinged a bit with lingering pins and needles when he flexed them, and his grip felt weak. But the Anchor had returned to its dormant state and that was the greatest relief.

The sheer scope of the Inquisition’s presence in this region meant even their outlying camps were more than just a circle of tents set up around a campfire. Here their people were spread out and dug in, supported by the university’s people and prepared for a long-term stay. And Idhren had four walls and a roof over his head almost every night. Drafty walls, and a space he was forced to share with Sera – whose snoring was not nearly as endearing as Dorian’s – but walls all the same.

“Inquisitor,” he was greeted by the camp’s lead scout moments after arriving.

“Farrow,” Idhren replied. “The two rifts along the river are closed, you can tell your people it should be safe to move that way from now on.”

The scout perked up on hearing this and smiled. “Fantastic news, Your Worship,” he replied, “I’ll get word to the other camps as well.”

“Thank you, Farrow,” Idhren nodded, grateful someone else could take over that task. He didn’t have the energy to wrangle up that many runners tonight. “Any other news today?”

“Scouts up the ridge spotted a group of those hostile Avvar ’round noon,” he reported. “Weren’t seen, and said the Avvar were headed further into the hills. Direction of those Tevinter ruins in the northeast.”

“Not the ones Professor Kenric’s looking at, I hope?” Idhren asked in mild concern.

“No, ser,” the scout was quick to assure. “He’s safe and sound far as I know.”

“Good, good,” Idhren breathed a sigh of relief. “Continue keeping an eye on those paths in case more of them show up,” he ordered, and waited for the nod of understanding before continuing, “Anything else?”

“No, ser,” Farrow said again.

“In that case, if you could have someone send dinner to my cabin when it’s ready?” Idhren requested.

“Of course, Your Worship,” the scout assured, gave a little half bow, and then went off back to his duties.

Idhren sighed, shoulders slumping with fatigue, and trudged into the small, hastily constructed cabin he’d been sharing with Sera for several nights already. She wasn’t there at the moment, but had deposited her bow and quiver unceremoniously on the bed before going off, likely to bother the soldiers or complain about the food not being ready. He was glad for the privacy as he stripped out of his soiled armor and flopped down onto the cot that served as his bed.

With his gloves off, Idhren held his hand up over his face and scowled at the mark emblazoned across his palm. When the magic was inactive it wasn’t very impressive, a dully iridescent green scar in his flesh. And it looked no different now than the entire time it had been there. For two years he had been studying how it worked, learning how to control its magic; he liked to think he understood it better than anyone else in the world. But he didn’t understand why it was acting like this now.

Out of curiosity, he held his hand away from his face and pushed the tiniest drop of his own magic
into the mark. As expected, the mark reacted by flaring and spitting, as though it were angry at the provocation. And it hurt. Using the mark always hurt, but this was bad enough Idhren had to grit his teeth to keep from crying out. Immediately he withdrew his magic and the mark calmed once more, leaving him panting and wincing.

Such a small reaction shouldn’t hurt so much.

Was it because he had overworked it already that day? Or was something else going on?


Frostback Basin

16 Justinian, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

I think you would have enjoyed this particular expedition. Not the camping, of course, I know how you feel about the great outdoors, but otherwise. This region is actually rather lovely. A bit cold, but no worse than Skyhold at this time of year.

I've been working with a Professor Kenric from the University of Orlais. Foremost expert on Inquisitor Ameridan, apparently. I read his book on the journey here and it's actually quite good, I highly recommend it if you've the time. And having spoken with him now I find him quite pleasant. I hadn't realized quite how much I missed academics until working with him.

You joke about my predecessor being eaten by a dragon, but that may not be far from the truth. He was, evidently, rather famous for dragon hunting. Something he and I have in common, it would seem. And the Avvar have some legend about a dragon from around that time.

The Avvar have been somewhat of a concern, but less than I expected. The tribe that is permanently settled in this region is quite friendly, so long as you respect them and their holdings, but they have been under invasion by another group of their people. It's these we've had to look out for. The Avvar leader claims they have formed some sort of cult worshiping their god of vengeance and war. They attack anyone that crosses their path without provocation and have proved to be the most difficult part of this excursion.

I've been forced to split my time between closing rifts, negotiating with the Avvar tribe, and assisting Kenric. But I believe we're nearing a discovery.

Avvar cultists aside, the trip has been surprisingly pleasant. And would have been perfectly safe if not for their interference. Still, at the moment they've proved little more than an annoyance. We have quite a bit of experience dealing with angry cultists, don't we?

I am glad to hear that you are beginning to make some headway in your own work. I hope your gang of young idealists serves you well. If they are anything like you were ten years ago I fear they may do something well intentioned but horrifically foolish. Keep an eye on them. And should you need further help convincing Magister Tilani to do the right thing in regards to her slaves, I would be eager to help. I can write to her, with your permission, or I can provide you with counter-arguments to any of her protests. Just because this is the way Tevinter has been run for centuries
does not make it right.

I am terribly proud of you. You know that, yes?

All my love,

Idhren

Minrathous

28 Justinian, 9:43 Dragon

Amatus,

All your love? You are turning into quite the sap in my absence. Tell me again how much you miss my sultry voice and handsome face. I haven’t heard it nearly often enough lately. Although I suppose you’re more likely to call me an idiot and insult my facial hair. Out of jealousy, I’m sure. No one has done that for quite a while, either. It’s not something I expected to miss.

Your current expedition does sound fascinating. Other than the camping, I feel I would much prefer it to my present circumstance. But I shouldn’t complain.

I may not be out there in the thick of things like you, but Tevinter politics certainly never lacks for drama. Two magisters have been removed from their positions after it was revealed they had ties to the Venatori. I’ll be certain to thank the Nightingale for that information, perhaps send her a nice fruit basket or some such. What does she like other than secrets and murder? I’ll think of something.

Yours,

Dorian

Frostback Basin

5 Solace, 9:43 Dragon

Inquisitor Ameridan was an elf.

He was a Dalish elf and a mage.

He was like me.

Do you know how many people still spit ‘knife-ear’ behind my back? As though I’m not worthy of this position or their respect. As though I’m not even a person.
I will be writing to Cassandra and to Celene and we will have words.

I am sick and tired of bastard shemlen erasing the history of my people because it is inconvenient. Because it makes them look bad. Humans have stolen our culture and our homeland twice over and I will not let them continue to parade my history as their own while grinding my people into the dirt under their feet.

Ameridan was a hero, and he was one of the People. I will not let anyone forget that fact again.

I will not let them erase him again.

I will not let them erase me.
Etched Into My Every Step

Do not grieve for me, Maker of All.

Though all others may forget You,

Your name is etched into my every step.

I will not forsake You, even if I forget myself.

- Canticle of Trials 1:9

Skyhold, Solace, 9:43 Dragon

When the Inquisitor rode back into Skyhold's courtyard after over a month away in the Frostback Basin he was unsurprised to find his ambassador waiting for him inside the gate.

Idhren swung down off his mount, patted the dracolisk's neck fondly and retrieved a sheaf of parchment from a saddlebag before turning the animal over to a waiting stablehand. "Josephine," he addressed, not even bothering with a polite greeting. He had been stewing in anger the entire near-week-long journey back to the keep. From the disorganized collection of papers in his arms he withdrew two sealed letters and held them out to the lady ambassador. "See these are delivered to the Grand Cathedral and the Imperial Palace immediately." Josephine accepted the letters with no small amount of confusion. "And this," Idhren continued without giving her a chance to respond. He dug through his papers a moment more before producing another envelope sealed and addressed in a different hand, "To the University of Orlais. And every bloody town crier from here to Tevinter."

Josephine accepted this letter as well and added it to the others in her grasp. "Did something happen, Inquisitor?" she asked.

Idhren scowled down at the papers in his arms for a moment before looking up to meet her gaze at long last. "Inquisitor Ameridan was a Dalish mage," he said flatly. "The Orlesian Empire erased and covered up this part of our history, intentionally or otherwise, and I will not allow that to continue any longer."

"That... Is going to be a very controversial claim," Josephine said carefully.

Did she not believe him? Did she think he would lie about something like this in order to make his own people look better in the eyes of history? Idhren frowned, and then shook his head. He trusted Josephine more than that. She was being reasonably skeptical about such a wild claim. "I have proof," Idhren informed her, nodding to the papers in his arms. "And Professor Kenric is still gathering more."

"There are noble houses who claim familial ties to Ameridan," Josephine commented.

Idhren breezed past her on his way up to the keep and she easily fell in step with him. "Those houses lied," he said curtly.

"Several hundred years ago," Josephine pointed out. "But it would still be a tremendous scandal for them to reveal this. People will be angry."
"I’m angry that my entire culture was wiped out – twice – and that my people are forced to live in squalor,” Idhren snapped impatiently. “I could not possibly care less about the feelings of some pampered noble family.” This last was said as they stepped into the main hall, and perhaps a bit too loudly. Visitors to Skyhold always managed to show up to see the Inquisitor return from a trip, and a small number of those were hovering suspiciously close to the door. When Idhren stepped in, those eyes turned to him, and he knew he’d been overheard. Not the best phrase to be heard out of context, but for good or ill there was no taking it back now.

“We need to find Ameridan’s clan, if it still exists,” he continued, carefully avoiding eye contact as he made his way through the main hall toward the door to his quarters.

“That may be a task better suited to Leliana’s people,” Josephine commented, “But I can certainly look into it.”

“I’ll talk to her as well,” Idhren assured. After he had a chance to bathe and change clothes. Maybe get something to eat. "Did any other business come up while I was away?"

"I’ve been in correspondence with Ferelden’s Arls, as well as the crown,” Josephine informed him. "We have promised to communicate all current and future troop movements through their lands, even scouting parties and any of the mages, regardless of their purpose there.” Idhren frowned as he heard this. Even though this was what he had proposed he didn't like it. Soldiers he understood, anything with a military purpose he understood. Tracking mages visiting family and traveling for study was uncalled for. He remained silent, however, and let Josephine continue. "This seems to have placated them for now, but I feel they only tolerate our presence because we are assisting in restoration efforts. I cannot say how much longer that tolerance will last."

"We will have to deal with that if it happens," Idhren replied. He already did not like having to announce their movements for all to hear. Being able to move in secret and without needing permission was how they had ended the war so quickly. But he also had no desire to start another war by abusing the goodwill of their neighbors. "Let me know as soon as possible if there's any further complaint."

