### By Any Other Name

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#### Summary

All mages are born with a soulmate—a voice they hear in the darkness of the Fade all their lives. The lucky ones find their soulmates and forge a bond strong enough to threaten the very foundations of the Chantry. At least, that's what they claim.

Dorian has no intention of being bonded. He's prepared to deny his soulmate and walk away...but there's no denying Taran Trevelyan: Herald of Andraste, Inquisitor, potential savior of Thedas, and, frustratingly, undeniably, indelibly the other half of Dorian's soul.

Maker save them both.

#### Notes

By Any Other Name takes place in the same universe as Fire, Walk with Me (Hawke/Fenris) and A Part of Your World (Warden/Alistair).
Chapter Notes

**WARNING:** There is a (only very vaguely described) childbirth scene in which the mother dies. If this is triggering to you, please skip to Chapter Two.
It was an ill-fated day, rainclouds hugging the coast and each buffeting wind bringing with it the scent of an oncoming storm. Josselyn could see its warning flickers spreading out across the Waking Sea; each flare of lightning seemed to catch on white-crested waves, making them glow eerily before they were swallowed back into the ocean’s depths.

Eyes, she thought, wrapping skinny arms around herself with a shiver. This far out, they looked like eyes in the dark. A score of them, more, blinking slowly as they eased ever-closer.

Watching her. Why were they always, always watching her?
"Josselyn!"

She turned with a start, one hand jerking to cover a barley stifled scream. Cassius was picking his way across the cliff face toward her, gripping the hilt of his practice blade where it rested in its loose scabbard. He was still wearing his leathers, the weathered breastplate etched with the Trevelyan family seal. It fit poorly, and even in the dim, she could see where its straps had been mended and remended several times.

He was scowling. Of course, with another brother or sister on the way, they both had good reason to be scowling.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” he said, vaulting up the last few rocks. He caught her arm, but Josselyn jerked away, long skirts swirling about her legs. His scowl deepened. “You know you’re not supposed to leave the manor after dark.”

“There’s no one to see me,” Josselyn pointed out. “Anyone who might care is already inside, anyway, tending to Mama.”

Cassius caught her arm again. “Which is why we should be there, in case anyone thinks to look for us. Come on,” he added, giving her a hard tug.

Josselyn let herself be pulled along a few steps before remembering. “Wait!” she cried, slipping free of his grasp again. For all that Cassius was big and strong for a boy of barely fifteen, she was fast. “I didn’t come out here to watch the sea. I was— Here.” She snagged the basket she had nestled between two jutting rocks. It was filled with leafy green fronds, the sharp stench of elfroot swirling around her as Josselyn settled it into the crook of her arm. “All right, now you can play disapproving Templar.”

The look he shot her almost made her regret the tart words. It wasn’t Cassius’s fault she was no good at following orders. “I’m sorry,” Josselyn added quietly, leaning in to buss his cheek. His scowl deepened, but he didn’t pull away. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes you did.” Cassius glanced back out toward the water, straight, serious brows twin slashes over his wary eyes. “Did you see anything this time?”

“No,” Josselyn lied, threading her arm through her twin’s and squeezing it gently. “There’s nothing to see. Come on; I suppose we really should be getting back.”

Together, they wended their way down the rocky slope toward the gentle moorland that led to the manor’s front door. Trevelyan House was an ancient thing, crouched unsteadily some ways back from the coast, as if considering a bounding leap off the nearest rocky cliff. In the growing dark, its slate-grey walls and crumbling roof were barely visible. Only the occasional candle-lit window was clear, blinking lazily as the two children made their way back into its shadow.

Eyes again, locked on her. And the sensation of being watched was just getting worse as the years went by, not better the way Tante Maria had promised it would.

*You can’t see me,* Josselyn thought, staring up at the brightest window, where Mama was giving birth to their latest sibling under Tante’s watchful gaze. *I’m not strong enough to matter.* And then, because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching her, creeping ever-closer: *Go away!*

The wind howled in response.

Josselyn shivered and fought to smile away Cassius’ worried frown. “Cold,” she said, squeezing his
arm before letting him go. “Come on—I’ll race you up to the house.”

Cassius couldn’t resist a challenge. They ran the rest of the way, Josselyn taking the lead before she deliberately began to slow, letting Cassius outpace her. The howling wind felt good as it streamed through her tangles of hair, and her long skirts snapped and furled behind her like she was a Rivaini skiff chasing the breeze. The first light patter of rain hit her upturned face, and Josselyn felt a sudden wildly defiant joy. Laughing, she could almost ignore the rumble of thunder on the horizon, or the way the storm windows were already rattling in their grooves as the two came tumbling into the house.

She slammed the door shut behind them and fell back against it, breathless. The main entrance hall—which used to be grand—was dark. Her hair was a tangle and her skirts were sodden; anyone who saw her would know where she had been.

Voices drifted from the second landing.

Cassius placed a hand over his lips and quickly slipped through the left-hand door even as the voices went quiet. Josselyn covered a giggle with one hand, slipping out of sight at the first tred of heels on the cold stone.

“Hello?” one of her older sisters called, but she and Cassius were already threading through the back halls and toward the servants’ stair. There were only two servants left now—elves who were old enough they didn’t really have anywhere else to go—but neither was anywhere to be seen.

“Come on,” Cassius whispered, thundering up the stairs. “The attic!”

“Okay!” she whispered back. Josselyn sped after her twin, woven basket banging merrily against her thigh in time to her drumming heels. A floorboard creaked loudly just past the next landing and she cursed as she struggled to keep the damp weight of her long skirts out of the way of her feet. She probably would have made it if she hadn’t had to pause long enough to yank the trailing ends out of the way. In the half-second it took to reorient herself, the door flung open and Tante Maria stepped straight into her path.

Josselyn abruptly skidded back a step, startled. She could feel her heel teetering over the lip of the topmost stair, but Tante grabbed her flailing arm before she could fall, yanking her through the doorway and onto the main landing.

“You are late,” the Orlesian woman hissed as she sailed down the dim and dingy halls, Josselyn caught like flotsam in her wake. “Your poor Mama has been left to suffer on her own, and your Papa has been asking after you. You know you were to be back before he thought to notice.”

“I’m sorry,” Josselyn said. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder, spotting Cassius peeking around the doorway. She forced herself to smile reassuringly at him before turning her attention back to Tante. “I had trouble finding enough elfroot.”

Her old nursemaid sniffed down at her. “Lies. I can scent the wildness on you.”

Josselyn flushed. There was no hiding anything from Tante, no matter how hard she tried. Years ago, when the dreams had first come, she’d tried to hide those from everyone…well, after confessing the strange things she saw to her father.

That had not gone well. They’d lost a sister to the Circle years before, and the Trevelyanst—already clinging to the fringes of Marcher society, backwards and poor and too big for their own good in the ramshackle manor on the moors—couldn’t afford to be known as a family given to magic.
So she hid the whispers, and she hid from sight, and only Tante and Father and Cassius knew that eyes sometimes watched her from the shadows.

“I’m sorry,” she said, voice dropping low. She hated disappointing Tante almost as much as she hated being cooped up inside. “I’ll do better. The next time you send me out on an errand, I won’t stray.”

“Oh child,” her Tante murmured, pausing outside Mama’s door. She turned, grip on Josselyn’s arm going gentle, and cupped her jaw. Those dark, often stern eyes were warm enough to stir a breathless sort of love inside Josselyn’s young breast. “How you lie. Now smile pretty for your mama and stay out of sight unless we need you. You remember what I taught you?”

“I do,” she whispered, afraid.

“Good.” Tante brushed the pad of her thumb along Josselyn’s cheek, then turned and pushed open the doors. Mama’s bedroom was dark, only a single candle in the window casting light. The air felt heavy and thick, filled with anticipation. Two of Josselyn’s older sisters moved quietly about the room, one helping Mama walk across the creaking floorboards, another changing the bed linens. There was a dark stain spreading across the sheets she bundled up and dropped to the floor, and when Josselyn sucked in a breath, her lungs were filled with the scent of copper.

Father was by the window. He turned when they entered, eyes going straight to Josselyn, dark brows drawn fierce.

“He knew.

“I brought elfroot,” Josselyn blurted before he could say anything. “Tante sent me for it.”

“The child can help,” Tante added in a quiet undertone, one hand falling to the curve of her spine.

The physician—older and frailer than any man Josselyn had ever seen, soft drifts of hair as white as any cloud—looked up from his bag. “Yes, good,” he said in his thin voice. “Good, good, more elfroot never hurt anyone. Would you be so kind as to…”

His words trailed off when Mama gave a low moan.

“You know what to do, child,” Tante hissed, giving her a little push toward the old writing desk. It had been shoved into the corner to make room for all of Mama’s attendants. Josselyn glanced toward her mother—a strange, hunched shape in the dark—as she set the basket down and began methodically stripping leaves.

“How much longer will this be?” Father asked.

Mama looked up, face drawn tight, as if her skin didn’t quite fit anymore. The sudden flare of firelight caught in her dark eyes. “The girls and I will handle this,” she said tightly. “You may go.”

He frowned. “I should be here.” It’s what’s expected, he didn’t add. He didn’t have to.

But Mama shook her head, eyes closing against a pain. “I do not want you here.” She leaned more heavily against Josselyn’s older sister, silver-streaked dark hair falling in a curtain over her face. “Go.”

Father drew himself up, tension radiating around him like a thunderclap, and Josselyn shrank back into herself in sudden fear. She could feel the electricity in the air like a real, living thing. It danced over her skin; it made her fingertips itch. She swore, for a moment, she almost saw its spark.
But then he let out his breath and gave a sharp, too-polite incline of his head before stalking past his wife and daughters and out of the dark room.

The door clicked shut behind him.

“Quickly, Ara,” Tante said, springing into action. “Get the window. Cora, we need more light. Josselyn…?”

“I’m ready,” she said, her voice suspiciously quavery. Josselyn swallowed and clenched her hands into fists, bright sparks dying. Or no, no, they had never been. She had to remember that.

Mama gave an unsteady laugh. “I want this over with,” she said, gripping Tante’s shoulders hard as she was pressed into the older woman’s tender grip. “I want to be done. No more. I can’t bear it again. Tante, I will come at him with a blade if he tries to—”

“Hush,” Tante murmured into her mother’s hair, supporting her the way she had done so many times. Several feet away, the useless old physician cleared his throat and busied himself with his tinctures. “Three of your beautiful children are here, and they do not need to listen to the words buzzing in your skull. Just focus on bringing your babe to the world, and the future will take care of itself.”

But Mama was too far gone. “No more,” she said, tears on her cheeks. Her fingers dug into Tante’s shoulder and she gave a whuffing breath, other hand dropping to her straining belly. “I don’t want it. I don’t want him. Tante…”

“Hush, Josselyn!”

Josselyn startled, horrified gaze dragging from her mother to Tante. Her sisters were silent and pale, watching the scene unfold like the bitter stirrings of a gothic novel. “Tante,” she whispered. The newly opened windows rattled against the wind, rain soaking the sill. Thunder cracked, and lightning lit the small room.

She could feel the demons pressing against her mind.

“Be ready.” Tante didn’t see them; Tante didn’t know they were there. Tante didn’t realize that if Josselyn called on her small bit of secret magic to fumblingly heal…whatever needed to be healed…they might come swooping out of the night to drag her away.

Her small fingers curled around the vines of elfroot—her meager excuse for the wonders she might be called on to perform. Cora moved to join her, trying to catch her eye and smile, and over her shoulder, Josselyn saw Ara echoing the gesture. They didn’t know; they couldn’t know. No one could know, and oh Maker, Maker…

Mama cried out just as another crack of thunder shook the old house. Tante and the surgeon leapt to assist as the final stages began; Josselyn could feel it thick in the air, could feel a sharp tugging begin deep in her breast as if… As if her heart were beating in time with her mother’s. As if against her will and against what fumbling, limited training Tante could give her, her magic were responding to her newest sibling’s birth.

Her breath came in quick, harsh pants. She wanted, all at once, to turn on her heel and fly out into the storm. Cora dropped a hand to her shoulder and squeezed. Ara moved to Mama’s side. “I was five when you were born,” Cora murmured, helping Josselyn with the last of the elfroot. “I couldn’t understand what was happening, but the next morning, you and Cassius were brought down to the breakfast table—ugly little things, like speckled beans wrapped in swaddling.”
Josselyn gave a breathless laugh, looking up. Cora smiled down at her, reaching to brush back the wild tangle of Josselyn’s hair. “But you grew on me. And then two years later, Ellen, and a year after that, Claire, and a year after that Nerida, then Thea…”

“And then ten years,” Josselyn said, not looking at their mother. Not letting herself look. “Mama doesn’t want this baby. She’s too old for it. She’ll—”

Cora shot a quick look toward their mother as a sharp cry filled the room. “Hush,” she said, not unkindly. “She’ll bear it. And this baby will grow up big and strong like all the rest of us have…and someday he or she will be old enough to flee this place like all the rest of us will. Even you, little bird.”

“Promise?” Josselyn whispered, feeling a stirring deep inside her.

Cora’s smile was so incredibly sad. “I promise,” she said—and then a tiny, tremulous wail filled the air, and there was no more time in which to be afraid. They all sprang into action, Cora hurrying to Mama’s side, the surgeon bracing her body against his own. Mama was lost beneath the flurry and Josselyn took an anxious step toward her, magic humming in her blood—only to stop at the hard look Tante shot her.

Tante stood, arms filled with a tiny, sluggishly wriggling form wrapped in a dark shawl. She strode to Josselyn and pressed the bundle into her arms. “See that he’s healthy,” she murmured. “We will see to your Mama.”

“But I don’t want—” Josselyn began. If she were to use this power building up inside her, she wanted it to be on her mother, not this unwanted creature.

But Tante shot her a furious look and Josselyn swallowed back her protests, nodding. “Yes ma’am,” she murmured, falling back to the small writing table again. She turned her back on the bustle of activity, sensing the heavy tug of her mother’s need even as she forced herself to ignore it. Hands trembling, Josselyn laid the baby on the table and tried to focus on him instead.

He was little. So pathetically, terribly little—too small, surely, to survive. He was flushed purple-red, still slick, his face scrunched up and tremulous, kittenish wails falling from his tiny mouth. Impotent fists flailed, and she could feel the weakness in him. Little heart pounding too hard, strained and irregular in its beats and...

And something was wrong.

Pressing closer, Josselyn strained to hear. She laid her fingers across his weak chest, hand easily spanning him from neck to thigh. Premature, Tante had said. It wasn’t until now that Josselyn truly understood what that could mean.

“Shh, shh,” she murmured, closing her eyes as she tried to sense the fragile workings of his flesh and blood and bone. She heard the whooshing of his blood, the way his lungs filled with each breath, the constricting of his veins…the whistling in his heart, a tiny hole where there should be none.

Josselyn pulled back, horrified—and in that moment, somehow, those scrunched up eyes opened and she didn’t see another useless baby born into the Trevelyan family a good ten years too late. Instead, she saw her brother, tiny, in pain. Dying.

She had to do something.

“It’s all right,” she said, as soothing as she could. She gathered him up into her arms again, cradling his head, shocked at how light he was. How fragile. “Shh, shh, it’s all right. I’ll help you.” And then,
because she needed a name to attach to the tiny, dwindling life in her arms: “You’ll be Taran. From the story books. From my very favorite story. I’ll tell it to you someday,” Josselyn promised, reaching for the threads of magic—deeper than Tante had ever allowed her to go, because her heart was pounding in time with Taran’s, and she would not let him die. “I promise, I’ll tell you so many stories if you just grow strong.”

Outside the crumbling manor, the wind howled. Josselyn swore she heard voices on the wind, like rat’s nails over glass, but she was too focused on tearing open the barriers she kept around her magic and feeding it into Taran’s little body. He needed more than the little magic she’d dared used before; he needed so much.

Just across the room, collapsing back into the arms of her daughters, Eleanor Trevelyan sucked in a breath…and went still. Cradled within his big sister’s arms, filled to bursting with the magic Josselyn was never supposed to yield so strongly, Taran Trevelyan sucked in a breath…and let it out on a gusty, healthy wail.

The wind howled across the moor in warning. The eyes watched the little tableau in the darkness.

Taran lived the night his mother died…and the demons came to haunt Trevelyan House for good.
It wasn’t fair.

Dorian kicked the door again, watching the ebony-inlaid teak rattle in its frame, scowling at how wooly-headed the wards were making him feel. Father was going to be furious. At this point it didn’t matter if it was with Dorian or the Circle. If the door opened again it would be best to just start running and never go home.

It had opened three times since he’d been pushed inside by pinching fingers on his ear (which still hurt, he noted as he rubbed at the shell under his disheveled hair) to wait in the small isolation room for whatever punishment was decided. As if after setting Craius’ hair on fire there was any real question of that. Each time he’d been given some food, some water, and a stern lecture on the severity of his actions.

He flopped back onto the thin cot and stared at the ceiling, letting out a shout of frustration, his voice sounding thin and pathetic to his own ears. He was going to be expelled from Carastes and Father was going to flay him.

So, he was enjoying his last moments of freedom, ironically, in this little cell for bad children with poor control over their powers. Well, Dorian was bad, at least. And the only thing he had poor control over was his sulking.

The bolt on the door startled him as it was thrown and he jumped off the bed. Greet your fate with your head up, Lord Dorian, Delectus was fond of telling him when he was hiding from his mother’s ire and the big, affable man was sent to find him. Dorian lifted his chin, skinny arms folded tightly across his chest. Please let it be Delectus.

The door swung open and instead it was Lucia. Of bloody course it was Lucia.

“I see the reports of your lack of contrition are entirely accurate.” She was tall, as tall as his father, and dressed in his colors, the collar of a bonded slave thick and heavy around her neck. Unum vinctum, severe, studious, and proud, Dorian’s father had been in possession of her for more than half his life, and Dorian was entirely sure if his own unum vinctum was such a stone-faced crow of a woman he’d throw himself off the gates of Minrathous onto the head of a golem rather than accept her.

He was really quite sick with the idea.

She had her hands clasped, the fall of the long, full sleeves of her tunic hiding them. They had been cut in such a way that the embroidery on each cuff completed the other when she stood just like that, a stylized, coiling snake that glittered in gold thread, like Father’s crest. Lucia stepped aside in the doorway. “Nothing to say at all? Are you sure they didn’t make you Tranquil as punishment? Presumptuous, but I can’t say I disagree.”

Dorian felt cold, naked fear wash through him as he scampered through the door in front of her. No one had said Craius was dead, or critically injured, and Dorian didn’t think they’d punish him that severely for a stupid, no-talent, ginger getting some of his stupid hair scorched down to the scalp by a swarm of beetles made of fire. “They won’t! They wouldn’t! Father wouldn’t let them!”
“And if I told you that a contract for your mother to bear a second child was at this moment being drawn up?” Lucia’s eyes seemed to gleam with a small, cruel light.

“Is that true?” Dorian felt his lower lip go all soft and wobbly, his voice tiny.

Lucia’s sniff was a sharp blade that seemed to score his skin with disdain, though whether it was for Dorian or the idea he couldn’t quite tell. “As if he’d bother. Her first whelp is enough trouble.” She led the way down the hall and out of the detention ward.

He had to trot to keep up, her long, hateful legs eating ground, and when he asked where they were going she ignored him. She was just a slave. His father’s horrible, life-ruining unum vinctum that he hated. No matter how hard he studied, how keenly he listened, she always found fault, pressed her pointy bitter fingers into the soft spots, made him feel weak. Unworthy. And then got this look that was as good as a sneer when his mother praised him. She was a complete ogre.

It should have occurred to him as he scrambled to keep up that his father would be waiting in the atrium, though he probably wouldn’t have pictured him seated and sipping something that obnoxiously violet out of a tiny glass shaped like a lily. With the headmaster. Dorian swallowed. Well, they weren’t going to make him Tranquil here.

He straightened his robes, smoothed his hair, and tried to pass Lucia so that he could present himself as he’d been taught, like the scion of Pavus, the legacy that he supposedly was.

Her long, biting fingers scruffed him by the back of his collar.

She never should have done that in public. For all vincta were more than common slaves, and in households like Dorian’s parents’ were kept close as treasured retainers, they were still owned. They couldn’t be sold or inherited, or ever, ever freed once bound. But they were still slaves. For Lucia to break decorum quite so baldly where someone other than Father could see? He must have been truly angry with Dorian, and she was the glass that his shadow reflected in. It was his anger in her hand as she snatched and shook him and Dorian saw the moment the headmaster gave his father the look.

Dorian had seen that look plenty of times, usually tossed at students of the Carastes Circle with little merit and next to no prospects, but plenty of money when they bragged about their families instead of their magical talent. It was reserved for the dumbest of the vulture-hopefuls to the magisterium and now the headmaster was looking at the head of House Pavus, Magister in his own right, with just that level of disdain. Disrespect.

Lucia’s hand trembled and loosened, the full length of Dorian’s feet finding the floor again. There were birds painted on the blue and white tiles. He’d always found it strange that the floor was painted to look like the sky.

“The carriage, Lucia. Take the boy.” Father’s voice was almost bored, a silk-soft lie. Dorian flinched as Lucia’s hand fell to his shoulder, but the touch was careful, he’d think it controlled if he couldn’t feel the way her fingers trembled as she steered him out of the atrium. Behind them he could hear Father speaking, but the words were lost. All Dorian could catch was the word, apologies, in a tone that Father used when he found whatever Dorian was doing tiresome, and it was enough to drive an angry flush up in his cheeks, tears pricking in his eyes.

Father’s carriage was waiting outside the broad marble steps of the main building and that meant there had never been any question about collecting Dorian and taking him home. He was helped inside by the slave standing attendant, followed by Lucia who sat in the opposite corner from him, dark eyes narrowed, watching. The silence kept on and on until Dorian started to squirm.
“Stop.” Her voice was like a whip crack in the silence of the coach.

“You can’t tell me what to do.” They both knew that was more of a wish than anything. Most of the time Lucia’s spoke with Father’s authority. After her slip in the courtyard, he wasn’t sure if that was still true.

“Flouting your father’s will further is going to make things very uncomfortable for you.”

*Uncomfortable.* He wasn’t sure the scalding heat in his cheeks would ever fade. He was expelled and everyone would be whispering about it and Mother would want to know why he couldn’t just behave. “If you were my *unum vinctum* I’d drown myself in the courtyard fountain.”

“If I were yours I would drown you in the courtyard fountain,” Lucia snapped back through gritted teeth. “Now, be silent, little peacock.”

Dorian could grit his teeth too. He didn’t want to be silent. Especially not when *she* told him to, but if he antagonized her, Father would *know* and whatever punishment was coming, it would only be worse.

When Father finally joined them, Dorian had been reduced to snapping multi-colored sparks between his fingertips. It let him ignore the lead ball in his stomach, the dread, the shame that ran like stinging insects down his back whenever he felt Lucia’s eyes on him.

When the carriage door suddenly slammed open he sat straight, the tiny purple spark arcing into something very close to a proper lightning bolt between his left hand and his right. He sat on his hands as Father climbed in and sat next to Lucia.

There seemed to be no room in the coach for anything other than his disapproval, everything else pushed into the corners, made small and cramped in the face of Father’s frown. Dorian felt the tears starting in his eyes again and would have drawn his feet up to hide his face in his knees, but he was afraid to put his slippers on the seat.

When the carriage lurched into motion the tense silence was broken only by the rumble of the wheels on the stone flags of the street.

It seemed like that’s all Dorian heard for three days. The trip from Carastes to Qarinus via ship was dangerous this time of year, the Ventosus Straits harassed by pirates and Qunari warships both. Dorian had been delivered to Carastes by ship, and that trip was lodged into his memory as gripping for both nightmares that they would be attacked by a dreadnaught and he would be taken away to have his mouth sewn shut and his eyes gouged out, and the volume of bile he’d sicked up over the rails.

Being trapped in the carriage for days with Lucia and Father was terrible, but a ship would have been worse.

What he was supposed to make of the oppressive, brooding silence from his father, and the way Lucia flinched any time he so much as breathed too loudly, did nothing to make the journey enjoyable though.

The second night at the wayside inn that slouched next to the highway, Dorian dared to finally speak. Dinner was cleared and his father was seated at the small table, writing a letter to… someone important if Father was bothering to write them from the road. Two days of silence, of Father never addressing Dorian directly, but only speaking *about* him to Lucia had started to make him wonder if she hadn’t been lying about the contract for a second child.
“I didn’t mean to disappoint you and Mother.” He’d been instructed to go to sleep, but the scratching of the quill had started to sound like the gnawing of rats in the silence, and Dorian couldn’t keep still anymore.

He also couldn’t bring himself to turn his head to look at his father, and his eyes snapped shut at the click of the inkwell being capped. Why had he done that? Foolish little Dorian, mouth running away again. Now he had Father’s attention, what did he think was going to happen?

“It cost a great deal of money to settle the boy’s injury. He’s going to have scars for the rest of his life. Your name will have a mark against it at whatever academy you go to next. And for what, Dorian? A child’s pride and jealousy?” Father sounded more tired than angry.

“I’m not jealous of Craius Iridus!” The idea was stupid. Ridiculous. Revolting even. He sat up, throwing the coverlet off of him and glared -- not at Father, he wasn’t insane.

“It didn’t have anything to do with his announcement that his family had acquired his future bondslave?” Something in Father’s tone made Dorian wary, worried.

“He’s a liberati serf who looks like a potato dipped in red paint.”

“You’re being petulant, Dorian.” Father’s sigh made his chest ache.

“And she’s probably some warty frontier carter’s daughter who doesn’t know how to read!”

Father pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes hidden from him, and Lucia who had been quiet in the corner with a book in her lap raised her head with a frown. It should have been cast at Dorian. Instead it was darted at Father and then back down at her book.

That was even more unsettling than the sigh had been.

“Well, you bested a boy four years your senior in a fairly fought duel, so it only seems fair to begin your search.”

That hadn’t been what Dorian expected at all. Not at all. To be sent to the Fade with a belly full of lyrium to try to search out the one person in the whole world who was destined to be his most jealousy held possession? There was no knowing how strong a mage he would be for years yet, and then not until the bond had been completed as well. The power he’d had at his fingertips when he’d bested Craius had been utterly terrifying, and now Father was saying it was enough to risk calling attention to him in the Fade by sending him deeply enough to find his *unum vinctum*? He shuddered.

The abject panic that Dorian was feeling must have shown on his face because for the first time in two days Father smiled.

The lyrium was all freezing and hot and gritty and smooth as sunlight on his skin when he drank it. Dorian’s head still swam as he looked around Father’s study-- or at least the reflection of it he found in the Fade. He was supposed to listen. Listen and wait and Father would make sure no demons took an interest in him being in the Fade so very deeply for the first time.

“He’s so young, Halward.” Mother had disapproved of the idea of sending him to try to find his *unum vinctum*. Of course Mother had also refused to believe he’d been the one to challenge Craius to the duel that got him expelled.
“Please, Aquinea, you’re being absurd. With as strong as his magic has already become, there’s no reason not to look for her. The sooner we acquire her the better.” Halward refused to explain why it was so important for Dorian’s *unum vinctum* to be acquired, at least not in Dorian’s earshot, but he thought it had to do with demons probably.

Not that they visited Dorian’s dreams often, but them going away for good was really the only reason Dorian could imagine wanting to find the girl that would be his bonded slave. Some porridge-brained Ferelden farmgirl probably, because that’s just how unfair his life was. He had shuddered and scowled and wondered at how *wrong* the very idea felt.

So here he stood in the Fade straining to hear something that was supposed to be like the… beat of his heart or the way his magic hummed inside him. It was the rest of his power, the power that was his by right, waiting for him to find it and claim it and *use* it. To become the son Father would be proud of.

It was just he didn’t hear any of that.

He stomped in a slow circle, hands fisted at his sides. Useless. And without even any demons lurking around to bother *boring* too.

Dorian had no idea how long he would be stuck here because time was always different when dreaming, but the thought of waking suddenly and soon to the disappointment in his father’s face that he’d failed here too made him grow still and reach as hard as he could for anything.

He took a step.

The cliff was wild with heather, swept by wind, and he could see a girl no more than sixteen standing on the edge staring out at the sea. Her dark hair was a tangle blown wild around her. She was holding something and singing and the whole place stank of demons. A mage then?

Dorian’s skin bloomed in goosebumps. Some mages had vincta that were mages as well, and the stories about them were unsettling. Powerful, yes, but prone to madness. Poisoned. All of a sudden Lucia’s taunt that his parents would draw another contract for a second child seemed so easy to believe. But their line would forever be tarnished, having thrown such an aberrant child.

Tears were stinging his eyes as he picked his way around a gorse bush that the second time he looked was full of bloody rags, caught in the thorns and waving in the wind like ribbons. He could barely see her through the blurring. How would he explain it? *I’m so sorry, Father, but I can’t be the Archon someday because I’m going to go mad with power and bring down the Imperium if I do?*

Nothing was ever going to be okay ever again. *Bivenium*. She was *bivenium* and, somehow worse, a *girl*.

As he came abreast of her, wondering how she still couldn’t see him, he caught a glimpse of her profile and the bundled doll she held. Nothing was right about this.

*Nothing.*

Dorian broke into giddy, desperate giggles. She wasn’t his. Not at all. Some trace of a tingle had pulled him here, but when he looked at her it was empty when by all the tales he’d heard it should be like a crash of thunder or a bolt of lighting or some other really over-used turn of phrase, but what he shouldn’t feel was *nothing*. But that’s all there was. Some tiny flicker, an echo of an echo, but if he hadn’t been so desperate not to disappoint Father in the first place he wouldn’t have felt it at all. And he was so relieved he was practically crying.
He wasn’t going to have to explain that he’d found his future bond and she was some Southern apostate who was going to die a scaly abomination like they did down there. It was okay, because she wasn’t his.

Dorian could hear her voice now, the wind whistling in his ears carrying her words to him and not away, and the song she was singing… he’d heard it before he thought. A cradle song? Maybe one of the slaves or… Lucia? When had she ever sang to anyone? Who would want to listen?

But the girl broke off and whispered to the doll in her arms, “Shhh, Taran, you didn’t mean it. You’ll be a good baby. Tell mother hello,” and then the rag wrapped bundle that was full of bones and not a doll at all tumbled out of her arms and into the waves.
He was ripped awake by the sound of screams.

They rose and rose and rose from somewhere deep inside the house, raw and real and terrible. For a moment, hearing them, Cassius was locked in reflexive terror—a little boy again rather than a grown man of nearly twenty. He had to fight the urge to clap his hands over his ears, curling up instinctively against the old nightmares that followed him from his sleep.

Ah, Maker, it was happening again.

He flinched back from the thought before he could stop himself. And then he remembered that he was supposed to be a man—that other than his twin, he was the oldest Trevelyan left in the manor—and the fear was pushed away by a sudden flare of duty. His younger sisters were in this house; his baby brother was in this house. He couldn’t afford to be afraid.

Gritting his teeth, Cassius swung out of bed, fumbling for the sword he kept propped against his nightstand. He overextended, bumping an unlit lantern and sending it teetering over to crash on the floor; it fractured, oil spattering his feet and tiny shards of glass digging into his heels as he sprinted for the door; he barely noticed.

Protect them, protect them, protect them. It was a mantra blaring in his mind—like his own kind of inner scream.

He slammed out into the hall, drawing his sword and letting the faded scabbard drop behind him. The screams rose into a fevered pitch, drifting up from the main stairwell. Desperate ululations, thick and throaty and terrible enough to steal his breath.

“Cassius!” one of his sisters hissed from her cracked-open doorway. Another was stepping out into the hall, a dagger in her trembling hand. Further down the hall, other doors were opening one by one.

“Stay here,” Cassius ordered, knowing they wouldn’t listen. He took a step toward the landing, grip on his sword tightening, ready to face whatever he must—

—and froze mid-step when the terrible noise suddenly stopped.

It was over as abruptly as it had begun, like a flame being snuffed out. No trailing off, no shuddery exhale, no slow diminuendo—just silence, as ominous as the horror it replaced. There was something heavy about that quiet. Patient. Waiting. Cassius glanced over his shoulder at the pale, anxious faces of his younger sisters and thought, No way am I going down there now.

But he had to, didn’t he? So he swallowed back the creeping dread and forced himself to creep forward again.
The old house creaked and moaned with every step, the sound of settling wood unnervingly loud in the weighted silence. He had to swallow back an uneven breath and force himself to keep going, shuffling forward to help mitigate the tell-tale sound of his tred. Even so, every time he moved there was a *creeeak* and *groooaan*, as if Trevelyan House itself had turned against him.

*Fuck.*

Cassius held his breath and shuffled toward the main landing, gesturing occasionally to remind his sisters to *stay back*. He couldn’t say which of them bothered to listen, but it was too late to round everyone up into their rooms now; he was nearly at the landing, where he would see and be seen, no matter the consequences.

But before he could reach the landing and take stock of whatever horrors waited for him, a second, even more chilling sound drifted from below:

*Laughter.*

Bright, infectious, *young*. A little boy’s joy. And threaded through it, the distant rumble of thunder underscored by a familiar tune. A lullaby.

All at once, Cassius knew what was waiting below. All at once, he knew it was so, so much worse than any of them had feared.

He whirled on his heel, one hand out-flung toward his younger sisters—*two* of whom were creeping behind him, expressions set in varying degrees of determination and horror. They froze in place, pale in the sudden crack of lightning. Just beyond Claire and Nerida, Cassius could make out Ellen and Thea hovering at their doors, ghostly in their long nightgowns.

“It’s all right,” he lied in a steady whisper, gesturing in what he hoped was a commanding way. “Go back to bed.”

“Are you *insane*?” Nerida hissed; she gripped the hilt of her knife tighter. “Keep going. *Taran* is down there. Josselyn could—”

He saw the moment she understood. The next flash of lightning highlighted the horror there perfectly as, down below, baby Taran gave another delighted, chilling, hollow laugh.

“*Go,*” Cassius pleaded. No matter how hard he tried to remember he was a man grown, with each sick second that passed, he felt more and more like a little boy again. “It’s going to be okay. Josselyn’s just having another one of her spells, that’s all.”

“Oh Maker,” Claire breathed, hand over her mouth. The front door *banged* against the wall on a sudden gust of wind, making her startle; it howled in from across the rocky crags, drowning out the threatening rumble of thunder. “Cassius, what if she’s…”

Nerida reached back to grab her sister’s hand, squeezing tight. “Come on,” she said, already pulling back down the hall again. Her dark eyes were grim in a pinched face. “You know Cas is the only one who can reach her when she’s like this.”

“But—oh Maker—if she has Taran…”

“*Come on,*” Nerida repeated, because there really was nothing else to say. If their sister had let the demons take her again, there was nothing anyone but Cassius *could* do to coax her back to herself. And if she had gone far enough that she was willing to take Taran in her thrall…
Suddenly, the bright laughter he had heard seemed all the more ominous. Taran was five; plenty old enough to know when something was seriously wrong. Which meant that Josselyn had to be controlling the little boy, which meant she had crossed that final line, which meant…

“But Nerida,” Claire whimpered, even as she allowed herself to be tugged back to their rooms. Down the hall, other doors were closing. And, echoing the sick fear rising up from his gullet: “If Josselyn’s been taken again, then who was that screaming?”

Maker. He wished for the final time that he was young enough to run back to bed and bury his head under his pillow. He wished he didn’t have to go to the landing and find out just how far his twin sister had fallen. But Father was gone, and the older Trevelyan children were either dead, mad, or given to the Chantry—there was no one left but him to see this through. So he swallowed back the bile rising in his throat, tightened his grip on his sword, and forced himself to walk to the second floor landing, each step making the floorboards scream his presence.

There was no point hiding from Josselyn now.

The main entryway looked perfectly normal at first glance, cast as it was in darkness. He could see the double stairs leading down from the upper landing to the main foyer below. The front door was thrown open, letting in a violent wind. Outside, thunder rumbled and the first shush of rain swept across the sea. Everything seemed eerie in its familiarity.

And then lightning flashed, silhouetting a lithe figure making her way down to the rocky crags, a little boy clasped in her arms. And, directly on the landing directly below him, Cassius spotted the corpse of his Tante staring at him from a growing halo of blood.

Darkness again.

He closed his eyes against the horror still imprinted on his lids—and yet, somehow, the sight of Tante’s body was enough to leech away the rest of his fear. Who knew what had spurred Josselyn’s literal inner demons to lash out, but if she had lost control to them so utterly, then at least—at last—his path was clear.

He had to kill his sister, or die trying.

Cassius retreated back to his room only long enough to grab his cloak, his sheath, and his shoes. On the way out, he snagged his blanket as well, bundling it in his arms as he moved through the dark manor to the first landing. Tante was sprawled across cold tile like a broken weathervane, her limbs snapped in horrifying twists and turns, her mouth agape, her eyes wide. He spared a moment to toss the blanket over her still form before slipping out into the stormy night, tugging the door shut behind him.

It closed with a hollow snap. Beyond the sill, the night was a rain-soaked grey; each howl of the wind reached his ears as a scream.

Maker.

Cassius bound the sheathed sword about his waist and hurriedly wrapped himself in his cloak before setting off into the storm. Josselyn was already too far ahead for him to spot her, but he could make out footprints in the thick, sucking mud—four bare feet, and sometimes two when it was clear Josselyn paused to pick up Taran, blood already washed away from the shallow graves of their tread. She veered left as she neared the crags and Cassius blindly followed, head down against the driving rain, grim purpose making his blood rush cold.
I should have killed her years ago, he thought, grimacing against the rain that stung his face. Tante is dead because I wasn’t strong enough to do it.