"I will," Josephine assured him.

"Anything from Orlesia?” Idhren asked. If Ferelden was complaining, he half expected their other neighbor to do so as well. "They're not angry at us, are they?"

"Not at the moment," Josephine replied. "The empress owes you her life and her throne, that goodwill will not be lost quickly."

"Well, I'm about to call one of their noble houses a bunch of lying power mongers, so we may lose it more quickly than you think,” Idhren said. He wasn't blind to the complications that revealing Ameridan's true heritage would bring about. But the truth was more important than the feelings and reputation of some human family, as far as he was concerned.

"Yes," Josephine sighed regretfully. "You are certain you wish to publicize this information?"

Idhren stopped just outside his door and turned to face her. "The Orlesian Empire destroyed my people's homeland. Ameridan's homeland. Now they are using his name for their own gain while forcing my people to live as second class citizens. For centuries humans have stolen the best of my peoples' history and claimed it as their own. I will not tolerate such slander any longer if there is something I can do to change it."

To her credit, Josephine looked suitably convinced by his argument. She would bear the brunt of the
initial outcry, and he felt guilty for that, but this was for the best. The world needed to know the truth. The world needed to acknowledge that elves were good for something other than scrubbing floors and looking pretty.

"I'll speak to Leliana about finding Ameridan's clan after I've had a chance to clean up," he informed his ambassador, turning away from her once more and pulling open the door.

"Of course, Inquisitor," Josephine nodded.

Idhren did not offer a goodbye as he let the door slam shut behind him.

The d’Ameride family was not at all happy to have the bloodline they’d built their entire status and reputation upon pulled out from under them. They were also not happy to have a clan of Dalish elves knocking down their doors – figuratively of course – demanding reparations.

Representatives from each had shown up at Skyhold apparently for the express purpose of screaming at each other.

“Our clan has always known that Ameridan was one of our own.” Clan Ghilain had sent their First, a young woman with a wooden staff across her back, bare feet and tangled hair and Mythal’s vallaslin inked in burgundy across her forehead. “This is not the first time we’ve tried to make the shemlen admit the truth, and every time they have laughed in our faces and thrown us out of their cities. Now their deceit is revealed to the world and still they act as though they deserve all that their lies brought them.”

“How were we to know the wild claims of some homeless tribe of elves were more than an attempt at grabbing power and influence for themselves?” House d’Ameride had the sense to send one of their youngest sons rather than an ambassador, but the man lacked the tact of a seasoned diplomat. The gilded Orlesian mask across his eyes did nothing to hide the disdain in his voice or the way he sneered when looking upon the elf across from him. “And anyway the claim was made centuries ago. Should those living today be punished for the mistakes of long-dead ancestors?”

“You have no problems punishing my people for the mistakes of your ancestors,” the elven woman spat in return.

“She makes a valid point,” Idhren interrupted. All their shouting was leading nowhere, and it was beginning to give him a headache. “You harm more than just Clan Ghilain by stealing elven history, intentionally or not.”

“Of course you would side with them,” d’Ameride sneered. “How are we to know the claims bear any truth this time, and you are not using the Inquisition’s influence for your own gain?”

Idhren’s eyes narrowed. “You have seen the same evidence that I have,” he said flatly. “This is the truth. My personal feelings have no sway here.”

D’Ameride scoffed, “You expect me to believe that you take no pleasure in the knowledge that this scandal will destroy our house?”

“If the only redeeming quality that your house had was its claimed connection to Inquisitor Ameridan, then perhaps you do not deserve your titles in the first place,” Idhren said curtly. “But my
concern is in preserving history accurately. This is your chance to make reparations for the mistakes of your ancestors, as you so aptly put it, and prove yourselves of greater principle.”

“Reperations?” d’Ameride exclaimed in disbelief.

“I think it only fair. After all, your house has been profiting from this claim,” Idhren replied. “Would that be suitable for you?” he asked, turning to the elven woman once more.

“They must also cease their claims to Ameridan,” she demanded. “And admit their lies.”

“Of course,” Idhren agreed, “That goes without saying.”

“The empress will hear about this,” d’Ameride fumed in impotent rage.

“Oh, she already knows,” Idhren smiled, “And I think she would agree with me. But you are more than welcome to take up the matter with her as well, should you like. In the mean time, Lady Montilyet would be more than happy to help negotiate suitable repayment to Clan Ghilain.”

On cue, Josephine stepped forward, pen in hand and calculated smile on her lips. “I have several proposals prepared that I would be happy to discuss with the both of you,” she informed the representatives. “I’m certain we can come to a solution that is agreeable for both sides.”

The elven woman eyed Josephine distrustfully, but she nodded in acceptance. However, d’Ameride was none too pleased with this turn of events. “House d’Ameride will not forget this, Inquisitor,” he practically snarled, “Let the ruin of our house rest on your shoulders.”

Idhren had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. “The ruin of your house rests on your own shoulders; Clan Ghilain gave you many opportunities to correct your family’s mistakes. It is not my fault you squandered them,” he snapped. “And,” he added, turning to the elven representative again, “Should Clan Ghilain face any trouble in the future, from House d’Ameride or otherwise, know that the Inquisition will always be at your disposal.”

He offered the woman a small bow, which she returned with a growing smile. “Ma serannas, ha’hren ,” she murmured. “Nuva mar’shos’lahn’en ir’tel’dera Fen’Harel .”

Idhren smiled as well. “Sathem lasa halani , sael ,” he returned, and left the room, ignoring the protests shouted after him.

——

Skyhold

10 August, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

There hasn’t been any sort of crisis now for weeks. Not so much as bandits on the roads or runaway druffalo. Life in Skyhold has been strangely peacefully and unexpectedly boring. I keep expecting to receive news of some new horror, but it doesn’t come. I have to remind myself that the war is over. The scouts report no more rifts. No demons. The south is clear. We’re done. It’s over.
There are, of course, still demands from the local nobility. They are becoming rather insufferable, if I’m going to be completely honest. The Inquisition’s luster has worn off, I think. They’re no longer too full of gratitude to make demands. And they are full of demands. Sometimes I actually find myself wishing for the sky to split open again so that I can escape them.

But I’m certain you have your own political troubles to worry about, so I won’t bore you with mine.

It feels strange, having the fate of the world no longer rest on our shoulders. I may need to learn how to relax again.

To that end, and to escape the ire of diplomats currently in residence at Skyhold, I have decided to take a vacation, of sorts. I’m going to visit my clan.

Since this whole thing began I’ve exchanged letters with the Keeper (the clan’s leader, in case you’ve forgotten all I taught you). And of course you know the trouble they faced in Wycome. It will be a relief to see for myself that they are doing well.

And yet I’m nervous.

This will be the first time seeing any of them since I lost Tainan. They were such an integral part of my life there I fear the visit will only make the loss all that more keen.

I know you don’t want to hear all this, my pathetic mooning over someone who is not you, but I have no one else to confide in. I fear this will not be a joyous homecoming but a painful one. To be confronted with everything I lost the day the Breach opened. Will they blame me for what happened?

My plan is to stay with Clan Lavellan for a month or more. I still have a responsibility to them. I remain their First still in name even if I have been absent. So I will ensure that they are safe and secure, and pass my title on officially. Elera was always bitter that I took it from her in the first place.

You are free to write to me there. The clan is still camped outside of Wycome and unlikely to leave any time soon as they are assisting the city in its efforts to rebuild after the war. I am very curious, and also nervous, to see how the local nobility feel about working side by side with a clan of ‘wild Dalish elves’.

You may address your letters care of Keeper Istimathoriel of Clan Lavellan and they should reach me. I will let you know how it goes.

Sule sal harthir,

Idhren

Free Marches, Firstfall, 9:43 Dragon

Two years Idhren had been away. It was only supposed to be a few months, then return and get married and go on with life. That plan seemed like such a long ago memory. His life among the Dalish felt almost like a dream.
And yet, when the camp came into view outside Wycome’s walls Idhren was jarred by how different it appeared than his memory.

In the years that Idhren had lived among the clan he had never known them to camp within sight of a human settlement, even those small villages that were friendly toward them. Certainly they would never have dared come closer than a half-day’s walk to a major city like Wycome. Now it seemed that caution was a thing of the past.

Clan Lavellan’s camp was pressed right up against the city walls. A semicircle of wagons and tents butting up against a deconstructed portion of wall and bordering the road to the city. About the outside of the aravels someone had constructed a fence that seemed more for show than function. Idhren passed through a gap in that fence - there was no gate - and once within the camp proper it felt far more recognizable.

Even with the city walls looming over it the camp inside that circle of wagons was so familiar it was nearly painful. The aravels with their crimson sails fluttering in the wind. The halla wandering aimlessly between, trusted not to wander off. People bustling about, going about their lives as if nothing had changed. And the keeper waiting for him in the center of it all with a smile on her face.

“Idhren,” she greeted, eyes crinkling at the edges as she looked down at him.

“Keeper,” he replied.

Without hesitation, the woman held out her arms, and Idhren moved into them instinctively, embracing her tightly. “It’s so good to see you again, da’len,” the woman breathed, squeezing him tightly. “And to see that you are well.”

“I am well now,” Idhren assured her, “Though it’s been difficult getting here.”

Istimaethoriel pulled away, holding Idhren by his shoulders as she looked into his eyes. He offered her a smile, melancholy though it was, and the gesture was quickly returned. “I’m sure it was,” she murmured. “Come, you must be tired and hungry from your trip. Let’s get you something to eat and you can tell me everything. Your letters haven’t been nearly frequent enough.”

Idhren allowed her to wrap an arm around his shoulder and begin leading him toward her aravel at the far side of camp. “I haven’t had much time to write,” he said, “But I’m sure enough of the news reached you here. I’m more interested in hearing how you’ve been. I was worried.”

Istimaethoriel scoffed as she guided Idhren across the camp. “Those soldiers of yours must have exaggerated frightfully,” she said.

“You don’t have to lie to me, Keeper,” Idhren told her. “I know how bad it was.” He’d read all the reports, often multiple times, stayed up all night worrying on more than one occasion. Venatori infiltrators, red lyrium in the water supply. It was a miracle the clan had survived at all. “I’m just glad you’re all safe.”

“We did lose a few,” Istimaethoriel admitted quietly. They had reached her aravel, with the campfire burnt down to embers outside and the eaves hung with drying herbs and flowers. She stopped there and took her arm from Idhren’s shoulders. And for the briefest of moments he saw her ever-present façade of strength and confidence drop, revealing a weary old woman with graying hair and more lines on her brow than Idhren remembered. “It was not easy,” she sighed. And then she drew herself up again, façade back in place, “But I’m certain it was nothing compared to what you have seen.”

That much Idhren believed to be true. The things he had seen and done in the time since he left the
Istimaethoriel ushered him into the aravel so he might put down his things. The inside looked much the same as Idhren remembered. Swaths of woven cloth decorated the walls and hung as curtains separating the interior of the wagon into rough sections. Sunlight filtered in through slitted windows and the cracks between boards, illuminating dust motes floating through the air and lending the close space an almost ethereal quality. Toward the back Idhren remembered that one of those colorful curtains closed off the Keeper's bed, but off to one side the nook that had once been his own living space was stocked with bedding. That was a surprise for Idhren.

"I thought you might stay with me while you're here," Istimaethoriel commented as she joined him inside. "Since your aravel has been passed on."

Idhren smiled despite himself. Warmth flooded his chest and he went over to set down his pack without question. "I would love nothing more than to stay with you again, Keeper."

The elderly woman smiled. "I thought as much," she murmured knowingly. "And I have one more thing for you, while we're in here." She passed the alcove where Idhren stood and opened up a cabinet built into the wall. "I sent most of your things to you, but this was... Well, it's a bit too large to fit in a trunk and I didn't want it to be lost or damaged on the way."

Curious, Idhren followed her to the other end of the wagon, but he was not at all prepared for what she presented him with.

It was a longbow. Made of ironbark in Dalish style and not particularly noteworthy at first glance. But upon closer inspection the delicate carvings along the bow's length were unique, and Idhren recognized them immediately. "Tainan's..." he couldn't even finish the thought before he began to choke up. This was Tainan's bow. One of several, but one that Idhren knew had held the most meaning to them, a gift from their father when Tainan received their vallaslin.

With trembling fingers, Idhren reached out and took the bow from her hands. It was heavy, and longer than Idhren was tall when unstrung. "You kept this?" he breathed, voice tight, running the fingers of one hand over the abstract designs carved into the wood.

"Of course," Istimaethoriel replied. "I thought you might like to have it. As a memento, of sorts."

Idhren swallowed back the lump in his throat. Or tried to. Tears welled in his eyes that he tried to blink back, ultimately failing as a drop fell down and splattered on the wood beneath his fingers. "Thank you," he breathed, barely managing more than a whisper.

Gentle arms wrapped around his shoulders slowly. Istimaethoriel pulled him to her chest and he lay his head against her shoulder as the tears continued to fall.

"I'm sorry," Idhren choked out.

"Sorry?" the Keeper asked gently. "You have nothing to be sorry for, da'len. "

Idhren shook his head against her shoulder. "I should have... I should have made them stay here... They were protecting me... I should have..."

"It was not your fault," Istimaethoriel sighed. One hand moved to gently stroke Idhren's hair, the other his back as he heaved broken sobs against her shoulder. "No one blames you. Some things are simply beyond our control."
Idhren had really thought he was done crying about this, that the years since Tainan’s death would dampen the pain. They did, somewhat. The hunter’s memory no longer haunted him even in his dreams. But still the pain was there, a dull ache like an old bruise on his heart.

The tears stopped after a while and Idhren slowly pulled himself out of Istimaethoriel’s embrace to wipe the tears from his cheek with a hand. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled again. Although it was hardly the first time she had seen him break down like a child.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she said again, more firmly this time. “Now come,” she wiped the remaining tears from his cheeks with a thumb and gently eased to the bow out of his hands to lean it against the wall beside his pack, “There are plenty of other people eager to see you again.”

It felt comfortable to be back in the roughshod dalish camp again. It felt like coming home, far more so than he had expected.

But that only made the small difference all that more glaring.

He learned that the camp had been set up neighboring the city’s alienage, and the wall between them was being carefully deconstructed so the elves could easily move between the city and the dalish camp beyond. City elves mingled freely among the clan, children from both cultures played together in the grass, the craftsmen set up a small stall in the city market to sell their wares.

“Is it strange,” Idhren asked the Keeper one day as they walked through the city together, “Living together with the city like this?”

Istimaethoriel was quiet for a moment before giving her answer, “It is, at times. We have never stayed in one place for so long, and never dared set our aravels so close to the shemlen cities. It has certainly been an adjustment for all those in the clan.”

As much of an adjustment as it had been for Idhren to go the other way, he imagined. “But they are happy here, aren’t they?”

“For the most part, yes,” Istimaethoriel assured him. “The elves of the city have been more than welcoming, and thanks to your Inquisition I have been able to work with them and the shemlen leaders to ensure a better life for our people in the city.”

That thought brought a smile to Idhren’s face. “Hopefully this can serve as an example to others as to how elves and humans can live and work together, even the dalish.”

“You would change the whole world if given enough time, I think,” the Keeper teased.

“For the better, I hope,” Idhren laughed, but flushed a bit in embarrassment.

“That certainly seems to be the case so far,” Istimaethoriel assured him.

Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of an elven teen - face bare and dressed in the fashion of the city, though a belt wrapped about their waist that was distinctly dalish in style - bearing a satchel full of papers and parchment-wrapped parcels. “Keeper,” the youth greeted, nodding respectfully to her, “Messages for you from the city council.” Istimaethoriel accepted a small stack of folded envelopes with polite thanks. “And a letter for you, Inquisitor,” they added, holding out to
Idhren a single envelope bearing a familiar wax seal that instantly caused his eyes to light up.

He thanked the messenger and took the letter, doing a poor job at hiding his excitement as the youth scurried off to continue their deliveries. His eyes traced over the wax seal, deep red and worn slightly in transit, but a crest he sought out on every letter he had received for the past year and a half.

“A letter from someone special?” Istimaethoriel’s teasing voice broke into Idhren’s momentary trance. He stopped himself halfway to tearing open the seal and devouring the contents of the letter. His face flushed hot as he looked over at the Keeper to find her smiling knowingly at him. “I know that expression, da’len.”

Idhren forced himself to lower the letter, to not embarrass himself further by tearing into it here in public like a child with a present. “It’s from Dorian,” he told her.

“Oh, your Tevinter friend,” Istimaethoriel nodded. Her words were innocuous, but the glint in her eye and the emphasis she put on ‘friend’ said more than words ever could. “I remember what it is to be young, I will not delay you from your love letters. Besides, I must see what the shemlen want of me today.”

“They’re not love letters,” Idhren protested. His cheeks burned so hot he did not think it was possible for him to blush any harder. “I don’t write love letters.”

“Of course not,” Istimaethoriel replied. That knowing smile on her lips was equal parts infuriating and mortifying. She knew far too much about the goings on in Idhren’s life and exactly how to fluster him for her own amusement. But the expression faded as she looked down to the correspondence in her own hands. Three letters bearing seals that Idhren did not immediately recognize but assumed were local nobility. “It is bound to be more pleasant than this, at any rate. Shemlen politics are certainly exhausting, aren’t they? I can only imagine your position is more insufferable.”

Thinking of the mess he had left in Josephine’s lap when he left for this holiday Idhren felt somewhat ashamed, but not enough to make him regret coming. “If you ever need help--.”

“No, no,” Istimaethoriel waved off his concerns before they could even be fully voiced. “I may be new to their silly games, but I am fully capable of handling anything they may throw at us. I have been managing quite well so far. Now off you go,” she shooed him like a wayward child, “You are here to relax, not bother yourself with even more politics.”

Idhren clutched the letter in his hands, hesitant and feeling childish for being so eager to read a letter. But lately Dorian’s letters had become one of few bright spots in an increasingly frustrating existence.

Watching his hesitation, Istimaethoriel’s expression softened to one of sympathy. “You must miss him terribly.”

Idhren glanced back down at the letter in his hands, ran a thumb over the wax seal. “More every day,” he admitted quietly.

He felt Istimaethoriel rest a hand on his shoulder, and then her lips press a soft kiss to his forehead. “I am glad you were able to find happiness again,” she murmured. “I have never known someone more deserving.”
Minrathous

30 August, 9:43 Dragon

Idhren,

I hope this letter reaches you in Wycome, and I hope that it find you well. I am glad that at least one of us is able to enjoy some sort of respite. You certainly deserve it after all you have done.

I do hope that all those puffed up Orlesian diplomats are not giving you too much trouble. You can kindly remind them that we would all be dead now if not for you. That should quiet them down, I would think.

But I should not remind you of such unpleasant things while you are on holiday. How is your clan faring these days? How does it feel to be living like a savage again after returning to civilization? I do remember that they faced quite a bit of trouble during the war, which I pray they have recovered from now. I should think that the clan of the famous Inquisitor would find itself untroubled anymore by us meddling humans. But what do I know? Certainly nothing of Dalish politics, I’m sure.

My own political struggles are finally beginning to bear fruit, as it were. Maevaris now has enough actual magisters in her favor to consider themselves a true political faction, rather than merely a group of troublemakers. They have begun – in private of course – calling themselves Lucerni. Some poetic nonsense about bringing Tevinter’s reputation back into the light. I thought you might appreciate the symbolism, though.

It is rather inspiring to think we are finally making some tangible progress. Soon we may have enough weight to actually try introducing some legislation. Something small, of course, and likely bound to fail on the first attempt. But enough to get people looking in our direction, and hopefully enough to make them take us seriously.

I’ll be certain to keep you updated.

Do not eat any bugs. I don’t care that it’s your culture; if you eat one single insect I will never kiss you again.

Dorian

Wycome

9 Kingsway, 9:43 Dragon

Dorian,

And how will you know what I’m eating when you’re half the world away?

Although this is much closer than we have been in some time. A little jaunt over the border would not be terribly out of the way, would it? You deserve a break from the tedium of politics as well, and I am aching to see you again. It has been far too long since I have seen you. I miss you. I miss having someone to debate with. I miss the warmth of you in my bed. I miss your voice, and the sight
of you. I even miss your constant complaining and your ridiculous mustache. Look what you have
done to me.