Tante…and maybe Taran as well. But no, no, no point thinking that yet. There might still be time.

He caught sight of the trailhead mostly by chance, too turned around by the storm to be able to see clearly. It was a torrent now, lightning forking wild over the Waking Sea, his cloak snapping madly around him. Cassius grabbed for slick rock and carefully began to make his way down the precarious passage—in the summer, in full sunlight when the winds were sweet and he had all the time in the world, this path to the sea caves was a challenging one. Now it was suicide; if Josselyn let Taran go even for a moment, their little brother would be lost amongst an avalanche of stone.

Andraste, guide us, Cassius prayed, picking his way down slowly slowly slowly.

A sudden wind nearly knocked him off his feet, but Cassius grabbed a sharply thrusting stone and dug in his heels, waiting it out. He had to tuck his face against his chest and breathe sharply through each wild burst, staring down at the white-crested waves below and telling himself those weren’t bodies being tossed amongst the swells.

Eventually, the wind slackened enough for him to move again, and he continued to carefully edge his way down, aware that each breath, each step, each snap of rain-soaked wind could be his last. And yet what felt like hours later, he was slipping past the last stones and stumbling into the mouth of the cave, wet through and aching. Each crash of waves against the sentinel stones sent a spray of white cascading around him; the cave ran deep and echoed with lonely drips of water off stalactites.

Beneath that hollow noise came the sound of Josselyn’s low, broken hum.

That damn lullaby.

Cassius moved carefully across the slick stones deeper into the cave. There was a fire going in the distance—small and homey despite everything. He remembered long years of creeping down here with his sisters to play. Every crag he passed, every small tidepool, was filled with the echo of those memories, ghosts creeping along in his wake.

His heel landed on an unsteady rock, sending it scattering…and all at once the lullaby stopped. Cassius swallowed. “Josselyn,” he called, keeping his voice steady by will alone. He paused, then pressed forward when she didn’t answer, forcing himself to keep moving toward the fire. Cassius tried to make himself smile despite the horror of the evening—despite knowing what he would have to do—shoulders back and muscles as relaxed as he could manage as he stepped toward the warm glow. “Joss, are you here?”

He heard a serrated breath in the darkness and swore he could feel the demon’s eyes on him. Pressing against his dim magicless awareness, sipping at the edges of his thoughts. He wondered, suddenly, whether Josselyn’s demon would try to possess him—whether now that it had tasted blood, it would want a soldier’s arm to cut a dark swath through the rest of the Trevelyan clan. He tensed against that formless terror, skin crawling with cold and fear and eyes in the dark, when—

When suddenly there was movement to his left—a dull grey flurry, coming right at him—and Cassius drew his blade with a sharp cry, swinging toward the rushing form.

The little form of Taran, all of five and sucking in a startled cry as Cassius’ blade nicked across his cheek. Cassius jerked back immediately, stopping the blow from following through—and the two brothers stared at each other, dark eyes on dark, breaths heaving in tandem.
Taran should have cried then. A normal boy would have. But perhaps being raised by Josselyn and the wilds had warped him, or perhaps her spell was still just now wearing off—whatever it was, Taran stared up the bared blade toward Cassius with an almost adult understanding, blood seeping down the round curve of his chubby cheek to join the spray of red droplets staining his nightrail.

*Tante’s* blood? Maker, probably.

“She told me to run,” Taran said. His voice was high and sweet, so *young* and already so heartbreakingly grave that Cassius could barely stand it. “She said she’d kill me if I didn’t. Cassius…” He bit his lip as Cassius shakily lowered the blade. That had been close; that had been far, far too close. “Do you really think she would kill me?”

“No,” Cassius lied, reaching out to cup Taran’s good cheek. He stepped in and tugged Taran close in the same motion, heart beginning to break at the way the little boy crumpled against his side as if buckling under some terrible weight. “Josselyn would never hurt you. She loves you too much.”

Taran nodded against Cassius’s thigh, shoulders giving a sharp jerk; *crying* at last, but crying so silently Cassius might never have known otherwise. One of his filthy little hands curled in Cassius’ nightshirt and it took everything Cassius had not to bundle Taran up in his arms and carry him away. Let the night have Josselyn, let the demons finally take her for good, let the storm wash in and drag her out to sea.

But there was no reassurance that the sea wouldn’t eventually give her *back*, and if she’d finally weakened enough to let those *things* kill…

Cassius cupped the back of Taran’s head, thumb running over the soft wisps of brown hair even as he looked grimly toward the fire. “I need you to be strong right now,” Cassius said. “I need you to guard the exit and make sure nothing gets in here.”

His little brother looked up, all of five and, *fuck*, understanding him completely. “Don’t hurt her,” he said. “She doesn’t mean to be bad.”

“I know,” Cassius said, heart lurching. Wasn’t that what he’d been telling himself for years now, ever since Taran was born? Josselyn didn’t *mean* to lose control. She didn’t *mean* to lash out. She didn’t *mean* any of this. And yet, and yet, and yet. “I won’t hurt her. Guard the exit,” he said again, giving Taran a little push. “I’ll be with you a minute.”

Taran took a step back, rubbing at his sore cheek, those tears on his lashes. But he nodded and turned away without another word of protest, disappearing into the dark.

Cassius watched him go for as long as he dared, counting the seconds as thunder rumbled and lightning crashed just outside the cave. Then, sucking in an unsteady breath, he turned back toward the fire and his waiting twin.

Josselyn was curled into a ball on the cold stone, staring into the flames. Her dark hair spilled around her the way it used to when she was a girl, only now there were ropes of white mingled with the brown, making her look far older than her not-yet-twenty years. She didn’t make a move at the sound of his footfall, though he could tell from the slow tensing of her body that she heard him.

Her eyes, from what he could see, were clear; that at least was a blessing, though Maker knew it would be easier to see this through if she had been completely gone.

“Joss,” Cassius murmured, moving around the fire to her side. He tugged his cloak off and draped it across her shoulders as he sat next to her, resting his sword at his side. She was dressed in her thin
nightgown, white lawn drenched with rain and blood. Her thin body shuddered, though he couldn’t
tell if it was the cold or the shock. Either way, his heart ached at the sight. “C’mere.”

Cassius reached down—slowly, carefully, mindfully—and gathered up the bird-thin form of his twin,
tugging her until she was curled within the warmth of his body. She turned her face, pressing her
cheek against his chest, and he gently stroked his fingers through her hair. Calming her. Soothing
away the unspooling horror as she cried just as silently as Taran had.

They sat there for what felt like a very long time, Josselyn’s body shaking with silent sobs: the
Trevelyan twins unraveling together before a slowly dying fire.

Finally, gradually, Josselyn began to relax, fingers tangling in the front of his nightshirt. Her breath
caught on a ragged gasp before she spoke. “Is she d-dead?”

Cassius pressed his cheek to the top of her head. “No,” he lied. “But the demon did hurt her. Did it
hurt you?”

“Only when I pushed it back again.” She sighed and curled even closer. “It’s not going to leave me
alone, Cassius. I’ve been fighting for so long to ignore them, but they’re always there, and this one—
It’s not going to leave.”

“We’ll find a way to make it,” he said, knowing they wouldn’t, couldn’t. It was far too late for that.
“We’ll find an apostate to teach you.”

“That’s what Taran says,” she murmured, meaning: that’s something only a child would believe.

Cassius kissed the crown of her head, resting his cheek against her once-lustrous hair. “Taran is very
wise for a five-year-old,” he said. “You’ve been teaching him well.” Slowly, inch by inch, he
reached for his sword. It was better if this happened fast—Josselyn wouldn’t fight him, he knew, but
the things living inside her would.

“No,” Josselyn said. She gripped his shirt tighter, dragging her forehead against the wet material as
she shook her head. “Maker only knows what he’s been learning from me. From all of us.” Josselyn
looked up and Cassius went very still, blade in hand but still hidden. “You must make sure he
escapes this place,” she said. “And you with him. This house, the Trevelyans…sometimes I think
we’re cursed. We all say we’ll escape, and one by one we lose ourselves along the way.”

“Joss,” he began.

“Promise me, Cass,” she said. “Promise me you’ll both find a way.”

“You’re talking nonsense.” He knew he should promise—he should be willing to tell her anything—
but there was an inevitability about being a Trevelyan. If his life had taught him anything, it was that
there was no escaping the fates they had all been dealt. “Why don’t we head back to the house? We
can change into something dry and sit up together to watch the storm.”

Josselyn studied his face for a long, long minute, frowning. Then, slowly, her shoulders drooped and
she dropped her forehead against his shoulder, nodding. Her body felt heavy, listless. “All right,” she
murmured. Then, “Maybe Tante could make us some of that tea she’s always trying to push on us.”

Tante.

He squeezed his eyes shut, carefully, carefully, carefully lifting the blade. “We could ask,” he said.

“We’ll stay up to watch the dawn. Taran will fall asleep long before then, but maybe one of the girls
will want to join us.” She started to look up. “I’ve been thinking that I should tell them—”

And her eyes went wide—wide and fathomless and dark—mouth open and nothing but blood coming out. Cassius stared into his sister’s face as confusion and acceptance and fear and then *nothing, nothing*, crossed it. Her blood sprayed across his front, spattering the stone around them. Hot. So scaldingly hot against the cold night air.

The sword clattered to the ground and he caught her against him as she spasmed. The wet suction of her breath was horrible to hear, but no worse than the way her fingers clenched at air, weakening, weakening, each spam smaller than the last as she began to slump heavy in his arms.

Cassius looked away from his dying twin, eyes hot with tears. The cave blurred, became a smudge of darkness and firelight, and they were children again—huddling together against the oncoming storm, whispering secrets and pretending they weren’t afraid. Only they weren’t, they *weren’t* children, and she was gone, gone, gone.

He sucked in a breath, looking away from the staring eyes of his twin—and straight into the staring eyes of his baby brother. *Taran* stood at the opposite end of the fire, stricken-pale and unblinking. Unmoving.

Cassius reached out. “Taran,” he said, but his extended hand was wet with *her* blood, and he dropped it away when Taran took a staggering step back as if frightened of him—of *him*, his savior, and not his demon-azzled mage of a sister. “Taran, wait.”

“We could have saved her,” Taran said in that small voice, sounding at once too old and too young. Cassius should have been strong enough to do this years ago, before Josselyn could fill Taran’s head with such impossible thoughts. “We *should* have saved her.”

“There was no saving her, Taran,” he said. Then, arms full of his dead sister, heart so cold he felt as if it had frozen in his chest, Cassius added without truly even wanting to: “There’s no saving any of them.”

Taran took another jerky step back. Another. “I’m,” he began, quavery, shaking so hard it was a wonder he hadn’t fallen. His eyes kept jerking down to Josselyn’s still, staring body, and Cassius—feeling a thousand miles away from his own head, shocky and frozen and distant—wondered what the little boy was seeing. Josselyn had been Cassius’ twin, but she had practically raised Taran from birth. What, he wondered, was it like to see your mother-figure murdered by your own brother? What kind of ways did a little boy’s brain have to process that horror?

“I’m not sorry,” Cassius said, monstrous in his own grief. Then, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“You’re wrong,” was all his brother managed. And then he turned on his heel and sprinted off into the black—into the storm—leaving Cassius with his twin and his cave of painful memories and his shocked-frozen, grieving, *angry* heart. He hated Taran in that moment. He hated himself. He hated everything and everyone that had pushed him toward this moment. He. Just. *Hated*. And he grieved. And he refused to weep.

He was too cold inside for that now.

Outside, the wind howled and lashed at the shore. The storm broke across the crags and moor and ramshackle home. Because *that* was the night the demons left Trevelyan House for good…and a monster came to live in their place.
The knock on the door startled Dorian, for all he’d been waiting for it for what seemed like hours. He had a headache from the three glasses of wine he’d snitched the night before, and hadn’t been able to sleep much for all that he’d gone to bed feeling like he was going to float away at an errant breeze. He stood from where he’d been perched on the stool in front of his dressing table and crossed to open the door.

“Lord Halward requires you, little peacock.” Lucia’s eyebrows ticked up when she took in his appearance -- neat, pressed, hair combed, all the things that Dorian, magical prodigy and family embarrassment wasn’t expected to be. “You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered. It isn’t every day that a young man’s family spends a small fortune on lyrium to send him into the Fade for his yearly ritual failure, is it?”

Lucia’s eyes narrowed just a touch, which was a victory, because it was the expression that Dorian associated with her being both irritated and confused. “Well, let’s get you to your humiliation punctually.” She gestured him out the door, and it was so like every other time they’d done this dance, this stupid farcical jig to find the one… girl in all the world that would make his lineage, his bloodlines, his talent and education, successful and complete that Dorian burst out laughing. Now her nostrils were flaring. That meant anger as well as confusion. Good.

The laughter continued as they walked through the breezeways and collonaded hallways of the estate, though by the the third turn Dorian had stopped and was frowning at her back. “This isn’t the way to Father’s study.” Every other time they’d attempted to find his unum vinctum it had been in that familiar room, the light honey colored from the amber colored crystal that held the magelights, the dark wood warm, the carpet under his feet a thick woven silk that had been enchanted to subtly change colors with the time of day. As a tiny boy he’d loved that room more than anywhere else in the estate. Now it just meant failure.

“No, it isn’t.”

Very helpful. Dorian sighed and rolled his eyes. Nothing to do but follow her if she was going to be like that. He smoothed the drape of his robe and peered down the hallway that led toward the garden, wishing it were an escape.

Not much had changed in the year he’d been gone. New slaves here and there among the faces that they passed. Maybe? He realized he honestly wasn’t even sure how many were housed in the Qarinus estate. Enough to keep everything spotlessly elegant, luxuriously formal, and most importantly seemly, dignified, and respectable. Well, excepting Dorian. Apparently no expenditure of wealth, no number of slaves, could quite shape him up to that standard.

His parents hoped that there was one, though, one that would make him settle, less restless, less volatile, less likely to be dismissed by the magisters who appreciated his sparkling intellect and aptitude for magic but really didn’t want quite so much wit from their apprentices. Nor quite so much of what they saw as disregard for their own reputations. All of which was why he was home now, instead of in two months for the summer. Why there had been a banquet welcoming him last night, when everyone knew he’d been tossed out on his ear for shredding the research of Avedius’ older apprentice publicly. Why he was being sent once more into the Fade to search for the voice in the dark.
“You were from the south, weren’t you?” Dorian’s latest growth spurt meant he didn’t have to stretch quite so much to keep up with Lucia. The look she gave him at his question was no longer quite so… down the nose either. It was the only gratifying part of being sent home: finding he’d closed the gap between their heights by another few, vital inches. Before long she wouldn’t be intimidating at all. Not that Dorian was intimidated. “I mean, the Marches, yes? You weren’t born in Tevinter like Del?”

Lucia stopped so abruptly Dorian tripped over himself trying not to run into her. “You are being particularly loathsome today.” The muscle in her jaw twitched. He had certainly made her furious. “Nevarra.” Her eyebrow rose. “Why?”

“You’re just different than him. Different than most **vinceta** I’ve met. And since mine is probably a Marcher, I thought you’d know how it felt when you—” Dorian broke off, a chill walking up his spine, a thousand prickling legs of apprehension at the look she gave him.

“The Mortalitasi of Nevarra do not keep **vinceta**.” Lucia’s mouth seemed to bite the word. “They have Voices. I did not understand the difference when your father’s offer came to my family. And now I do. If you ever find your Marcher I expect you will break their heart as well.” She turned again and led him through an archway and down the stairs toward the laboratory that Father kept below.

Voice. Dorian had heard talk about such things. Mostly snickering among apprentices or sneering from adults. It was definitely not polite conversation, unless one were mocking the vulgarity of the south.

There had even been one collection of ridiculous tales, written in Antiva or maybe Rivain that had made the round among the apprentices at his second placement. It had been discovered and burned, but not before they had all read some story about a lady knight and a tower with a mage boy locked inside it, caged by demons, with dreams and singing, and a kiss that banished the darkness. It had been absurd. And perverse. He’d laughed, revolted, with the rest of the youths, imagining Lucia and Father… no. Absolutely not.

But Lucia’s face had been stone when she spoke of a broken heart. Was that truly what southerners believed? Dorian’s scalp felt hot, palms sweaty, as he considered her words, each step down the stone stairwell into the lower cellars echoing like a heartbeat that wasn’t his own.

Dorian hadn’t spent a great deal of time in the laboratory, but there wasn’t much time to peer around curiously at the apparatus on various benches, the shelves that held books his fingers itched to pry open, because his attention was arrested by the large sigil that had been painted on the circle of polished black basalt that the room centered on, and his father standing beside it.

“Dorian. Thank you for being prompt.” His father’s voice held a warmer note than he’d expected, and he extended his hands as Dorian drew close, palms falling onto his shoulders. “We’re trying something different today.”

“Goody?” The direct gaze was uncomfortable, as was Lucia’s presence. Dorian had truly hoped to shuffle in, swill the lyrium, bumble around the Fade for a few hours, and then go back to bed to hide from the frustration (Father) and pity (Mother) that inevitably came. But instead there were sigils and ritual chambers, and blessed Maker, he couldn’t help the gooseflesh that prickly of fear was raising despite the very comfortable temperature of the room.

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“Quite.” His father’s mouth thinned as he shook his head, hands turning Dorian toward the prepared floor. “Sit in the center. Lucia, bring the draught.”

Despite the runework being unfamiliar, Dorian could feel the power present in the lines, the way it
scraped under his skin as he stepped carefully across. In the middle he settled, crossing his legs and frowning at the crystal cup that Lucia approached him with. “Father? What is all this?” The swirling blue within the delicate chalice made it hard to focus on anything else, but Dorian kept his eyes up, watching his father’s face as he seemed to consider his only son with the faint frown he might use examining a particularly thorny political mess.

“It’s an enchantment to keep you in the Fade longer than usual. Similar to the Harrowing rituals that the southern Circles use.” He waved his hand dismissively. “It will give you a bit longer to look.”

“Longer to look.” Dorian’s ears were hot as he looked down into the cup. Because apparently his attempts to find his intended bond were so disappointing that Halward Pavus had spent double the usual fortune on lyrium to make sure Dorian didn’t come back without something to tell.

“Don’t sulk, Dorian. Drink the lyrium. Not everyone can be brilliant at everything.”

Even if that was what he’d been bred to be. Dorian’s genealogy tutors had driven that home into his mind with such brutal repetition it was the only thing he was sure of. Perfect mage, perfect mind, brilliant at everything. He drank the lyrium in three huge swallows, his teeth chattering with the sizzling cold as he set the cup down. He blinked once, and again, and the third time his eyes remained closed, listening to his heartbeat echo in the darkness as he was dragged from the waking world to the Fade.

The garden. Dorian had expected to find himself in the laboratory, but instead it was the water garden with its draped green silk shot with gold hanging in long falls from the sunward arbor to provide additional shade. Of course there was no sun here, and the sound of the water flowing through the fountain sounded more like the hollow rattle of dice in a cup. Close, but not real.

Nothing here was real. A good reminder. Unless he could find the voice that should be calling for him. He closed his eyes, trying to focus on what should be an instinctive step forward in the direction of that part of his own power that had been inconveniently stored elsewhere, in someone he was destined to break the heart of, apparently. He tried, desperately, as he always did to imagine her, but it felt just as wrong as every other time. As always he couldn’t “hear” anything. “What a bloody waste of time.”

It usually is. The strange sibilance of the voice made Dorian’s skin prickle and his eyes snap open. On the far side of the fountain, settling onto one of the chaises, was a… well a demon. Especially when you refuse to look for what you want.

“Um?” Dorian’s mouth had dried looking at the… creature. It was… well. His cheeks stung with the blush in them and he looked away, toward the shifting silks of the curtain. Naked. The demon was naked. Tall, skin shifting from a pale lavender to dark purple, with horns that curved up and back from the crest of its brow like a Qunari. Copper-coin eyes, with slitted pupils, had caught on Dorian’s for just a moment before he’d looked away. Muscular. Strong. None of the breasts he’d seen so specifically rendered in the primers on the Fade he’d read. No. This desire demon was definitely, definitely male.

The sound of it’s laughter, a chuckle that he could feel like the tips of its claws skimming over his skin, did nothing to reduce the panicky flush over his whole body. It made everything feel too tight, too heavy, particularly his clothes. Rough where before the silk had been soft, constricting where things had been comfortably fitted. His stomach twisted even while he tried to ignore the low coal of… something in his gut.

Demon. It was a demon. This is what they did. Confused. Distracted. Why was it even here? Did the ritual his father had performed remove the safeguards that had always kept them away before on
Dorian… Its voice was somewhere between a sing-song and a purr.

“Yes? I mean… hello. I… look this is awkward but I really wasn’t expecting to see any of you-- your kind? Here. Especially not…” He flapped a hand in its general direction. “So much of your--” He broke off to clear his throat, back of his neck hot as it laughed again.

*I’ve been waiting for five years to get to talk to you, dear boy. Won’t you sit down?*

Dorian flicked a glance over to the demon, finding it reclining, displaying all of its… everything with one leg bent and an elbow resting atop it. His eyes snapped shut and he breathed hard, through his nose. Desire demon. Male desire demon. This wasn’t what was supposed to be happening right now. He was supposed to be finding his *unum vinctum*, the final key to his birthright and the Pavus legacy that represented generations of investment culminating in *him*. As heavy as it was, that birthright was his.

*You know, it could be that there isn’t one for you to find. Many mages’ little Voices die before they’re ever found. The use of that word drew Dorian’s eyes up again, focusing on the demon’s face. Or it could be you’ve spent all these years looking for what you think you should find, and not what you want. Maybe I can help with that?* The demon shimmered in a way that made Dorian feel like he was going blind and instead of it’s mockery of human features, too beautiful to be real, Theo was looking back at him with his dark eyes over the rim of a wine glass that hadn’t been there before.

The flush of shame that climbed Dorian’s cheeks stung like sinking into water far too hot for the bath. Avedius’ apprentice was terribly handsome, had always been painfully so when he smiled at Dorian like that, as if the two of them were the keepers of some precious secret. When that secret, those words whispered with soft lips against Dorian’s ear, the taller boy pressing into him so fleetingly, no longer seemed soft and sweet, had sharpened into a knife to be used against him, Dorian had done the only thing he could: destroyed Theo’s credibility as thoroughly as he’d been able.

“Ah. N-no. No thank you.” Listening to demons was never a good idea, especially not when they were right about things. Things that made one vulnerable, *different*, things that must never be shared.

“No? Hm. Don’t be boring, Pavus.” Theo -- no -- the demon grinned at him. “If you’d prefer to do something other than talk, well, why not. It isn’t as if there’s anyone out there for you to find.” The demon sipped its wine again. “At least no one suitable. Won’t that be phenomenal. Your parents are going to send you to Seheron when they find out.”

“Find out what?” Oh, Dorian knew what. Because all this insinuating and hinting… he’d have to be an idiot to keep pretending he didn’t know what the demon meant. The reason his attempts at imagining the girl who was to be his *unum vinctum* had always felt so wrong. The reason a desire demon would appear to him as Theo. Maker save him.

The laugh was Theo’s cruelest. The one that had convinced Dorian that he had to push back or be ruined. “Precious.” Another sip of wine and Dorian was beginning to wonder just how long he was going to have to stand here and listen to the thing be smug and insolent.

“I am. Thank you. And have a lovely whatever time it is for you. Good day!” Dorian’s voice cracked as he chirped his dismissal, turning his back on the idyll behind him. If it followed what would he do? He couldn’t *fight* it. Could he?

That cruel, cruel laughter chased him as he fled.
But where had he fled? The step he’d taken had twisted the Fade around him, a sliding lurch that made his stomach roll. It was an intolerable annoyance to feel things like nausea or the urge to sneeze when your mind was the only thing that was real here. He’d read several philosophical papers about the autonomic systems of the body and the Fade and they’d all been about as deep as a mud puddle.

Or the tidepool that he found himself standing in at the mouth of a sea cave.

The cliff above him seemed to rise impossibly high in the false night, a winding stair carved into the shining surface of slick rock. The roar of the waves was familiar, along with the clammy air. He would have bet Mother’s entire jewelry box that it was the same cliff he’d watched that crazy mage girl throw a baby doll made of bones off all those years ago.

Had she drawn him here again? He shuddered, not looking forward to whatever macabre nonsense the demons were whispering to her this time. Maybe he could just walk away.

The step he intended to take away from the cave mouth, toward the cliff path that he would have to be a goat to have any hope of climbing, took him the other way. How?

Another step away. Closer yet.

“Oh bloody… Well I know it’s not her so why am I here?” he shouted. His voice echoed back at him off the craggy rocks, mixing with the sound of the ceaseless beating waves. The nervous churn of his stomach wasn’t all due to the thought of more demons. He could feel the way it pulled at him. Led him despite his intentions, his fear, here.

Well. Maybe it was time. Time to face whatever it was that the blasted desire demon thought he wanted. Time to admit it.

It.

He dragged the heels of his hands over his eyes and then made himself stand straight, chin up, and walked with all the dignity he could muster with his boots full of seawater toward the yawning opening in the black rock cliff.

The tang of salt bit the air in a way that Dorian didn’t expect from the Fade. It meant he had bumped up against someone else’s dreamscape. And based on the pull that guided his path, it was his unum vinctum. He rubbed at his nose, squinting into the dark. The deep shadows of the cave seemed to stretch impossibly far back and in the far, far distance was a tiny golden light, the smallest bubble of warmth but that was where he was going, wasn’t it? Traversing this terrifying cave that was like the maw of a dragon left lolling open to eat the unwary to get to that faint flicker of certainty.

And Dorian had gotten so used to living without it. Willfully perhaps. After so many years of blank boredom when he entered the Fade, small flickers of recognition when looking into faces of what seemed like a dozen strangers, to finally feel the pull toward what he was told was his, but he wasn’t sure he wanted? It was hard to put one foot in front of the other, each step trembling as it set gingerly down on the slick rock, splashed through a puddle trapped in a dip in the uneven ground.

“Hello?” His voice quavered, cracking high for a moment, and he cleared his throat. The blush that crept into his cheeks was foolish -- his unum vinctum wouldn’t be able to hear him, wouldn’t know that his voice was sprung with nerves and puberty. He was close enough to the bubble of light that he should be able to see her -- him -- he winced with the turn of his thoughts each time he stumbled back to the demon’s insidious whispers.

It claimed he couldn’t find what he was seeking because he wasn’t looking for what he wanted.
What Dorian wanted was for the creeping fear that he was different enough to make his parents shun him to go away. What he wanted was for his father to be proud that he’d finally found the last piece of the puzzle that would make him a great man. What he wanted had always been to be who he was supposed to be.

He had never once wanted a small boy, alone in dark, the light of the fire putting glints of gold and copper in his hair as it fell in a tumble into his eyes.

Dorian didn’t have words for this. Not in the common tongue, not in Old Tevene, not in the scraps of qunlat he’d learned. How could words describe what it felt like to look at the soul of someone he had never seen and find that suddenly it all made so much damned sense? Why he was different. Why he’d wanted Theo. Why his parents were never, ever going to be wholly pleased with him.

The answer to every question he’d ever had about himself were answered in the rich, warm brown of those half-hidden eyes.

“Oh.” Dorian’s feet tangled together as he tried to hurry closer, to find some way to bundle a blanket around the shivering child, to protect him from whatever had made him hide here in the dark. Help. Dorian wanted to help. He stumbled, caught himself and stood there with his knees quaking in time with his galloping heart. He needed to breathe. This was his unum vinctum, his intended bondslave, and… and he was going to have to… “Kaffas.”

From his place by the fire he could see that the boy -- a child, far younger than Dorian -- was scooping up handfuls of sand, red, no -- blood? It was both in the way of dreams and he was filling a sack with, endlessly, hands stained. “He didn’t mean it, Josselyn. We’ll fix it. You’ll get better again. Cassius is sorry.” The sack had become a dress, stuffing those handfuls of red into the neck. The snap of the fire brought the boy’s eyes up, face filthy, tears running tracks through the rust on his cheeks.

“Who are you?” Dorian’s voice broke again, this time with tears that had thickened his throat. He couldn’t leave the boy here, alone. Alone. The air around them was bitter with it. “Where are you? Think, Dorian. Marches, yes? Okay. Josselyn. I don’t... “ The boy began humming as he went back to his work, and Dorian recognized it, had been dreaming it half the nights since his first dose of lyrium had sent him to look. “Taran. Are you Taran?” He was the right age if the doll that she’d thrown into the waves somehow represented the boy he was looking at now. “She was singing to you? Your mad apostate… what? Sister? Maker’s breath.” Taran, Josselyn, Cassius. Three names. The Free Marches? How would Dorian ever find them?

The sea and the salt and this cold, clammy cave. Wrong. All of it. He could make sure he was safe, warm, no longer alone.

Dorian paced on the far side of the fire. There were agents who did this work -- found the far astray unum vinctum of the wealthy and powerful, brought them back to Tevinter, to be… bound. Collared. Dorian’s legs went unsteady and he sat, hard, Lucia’s flinty eyes as she spoke of heartbreak, accusing in his mind.

“Oh.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. A boy. A small, lost, lonely boy, with tragedy in his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose hard and then sat up straighter, hands on his knees, staring right at this boy who Dorian only wanted to protect from whatever wicked, hateful thing had made him look so desperately alone.

But how could he ever do that? In Tevinter, where an unum vinctum of the same gender as a mage was a cause for whispers, for sly comments, for continuous torment to prove that there was no overly familiar attachment, nothing aberrant there.
Dorian’s hands clenched into fists where he pressed them against his knees, watching the endless motions of those filthy red hands, the stubborn set of the child’s jaw. As if whoever he was talking to, whoever he had lost, could be saved if he just wanted it hard enough. Could the light that was keeping the darkness at bay in his dreams weather everything terrible that Tevinter could throw at a child. Could Dorian?

Because there would be whispers. There would be talk. There would be innuendo and blatant accusations. There would be assumptions and knowing looks. Liberties taken. Offenses made. He thought he might vomit for a moment and this time he didn’t bother with grousing about not even having a stomach here. He would have to let things happen to the boy in front of him, or he would lose everything.

For the first time Dorian could see, sharp and cruel and cold to his bones, how Tevinter would break him. Break them. He looked up at the shadows that swallowed the ceiling. Maker’s grace, he was a coward on top of every other thing, wasn’t he?

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You’re safer there. With your… dress full of blood.” The bark of laughter that came out of Dorian’s mouth was half-sob, definitely bordering on hysterical. “And I’m safer too.”

He let himself shiver, sitting in a puddle, skin crawling all over with the cold and the prickle of lyrium, as Taran eventually faded away—waking or wandered on to a hopefully more pleasant dream. Dorian didn’t know. Wouldn’t look. He… he couldn’t. Never again. He would tell his parents he was incomplete, the Fade silent and cold like he’d been told happened to those whose vincita died before they were found. He’d been visited by a demon, after all.

Those types of dreams would only get worse. He could already feel the eyes peering curiously from the cracks that had formed in Taran’s dream after he’d gone. Copper eyes, covetous and full of malice, that knew the shape of Dorian’s Voice.

And now it was his job to keep them both safe.
He made it a quarter way down the beach before his legs finally gave out.

It happened suddenly, with no fanfare, no chance to catch a fourth (fifth, ninth, twentieth) wind and soldier on. One moment Fenris was struggling against the driving rain and the next…

…the next he was slumped across rock-strewn sand, the crashing waves dragging at his heels, threatening to pull him back out to sea. Would the captain who’d smuggled him out of Kirkwall even bother to fish him out of the riptide now that his coin had been paid?

Bah. What did it matter anyway?

Fenris closed his eyes, breathing in slow, irregular pants—counting each heartbeat as it lurched against his chest. It was late, early, something. His muscles ached and his head spun and his heart, his heart was jagged glass. Shattered, cutting. Useless. Lightning forked overhead and thunder rumbled in warning. A battle cry, echoing off cave walls. The wet drag of the Deep Roads sinking icy fingers into his bones. The night lit up with flickers of lyrium and he—

No. No. Lightning, not lyrium. A storm off the coast. Maker, he was drifting, bleeding time and energy and the will to keep going bit by bit by bit. Soon there’d be nothing left.

He’d started out with so little, after all.

Fenris groaned and huddled around himself, so cold he was no longer shivering. Bare fingers dug into wet sand and salt water filled his lungs—a wave, crashing around him, over him. Fenris squeezed his eyes tight and barely found the strength to turn his face away. His legs were too weak to push himself up. His arms were too weary to hold him even if he managed to stand. His will—always the strongest part of him—was barely a flicker inside his chest.

This, Fenris thought, letting the wave tug him toward the churning sea, is as good a place to die as any.

The thought would have made him angry just a few short weeks ago. He had faced too much, fought too hard, lived through everything Danarius thought to throw at him; he would not give up, no matter the provocation. And yet here, now, in a world without Aidan Hawke, he could only sink into the bleak inevitability of death. Ready in a way he’d never been before. Eager, almost, to face the end.

He hunched around the thought, wave crashing over his broken body. His tongue felt thick and sour in his mouth, the wine long since dried on his tongue. He wished he had another bottle now. That was how he’d choose to go. Laying on his back and watching the sky, throat filled with something deep and red and—
A warm hand clasped his shoulder.

“By the Maker,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Are you all right?”

No, he wanted to snarl, wanted to jerk away. No, leave me be. Leave me here. He didn’t have the strength even to protest as he was caught by the pits and dragged a few feel out of the surf. His deadened legs were left to catch each crashing wave, but now he could cough and hack up seawater, angrily blinking away grit. His sight was bleary, night nothing more than shadows lit by the occasional flicker—but those hands were on him again, soothing his back, pushing back his hair, helping him turn over and sit up, braced by a warm body.

“That was a stupid question,” the boy said, one arm looping around Fenris’s waist to keep him from toppling over. “You’re half-drowned; of course you’re not all right. Here. Here, catch your breath. It’s going to be better now.”

Fenris curled his lip back, only to be caught in a hacking cough. He tried to yank away, tried to curl back around his misery, but the boy held on with surprising strength. “Steady there,” he said. “Steady. You need to find your bearings again.”

“Do not,” Fenris began, turning to glare. His words felt heavy in his mouth, tongue thick. He reached up to shove the boy away, but his arms wouldn’t obey him—though whether from drink or cold or the creeping promise of the void, he couldn’t say. Close. He had been so close. “Do not…”

The boy’s brows drew together. He was young, barely out of childhood, though already built with broad shoulders and a strong chest that hinted at a warrior’s muscle to come. Golden-brown hair was plastered to his forehead and warm brown eyes watched Fenris with tangible concern—the way Aidan might have looked at him. He had the same eyes, even if they were a different color. The same gentle energy. The same—

Fenris turned his head and vomited a heady mix of wine and seawater.

“Well,” the boy said, quickly leaning him forward so the bile could spatter across wet sand. “Okay. Okay, I’m going to assume that’s good. Just…get it out of you. Right?” His hand rubbed a soothing circle against Fenris’s back, the way a mother might her babe. “It’s okay. I’ve got you, ser.”

He gripped the boy’s other wrist, letting that be the anchor he needed as he lost the contents—the lining—the void-taken dissolved pieces of his stomach, practically. His whole body burned.

Overhead, lightning forked and the wind changed directions, driving rain toward their exposed faces. Fenris turned his head, spitting and sputtering, miserable. “Let me know when you think you can stand,” the boy said. “There’s a cave nearby. I have some potions there. Once we get some elfroot in you, you should start feeling better. What were you doing out in the storm? No,” he added quickly, “don’t answer that; don’t try to talk. I’m sorry, I just haven’t seen someone who isn’t my brother in ages. Here.”

One hand slid down Fenris’s spine, and the boy caught his arm, gently slinging it over those improbably broad shoulders. He tipped his head, waiting for Fenris’s jerky nod, before slowly rising—slowly slowly slowly bringing Fenris with him. Fenris’s head swam with the change and his legs shook, but he grit his teeth against a second wave of nausea and held on, refusing to let himself collapse to the sand again.

He was alive; he might as well deal with that while it was still true.

The boy’s arm slid around his waist, holding most of his weight. He was strong, Fenris noted
absently; Aveline and Donnic would have been glad to have a boy like him training for the guard. His cheeks were still round and ruddy with youth, but there was a light fuzz of hair on his chin, and the way he set his jaw and began half-carrying, half-dragging Fenris down the beach spoke of deep wells of determination.

Perhaps he’d mention the boy to Aveline when he returned to Kirkwall.

(Aidan was dead; he was never going home again.)

Fenris stumbled, legs giving out beneath him, but the boy caught him before they could topple over. He grunted and used his body to keep Fenris from collapsing, adjusting his grip so that he was carrying even more of his weight. “It isn’t far,” the boy promised. “We just need to make it to those rocks and everything will be okay.”

He didn’t bother to look. Those rocks may as well have been the depths of the void for all he cared. His head was too full of memory, of regret, of rending, crushing, debilitating anguish—loss, and guilt, burning in his gut, making him—

Fenris retched again, barely turning his face in time. His stomach was empty of everything but wine-tinted bile, and it burned as it filled his throat. He gagged at the choking sob that wanted to rise out of him and held on to his unexpected lifeline as fiercely as he could.