Clan Lavellan is doing remarkably well, all things considered, but I am finding it somewhat difficult
to be back here again. The life I had here feels like a lifetime ago, or a dream of some sort. Difficult
to think it has been less than three years since I left.

I am sorry this letter turned so melancholy. I promise I am not always as miserable as this, only
being here brings back so many memories. I am reminded that I have never been as happy as I was
while living here, and I may never be again. That is no fault of yours, I swear, and no comment on
my feelings for you. I’m sorry, this is all coming across wrong. Only life was so simple here back
then. No politics, no world ending crisis, only a simple life like normal people. I want that again. To
be normal.

I’m sorry, I truly do not mean to sound like such an emotional wreck. Being back here is trying, but I
am glad I came. Please do not worry about me overmuch, I am fine. Certainly don’t let it distract
you from your own work now that you are finally seeing progress.

You are doing great things, Dorian, and no matter how I miss you I would not tear you away.

I love you with all my heart, and I hope desperately that we may see each other again soon.

Idhren

There were more people who seemed genuinely happy to see him again than Idhren had expected.
Because he had lived with the clan for only a few years he had always thought the rest continued to
see him as an outsider rather than one of their own. Some surely did, but many more welcomed him
back with smiles and open arms. And questions of whether he would be staying permanently.

"No," Idhren had to answer every time. Enough times that he wondered if he shouldn't just make an
announcement in front of the entire clan. But word would spread through the community quickly, he
knew. "The Inquisition still needs me. And there's more work I can do there to help our people."
This seemed to be a very satisfactory answer for all except one person.

Elera was no longer the young girl she’d been when Idhren first joined the clan, proud of her position
as the Keeper's apprentice and angry at having it stolen away by an outsider. She was grown now,
vallaslin on her cheeks and as tall as Idhren himself. "You've just come to say goodbye then?" she
asked.

"And to see that you are all safe, after everything that's happened," Idhren answered. "I also came to
tell you in person that I'm relinquishing my position. Although that probably doesn't need saying."

"I figured that much out on my own," Elera said.

Of all the people in the clan Idhren had worked closely with, he had the most complicated
relationship with Elera. "I suppose you're happy I'm not coming back to stay," he murmured.

The young woman frowned, "Why should I be happy about that?" she asked in confusion.

"Because you'll have back the position I stole," Idhren replied. Was that not obvious? "I know
you've always been bitter about that, you don't have to pretend otherwise."

Her frown deepened and she stared at Idhren with open confusion. "Bitter?" she asked, confounded. "Maybe at first, yes, but not anymore." Then she laughed, "Did you really think that I hated you all this time?"

"Well you never seemed to like me all that much," Idhren replied, confused now himself. Had he been so wrong? "You complained whenever you trained with me and barely spoke to me otherwise."

Elera laughed again, louder this time. "I complained because your training was hard," she said. "But I always thought you were a better teacher than the Keeper, about some things anyway. She always wants me to hold back, to be cautious and careful. You pushed me harder, made me do things I didn't think I could. And you let me practice the dangerous spells she didn't even want me to think about."

Now Idhren had to laugh. "She has always been overcautious," he agreed. "Why didn't you tell me any of that back then?"

"Because I was a child," Elera said, chuckling a little in embarrassment. A child, she called herself, as though it were ages ago rather than only a few years. But a person could change a lot in a few years, especially when the world was at war. "I was embarrassed and I also..." now she flushed and would no longer meet his eyes, "I may have had a small crush on you."

"What?" Idhren exclaimed, blushing himself and gaping in disbelief.

"I was a child," Elera protested. "And you were this runaway from Tevinter who was so smart and let me blow things up when Keeper wasn't looking."

Idhren laughed weakly, feeling suddenly very awkward. "I had no idea."

"Yes, well..." Elera trailed off in embarrassment. But the flush was beginning to fade from her cheeks. "You only had eyes for Tainan right from the start. I'm sorry, by the way."

All mirth faded from Idhren. His smile faltered and his shoulders slumped. Everyone kept saying that, and every sympathetic glance or kind word was like a dagger reopening the wound. "It's hard to be back here without them," he admitted for the first time.

And then, perfectly on cue to ruin the moment, the mark on Idhren's hand flared. With no warning and no provocation the space between him and Elera was filled with green light. Pain stabbed through Idhren's hand like a knife, making him gasp. Elera cried out in alarm, drawing attention from the handful of people nearby.

For a moment that felt like an eternity the mark spit and sputtered in Idhren's hand, and then it slowly faded, a fire burning down to embers, and with it the pain subsided as well.

"Creators," Elera swore in muted horror. "What was that? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Idhren assured quickly, and then repeated himself louder for those nearby, some of whom were on their feet, halfway to him to see what was wrong. "It... does that sometimes."

"That's the mark?" Elera asked, her gaze focused on Idhren's hands. "The one the shemlen say their god gave you?"

"Yes," Idhren confirmed, and he held his hand out for her to see. His fingers trembled from lingering
shock as the glow faded into nothing once more.

“Is it normal for it to do that?” she asked, gazing curiously at what now appeared to be little more than a scar.

No, Idhren’s mind screamed, but he had no idea what had caused the mark to react just now. It was the first time it had flared without some sort of outside stimulus. “It’s not common,” he lied, “But it happens.”

“How frightening,” Elera breathed.

Frightening was an understatement for the feeling that lodged itself in Idhren’s chest. He could no longer ignore that the mark had been acting unusual as of late. He only wished he knew whether or not he should be worried.

Two months Idhren stayed with Clan Lavellan before a raven arrived bearing a note that called him back to Skyhold.

He’d always known his sojourn could not last forever, however much he may have wanted it to.

Scribbling a hasty reply, he sent the messenger bird off again and began preparing to leave. This time for good. A quick letter to Dorian was the first order of business, just a simple note that he would be returning to Skyhold soon, and then booking passage on a ship back to Ferelden. It was much easier this time to secure passage. When last he had left his clan he had practically had to beg for space in a cargo hold of a ship. Now, thanks to the Inquisition emblem on his shirt, he had an actual cabin.

He still found sea travel unpleasant. His stomach churned for the first day even with the herbs Istimaethoriel sent with him. But despite the early winter chill and biting winds this time of the year, he dared to venture out on deck during the middle part of the day, and the fresh air helped.

So he stood on deck, bundled tight in his coat and trying to be out of the way, staring out at the waves as the wind whipped his hair into his face. His hair was getting long; he should do something about that soon.

The ship dipped after cresting a particularly large swell. Idhren’s stomach momentarily leapt into his throat and he gripped the rail with both hands, hunched over until the nausea passed. But the feeling did not pass so much as become overshadowed by the sudden pain in his hand.

For the briefest moment Idhren thought he had somehow injured himself, but one glance down proved him wrong.

His hand still gripped the ship’s railing, white knuckled with pain, and from beneath his palm flickered sparks of green.

His head whipped up, looking around with wide eyes for any possible trigger that might have caused the mark to activate. But there was nothing. Nothing on the ship was even remotely magical except Idhren himself, and there was nothing in sight but water for as far as the eye could see.

The thought of a rift beneath the waves briefly crossed his mind, but was dismissed just as quickly.
There was nothing.

Idhren grit his teeth and gripped the railing tighter. At least none of the sailors on deck seemed to have noticed, and he could easily pass his discomfort off as sea sickness. The mark would settle down in a moment and the pain would pass.

But it didn’t.

Long moments Idhren stood at the rail, forcing deep breaths in through his clenched teeth as he waited for the flare to pass, but nothing changed. The pain didn’t subside, and the mark continued spitting and sputtering against the wood. In desperation Idhren attempted to clamp down on it with his magic the same way he might pull back an out-of-control spell.

The mark did not like that.

It flared stronger, brighter, more painful, until Idhren pulled back again, unable to contain the tiny choked whimper of pain that escaped his throat. Then the mark settled down to its previous state, but it remained active.

Why was it active, though? It shouldn’t be doing anything on its own now that the Breach was closed. Years the magic had been embedded in the flesh of his palm and it had never done anything like this. It reacted to specific triggers, always the same and always predictable. Now twice in as many months it had reacted to absolutely nothing at all. This was not right. Something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong.

With conscious effort, Idhren pried his fingers away from the railing and buried his hands in the folds of his coat. That would hide the glow well enough for him to make his way back to his cabin without notice.

Safely in the privacy of his cabin, Idhren collapsed back against the door, trembling from head to toe. He let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, and then gasped in pain. Only to clamp down on that noise as quickly as he could manage. The walls were not thick.

On shaking legs he made his way the two paces over to his narrow bed and collapsed onto the thin mattress. Not bothering to remove his boots or coat, he curled in around himself, clutching his left hand to his chest. When he could not suppress a whimper of pain he buried his face in the pillow to muffle the noise as much as possible and stayed that way, praying desperately that the fit would pass soon.

Why was it doing this? What was wrong? What would he do if the pain did not stop?

The pain did stop eventually, after what felt like an eternity. An hour, maybe more. It was hard to say how long he lie there, only that he felt exhausted afterward. Even when the mark ceased glowing the muscles of his arm twitched and spasmed and ached from being tensed so long. His whole hand tingled with pins and needles.

Blinking the blur of tears from his vision, Idhren rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling as his breathing returned to normal.

He still did not understand what was happening to the mark.

He tried to think back to the first days of the Inquisition. That first horrible day when he’d woken to find a foreign magic in his flesh and the sky torn asunder. The mark had been wild and uncontrollable then, eating away at him the same way the Breach ate away at the sky. Had it hurt this much that day? He couldn’t remember. His memories clouded and warped by panic and time.
But the Breach had been closed now for over a year. Nothing but a scar in the sky to match the one on his hand.

This should not be happening. He didn’t understand why it was happening. And that terrified him more than anything he’d done during the war.

Skyhold

11 Drakonis, 9:44 Dragon

Dorian,

I cannot begin to describe my current situation. I feel as though I am being torn apart.

Things are looking rather dire for the Inquisition. It seems our goodwill with the people has run out.

Ferelden wants us gone, either from their lands or for good. Orlais wants us to join with the Chantry, something about accountability and nepotism. I have spent the past month being yelled at by various diplomats. I am exhausted and it feels as though the entire world hates me.

I am trying to compromise. I don’t want to start another war or breed ill will with our neighbors, but neither do I want to give up the Inquisition’s independence. But they will not hear me.

Cassandra – sorry, Divine Victoria – wrote to me recently. The complaints of the nobility have reached even her. She is trying to calm the situation, but you know that has never been her strong suit. I fear this cannot be settled by her brand of politics, though I am grateful for the attempt.

There will be formal negotiations. A council to decide the Inquisition’s fate. Empress Celene has offered the Winter Palace as neutral ground, one last favor before all has been spent.

I am nervous. And I am angry. And I cannot do this on my own, Dorian. Please, if it is at all possible I ask that you come. I, and the Inquisition, will need all the support that we can get.

Idhren

Minrathous

26 Drakonis, 9:44 Dragon

Idhren,

I should let you know that I received a similar, if much more formal, letter from Josephine at the same time as your own. Requesting my presence at the Divine’s Exalted Council. Though it was completely unnecessary.

As though I could ever make you suffer through another Divine something-or-other without my
being there to keep an eye on you. Last time you almost got yourself blown up. Yes, that was no fault of your own, but horrendous bad luck at political functions is something of your trademark. Someone must make sure you don’t do something incredibly foolish, and evidently I cannot trust anyone but myself in this endeavor.

Besides, I suppose it is a good excuse to see you again. It has been entirely too long. Maevaris will have to survive without me for a time. But surely something of this seriousness will be of interest to the people up here, so it won’t be a complete loss on their part.

It will take me a few days to sort everything and book passage south, but I should make it to Orlais in time.

You are not alone in this, Amatus. Your friends will stand by you no matter what.

Dorian
Be Certain In Need

Be certain in need,
and the path will emerge
to a home tomorrow
and time will again
be the joy it once was

- From Suledin, an elven song

Halamshiral, Orlais, Bloomingtide 9:44 Dragon

The Winter Palace looked different by daylight. The midsummer sun shone off its whitewashed walls and glittered off gilded gates and fountains. The manicured courtyards were filled with the sounds of running water, of birds in the trees, and music drifted on the breeze from somewhere nearby. It was a much different impression than the Palace had given the first time Idhren laid eyes on it, a lighter, friendlier impression. But Idhren was no happier to be here than he had been the last time.

The Palace was as much a mask as what the Orlesian nobility wore on their faces. A golden, smiling façade to hide the filth within.

At least no one was trying to kill him this time.

Only tear his Inquisition limb from limb now that they no longer had need of it.

It was crumbling already, if Idhren were perfectly honest. He had tried for so long to ignore the feeling, but each time he returned to Skyhold it felt more empty. Many of his friends had departed back to their own lives, their halls were no longer filled with visitors and allies, and even the army’s camp outside the fortress walls was notably thin these days.

Already they were becoming little more than a memory. A few pages in a history book. Legends about a war that almost ended the world and the man who stopped it.

Would they forget him the way they forgot Ameridan?

Idhren tried to shake such thoughts from his head. He had been entirely too melancholy lately, miserable and lonely in a way he hadn’t been since living in Tevinter.

But the council loomed before him, always in the back of his mind and filling him with anxious dread every time he paused to think. Threatening to tear the foundations of his life out from under him and leave him floundering again.

There was only one thing that he was looking forward to. One bright spot amidst the dark cloud that clung to his mind.

Dorian.

Two of the longest years of Idhren’s life, and there he was now within arms reach.

He did not look much different, although Tevinter had left a bit of a mark on him. Tevinter fashions, at least. His current outfit was finer and a slight more ostentatious than anything he’d worn when last in the south. But from experience Idhren knew it was still a far cry from the finery that some of
Tevinter’s elite favored.

The man was currently embroiled in conversation with an Orlesian nobleman – the ambassador, if he was remembering Leliana’s briefing correctly – and rather than interrupt Idhren merely stood back and watched.

But Dorian spotted him quickly regardless, eyes catching his over the ambassador's shoulder, and a fond smile spread across his lips. “But if you'll excuse me,” he cut the conversation short, already moving in Idhren’s direction, “I see an old friend I need to greet.”

“An old friend?” Idhren asked, unable and unwilling to keep a matching smile from spreading across his lips. “Is that all I am now?”


Idhren was already reaching for him as soon as Dorian was close enough. “I should hope so,” he murmured, fingers finding purchase in the man’s collar. Then he was rising up on his toes as Dorian leaned down to meet him, hands easily finding Idhren’s waist only a moment before their lips met.

It took every ounce of self control that Idhren had not to climb the man like a tree right there in front of the Orlesian Ambassador. That certainly wouldn’t help negotiations. But after two years even one small kiss was nearly overwhelming. And that kiss was over all too soon, barely enough time for him to remember the feel of Dorian’s lips on his, the smell of his cologne, the warmth of those hands on his waist. He had to force himself to take a step backward, put a little distance between them so he could think again without being overcome by the urge to kiss him again.

“I missed you,” he said still, the words slipping past his lips easily.

Dorian’s smile turned smug. Idhren couldn’t help wondering if the man felt even a fraction of the desire he felt in that moment - two years of pent up lust and cold beds. “You won’t be happy until I say the same, will you?” he asked, voice teasing, “No matter how embarrassing it is.”

“You’ll say it in letters but not aloud?” Idhren asked, “You’ve been in Tevinter far too long.”

For a moment, the mirth faded from Dorian’s eyes, so briefly that had Idhren not been staring at him so closely he may not have noticed. “There’s truth to that,” he said. “Very well, I missed you terribly, like a limb, if we’re being dramatic.”

Idhren chuckled, “I’ve never known you to shy away from dramatics,” he teased. “But tell me, how was your trip? Uneventful, I hope?”

“Oh, dreadful, as always,” Dorian sighed. “But I’m not about to share the horrific details of my seasickness here in public. Or ever, if I have a choice. More importantly, you’ve gone and changed your hair again,” he pointed out. Unconsciously Idhren reached up to touch his hair, where aside from the shorn sides he’d allowed it to grow long enough to be tied back in a short ponytail. “Is this going to become a habit with you? Every time we're parted you change your hair in a fit of pique?”

“Stop leaving and you’ll find out,” Idhren laughed.

Dorian cringed faintly, but quickly covered it with a smile again. “Fair point,” he conceded. “It suits you.”

“Thank you,” Idhren replied. “Now, tell me what you’ve heard about this council.”

“Likely nothing you haven’t heard yourself,” Dorian replied. “Orlais wants the Inquisition tamed,
Ferelden wants it gone, and Tevinter sends but one token ambassador. That’s me, by the way.”

“I’d heard such a rumor,” Idhren said. “Shall I congratulate you, Ambassador Pavus?”

“Hardly,” Dorian scoffed. “It’s a token appointment, you know how the Magisterium likes to make itself known. It’s not as though I weren’t going to be here anyway.”

“Well, I’m very glad that you are,” Idhren replied.

“Of course you are,” Dorian laughed. “If I had been forced to read one more letter of your sad pining for me I should have been obligated to come visit regardless.”

Idhren flushed at the reminder, “As though you were any different,” he accused.


Idhren pulled him down for another brief kiss, again far more chaste than he would have liked. “Well maybe later we can make up for lost time, Ambassador,” he murmured low enough for only Dorian to hear.

A smirk pulled at the man’s mouth as he replied. “I would be a fool to turn down such an offer, Inquisitor.”

Idhren chuckled as he stepped away from Dorian once more. “I have some other business to finish first, but I will look for you when I am finished.”

“And I’ll look forward to it,” Dorian replied.

It was hours more of forced polite conversation before Idhren was certain he’d made all the requisite small talk to ensure all the negotiating parties would not hate him any more than they already did. By then the afternoon was stretching on and he was eager to use the scarce hours left to him before the council officially began in a much more pleasant way.

He found Dorian with a motley gathering of their friends, having laid claim to one of the garden’s seating areas and filled the small table with wine bottles. Likely on Varric’s dime, if Idhren had to guess.

“What’s all this about?” Idhren asked as he approached, curious as to the reason behind the impromptu celebration. Though knowing this group they likely didn’t need much of a reason.

“Sparky, you’re just in time!” Varric enthused, waving for Idhren to come join them.

“Varric this really isn’t necessary,” Dorian protested, voice tight. Something in his expression seemed almost panicked.

“Nonsense!” Varric brushed it off without seeming to notice Dorian’s discomfort. He raised his glass in a toast and began to speak. “Sparkler, the Imperium doesn’t deserve you. Or want you. It may even kill you. But we’ll miss you, if it counts.”

Why did this feel like a going away party? Dorian had only just arrived. He couldn’t already be planning to go back to Tevinter.
“And… you didn’t know,” Varric realized, trailing off as he saw Idhren’s confusion. “Well, shit. Okay folks, time to take the party elsewhere.”

Varric quickly ushered the rest of the onlookers away. Idhren was glad for the dwarf’s ability to read the mood, but it did nothing to improve his own. He didn’t take his eyes off of Dorian., though Dorian would notably not meet his gaze until everyone else had left them to the relative privacy of their garden alcove.

“Dorian-,”

“It’s true,” Dorian blurted, before Idhren could demand an explanation. “When the Exalted Council is ended I’m going back to Tevinter.” He still could hardly meet Idhren’s eyes. “For good this time.”

Idhren shouldn’t have been surprised, really. He supported Dorian’s work in Tevinter, encouraged him in it. But he had expected the man to stay longer. He’d expected them to have time together without politics or thousands of miles in between.

“But you’ve only just arrived,” he protested.

“I know,” Dorian replied. “It’s not what I’d wanted, either, believe me. But…” he trailed off a moment, then breathed a soft sigh and continued, “My father is dead. Assassinated, I believe. I received notice this morning. A perversely cheerful letter congratulating me on assuming his seat in the Magisterium.”

Good riddance, Idhren thought, but he knew enough to keep his mouth shut. He might not care at all for Dorian’s father, and knew Dorian wasn’t particularly fond of the man either, but it was still his father. “I’m sorry,” he said instead.

“No you’re not,” Dorian replied, but there was no anger in his voice. “You hated him.”

“He was still your father,” Idhren said.

Dorian met his eyes, and for the briefest moment Idhren saw real grief in his gaze, before Dorian quickly masked it again. “Yes, well,” he tried somewhat awkwardly to brush off Idhren’s condolences. “It’s all somewhat of a shock, to be honest. I only saw him a handful of times in Minrathous. He never mentioned anything about keeping me as his heir.”