The boy was full-on carrying him now, shouldering his weight with remarkable ease, despite the telltale wheeze of his breath. He kept murmuring quietly, things like, “It’s okay,” and “almost there”, though Fenris couldn’t be sure which of them he was reassuring. It didn’t matter. He kept his head down, shoulders slumped forward, and allowed himself to be saved once more, whether he willed it or no.

The drag of stone brought him back from a bleary half-unconsciousness, followed by the boy’s grunt as he hauled Fenris up a rocky outcropping. The waves were still crashing on the beach, eating up the shore (swallowing the spot he’d already half-chosen as his grave), but the moment the driving rain was cut off by rock overhead was a revelation, and Fenris dragged in a relieved breath, letting his head fall back.

“Alive,” he said, voice a croak.

“And I’m determined to keep you that way.” The boy took a deep breath and hauled Fenris up against his side for one last, herculean push. He carried him into the depths of the cave, moving with the sure-footed grace of someone who was all too familiar with the landscape. It struck Fenris as strange—this whole blasted, benighted coast struck Fenris as strange. It was dark and miserable and violent and grey. How, how had this boy stumbled out of a place like that, all warm empathy that left a curdling hole in his gut?

Fenris wet his lips and forced his feet back under him, stumbling with the boy the last little bit. He spotted a firepit some ways back, just visible in the flashes of lightning through irregularly fitted rock. “Who,” he began, voice rusty.


He helped Fenris into a careful seat of smoothed stone. There were bundles of clothing here, Fenris noticed. Crates filled with what looked like bottles, some half-full, most long empty. He thought he saw the bluish glow of lyrium in one as Taran moved a few of the bottles aside, sorting through the empties before pulling out a mostly-full vial of elfroot. “Here,” Taran said with a relieved smile. He uncorked it with his thumb, then held it out to Fenris—an offering. A lifeline.
Take this if you want to live.

But…did he?

“Where,” Fenris began, not reaching for the vial. He cleared his throat. “Where is this?” The captain hadn’t said. He’d simply dumped Fenris on the first bit of shore after the coin had run out. It didn’t look like Tevinter, but other than that, Fenris couldn’t say.

Taran sat on the bit of stone next to him, still holding the bottle—patiently waiting. “You’re in Ostwick,” he said. “Of the Free Marches. Did you…did your boat capsize?”

Ostwick. So he hadn’t made it so very far from Kirkwall after all.

Good. Maker take him, but he was glad he hadn’t managed to flee far. It felt…damned wrong to be away from the city that had become home to him. It felt damned wrong to be away from Aidan, even if Aidan no longer lived. At least, if he had remained in Kirkwall, he could have been near the place where they had almost been happy.

(And venhedis, but that was a miserable thought. He needed to stop.)

“Ostwick,” Fenris repeated, testing the word on his tongue. He looked down at his hands, beginning to finally shiver again. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? He thought he remembered that mage…remembered Anders…saying that once. It meant his body wasn’t so damaged by the cold that it was shutting down.

“Here,” the boy, Taran, said again. He lifted the vial, earnest eyes on Fenris’s face. “You need to drink this so I can get a fire going. You’ll freeze if I don’t.”

He should tell him to leave off, to let him be. What was there for him here—in Ostwick, close enough to Kirkwall that it would be a constant ache? And yet when Fenris looked up to meet those warm honey-brown eyes in that young face, the sharp words died on his tongue. He felt his heart give an unexpected lurch.

“Fine,” he said, reaching out to blindly grab the vial. He threw his head back and swallowed it in one go, letting the familiar herbal tang drown out the burn of wine and bile and sea salt. Letting the magic coil through his frozen limbs and bloom hot and hopeful in his chest—healing him in every way but the one that mattered.

Taran gave a little nod, satisfied, and moved to begin stacking firewood (carefully piled under oilcloth to protect it from the damp air) in the remains of the firepit. He worked quickly, efficiently, sparking tinder and flint on a small pile of wood shavings before leaning close to blow the first curl of smoke into a flame.

Fenris watched the boy work, empty vial held within trembling fingers. His stomach wanted to protest again, but the elfroot was taking care of that, too—coiling in his belly, mending what ailed him, bringing him back from some sort of precipice.

But where will I be when it’s done? Fenris thought, staring down at the pitted rock. Where will I go? The whole wide world was open to him, and there was nowhere he wanted to be. Nothing he wanted to see. Noone he wanted to become.

He was through with running, but he couldn’t very well stay here, could he?

“Why not?” Taran asked, looking up from the fire. It was finally catching, sparks lifting toward the high ceiling as warm light filled the cavern. It caught the boy’s face in half-shadow, and yet even that
only made him look more golden, more earnest. He straightened as Fenris stared at him, startled, half wondering if he’d stumbled into a blood mage’s lair. “You were talking under your breath,” Taran added. “In Tevene. Sorry. I should have told you I knew the language.”

“What do you know Tevene for?” he demanded.

Taran shrugged a shoulder and sat back on another bit of smooth rock. He dropped his elbows against his knees, letting awkwardly long, gangly arms dangle between his thighs. “Cassius—my older brother—figured I should know the major languages. He’s had me learning them since as long as I can remember. Though why when the only person I ever talk to these days is him, I don’t know.”

He looked down with a crooked, yet somehow pained-looking smile. “My sisters used to teach me, when they still lived with us. They’ve all flown by now, but I guess the habit stuck, so I try to teach myself Nevarran in the evenings. It’s…” Taran made a face, looking up again. “Have you ever tried to read Nevarran?”

He didn’t bother telling the boy he’d never been able to read, period. “No,” he said.

“It feels like squeezing your brain through the eye of a needle. I swear there’s got to be a trick to it, but I haven’t learned it yet. Do you want a blanket?”

Taran stood before Fenris could answer, going to one of the stacked crates. He came back with an old and patched—though wonderfully clean—blanket, barely hesitating before spreading it over Fenris’s shoulders. Fenris froze, ready to flinch or recoil at the unfamiliar touch…then relaxed by slow, startled degrees when he realized it didn’t bother him. If anything, it felt good to be fussed over. Cared about.

He had grown used to the feeling, after all.

Fenris turned his face away, heart reflexively clenching at the thought, a fresh wave of grief and shame and guilt overtaking him. He tightened his hands into fists, barely aware of the tinkling sound of breaking glass or the way the boy dropped down beside him, one arm going around his shoulders as if Taran could somehow hold him together by the force of his will alone.

“Hey,” he said in a quiet voice, present and yet not intruding on Fenris’s grief. Just that, just one word, as if reminding Fenris he wasn’t alone. “Hey. Hey.”

Fenris closed his eyes, lashes burning with tears, and growled, “I need to keep moving.”

“All right,” Taran responded easily enough. But then he added in a lower voice, “But—forgive me if I’m wrong—I’m getting the sense you don’t know where you’re going. And,” he added quickly, as if afraid he’d overstepped, “we’re an awful long way from anywhere you might want to be.”

That isn’t true, he almost said, thinking of Kirkwall; thinking of that bit of drowned sand where he could have died. He felt like he was walking a thin line balanced between the two—any sudden gust might be enough to send him toppling over one way or the other. “I cannot stay here,” he said again. And, because it seemed the boy would once more ask why, he added, “I do not know you.”

“Yes you do,” Taran said with a warm laugh. “I told you: Taran Trevelyan, from Ostwick. I learn languages from old books and practice my swordwork on fraying dummies and come here to—”

He stopped abruptly.

Fenris lifted his head, taking in the half-empty bottles of elfroot and lyrium, the piles of clean rags
and carefully mended clothing, the signs of people having passed through not too long ago. “You come here to help mages escape.”

He meant the word to come out curdled, the way it always had before, but for some reason, he couldn’t seem to find that old vitriol. Magic had ruined his life once upon a time, but it had also given him so very much. If he had let himself just reach out and take it, he could have had— He could have— “Apostates? Or runaways?”

Taran flushed and pulled back. “I’d rather not say?” he tried.

But Fenris’s gaze was fixed on his face. “You said it is just you and your brother,” he snapped. “Does he help you?” He could read the negative in the way Taran flinched. “Does he even know what you are doing?” Again, that little flinch.

Fenris sat back with a hiss. “You are a fool,” he said. “Barely out of boyhood and meddling in dangerous affairs that have been the death of men twice your age. Venhedis, do you even know what you are doing?”

“Yes,” Taran said, suddenly looking up. Those honey-gold eyes caught the light. “The right bloody thing, okay?”

Fool, Fenris thought, but the word was tinged with unexpected affection—because that could have just as easily been Aidan speaking. This boy had a bleeding heart that was going to get him killed, and oh, but he could see so much of his Voice there. What’s more…surely Taran’s work was helping other mages find their Voices. That was what Anders was always saying they wanted, wasn’t it? To be free of control and, and bondage. To have a say in their own lives. To be able to search out their Voices wherever they might be.

To bond with the other halves of themselves. To be happy.

And here he was, after having railed against Anders for his bloody idealism, after having raged at the idea of the Circles being broken and mages being allowed to walk free—stumbling upon a mage underground and feeling, for the first time, like a part of him understood.

Or at least, that a part of him wanted to understand. He would want to find his Voice again, too, if he only had the chance.

“Very well,” Fenris said.

Taran blinked, straightening. “I’m sorry?”

“I will stay.” It seemed…right…somehow…that if he was going to keep living, he’d devote his time to some sort of penance. Helping mages on their way to freedom was exactly the sort of recompense Aidan might have asked of him, if he had managed to survive Fenris’s love. “You need to be shown how to be smarter about this, or you will have a short, miserable life.”

“Wait, really?” Taran said—then chuffed a laugh. “Not that I’m trying to talk you out of it, because, I mean, you obviously need someplace to stay and I obviously need someone to talk to, if I’ve taken to fishing new friends out of the ocean and all. Convincing Cassius may be tricky, but…”

Fenris held up a hand. “You said you train yourself on broken practice dummies,” he said. “I will train you instead. Even this Cassius must see the logic in that.”

“Maybe,” Taran said slowly, as if he doubted Fenris could convince his brother, but Fenris wasn’t concerned. Once he had his strength back, he’d knock this Cassius on his ass a few times; that would
be enough of a test of his qualifications. “And…you really will help me? With the mage underground?”

_Mage underground._ Maker, but the boy was too hopelessly earnest. “I will help,” he said curtly, refusing to be even the slightest bit warmed when Taran grinned. “Maybe you will learn not to be such an idealistic fool along the way.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Taran said, laughing, and the sound would never be enough to mend a fraction of Fenris’s broken heart, but at least here, sitting at the hub of a mage underground, knowing that he had _some_ semblance of a purpose in the face of endless, aching loss…a small part of Fenris relaxed its guard.

And a tentative friendship was born.
Tevinter parties were the worst.

Not that Feynriel had much basis for comparison. There was scarce little to celebrate in Kirkwall’s alienage. Life was hard, and while the occasional festival swept through the cobbled streets, most elves were too poor and too exhausted and too…too everything to pay old Dalish holidays much mind. Besides, Feynriel hadn’t been welcome at those either; nothing made usually-friendly neighbors more hostile to outsiders than festival commemorating the human conquest of their ancestors. And with Feynriel’s half-elven features, he never could be anything but an outsider.

Still. Even if he’d been raised in some Hightown estate and went to galas every night—even if he had so much experience that he was as bored and feckless as any noble—Feynriel was comfortable assuming that Tevinter parties would still be the absolute bloody worst.

Mostly because they were Tevinter.

And all of Tevinter could bite his skinny ass.

“You are the dreamer, are you not?”

The elegantly dressed woman was shorter by half a hand, and yet she somehow still managed to look down her aristocratic nose at him. Feynriel shuffled in place, fighting the urge to tug at the single sleeve of his ridiculous robe. Little bits and bobs sewn into the so-dark-a-green-it-was-nearly-black fabric caught the candlelight with every nervous twitch. If he wasn’t careful, he’d look like a particularly nervous armored nug. “Yes,” he said. Usually this was when he was expected to rattle off his bona fides so the other mage had an excuse to do the same—it was all about status in Tevinter, and nothing made them happier than whipping it out and comparing length…well, figuratively—but he was too tired to play along. Krem had been injured in the Charger’s latest job, and his dreams were stained a sickly yellow as worry and pain flickered through the Fade in choking mists. It took everything Feynriel had not to charter a boat and track his Voice down immediately.

The woman arched a dark brow, as if reading the eddies of worry on his face. She had uncanny blue eyes and an unfortunate habit of not blinking anywhere near enough. It made Feynriel’s own eyes water just to look at her. “And is it true that you can dip at will into the dreams of others?”

Here it goes, he thought with a sigh. He should have guessed this was where they were headed—he would have, if he hadn’t been so distracted. She didn’t just want to compare masters and training and arcane studies and blah blah blah. She was one of those—one of the power-hungry who thought they could somehow convince him to sneak into the dreams of their rivals and assassinate them while they slept. Those were the worst; they always left his skin crawling long after he’d managed to make his escape.

He definitely wasn’t in the mood for all that backstabby bullshit tonight. Retreat, retreat, retreat.

“I’m sure my master,” ugh, what an awful word; especially here in Tevinter where the sight of elvish slaves everywhere gave it such a sickly double meaning, “could tell you much more about that. Uh, if you’ll excuse…” He started to edge around her.

Not quickly enough. The woman moved like a striking snake, catching his wrist in a cold vise-like grip. Her too-blue eyes practically burned through him—like lyrium, or the first hint of a winter’s
grasp gone wrong—and Feynriel shivered and flinched away, trapped. “I’m not—” he began, trying
to twist free.

She merely tightened her grip—**hard**, each finger seeming to sear into his skin. Cold, cold, so very
cold, and yet he could easily imagine the burning red marks they might leave behind. “I am not
asking your master,” she said, leaning closer. Seeming to loom despite their difference in heights. “I
am asking you. Is it true you are able to dip into the dreams of others? Is it true you are able to track
those who have been lost?”

**Bloody void.** “Yes,” Feynriel snapped, fighting to hide the panic rising in his throat. Master Xerxes
shielded him from most glory-seekers looking to duel the barbarian Ferelden somniari, but a few
slipped through the cracks now and again. (*Or, Feynriel sometimes thought in his darkest moments,*
**Master Xerxes lets them slip through to test me.**) Apprentice duels weren’t nearly as deadly as their
older counterparts, but they were no less dangerous—to status, to standing in the slippery bog that
was Tevinter politics, to the future: one failure, after all, bred many others as the carrion crows
circled every-closer. Andraste’s tits, but he wasn’t in a good state to face that sort of threat tonight.

“Yes, okay? Now if you’d just let me—”

Feynriel broke off with a low whine at the sudden flare of pain. It radiated from her freezing cold
grip and traveled up his arm; he could actually see the veins beneath his pale skin glow a brilliant
blue. He looked up, frightened, trapped, but no one else seemed to be paying them any mind. Theirs
was just another quiet power play flaring up in some easily-ignored corner; nothing new, and
certainly not remarkable enough to bring anyone to his defense.

**Fucking Tevinter.**

“My master lost someone,” the woman was saying, voice low and measured, rasping in a sibilant
hiss. “His servant; his bodyguard. An elf. This young wolf stole something very valuable when he
ran.”

“So what is he then?” Feynriel said, trying to twist away, trying to recall a spell that might send her
stumbling back without attracting undue attention. That was the trick, wasn’t it? Weaponize spellcraft
as much as you want, torment other apprentices as much as you dare, but for the Maker’s sake, be
**subtle** about it. “An elf or a wolf?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Find him for me, and I will make sure you are amply rewarded. Master
Danarius is a powerful mage; I could introduce you to him when next the magisterium gathers.”

**And is he as charming as you?** Feynriel thought darkly, letting subtle heat spring to his fingertips,
counteracting the bone-deep chill. *I imagine the two of you are just a hoot.* “Very well. Send a
description to my lodgings,” he said, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. These mages
were suckers for conspiracy; more than half the time, all he really needed was to play along and
they’d find a way to hang themselves without his help. “His name, his background, his appearance.
I’ll need,” bother, what bullshit to ask for this time? “something he touched. Something
**important.** Not just a table knife he moved once, but something that stayed against his skin for prolonged period
of time.”

She was nodding along, intent, unblinking. No longer threatening now that he seemed sufficiently
cowed. It was funny how many people tried to take advantage of his rare power without actually
understanding how it worked—if she knew anything at all, she would have been able to smell
bullshit on the wind. “I will do this,” she said. Then, as if it meant anything to him: “I am Hadriana.”

“Of course you are,” Feynriel said. When her eyes narrowed, he added, “Everyone has heard of you
and your great master, obviously.”

That pleased her more than anything. The smug smile that stretched her face would have been funny if he was in any sort of a laughing mood. “Very well,” she said. Hadriana reached out to brush one talon-like fingernail down the center of his chest, smile stretching when he flinched back. Those chilling eyes never left his face. “I look forward to your cooperation, Feynriel,” she purred before turning and slinking away, silent as any shade.

Feynriel shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself. He could feel the lingering echo of her touch, and it was all he could do not to turn on his heel and flee the room—the party—Minrathous itself. Maker. It felt like everyone was watching him. Balls, maybe they were—maybe they were staring at the stupid half-elf and laughing behind their creepy dead eyes.

He needed to get out of here. He needed to hide.

Feynriel took a step back, bumping into a delicate table and nearly sending a likely priceless vase toppling. A semi-familiar apprentice was looking his way, brows arched in amused disdain. Feynriel cursed under his breath and quickly straightened the vase, holding onto its delicate rim until he was certain it was steady. Then he carefully carefully carefully backed away…only to clip against the elbow of a woman in glittering white robes.

“Apologies,” he muttered in Tevene, ducking his head and trying to ignore her scathing glare. He felt all at once too big for his skin, limbs long and awkward, body no longer fully under his control. It was the threat he’d seen in Hadriana’s eyes—the ice of her unwanted touch—something getting under his skin and sending him spiraling out of balance. (It took so little to have him spooked; he’d never much felt at home in his own skin.) “Apologies,” he said again beneath his breath, to the room at large, to his master, to himself. To a mother who thought he was in Tevinter learning to be a great man and to Aidan Hawke, who saved him only for Feynriel to fucking step in it every chance he got. No one paid him any mind, even as he crept along the perimeter of the room, making a beeline for a heavy set of drapes he’d noticed earlier in the evening. And wasn’t that just fucking sad that he made a habit out of seeking out places to hide every time he left the safety of his rooms? (Almost as sad as the fact that he made a habit out of ducking into those little alcoves every chance he got.) But Maker he was glad for it now. He couldn’t leave the party without causing offense, but hiding? Hiding he was so very good at.

Feynriel glanced around the room to make sure no one was watching him—the coast seemed clear, mingling guests too busy with each other to pay him much mind. Drawing a breath, Feynriel slipped behind the heavy fold of the curtain, letting it flutter behind him as he retreated deeper into the little alcove.

It was dark, thick drapery blocking light and muffling sound. It felt like being in the womb—or, more apt, like yanking his blankets over his head and squeezing his eyes shut. In other words, pure heaven. Feynriel let out a ragged breath and shuffled back toward the window, feeling his way with outstretched fingertips…

…and nearly yowling with surprise when his hand came in contact with all-too-living flesh.

“Maker!” he yelped, stumbling back, arms pinwheeling violently.

The figure moved fast, jerking out to snag his bare upper arm, grip tight—keeping him from tripping on the trailing end of his own robe and toppling ass-over-teakettle back into the party. Feynriel caught an impression of flashing white teeth against dark skin and gold heavy around a bare bicep. The man’s grip tightened before slowly letting go. “Are you quite all right?” he asked, in barely-
accented Common. Amusement curled around each word, but it didn’t sound as if the stranger was outright laughing at him. That was a pleasant change of pace. “Catch your feet again?”

“Something close enough, I suppose,” Feynriel muttered. He brushed back the long tendrils of ash-blond hair spilling from his ridiculously fancy braid. Thank the Maker for the darkness of the alcove, or the stranger would be able to see his cheeks flaming bright red. “Erm—thank you. And I apologize; I didn’t see you there.”

“Well,” the man said, sitting on the (open) windowsill again. “That would be because I am hiding, naturally. I dare say it would defeat the purpose if I were easily seen.”

“Um,” Feynriel said. He had…no idea how to respond to that. It never occurred to him that someone else might want to hide from the festivities.

He glanced once over his shoulder, anxious. The party seemed so wonderfully distant, so inconsequential. The drapes muffled everything until it became a wall of indistinct sound; the breeze felt wonderfully cooling against his flushed cheeks. He didn’t want to leave.

The stranger seemed to sense that. “Here,” he said, gesturing next to him. The window was broad enough (and Feynriel skinny enough, in the way all underfed alienage brats were skinny) that they could sit side-by-side and still not be touching. “Perhaps you would care to join me?”

“…didn’t you come back here to be alone?” I did, he didn’t add—wasn’t sure he needed to. Something about the stranger was causing the tension to bleed from his shoulders slowly but surely. He didn’t necessarily consider himself a quick judge of character, but he was already fairly certain that this handsome man (mage? Yes, easy enough to assume so, judging by the fine robes he wore) meant him no harm. “I should leave you be.”

He just waved Feynriel off, rings catching the dull light. “You hardly seem like the kind to be a bother,” he said. “You’re Feynriel, aren’t you? Don’t worry,” he added with another quick, quixotic grin as Feynriel pulled back, “I won’t ask you to murder my enemies in their sleep or whatever horrid little crimes my peers pester you for. Please, sit.”

And to Feynriel’s utter surprise, he did. He was moving on instinct even before his brain fully kicked in, settling on the windowsill next to the strange mage and drawing up his legs to wrap his arms around his shins. Like a child, but the other man didn’t seem to care.

“There now,” he said, smiling at Feynriel. “We can both hide away, and no one else the wiser.”

Feynriel rested his chin on his knees. “Why are you hiding?” he asked, studying the other man’s face. There was just enough starlight that Feynriel was able to make out the vague shape of him, now that his eyes were adjusting. Dark hair cut very short; dark eyes with ridiculously long lashes; a carefully manicured moustache; a crooked smile that didn’t seem half as cruel as he’d come to expect from the powerful. Handsome, Feynriel supposed, though Krem had gotten so under his skin that he barely recognized that fact as anything more than a curious abstract. “Oh. And what’s your name?”

“I had wondered when you’d call me out for being unforgivably rude,” the man said dryly. He pressed a hand over his chest. “Dorian Pavus, at your disposal.”

Pavus, Pavus. He knew that name. “You’re…apprenticed to Magister Alexius?” Feynriel asked slowly, drawing fragments of memory and gossip together. He only paid as much attention to the various alliances and enmities as necessary, preferring to keep as far away from the constant battle that was Tevinter culture as possible, but sometimes information made it through his self-imposed embargo. Magister Alexius, his son, and his brilliant protégé were supposedly working on high-level
theoretical magics—impressive enough to have tongues wagging despite (or maybe because of) their refusal to use…all the tools at their disposal.

Which Feynriel was safe assuming meant blood magic.

Dorian’s smile was widening, growing increasingly laconic. He leaned back against the sill, watching Feynriel with an arched brow. “You’ve heard of me, then? Hopefully good things. I do so like to be admired.”

Feynriel laughed, startled. “Yeah? Well, I’m sure you’ve got enough admirers already—you don’t need to add me.”

“And if I wanted to add you?” he murmured, tipping his head the other way, those pretty eyes of his locked on Feynriel’s face.

Feynriel felt his cheeks heat again, stomach dropping like a rock in water. Oh. Oh, awkward. “You’d have a rough time of it, I’m afraid,” he said, squirming a little in place. Dorian really was remarkably attractive, of course, but he wasn’t Krem. Feynriel didn’t know how or why or, or, or whatever, but he’d never found anyone other than Krem particularly attractive. He’d never wanted to find anyone other than Krem attractive, and the few times when someone showed interest were uniformly mortifying and awful. “I’m, um, taken. I mean. I have a Voice, of course. And I guess you could say I’m pretty devoted to him.”

There. Let Dorian make of that whatever he wanted. Feynriel was already mentally retreating, ready to make tracks the moment the words unum vinctum passed the other man’s lips.

But, once again, Dorian surprised him. He leaned forward, a curiously intent look on his face. “Voice,” he said, as if testing the word out. His tongue flicked out to touch his upper lip in a surprisingly obvious tell. All that easy, flirtatious bullshit was gone, replaced by something…quieter. More honest. And…afraid? Gah, Feynriel had never been all that great at reading people. “Right, yes, of course. You’re a Marcher. Things are…different where you come from.”

“Yes,” Feynriel said, thinking of all those unum vinctum he had seen, their eyes suitably lowered, as silent as any shadow. The mere idea of Krem being treated like that—of Krem being considered little more than his slave—never failed to make him flush with silent rage. Of all the downfalls of Tevinter culture—of all the things he frankly detested—that was the worst.

Though to be a little fair, a part of him whispered, it isn’t as if a mage and his Voice can be free in the Marches either.

He pushed that thought aside.

Dorian was still studying him—silently, measuringly, as if trying to decide what to say next. As if weighing his words oh so carefully. Finally he flicked his tongue against his upper lip again (definitely a tell, and proof enough how very nervous the other man was), and added, “Ah. Not to be unforgivably forward, but what can you tell me about your…Voice?”

“About my Voice?” He’d rather tumble face-first into the void than tell any Tevinter, no matter how nice, about Krem.

Dorian was already shaking his head, however, waving away the words. “No, no, of course, I mean in general. The…concept intrigues me, you could say.” He paused, brows twitching faintly together, and dropped his gaze—just for a moment, barely enough to give him away. “Being a scholarly sort and all, you know.”
“I’m not a science experiment,” Feynriel said, beginning to stand.

Dorian just held out his hand, rings flashing gold in the moonlight. “A scholarly sort,” he said, voice so incredibly quiet, “with, you could say, a…vested interest.”

Oh.

Oh.

Feynriel sat back, a prickle of gooseflesh sweeping down his arms. He could count on one hand all the times he had been asked about Voices here: for most Tevinter mages, it wasn’t a concept they cared to understand. Things were _different_ in Tevinter. Even Feynriel’s own master kept an _unum vinctum_—a quiet Ferelden girl who followed like a shadow in his footsteps.

For the first few months of Feynriel’s apprenticeship, he’d been so horrified by the golden collar about her pretty throat that he’d barely been able to focus past the rage. He’d tried to corner her alone, to ask her if she wanted help escaping; all she’d ever said, in a voice as soft as a raven’s wing: “I am where I am meant to be.”

As if she had become so brainwashed by the magister that she no longer wished to be free. Or maybe it was just a perverted echo of love that was supposed to bloom between a mage and their Voice: but Feynriel couldn’t imagine how such obvious servitude could be mistaken for _love_, and he burned brighter and brighter with each _unum vinctum_ he passed, determined to learn what he could to be _safe_ so he could find Krem and and and—

And what? Admit that he’d left so many Voices behind him, trapped in bondage? Admit that he’d been a coward? Admit that he’d lived in Tevinter for so long and still didn’t know what the bloody hell to _do_?

_And oh balls_, Feynriel thought, viciously pushing that self-flagellation away for another day. He’d face that shame when the time came. Now there was…this. Now there was Dorian Pavus, heir to a well-established Tevinter family, asking him about _Voices_. “It’s nothing like what you have here,” Feynriel said—testing the waters.

“That I do not doubt,” Dorian said, and something about the bitter curl of self-hatred in his tone had Feynriel relaxing all over again. This wasn’t one of those mages who thought Tevinter culture was the end-all and be-all of Thedas, he reminded himself. From all he’d heard, Dorian Pavus was…different. And maybe if he could plant the seeds and change one willing Tevinter mind, he wouldn’t feel like such a failure when he finally fled this place in search of Krem.

_One pebble thrown into a whole ocean of fucked-upedness_, Feynriel thought, but he leaned forward on his elbows, willing to give it a shot anyway. If nothing else, it gave him the excuse to talk about his favorite topic for a little while. “All right,” he said. “I can tell you all about Voices.” He faltered then under those bright, curious, _intelligent_ eyes—awkward and uncertain how to begin. “Um, so, what do you want to know?”

“Why don’t we start with everything?” Dorian said, crossing his legs and leaning one elbow against his knee. He propped a chin in his palm, watching Feynriel with open amusement and curiosity and…hunger? Yes, that word felt right: _hunger_. But not for Feynriel himself, he was realizing slowly, that uneasiness drifting away like smoke on a light breeze. More like he was desperate for every bit of knowledge Feynriel could share. As if he were…starved for the little scraps of lore Feynriel had gathered about Voices all his life.

_I wonder_, Feynriel suddenly wondered, feeling a flutter of pity growing deep in the pit of his
stomach, what happens to a Tevinter mage who falls in love with his unum vinctum?

It seemed rude to ask. Even more so, it seemed cruel.

Feynriel cleared his throat. “All right,” he said, trying to settle into his thoughts, increasingly certain that no matter what he said about Voices, this man would understand. Maybe not all of Tevinter, but this Tevinter.

That was…a start? Wasn’t it?

“So, for the rest of us, it begins with a voice in the Fade.”
Dorian

Chapter by delazeur, Khirsah

Dorian sighed and tipped his head back against the small mountain of pillows. The only thing worse than being kidnapped and held prisoner in your childhood home was—

No. No, there really wasn’t anything worse than being kidnapped and held prisoner in your childhood home, was there? Especially not when it seemed your loving parents were all too happy to leave you there to rot.

“Fasta vass,” he muttered, glaring up at his ceiling. It had been a very, very long time since he’d found himself here. He liked to think he was a different man now—grown leagues away from the angry, confused, yearning little twit who used to stare up at this very ceiling every night and wish himself into something, someone, different, if only to please his father. Now he was—

What? Now he was what?

No longer one of the most promising young enchanter’s in the Minrathous Circle, that was for certain. Alexius’ decent into obsessive madness had taken care of that. No longer quite the dutiful son, either. Certainly not a credit to his family’s good name. Not a mage anyone would want to be, not a man anyone would particularly admire.

What was it his father had called him, the day he’d dragged him bodily from Lord Who-sit’s estate? A reprobate. An ingrate. A drunken, lecherous fool determined to ruin everything this family stands for.

Dorian blew out a breath, hating the way his insides cringed at the memory. It had been nearly two months since he’d been pulled out of his…downward spiral…and shipped off to his childhood home to cool his heels. Two months to be angry, to be frustrated, to be restless, to be yes, fine, ashamed.

He was ashamed of the way he’d acted, crawling into the deepest, most licentious pit he could find after failing to pull his former master back from the ledge. He was ashamed of the way he’d deliberately flaunted his excesses; he was ashamed to admit that, deep down, he’d wanted to flame out so badly that someone—his father—would be forced to come down from on high and finally pay attention. To bloody help, all right?

“This,” Dorian told his childhood room, settling deeper into the creaking old bed, “is not helping.”

Though of course, a part of him whispered, lying here in a proper sulk isn’t much help either.

He groaned and covered his eyes with an arm, nearly frustrated enough to send a fireball flying at the far wall. It wouldn’t be quite so bad if his parents hadn’t just left him here, with nothing but a stern warning to keep him prisoner. In theory, he could leave at any time—if he could just get his father’s baleful glare out of his head.

If he wanted to become that reprobate his father took him for.

“Oh, bloody void take it all,” Dorian decided, throwing his arm aside and curling determinedly around one of his many silken pillows. He pressed his face against the cool cloth, breathing through the fireflash of shame shame shame building in his gut, and forced himself to close his eyes.

There was no use wallowing. There was even less use picking at old scabs and expecting the pain to be any less than before. What was done was done, and the truth was he did want to be pulled from
the refuse pit he’d made of himself over the last sloppy few months in the wake of his break with Alexius. If the price of that transformation was enforced exile and boredom, well, then, he may as well wait patiently for his father to remember he existed and count his lucky stars it all wasn’t so much worse.

Still, as Dorian gave himself up to the Fade, he couldn’t quite escape that feeling of having failed: himself, his parents, his teacher, his whole fucking bloodline. It sat heavy on his chest, fit to choke the breath from him. It…hurt. It hurt more than he was willing to admit. And, reeling from that hurt, raw from that shame, there was only one place in the whole of Thedas Dorian wanted to be right now—the one place he hadn’t allowed himself to go for, Maker, could it have been years now?

No. It couldn’t possibly have been that long. …could it?

Standing in the Fade, drifting through the darkness of unsettled dreams, Dorian stilled long enough to let himself listen for the call of his Voice—young and sweet and strong despite how hard Dorian fought every night to ignore it. Wending its way through each pulse of his blood as if somehow the boy he still refused to admit existed had some terrible hold on him.

It’s funny, Dorian thought, drifting subtly closer to that magnetic pull; both afraid and excited to see his Voice again after so long. For all I think about him all the time, I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to be near him.

The last time he’d been weak enough to seek Taran out in the Fade, Alexius’s wife had just been killed. That had been a dark, dark time. Alexius was beside himself, frantic and furious and ripped to shreds by grief; Felix was little more than a pale shell of himself. Dorian had done everything he could think of to help, but the sheer raw power of Alexius’ loss had burned hot as a flame. Every time he tried to draw near, it burned.

Seeing Taran—always from a distance, always for just a few moments at a time—was the only thing that kept him going in those first dark days. The boy had been awkward and coltish and endearingly earnest as he sprinted through Dorian’s dreams. Golden, like something out of a fairy story. Some prince in his earliest stages, stumbling at the threshold of adulthood and so. Fucking. Sweet. It was almost painful to look at him, his smile was so bright.

Yes, Dorian thought, drifting closer, letting himself be pulled faster and faster toward that echoing voice in the darkness. It’s been long enough; a few minutes tonight won’t hurt. Anyone who cared about Dorian tracking down his unum vinctum had long since given up on him, after all. What harm could there be in just…

A flash of light, the scent of salt, the sound of crashing waves that always, always heralded Taran’s approach—as if his Voice had been birthed by the Waking Sea itself. And then—

He was there.

Dorian blinked against the sudden glare of sunlight, lifting one hand to shield his eyes. It was hot against his skin, the dream so real he could feel it in his bones. Sweat pricked at his temples and gathered at the base of his spine. A low wind blew, dragging the edges of his robes around him like tendrils of smoke.

He was standing at the crest of the cliff overlooking the Waking Sea. Many, many yards below him was the open span of the beach—a wide swath of sand, this low in the tide—and behind him crouched the terrible eyesore that was Trevelyan Manor. Dorian didn’t bother glancing back toward that ghastly mausoleum of a home, instead lifting the ends of his robe and beginning the treacherous climb down to the shore. Taran was almost never near the house. It was almost as if the boy were as
wary of it and its ghosts as Dorian was of his own father.

Considering the gothic horror of Taran’s life, he supposed he couldn’t blame him.

The wind kicked up again, blowing a fine mist of ocean spray across his cheeks. He could hear the scuff of feet drifting up from the beach far below, underscored by the occasional grunt of effort. Taran was either rescuing mages in his dreams again (and Maker, but it was ridiculous how that warmed his heart), or practicing his swordplay.

He hurried his steps, taking less care with the steep path than he would if this weren’t all a dream. Now that he was close, he suddenly couldn’t stand another moment not in Taran’s company. It was remarkable he managed to stay away for so long at a time, resisting the siren call he heard every night, determined to keep his young Voice safe. That was what mattered most—keeping Taran from the collar, the shame, the, the, the utter horror of becoming an unum vinctum. A boy like Taran, with his sunny smile and irrepressible charm, would wither away in captivity. A boy like Taran, with his fierce sense of right and wrong and his drive to help everyone around him, would be broken by the corruption of Tevinter. A boy like Taran…

A boy like…

A boy…

Dorian slowed his steps as he reached the base of the cliff, staring across the little span of beach where Taran was practicing his swordplay—shirtless and gleaming with sweat, and holy fucking Maker, certainly no boy any longer.

The Voice he had last seen, so long ago, had been gawky and endearingly awkward, arms and legs far too long for his body, hands and feet ridiculously big. He’d never been scrawny, even as a little boy, but it always seemed as if he was half-starved for food and affection and bloody well everything. Too lean and hollowed out for the muscles that were beginning to grow on his coltish frame.

Now.

Now.

Now Taran was something else altogether. He was…

Dorian wet his lips, watching, struck dumb, as the young man he’d loved for years twisted with the elegant dance of his swordwork, muscles straining the sun-kissed gold of his skin. He was tall—taller by Dorian by at least a hand—and deliciously broad across the shoulders. His bare chest was carved perfection, dusted with a light trail of golden-brown hair that darkened bit by bit as it crept down his toned stomach. His loose training pants hung low on his hips, revealing a tempting cut of muscle that, fasta vass, had him all but drooling like a lecher.

He forced his eyes up, feeling his own skin heating. The last he’d seen Taran, he’d had the body of a youth; now, there was no denying he was quickly becoming a man, and for the first time, attraction burned alongside the love he’d long harbored. Fuck, he was standing here all but undressing his Voice with his eyes—he had no idea what to do with this.

“This,” Dorian said, voice breaking in a way that would have been mortifying if Taran were actually able to hear him, “is a little excessive, don’t you think? This whole…” He gestured, taking Taran in from the top of his golden-brown head down to his bare toes flecked with sand. “Absolutely gorgeous thing you’re doing. I’d really rather you stop it right now and go back to being cute and
sexless, thank you.”

Taran twisted with his next steady blow, sword catching the sunlight. His brows were set in concentration, but he was smiling a little, too. That smile, at least, was familiar. It kept Taran from being a complete stranger to him—a stranger he very much wanted to know, to touch, to… To do all sorts of things with and to, and Maker he needed to scrub his brain for all the filth that was sprinting through it.

Dorian gave a huff of breath and moved to a nearby rock, dropping down on it with little elegance. He remembered that half-elf boy he still sometimes wrote to, Feynriel, talking about venturing into the Fade to watch his own Voice practice swordplay for all hours of the night. It had seemed a little strange at the time, but Dorian was beginning to get the appeal now.

Sunlight shone on tanned skin; it glistened off every damned bead of sweat streaming down Taran’s impressive shoulders, back, chest. Dorian actually licked his lips, feeling like a terrible pervert and unable to help himself from imagining following one of those intriguing trails with his tongue.

He covered his face with his hands and groaned. “You. Are. Too. Young. For. Me. To. Be. This. Interested!” he said, voice muffled. He was half-hard and certainly hot enough beneath the collar to warrant every kind of shame possible. Maker, Taran couldn’t be much more than eighteen—if that. Just a couple of years shy of thirty himself, Dorian should have been able to trust himself not to be enticed by such…absolutely glorious displays of youth. He’d certainly seen to it that he had experience of the flesh enough, no matter how solidly his heart was taken.

And yet—and yet—there was no denying now that he was very, very interested in Taran Trevelyan in every possible way. The near-innocent love he’d been harboring for the boy he saw in flashes through the years was quickly changing on him, expanding, growing into something terrifyingly real and adult as he grappled with the fact that the little boy of his heart was no longer quite so little anymore.

That his Voice could maybe someday be a true partner, a true lover, in every sense of the word. A, a, a bondmate, a husband, a—

He stood up with a start, heart racing with something that felt like terror at the thought. Taran, unaware of his fear, continued to move across the sand with focused grace; leonine and strong and heartbreakingly beautiful. It was all too easy to let himself imagine leaning against that strong body—tucking his head against Taran’s shoulder, just tall enough to press his face into the curve of his neck. Taking strength from a warm hand at the base of his spine and the scent of the sea and the solid, loving comfort of another person—another man—there at his side for longer than one hurried night at a time.

“I doubt you realize this,” Dorian said, voice breaking again, “but you have just become the most dangerous person in my life.”

The most dangerous, and the most tempting. No desire demon had anything on Taran Trevelyan. Because now that he’d had the thought, now that he’d let himself imagine what actually being with his Voice would be like, he could actually feel his heart breaking over the knowledge that it could never happen. He was an altus of Tevinter; Taran was his unum vinctum. If anyone discovered he had found Taran and refused to claim him…

Dorian dropped his face into his hands, squeezing his eyes shut as if he could somehow erase the image burned into his brain. It would have been better if he’d gone on thinking of Taran as that distant boy he’d give his life to protect. It hurt enough being away from him; keeping himself away from the possibility of a fully realized romantic life was, venhedis, absolute torture.
But he would do it.

To keep Taran safe, he would do just about anything.

“I should go,” he said—not wanting to. That was the greatest danger in all of this, though, wasn’t it? How little he wanted to leave Taran’s side. “I should…return to wallowing. I should—” He sighed, dropped his hands. “It is a very good thing I am principled when it comes to you, you realize,” Dorian said. “Because the way I have been acting recently—the things I have done—have not made me a very good man. Maybe not even a decent man. And I can’t help but think…well.”

His lips twisted into a smile. “You deserve the very best, don’t you?”

Taran didn’t respond. But then, bathed in sunlight, his own smile toying at the corner of his lips, his eyes clear and back straight and body strong, he didn’t exactly need to.

Dorian opened his mouth to say one final goodbye, heart aching—when suddenly the world tipped sideways.

He startled up, one hand lifting to protect himself, fingertips glowing with dark energy as he was yanked from the Fade. His room was dark, wreathed in late night shadows so deep he almost missed the figure leaning over him until it clapped a clammy hand across his mouth.

Dorian gave a shout, struggling up, only to be pushed back. “Hush, you idiot boy!” Lucia hissed, face swinging closer to his in the darkness.

Narrowing his eyes, Dorian bit her bony hand.

Lucia muttered something beneath her breath, but at least she dropped her hand and pulled back. Dorian shoved away the light sheet covering him, swinging up to stand next to her. Whatever his father’s unum vinctum was doing in his bedroom this late at night, he had no intention of facing the harpy lying down. In fact, he—

Wait.

If Lucia was here, in this house, then his father couldn’t be far behind.

“So he finally decided to remember he had a son,” Dorian said, crossing his arms. He refused to look cowed in front of Lucia. The two of them had been little better than rival cats ever since he was old enough to realize his father’s narrowed-eyed shadow wasn’t another mother. She was probably delighted how far he’d fallen in everyone’s favor. She’d certainly enjoy reminding him he’d done this to himself, given half the chance. “Though maybe not one he’s willing to remind the magisterium of yet—I presume that’s why the two of you chose to steal in here like thieves in the night when—”

She gave a frustrated hiss of breath, cutting him off before he could find his way to truly self-righteous. “Dorian, listen to me,” Lucia said. “There isn’t—”

Like hell was he going to allow her to shush him. He wasn’t exactly a child anymore. “Or was he hoping to catch me unawares? Perhaps see if I had found a way to backslide into my…what did he call it?...disgusting little display of—”

“Shut up,” the unum vinctum hissed, baring her teeth at him, “and listen to me for once in your Maker-damned life!”

The fury behind those words—the fear—was enough to shock Dorian into silence. He and Lucia
were always at each other’s’ throats for as long as he could remember, but she’d always kept some
measure of proper respect in her tone. Even when she was at her most needling, she was at least
aware she was the scion of House Pavus and the son of her master.

This? This was a new side to Lucia—a frightened, human side that had him studying her in a new
light. Her eyes were wide, a little wild, and her lips pale. She was… Was she trembling?

“What is happening?” Dorian asked, reaching out on some impulse to catch her (cold) hands
between his own. He rubbed them briskly, warming them as if she hadn’t always hated him. “Are
you all right?”

Lucia closed her eyes. “Yes,” she said. “But you aren’t.”

“Well that is hardly news.”

Lucia tugged her hands free, lips pressed into a thin line; she was still quaking, nervous in a way he
had never seen her before. “No, Dorian,” she said, keeping her voice low. “You don’t understand.
You’re in terrible danger right now. Your father is in his study, preparing a spell that…”

She trailed off, helpless, as if she couldn’t even find the words to encompass her horror.

“What?” Dorian demanded. His head must have still been foggy with sleep, because none of this
made any sense. “What kind of spell? Why would he slip home in the middle of the night to cast it—
and why would it put me in any danger?” And, with a surety he felt to his bones: “My father would
never do anything to hurt me.”

“She’s at the end of his rope with you,” Lucia said. “You’re so void-bent on ruining your life and
taking the rest of your family down with you—he doesn’t know how to stop it, except to…change
that part of you that makes you resist your fate.”

“What are you talking about?”

Lucia made a frustrated noise and stalked away, going to yank open Dorian’s wardrobe. She began
pulling out his clothes at random, tossing them toward the bed with neat, almost weaponized
efficiency. She’d gladly helped pack him off to this school or that over the years; she certainly had
the method down to a science.

“Lucia,” Dorian said, baffled, annoyed, and increasingly anxious himself, no matter that he was
nearly thirty and hardly a child she could terrorize anymore, “what are you doing?”

“Once you see I’m telling the truth, you’ll want to be able to escape as quickly as possible,” she said,
moving efficiently through his room, beginning to pack his things. Clothes and his favorite books
and jewels and mementos—all the things he would have reached for first if he had been the one
trying to uproot his life. If he gave himself a moment to consider it, it would be shocking how well
his father’s unum vinctum knew him. “There’s a small window while your father draws enough
blood and arranges the reagents for the spell, but it won’t last forever. You’ll have to—”

Flaring with (terrified) fury, Dorian caught her about the shoulders and forced her to turn and look at
him. He could feel the magic rising in him, reacting, wanting to blast out in a show of power, but he
swallowed it back as he met her eyes. Controlling himself with everything he had, Dorian said, “You
need to stop and explain yourself. Kaffas. What do you mean by insinuating my father would stoop
to blood magic? He would never. Lucia—he would never.”

“But he is,” she said, gently. It was that unexpected softness that startled him into letting her go—into
almost, for a moment, believing her. “He doesn’t want to, but he thinks this is the only way. If he can
change you, maybe you’ll fall in line and be the heir he needs.” She drew a hand across her brow, looking all at once old and frail. Too thin, as if she hadn’t been eating well for weeks. “He thinks he can make you content—maybe even happy. But first he has to violate everything you are, and I can’t just stand by and watch him ruin himself like this.”


Lucia lifted her hands to his chest and shoved back, hard. “You couldn’t just be like the rest of us, could you?” she said. “You couldn’t just bend when you had to; you had to make him break you? Well, breaking you is going to break him, and I can’t, I won’t, I won’t allow that to happen. I won’t stand by and watch the other half of my soul shatter just because everything in this Maker-forsaken country has given itself over to corruption.”

He’d never heard her talk like this; he’d never even imagined she could. Lucia had belonged to his father for longer than Dorian had been alive. He’d assumed that somewhere along the way, she’d forgotten what it was like to be Nevarran, to be a free woman. He supposed he’d always assumed that his father had broken her in all those years, until she’d become the unum vinctum instead of the Voice.

“How?” he asked quietly, not wanting to believe her but beginning to despite himself. That kind of passion had to come from somewhere. “How does he plan to change me? What is he trying to do?”

She turned away from him again, back to packing his things. Instead of fighting her, Dorian moved to help. If she was wrong about all of this—and Maker, she had to be wrong, to be deluded, didn’t she?—then it wouldn’t hurt anything to have gone through this trouble. He would simply pretend this night never happened, and in the morning they’d go back to snipping at each other whenever his father wasn’t looking. But if she was telling the truth…

“…some kind of spell,” Lucia was saying. “It requires a great deal of blood, both his and yours. I don’t know how it works, but he said it would change your nature. You would no longer care for men the way you do.” He refused to wince to hear her say it. “You would no longer want to fight against getting married, or joining your father’s politics, or whatever else it was he needed of you. You would become…” She trailed off.

“Lobotomized,” Dorian finished for her, utterly cold.

“Docile,” she agreed, glancing over at him. That unexpected kindness was back in her eyes again. No, not kindness…kinship. As if she understood exactly how he felt. “Certainly not you anymore. And he wouldn’t recover from the guilt.” Lucia reached over and gently plucked the robe Dorian was holding between nerveless fingers. “Go on,” she added, tipping her head toward the door. “He’s so focused on preparations that he won’t hear you if you want to spy in on him. Go see for yourself so you know beyond any doubt what he plans for you; I’ll finish packing your bag so you can be ready to run.”

“No, Dorian thought, wanting to push back against the possibility that any of this could be real. If he just shoved her out of his room and went back to bed—drew the blankets up and squeezed his eyes tight—all of this would go away.

But if she was telling the truth…

If his father truly did mean to commit this act of violence…

If his father…
“He wouldn’t,” Dorian said quietly, wishing he was young and blind and foolish enough to believe that. To believe that the love his stern father had for him was strong enough to stand against the sheer crushing weight of centuries of family expectation. His father did love him; he believed that much.

But there was also a piece of him that believed his father truly would do this, just to see his bloodline continue.

The way Lucia looked at him hurt. It hurt, and it made him angry, and it made him want to run scared into the night, as if the years had never passed and he was that frustrated little boy again: struggling against the world he never quite fit into. “I’ll prove you wrong,” Dorian said, even though he already believed she was telling the truth. He already, deep down, believed his father was capable of doing this to him—and that was reason enough to leave House Pavus and never look back.

Lucia—his father’s unum vinctum—the woman who’d challenged him all his life, at every turn—smiled in a way that nearly broke his heart. “Oh Dorian,” she said, far more affection on those two words than she had ever shown him before in his miserable life, “I really wish you would.”
“Stop gaping,” Cassius hissed beneath his breath. He was standing in a new suit of armor, polished to an impossible shine. His brand new, untried, blade was strapped to one hip. “People are beginning to notice.”

Taran glanced at his brother, one corner of his mouth quirking. “I doubt anyone cares enough to look twice at me,” he said, but he did try to keep from staring at everything around him. It was a nearly impossible task. The whole mountainside seemed to echo with energy, excitement, nerves and fear. Templars marched down the rutted street in rows of two, and the rebel mages drew together in a solid wall of defiance, murmuring amongst themselves.

The tension was so strong, it was a physical presence. But there was hope here, too, Taran thought—caught in the whispers that swept through the temple of sacred ashes: Divine Justinia will make this right.

Whether or not a single woman could live up to such heightened expectation remained to be seen.

Taran followed in his brother’s footsteps, three paces behind like the obedient squire he was pretending to be. There hadn’t been enough coin to buy him new arms and armor, so he was in Cassius’ castoffs; the edges were worn so thin they were in danger of going ragged, and the tooled leather breastplate fit poorly across Taran’s broader chest. If he just sat still and didn’t breathe like his brother had commanded, he should be fine, but…

But there was just so much to see.

“Taran!”

Cassius didn’t strike him or cuff him upside the head—he wasn’t a boy any longer, in need of his brother’s all-too-firm hand—but Taran jerked to attention all the same. He bit back the sheepish expression, knowing it would only make Cassius angrier, and hurried to keep pace. The rocky path beneath their feet was newly paved, and the mountains rose high and majestic around them. It looked like the sort of place one would fight a dragon, face clever traps and riddles, and discover ancient treasure.

“Do you suppose there really was a dragon?” Taran asked, voice pitched low. He cast a quick look at the big iron bell as they passed, wondering if the Hero of Ferelden really had used it to call down the temple’s guardian. A few of the younger-looking mages were edging around it, talking in excited whispers. Taran wanted nothing more than to join them; to explore this place he’d read so much about and relive the Warden’s adventures in his head as if he really was still a child. “Would you have called the dragon to fight, or would you have tried to find a way around it?”

Cassius just kept walking.

Taran did his best to keep pace and not let his imagination get the better of him—but even Cassius had to briefly slow as another neat phalanx of Templars approached from the west, plate metal clashing as they moved in step. The mages clustered near the bell straightened at once, hands hovering at their staves, eyes narrowed in suspicion. All except one, whose back was turned to the Templars. She reached out and rapped the hilt of her small knife against the ancient metal, laughing at the hollow toll of the dragon’s bell.
One of her friends elbowed her in the side and she swung around, lips parted in question. When she spotted the approaching Templars, her grip on the blade shifted and that open, friendly expression melted into something fierce; something hateful. She bared her teeth and stiffened, tense as a crouching wolf.

_I should do something_, Taran thought, twisting around and walking backwards on the path to the mountain temple, eyes darting between the two groups. The Templars could have turned rank and file north at any moment, but they kept doggedly to their current trajectory. Taran watched as a few reached down to grip the hilts of swords; others glanced at each other with speaking looks. _I should say something._

But…what? What in the void could he do, say, to make this kind of antagonism right? And why would anyone bother listening?

“Taran!” Cassius snapped, sounding truly angry now.

Taran sighed, turning, and hurried to keep pace with Cassius, leaving the potential stand-off behind. The truth was, there was nothing he could do to make this right, and there was no one here who would listen even if he managed to scrabble together the right words. Why should they listen to him—the last son of a poor family; the dead end of House Trevelyan. A…what had Cassius called him? A gawping yokel, so sheltered that _this_ was his first time stepping foot past the broken moors of Ostwick.

This: the nexus of the mage-templar wars. The beginning (if all went as the Divine planned) of a new peace.

_At least_, Taran comforted himself, following his brother up the wide stone steps and into the temple proper, _you’re here to witness history_. Today wouldn’t be just another chapter in one of his books. Today he’d be allowed to live it, for good or for ill.

The inside of the Temple of Sacred Ashes was cool and clean, all polished stone and colored glass. It had been an abandoned ruin at one point—back when Warden Solona Amell had fought her way through with her companions at her side—but since its rediscovery, a legion of Chantry devotees had rebuilt it stone by stone. Each niche they passed, each painstakingly detailed tapestry they didn’t take time to admire, spoke of a hundred thousand pilgrims pouring prayers and resources and time into saving this holy place from the edge of ruin.

He wished he was more religious, so he could really appreciate what had to be the palpable touch of the Maker himself—but instead, Taran contented himself with admiring marble statues and trying to read the names carved in memorials along the wide flagstones, promising himself he’d come back someday to truly come to grips with this place and what it meant.

Or, even better, to explore around every corner for signs of the exciting trials the Hero of Ferelden had undergone.

Past the narthex and into the nave, the cavernous room was filled to bursting. The mages and Templars were milling in, of course, carefully keeping to opposite sides of the temple, but there were also city guardsmen and well-dressed nobles from many of the major houses across Ferelden, the Marches, and Orlais. There were guild representatives and chevaliers and merchantmen and even a few Dalish, keeping to the corners of the room with a wary eye for anyone who approached.

All of Thedas was here, it seemed; all of Thedas was waiting for the Divine to appear and ascend the steps to the chancel where she very well might finally put an end to the bloodshed once and for all.
“…Maker damn the lot of them,” Cassius was saying. He grabbed for Taran’s elbow, pulling him out of his tumbling daydreams and to an abrupt stop. Taran had a vague memory of his brother being kind once—years and years ago—but time and old ghosts had worn him down until he wore his bitterness like a new face. It had carved grooves into flesh, shadows beneath his eyes, wrinkles fanning out despite his relatively young age. Those strong fingers that had once taken his childish hand in theirs now dug hard into the muscle of Taran’s bicep.

It was too bad the Divine Mother couldn’t find a few words to bring peace to Cassius, too.

“You’d think they would have already eaten their fill, feasting off the corpse of the Trevelyan estates. Look at them, the lot of vultures.”

Taran followed Cassius’ gaze, spotting familiar faces in the crowd. He wasn’t often brought to meetings between local lords, but he thought he may have spoken a word or two with the heirs of House Cyrene before. He’d certainly heard enough about them that he could practically recite their history by heart. “All the houses were invited, Cassius,” he pointed out.

Cassius’s upper lip curled. “But no one bloody well invited them to sit in the Trevelyan pew.”

The big, boisterous family had spilled out of their own assigned seats, Taran noticed—and, yes, there were a couple sitting at the far end of the Trevelyan pew. But, “Their family is bigger than ours,” he had to point out. “There are ten of them here; the two of us don’t need an entire pew.”

The look Cassius shot him could have flayed skin from bone if he wasn’t all but immune to it by now. “It isn’t about what we need,” Cassius said, “it’s what we’re due. If the other houses see us allowing Cyrene to encroach on our territory, they’ll think us powerless.”

Who cares what they think, Taran didn’t say, because at least he knew enough about politics to realize he knew absolutely nothing at all. As the youngest of fourteen children—most of them long dead or scattered to all corners of the world—he’d never been expected to take over the stewardship of the family’s name. He’d never really been expected to do much of anything but stay out of people’s way. Which, since Cassius didn’t exactly need him underfoot for this…

“I’m sure you’ll handle it, brother,” Taran said loyally. “While you do, I was hoping I could maybe glance around. Pay my respects,” he added quickly.

Cassius waved him off, attention fixed on the Cyrene family and his own growing sense of injured self-importance. “Just be back in time for the processional,” he said. “I can’t be seen without a squire.”

“Of course!” he said, then darted off before Cassius could change his mind. He felt all of fifteen again—instead of an oh-so mature eighteen—filled to bursting with curiosity and excitement and a growing longing for adventure. Some of that gnawing need had been filled over the years by being able to help with the mage underground, but this—this—was the kind of thing he’d truly longed for. To be in the middle of history as it happened. To witness the tectonic changes in the world and not be tucked away in a forgotten old mansion with its wind-swept moors and crashing sees and ghosts haunting his every step.

Josselyn would have loved this, Taran thought, skirting about a group of nobles and casting a glance up up up at the high ceiling. She’d been dead for nearly longer than he could remember, but still, he couldn’t help but think she would have come exploring with him; he could practically feel the chill of her hand in his, the whisper of her breath at the back of his neck.

The main chapel was beautiful—a monument to both ancient and modern architecture—even
crammed to bursting with people. Yet it wasn’t what he was more eager to see. That was deeper in the mountainside, branching off from the temple in long, winding corridors. If he hurried, he might be able to glimpse a fraction of what the Hero had seen before he had to be back at his brother’s side.

He took the first left at the transept, ducking into a long hallway. There was another knot of mages here, and they all watched him warily as he passed. Taran kept his head down and his eyes on the flagstones, both to reassure them that no matter his size, he meant no threat and to make sure no one recognized him. The last thing he needed was for one of the apostates he’d helped to speak up where word could get to his brother; there’d be no coming back from that. If Cassius didn’t murder him right on the spot, he’d drag him immediately back to Ostwick and make the manor house his tomb.

They didn’t speak as he slipped by. His soft leather soles slapped against stone, echoing down the hall as he hurried his pace, then took the first turn, ducking out of sight. Left, left, he thought, trying to commit his path to memory. He could easily see getting lost in the temple; it was huge, sprawling out from its main chapel in a labyrinth of rooms and tunnels. On instinct, Taran took a turn that would bring him deeper into the mountain, then another, then another. He trailed his fingers along the cool stone walls as they grew less polished and more aged. As he explored deeper into the heart of the temple, he was leaving tapestries and delicate statues behind. There were fewer sconces lighting the way, and the low-flickering light cast long shadows across increasingly jagged floors.

This had to be what the Warden had experienced.

He bit his lip, wishing he was still young enough to play-pretend. If so, he would be Warden Alistair, eyeing the darkness with wary experience, ready to go leaping into battle at the first sign of trouble. Or maybe he would be the Sister Leliana, clever knives spinning as quick as her knowing tongue.

“Probably you’d just be the dog,” he said dryly, then winced at the way his voice echoed far too loud down the halls. Taran paused, casting a quick glance over his shoulder…but no one poked their heads out of rough-hewn doorways. No one seemed to be around to hear.

From what felt like far, far away, drifting from outside the temple came the tolling of a bell. The bell? Likely. He couldn’t hear the hubbub of the main chapel anymore, but it was likely deafening as everyone filed to their assigned seats. The Divine Justinia would be making her way inside soon, flanked by her Left and Right Hands, and shortly after that each noble house would be expected to present itself to be tallied, followed by representatives from the guilds, the merchants, the mages and Templars.

Time to go, he thought, casting a wistful look over his shoulder toward a dark bend of hallway. There was so much more to be explored; there was so much he hadn’t seen. But Cassius would flay him alive if Taran left him waiting for even a moment.

He began to turn…then hesitated and turned back, smiling to himself. “Just around the corner,” Taran compromised, hurrying down the last bit of hallway to see where that final bend would take him. It was probably just another long corridor, but if he didn’t check, he’d spend the rest of his life dreaming of what he could have seen. “Just around the corner, and then back to Cassius.”

His footsteps echoed around him, and the distant toll of the bell seemed to thrum deep inside his body. Humming almost, like electricity just beneath his skin. Taran shivered, trailing his fingers along the cold wall, letting the dreamlike excitement of the moment overtake him. For a brief flash, he was Warden Alistair; exploring a ruin lost to legend, searching for the ashes that would save his dying kin, trusting that somehow he and the brave woman he followed would save the day no matter the odds. No matter how impossible the stakes. No matter—

He turned the corner.
It wasn’t another long hall. Instead, after about twenty feet, a huge carved brass door stood firmly shut and gleaming in the fickle light. Taran cocked his head. The other doors he’d passed had been carved oak or—as he drew deeper into the bowels of the old temple—ancient rough-hewn wood. This was something different. It was...

“Beautiful,” he said, feeling like an idiot for the breathless murmur even as he drew closer. The door seemed to glow with its own warm light. Across its wide face were intricate figures locked in prayer and battle; they seemed to flow, one from the other, as he scanned the scene, trying to place the story it was telling.

There was Andraste, astride her warhorse and leading the head of her army. The exalted march? Maybe, but not all the pieces seemed to fit.

He stepped up to the door, fingertips brushing just over the carved bronze; that buzzing sense of excitement, of electricity building beneath his skin, was all the stronger now, as if it were feeding off his discovery. As if mere proximity to this artifact were enough to pluck magic from the air, despite the fact that he’d never shown his sisters’ gifts.

And then his shoe scuffed something on the rough stone and he looked down, surprised to see...

Was that rust?

Taran crouched, aware of time slipping through his fingers but too curious to turn away now. He dragged his fingers through the fine snowdrift of dust, and sure enough the tips were tinged reddish-brown. He glanced up, brows knit, and spotted the thrown locks. They were huge and ancient—older than anything he had ever seen—and judging by the amount of rust gathering along the hinges, long-sealed. The fresh layer of rust littering the threshold could only mean the door had been thrown open for the first time in an age not that far in the past…and the mystery of that discovery was just too strong to deny.

Straightening, Taran reached for the hooked door handle. He pressed one hand on the wide face of the door, just above blessed Andraste herself, and gave it a shove.

Just a glimpse, he told himself as the door swung wide, revealing the antechamber of a much, much larger room—a room almost as big as the main temple itself, where everyone waited with bated breath for Divine Justinia’s wisdom. Twin stone stairways hooked from the left and right of the antechamber, leading to a wrap-around balcony. The room beyond was dark, save for a strange flickering light just beyond Taran’s line of sight.

Red, and green, and charged with unmistakable power.

Taran hesitated at the sound of voices murmuring a foreign tongue, a chill working its way down his spine. Whatever he had stumbled in on—whatever he was witnessing—was not meant for his eyes or ears.

Go back a part of him whispered, even as an even larger part urged, see what’s happening.

He wet his lips, straining to pick out sounds nearly lost beneath the deep tolling chant. There were footfalls, and someone breathing heavily, rapidly; animal-scared. A strange pop and sizzle of magic, and the hair along Taran’s arms stood up in instant response.

“Why are you doing this?” He heard a woman’s voice now, heavy with its Orlesian accent and threaded through with pain and fear and outrage. Taran’s heart lurched and began to race at the sound. No, no he definitely wasn’t supposed to be witnessing this. He should go, he should run—but he was rooted to the spot, wishing he had his sword. An army. Something. “You, of all people.”
The chanting stopped, the hum of magic growing to fill its silence, ringing ringing ringing through Taran’s head—too loud, too invasive, like a tuning fork struck within the shell of his skull. Then, rising above it, that strange cold voice again, echoing deep inside him: “Keep the sacrifice still.”

**Sacrifice?**

Taran jerked in place as if struck by a stray bolt, startled. He heard the woman cry out in palpable terror, (“*Someone, help me!*”) and without another thought, without a moment to grapple with the fact that he was nothing more than the dead end of a pauper family, without sword without plan without *anything* but a sudden fierce drive to protect the unknown woman in so much pain, he was lunging forward, pushing his way into the main room.

“What’s going on here?” Taran demanded, gaze sweeping the cavernous space. He drew himself up tall, trying to look imposing, using his impressive height to his advantage as if he could bluff his way into victory—and immediately lost all momentum as he stared, dumbfounded, at the strange tableau waiting for him.

It was a scene from a nightmare. An all-too-real haunting terrifying enough to steal the breath from his lungs in one sharp jab. He only had a moment to take in the scene: Divine Justinia, dressed in holy regalia, held aloft by some pulsing red magic. Around her, figures in dark robes, staves in one hand, bloody knives in the other, cowled heads turning as one toward him.

And, just beyond Justinia—tall and strange and skeletal, with jagged red crystals sprouting from his mostly-human face—was…

Was…

By the Maker, he had no idea what that thing was, but he knew it was going to haunt his dreams for a very long time to come.

Struck dumb, frozen with shock, Taran stared at the macabre creature. He was holding a glowing green orb in one bony claw, dark eyes glittering as he glared at Taran across the nave. Justinia looked so small in comparison—fragile, weak—which only made it all the more shocking when she gave a cry and wrenched her arm free of that strange red magic, backhanding the glowing orb out of the creature’s hands.

It went spinning, hitting the floor and rolling wildly. Several of the cloaked figures lunged for it, but they were too far away, too tangled up in their own bloody ritual to intercept. Taran reacted without thinking, darting to grab the orb as it rolled past, aware of shouts and cries and demon hisses, like nails raking down his spine. He didn’t know what would come next; he had no way of knowing what sort of dark magic he had unwittingly pitted himself against. He just knew that Divine Justinia was counting on him, and he *would not* let her down, even if—

“NO!” the creature howled, lurching toward him, but he was too late. Far, far too late. Taran’s fingers closed around the glowing orb …

…and the world was suddenly lost in an explosion of green light.
“Nice trick you’ve got there,” Dorian said, feeling testy. He didn’t look up from his book, no matter that it was little more than snatches of familiar text and blurred white pages. Funny thing, how the Fade could plumb memories and dreams and the depths of men’s desires, but it couldn’t seem to pull together a fully functional library. “The tolling bells and all. Was that your version of a friendly knock?”

Feynriel paused on the threshold and blinked owlishly at him. “No,” he said. Then, tilting his head: “I mean… What?”

Dorian watched the other man out of the corner of his eyes, even as he casually turned the page, pretending to be engrossed. Feynriel was still dressed in the elaborate Tevinter robe he’d likely worn for the evening, hair pulled in a fetchingly intricate series of braids. There was kohl about his eyes and gold glinting on one bared bicep; he was, undeniably, beautiful, though it was painfully unlikely he’d ever see that for himself.

Also? He was looking increasingly awkward, as if he still hadn’t figured out how to pull off the more complicated dress robes no matter how many years he’d swum with Tevinter sharks.

Dorian sighed and closed the book over his thumb, letting it dissipate in a puff of smoke. He arched a brow at the way Feynriel shifted back and forth in the doorway. “The bells,” Dorian repeated, gesturing. “I assumed they were your way of announcing yourself. Come in; there’s no need to clutter up the doorway. Nice robes,” he added as Feynriel moved across the marble floor. “Fetching. Should I play the ardent admirer tonight?”

Feynriel nearly tripped, looking down—then made a scoffing noise in the back of his throat. “These,” he said, form shifting as effortlessly as if this were his dream and not Dorian’s, “are not my fault.”

“I would never assume otherwise,” Dorian said, watching as Feynriel gracelessly flopped down into an instantly-materializing armchair. The robes were now a comfortably worn green tunic and tan leathers; his hair was back in its low ponytail, a few ash-blond strands escaping. He’d forgotten the smoky black kohl ringing his half-elven eyes, but Dorian decided not to mention it. He had no interest in actually seducing his friend, but it certainly made a pretty enough picture. “Long day?”

“The longest.” Feynriel wrinkled up his nose…then cocked his head. “I didn’t hear any bells, by the way.”

Dorian frowned. They had been faint but impossible to ignore, tolling deep enough to make his body quake with the reverberations. That sort of thing usually didn’t slip into his dreams without cause. “Hm,” he said, and filed the mystery away for later. “Ah well, no matter; you’re here now. Why?”

The corner of Feynriel’s mouth lifted into a quirking smile. “Oof, what a welcome. You’re in a fine mood tonight. Should I beat a hasty retreat before you leave claw marks down my back?”

“My dear Feynriel.” Dorian lowered his voice to a husky near-purr, lashes dropping. He hadn’t given himself over to mindless debauchery since his father had almost…since Lucia had…since that night, but the old tricks were still close at hand. “I assure you, if I was inclined to leave my mark, you would not be running away.”
Feynriel just rolled his eyes, as immune to Dorian’s charm as always. “Save it for your Voice,” he said…then paused at whatever flicker of emotion he saw cross Dorian’s face. “Oh,” Feynriel said, beginning to grin, “that’s why you’re in such a sour mood. You know, I probably should have guessed.”

Dorian stood, smoothing his own immaculate robes with all the dignity he could muster. “You are imagining things,” he lied.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not,” Feynriel countered. That crooked grin widened, brightening his narrow face. It would have been insufferable if Dorian wasn’t so inclined to forgive Feynriel pretty much anything. They’d kept in touch after their first fateful meeting, exchanging letters as they each studied under their respective masters. The first time Feynriel had tiptoed into Dorian’s dreams had been… Maker, was it right after Alexius’s wife passed? Yes, he remembered Feynriel doing his socially awkward best to walk him through his own grief and fear for Alexius and Felix.

He kept coming around after that, maybe once a week or so, just to check in. Surprising, that a Marcher somniari raised in some dirty little alienage would become such a mainstay of his life, walking alongside him in his darkest moments: the attack on Felix, Alexius’s descent, Dorian’s own self-destructive year of excess…his father and the night Lucia saved him from a fate worse than death. And now, Feynriel often popped in to keep him company as Dorian scoured every damn hill and crevasse in the Free Marches, searching for—

“I take it you haven’t found him, then?”

Dorian pretended to study the nearest bookshelf, fingertip trailing over the ancient leather-bound copies with titles like: He’s Onto You, and Stop Being Such a Damn Fool.

He sighed. Blasted subconscious.

“The Free Marches are admittedly larger than they appear on any reasonable map,” Dorian admitted, pulling a book with the promising title Maybe If You Weren’t A Complete Wastrel You Would Have Found Him By Now. “Too many shorelines; too many depressing little villages to choose from. Besides,” he added, sinking back into his chair, “he’s left the Marches.”

Feynriel’s brows rose. “You’re sure?”

“Why do you think I’m here with you instead of oogling my fill?” he countered, flippant. The past few months had been spent trying to take in all the details he’d devoted his entire life to ignoring. Funny—he’d always been so determined never to discover where his unun vinctum might be, terrified that his parents could somehow pluck the knowledge from his brain and drag Taran to Tevinter against his will. Now that he was free of all that, now that he finally wanted to track down his Voice, to see him with his own two eyes and…other vaguely embarrassing romantic notions…he felt like he was starting from day one.

Worse than day one. At least as a spoiled altus, he’d had a home and a bed and three square meals a day. This whole impoverished apostate thing was not at all agreeable.

Dorian grumbled beneath his breath, flipping the book open.

Feynriel made a sympathetic face, swinging his legs up to hook his heels on the lip of the chair, sharp chin resting on those knobby knees. He wrapped his arms around himself. “He’s shifting sleep cycles, isn’t he?” he asked. “I hate when that happens. My Voice,” even after all this time, Feynriel still wouldn’t share the name, “travels here, there, bloody everywhere. It’s okay when he sticks to a single country—or near-abouts—but it feels like his group can’t even keep in the same continent for
a month at a time.”

“What do you do?” Dorian was forced to ask. It was endlessly frustrating to find Taran slipping out of the Fade so shortly after Dorian found him every night.

“Take lots of naps,” Feynriel said—then laughed at whatever he saw in Dorian’s expression. “Well it works! And in my defense, it’s all part of my training, anyway. You can’t very well become a master somniari without traveling through dreams. And to do that, you have to sleep.”

He supposed that made a certain amount of sense, even if the advice wasn’t exactly what Dorian would have called helpful. He sighed, absentmindedly flipping through pages without focusing on any one.

“On the bright side, at least I have a fairly strong idea where he might be headed,” Dorian mused. “Another night or two and I’ll know for certain.” Taran’s dreams—what little Dorian had been able to catch of them—had been filled to the brim lately with ships and docks and endearing excitement.

“Oh?” Feynriel asked, curious.

Dorian raised a single brow.

Feynriel cocked his head, not understanding, not understanding, not… His eyes widened. “Oh,” he said, suddenly getting it. “Oh, oh, you mean you think he’s— He wouldn’t be going to the conclave, would he?”

“And why not?” Dorian said. “He’s the noble son of some…backward Marcher house or another. Your Divine is making a big scene of her act of reconciliation.” He sighed and closed the book, letting it disappear between his hands as well. “Once I’m certain, I suppose there’s nothing to it but charter a ship and hope I can survive the stench of unwashed savage and wet dog. From everything my friends have told me, I can’t expect anything less from Ferelden. Of course,” he added with a crooked smile, “my friends are also terrible people who are prone to exa—”

“Dorian,” Feynriel interrupted. He dropped his feet to the floor, leaning in with an earnest, anxious expression that immediately stilled the flippant words on Dorian’s tongue. “You can’t go to the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

Dorian tilted his head. “Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s dangerous,” Feynriel said. When Dorian just arched a brow, he added, “Because it’s overflowing with Templars and rebel mages and Chantry officials and— And all kinds of people who have every reason to hate each other and, even more, hate you on sight. Even if there’s no blood shed between those factions, all three would be all too happy to see someone like you become a mutual punching bag. They might even get along long enough to decide how to string you up as a warning to other magisters.”

“And people say the Imperium’s good for nothing,” Dorian teased. “Why, here we are bringing people together left and right: how marvelous.”

“Dorian…”

He waved off Feynriel’s concern, expression softening. “Your worry over my safety is gratefully noted,” he said. “There are only a depressingly small handful of people left in this world who’d give two figs about whether my head stayed attached to my shoulder or not.” That may have been an exaggeration, but he’d been in a dour, self-pitying mood of late. “But you may have forgotten that I am terribly clever; I’ll be able to move amongst the rebel mages with no one the wiser.”

Feynriel rubbed the meat of his palms against his eyes with an aggrieved sigh. He looked worn,
Dorian noted; almost fragile. He’d never known the other man when he wasn’t coiled tense as a spring ready to snap, but Feynriel was nothing if not a scrapper, even tossed amongst the worst Tevinter had to offer. This slump-shouldered version of him had Dorian up on his feet and crossing the pavestones to press a reassuring hand to his mostly-insubstantial shoulder.