“You’re actually taking it, then? The Magisterial seat?” Idhren asked. That was perhaps the biggest shock of it all. For how much Dorian claimed to loathe Tevinter high society, and how much he had protested being mistakenly called a magister in the past, it was strange to think he would willingly step into the role he had so long despised.

“How could I not?” Dorian asked in reply. “If I don’t, it would go to one of my horrid cousins. And it would help the Lucerni immensely to have another voice in the Magisterium.”

Dorian spoke as though it were obvious, as though there were no question. He had made the decision already, and without consulting Idhren in the slightest. “And you were going to tell me this when, exactly?” Idhren demanded, feeling hurt and anger well up inside him.

“Soon,” Dorian insisted. “I only just found out myself, so I certainly wasn’t keeping it from you on purpose.”

“And yet you told everyone else before you so much as mentioned it to me,” Idhren pointed out.

“I’ve hardly seen you,” Dorian defended. “Would you have rather had this conversation in front of
“I would rather have been the first person to know, not the last!” Idhren exploded.

“I--,” Dorian started to argue, and then stopped himself. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

The apology cooled Idhren’s temper somewhat, but he was still angry. Still hurt. “You’re not coming back, then.” It was not a question. “Ever.”

“Ever is a very strong word,” Dorian protested. “I can still visit.”

“Two years you were away, Dorian,” Idhren said, and glared up at him. “You didn’t visit then.”

“Well, you were very busy, running off all over the world at the drop of a hat,” Dorian argued. “For all I knew I’d show up at Skyhold to find you gone.”

“You’re making excuses,” Idhren accused. “You know I would have dropped everything if I knew you were coming, I would have been there.”

“And that’s the problem, isn’t it?” Dorian asked in exasperation. “I don’t want you to drop everything for me! What would people say?”

“I don’t give two shits what people have to say about us,” Idhren snapped. “I never have. And I thought you’d stopped caring, too. Evidently I was wrong. Or has that changed recently?”

“You know it’s not that simple,” Dorian protested. “I think this whole debacle is evidence of that.”

Idhren doubted the occasional visit from his Tevinter lover could have made this situation any worse. He had stepped on too many toes in the past years. People were tired of answering to an upstart Dalish elf. “What do you propose, then?” he asked in frustration. “I don’t want to go two years – or more – without seeing you again.”

“I do have something,” Dorian replied, raising one hand in a placating gesture. He reached into a pouch on his belt and withdrew a small object. “A going away present… of sorts,” he explained, holding the object out to Idhren. Laying there in the palm of his hand was a necklace. A somewhat bulky gold locket on a chain. Frowning, Idhren reached out to take the object, confused but curious.

“It’s a sending crystal,” Dorian explained before Idhren could even voice his questions. And sure enough, when Idhren popped the locket open instead of a portrait inside, a slim crystal was set into the pendant’s back. “So when you become overwhelmed by sorrow for lack of my velvety voice – magic!”

Practically miraculous that Dorian could even get his hands on a pair of these. They were exceedingly rare and exceedingly expensive. The effort it must have taken to obtain these crystals spoke to how Dorian must have also been miserable during their time apart. So Idhren really should appreciate it more. But it was just a cold weight in his hand to match the one in his heart.

“You think this is a good enough substitute for not seeing you?” Idhren asked, still staring down at the necklace.

Dorian hesitated, floundered a moment unable to find a suitably glib response. “Well… no,” he admitted at last, “But it’s an improvement over waiting weeks between letters, don’t you think?”

It was. And Idhren would have greatly appreciated this sentiment two years ago. But now he was tired, lonely, and he could not bear the thought of another long separation. “I would rather just go to Tevinter with you this time.”
“But you hate Tevinter,” Dorian said, perplexed. “You told me you never wanted to set foot there again.”

“I know what I said,” Idhren snapped. “But this…” he gestured vaguely to their surroundings. Even the splendor of the Winter Palace felt like a gilded cage no different than the one he’d fled half a lifetime ago.

Unbidden, he remembered a conversation with Cassandra earlier that day. Marriage. A concept he’d fled from in fear for years, but now the idea made his heart flutter with nervous hope. But did Dorian feel the same? Idhren had no idea. The future of their relationship was not something they had ever spoken about. Perhaps an oversight, Idhren realized now, to leave it so formless. So uncertain.

“Inquisitor Ameridan told me something before he died,” he said wistfully, “To take moments of happiness where they come. Cassandra said something similar to me this morning.

“I never wanted power or political influence. I only want a normal life,” Idhren sighed. “That’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted.”

For a long moment silence hung between them, heavy with unspoken words. He had never realized how much remained unsaid between them. Now all those conversations they had never had gnawed at the back of his mind.

“You can’t seriously be considering throwing it all away, though,” Dorian scoffed, and the flippantness of his tone made Idhren wince and look away. “What about the Inquisition? I thought you wanted to keep helping people.”

“I do,” Idhren insisted, “But we both know that whatever is left of the Inquisition after this - if there’s anything at all - it won’t be the same. I won’t sit by and watch the Inquisition be turned into just another of the Chantry’s useless lap dogs.”

“You don’t know for certain that will happen,” Dorian protested.

“And you don’t know for certain that it won’t,” Idhren argued.

For that Dorian clearly had no counter. “Very well,” he relented. He reached out to take Idhren’s hand and draw him closer. “If, when this council is over, you still wish to abandon the south to its own devices, I shan’t stop you.”

“I can agree to that,” Idhren replied. A fair compromise. Perhaps Dorian was right, and Idhren was letting the stress and melancholy get the better of him, making him pessimistic. Perhaps when this was resolved he would feel differently about leaving for good. But either way, he knew he did not want to go another two years separated from the man he loved.

“Good,” Dorian smiled. “Now, let’s finish the good wine before the others come back.”
Merciless the Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Merciless, the fire did not spare her mortal flesh.
And while Hessarian heard over the roar of the bonfire
The cheering of his magisters, he also heard the distant
Song of the faithful mourning their Lady.
- Canticle of Apotheosis 2:10

Halamsiral, Orlais, Bloomingtide 9:44 Dragon

Idhren woke early the following morning, with the first rays of the sun peeking around the curtains to light his suite. Beside him Dorian was still sound asleep. As much as Idhren wanted to roll over and go back to sleep himself, he knew if he did he would never wake up again in time for the council. A quick way to doom this whole thing before it even began.

So he forced himself to sit up and climb out of the warm, comfortable bed, splashed water on his face, and tied back his hair. Leaving the curtains drawn so that Dorian might sleep a while longer he dressed himself in the early half-light. Pants, shirt, jacket; but as he picked up the sash to wrap about his waist the silken fabric slipped from suddenly uncooperative fingers. Then pain shot up his arm from palm to elbow, accompanied by a flash of green light.

A short cry of alarm escaped Idhren’s lips before he was able to bite it back, clenching his teeth together hard enough to make his jaw ache. He shoved his left hand into the folds of his jacket to stifle the light. Sat down heavily on the dressing bench on the end of the bed.

Not now. Not today.

He just needed to make it through a few days for this council then he would be back in Skyhold, with his books and his privacy. And all the time in the world to figure out what was going on.

Except he didn’t have all the time in the world.

The anchor’s sudden flare ups were coming more frequently, unprompted by nearby rifts or magics.

As suddenly as it had begun, the flare stopped. The green glow subsided, but little shocks of lingering pain shot up and down his arm, leaving him trembling and panting.

Cautiously, he withdrew his hand from his jacket, double checking that the glow was gone and would not wake Dorian. The last thing he wanted right now was for Dorian to start worrying over him again.

But the glow was indeed gone, the mark returned to it’s more familiar appearance as a sickly green scar across his hand.

Only it wasn’t just on his hand anymore.
That green scar had crept down to touch his wrist, and closer to his fingers.

It certainly hadn’t always been that big.

Spreading again? But it hadn’t done that in three years. And the Breach was gone, had been gone years now.

Shit, he didn’t need to worry about this on top of everything else. Why couldn’t it just stay quiet for a few days? Just a few more days.

“...matus?”

Mumbled and quiet though Dorian’s voice was, it still startled Idhren enough to make him jump. He had been so lost in his own head. Turning to look over his shoulder he saw Dorian half-awake propped up on one elbow to look at him. “Sorry, I tried not to wake you,” he said, tried to sound casual and unconcerned, but worried that his voice trembled when he spoke. “You can go back to sleep.”

Dorian blinked groggily at him for a moment during which Idhren feared the man saw through his facade, or perhaps had seen the whole episode. But all Dorian said was, “Good luck with the council,” and then flopped back into the pillows and pulled the blankets tighter around himself.

Idhren breathed a sigh of relief. He waited for his left hand to stop trembling, and then finished getting dressed.

Only a few hours in Idhren was already growing tired of this council. It had begun pleasant enough, if dull, as the ambassadors once more expressed thanks to the Inquisition for handling Corypheus and the Breach - and the mages and templars, and the Orlesian civil war. They did not want to appear ungrateful. But ungrateful was all that Idhren could see when that list of praises was followed by an equally long list of grievances.

Ridiculous grievances, at that.

Should he have left a perfectly serviceable keep for bandits - or worse - to move back into? And if the Ferelden throne wanted it back so badly, why hadn’t they bothered asking before now?

It was all so petty. All posturing.

Maker, but he hated politics.

So it was a relief, at first, when a messenger slipped in and whispered that the spymaster needed him urgently.

Until he saw why he had been summoned.

“Today just gets better and better,” he muttered, staring down at the bloody body on the floor. Qunari. And a proper one, according to Bull. Vanguard soldier. That was not a good sign. “Why is there a dead Qunari in the winter palace? And where did he come from?”

The answer to that was found at the end of a trail of blood, and it only prompted more questions.

The eluvian was found in a small storage room. Stashed amidst other junk it could have been there
 unnoticed for years, easily mistaken for a regular old mirror until it was activated.

“Has Lady Morrigan taken up residence again, by any chance?” Idhren asked without much hope.

“No,” came Leliana’s inevitable confirmation. And despite her inscrutable expression, Idhren knew she must be thinking the same as he. Morrigan would never be so careless with an eluvian as to leave it open.

It wasn’t the excuse Idhren wanted to escape from the Exalted Council, but it would do. The potential for Qunari invasion was a bit more urgent than political squabbles. But the use of eluvians, and the fact their uninvited guest appeared to have been fleeing for his life, spoke to something far more complicated going on.

“Well, I suppose we’d better investigate, then. Josephine can handle the council; I’ll go change into something more resistant to blood stains.”
“This doesn’t make any sense,” he said for what felt the hundredth time.

“Yes, you keep saying that,” Dorian replied as they headed into the depths of yet another ruined tower. “I think we’re all well aware at this point.”

“Well, it doesn’t,” Idhren grumbled.

The depths of the ruins were dark. What few torches remained not rotted away by time burnt weakly and provided just barely enough light to see by. At the base of the stairs Idhren had expected to find another eluvian for them to jump through in this ridiculous chase. Instead, there was only a dark room. In the dim light he thought he could make out more frescoes on the walls, and in the center of the room what appeared like a sculpture of a tree. Some sort of magical artifact. Curious, Idhren stepped forward into the room.

A now-familiar stab of pain shot up his arm.

He gasped as the anchor flared to life, it’s eerie glow illuminating the room, almost blindingly bright for the briefest of moments. The artifact also flared briefly in response, the same brilliant veilfire green, before both settled down once more.

“Maker, what was that? Are you alright?” Dorian was already at his side as the pain faded from his arm. But his hand continued to ache, and the anchor continued to emit a dim glow.

“Yes, I -- I’m fine,” Idhren was quick to insist, but his heart was racing, his hands trembling, and his voice weak. Dorian took his hand with both of his own and stared down into the anchor with a frown, though what he hoped to find there Idhren didn’t know. “It reacted to this artifact, I think.”

“Or the artifact reacted to it,” Dorian said thoughtfully, “Though I suppose the differentiation doesn’t matter. Sympathetic magic, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” Idhren murmured in reply. Was that all it was? The anchor reacting to similar magics? Had it been only that the past times the anchor had acted up on its own? Earlier that morning it could have reacted to the eluvian’s presence, or to its activation. On the ship back to Ferelden there could have been something in the ship’s cargo. And at the dalish camp there was bound to be something ancient and elven lying around. That’s all it was, then. Every time the anchor had acted up for no apparent reason it really was reacting to something, he just hadn’t known what to look for. Next time he would.

And for a while, Idhren was able to put such thoughts out of his mind. There were more important thing to think about, larger concerns than the anchor turning itself into a dowsing rod for elven magic.

A Qunari invasion. Lyrium mining in the deep roads and gaatlok smuggled into the Winter Palace.

That was what the eluvians were for. An invasion of the south that bypassed Tevinter, the only country strong enough to stand against the might of the Qun.

And of course, the Exalted Council had turned into an absolute clusterfuck.

By the time Idhren left a final meeting with his advisors night had fallen over Halamshiral and he was exhausted. As much as he wanted to continue on, keep following the clues to thwart this new threat, a full day of politics and battle had left him drained. He stumbled out of their makeshift war room, feet dragging as he made his way back to his temporary quarters.

Dorian was already there, likely just as worn out as Idhren but certainly not showing it as he lounged
in a chair by the fire, already changed out of his battle-soiled robes. He looked up as Idhren entered, a slight smile tugging at his lips as he took in the Inquisitor’s haggard appearance. “You look about to pass out on your feet,” he commented.

“Thanks,” Idhren muttered dryly, and began stripping out of his armor.

“Now, don’t be like that,” Dorian said. “And after I took the liberty of having dinner brought in for you.”

At the mere mention of food, Idhren’s stomach rumbled, fervently reminding him that he’d barely eaten a thing since breakfast. For the first time he noticed a food service set up on a side table by Dorian’s chair. His mood softened. “Thank you,” he said again, more earnest this time.

“Well, if I’m to be perfectly honest it was Sera’s idea,” Dorian admitted. “She’s a bit worried about you, I think, with everything that’s going on. Your hand in particular.”

Stripped down to shirtsleeves, Idhren joined Dorian be the fire. He collapsed into the matching armchair and examined the food on offer. But despite his hunger, he found he hadn’t much appetite. “I’m… not certain what caused it to react in the ruins,” he said honestly. The thought occurred to him to tell Dorian everything that had been going on with the mark on his hand. How today had not been an isolated incident. But no, not until he understood what was going on.

“We’ll just keep an eye on it, then,” Dorian said. “You’ll let me know if it’s anything to worry about, yes?”

“Of course,” Idhren replied.

After only a few hours of sleep Idhren was up again. Sore and still exhausted, he forced himself out of bed to face another day of politics and potential invasion. Was he out of shape? Perhaps he had grown complacent over the past year of peace.

After nudging Dorian until the man reluctantly crawled out of bed himself, Idhren stretched out the soreness in his muscles as best he could. And if his left arm hurt a bit more than the rest of him, it was only because he’d been careless in his casting the day before. And if the scar on his palm looked as though it stretched further toward his wrist than he remembered, it was only his imagination.

He only needed to get through this council, to resolve this new threat, and then he would have all the time in the world to figure out what was making the anchor act so strangely. And then he could fix it.

He could bear the pain that long.

But he could no longer keep his friends from noticing the problem.

The trail of clues and dead Qunari led through eluvians to a site that left Idhren breathless and Sera cursing. A library half in the Fade, and half destroyed because of it, that seemed a city in itself. But even in this ruined state the ambient magic was thick in the air, so strong he could nearly taste it.

So he should have been expecting the anchor’s violent reaction, yet still it caught him by surprise.

The pain came with no warning. No precursor. No slow build the way it had with rifts. It came full
force, that stabbing, burning, mind-numbing agony like a red hot spike being driven into his hand and up into his arm.

He screamed. Instinctively clutched his arm to his chest and curled around it and staggered a few steps before coming to a stop.

For a moment that pain was the only thing he was aware of. It could have lasted seconds or minutes. When finally the feeling began to recede and his mind cleared enough to think again, the first thing he became aware of were hands on his shoulders, gentle but firm, holding him steady as he hunched over on trembling legs.

His left hand was still glowing. He was panting, shaking, and felt as though he might throw up. But slowly the pain was beginning to fade.

He realized it was The Iron Bull holding him up, massive hands holding him up as though he didn’t weigh a thing. “That’s really not getting better, boss.”

“It’s fine,” Idhren insisted. He forced himself to stand, shaking of Bull’s hands and praying the former spy would not call his bluff. “The pain’s stopped.”

“You’re sure it’s alright?” Dorian butted in.

“It just caught me by surprise,” Idhren assured.

“Well it certainly seems to be reacting to elven magic,” Dorian said. “This place is so steeped with it I nearly feel like we’re in the Fade again.”

“Ugh, don’t say that,” Sera complained from behind him. “Don’t make this place any creepier than it already is.”

Dorian ignored her and fixed Idhren with a searching look that said maybe he didn’t entirely believe Idhren’s assurances. Idhren wasn’t entirely sure he believed them himself. Still, he held himself upright and said with as much confidence as he could muster, “I’m fine, really. I just wish it would give me a bit of warning, that’s all.”

“I hope it doesn’t happen while the Qunari are trying to kill us,” Sera muttered, “Knocked you flat on your arse, that did.”

“Yes, that would be less than ideal,” Dorian agreed. “Tell me if it gets worse.” The man’s tone brokered no argument. It was not a request.

“I will,” Idhren said, knowing full well it was a lie. If he’d had his way Dorian never would have found out that the anchor was acting up at all. Even Idhren barely knew a thing about the mark on his hand, and he’d been studying it for nearly three years now. If he couldn’t figure out what was wrong with it, how could Dorian? “We should keep moving.”

He would be fine so long as the anchor could keep to itself.

Unfortunately, nothing with the Inquisition ever went according to plan.

Their small group was wildly outnumbered. He was running low on mana and lyrium, and could only imagine Dorian was in a similar state. Sera would run out of arrows eventually, and even Bull was beginning to look winded. They needed to end this quickly, and he had only one trick guaranteed to do that.
It was a terrible idea, but it was the only idea he had.

What little mana he had left Idhren channeled down his arm and into his palm. Into the anchor.

It was a tactic he had used only as a last resort even during the war. Because even then it had been painful, risky, and unpredictable. He expected an explosion. He expected the pain that came along with it. He did not expect the magnitude.

A blast of raw Fade energy rocketed out from his hand with enough force to knock Idhren off his feet. It ripped a scream of shock and agony from his throat. Green fire scorched the air, hot wind against his skin. Fade light flooded the area as the smell of ozone and ash and charred flesh filled his nose. The blood rushing in his ears could not drown out the roar of the flames or the screams of those burned alive.

After what felt like an eternity the screams faded, and then the flames shortly thereafter, and Idhren could only look in horror at the destruction he had wrought.

He was still on the ground, his left arm completely numb up to the shoulder, on the outside of a circle of charred and melted stone littered with mangled corpses.

“Holy shit, boss.”

Idhren looked up to realize that Bull was standing not far away from him, also on the edge of the scorched ground. He was a bit scorched himself, at the edges, and dusted with ash as though he’d barely been able to get out of the way in time. Guilt flooded Idhren at the thought he’d nearly caught his friends in the blast. “It wasn’t meant to be that big,” he said breathlessly. “Is everyone alright?” he asked in fear. “Dorian?”

“We’re alright,” the man’s voice carried across the now-empty ground. Everything was almost painfully quiet after the deafening roar of the anchor’s flames and the screams they brought. Idhren finally spotted him, well out of the way of the blast and helping Sera to her feet. “Although a little warning would be nice next time you’re considering a stunt like that.”

“Yeah, give us some time to get out of the friggin’ way,” Sera complained. “Or maybe just don’t do friggin’ terrifying shit like that.”

“It wasn’t meant to be that big,” Idhren said again. Shaking and sick to his stomach, he began climbing unsteadily to his feet. He did not make it far before losing his balance and stumbling to the ground again. With mounting horror he realized that not only was his left arm completely numb, he could barely move it.

Bull was there a moment later, offering a hand to help pull him to his feet. A hand that Idhren was reluctant to take, because it was accompanied by a knowing, soul-piercing stare, practically daring the former spy asked, “You alright?”

There was a lie already on the tip of Idhren’s tongue, but that stare made him swallow it. “I can’t feel my arm,” he admitted.