Feynriel didn’t look up.

“Thank you,” Dorian said, clearly and carefully—letting down every last guard so Feynriel could know just how much he meant it. “But you truly do not have to worry yourself over me like this. If I do follow him to the Temple, I will take every precaution. I haven’t survived this long only to make myself a bloody chew toy for Templars and idiot apostates, have I?”

“We’re both so far away from all the craziness going on,” Feynriel pointed out. He dropped his hands and looked up, earnest—tired—bright eyes ringed with shadow. As if he was letting the weight of the entire world rest on his skinny shoulders. “It’s easy to underestimate just how bad it’s getting, but Dorian… I’ve been in their dreams. I’ve been watching as this whole thing unfolded, and it’s… It’s not going to get better. This conclave? It’s going to fail.”

He squeezed the ghosted shoulder again before letting go, tipping his head in question as one of the library walls silently crumbled. It now opened out onto a terrace, the gilt railing gracefully unscrolling in slow motion, like flowers in bloom. “You have never played the pessimist,” Dorian said as Feynriel stood, following him out into the bright sunlight. With a wave of Dorian’s hand, the sun sank behind distant mountains and stars burst overhead in firecracker shimmers. “Quite the opposite; where’s your usual faith in human, elf, dwarf, and qunari-kind?”

“It blew up with the Kirkwall Chantry,” Feynriel said bitterly, then sighed. He moved to the edge of the now-balcony, leaning his arms on the gold railing. At a single glance, a dogwood grew from seed to sapling to fully-grown tree, usually tall; delicate pink petals floated in the breeze Feynriel created through Dorian’s dreamscape. “That isn’t fair. But things are different this time, Dorian. The people are different. They’re…so angry and scared.”

Dorian settled in next to his friend, resting his weight on his folded arms, looking out across the world they absently created together. Whenever he let himself pause to think about it, it was a true marvel how Feynriel could shape the dreams of others with so little effort. If he were honest with himself, it was terrifying, too—if they weren’t friends, what sort of secrets could the other man be plucking from his mind?

Which he supposed was part of what had Feynriel so ruffled tonight. “You’ve been going deep into their dreams?”

Feynriel shrugged a single shoulder. “Yes. Deeper than I’ve ever gone before. This war…it’s not going to end because the Divine wants it to. Even if a quarter, more, of the mages and Templars involved are sick of the bloodshed, there are so many others who just want to…to force the issue until the other side is so beaten there’s no coming back. And I don’t blame them—the mages.” He gave an unsteady, unhappy laugh. “I mean, look at what my mother and I did to keep me out of the Kirkwall circle. I understand. But it’s starting to feel like a lot of them are so angry that they don’t understand just how bad this can get for both sides.”

“A pyrrhic victory,” Dorian said, and Feynriel sighed again, head dropping forward. “You believe that even if the mages win this thing, they will have lost?”

“And the other way around. Too many of the leaders are too…but lost in this. The conclave is just going to give them more chances to try to level the playing field in either—both—directions.”
Interesting. It wasn’t as if Dorian hadn’t considered that the Divine’s little intervention could become an elaborate game of assassin, but there was a great deal of difference between theory and confirmation. Feynriel would know; he would have seen the plots unfolding in dreams. “Have you considered doing your other little trick?” Dorian asked, keeping his voice even. Across the mountains, from far, far away, came the second tolling of some great bell. Or was that his imagination? Strange. “Stepping into the minds of their leaders and moving things around? You could single-handedly bring peace to all of Thedas if you took enough naps.”

Feynriel shot him a dirty look…but he didn’t look quite as offended at the suggestion as Dorian would have expected. Feynriel hated the darker, deeper aspects of his power. He hated how often his master tried to subtly pressure him into abusing them; he’d admitted to hating himself those few times he’d confessed to being tempted.

Now, there was something a little ashamed but defiant about his expression, even as his cheeks heated with color.

“Ah,” Dorian said slowly. “But of course, you’ve already tried that.”

“Can you blame me?” Feynriel shot back. “With so many lives at stake? Of course I want them to find a peaceful solution that ensures mages their continued freedom. It’s just…” He sighed and dropped his head forward again, silky blond strands falling across his cheeks. “It’s like trying to change a tapestry by pulling at individual threads. I have no idea if I’m making an impact or if I’m just unraveling the whole thing bit by bit. And even when I do manage to convince one person—a handful of important people—there’s always another dozen or more who are ready to shout them down and take over. Hawke says I should just—”

Dorian arched a brow. “Your Kirkwall friend? The Champion?” He’d heard the stories, both from official sources and Feynriel, of course.

Feynriel shrugged a shoulder in agreement. “Hawke says I should try talking to the various factions instead of shifting pieces of their minds around, but then, that didn’t work out so well for him, did it?”

He had to snort at that. “No, I imagine not. Though considering everything you’ve told me, I’m surprised he and his Voice aren’t elbowing their way into this whole conclave mess.”

“Oh, they are,” Feynriel said offhandedly. “They just got delayed by bad weather crossing the Waking Sea, so they’ll probably arrive a couple of days into the talks.” He paused, expression growing dour again. “I hope they manage to get there before people start trying to assassinate each other under the guise of hashing out peace. If anyone can put a stop to this whole mess, it’s probably Hawke and Fenris.”

“And not you?” Dorian said.

Feynriel just rolled his eyes, as if the idea were unthinkable.

There were so many things he could say to that—so many things he honestly wanted to say to that—but Dorian had never really trusted himself with finding words of comfort. He was funny, he was clever, he was cutting, he was brilliant…but gentle? Kind? That was a higher and more difficult bar to clear, and he wasn’t at all sure he trusted himself to come up with what Feynriel needed to hear.

*If Taran were here, Dorian thought wryly, I could just waggle my brows at him in question and let him take over; Maker knows between us he’s the good one.*
But Taran wasn’t here. Taran was half a world away, perhaps wading into this whole bloody mess. And until Dorian had (finally) found him and (finally) met those warm golden eyes and (finally) dared to admit to all the things he’d been systematically smothering in his heart of hearts for decades now, Dorian was on his own.

“You’ll figure it out,” he settled on. “Or your friends will make a perfectly timed arrival and knock a few heads together. Or,” he had to add, ruthlessly honest, “nothing any of us can do will make an impact at all, and the mages and Templars will start conflict after bloody conflict until we have another grand massacre in the name of peace.”

“You’re so reassuring, Dorian,” Feynriel said dryly. “Thank you.”

He laughed. “Well,” he countered, leaning indolently against the half-wall, watching the stars burst in brilliant showers of light overhead, “I do so try to obli—”

And just like that—with no warning, no sense of oncoming danger, nothing, nothing—a scream, Taran’s scream, ripped across the face of the Fade. It tore through the night sky, leaving a jagged hole in its wake: an open wound blooming dark with terrible fear as Dorian jerked up in surprise.

Taran? he cried, as if the other man could hear him.

By his side, Feynriel was looking around, startled, like he could hear Taran too—which bloody well should have been impossible. “What’s going on?”

Dorian ignored him. “Taran!” He turned in a desperate circle, searching the billowing black clouds as the library, the terrace, the beautiful scenery bled dark with Dorian’s fear. Maker, but he could feel his Voice’s pain, echoing all around him: an endless scream, as if the Fade itself were twisting and writhing in some unknowable agony. “Taran, where the bloody void are you?” he cried. He stumbled forward into a run, but he didn’t know where to go. Taran’s agony was all around, coming from every direction, so real he could almost reach out and touch. “Taran!”

“He’s here,” Feynriel said, stumbling after him. He looked like a spooked animal, all pale skin and awkward angles, staring out at the darkness with the first real fear Dorian had ever seen on him. “Fuck, how is he here?”

Dorian grabbed onto that thin thread of hope. “Like you are?” he demanded, catching Feynriel’s arm. Taran was no mage—no somniari—but maybe...maybe...fuck, maybe something. He’d work out the theory later; now he needed to find his Voice or go mad for searching. That single agonized cry kept stretching around him, as if the Fade itself were vibrating at the same terrible pitch. Fear clawed cold at Dorian’s throat. “You’re here.”

Feynriel was already shaking his head—trembling, hands up to block out the scream. “No, no, this isn’t—not like me. This isn’t right, this isn’t natural, he shouldn’t—Maker, I can’t think. The screams are—”

Screams. Screams, yes, there was a woman too, beneath Taran’s cry; they were both screaming, and time had stumbled still as the Fade shaped around that tangible pain, that fear, pulsing with sickening green light. He could feel Taran so close they were almost touching, the bond vibrating in Dorian’s chest like a tuning fork striking a single, desperate note.

Taran. Taran. Taran Taran Taran.

“Help me find him, damn you,” Dorian snarled, turning, searching. He tried to shape the Fade, to force Taran to become clear, but all he felt was a sense of, of, of falling. He was falling, and there
were whispers in the dark, and sickly green light blooming from the core of this magical world as something terrible ripped into its heart. “Help me.”

And then—

—like a shock of lightning, straight through his core—

—Dorian saw him.

Taran stood at the base of a distant mountain, hand lifting to cover his eyes. That hollow scream still rang out across the tearing Fade, but he was there, and he was whole, and Dorian nearly stumbled at the gut-punch of relief. He thought he might have cried out, but Taran didn’t respond. Instead, he glanced over his shoulder as if at the sound of footsteps—and then he was running.

“We have to,” Dorian said, staggering after him. The Fade had never felt more like a dream. Always before, he’d had some control: he could shape worlds and build monuments to his whims, strong enough in his magic to have little fear. But here, now, when he was so desperate to reach his Voice, he felt powerless. The ground turned to quicksand beneath his feet; the air thickened, until each movement was dearly bought. Ahead, Taran was scrambling up the sheer face of the mountain, running for his life—shining brilliant gold and green, the center point of the whole damned world. Dorian could feel a part of himself unraveling, the unfinished bond he’d carried within his chest all his life unfolding piece by piece inside his chest in response, and Maker, but he was on fire inside, he was powerless to stop it, he was—

The shining light that was his Voice flared like a dying star, whiting out the world around him…and just as suddenly as Taran appeared, he was gone.

Gone.

“No,” Dorian gasped, staggering down onto his hands and knees as the strange weight of the Fade suddenly reverted, becoming normal again. Feynriel collapsed just behind him, gasping in heaving breaths, but all Dorian could hear was the ringing in his ears, the thundering of his pulse, the…utter silence where seconds ago, there had been Taran.

It wasn’t just a return to how things were before, either. He could feel the half-formed bond aching and wounded in his chest, shattering apart in horrified heartbreak as Dorian slumped over onto his back and stared up at the silent Fade. He stretched, searching, eyes beginning to burn with the first shocked tears when he met nothing but indifferent silence.

Taran had been there. Taran had been there, and now he was gone, and the world echoed dark where he should have been.

“Dorian,” Feynriel said—tears in his throat, as if he understood at the exact same moment Dorian did. As if he could somehow sense the complete fullness of his loss. Of Taran’s death. “Oh Maker. I am so sorry.”

No, Dorian thought, staring up at the blank sky—shattered across the ground as if he’d been taken too. No, no, he can’t be gone. He can’t be. I never—

What? Never what?

Saw him.

Touched him.
Told him.

*Knew him.* All his life, Dorian had tried to keep his Voice locked away in fear, and now, when he was finally ready to give in and unlock that door, to be in bloody love and all that wonderful nonsense from those long-ago fairy tales…Taran was gone. He was gone. He was *gone.*

And there was nothing left but silence.

“I’m so sorry,” Feynriel said again, caught with him in the shallows of grief as the sheer weight of Dorian’s loss came crashing down around him. “Dorian, Maker, I’m so, so bloody *fucking* sorry.”
Taran:

He was raw and aching, body little more than one continuous bruise, headache pounding at his temples. But the worst part—the most frightening—the most strange by far—was that insistent buzzing tension building beneath the skin of his palm. It felt…

There weren’t words for how it felt. Still, as Taran waited chained in the dungeon surrounded by armed guards (pointing bared steel at him as if he were somehow dangerous), he tried to fumble for some description, some scrap of memory, something. Maker, anything would do if it would just help him understand what was happening.

It was like… Like he’d cut his skin with his sharpest blade and packed the open wound with lightning. Or like a sliver of lyrium had been inserted along the curve of one of the delicate bones in his palm. Or—

The buzzing tension sparked suddenly, green fire erupting, and Taran cried out at the shock of pain. He jerked his hand protectively against his body, chains clanking, then immediately thrust it away. Maker, was it dangerous? Was he infected with some kind of magic? Was, was he, was this, would he ever…

“Fuck,” Taran breathed through the worst of the pain, bearing down against the childish impulse to cry out—aware of those four well-armed men inching their blades closer to him as if they were afraid as well. (Afraid of him.) “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

The green fire sputtered and died, curled within the meat of his palm, but he could still feel it buzzing. He could still feel the tension growing, burning just out of sight like the embers of a fire that only needed a single breath to spark light again.

Distantly, he heard the jingle of keys and the sound of a lock turning. He looked up, fingers curled into a fist, and fought to keep the sudden burst of hope from overwhelming him. Because oh, oh, maybe it was his brother come at last. Maybe Cassius had finally managed to convince…whoever it was who’d taken him prisoner…that this was all some terrible mistake.

Maybe he was finally, finally going to be allowed to go home.

But the figure who stepped through the door wasn’t Cassius. She was tall and broad across the shoulders, severe face beautiful even as she turned a hard gaze on him. The sigil she wore across her breastplate was instantly familiar: a Seeker.

Taran’s stomach bottomed out.

The four guards snapped to attention as she stalked into the room, followed by a lithe shadow in elegant leathers. The cowl was drawn up as if to shield her face, but Taran caught the impression of sharp features, intelligent eyes, a flash of red hair.

He’d never seen the famous Leliana in person—he’d never left Trevelyan House until this fateful trip—but the pieces were falling into place all too easily. This was the Left and Right Hands of the Divine. This was as serious as it got.
Whatever they thought he’d done, it must have been terrible.

They stepped into the room silently, eyes locked on him. Leliana moved back to a shadowed corner, gaze dropping to his bound hands. The Seeker circled behind him slowly, menace in every step; he could feel her eyes boring into him even as she passed out of sight. The dungeon echoed with her footsteps, the soft clank of armor, the distant drip drip drip of condensation. He swore he could hear his own heart racing in his chest.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the Seeker leaned close to his ear. “Tell me why we shouldn’t kill you now,” she said.

Leliana stepped forward, moving with such easy grace, but she wasn’t the hero out of his stories now. There was menace in her cold, flat gaze; hatred. Taran met her furious gaze with as much raw honesty as he had inside him, willing her to see the truth writ there. *Whatever happened, whatever atrocity you think I’m responsible for, I swear it was not me.*

The Seeker was still talking, moving around him with predatory steps. “The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead.” The shock of that had him jerking to look at her even as she jabbed a finger toward his face with barely leashed violence. “Except for you.”

That wasn’t possible. “What do you mean everyone is dead?” He was asleep. He was in some terrible Fade dream and he would wake up any moment to find Cassius snarling at him to hurry.

They were going to the Conclave today. They were…they…they *had gone* to the Conclave, and he had… He… *What* had he done? *What* had happened? Taran’s breaths quickened as he realized, Maker, he had no idea. The memories that should have been there were gone,

The woman must have read some of that mounting panic on his face. She lunged forward, grabbing his bound hands and giving them a vicious shake as green fire erupted. “Explain this,” she said, face cast in queasy shadow and light.

“I…” Taran began, frightened, sickened, grieving. Cassius. If the entire Conclave was gone, then that meant Cassius was gone too. It had been a very long time since his older brother had looked on him with kindness, but the shock of sudden loss was still overwhelming. Taran curled his fingers into a fist, eyes burning hot as he tried to ignore the pain, inside and out. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you *can’t*?”

Everything was moving too fast. Taran looked between them—looked toward the men guarding him—and saw nothing but pain and rage. Even if he could answer the Seeker’s questions, he wasn’t convinced it would do any good. (*It won’t bring anyone back.*) “I don’t know what that is,” Taran said, “or how it got there.”

The Seeker lunged for him again, sudden and vicious in her fury. “You’re lying!” she cried, hands like steel around his biceps, yanking him forward.

Leliana grabbed Cassandra by the arm and pulled her back. “We need him, Cassandra!” she snapped, meeting Taran’s eyes. There was judgment there, cold and calculating. Pain, too, hidden so deftly Taran might have missed it.

But no. No, he could feel it humming between the three of them: a raw nerve, a shared loss. Trauma and fear and a fumbling desire to find answers somewhere, anywhere. He wished he could tell them what they needed to hear. He wished— He—

Taran dropped his gaze, hands curling and uncurling. “I can’t believe it,” he murmured, hollow. “All
those people...dead?"

There was a beat of silence, the tension fading into something quieter. Then: “Do you remember what happened? How all this began?” Leliana asked. Her voice was pitched lower, some of that sharpness gone.

The Seeker—Cassandra—began to pace the room again, circling around him, but the fury that had sparked her outburst was banked. She seemed more frustrated than murderous now, as if she’d looked into his thoughts and read innocence there.

Or, Maker, was he just being fanciful? That seemed too much like raw hope to be real.

Taran swallowed, focusing. “I remember,” he began, fighting to recall the details. “…running. Things were chasing me. And then…” He closed his eyes, picturing it. A mountain. Scuttling in the darkness. A glowing light. “A woman?”

He looked up just in time to see Leliana jerk back. “A woman?”

“She reached out to me,” Taran tried to explain, “but then…” He trailed off with a hopeless shrug. The rest of his memory faded away into a burst of green-white light. He could no more say what happened next than he could read the future in the twisting clouds.

Cassandra stopped her restless pacing, staring down at him. Her expression was stoney, impassive, but her eyes burned like coals. He met her gaze straight-on, letting her read whatever she needed in his expression. He had nothing to hide; he didn’t remember enough to want to hide.

Finally, jerkily, she nodded and turned back to the other woman. “Go to the forward camp, Leliana,” she said. “I will take him to the rift.”

The rift?

Taran watched, heart in his throat, feeling a decade older—aching with loss and fear and burning pain radiating from the strange gash in his palm—as Leliana nodded once and left. Cassandra watched her go, straight-backed as any soldier, before turning back to Taran. She studied him for another long minute before tightening her jaw and coming to unlock the chains that kept him anchored to the floor. The heavy metal cuffs remained about his wrists, but he was able to struggle to his feet with her help.

“What did happen?” Taran asked. He knew he should bite his tongue—knew she was still so very angry, even if some of that fury seemed to have been shunted away from him—but he had to know. The images tumbling through his head were a thousand times worse than any reality could possible match.

Right?

Cassandra shook her head, not meeting his eyes. Taran’s stomach dropped. “It will be easier to show you,” she said before leading him out from his makeshift prison and into the end of the world.

Varrie:

“Shoulda run when you had the chance, kid,” Varric said at the sound of a footfall behind him.
There was a beat of silence, then a soft laugh. “All right,” Taran said, moving to join him by the fire. “I almost hate to ask, but how did you know it was me?”

Varric arched a single brow. “A good con never shares his tricks,” he said. Then, laughing at the kid’s face, he added, “Spotted someone up there spotting you. There’s only one person in Haven who inspires that kind of open reverence.”

Taran made a face, slumping down onto the log seat next to Varric. He’d been upgraded into a new set of armor, Varric noted—sturdier, more suited to his big frame and powerful blows than the hand-me-down green leathers he’d been sporting. With the bronze-gold gleam of the armor against the warm tan of his skin and the glints of gold in his hair and eyes, he seemed like a statue come to life. Like one of those golden idols peppering Orzammar.

Funny. If the kid was a dwarf, no way he wouldn’t be made Paragon by now. Closing that main rift alone would’ve been more than enough.

“How you hanging in there?” he asked, grabbing a stick and poking at the fire. Sparks rose, swirling into the cold air.

Taran just shrugged a shoulder; the gesture nearly made him look his age for once. “I’m fine.”

Varric hummed a noncommittal reply, glancing at him out of the corner of his eyes. A week ago, two, he would’ve called bullshit (in his head, at least, if not upfront and outloud.) But now… Taran looked like hell, still, but a damn sight better than he had since tumbling out of that hole in the sky. The dark shadows were fading and that haunted, guilty look was leaving his eyes. He looked almost like he was edging toward…if not happy, then at least marginally satisfied with what they were managing to accomplish.

Varric guessed he understood the feeling. As bad as things were in the Hinterlands—as tough as it was trudging through battle after battle and seeing desperation around every corner—it was doing all of them good to do some good. Finding Dennett, clearing out Templar bases, hunting bloody rams and blankets and caches of supplies to help the refugees…little by little, they were making a positive change.

Not to mention, with every rift the kid managed to close, they were literally knitting the world back together. There was something really powerful about that feeling, even if it also made Varric want to run and hide beneath the nearest rock.

“You know, it’s funny,” Varric said, staring into the fire and thinking wistfully of the world, the life, he’d once known. He wondered how Kirkwall was faring. He wondered if his friends were still alive. Shit, he hoped Hawke and Fenris had made it out of Anderfels okay. “A few years ago, I never would have gone in for all this making a difference shit. All I needed was some coin, good ale, and a fire and I was happy to let the world go to hell around me.” His lips twisted into a crooked grin. “You’re a bad influence, kid.”

Taran just tilted his head, studying Varric’s face for what felt like a long minute. The fire popped and cracked before them, spitting sparks up toward the star-flung sky. “You know, it’s funny,” Taran finally said, deliberately echoing Varric’s words. “But I’m pretty sure you’re full of crap, old man.”

That surprised a laugh out of him—a real laugh, the first in what had to be weeks. He choked on it, lifting a hand to cough into his fist as Taran slowly began to grin. Wider and wider, dimples flashing at the corners of his mouth, and shit, that boy could shine as bright as the sun—no wonder people kept whispering he was the chosen of Andraste. (No wonder, no matter how hard Varric tried to stuff the uncomfortable feeling down, he couldn’t help but feel a hint of…awe, reverence, whatever,
himself.) “All right, you’ve got me,” he had to admit. “I’ve always been a sucker for a lost cause and a tragic tale.”

“Is that what we are then?” Taran asked, still smiling—not taking it to heart. That kind of optimism might just see them through some of this darkness, at least until things inevitably fell apart. “A lost cause?”

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you your stories, kid?” Varric said, smiling back, charmed and sad and all twisted up inside despite himself. He remembered the first time he’d stumbled across Aidan and Carver Hawke, all those years ago. He remembered the light that used to shine so bright and almost innocent in Aidan’s eyes. *Shit.* Things certainly took a rocky turn or ten for *him.* “You’re smack-dab right in the center of an epic tragedy. There’s no escaping your fate now, I’m afraid.”

Taran just shrugged philosophically, spreading his hands before the fire. “I guess I’m doomed, then,” he said with the kind of easy acceptance of the young. “At least I’m marching toward my inevitable unhappy ending in good company.”

Varric looked him over “Yeah,” he said, all of a sudden feeling surprisingly choked up. He wasn’t much of a believer, and he wasn’t much of a joiner, and he certainly wasn’t big on signing up for epic crash-and-burn failures, but he knew his stories; he knew his heroes. And from what he’d seen over the past few weeks—the crazy shit he’d already experienced as a matter of course—inevitable tragedy or not, this kid…this sweet, shining *kid*…was worth following. Hell, maybe even to the bitter end. “Well. Here’s to good company.”

They sat in companionable silence, watching the fire reach up up up toward the huge expanse of stars—the open wound in the sky an inescapable reminder of exactly what impossible odds they had left to face.

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**Krem:**

Krem spotted movement on the cliffs overlooking the beach.

“We got company, Chief!” he called, sword and buckler already out. He swung, parrying the ‘Vint’s blow, and pushed back with a loud clang of steel on steel. It was pissing rain, a good half of it coming at him sideways; he squinted against the drops gathering on his lashes and swung again, taking advantage of an opening. The grunt of pain and the scrape of steel through cheap plate mail was one of the most satisfying sounds in the world. “Chief?”

“Yeah, I see them,” the Iron Bull grunted. He gripped the end of his heavy maul and swung it wide, wild, denting helms and crushing unguarded skulls. Dalish easily ducked out of the way, a crack of lightning springing from her fingers. “Pretty hard to—oh no you don’t—miss.”

Krem slammed his shield into a ‘Vint’s sword arm, tipping the edge to clip his fingers. If he aimed it just right…ha! There! The ‘Vint cursed and dropped his sword from suddenly-numb fingers, giving Krem the opening he needed. “Wasn’t talking about these bastards,” he said, as casually, as easily, as if they were trading bullshit over beers. In a real fight, with a real challenge, he’d learned to keep his trap shut and focus on the task at hand. But this crew of Tevinter extremists were barely strong enough to wipe his ass, much less kick it. “Up on the cliff, coming down fast. There’s a mage with them.”
The Bull grabbed one of the men by his (bare) head, huge hand wrapping over the skull. He lifted him up, ignoring the daggers the little asshole tried to swipe at him, and bodily flung him toward the churning sea. “I see them, Krem,” he said; there was chaos all around them, but the fight seemed to be waning. The Chargers made quick work of fools. “Two warriors, an archer, a mage. One of ‘em’s wearing Seeker gear, and I’d bet my balls the kid beside her’s that Herald everyone’s gone on about. Looks like they took you up on our offer after all.” He smirked. “I may have one eye, but it’s a damn good one.”

“It’s a damn something, all right,” Krem agreed easily. Now that he was pausing enough to get a clear look, he recognized the Herald and the Seeker from his short visit to Haven. He hadn’t been convinced the Inquisition would come; he was glad to be proven wrong. “Good timing.”

“Good timing,” the Bull agreed. Then he laughed. “Now let’s give them a show. Chargers!”

Krem called out with the rest of them—a deep, guttural roar rising from his chest as he flung himself back into the fight, steel clashing with steel, fine mist of rain caught on his lashes, the pleasure of battle humming through his blood. Whatever else this Inquisition came to think, they’d be impressed by the Iron Bull’s Chargers if every single one of them had to stake their lives on it.

*Good thing, Krem thought, carving through another ‘Vint bastard, we’re so bloody good at what we do.*

**Feynriel:**

The Fade had never been so frightening.

Feynriel slipped deeper into dreams, braced against the clawing fear he could no longer seem to control. The wound that stretched across the sky was echoed here, too, though he doubted the normal dreamers could sense it the way he could. It felt…

It felt, eerily, like an eye glaring down on the ever-changing landscape below. And if he was willing to allow his flights of fancy to continue—to take that metaphor to its natural end—it felt like whatever powered that eye always, always managed to zero in on him whenever he pushed his consciousness past the veil. *Watching* him as he slipped effortlessly through dreams.

He shivered, forcing himself to ignore the creeping sensation of being watched, measured, found wanting, and concentrated instead on slipping through the dark sea of dreamers. A few shone bright, beckoning him: powerful minds caught in elaborate dreams. Diamonds winking multi-faceted light across the Fade. Feynriel was tempted—so very bloody tempted—to seek out Krem, the brightest of those lights. He was a safe haven in the Fade, a port in a turbulent storm…but there was someone who needed him more right now. And as much as he wanted to be comforted, Feynriel was determined to do his best to give comfort instead.

Fighting to ignore the creeping pressure of that tear in the Fade, of *that eye* watching him, Feynriel reached out for Dorian’s awareness, flinging himself across the endless stretch of dreams to sink into his sleeping thoughts with a sigh. There was no resistance, as there often was with mages: even now, Dorian welcomed him in to his dreams. Perhaps especially now that… Well.

He drifted like a spirit down down down into the other man’s thoughts, the world of Dorian’s dreams forming around him in jagged shapes and broken edges. The Waking Sea formed in the distance,
grey and swollen with storms, and a crumbling manor house stood perched on the edge of the cliff as if bracing for a swan-dive into oblivion.

Dorian’s mind was utter chaos. The air itself seemed to vibrate with his grief.

“Maker,” Feynriel breathed, mustering his strength. Every night for weeks he’d come to keep his friend company through his fitful dreams; every night he was struck anew by the horror of loss. If Krem had been killed instead of Dorian’s Voice—

No. No, fuck, he couldn’t even think about it.

Feynriel pushed past the impulse to flinch back from the open wound that was his friend’s mind and instead picked his way across crumbling black rock to the beach below. Dorian was sitting by the mouth of a cave just past the water’s reach. He had his knees drawn up and his arms locked across his shins—eyes red-rimmed and lost as any child’s. The way his shoulders sloped, the way he held himself still as if any sudden movement could send him shattering to pieces, hurt. It hurt to see Dorian like this, after everything he had survived.

Maker.

Feynriel fought to keep the pity off his face as he moved to join his friend, sitting on a rock just an arms-length away. He drew his own legs up, folding them beneath him as he rested his chin on his fist. For the first week, neither had said much at all. What was there to say? I’m sorry for your loss? Hollow words and hollow sentiment: until Feynriel felt his own soul being snapped in half, there was no way he could even hope to understand how Dorian felt.

So. He didn’t try to pretend he did. Instead, he just sat there, a presence in his dreams, just to keep the Fade from feeling so crushingly empty.

Now, weeks after the end of the world, with news of the Inquisition growing in Haven and the rebel mages gathering in Redcliffe and…something strange and powerful emerging from Tevinter, the silence was sometimes broken, but the weight of it still remained between them—a solid wall only Dorian could breach.

He didn’t glance over at Feynriel. He didn’t even blink. Today’s silence stretched long and heavy and painful between them, filled only by the crash of the waves and skitter of small rocks tumbling down the sheer face of the cliff as the manor house slowly crumbled into the sea.

It was like being trapped in a gothic nightmare; Feynriel couldn’t help but wonder what brought Dorian’s mind here time and time again. His dead Voice? Maker.

Finally, with a serrated breath, Dorian spoke. “Do you have news?” His voice sounded rusty, but at least he was trying. Feynriel wasn’t sure he’d be able to do the same in his place.

Don’t think about that. He curled his hands into fists, nails digging into the meat of his palms. “Yes,” he said. Then, more truthfully: “I’m not sure.”

The other man didn’t look over at him. Those dark eyes scanned the far horizon, where lightning forked from blackened clouds to strike white-capped waves. His lips twisted into the echo of his old smile. “More of that cult nonsense? Alexius always did have a flair for the dramatic, but he was never a fool before.”

“The Venatori are gathering strength—and numbers. They’re still shielding their dreams from me. I can catch glimpses now and again, but…” Feynriel spread his hands helplessly. “I did manage to reach your old friend, though. The…the sick one?”
That had Dorian’s attention. He tilted his head to look at Feynriel, gaze sharpening. “Felix?” he said. “So he’s still…?”

“Yes.” Whatever Dorian meant to say, it was true, at least for now. *Still alive, still tainted, still slowly fading away.* “His father has placed powerful wards around him, but I could still manage to reach him. He wanted me to tell you that Alexius is playing with something dangerous.”

“That is hardly new,” Dorian said, just a touch too sharply. He began to turn away again, hunching around himself…then sighed and pushed his fingers through his hair. It was mussed in a way Feynriel had never seen before that horrible day, unkempt, as if Dorian couldn’t bother presenting his usual suave façade. Not here in his own dreams at least, where the whole world echoed the bruised ache of unimaginable loss. “What did Felix tell you?”

Feynriel leaned forward. “I didn’t fully understand it,” he admitted. “Something about the rebel mages and *time*, and how his father was making certain there was more than enough of it. I couldn’t reach him for long, and the message was…”

Dorian jerked to look at him. “*Time*?” he said. “You’re certain Felix said his father was mucking about with *time*?”

He hadn’t looked so animated in well over a month. The light in his eyes was both frightening and an incredible relief. “Yes,” Feynriel said quickly, “we only had a moment before I was pushed out of his head, but Felix was adamant that Alexius intended to reach the rebel mages in Redcliffe, and he was fixated on making sure there was enough…what are you doing?”

Feynriel awkwardly scrambled up even as Dorian stood, dark robes settling around him in graceful folds. Across the sea, thunder rumbled in warning. “Alexius has lost his mind,” Dorian said grimly. Above them, the crumbling mansion faded into mist. Behind them, the cavern closed, disappearing into a sheer stretch of jagged rock. “If he’s playing with *time*, then we are running out of it.”

“What will you do?”

Dorian smoothed his hand through his hair again, but this time the sleek black strands followed the flow of his fingers, magically settling into place. His shoulders came back, and if it weren’t for that hollow, haunted look in his eyes, he may have been the smiling, gleaming façade Feynriel had come to know so many years before. (Long, long before he’d been granted permission to see past that knowing smirk.) “I’ll go to Redcliffe and see if I can’t manage to stop him before he goes through with whatever madness he has planned. Felix will help me, no doubt. Perhaps if I’m lucky, the Inquisition will see fit to make an appearance.”

“How can I help?” There was no hesitation, no question: *of course* Feynriel would do everything he could to help his friend. That would be true even if the stakes were lower, the world less chaotic.

The small smile almost reached Dorian’s eyes. “Make certain I’m lucky,” he said, “and the Inquisition sees fit to make an appearance.”

“I can’t find the Herald in the Fade,” Feynriel reminded him. “Every time I look, all I get is blinding light.”

“I know you’ll find a way. And speaking of finding a way…” Dorian reached out to clasp Feynriel’s shoulder, squeezing gently. It was the first time since the loss of his Voice that Dorian had initiated contact, and even though Feynriel knew there was a long, long road to travel before he had recovered, even though he knew much of his current strength was fed by necessity and a desperate grab for some vital task to distract himself from grief, he still felt a spark of hope at the touch. Maybe,
with time, Dorian would be…if not whole, at least recovered. “I think it is far past time you found your way from Tevinter. The world needs you.”

Feynriel’s stomach clenched in reflexive fear. But I’m not ready, he thought. There’s still so much I don’t know.

But Dorian was looking at him with something almost like a plea in his eyes, as if to say: I need you too. And even if that wasn’t true—even if there was no way the great Dorian Pavus needed some alienage brat at his side—the mere thought had Feynriel standing straighter. Nodding. “Yeah,” he said, trying to smile as Dorian began to fade around the edges, slipping from his dream: already set on the path that would lead him to Redcliffe. “All right. I’ll…see you in the Inquisition, then.”

“Haven,” Dorian said—and was gone.

His dream crumbled around the place where he once stood, cliff and storm and raging sea dissipating until Feynriel stood alone in the darkness of the Fade, a million brilliant dreamers winking up at him like the night sky—the overwhelming gleam of the Herald’s light burning as bright as the sun in the distance as, overhead, some great eye glared down at him: aware. So very chillingly, horrifyingly aware. Sucking in a shaking breath, Feynriel blinked out of the Fade and back into the waking world.

He had work to do.
“Careful,” Varric said, casting a glance over his shoulder. No one seemed to be paying them any mind as they headed up the rocky path toward the chantry, but there was an unnatural stillness to the air, as if the whole town of Redcliffe was holding its breath. “I don’t like the looks of this.”

Taran couldn’t help but agree. Meeting Alexius had been bad enough—meeting his son for some clandestine…something…had a shiver working up his spine. Still: “You don’t like the looks of steep hills or wide streams, either,” he pointed out with a crooked smile. “Is there anything you do like?”

A few steps behind them, Cassandra snorted. Varric just shot him a crooked smile. “Sure, kid,” he said. “I like a hot fire, a strong drink, and a good book just fine.”

“Add a soft bed in there and you’ve got me sold.”

“Shit,” Varric sighed as they reached the imposing old building, “we’ve been slogging through the ass-crack of Ferelden for so long that I’ve forgotten what one feels like. I almost—”

Solas caught Taran’s arm before he could reach for the round brass handle. “Wait,” he said, tilting his head. Those canny eyes of his had a far-away look. “Do you feel that?”

“I do not feel anything,” Cassandra said immediately—prickly and a little affronted, as she still was around the apostate. But Taran let himself go still and closed his eyes, reaching out blindly for whatever had Solas on edge. He was no mage, but the strange mark on his hand had changed him in more ways than one, and sometimes he could—

He—

 Shiv.

Taran grimly reached for his greatsword. “Rift,” he said by way of explanation, loosening it from its sheath. As if in response, green fire crackled around his fingertips.

Cassandra immediately drew blade and shield, ready to throw herself into battle; Varric sighed. “You never take us anywhere nice, do you?” he complained, a smile in his voice even as he loosened Bianca. Solas tilted his staff, its tip already glowing in anticipation, and reached for the door. “Three silvers says it’s one of those jumpy ones.”

“Ugh,” said Cassandra as the chantry door swung open, though there was no telling which disgusted her more: the betting or the demons. Taran had to admit…the jumpy ones were his least favorite too. (Climbing back up to his feet in full plate armor was the worst.)

Ignoring that—focusing instead on the task ahead—he stepped into the dim chantry, ready to face whatever waited there. Taran took in the scene on a glance.

It was a sizable space, pews already pushed back or toppled over against the wall, stone floor cleared. Good: lots of room to maneuver if things got dicey. Afternoon sunlight slanted through gaps in the shredded cloth covering the far rose window, but the central rift cast its own queasy light. A shade hissed, turning its head as if sensing Taran, and the rift spiked with renewed energy—making his blood hum in response.
All of that was to be expected. They’d been fighting their way across the Hinterlands and up into the Storm Coast for months now, closing rifts and sealing away demons. Each battle was different, but the pieces were all the same. The humming energy, the quickening of strange magic in his body, the strain and sweat and blood.

Iron pieces moving across a board.