“That’s probably not a good sign, boss.”

“No,” Idhren was forced to agree. It was getting worse. He didn’t want to admit that it was getting worse. He didn’t want to consider what that meant.

Footsteps on the stone floor announced Dorian and Sera’s approach, along with Sera’s colorful commentary about the now blackened ground. Idhren fixed Bull with a stare that he hoped conveyed
a warning not to say anything, before turning to meet them.

“Oi, you’re still glowing,” Sera exclaimed before Idhren could even open his mouth. “That’s not normal, is it? It shouldn’t still be doing that, right?”

Idhren glanced downward and sure enough the anchor was still alight. Dim as a candle flame.

“Effective as that stunt was,” Dorian frowned as he looked down at Idhren’s limp arm, “I think perhaps you should hold off on aggravating that thing any further until we know what’s wrong with it. Might I have a look at it?”

They were catching on. They knew something wasn’t right, and now they were beginning to think it was serious. “I don’t think this is the best place for it,” Idhren said, purposefully taking a step further away. That earned him an even deeper frown from Dorian. “We should head back to the Winter Palace. I need to tell the others what we’ve learned.”

The feeling gradually began to return to Idhren’s arm as they made their way back to the Winter Palace, so that by the time he stepped through the last eluvian he was left with only a feeling of pins and needles in his hand. But the glow had never diminished from that flickering candlelight, and it was not going unnoticed.

It was a miracle he managed to dodge Dorian’s request to examine the anchor again by ducking into their make-shift war room.

Dorian would ask too many questions, he knew. Too many questions that Idhren didn’t have the answers for. And that he didn’t want to think about the answers for.

He could only focus on one crisis at a time, and right now the Qunari threat was a bit more urgent.

“Our agents confirm there are gaatlok barrels in Denerim’s palace,” Leliana informed almost as soon as Idhren entered the room, still shedding the more cumbersome pieces of his armor. “And in Val Royeaux, and across the Free Marches. The Winter Palace is not the only target.”

“The Qunari are one order away from destroying every noble house in the known world,” Cullen said, and the weight of that realization was heavy on Idhren’s shoulders.

“That power vacuum would cause chaos,” Idhren realized, “Easy for the Qunari to step in take over while we fight amongst ourselves.” Assassination was an old strategy, but the scope of this plan was unfathomable.

“There is a bright side,” Josephine said, ever trying to find the silver lining in any situation, “Warning the ambassadors will remind them of the Inquisition’s importance.”

“Not when the Inquisition is responsible for the threat,” Leliana sighed.

“What do you mean?” Idhren asked. “They came in through us? How?”

“The barrels came into the Winter Palace on the Inquisition’s supply manifest,” Leliana answered.

One of their own people was a part of this? Why? The Inquisition was meant to stop just this sort of thing from happening. “Do we know who got the barrels on that manifest?”
“Yes,” Leliana confirmed. “Several of the Inquisition’s elven workers have gone missing. I had their backgrounds checked. They joined after fleeing the chaos in Kirkwall.”

Cullen sighed, long and suffering. “I remember when the city was at its worst. Many of the elves converted to the Qun trying to find a better life.”

“And the Qunari turned them into spies,” Josephine breathed.

“Then they’ve been with us from the start,” Idhren said. This went so much deeper than he could have imagined. The Inquisition had become exactly the sort of thing they’d been formed to stop. Just another potential danger to the stability of the south, another place for spies and double agents to hide. He couldn’t even trust his own people anymore. Could he even trust Leliana’s information? There could be spies among her agents, feeding them lies.

As his advisors descended into petty bickering, Idhren stared down at the maps laid out before them. His thoughts were a whirlwind of doubts and fears. He had grown up with the Qunari always a potential threat, but the war on Seheron had stagnated years ago, a deadlock that would probably never end. Fighting just for the sake of it, to keep up appearances. Even after Kirkwall he had never imagined the Qun would try something as brash as this. This was a full scale invasion that no one would see coming.

How many innocents would suffer or die if the Qunari succeeded? For all their preaching, the Qun did not care about saving people, only about taking power and putting the whole world under its thumb. It was no better than any other tyrant.

So consumed with his own furious thoughts while his advisors tried to argue themselves into a consensus, Idhren was caught completely off guard by the sudden flash of green light and stab of pain that shot up his arm.

The anchor flared again. A burst of energy and flame that swallowed his hand and flickered up his arm. The pain stabbed into his hand and burned up his veins, pulling a shout of agony from his throat.

He doubled over onto the table, deaf to the alarmed exclamations of his advisors, and clutched at his left arm.

The outburst lasted only a moment, though it felt like an eternity.

Breathless, Idhren pulled himself upright again.

He chanced a look across the table at his advisors. Their faces were drawn. Alarm, fear, concern.

He looked away again, dropped his gaze down to his left hand, still clutched before him.

It was the first time Idhren had allowed himself to actually look at the anchor since the day began. What had once been a familiar - if somewhat unnerving - sight, a smudge of green scar tissue across his palm that was barely noticeable, had turned alien and terrifying. It had not stopped glowing since the library. Even here, with nothing to trigger it, it shone bright as a candle and cast a sickly green over everything he touched. It hurt, as well. A persistent dull burning broken by an occasional spike of sharper pain. And most frightening of all, it had spread.

Luminescent green stretched down onto his wrist, disappearing up his shirt sleeve, and tendrils of it reached out from the larger bulk, spiderwebbing up his fingers and onto the back of his hand.

He couldn’t deny this anymore. Not to himself, and not to the people around him.
Slowly, the Inquisitor raised his head to meet the gazes of his advisors, each full of concern and alarm. “So… It’s getting worse.” It was difficult to admit out loud after so long in denial. “I don’t know why. I don’t know how to stop it.” He swallowed thickly as he allowed the truth of the matter to finally sink in. If it kept progressing at this rate. “I don’t know how much time I’ve got left.”

A soft gasp, Josephine’s hand raised to her lips, always the worst of them at hiding her emotions.

“What I do know,” Idhren continued before any of them might be able to offer a consoling word, clamping down on his own fear before he could let it consume him, “Is that the Qunari need to be stopped. So we need to end this before…” before the pain crippled him, before the anchor spread further, “Before it’s too late.”

“Would you,” Josephine began, then had to stop to steady her voice. The concern and fear was clear on her face. “Would you like us to inform the Exalted Council of the danger?”

“Yes,” Idhren replied. “They deserve to know what’s happening. And if we fail… They will need to know what’s coming so they can prepare.”

“I will inform them personally,” Leliana assured. She was so good at hiding her emotions, but even she sounded solemn, sad.

“Thank you.” Idhren took a deep breath. He was glad that no one tried to offer a comforting word. He was not sure he would be able to hold himself together if they did. “And tell the others to meet me at the eluvian as soon as they can.”

One by one his advisors left the room, Josephine hesitating the longest before he heard her heels clicking against the floor and the door shut behind her. Idhren remained a while longer, leaning heavily against the table. He squeezed both hands into fists, squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head. He kept waiting for the pain in his hand to fade again, but long moment after long moment it remained.

He swallowed back a lump in his throat. Pressed his hands into his eyes when he felt them begin to sting.

He would not allow himself to break down. No matter how much he wanted to, he would not allow his fear to consume him. He was stronger than this.

Breathing deep, Idhren pulled himself back together. He could do this. Just a little while longer.

He scrubbed the moisture from his eyes and let his hands fall back to his sides. One more deep breath. Then he grabbed up his gloves and his staff and left to face the world again.

Dorian caught him on the balcony, a hand on his arm, stopping him before he could slip into the room where the eluvian was housed. Night had fallen and the gardens were abandoned. “Leliana told me about your little pyrotechnics display,” he said. His voice and expression were carefully schooled, emotionless in the torchlight.

Idhren’s first instinct was to deny it, to reassure Dorian that everything was fine, there was nothing to worry about. But he had neither the heart nor the strength of will to continue that charade.
“I knew there was more going on with that blasted thing than you were telling us,” Dorian continued. “But I thought you would have trusted me enough to say something if it were serious.”

“I didn’t think it was… at first,” Idhren said.

“How bad is it, then?” Dorian demanded.

Idhren swallowed thickly, still not fully recovered from the realization himself. “It’s getting worse,” he said quietly. “It’s… spreading. Like when the Breach first opened and it was,” he paused, reluctant to say the words as though keeping them inside would stop them from being true, “killing me.”

Dorian sucked in a breath. He was silent for a long moment. “You should have told me,” his voice was accusing. At least, it was trying to be. “I could have…” his voice broke, and along with it his stoic facade. He crumbled, shoulders slumped and head down. “I don’t know… something.”

“I’m sorry,” Idhren said. Barely above a whisper. It was the only think he could think of to say.

“How long has it been like this?” Dorian asked. The anguish in his voice, on his face, was too much for Idhren to bear, Idhren had to look away. “It can’t have just started. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know,” Idhren admitted. He couldn’t pinpoint the moment the anchor had begun acting strange. He had tried to ignore it for so long. “I didn’t want anyone to worry.”

“Thought you would fix it all by yourself, I’ll bet,” Dorian tried to joke, but there was no mirth in his voice, only pain.

“I’m sorry,” Idhren said again. He didn’t know what else to say. Perhaps there was nothing else. He forced himself to meet Dorian’s gaze despite the pain in the man’s eyes, the unshed tears. “I love you.”

The next thing he knew Dorian’s arms were around his shoulders, pulling him in tight, squeezing so hard he could barely breath. “I knew you would break my heart you bloody bastard,” the man choked out, breath hot and trembling against Idhren’s ear. “You damn fool.”

Idhren’s good arm wrapped around Dorian’s chest. He pressed his face into the collar of his robes and breathed in deep, then let out a trembling breath. “It’s not over yet, Dorian.”

“No,” Dorian scoffed a bitter, broken laugh. “After we stop the Qunari invasion we only have to unlock the secrets of lost elven magic. Then we’ll fix you up no problem.”

“See? Easy.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter out. I really struggled with it, and I’m still not completely happy, but it is what it is for now. We’re nearing the end of this journey, there should be only a few chapters left. But I’ve run out of buffer material, so the next chapter may be a little late as well, depending how life goes. Follow me on tumblr for status updates.

erandir . tumblr . com
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!