Except this time, there was a key difference: a single mage stood alone against the shades, staff swinging with a showy grace unlike anything Taran had ever seen. Each movement was fluid, like the prelude to a complicated dance he could never hope to understand, much less master: the rift-light shone on bits of metal sewn into the complicated line of the mage’s robe, making him wink in the darkness like a hundred brilliant stars.

Beautiful, Taran couldn’t help but think, stumbling to a stop. Lowering his blade in surprise. Behind him, Cassandra, Varric and Solas took his cue and hesitated, the four of them watching the end of the battle play out.

The mage whirled with a grunt of effort, slamming the end of his staff into the shade’s face. His single bared bicep bulged, muscle rippling, green light catching on the curve of his jaw as he swung around again, again, each twist of his powerful body bringing his staff down hard against the creature’s head.

It hissed in pain, lifting a clawed hand to strike. Taran jerked forward a step, cry of warning dying on his lips as a flare of dark light emanated from the tip of the mage’s staff, enveloping the shade in deeper shadow. It screamed, high-pitched ululation echoing off the chantry walls as it lurched back and began to melt in on itself, caught in a final, desperate writhe.

The mage straightened, staff still alight, and brushed a hand across his immaculate robe. He was standing in profile, the crackling green light of the still-open rift haloed about a strong brow, an aristocratic nose, full lips. A dark curling mustache that shouldn’t have looked as handsome as it did.

Taran felt his mouth go bone-dry in an instant.

The mage was… He was… Beautiful, a quiet part of him whispered again, even as the rest clamored louder, sharper, that this man was something more than that. Something familiar and yet strange, perfect and yet unsettling—attractive in every possible sense of the word, as if he were an open singularity pulling at parts of Taran he’d never bothered to examine before. His heart was pounding in his chest and he swore—

Taran swore he was falling from some great height as the mage smirked up at the rift and then turned to face their small party with a careless flourish. “Ah, good,” he said with a mannered quirk of a dark brow, gaze sweeping across the lot of them. “You’re finally here. Now help me…”

He froze, eyes locking with Taran’s, words trailing off between them.

The silence that remained echoed, heavy as the golden armor Taran wore: stunned, as if the very sight of Taran had struck the other man speechless. Those dark eyes widened, and he was too far away to read the emotion laid clear there, but he could feel its dangerous undertow creeping around them, between them. Heavy, heady, indescribable.

I know you, Taran wanted to say—but then, of course, that was crazy. He’d never met this man in his life. I want to know you. But that was crazy too, wasn’t it? People didn’t just clap eyes on each other and feel their insides twist inside-out in sudden, heady need to be as close as humanly possible.
He took a jerky step forward, freezing when the mage stumbled a step back, eyes going wider and wider, silence stretching out between them to its absolute breaking point. Beyond, the crackle of the rift the only thing breaking their shocked tableau.

They might have stood there forever, stunned, if energy hadn’t spiked just over the other man’s shoulder in four arcs of light. Varric cursed, jerking his crossbow up and Cassandra pushed past Taran on her way to one of the points of eruption. Taran still remained as if frozen in place, mind circling itself uselessly as he stared, and stared, and stared.

The strange man stared back, trapped in the same spell—one hand over his heart as if to catch its breaking pieces.

A few steps away, one of those points of eruption bubbled, casting eerily shifting light across the man’s (beautiful; perfect) face. A clawed hand reached out, swiping angrily as the demon struggled to drag itself free, already screeching its fury. That was enough to have Taran’s mouth unglued; that was enough to have him stumbling into the fray, sword lifting and arcing down with a single powerful swing, cleaving the creature before the Fade could finish birthing it into the world.

What felt like a continent away, he was aware of Varric’s crossbow bolts thunking into the thick hide of another demon. Cassandra gave a taunting shout, and ice spread in a musical wave across the stone flagons from Solas’s spell, but he was looking up just as the mage was looking down, and their eyes caught again—this time close enough that Taran could see himself reflected in their depths.

Time slowed.

Froze.

Became meaningless around them.

Taran straightened as if in slow motion, lifting his sword. Ichor pooled in perfect crystalline beads from its razor sharp edge, each one falling like molasses toward stone: Drip. Drip. Drip. The man’s ridiculously long lashes flickered, eyes dropping down Taran’s body and then up again, an alien hunger burning in their depths. It wasn’t sexual, though Taran felt a spark flare deep in his belly in response. It was more like…

Like he was the answer to a question he hadn’t realized had been asked.

Taran flushed, finally fully upright, just a pace or two away. The mage lifted his staff by painstaking degrees, lips parting, moving, shaping each syllable with utmost care as if begging Taran to read his lips. (And really, it was no hardship to stare at his mouth; Maker, had he ever looked at the shape of someone’s lips before? Certainly not like this.) “We…ought…to…”

It wasn’t until he was three words in that Taran realized with a snap that this—this strange, slow, hazy awareness—wasn’t natural. He wasn’t just mentally falling all over himself at the sight of a pretty face and haunted dark eyes: the world really had slowed down around them, stretched thin as taffy while the rest of his friends battled.

His cheeks heated even more at the realization, and he pulled back a step, nodding. He was lifting his sword even as the mage twirled his staff in painfully slow rotations—growing quicker and quicker as they both broke free of the strange time warp, until with a sudden snap the world realigned and they were thrust into the thick of battle.

Taran forced himself to look away and throw himself into fighting, passing in and out of unexpected pockets of time as shades raged around them. They fought back waves of demons as they whittled
back the rift’s strength, priming it for the moment he felt that tell-tale tug at his palm.

Now, an innate part of him whispered. Now now now.

He turned and thrust up a hand, green power arching from him like reverse lighting. He was hyperaware of the strange mage leaning against his staff no more than ten feet away, cheeks flecked with demon ichor and burning eyes locked on him—watching as he grimaced at the near-overwhelming tug of the Fade, the pain lacing through him in poison-swift eddies, then jerked his hand into a fist.

Green fire erupted over their heads, falling in a shower of sparks that disappeared the moment they kissed the ground. The rift closed over them, and the chantry was pitched into shadow.

Taran dragged in an unsteady breath, slowly lowering his hand.

No one said a word.

He glanced around to take stock of his friends before looking toward the mage again. He was watching Taran with a focus that was almost unnerving, that look in his eyes again. It flared dark and starved and unsettlingly magnetic until, at the scrape of Cassandra’s sword in its sheath, the mage blinked and it was suddenly gone.

“Fascinating,” he said. He turned from Taran to glance up toward where the rift had been, head tilting to the side: curiosity sharpened to a fine edge. “How does that work, exactly?”

And oh, no, of course: he wasn’t looking at Taran with…whatever in his eyes. He’d been looking at the bloody Herald. It was still so easy to forget that after nineteen years of being absolutely nobody, now he was supposed to be some kind of holy symbol or whatever, the chosen of Andraste—as if Andraste had nothing better to do than pluck backwater know-nothings out of complete obscurity and dump them tits over ass in the middle of the end of the world.

The mage glanced back at him, brows arched, and Taran realized with a flush that he’d just been standing there like an idiot in the wake of his question. Yeah, he was doing such a good job representing Andraste, wasn’t he? The Maker’s chosen, his ass.

“You don’t even know, do you?” There was a slight hysterical tinge to the mage’s laugh as he turned to face him again, and Taran tried not to wince. He could practically hear the man adding clueless to his first impressions of young and easily distracted by a pretty (pretty) face. “You just wiggle your fingers and boom! Rift closes.”

“Who are you?” Taran asked. That seemed like the most important thing to know now. Vital, even.

He tipped his head. “Ah,” he said, and there was a strange undercurrent to his words, to his voice. More curiosity? Uncertainty at meeting the bloody Herald? Taran couldn’t say; he’d never known enough people to be able to read them well. “Getting ahead of myself again, I see. Dorian of House Pavus,” Dorian said with a slight, almost ironic bow. “Most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?”

“Another Tevinter,” Cassandra said. Taran glanced over at her, catching her serious, speaking look. “Be cautious with this one.” He had to fight not to flush. Could she tell how…intriguing he found this man? Maker, could all of them tell?

That would be humiliating.

If Dorian caught the undercurrent of her warning, he didn’t let on. “Suspicious friends you have
here,” he said, voice light, as if it didn’t bother him at all. Then, “Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance should be valuable—as I’m sure you can imagine.”

So much for fighting back the flush; it felt like his cheeks were on fire. “I was expecting Felix to be here,” Taran said. It was probably best to just ignore how off-balance he felt and hope for the best.

“I’m sure he’s on his way,” Dorian said. He took a half-step closer, then paused when Cassandra very obviously dropped her hand to the hilt of her sword. He cleared his throat. “That is, he was to give you the note, then meet us here after ditching his father.”

Which brought its own rash of questions. “Alexius couldn’t jump to Felix’s side faster when he pretended to be faint. Is something wrong with him?”

“He’s had some lingering illness for months. Felix is an only child, and Alexius is being a mother hen, most likely.”

Oh. Well. That made sense. Taran glanced over toward where Varric and Solas had come up to flank him, then over toward Cassandra. He wasn’t quite sure what else he was supposed to say, so he fumbled for the obvious. “You’re betraying your mentor because…?”

Dorian opened his mouth; closed it. Drew a breath. “Alexius was my mentor,” he said, though Taran couldn’t help but feel he’d almost said something else. “Meaning he’s not any longer. Not for some time.” That didn’t answer Taran’s question, but Dorian wasn’t finished. He stepped forward again, closer, ignoring Cassandra’s low noise of displeasure and the way even Varric oh-so-casually hefted Bianca. Taran wanted to tell them to stop—tell them Dorian wouldn’t hurt him—but then…how was he so certain of that? He didn’t know the other man. He didn’t know anything about him, other than he made his head swim and his pulse race. Oh, and he was from Tevinter and wanted to help them take down Alexius for some reason.

“Look,” Dorian said quietly, as if just for him. As if the rest of them, the rest of the world, no longer existed. Strange how true that felt right now. “You must know there’s danger. That should be obvious even without the note. Let’s start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the mage rebels out from under you. As if by magic, yes? Which is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself.”

That. Couldn’t be possible. Could it?

Maker, no, he’d seen enough impossible things in the last few months to believe every word. And it even made a twisted sort of sense. “He arranged it so he could arrive here just after the Divine died?”

Dorian smiled—a real smile, small but warm enough to reach his eyes. “You catch on quick,” he murmured in a way that had Taran’s insides glowing with warmth.

Solas made a noise in the back of his throat. “That is fascinating, if true,” he said. “And almost certainly dangerous.”

“The rift you closed here,” Dorian added. “You saw how it twisted time around itself, sped some things up and slowed others down?” Taran flushed; he wasn’t likely to forget that, or his own idiocy, any time soon. “Soon there will be more like it, and they’ll appear further and further away from Redcliffe. The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it’s unraveling the world.”

“You’re asking me to take a lot on faith,” Taran said slowly.

Dorian pulled back a half-step, which very nearly had Taran fumbling over himself to apologize. He hadn’t meant to offend him, but… “I know what I’m talking about,” Dorian said. “I helped develop
this magic. When I was still his apprentice, it was pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work. What I don’t understand is why he’s doing it. Ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?”

“He didn’t do it for them,” said a voice from the darkness.

Taran whirled, hand on his sword, as Varric cursed and Cassandra drew her own blade. He took an impulsive step in front of Dorian, as if to guard him—at the very same moment, Dorian pushed ahead of him, staff out, one hand splayed protectively before Taran, as if he meant to do the very same.

Taran stared at him, dumbfounded, even as his friends relaxed their guard as Felix stepped into the light.

There was an awkward beat before Dorian lowered his staff and his outflung hand; he did not look back at Taran. “Took you long enough,” he said, voice oddly strained. “Is he getting suspicious?”

“No,” Felix said, moving to join them, “but I shouldn’t have played the illness card. I thought he’d be fussing over me all day. My father’s joined a cult,” he added to Taran. “Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves Venatori. And I can tell you one thing: whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to you.”

Taran looked between the two of them—these two Tevinter mages working together against a man who had, at least in theory, been important to them. It seemed strange that they’d be willing to fight against Alexius and these…Venatori…but then, the world was strange. It didn’t seem right to question their allegiances again. “Why would he rearrange time and indenture the mage rebellion just to get to me?”

“They’re obsessed with you,” Felix said, “but I don’t know why. Perhaps because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes?”

Dorian made a low noise at that. Taran and Felix both looked toward him, but his expression was a mask—impossible to read. He cleared his throat. “You can close the rifts,” he said before either could say anything. “Maybe there’s a connection? Or they see you as a threat?”

“If the Venatori are behind those rifts, or the Breach in the sky, they’re even worse than I thought,” Felix said.

This was almost too much to handle. Cassius’s death, a hole in the sky, a mark on his hand, the way people stared at him, and now…this. “All this for me?” Taran said with a crooked smile to break the tension. It was the best he could do. “And here I didn’t get Alexius anything.”

Dorian gave a soft chuff of laughter. “Send him a fruit basket,” he said. “Everyone loves those.” And before Taran could say anything, he added in a more serious voice: “You know you’re his target.”

“Expecting the trap is the first step toward turning it to your advantage,” Solas pointed out thoughtfully.

Varric whistled. “Doesn’t that make him the bait? Shit. I don’t like the sound of that, kid.”

“I don’t like the sound of any of this,” Taran admitted, “but we have to do something. We’ll head back to Haven,” he added after a moment of thought. “We can cut down travel to a few days if we double-time it and refresh our horses along the way. Cassandra and I need to talk this over with the others before we make our move…one way or the other. I assume you’ll both want to stay near Alexius,” he added to Felix and Dorian.
“Yes,” Felix said. “I need to stay by his side.”

But Dorian was already shaking his head. “I will come with you,” he said with surprising firmness, as if he couldn’t imagine it any other way. Then, at Taran’s surprised silence: “That is, if the Inquisition will have me.”

“I’ll have you,” Taran said. Crap, that came out all wrong. He paused, feeling the blush creep across his cheeks again. “We’ll have you,” he said. That wasn’t much better though, was it? “The Inquisition will have you. I mean, we’ll have anyone.”

Varric snorted a laugh. “I’d stop digging, kid,” he said. “You’re deep enough as it is.”

Dorian was smiling though, that warmth in his eyes as he looked at Taran—it made him feel like the only person in the room again. Maker, but Dorian had beautiful eyes. “If the Inquisition will have anyone,” he said, a teasing lilt to his words, “then I’m very honored to be had by you.”

“Ugh,” Cassandra muttered.

“Smooth,” Varric admired.

Taran simply stood there, flatfooted, tongue-tied, immolating from the inside-out.

“Well,” Dorian said. “If we’re to make it to Haven and back before Alexius grows impatient, we should be off. Oh and Felix?” he added as Felix gave a formal half-bow and began to slink back into the shadows. “Try not to get yourself killed.”

“There are worse things than dying, Dorian,” Felix said with a sad twist of his lips—and then he was gone.

Dorian let out a soft puff of breath, watching the darkness where the other mage had been. “Yes,” he said quietly, almost under his breath. He turned, eyes seeking out Taran again, and that…haunted look was back, there and gone again in a flash. “I suppose that’s true. So! Shall we be off then?”

“I…yes,” Taran said, struggling for the threads of his thoughts. He wet his lips, stepping back—then suddenly laughed. “Oh!” he said, grin spreading across his face. Maker, he was terrible at this. “I can’t believe we went through all that and I never actually introduced myself. I’m Taran Trevelyan, of Ostwick. It’s so nice to meet you, Dorian.”

“Taran,” Dorian murmured slowly, as if testing out the name. His hand curled tight tight tight around his staff, knuckles bleeding white, but he smiled as he said: “Taran Trevelyan, of Ostwick. Well, Taran Trevelyan of Ostwick…I can’t tell you how good it is to finally meet you.”
So this is what going mad bloody well feels like, Dorian thought, clinging to the back of his piebald mare as they raced across the rolling hills of Redcliffe. It was late in the evening, moonlight casting over dappled hollows and winding streams: utterly brilliant in the cloudless sky. Dorian watched, feeling, just, far too much as that soft light haloed Taran’s face when he turned his head to flash Dorian a crooked grin. It cast shadows across his armor—shadows and light, shadows and light, more real than anything he thought he’d ever see.

Beautiful and solid and just a stone’s throw away. Alive. Somehow, impossibly, wonderfully alive.

Taran tipped his head, reading something in Dorian’s eyes, and Dorian forced himself to tear his gaze away as he leaned over the creaking old saddle, heart hammering like a dwarven forge in his chest. His hands actually trembled where they gripped the reins tight tight tight, and he swore he was going to go flying apart at any moment.

Kaffas, he thought, staring blindly ahead of him, all too aware of Taran to his right. That was the problem, wasn’t it? He’d suffered a shock in that little backwater chantry and there hadn’t been a moment to himself where he could reorient his scattered world from grief to joy to…what? The other half of his soul was miraculously alive, but he was also the bloody Herald of Andraste—how was he supposed to respond to that? How was he supposed to know what to do? The holy savior of Thedas, bonded to a Tevinter mage? Preposterous.

Dorian grit his teeth and focused on swallowing back all the bloody nonsense rattling about in his head, leaving him shaken. Shaking. Keep it together; worry about all that later.

They’d been riding for most of the day now, stopping only to switch horses and force down quick meals at the various Inquisition camps along the way. War-torn Redcliffe seemed almost peaceful under those already-familiar banners, and Dorian would have given the Inquisition credit for clearing the roads and settling the chaos so neatly…if he could somehow manage to keep his thoughts from spiraling off into near-hysterical blithering every few minutes.

This? Was going to be a problem.

My unum vinctum, he thought, sneaking another glance at the younger man. Then, swiftly: No. My Voice. Not that he was prepared to admit as much now. Still, he couldn’t help but soak him in every chance he got, gaze seeking him out with a maddening hunger. Taran rode like someone new to the saddle, but there was a joy to the way he moved with his horse. There was a joy to every bloody thing he did, and how, how had Dorian ended up drawn to someone so effortlessly pure? So…sweet, with flashing smiles and Maker-damned dimples and a blush that crept across his cheeks every time he looked over and caught Dorian staring.

Staring like he was now, watching Taran move with the steady drum of his horse’s hooves out of the corners of his eyes. The new armor only served to highlight the sheer breadth of his warrior’s body, the length of his powerful limbs. Youth still clung to his features, but there was new wisdom there too—as if Taran had been changed by everything he’d seen.

By the mark on his hand?

Kaffas, it was crazy how much he wanted to reach over and take that hand. Wanted to cup it
between his palms and run his thumb across the point where green magic flared bright. He wished he could lean down and brush his lips across the mark, flick his tongue against the seam of skin and swallow some of that light inside himself because it had saved Taran. It had kept him alive against all odds, against all hope, against—

Against reason itself.

*Obviously I’m dreaming,* Dorian told himself again even as he twined his (trembling) hands in his mare’s reins. *Or I really have gone mad.* Either seemed just as likely as somehow stumbling across his presumed-dead Voice, who just so happened to be the Herald of bloody Andraste: sole survivor of Haven and the last great hope for all the known world.

His stomach twisted in some queasy mix of elation and dread as Taran lifted his hand, whistling to get their attention.

Taran dug his heels in, pulling forward, taking the lead. Dorian helplessly followed, loathe to fall too far behind even as Taran lifted his fingers to his lips and whistled again—the signal that they were nearing their next stop. The small caravan slowed as they approached a rapidly expanding point of light, Inquisition scouts raising their hands in greeting. Dorian forced himself to look away from Taran and instead scanned the orderly campground. He spotted tents rising from the darkness, dotting the hillside as men patrolled in groups of two, others gathering on felled logs about the main bonfire.

Its light caught Taran’s face, his armor, as they drew close and Dorian found himself helplessly staring again despite himself. It made the younger man shine bright as any sun when he swung a leg over his horse’s side, dropping lightly to the ground. “We’ll stay the rest of the night, don’t you think?” he said, glancing toward Cassandra. “We can ride fresh at dawn.”

“As you say,” Cassandra agreed easily, as if Taran were the one giving the orders.

“But damn time,” Varric grumbled, earning a soft laugh. Taran stroked a hand down his horse’s muzzle just as one of the scouts came to claim its reins, leading it away. Some distance back, Solas slid easily from his mount while, a few feet away, Varric tumbled down with a grunt of displeasure. Dorian simply sat there, transfixed by the way Taran’s hair fell across his eyes, the way his mouth shaped words, the way that dimple flashed as he responded to Varric, so real, so vital, so alive that not even Dorian could convince himself this was all some kind of extended hallucination. There was no way he could have dreamed all the details that made up this bizarre moment, and no demon could have so perfectly captured the way Taran glowed in firelight.

Maker, but he was just so distressingly *pretty.* And he was here. And he was alive. And and and he was *looking right at Dorian again,* color high in his cheeks as he tipped his head up to watch him just sitting there frozen like some kind of love-struck fool—damn, damn, double damn.

“You can sleep in the saddle if you want,” Taran said, moving to stand by Dorian’s horse. He reached up, one hand pressed against the curve of its shoulder, mind-bogglingly close to Dorian’s thigh; he swore he could feel the heat even through his robes. “But I’m betting there’s a bedroll that’s a far sight more comfortable if you want it.”

Bedrolls. He was sitting here, talking to his dead Voice—who just so happened to be the holy chosen of Andraste or what-have-you—about horses and bedrolls, as if every moment Taran drew breath wasn’t some kind of miracle.

Dorian cleared his throat. “One thing you’ll learn about me is that I *always* preference comfort—especially when it’s my own.” There. That sounded sufficiently casual. He began to swing a leg over
the saddle, prepared to drop more-or-less gracefully to the ground when his stiff body (held impossibly tight for the past endless haze of hours as joy, shock, confusion, fear and hope rioted through him in blinding succession) locked up, muscles cramping.

He hissed out a breath, freezing midway down.

Taran reached out instinctively to catch Dorian’s hips. “Here,” he said, completely and blissfully unaware of the way Dorian’s thoughts shattered at the contact. His hands were, Maker, big. Strong. Gripping his waist as Taran all but took his weight, helping him down like some kind of knight out of a fairy story, and Maker take me, stop swooning and focus. “…okay?”

He’d lost most of the words in a blaze of white-hot heat, but Dorian closed his eyes and forced himself back together again, settling his expression into an easy enough smile as he turned to face Taran…subtly stepping away from his steadying grip. “Yes, yes, fine,” he said, waving it off as if his whole body weren’t humming with electricity. “You rode us hard, that’s all.”

**Great bloody hell,** he hadn’t just said that.

Taran, bless him, was several degrees too innocent to realize how filthy that double entendre really was. “I’m sorry about that,” he said, ducking his head and looking adorably chastised. “I know the pace is brutal, and it’s just going to get harder, but it’ll be worth it when we make it to the end.”

It took everything Dorian had not to choke.

“Are you sore?” Taran asked, earnest. “I can show you a few stretches if you’re—”

“It’s fine!” Dorian said quickly, before his brain could conjure up lurid images of Taran stretching him. Standing just a few paces away from the boy was bad enough—he didn’t need to feed the flickering coals low in his belly. “It’s fine. A few hours out of the saddle should be more than enough.”

Taran offered a crooked smile, giving Dorian’s mare a final pat as one of the scouts led it away. “Okay, good. Though if it gets really bad, be sure to let us know. For the first week we were at this—you know, crossing Redcliffe, looking for rifts and people to help and such—I just assumed it was supposed to hurt. I’d been practicing swordwork since I was little, but there’s a big difference between swinging a sword for play and swinging it to keep your head on your shoulders. My muscles were so cramped every night that I took to stuffing the edge of my bedroll in my mouth so I wouldn’t accidentally cry out and wake everyone.”

Dorian blinked at him, dumbfounded. Taran must have taken that horror for reprobation—he flushed, ducking his head until the longish bangs fell across his eyes. “I know,” he said on a laugh. “I know, it was so stupid of me. When Cassandra figured out why I was so stiff in battle—why I was so exhausted all the time—she nearly had my head. She’s the one who showed me the stretches, and Solas made this salve of elfroot for the worst of it. Neither of them let me forget it for weeks, either. I sure learned better than to hide when I was hurting after that.”

“I am…not quite so self-sacrificing,” Dorian assured him. “If I need help, you will hear me complain loud and long.”

He laughed—the sweetest sound—and rubbed the back of his neck. “Varric said something similar. I think the two of you are going to get along just great.”

“Perhaps,” Dorian said, too distracted by Taran’s proximity, his warmth, his smile to pay attention to what either of them was saying. The others had long since wandered off to find food or bedrolls, but
they were still standing in place, away from the fires: distant satellites circling each other like the moon and venhedis, he really needed to stop letting his brain run away with him every bloody time this man looked at him. It was dangerous to let his guard down before he’d had time to puzzle out what in the Maker’s name they were going to do.

Dorian cleared his throat and forced himself back a subtle step. He smiled, indolent and unaffected, as if his heart wasn’t straining against his ribcage. “But then,” he said, “perhaps not. I am wonderfully charming, you see, but I have never exactly been known for my ability to get along.”

He meant that as a subtle warning—a way to distance himself from Taran and the rest of his ragtag crew—but Taran just took a step closer, eyes on his, and said with enough earnestness to melt even a demon’s heart: “Well, I like you just fine.”

Dorian swallowed back a broken noise and absolutely refused to let himself fall into his Voice’s arms.

“Oh. But you weren’t feeling well. Here,” Taran added, gesturing Dorian ahead of him as if suddenly remembering his manners. “You’ll feel much better after you’ve sat by the fire awhile. I can get you some food and…tea? Do you like tea? Or do you prefer something stronger?”

He let himself be gently ushered toward one of the big bonfires, all too aware that the heat prickling his skin wasn’t entirely due to the flames. “Oh, don’t bother.” Then, when he could practically feel Taran drawing in a breath to protest: “Whatever you’re having is fine.” The words came out sounding dismissive, but it was all Dorian could do not to turn around and stare and stare and stare as Taran veered off toward the smattering of small cookfires. Instead, he made his way with ever-quickening strides toward where Varric was settling in before the main bonfire, ignoring curious glances Inquisition troops shot him as he pulled up his own patch of earth just a few feet away.

_Breathe_, Dorian told himself, and sucked in a lungful of air. Then another. Another. The heat felt wonderfully bracing, flames crackling high up up up toward the night sky. With Taran out of sight for the first time in hours, he felt as if his lungs, long constricted, were finally able to expand.

_Maker_, what was he going to do?

Varric tipped his head in welcome, watching him for what felt like a very long time. Finally, he broke the silence. “So,” he said, leaning back against the felled log he was using as a backrest, eyes on Dorian, “you’re a Tevinter mage.”

Dorian swallowed back a groan. _Ah, yes, here we go_. Really, it was a surprise they’d made it this far without Cassandra dragging him from his horse and shouting vaguely threatening questions into his face. “And you are a dwarf,” Dorian said, still too unsettled to take the interrogation with anything even approaching grace. “Quite a terrible one, too, if your beard is anything to go by.”

The dwarf smirked, rubbing at his darkly-stubbled chin. “And how about you, Sparkler?”

He arched a brow at the nickname. “Am I a terrible dwarf?” he said. “Oh, _naturally._”

That earned a laugh—loud and rasping and surprisingly friendly. Dorian’s shoulders began to relax by slow degrees, his hackles lowering. “I don’t know,” Varric said, head tipping back so he could stare up at the stars, “lose a couple of feet and you’d probably be a better dwarf than me. The bar on that one’s set pretty low. What brings you down to Ferelden?”

_Heartbreak_. Maker, how maudlin he had become. “Curiosity,” Dorian lied. Then, when Varric rolled his head to give him a _look_, he added more honestly: “I wanted to help. Not every Tevinter is
on some mad quest to end all existence, you realize. I’m rather attached to the idea of helping to save the world; I quite like living in it, you see."

“Tt hear you on that. So you’re here to stop Alexius and help out the Inquisition?”

“You’re the only ones who seem to be accomplishing anything.” Dorian crossed his legs, smoothing his robe out to give his hands something to do. His pulse had begun to quicken again, making him feel unaccountably jumpy and irritable, though it wasn’t until a branch cracked beneath a heavy footfall that he realized—twisting around to see who was coming, heart in his throat—that he was listening for Taran.

He didn’t like having his Voice out of his sight, any more than he knew how to function when his Voice was in his sight.

Dorian forced himself to twist back toward the fire and away from the scout passing just behind him. Not Taran. He ignored Varric’s curious glance, twining his fingers together to keep them from fidgeting. He wasn’t used to being so flat-footed. Always, always before, Dorian had been able to rely on his wits and his silver tongue and his instincts to see him through. Now…

He felt like he was drowning, torn between an instinct to claim his soulmate before Taran could be ripped away from him for good this time…and the utter certainty that if he let anyone know the Herald of Andraste was Voice to a ‘Vint, what was left of the world would surely burn.

The Inquisition was Thedas’s only hope; could he really muck all that up out of his own single, selfish desire?

“And what’s your take on this whole Herald of Andraste business?”

It was as if the dwarf could read his mind—or, perhaps, an unguarded expression as it crossed his face, there and gone in an instant. Maker knew he felt far more vulnerable than he ever had before. More exposed, as if every bit of hurt and hope and longing and conflicted fear were writ clear across his face.

He had to deflect if he had any hope of making it through this endless day unscathed. He had to convince Varric just how disinterested he was—at least until he had time to be alone long enough to formulate a plan.

Stall, Dorian thought, drawing in a calming breath and relaxing back against the log in his own careful, indolent sprawl. Lie. Conceal. He arched a single brow. “What,” he said, so carelessly even he almost believed it, “the boy?”

Both of Varric’s brows rose. “Yeah,” he said. “You know: the one with the glowing green hand? Closes rifts, kills demons, stops to help old ladies cross the battlefield?”

“Ah. Well. He’s committed enough, I suppose, but is he really Andraste’s chosen?” Dorian filled his voice with all the casual condescension he’d ever learned from his father’s unum vinctum. Funny, that Lucia had managed to teach him so much about turning defense into an offense subtle enough to avoid raising alarm, just by her prickly presence.

Bitchery by osmosis.

Varric was really looking at him now, leaning forward, eyes faintly narrowed. Still trying to take Dorian’s measure but clearly missing the mark—distracted, just like Dorian had intended, by the implied insult. “Shit, Sparkler,” he said, “I don’t know much about that. You’ll have to ask a Sister if you want the theology; I’m not much of a believer.”
Liar, Dorian thought, surprised by the revelation. It looked like Taran had the beginnings of an honest-to-Maker disciple in this one. “And really, who could blame you?” Dorian said with a flick of his fingers, as if he weren’t already so desperately in love he would do anything to help Taran—even distance himself from him. “The Herald of Andraste should be powerful, awe-inspiring…not some overgrown child with all the social grace of a mabari pup. In fact—”

This time, when a branch cracked just a few feet behind him, Dorian didn’t swivel around. He didn’t have to. He could see the way Varric’s expression changed, could read the chagrined expression in his eyes, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt who was standing just behind him—overhearing every word and no doubt taking them all at face value.

I didn’t mean it, Dorian didn’t, couldn’t say. He took an uneven breath, fighting with everything he had to keep an impassive expression as Taran—Taran—cleared his throat and awkwardly started-then stopped toward them, hesitating as if all at once painfully uncertain.

I did that, he thought, hating himself for it even as he looked up. Taran’s cheeks were flushed a deep red, and he held a mug between his hands. I did that, but I swear, I swear I didn’t mean it.

“Ah, here’s your tea,” Taran said. He couldn’t quite meet Dorian’s eyes as he handed it over, too-careful to make sure their fingers didn’t brush.

Dorian’s stomach somehow sank further.

“Right,” he said, when what he meant to say was thank you. Words were getting all jumbled up in his head, on his tongue, and he had to look away as Taran straightened. The tension was so thick it was like moving through one of his spells. “Quite.” Idiot, say something.

“I need to…” Taran began, only to trail off. He gestured behind him, back toward from where he’d come. “Varric, do you want any, um…”

Varric rose to his feet. “Yeah, sure thing,” he said, slipping past. He caught Taran’s arm and gently tugged him away—rescuing the poor boy. From me, Dorian thought, feeling like a fucking monster. He was only trying to protect himself; he hadn’t meant any of it. But there was no way to walk the overheard insult back without making it ten times worse. “C’mon, kid: I’ll lend you another pair of hands to make the work go faster.”

“Thank you,” Taran said, sounding relieved—and the two of them headed off into the darkness again, leaving Dorian alone by the fire cradling his cup of tea. He stared into the flames, hunched silently around the unhappy curdle of his stomach. The night sky stretched wide and cold overhead; the wind whistled through the hills of Redcliffe; the Inquisition camp slowly quieted around him.

He stayed where he was for what felt like a very long time, sparks climbing high toward the shattered sky, tea gradually cooling between trembling palms.

He didn’t sleep a wink.

Dorian eventually retired to his bedroll, but he spent the night tossing and turning, reliving the moment he realized Taran had overheard the carefully distancing insult. He dissected his own words a thousand different ways, dreaming up and rejecting a million apologies he could make.
What exactly could he tell Taran? *I loved you, and I lost you, and I found you again—but I don’t yet know how to be around you now that you’re the bloody savior of all mankind?* Yes, that was sure to go over well. Or perhaps: *I’m sorry; I’m a coward. I’m afraid to let you close because I don’t think I could bring myself to share you with the world.*

No, Maker, that was even worse. Maybe he should just settle for the truth: *I am a terrible person and you should hate me.* That was clean and simple and elegant in its accuracy.

Either way, what should have been a night spent carefully picking apart the complex web of his reaction to Taran’s resurrection was lost to cringing regret. Dorian dragged himself awake just as the sun was kissing the horizon, bleary-eyed and more tangled up inside than before. He staggered out the first few steps before slowing and forcing himself to regroup: fingers smoothing his hair and mustache, flicking out the wrinkles in his robe, faking a disinterested half-smile, as if he’d spent a night of dreamless sleep. Scouts were already moving about the slowly waking camp, readying their fresh horses. Dorian spotted Cassandra by one of the campfires, drinking from a tin cup.

Best avoid her. Best avoid everyone until he was on an even keel again.

He headed to the horses. He could pretend to be checking on them if anyone asked and use the time to hide like the coward he was. One of the scouts was already moving amongst them, testing saddles and bridles, and Dorian murmured a quiet greeting as he stepped toward the black mare he planned to claim for his own.

The scout paused, one hand on the bridle of a beautiful appaloosa. Then, almost shyly, he glanced over and Dorian got a good look at him.

*Taran.* No, right, of course it was Taran. Bloody well his luck and all.

“Good morning, Dorian,” Taran said. If he was still upset—angry—about what he’d overheard last night, he didn’t show it. “Did you sleep well?”

“No,” Dorian said, startled into honesty. His stomach began swooping like a restless bird, and his heart was already pounding. Void, but it was unfair what this single Marcher boy did to him. “I mean, that is… tolerably, yes. Ah. And you?”

*Oh* that was awkward. He hadn’t felt so off-balance since he was a child, first discovering that the formless flutters in his chest whenever he was around his (male) friends actually meant something more than admiration. He didn’t know what to do with his feet or his hands, and kaffas, he wasn’t staring again, was he?

“Um, tolerably,” Taran echoed—though he had to be lying, too. Pale violet shadows ringed his eyes, and Dorian wanted nothing more than to reach up and brush them away with the pad of his thumb. To…kiss them or some-such nonsense.

(The mere thought made him shiver in place, no matter how harshly he tried to mock it.)

“Look,” Dorian began, desperate for any kind of equilibrium, just as Taran said, “Well, I should…” Both of them trailed off.

Taran was the first to recover. “We’ll be riding off in the next quarter-hour,” he said. He gave the appaloosa a light pat before stepping away. “I should pry my way back into my armor before Cassandra can chase me down.”

“All right,” Dorian said, watching him step back, pull away, begin to turn. “Taran,” he called before his Voice could get more than a few paces away.
Taran turned to look at him; Dorian’s stomach twisted in response. “I never said thank you,” he said, meeting Taran’s eyes. Falling helplessly, hopelessly into their golden-brown depths. “Last night. For the tea.”

Taran’s smile was slow and warm and heartbreakingly sweet. Wide, corners of his eyes crinkling and dimples flashing and dear Maker, it would take another miracle to keep Dorian from throwing himself at this man’s feet if he continued to smile at him like that. It was intolerable. (It was everything he ever wanted.) “Oh, well,” Taran said, voice just a touch hoarse. “You’re welcome, Dorian.” Then, with a final forgiving glance, he turned away and strode purposefully toward the camp, thin line of his underarmor doing absolutely nothing to hide the shift of hard muscle—or keep Dorian’s mind from spinning toward thoughts he knew he should fight like the devil to avoid.

He was a Tevinter mage. He was the son of House Pavus. He was in his thirties and he was no blushing virgin and he had experienced the world, damn it.

And yet as Dorian watched Taran go, he had to lift a hand to cover the return smile spreading across his own face—bloody shy and hopeful and all too ready to give absolutely everything away if he wasn’t careful.
They had been arguing for what must have been hours now. Cassandra stood at the far end of the table, hands clasped behind her back—fingers of one hand curled tight about the wrist of the other—just to keep from lunging forward and throttling them all.

Maker but she hated the indecisiveness. The bickering. They were like children fighting over inconsequentialities when it was clear to her what must be done.

“This is meaningless,” she said, butting into Cullen and Leliana’s squabble. The commander’s face was flushed red with temper, but the spymaster had gone pale. There was poetry in that if she had the patience to stop and study it. “We are wasting time. We must choose and stand by our decision no matter what comes.”

“Cassandra is right,” Leliana said. “And we must choose Redcliffe.”

Cullen made a frustrated, guttural noise deep in the back of his throat. “We don’t have the manpower to take the castle,” he snapped. “Either we find another way in, or give up this nonsense and go get the Templars!”

Impossible. “Redcliffe is in the hands of a magister,” she said, glaring him down. “This cannot be allowed to stand.”

Standing to the far right, flickering candles playing off the gold of her dress, Josephine sighed. “The letter from Alexius asked for the Herald of Andraste by name. It’s an obvious trap.”

Obviously. Alexius’s intentions couldn’t have been more clear if he’d begun stroking his chin and cackling to himself the moment the Herald stepped into that inn, but it didn’t change the facts: a Tevinter magister held Redcliffe. He had control over the rebel mage army. He had them backed into a corner and they could not allow him to win, no matter the cost.

“I will not—” Cassandra began hotly, digging her nails into the soft flesh of her wrist.

The Herald—Taran—shot her a glance. “We can’t waste time fighting among ourselves,” he said. Again. And thank the Maker for his level head in the face of all this…utter bullshit. He understood, even if the rest of them seemed ready to argue themselves into their early graves. “We have to come to an agreement.”

“The Herald is right,” Cassandra said. “We are. Wasting. Time.”

Cullen threw up his hands, as if they were the unreasonable ones. “That’s all very well, Cassandra, but how can we come to an agreement if we can’t even agree on—”

“A Tevinter magister controls Redcliffe,” she said, speaking over him, “invites us to the castle to talk, and yet you want us to do nothing.”

Josephine let out a hard breath. “Not this again.”

“Redcliffe Castle is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden,” Cullen said for what had to be the sixth time. More. Maker, they had been talking in circles to no end, accomplishing nothing but expelling hot air. If she thought she could get away with it, she’d slam her fist against the table and
force them to listen.

But she couldn’t get away with it. Not anymore. Somewhere along the line, all of them—including herself—had stopped thinking of Cassandra as the de facto leader of the Inquisition. That dubious honor, somehow, was more and more often resting in the hands of a boy barely out of manhood—currently listening to each of them with serious gold-brown eyes and a frown between his brows.

Taran might be able to muscle his way into the fight and stop them…but that wasn’t his way. Which she would likely admire, if she wasn’t so agitated now, spoiling for a fight as another day slipped past them. She wanted to take them all to task—as it was, Cassandra had to bite her tongue and let them fall head-first into another pointless round of bickering. Maker.

“It has repelled thousands of assaults,” Cullen was saying. He turned the steady strength of his glare on the Herald. “If you go in there, you’ll die. And we’ll lose the only means we have of closing these rifts. I won’t allow it.”

Standing at her side, Taran subtly stiffened at that. I won’t allow it. For all his good nature, the boy had an independent streak a mile wide.

Leliana pinched the bridge of her nose. “And if we don’t even try to meet Alexius, we lose the mages and leave a hostile foreign power on our doorstep!”

“Even if we could assault the keep,” Josephine objected, “it would be for naught. An ‘Orlesian’ Inquisition’s army marching into Ferelden would provoke a war.” She gave a jab of her pen to underscore her point. “Our hands are tied.”

Of all the useless… “The magister—” Cassandra began, hotly.

Cullen cut her off with a cold glower. “Has outplayed us.”

Taran leaned forward, subtly casting Cassandra a glance. I’m with you, it seemed to say. I have your back. The thought, the gesture, was…surprisingly welcome. Taran Trevelyan may have been young, but he had a good head on his shoulders. When he spoke, people listened: like now, Cullen and Josephine straightening when he said, “If we’re to vote, I vote Redcliffe. We need the mages…and more than that, right now, they need us. We can’t just leave them slaves.”

Even Cullen had to incline his chin in agreement to that.

Taran toyed with one of the iron pieces, voice going quieter, as if he were thinking aloud. “The magister’s son, Felix, told me Alexius is in a cult that’s obsessed with me,” he said. “I doubt they’ll graciously receive our apologies and go about their business.”

“They will remain a threat, and a powerful one, unless we act.” Leliana crossed her arms, red brows drawn firmly together. “I vote Redcliffe as well.”

“And I,” Cassandra said, as if there were any doubt.

Josephine sighed and tilted her head toward Cullen; he nodded his (visibly reluctant) agreement. Cassandra fought not to crow with victory. Finally. Three against two. She could feel the direction of the argument shifting with that revelation—thank the Maker—but they weren’t done yet. Now that they had a direction, they still needed a plan. “We cannot accept defeat now,” she said. “There must be a solution.” A way to grab this puzzle by the proverbial balls and force it to line up.

Taran studied the war table as if it could give them some clue. “Where is the arl of Redcliffe? I’m sure he’d help us get his castle back.”
Josephine sighed. “After he was displaced, Arl Teagan rode straight for Denerim to petition the Crown for help. I doubt he’ll want our assistance once the Ferelden army lays siege to his castle.”

Cullen opened his mouth to speak, only to stutter to silence when Leliana suddenly straightened, snapping her fingers. “Wait,” she said. An unexpected but not entirely unwelcome gleam brightened her eyes. “There is a secret passage into the castle—an escape route for the family. It’s too narrow for our troops, but we could send agents through.”

Cassandra shot her an aggrieved look. “You could not have mentioned this before?”

“It has been a long time since I’ve had reason to think of it,” Leliana countered. “Not since the Blight.”

Taran nearly dropped the little iron piece, fumbling with it in suddenly-clumsy fingers as he straightened to gape at Leliana. “The Blight,” he echoed, expression brightening. “You mean the Warden! This passage—it’s the one the Warden took to infiltrate Redcliffe Castle. Before the quest for the sacred ashes,” he added, looking toward Cullen in excited explanation.

Cullen’s lips quirked. “Yes,” he said, visibly amused by the boy’s enthusiasm. “I remember.”

Taran blinked, then flushed. “Oh, right,” he said, deflating a little. He laughed, dragging his fingers through his hair in that way he had whenever he was feeling particularly awkward or unbalanced. “I sometime forget they’re more than storybooks for you; you were actually there.”

“I was…near,” Cullen said, voice going quiet. Grim and subtly pained, as if the memory weren’t a good one. “In the Circle. I did not have Leliana’s front row view of history unfolding.”

“I would be happy to show you the tunnels the Warden used,” she said, leaning her hip against the table and very nearly smiling. “Though I hope you have an easier time of it than Solona. Fewer demons would be a nice start.”

Cullen cleared his throat. “Even with this hidden entrance, the whole plan is too risky. Whoever used it would be discovered well before they reached the magister.”

“That’s why we need a distraction,” Leliana countered. She tipped her head toward Taran, a single brow arching. “Perhaps the envoy Alexius wants so badly?”

Cassandra fought the kneejerk desire to protest. That is madness, she thought, followed quickly by, That is suicide. But as much as she instinctively raged against the idea of dangling the Herald in front of Alexius as bait, even she had to admit that the idea held merit.

She had seen the look in the magister’s eyes. He was desperate to get his hands on Taran. And if they could use that to their advantage…

Cullen appeared to be reaching the same conclusion. “Keep attention on Trevelyan while we disable the magister’s defenses,” he murmured, studying the iron pieces on the board with a thoughtful expression. Even Josephine, usually so very cautious when it came to human life, appeared to be considering it. “Distract him with what he really wants while we take out his forces from within. It’s a gamble, but it might work.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing—” Taran began, only to be cut off by a muffled sound from just outside the war room doors. Cassandra turned with a scowl as both of the heavy doors were pushed open in a flashy show of effortless grace, that Tevinter mage sauntering in as if he had any say in this.

“Fortunately,” he said, grandstanding as always, “you’ll have help.” The scout stumbling in his
footsteps grabbed for his arm, but Dorian ducked away easily, moving to stand between Cassandra and Taran—whose eyes were already fixed on that damnable smirk. “And by help, I mean my help, which is already ten times better than anything you could have had before.”

Cassandra ground her teeth.

“What are you doing here?” Cullen demanded, instantly impatient; Cassandra had never related to him more fully. “This is a closed meeting.”

The scout immediately knuckled his forehead in apology. “This man says he has information about the magister and his methods, Commander.”

Dorian waved an airy hand. “Information, action, and a few tricks up my sleeves I think you’ll like.”

“Well, there can’t be all that many tricks,” Taran said—instantly blushing when all eyes turned on him. “I mean…” He gestured. “You only have one. Sleeve, I mean.”

Cullen rubbed at his brow; Cassandra made an irritated noise; Dorian just ducked his head and looked pleased by the bad joke, even as the scout quietly slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind him. “Ah, yes. Quite. Either way, your spies will never get past Alexius’s magic without my help. So if you’re going after him, I’m coming along.”

The last was said directly to the Herald, dark eyes lifting to meet golden-brown.

“The plan puts you in the most danger,” Cullen pointed out, though Cassandra couldn’t escape the feeling they no longer had Taran’s full attention. “We can’t, in good conscience, order you to do this. We can still go after the Templars if you’d rather not play the bait.” He waited what felt like a long, heavy moment as Taran finally looked over to meet his eyes. Cullen snagged an iron piece and held it between his fingers, lifted in question.

Where will we go? it seemed to be asking. What will we do?

“It’s up to you,” Cullen said.

Taran swallowed, glancing around the table one last time. In the day-to-day running of the Inquisition—trekking through the Hinterlands, fighting demons, mending rifts—it was easy to forget that this boy was younger than most raw Templar initiates. Unschooled, untrained, unprepared for everything the wider world had to throw at him.

And yet, Cassandra had to admit, somehow holding his own. Taran Trevelyan had been nothing but an increasingly pleasant surprise from the moment she and Leliana stormed into that Haven dungeon, determined to make him pay for the murder of the most holy Justinia. His compassion for those who had been lost caught her off-guard at the time. It still caught her off-guard, and inspired her, and made her inexplicably eager to follow a boy nearly half her age.

Knowing Taran Trevelyan, the Herald of Andraste, was like knowing one of the heroes in Varric’s books. And even as she hated how deeply she was already invested in how his story would play out, Cassandra could feel herself beginning to nod along as Taran lifted his chin to meet Cullen’s eyes—and jerked his head in agreement.

“I’ll do it,” he said. And, “We can’t just stand by and let the mages be enslaved. We have to do something.” He shot Dorian a quick look out of the corner of his eyes, through his lashes, almost as if he were too shy to meet his gaze head-on. “With your help.”

Dorian cleared his throat. “With my help,” he said, “you can do just about anything.”
“That seems unlikely,” Cassandra muttered mostly to herself.

Taran just smiled. “Well then,” he said as Cullen formally moved the iron pieces to converge on Redcliffe Castle. “I look forward to your help doing just about *everything.*”
“So,” Dorian said as they left the war room.

“So,” Taran echoed with a little (obnoxiously endearing) quirk of his brow. He tipped his head toward Dorian’s as they fell into step together.

Cassandra remained behind to speak with Leliana in low, tense voices. Cullen brushed past with a gravelly, “Trevelyan,” and Josephine practically fled to her office, a worried pucker between her brows. Only Taran seemed relaxed in the face of what was about to happen—smiling, even, as if they hadn’t all just decided to put his life on the line.

Dorian wanted to take him by the ears and shake him. And then maybe kiss him breathless for good measure. “So,” he repeated instead, keeping his voice airy by sheer force of will. “You’re to play bait for Alexius and his army of enslaved rebel mages. Isn’t that…marvelous.”

Taran actually laughed at that, lightly knocking their shoulders together. “Are you worried?” he said. “You shouldn’t be. Cullen, Leliana, Cassandra and Josephine are very good at this sort of thing. Besides,” Taran added, that smile growing wider—honest-to-Maker dimples flashing at the corners, as if Dorian hadn’t already suffered enough. “I’ll have you there to watch my back, with all those tricks up your singular sleeve.”

Dorian made a non-committal noise to that, unable to form words.

Kaffas, he should have thought everything through before offering to help them execute this mad plan. But the thing was, he wasn’t thinking; he hadn’t been thinking, not since he saw Taran “die” in the Fade. And now that Taran was miraculously alive and by his side and more wonderful than Dorian could have imagined, it was all he could do to keep the shattered pieces of himself from scattering at the first strong wind.

Thinking, unfortunately, was out of the question. Everything was pure instinct now, and oh how he hated that.

They stepped out into the bracing cold, white flakes wending their way down down down to shush against growing drifts. The mountains stretched imposingly tall in the distance, their white peaks lost to nightfall. Queasy green light cast strange shadows across the ice-pitted earth. This close to the breach, there was no denying its power: Dorian could feel it in the air, against his skin, a prickling awareness that had him casting nervous glances up toward the ruined temple.

It felt like a malevolent eye, watching him from the darkness—and no, no, he wasn’t going to let his imagination sweep him away like that. He was exhausted, that was all.

“How can you possibly be sure of that?”

He tried for his best sardonic smile. “Oh, yes, what could possibly go wrong? Now,” he added before, Maker forbid, his brain managed to fill in some of those nightmare images (Alexius killing
Taran; Alexius sacrificing Taran; Alexius giving Taran to the bloody Venatori to bloody sacrifice, because wasn’t it always blood magic and human sacrifices with that sort of lot?), “if you could point me toward where I can find a bed, I believe I’ll turn in for the night. Early morning tomorrow, what with all the riding back to Redcliffe we have to do.”

Taran blinked once, then blushed—actually blushed, cheeks pinking in a way that Dorian was hard-pressed not to find utterly charming. “Oh, right, you still need a…a bed. Um.” He looked around as if one might materialize out of thin air before suddenly veering off to the left of the chapel. “This way,” he said. “I remember Josephine saying there was a small room we were using for storage—if you don’t mind sharing a bunk with crates of elfroot,” he added with a glance over his shoulder.

Dorian dutifully followed, keeping only a few steps behind the other man. He felt more comfortable when Taran was near, though he’d have to break himself of that habit sooner rather than later, unless he felt brave enough to ask whether Taran was looking to share a bunk.

(And was that same thought what had Taran blushing so bright? No, no, no, he would not let himself think about it. Not while he was still feeling so flat-footed and out of sorts. He needed time to pick apart the complicated ball of his feelings. Coming on to his unu…his Voice wouldn’t help anything.)

“I think I can manage a few boxes,” Dorian said, just a beat too late. Their feet crunched along the snowy path, flakes catching in the folds of his robe and—damn it—on his mustache. He smoothed it irritably. “Better that than a line of Cullen’s raw recruits.”

“Well, if you find it’s too cramped, there’s always room somewhere else,” Taran said. He led the way around the corner of a rough-hewn building. Across the way, Dorian spotted Solas moving past the window of another tiny hut. “The room they gave me is huge—much more than I need, really.”

Dorian felt his cheeks heating again at the confirmation that, oh yes, they had been thinking the exact same thing. He didn’t find the confirmation particularly reassuring. “Absolutely not,” he said, perhaps a touch too sharply and almost certainly too swift. “I would much prefer to share a room with the boxes, thank you.”

Taran cleared his throat and pushed open the door, carefully not looking at Dorian. Likely embarrassed, or maybe even hurt, and oh bloody void, was Dorian never going to stop putting his foot in his mouth? He fumbled to think of something else to say—something that might not sound like a callous rejection—but his thoughts kept slipping through his fingers like smoke.

“Well, here you are, then,” Taran said with an awkward gesture.

The room was small, all but overflowing with crates marked with Orlesian, Ferelden, and even a few Nevarran seals. The (cold) air smelled like cedar and elfroot—pleasant enough—and there was a small but serviceable bed tucked in the far corner.

Dorian slipped past Taran and moved to inspect the bed, pressing against the mattress and noting the pile of blankets. It wasn’t his lavish room back at his father’s estate, and that was enough to have him smiling wide and honest as he turned to look at his soulmate.

“This is perfect,” he said, meaning it. “Thank you, Taran.”

Taran’s smile was quickly becoming Dorian’s favorite thing in the world. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said, hovering there by the open door. “If you need anything—anything at all—my cabin is across the square. Near the gates,” he added. “Just ask anyone and they’ll be able to point you.”

“I will keep that firmly in mind,” Dorian promised.
His Voice shuffled back toward the threshold, reaching blindly for the doorknob, not looking away from him. “We leave early tomorrow morning,” he said. “It’ll be you, me, Cassandra and Varric. Solas is going to stay here; I figured that would be okay, since we want to keep the party small and we already have…well…you.”

He merely meant that they already had a mage, but Dorian could barely control the rush of pleasure he felt at those words. “I am happy to be had,” he said with far too much honesty before quickly adding, “Good night.”

“Good night,” Taran said, hesitating by the door another long moment before finally slipping back out into the snowy night. He closed the door behind him, and Dorian most certainly did not watch him walk by the window…then move quickly to the back window to watch as Taran made his way across the courtyard, face tipped up toward the snow, until he was lost to darkness.

Alone in his room, Dorian let out a heavy sigh and flopped dramatically back onto the bed. He fell against the pillow, rubbing the meat of his palms hard into his eyes. Maker, just being around Taran was making him act like a lovesick child. He hardly knew where he was, who he was—everything inside him was focused with dwarven precision on the Herald of bloody Andraste.

He dropped his hands, staring up at the ceiling. His breath formed clouds with each exhale, and he thought maybe he should yank his covers over his head and get as good a night’s sleep as he could manage before he was forced to spend another few days chasing Taran across the rolling Hinterlands.

Or, a part of him whispered, you could try to find him again in the Fade.

The idea…had its appeal. He had never much let himself seek Taran out since that fateful day he’d found him: small and afraid, hands covered in the blood of his sister. Maker, just being around Taran was making him act like a lovesick child. He hardly knew where he was, who he was—everything inside him was focused with dwarven precision on the Herald of bloody Andraste.

And then Taran had made his way to the conclave and Dorian had lost him to green fire. Was he still there, in the Fade? He hadn’t been able to sense him there since the explosion, but maybe now that they were close, he could…

“Not yet, you bloody fool,” Dorian muttered to himself. He snagged the covers and pulled them over himself, curling on his side and glaring down the darkness, the temptation, the draw to Taran’s side. It would be so easy to slip into dreams and try to trace his way back to Taran, but there was still so much he needed to straighten out in his own head before he began peeking into Taran’s. He needed to keep himself together if he was going to watch Taran’s back through this next foolcap adventure.

He needed to be thinking clearly if he was going to keep his Voice safe.

Closing his eyes, Dorian forced away the temptation, inured against it thanks to years of self-denial. He drew in a breath and let it out slowly, willing himself to relax. He had one night to take advantage of peace, quiet, and a bed. He planned to make the bloody most of it while he could.

Funny thing, Dorian thought sourly to himself the next morning, up before dawn and fumbling to get dressed in time to meet the rest of the party. Just because I didn’t to enter Taran’s dreams last night
didn’t mean he didn’t star in all of mine.

The irony might be funny if it wasn’t so damned early.

It turned out the race back into the Hinterlands was just as miserable as the ride to Haven. Dorian clung to the back of a series of horses—traded for fresh mares at each Inquisition camp they passed—and slept on the hard ground and ate camp food and made unfortunate compromises when it came to style vs. comfort.

But one thing had vastly improved from one journey to the next: this time, every time he found his gaze drifting back to Taran, he found the boy meeting his eyes with an excited smile, the light of adventure making those golden-brown eyes shine.

And even if something inside him clenched like a fist at the idea of Taran playing the bait for anyone—much less a talented mage like Alexius—every time he met that wide, dazzling grin…damned if he didn’t find himself smiling back.

“No, wait, stop,” Dorian hissed, catching Taran by the elbow before he could push his way up the steps toward the main keep—where Alexius no doubt waited for them. “I take everything back; this was a terrible idea. Your advisors should all be flogged for bloody idiots.”

Taran just looked back and smiled, one hand briefly closing over Dorian’s. It would have felt wonderful if he wasn’t so twisted up with worry: seriously, what had they been thinking allowing the Herald of Andraste—the sole living being who had a chance of closing rifts—a boy who had barely seen the world and all the horrors contained within it and, oh yes, who also happened to be the literal other half of his soul—walk blithely into a trap?

It was madness. It was stupidity. It was—

Taran’s smile warmed, golden-brown eyes gone softly reassuring. “It’s going to be all right,” he promised for what had to have been the hundredth time. Then, teasing: “Come one, Dorian: where’s your sense of adventure?”

“It turned tail and fled hand in hand with my common sense,” Dorian said. “I haven’t seen either for days.” He pulled his hand away, however, aware that eyes might be on them already. The wheels were already well in motion, and he had a part to play, after all.

Dorian and one of Leliana’s hand-picked scouts had dressed in the highly stylized robes and golden masks of Alexius’s Venatori guard, slipping ahead to greet Taran, Cassandra, and Varric at the gates. He’d never paid honor guards much mind when he was an apprentice; now, it was a slowly tumbling series of revelations of how uncomfortable the whole get-up was proving to be.

Or were those nerves making him sweat through his fine leathers? Venhedis, he felt like a leaf trembling on the breeze.

The scout tilted his head subtly toward Dorian. “We have company,” he murmured, so soft no one
beyond their little circle could hear.

Taran lifted his gaze, watching as the man moved down the outer steps to greet them. Eyes locked on his Voice’s face, Dorian could see the minute hardening of his jaw—the way he tensed, all softness fading from his expression. He sounded every inch the leader of an Inquisition when he ordered, “We’ve been waiting. Announce us.”

The mage inclined his head. “I would,” he said, “but we appear to have run into something of a snag. You see, the Magister’s invitation was for Master Trevelyan only. These others will have to remain here.”

A few paces back, Cassandra dropped a hand to the hilt of her blade. Varric simply arched a brow, lips curved into a smirk. Taran glanced at him, his own brows lifting as if this were all some kind of joke. (And if it was, Dorian was absolutely not laughing.) “They have to accompany me,” Taran said, putting so much polite shock into the words that it was almost a farce. “You wouldn’t deprive me of my attachés, would you?”

It was a gamble, mocking the mage like this—deliberately making light of Alexius’s summons, as if this were a game and not a matter of Taran’s life or death. But even though Taran was smiling, seemingly at ease, his eyes had flashed to pure steel as he stared the man down, daring him to object. We both know who holds the power right now, he may as well have said. And it Is. Not. You.

After a brief but heavy silence, the mage inclined his head and turned, leading the way up the steps toward the inner keep. Taran looked once between the two “guards” before passing by, his companions a few steps behind. Dorian had to force himself to count to five before he turned as well, following at a more leisurely pace. His fingers itched to grab for the staff strapped to his back, but he kept his body language loose and unconcerned, falling into the act as they moved through the threshold and down a grand hallway, up through a pair of golden doors to the main throne room.

Alexius had lit a fire in the hearth, backlighting him as he sat in the arl’s stone chair at the height of the dais. Felix was to one side of him, Dorian noted, and Fiona stood at the base of the steps, hands curled into impotent fists. More Venatori guards lined the hall a respectful ways back, but Dorian didn’t allow himself to search for movement in the shadows: he had to trust that Leliana and Cullen would see their part in all this through.

All that mattered was making sure Taran escaped this confrontation alive.

The blond mage paused at the base of the dais, turning so he was in profile. “My lord magister,” he said, inclining his head respectfully. “The agents of the Inquisition have arrived.”

Alexius stood, haloed by firelight—his face completely lost to shadow. “My friend,” he said with false cheer that had a shiver working its way up Dorian’s spine. “It’s so good to see you again.” A pregnant pause. “And your…associates, of course. I’m sure we can work out an arrangement that is equitable to all parties.”

Fiona pushed forward before Taran could speak. “Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?” she demanded.

“Fiona,” Alexius said, turning cold eyes on her, “you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives.”

“Enough pleasantries,” Taran said—and this, this was not the sweet-eyed boy Dorian had watched grow from child to young man. There was none of the hesitancy of inexperience in his voice; none
of the self-doubt that would have wracked many in his situation. He stood there, shining gold and bronze in the firelight, as relaxed as if he truly were Alexius’ equal in every way. It was enough to make Dorian’s heart skip a beat. “Shall we begin?”

Alexius seemed just as impressed, though he was struggling to hide it. “It’s refreshing to meet someone so goal-oriented,” he said before turning and slowly, deliberately pacing back toward the throne. Felix cast him a quick look, brows drawn into a faintly worried pucker. His lean frame was coiled tight as a spring, as if he were just waiting for the word before he sprang into action.

What do you know? Dorian thought, watching his old friend carefully. What is it he’s hiding that has you so on edge?

There was no time to puzzle it out as Alexius continued, “The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?”

Taran inclined his head. “I’d much rather discuss your time magic,” he said, utterly brazen. If Dorian hadn’t known Alexius as well as he did, he may have missed the way his one-time mentor tensed. Nothing showed in his eyes, however—no emotion flickered across his face as he said, “I’m afraid I have no idea what you mean.”

“He knows everything, Father,” Felix said quietly, turning to face the throne.

This time, Alexius couldn’t hide the emotion that flashed across his weathered face. “Felix,” he said, voice gone deep, hard. “What have you done?”

“Your son is concerned that you’re involved in something terrible,” Taran said.

Those furious eyes turned on Taran, Alexius’s fury palpable—terrifying. “So speaks the thief,” he hissed, and there was so much rage in his voice that Dorian edged an anxious step closer to his Voice. “Do you think you can turn my son against me?”

He gripped the edges of the throne as he rose, backlit by fire, terrible to behold. Power crackled in the air, and Taran and Dorian were the only ones who didn’t take an unconscious step back. Barely leashed violence echoed in every taut line of Alexius’s body. “You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark,” Alexius said, the voice his own but the words sounding foreign on his tongue, as if they belonged to someone else, “a gift you don’t even understand—and think you’re in control?”

Taran moved forward a step, eyes locked with Alexius’s—keeping his attention.

Alexius curled his upper lip, glowering down at him. “You’re nothing but a mistake.”

“If you know so much, enlighten me,” Taran challenged. “Tell me what this mark on my hand is for.”

Alexius looked like a storybook villain—he looked nothing like the man Dorian had once admired. There was murder in his eyes, and some terrible purpose in the line of his body as he said (in that cold voice, using those words that sounded like scripture handed down from a wicked god): “It belongs to your betters. You wouldn’t even begin to understand its purpose.”

Felix jerked forward, reaching out for his father. “Father, listen to yourself,” he pleaded. Alexius began to turn toward him, focus wavering. “Do you know what you sound like?”

Damn Felix. Dorian could appreciate the sentiment, but now wasn’t the time for sentimentality. There were shadows moving about the corners of the room—Leliana’s men slipping into place—and
if Alexius’s attention didn’t stay fixed on the all-too-tempting target that was the Herald of Andraste, then there was every chance this plan was doomed to failure. They needed to keep Alexius off-balance, distracted.

Which meant it was time to save the day with a bit of well-timed grandstanding.

“He sounds exactly like the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be,” Dorian said in a ringing voice, moving to stand at Taran’s side. He reached up, dramatically pulling off the golden mask and letting it drop from his fingers—he needed his hands free to grab for his staff at a moment’s notice.

Alexius’s head snapped back around, eyes narrowing. Ah. It was good to know he could still command a room. “Dorian,” his old master said. “I gave you a chance to be a part of this. You turned me down.” Before Dorian could say anything to that, Alexius shook off Felix’s anxious grip and stepped forward, voice dropping—going cold again. “The Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes.”

“That’s who you serve?” Taran asked. “The one who killed the Divine? Is he a mage?”

Alexius’s lips curved into a hollow mockery of a smile. “Soon he will become a god. He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas.”

From the sidelines, Fiona shouted, “You can’t involve my people in this!”

“Alexius,” Dorian said, subtly moving toward the steps, half in front of Taran. He could sense the argument coming to some conclusion, though Maker take him if he knew what it might be. “This is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen. Why would you support this?”

In the distance, there was a soft gurgle, a spatter of blood, a scrape of steel on steel as inert bodies were carefully lowered to the floor. Pacing back and forth along the dais, Alexius was too distracted to notice.

Good.

“Stop it, Father,” Felix begged, playing his part now as if he had the full script. “Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let’s go home.”

“No,” Alexius said, turning back to his son. The fury was gone, the cold murder fled from his eyes. Now he just looked... old. Old and sad and three seconds away from breaking. “It’s the only way, Felix. He can save you.”

“Save me?”

He lifted a hand. “There is a way,” he said—quieter, mostly to himself. “The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the Temple...” Grey eyes focused again on Taran. Dorian felt himself go cold. He fumbled back for his staff even as Taran stepped forward, moving toward the steps as if to confront Alexius face to face.

No, Dorian thought, panic growing, though he still couldn’t say why. No, no, not you. Not like this.

“...to die,” Felix was saying. “You need to accept that.”

Alexius pointed down at Taran, hand trembling. “Seize them, Venatori,” he snarled, voice echoing loud in the cavernous hall. “The Elder One demands this man’s life!”
There was no response.

Alexius whirled toward where his men lined the shadows, just as Inquisition scouts and soldiers stepped forward—armor spattered with blood, steel in hand, expressions grim.

“Your men are dead, Alexius,” Taran said, voice even, unafraid.

“You,” Alexius hissed, eyes narrowing down down down on Taran. He bared his teeth as if he wanted to come flying from the dais to wrap his fingers around Taran’s throat. “You are a mistake. You should never have existed!”

He lifted his palm, green fire sparking, a strangely familiar amulet rising up into the air.

Dorian felt the spell as it crackled to life. He sucked in a breath, grabbing for Taran’s arm—intending to yank him back safely behind him—even as he swung his staff with all his might. “No!” he shouted, the spell already lifting in a crackling shield around them.

The spells collided with a hollow crack, like black ice giving way beneath an unwary tread. Dorian was thrown back a pace, caught in Taran’s arms as—as oh bloody Maker—as a tear opened in the space between them and Alexius. It widened quickly, sucking the air down like a whirlpool; his robes flapped around his legs as they were caught in the undertow, and Dorian cried out as he was jerked forward. It felt as if something had him about the ankle, pulling—only Taran’s desperate grip kept him from flying away.

Steel screeched against stone as Taran was dragged with him, mailed boots digging furrows in the flagstones. He had both hands gripping one of Dorian’s, his eyes huge with frightened determination as they were both sucked into the growing hole in the world.

“No, stop,” Dorian tried to yell, but there was no air in his lungs, no way to shout over the growing maelstrom. “Let me go!”

He didn’t want to die, but he would rather fall into the void than take Taran with him. He had to get free, he had to wrench away, he had to— Had to—

Taran’s grip tightened just as that terrible pressure yanked at Dorian’s legs. The world was closing in on a solid point of light, getting farther and farther away with each terrified pulse of his rapid heartbeat—pounding pounding panicked terror as he tumbled back into Alexius’s spell…

…his soulmate’s determined grip on his wrist the final lingering impression he had of the world they left behind.

And then, nothing.
It was dark and cold, dark and cold, dark and cold—and then, with a splash, it was dark and cold and wet, brackish water closing over Taran’s head as awareness came rushing back in a frigid wave.

He surged up with a sputter, drenched hair plastered to his forehead and streaming into his eyes. Cold hands bracketed his jaw immediately, thumbs stroking over his cheeks, Dorian’s anxious face swimming into view as Taran blinked away his shock.

“By the Maker, for a moment, I thought…” Dorian began in Tevene. “I was here in this place, and you hadn’t yet appeared, and I thought…”

Taran reached up on instinct, wrapping his hands around Dorian’s wrists even as he straightened to meet his eyes. They were both kneeling in disgustingly grey-green water in some sort of cell; the queasy light seemed to hang heavy around them, oppressive, and Dorian was as wan as Taran had ever seen him—terrified. Visibly shaken and shaking.

“Hey,” Taran said, also in (only semi-broken) Tevene. He brushed his thumbs along Dorian’s racing pulse. His voice sounded rusty, worn, even to his own ears. “It’s okay. We made it through to…um, this place…together.” Though void only knew where this place actually was. Taran offered a crooked smile, pushing aside that worry in favor of offering what comfort he could. “You can ask Varric if you don’t believe me, but I’m actually pretty hard to get rid of.”

Dorian let out a harsh puff of breath—a not-quite laugh—dark gaze sweeping anxiously over and over Taran’s face as if reassuring himself that he was real. Real and whole and not scattered apart by whatever spell Alexius had thrown at them. His dark eyes seemed to focus bit by bit, expression relaxing from stark terror to relief and even a little curiosity as Taran remained stubbornly whole and alive.

Then, slowly, he leaned back, letting go.

Taran reluctantly let him, fingers curling and uncurling at the new emptiness. He looked around to distract himself, climbing to his feet. The air had a strange green tint to it, and (holy Maker) huge hunks of red lyrium grew out of the walls. The ceiling was crumbling in on itself a few feet away, a fitful waterfall pouring through the cracks. They appeared to be in a cell, the door half-open to the rest of the prison beyond, hinges rusted with disuse. “…huh,” Taran said.

Dorian snagged his staff from the deep pool and used it to pull himself up. The color was coming back to his cheeks—perhaps a little too well? Was Dorian actually flushing?

Taran began to turn to him, but before he could say anything (ask any questions, make any reassurances) an unfamiliar voice called out from just past the cell: “Blood of the Elder One!”

Taran’s attention snapped toward the door, where two soldiers were pushing their way in, swords drawn. The second grabbed the rusting metal bar and yanked the door shut behind them to block any escape—he could hear the latch catching even as Taran reached back to unsheathe his huge sword.

“Get behind me,” he told Dorian, even as the second guard muttered, “Where’d they come from?”

Taran didn’t give them a chance to do more. He swung in with an instant sense of purpose, focus, using all his strength to bring his blade slicing toward an unprotected join of metal and leather. The
guard cried out, jerking the flat of his blade around to deflect; the familiar clang of steel on steel echoed through Taran like a song, and he was already grimly smiling as he fell into the familiar dance of strike, counter-strike, cleave.

A cool wind passed his cheek, close as a kiss, and ice crystals spread across one of the guard’s chestplate seconds before frozen spikes erupted from the gashes left by his blade. Taran bobbed and wove around the spells that Dorian cast, somehow anticipating them despite the two of them never fighting together before. It was exhilarating—doing something in the face of his mounting confusion was exhilarating—and he let himself fall into the almost meditative calm of the familiar even as the whole world was literally crumbling apart around him.

It didn’t last long. The second guard dropped lifeless into the water seconds after his companion, eddies of red swirling around Taran’s calves. He pulled his blade back, letting the man sink, and closed his eyes in a seconds-long sending of his spirit—sorry, as always, for the lives he’d had no choice but to take.

Then he turned back to Dorian, checking him over briefly; all looked well. (And he couldn’t help but think Dorian was eyeing him for injuries in the exact same way.) “Well,” Taran said, quickly cleaning his blade before slinging it back onto its simple harness. “That was bracing. I should have tried to keep one alive for questioning, but I worried that…”

“No,” Dorian interrupted, re-sheathing his staff as well. “There could be more guards who would have heard if they called for help. We made the right choice.” Then his gaze fell on the closed-and-locked cell door and he let out a breath. “Kaffas. We may call attention to ourselves busting out of here, however.”

“However we got here…wherever here is.” Taran looked around the small cell, then sighed and moved to inspect the bodies. It had only taken a few days fighting at Cassandra’s side before he’d firmly internalized the importance of being thorough—and this time, the lesson paid off. “This one’s got a keyring!” Taran said, pulling it out with a flourish. He gave the ring a little shake, turning a relieved smile on Dorian.

Dorian didn’t seem to hear him. He was standing in the middle of the room, water up to his knees, staring at the shards of red lyrium thrust through the walls. His brows were knit together, fingers of one hand cupping his elbow as he stroked his mustache with the other. “Displacement?” he murmured to himself, turning a slow, full circle as he took in their cell as if for the first time. “Interesting!”

“Sure,” Taran said, straightening. He offered another crooked smile when Dorian looked at him. “We can go with interesting. Do you have any idea what happened? Why did Alexius send us…here?”

Dorian tapped his upper lip thoughtfully. “It’s probably not what Alexius intended. The Rift must have moved us…to what? The closest confluence of arcane energy?” He looked down again, studying the flagstones all but lost beneath the rush of water. “The last thing I remember, we were in the castle hall.”

Dorian tilted his head. “Mm, yes—me as well. What’s more, the stonework seems markedly Ferelden, don’t you think? So we can’t have gone far. And this.” He gestured to whatever he’d been studying, and Taran waded closer, grateful for the excuse to be near. This place had his skin crawling, no matter that he kept trying to tell himself it was just an adventure. Like something from the Warden’s tales.
He stood next to Dorian, their shoulders lightly brushing, and looked down where the other man was pointing. There was…something…in the water. Something round and reflecting what little light passed through.

A grate?

No, Taran realized as he squinted—a seal. An arl’s seal, and a familiar one at that.

“That’s the seal of Redcliffe,” Taran said, recognizing it from Josephine’s many, many, many reports.

Dorian hummed an agreement. “Delightful Ferelden custom, decorating cells with House seals—as if rotting away in here wouldn’t be bad enough without having to spend your days staring at proof of your jailor’s power. But all that aside, what this means is we aren’t far from where we began. We’re still in Redcliffe castle.”

“So Alexius teleported us deeper into the castle?” Taran looked around again, taking in the jutting red crystals, the crumbling rock, the slow waterfall. “I don’t know, Dorian. I’ve never met the arl of Redcliffe, but this doesn’t seem right.”

“Nothing seems right here,” Dorian agreed. He began to pace, Venatori robes swirling about his legs. “Let’s see,” he said, thinking aloud. “If we’re still in the castle, it isn’t… Oh! Of course!” Dorian turned toward Taran, expression brightening, looking almost excited, as if he’d discovered some dubiously wonderful surprise. “It’s not simply where—it’s when! Alexius used the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time!”

Taran blinked. “Moved us through time?” he said slowly. “Can that even be done?”

Dorian’s whole body seemed alight with new energy and curiosity despite their increasingly dire-sounding circumstances. “Normally, I would say no. Obviously Alexius has taken his research to exciting new heights.”

“Um, yes, very exciting.”

“We’ve seen his temporal rifts before, of course,” Dorian continued. “This time we simply…passed through one.”

He was going to have to take that on faith. The little Taran knew about magic came from Solas or tales of his two older sisters—Aria, who’d spent all of his life locked in the Kirkwall Circle, and Josselyn. Both had struggled with demons and neither—far as he knew—had worked with anything like time magic. Even Solas’s wonderful tales of distant dreams didn’t sound like this. “What was Alexius trying to do?” Taran asked, increasingly on edge.

Dorian must have heard the strained note in his voice. He turned at once to look at him, dark eyes scanning his face as he seemed to instinctively move forward; Taran let out a breath, relaxing minutely with Dorian close by his side. “I believe his original plan was to remove you from time completely.” Dorian said, some of that intrigued excitement faded, gone serious. “If that happened, you would never have been at the Temple of Sacred Ashes or mangled his Elder One’s Plan. I think your surprise in the castle hall made him reckless. He tossed us into the rift before he was ready. I countered it, the magic went wild, and here we are. Make sense?”

“It just seems so insane.”

Dorian let out a puff of breath. “Admittedly, most highly theoretical magic sounds a little mad at first. It was reckless, what Alexius did. I don’t even want to think about what this will do to the fabric of
the world. We didn’t travel through time so much as punch a hole through it and toss it into the privy.”

Taran…didn’t want to think about that either. There were enough holes in the world for him to worry about already. “There were others in the hall,” he said, focusing on what mattered now. “Could they have been drawn through the rift?”

“I doubt it was large enough to bring the whole room through,” Dorian said. “Alexius wouldn’t risk catching himself or Felix in it. They’re probably still where, and when, we left them. In some sense, anyway.”

So there went any hope of allies in this strange place. Taran anxiously toyed with the ring of keys, looking toward the cell door. Somewhere in this castle, there were answers to all of the questions still swirling around them. When were they, how had everything gotten this bad, what did it mean now that he and Dorian existed out of time. And, perhaps most pressing: “What happens if we can’t get back?”

Dorian reached out to rest a hand on Taran’s arm. He couldn’t feel it through the armor, but staring at those elegant fingers splayed wide over the bronze-and-gold, Taran felt himself slowly begin to warm.

It was…odd, how intensely he felt about this man he’d only just met. How long had it been? Maker, less than a week. He had known Dorian less than a week, and already he felt this undeniable pull toward him. As if he were a ship tossed about the Waking Sea, and Dorian was the anchor holding him in place. Or… Or maybe more like the compass pointing him toward true north. Or any number of tortured allegories he could dream up: the point was, Taran’s quiet, grey world had changed in a flash of green power at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and everything had been a sprint downhill ever since. And yet despite every change, every challenge, every triumph and failure and growing camaraderie he was feeling for the first time in his lonely little life, Dorian outshone everyone and everything. He was at once the most exciting and the most calming change in Taran’s life, and Taran had the sense he’d be trying to work out that contradiction for a long, long time.

Dorian had grabbed his chaotic world and somehow shaken everything back into place again…and oh Andraste save him, but here Taran was staring moonily at the other man for Maker knew how bloody long, like some kind of mudbrain fool.

“Um,” Taran said, cheeks instantly flaming with heat.

Dorian’s smile was slow and incandescent. He patted cold steel before letting go. “Don’t worry,” he said, voice suspiciously husky. “I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

He had no words. No thoughts. Nothing but a creeping sense that he would do just about anything for this man he barely knew—and he couldn’t bring himself to care that it made no sense. He and Dorian were trapped together in some hellish maybe-past, maybe-future, and it was all going to be all right.

They were together, after all.

Taran wet his lips. “Yes,” he said, flustered, flushing, completely out of his depth and drowning in emotion. Maker, what was it about this man? “I…you too.”

Dorian’s smile was a small, shy thing, making him look younger than his…oh, well, Andraste, he didn’t even know how old Dorian was. He barely knew anything about him. But that didn’t stop Taran from reaching out to just let their fingers brush together once—warmth against warmth,
something bigger than this whole frightening mess blooming in his chest at the look Dorian gave him—then forced himself to turn away and focus on the task ahead.

There’d be time to work through the tangled mess of this rapidly growing crush later. For now… they had work to do.

He sorted through the keys until he found the one that opened the cell door. The rest of the cells were just as dismal as theirs, red lyrium erupting in violent, softly *humming* clusters—no pattern, no logic, nothing but sighing malevolence. Taran shivered and led the way up a set of broken stairs and past a creepily pitted statue of Maferath toward the upper cells. These were somehow worse, lyrium glistening along the carved stone walls and winking from the shadows.

At his side, Dorian shivered. “Alexius has made a dreadful mess of this place, hasn’t he?” he murmured.

“I didn’t see this part of the castle,” Taran said. It felt better to talk, as if their voices were somehow beating back the darkness, but he kept to a whisper just in case there were more guards ahead. “When you snuck in earlier, did you see anything? Was it at all like this?”

Dorian snorted. “It was covered in the tackiest carvings of wolves and dogs I’d ever seen.” They passed a violent spike of lyrium, a long-dead soldier impaled by the sharp point. Most of his leathers had rotted away, and the exposed bone gleamed red red red. “This is not an improvement.”

Taran cast him a quick look, catching the flash of quickly hidden worry in his eyes. Dorian was so obviously trying to hold himself together, leaning on curiosity and humor as a distraction from the anxiety slowly ratcheting up between them. But that fear was a palpable thing—thick and undeniable, growing stronger and stronger the longer they prowled through this strange place…

…and nearly hitting a fever pitch when they reached the softly singing mage.

“Andraste blessed me, Andraste blessed me,” the mage sighed, voice gone whisper-soft and tragic. He stood by his cell door, vibrating in place, an odd red tracer emanating from his eyes. “My tears are my sins, my sins, my sins…"

“Oh Maker,” Taran breathed. He started forward, instinctively reaching out; Dorian caught his arm.

“Wait,” Dorian said, that fear, that horror, bright in his eyes again. There was no hiding it now as he looked between Taran and the mage—at the aura of sickly red surrounding him. Spikes of lyrium erupted from the wall around him, but he barely seemed to notice. “You shouldn’t go close. He may be infectious. There’s no telling what…”

He trailed off, staring horrified as the familiar mage sang off-key and swayed in place.

Taran gently pulled away from Dorian’s grip, going to the cell. He reached for the keyring he still carried, testing each key until one finally turned in the lock. The door screeched its protest as it was swung open, but the mage didn’t respond—didn’t move—didn’t blink. He simply stood there, oblivious to his freedom, swaying back and forth as he quietly sang.

He could feel his heart breaking. “What did they do to you?” Taran breathed.

There was a soft footfall as Dorian moved behind him, close. “He’s long gone,” he said, voice low.

“Maybe if we find a way to snap him out of it,” Taran began, but Dorian simply caught his arm again and tugged him back a step, away from the open cell and its lone prisoner.
“No,” Dorian said—*gently*, as if he could sense the horror building like a rising wave inside of Taran. “He’s lost in himself; we can’t save him.”

*We have to try,* he wanted to shout, but… But Maker, he already knew Dorian was right. That mage, that man, was a shell of a person. He could hear the soft hum of red lyrium threaded through each word, and there was nothing but an endless red reflection in his eyes.

There was nothing left to save.

Taran sucked in a breath and turned away, breaking from Dorian’s gentle grip again—moving quickly *away* from the open cell. He wanted to…he wanted to *scream,* or slam his fist into the wall, or track down Alexius and force him to *fix this.* The world was crumbling madness around him, and each step only took them deeper into a nightmare that felt like it had been ripped from his very past. His skin prickled and he couldn’t quite shake the tendrils of half-buried memory: the waves crashing against the shore; Josselyn’s dissonant voice as she sang him a lullaby, eyes gone blank; the hot spatter of blood across his cheeks.

“*Taran!*” Dorian hissed, but he was already half-sprinting up the steps, sword in hand, dark memories nipping at his heels. It was almost a relief to stumble across guards—normal, living guards without that haunting in their eyes.

He swung into the fight with reckless abandon, trusting his instincts to lead him out of this dance alive. Dorian’s spells swirled around him, and they once again fell into that effortless tempo, as if they could read each other’s minds even after so short a time. That, somehow, was soothing; the battle was soothing. It was familiar, and real, and nothing like the haunting shade of long-ago nightmares.

When it was over, Taran and Dorian stood there breathing heavily, staring at each other. The Venatori lay at their feet, and everything was briefly still.

Then Dorian swung his staff back into its scabbard and stepped over a body to reach him. “*Taran,*” he began—*gentle,* as if talking to a child. “What we are seeing here, what has happened—we have no proof that it is *real.* Or that, if it is some future, it is destined to come true. We cannot know—”

“I know,” Taran said. He closed his eyes against the old terror gibbering inside of him, swallowing back the fear, the doubt, the self-recrimination. If this *were* some kind of future, then obviously it was a glimpse of what the world would become if he failed. Right? Old friends and acquaintances and…and *everyone* walking around like hollow shells of themselves: Josselyn in every face he saw. “I know,” he said again. “We’ll have to… I have to fix this.”

“*Taran,*” Dorian said again, reaching for him, but Taran turned and moved toward one of the far doors—down into another set of cells again. If he let Dorian comfort him now, he might not be able to keep from pressing into that freely given warmth. He might not be able to be strong and, and bloody fucking well *fix this.*

A voice echoed up from the cell; Taran lifted his hand for silence, moving slowly down the crumbling steps toward it. He forced himself to focus, zeroing in on the eerily-familiar tone, fumbling through all-too-familiar words.

“The light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next. For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water.”

There was that strange dissonance again, red lyrium humming through each word, as if its song had sunk deep into the speaker’s throat. But there was more life in that tone than in the mage’s chant, and
as Taran crept closer, the familiar inflection grew stronger and stronger until—

He dropped his sword, moving quickly to the cell. “Cassandra,” he breathed, hands shaking as he reached for the bars.

She looked up, red eyes glowing eerily bright, skin stretched tight across her skull—a Mortalitasi in everything but truth. “You’ve returned to us!” she gasped, staring at him with open shock. Reverence. Oh Maker, hope, as if he somehow had all the answers instead of just more questions. “Can it be? Has Andraste given us another chance?”

Taran’s hands shook as he grabbed for the keyring, unlocking the cell and pulling it open.

“Cassandra,” he said, only to trail back into silence. He had no idea what he could possibly say to her that would bring anything but more pain.

“Maker forgive me,” she said, looking up at him with such naked loss that it hurt to meet her eyes. “I failed you—I failed everyone. The end must truly be upon us if the dead return to life.”

“You look wounded,” he said, moving in to help her to her feet. Dorian hovered just outside the cell, Taran’s abandoned sword held awkwardly in his hands. “Maybe we can help.”

She leaned against him, head tipping toward his as if to soak in his strength. He could feel Dorian’s unease, but he ignored it, slipping an arm around her waist as she regained her balance. “Nothing you do can help me now,” she said, and his heart broke again at the quiet acceptance in her tone. Those were the words of a woman who had already bowed to her fate. “I’ll be with the Maker soon.”

“No,” Taran said. “We can find a way to fix this.”

“Such faith you always had,” Cassandra murmured. “But…how are you here? Alive?” She straightened, looking at him again as if he were a ghost—or Andraste given form before her. “I was there. The magister obliterated you with a gesture.”

Dorian cleared his throat. “From what I can gather, Alexius sent us forward in time. If we find him, we may be able to return to the present.”

“Go back in time?” Cassandra pulled back from both of them, staring between them. “Then…can you make it so that none of this ever took place?”

“That’s my hope,” Taran said, wishing with everything he had that he could make it a promise.

Cassandra met his eyes, holding them for what felt like a long, long time. Then, slowly, she nodded—understanding. “Alexius’s master,” she finally continued. “After you died,” Dorian flinched, “we could not stop the Elder One from rising. Empress Celene was murdered. The army that swept in afterwards—it was a horde of demons. Nothing stopped them. Nothing.”

“I should have been there to help you,” Taran said, feeling the guilt, the anguish, the near-unstoppable drive to fight his way to Alexius and make this right rising up inside of him. The thought of his friends—his family; the only family he had left—fighting alone, struggling alone, dying alone…

Maker. Maker. He would throw himself into the very void if it meant stopping that.

Cassandra’s expression smoothed at whatever she read in his eyes. She reached out, Taran meeting her halfway by instinct, and clasped his forearm the way he’d seen Inquisition troops greet each other: brothers in battle.
Her lips curved into the faintest of smiles. “Well,” she said, ruined voice echoing with lyrium’s dark song. “You’re here now.”
The Venatori stalked back and forth in front of where she had been hung, bristling like an angry cat. If she had any emotion left in her after all this time, she might have smiled. “How did Trevelyan know of the sacrifice at the Temple?” he demanded. Then, as if he thought he could somehow cow her into obedience: “Answer!”

“Never,” Leliana hissed—crying out at the dull ache of the man’s backhand. It didn’t hurt as much as the blade—as much as the magic that sank deep into her bones like venom—but she’d found it was best to play along. The weaker she seemed, the readier to break at even harsher handling, the less likely the Venatori were to revert back to their toys.

A little roughing up couldn’t kill her; that line of blood-rusted instruments just might.

Thankfully for Leliana, this was a particularly stupid spellbinder. He took her whimpering at face value. “There’s no use to this defiance, little bird. There’s no one left for you to protect.”

That was all too true. “You’re wasting your breath,” she said, grunting at the thud of his gauntleted fist to her stomach. Broken bones cried out, but Leliana grit her teeth against the real pain, squirreling it away even as she gave the Venatori a hint of what he wanted.

Bide your time, she told herself, even though Maker knew there wasn’t anyone left to come to her rescue. Unless Cassandra and Varric managed to make it free, but ah, no, giving those vague hopes real shape was a good way to go mad. Best not think of them rotting away in their cells. Survive this day, then think about the next.

“Talk!” the spellbinder snarled, getting right up into her face. She could feel the heat of his breath, even through that ridiculous mask. “The Elder One demands answers.”

She had to laugh. The Elder One was a greedy god: he’d demanded, and claimed, almost everything already. And yet, “He’ll get used to disappointment,” Leliana said. She screamed at the man’s backhand, letting her head fall back as she rattled her chains. Perhaps a touch too dramatically, betraying too much of the real strength she’d been holding in reserve; when she rolled her head back to look at him, the Venatori was studying her with a thoughtful air.

Andraste’s blessed fire, what now?

“I think you are toying with me, little bird,” he said slowly, thoughtfully. She watched through narrowed eyes as the spellbinder moved to that rickety table, fingertips brushing lightly over the handles of various unpleasant blades and…other things…before closing his fingers around one. Its tip was nearly black with dried blood, and Leliana braced herself against the promise of real pain—in a few seconds, her screams would be all too real.

Still, she held the man’s eyes, letting him see the hatred in her face. I’m not your little bird, she thought, baring her teeth when he stepped close. I have claws and teeth that will gladly rip your throat out. Just give me a chance.

He pressed a hand to her chin, jerking back her head. “You will break,” he snarled, blade kissing her skin.

“I will die first,” she said, making it a vow.
Before he could answer, the door swung open with a solid *bang*, reverberating off the opposite wall. Leliana looked up even as the Venatori turned, and the breath was momentarily punched out of her.

There, standing in his gleaming armor, sword in hand and young face exactly how she remembered it was the *Herald of Andraste*. He hadn’t aged a day since the moment he’d died, and Leliana cast a quick prayer of thanksgiving toward the heavens even as she gathered her carefully rationed strength. The final battle was clearly nigh: it was now or never. “Or you will!” she spat, jerking herself up—curling her body in on itself and grabbing the surprised mage with her unbound legs. She met Taran’s startled gaze even as she hooked her calves about the Venatori’s throat, yanking him close to her and tightening against his struggles.

She could probably suffocate him this way—draw out his pain and let it last and last and last the way her own torture had extended out into a single blistering-bright line. But if Taran (and Dorian? Odd to see him here, too) had been sent back by the Maker, then clearly time was of the essence.

She tightened her core, braced herself for the wrenching pain, and jerked *hard*, effortlessly snapping her torturer’s neck.

He instantly slumped, and Leliana let him fall into a forgotten heap, drawing in a ragged breath. She watched as Taran quickly sheathed his blade and hurried over to her, checking the manacles holding her in place before crouching at the guard’s side without having to be told.

Smart boy. He’d shown so much promise when he’d been alive.

“*You’re alive,*” Leliana breathed, catching sight of Varric and Cassandra guarding the open door. Good—they’d survived too. Or had they died in their cells, only to be brought back by whatever holy magic had returned the Herald to her?

It didn’t matter.

Taran straightened, keys in hand, and made quick work of the manacles holding her suspended. “*You’re safe now,*” he soothed, carefully—*gently*—catching her against him. She was aware of the scent of leather and metal and horseflesh and sunshine. The lemon-and-rosemary-infused soap he preferred. Strange that she’d remember such a small detail.

Leliana pushed that thought aside, straightening despite the protest of her aching body. “Forget ‘safe’. If you came back from the dead, you need to do better than ‘safe’. You need to end this.” Taran pulled back from her, startled, but he didn’t protest or try to coddle her. That was something else she’d always appreciated about him. “The magister’s probably in his chambers.” She limped past him—and the Tevinter mage who’d wrapped himself up in this whole mess only to die alongside Taran on that horrible day—crouching before the chest. Unlocked, because her captors never dreamed she’d find her way free.

More fools they.

Dorian cleared his throat as she pulled out her armor and weapons. “*You…aren’t curious how we got here?*”

“No,” she said, tugging on the familiar purple leathers. She sensed Taran at her elbow and half-turned, eyes flicking from his face to the duo of small bottles he offered her. Ah. *Elfroot*. Yes, that would be a good idea. Leliana inclined her head in thanks and took both one after the other, letting the glass fall to the floor in a rainbow of glistening shards.
Then she slung her bow over her shoulder and adjusted the quiver.

Dorian cleared his throat again, clearly unsettled by the silence. “Alexius sent us into the future,” he explained. That gave her pause, but she mentally shrugged and went back to checking her knives. Back from the dead, back from the past—what did it really matter, in the end? The Herald was here, now, and they finally had a real hope of fighting back. “This, his victory, his Elder One—it was never meant to be.”

Taran finally spoke again. “I’m so sorry for—” he began, before stopping himself. Remembering, perhaps, the way she used to bristle in the face of his empathy. It shouldn’t have touched her so deeply that he remembered, and yet here, at the end of the world, Leliana almost found herself beginning to smile. “If we get back to the present and stop Alexius, then you’ll never have to go through this.”

“And mages always wonder why people fear them,” she said, that hint of softness disappearing beneath a new wave of bitterness. She turned her gaze on Dorian. “No one should have this power.”

“It’s dangerous and unpredictable,” he agreed, then sighed. Sighed, as if wistfully remembering experiments past. “Before the Breach, nothing we did—”

“Enough!” Leliana snapped, staring him down. She didn’t need the reminder that Dorian had had a hand in creating the very spell that had broken the world. If she let herself think about it—if she really came to grips with how strong a role he had inadvertently played in bringing this day to pass—she wouldn’t be able to hold herself back.

Her life had been ruined in part by this man, and he was talking about the dangers of his little experiment as if she hadn’t lived through them by the grace of the Maker. “This is all pretend to you, some future you hope will never exist. But it was real, and you cannot escape your part in it. I suffered. The whole world suffered.”

Dorian swallowed, hard, and Taran moved closer to him. Ah yes, how could she have forgotten—that way the Herald looked at Dorian, his heart clear in those golden-brown eyes? Taran lightly touched Dorian’s arm and Dorian reached up to brush his fingertips along the boy’s knuckles, gaze flicking up to his before pulling resolutely away. So he was still playing those foolish games, even now.

“We should get moving,” Taran said. “Are you able?”

Leliana inclined her head, falling into step just behind him as he left the room that had meant to be her grave. Cassandra gave her a subtle nod as she passed, and Varric actually winked—though even he couldn’t hide his shock at the sight of her. She must look terrible if he was trying so hard to pretend everything was all right.

It didn’t matter.

They crept down the empty hall, passing corpses—some fresh, some long dead. Cassandra and Varric carefully flanked Taran, defending him. She and Dorian took up the rear. He glanced at her awkwardly, polite enough to ignore the way she struggled to keep up. “What happened while we were away?” he finally asked.

“Stop talking.”

Dorian let out a short huff of breath. “I’m just asking for information,” he protested.

She turned her head, fixing him with a flat stare. “No,” she said, “you’re talking to fill silence.
Nothing happened that you want to hear.”

His eyes dropped, fingers tightening around his staff. If she had it in her anymore, she may have felt sorry for him. “I suppose you are right,” Dorian admitted, then fell silent again.

They moved up a series of steps and out into an open space. A metal overhang overlooked a bridge down below, fresh Venatori bodies sprawled here or there. Water tumbled from a broken bit of roof up above, and red lyrium erupted into jagged clusters, casting the world in eerie light.

She could hear its humming deep in her blood; it took everything Leliana had to push that creeping awareness away.

“We need to find Alexius,” Dorian murmured as they crossed another hall and down a short flight of stairs. “I’m sure he’ll be in the nicer part of the castle. …if there is one.”

“Wait,” Taran said, lifting one hand. There was a strange crackle, like distant thunder or falling stone, and Leliana instinctively braced herself before she realized—oh Maker, yes. That growing green light was coming from Taran’s hand.

A rift was close. A rift was close, and the one man who had the power to close it was miraculously back in their lives.

“Shit, kid,” Varric said, sounding almost close to tears—as if he’d made the exact same jump as Leliana.

Cassandra just shook her head, drawing her sword. “Thank the Maker,” she said feelingly before charging through an open doorway and into the waiting hall. Green fire erupted, casting shadows across their faces, as she gave a fiercely glad bellow.

Taran swung his sword free and raced to follow, the rest of them at his heels.

Leliana stayed back a few paces, hugging the wall and shooting arrows into the fray. Mostly, however, she just watched. It had been a long (long, long) time since she’d witnessed the Herald in action. More than that, perhaps, it had been a long time since she’d watched her allies fight with any real purpose. After his death…loss…whatever…they had fought bravely but without much hope. With no one left who could close the rifts, fighting demons was a matter of losing by degrees. They could wipe out individuals and perhaps win small measures of peace, but the rift still remained and the demons would always, always come back.

Now, Varric was all but grinning as he sent bolt after bolt into shades. Cassandra gave a bellow that echoed off the walls, and the fight was filled with so much life and purpose that Leliana’s heavy heart almost lifted. Watching Taran lower his sword and thrust a hand up toward the rift, power arcing between the two before he closed his fist and sealed it with a jerk had actual tears in her eyes—and here she’d thought she’d long ago shed her last.

Leliana slowly lowered her bow, watching as Varric pounded the Herald on the back and Cassandra turned away, one hand lifted as if to dash away her own tears. Even Dorian was smiling, breathless, though he couldn’t possibly comprehend exactly how big this was for them. The moment felt so much like a victory that Leliana was almost tempted to let herself sink fully into it.

But that would mean giving up the fight, even just for a moment. She couldn’t allow that. She couldn’t let herself relax into hope, because that way led to comfort, to complacency, to… Well. To the end of everything. She knew; she had watched it happen. And she would be damned if she stood by and watched it again.
Not when there is still breath in my lungs.

“Come,” Leliana said sharply, slinging her bow over a shoulder and moving to a large metal gate. Taran quickly stepped in to help her turn the crank, lifting the gate for everyone to pass. The mood in their little party was surprisingly light, for all that they still had so much farther to go…but it darkened again, bit by bit, as the path led them through a rough hallway and out toward the sound of open water.

A woman’s voice echoed from far away, strange and terrible: “The magister needs more power for his rituals.”

“No, don’t hurt me, Linnea!” a man cried. “You know me!”

“We should—” Dorian began, head jerking up.

“—hurry,” Taran finished for him, already darting forward. Cassandra was at his heels in an instant, Varric not far behind, and Leliana limped toward the rear. She grit her teeth against the bright starbursts of pain, growing brighter and brighter the farther she pushed her body. Before long, even she would reach her limit; endless days of torture had sapped away more of her strength than elfroot could cure.

Keep going, she told herself, moving toward the sound of battle. Whatever happens, you must keep going.

She reached the docks just as the party was finishing another battle; a shade screamed and melted into black tar, then nothing. Blood spattered what looked like a makeshift altar, and bodies were piled in haphazard stacks—sightless eyes staring up toward spikes of red lyrium, mouths forever open in twisted screams.

Taran let out a harsh breath. “How could it have gotten this bad?” he said, still not understanding just how important he really was.

Dorian shifted closer to him, protective. “This is madness,” he agreed in a soft murmur. “Alexius can’t have wanted this.”

“In the end, it did not matter.” Cassandra’s voice echoed with the red lyrium poisoning her body. “Come. We must continue.”

Taran shook his head, but it wasn’t in denial. “We’ll find a way to make this right,” he said. Then, eyes falling on Leliana as she slowly climbed the steps to join them: “Do you need more elfroot?”

She was beyond elfroot. “No,” Leliana said, brushing past him. To Taran’s credit, he didn’t press the matter. Instead, he followed at her side, keeping his steps in time with hers—letting Leliana set the pace. She grimly clenched her jaw and forced herself to move faster, unwilling to hold up the party. It was only a matter of time before the alarm was called, and who knew whether Alexius was desperate enough—mad enough—to summon his Elder One.

There was no way out of this but through. They had to complete this final mission.

Cassandra threw open the doors to the courtyard, leading the way out. Taran was looking at her, brows faintly puckered, so it was Dorian who first saw their ruined world. He made a shocked, torn noise, reaching out to grab the Herald’s arm. Taran instantly straightened, turning to him before following his gaze up up toward—

“The breach!” Taran whispered, staring in open horror. “It’s…”
“Everywhere,” Dorian finished on a breath.

Leliana looked up, trying to take in the world the way they must be seeing it. The breach—once a relatively small tear in the sky—now consumed everything in its wake. From horizon to horizon there was nothing but churning green energy, interspaced with the occasional flicker of blue where it hadn’t yet managed to swallow the sky. Huge rocks and chunks of mountainside floated mid-air, and all around was the crackle of energy as rifts opened and closed across the wide face of Thedas, spilling demons endlessly from beyond the veil.

A rift formed just below, in the courtyard proper, as they stood there on the steps. It crackled to life, green streaks of energy hitting the ground in four points. Taran’s hand lit up in response even as he flung himself over the railing and down into the fray, already reaching for his sword.

Cassandra cursed and charged after him. Varric took up point on the deck, and Leliana moved beside him, stringing an arrow. Dorian lifted his staff and sent a bolt of dark fire at a fiend as it pulled itself from the ground; then he muttered something beneath his breath and flew down the steps to join the fray.

This battle was more difficult than the one before, the rift stronger, the demons more aggressive. Leliana sent arrow after arrow sailing down into the courtyard, effortlessly falling into the tempo of battle. At her side, Varric notched another bolt into Bianca and—thwack!—skewered a demon in the throat.

He tossed her a crooked grin. “Feels good to be back at it, doesn’t it?” he said, voice rich with the reverberation of red lyrium. “Almost like we’ve actually got a nug’s prayer of making this whole crazy shit right again.”

She didn’t answer.

The second—then third—rift closed lead up through a broken-open door to the royal wing. This part of the castle had seen less decay, though red lyrium still thrust from the walls and ceiling and the air still felt heavy in her lungs. Leliana grit her teeth and soldiered on, aware that each step was sapping another precious bit of energy she would need for the final battle. She stared ahead and forced herself to go on, and on, and on, winding through the familiar-yet-not halls.

Finally, seemingly unable to help himself, Dorian broke the silence. “How much damage did Alexius’s spell do?”

Cassandra glanced over her shoulder at them, eyes flashing red; Varric shook his head.

Can’t you see with your own eyes? she was tempted to say. But perhaps there was a kernel of kindness left inside her—if not for Dorian’s sake, then for the Herald’s. “Rifts tore apart all of southern Thedas, starting here,” Leliana said. “Whether that’s his doing or the Breach, who can say?”

“What happened here?” Taran asked quietly, a few paces ahead. No one had the heart to answer him.

Dorian cleared his throat, expression reflecting a fraction of the horror they had all survived since that terrible day. “Somebody had very questionable taste,” he quipped weakly.

Taran began to turn toward him, the way he always seemed to—then stopped when green fire crackled across his fingers yet again. “Another rift,” he said, looking back toward a solid pair of double doors. He drew his blade. “Leliana, you guard the hall and make sure no one can surprise us.
The rest of you, follow me.”

“Hear hear,” Varric said, Bianca already at the ready. Cassandra met Taran’s gaze and they nodded, speaking without saying a word. Then, as one, the two warriors kicked in the heavy doors. They flew open, banging off crumbling stone walls, revealing a huge hall with towering—crumbling—marble columns and an arc of green riftlight and a pitched battle already in progress.

“Now!” Taran cried, leading the charge.

Leliana remained in the doorway, pulling free her bow but not attempting to find a target. This was yet another kindness, allowing her to “guard” their way instead of wasting yet more of her dwindling strength. She hovered in the shadow and tried not to be insulted by what was ultimately the right decision—even as she flinched every time she heard a scream, fissures of terror lancing through her. What if Taran died here, in this hall? What if they once again lost their only chance of saving the world? What if—

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, counting back the unspooling terrors until she was in control of herself again. If Taran died this day, then all the world was lost. She simply had to put her faith in Andraste and the Maker and trust that now wasn’t the Herald’s time. Now wasn’t her time.


Finally, she heard the familiar implosion of the rift closing. Leliana moved into the hall, taking in the scattered bodies of Venatori spellbinders and demon ichor. Dorian was draining a bottle of elfroot, blood staining his teeth a garish red when he grinned off the Herald’s worry, but Taran looked hale and whole and nearly entirely untouched. No doubt she had Cassandra and Varric—and Dorian, it seemed—to thank for that.

“This way,” Leliana said, stepping over a corpse. She walked to the huge, unfamiliar door blocking off the entrance to the throne room. It towered over them, oddly shaped for the space, with irregular deep grooves forming a pattern where a handle should have been. Leliana pressed her hand against the smooth petrified wood and gave it an experimental push—as expected, it didn’t budge.

“Magic?” Cassandra asked, meaning: can we break the damn thing down?

“It appears that way,” Leliana said, meaning: no.

Varric sighed. “Well…shit,” he said, glaring up at the door keeping them from Alexius and the end of this madness.

Dorian moved to stand next to her, fingertips brushing over the arcane symbols. Leliana stepped aside to give him room, watching through narrowed eyes as he investigated the odd markings.

“Maker’s breath, where did Alexius find this? How did he even move it here?”

“Can we open it?”

“Perhaps. Though only through arcane means.” He sighed, turning away from the door with a faint shake of his head. “How desperate and paranoid must he be? To bar himself inside like this… Well.” Dorian spread his hands as if pushing away swirling dark thoughts. “No matter. His servants must have a way through. He has to eat. Let’s look around.”

Leliana began to follow, only to freeze when Taran lightly caught her elbow. She looked at him with a chilly arch of her brows, but he just shook his head and subtly flicked his gaze toward the others, waiting until they were just out of range—searching the bodies of the fallen spellbinders for some sort of clue.
“What?” she finally demanded.

Taran let go. “You need to rest,” he said. “You’re hurt, and you’re not doing yourself any favors throwing yourself into battle after battle like this.”

Leliana felt that strange mix of gratitude and fury churning her gut. She turned on him, bristling, hating how right he was. “I can—” she began hotly.

His expression didn’t change, empathy and brutal practicality in those gold-brown eyes. “You aren’t doing us any favors either,” he said, and Maker, but she’d forgotten how strong he could be when there was need. It was so easy to look at him and see the young face, the sheepish grin, and blooming warmth and affection of a touch-starved boy desperately trying to build a family from the ashes of loss.

But there was steel there, too.

“I will wait here,” Leliana said quietly, stepping back. Giving in. It only made sense. “I will guard the door.”

“That’s a good idea,” Taran said, trying to smile, and if she were anyone else, anywhere else, she may have smiled back. “We’ll be quick.”

She let out a slow breath, feeling the aches of recent torture; feeling a hundred years old. “Be better than quick,” she said, leaning back against the door and holding her bow ready, just in case. “Be smart.”

Leliana watched as Taran gave a nod and turned, heading off to rejoin the party. Even knowing this was the best possible option, she had to wrestle back the urge to go after him. All through the next fifteen minutes or more, as she waited, and fretted, and stewed, she kept thinking—what if he was lost to them? What if the Maker had given her this hope, only to snatch it away again? What if, what if, what if.

Finally the sound of footsteps and the glint of broken light on bronze armor had her shoulders relaxing in sheer relief. Leliana pushed away from the door, making room as Dorian moved to begin fitting small red shards into the slots. He worked quickly, confidently, the arcane symbols lighting up with each movement.

“It believe…” he said, mostly to himself. “I just need to… There.”

With a flash, the doors swung open.

It all happened in a blur. That was the cliché, was it not? But for Leliana, each moment that came next unfolded in careful, deliberate origami shapes. Flashes of impressions frozen to still-life magnitude.

Taran facing Alexius: Alexius bowed, very nearly broken; Taran’s anger fading into horror and pity.

Dorian, standing by his obvious Voice’s side: torn between hatred of the man who would have killed his soulmate and love of a madman who had lost his way.
Cassandra and Varric: wreathed in the memory of red lyrium, dying by degrees. Impossible to save.

And, of course, Felix: a golem of a man, hunched over and useless as anything but a bargaining chip. As anything but an instrument for her rage. She slunk around the edge of the hall, letting Taran and Dorian keep Alexius’s attention, letting the whole melodrama play out. Felix didn’t seem to notice as her shadow crept toward him; he didn’t do more than grunt in pain when she lashed out, quick as a demon, and yanked him back by the throat.

Alexius turned with a startled cry, one hand outstretched, but Leliana already had Felix listing back against her, the edge of her blade kissing his throat. Taran and Dorian watched her with shocked eyes.

“Maker’s breath, Alexius,” Dorian said, staring between the old monster and his son, “what have you done?”

“He would have died, Dorian!” Alexius cried, as if half the world hadn’t died already. “I saved him.” His eyes never left Leliana. She edged back carefully, pressing the blade tighter when it looked like he might come toward her. Alexius froze, trembling; he looked so much older than she remembered. (She felt so much older, too.) “Please,” he said, breaking in slow motion. “Please don’t hurt my son. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Hand over the amulet and we’ll let him go,” the Herald said, as if this truly were a negotiation. He’d always been too soft; it was one of the things she used to like so much about him, that innate kindness reminding her of Solona Amell.

Alexius’s eyes never left hers. “Let him go and I swear you’ll get what you want,” he promised.

The fool.

“I want the world back,” she said, and never had blood spilling over her knuckles felt more welcome, more earned, than when her blade cut a new smile across Felix’s grey-tinged throat. He jerked once in her arms, breath wheezing out. The spatter of blood was like fresh rain, underscoring Alexius’s howl of rage and loss. She let Felix drop lifeless to the ground, already bracing for the burst of power that sent her tumbling back toward the far wall, head hitting marble with a solid thwack!

Black motes swum across her vision. She tasted copper on her tongue.

Taran cried out something and charged, and Leliana swore she heard Varric yell something about Bianca. There was a solid thwack thwack of bolts hitting leather before her lungs were filled with ozone and the crackle of the rift drowned out everything else.

She pressed a hand beneath her, pushing herself up. The nausea had her reeling, however, and Leliana cursed as she pressed fingers to the back of her skull. They came away slick with blood; if this weren’t the end, that might worry her.

She no longer feared what came next.

Leliana managed to prop herself against a broken column, out of range of the fight, and dug through the pouch attached to her quiver for elfroot. There was just enough to stave off the worst of the blow, those black motes fading into undulations of grey as she greedily swallowed every last drop. The battle was going well; she could tell by the satisfied grunts Cassandra made every time her blade connected with Alexius or one of his demons. The rift gave a familiar humming vibration, and Dorian let out a cry.
Then, the implosion; the scattering of green energy; the stillness after the end.

Leliana pushed herself up to her feet, leaving a handprint smear of blood across smooth stone. She took a careful step forward, then another, stooping to grab her dropped blade and wipe Felix’s blood onto her leathers.

Dorian was kneeling by the Venatori’s body. “He wanted to die, didn’t he?” he said quietly. Taran was crouched beside him, one hand on Dorian’s shoulder, eyes on his face. The fresh devotion in that look would have worried her if Leliana hadn’t already known this timeline—her timeline—was coming to a close.

_Ah well_, she thought, sheathing her knife. _A problem for my counterpart to lose sleep over._

Dorian was still lost in mourning. “All those lies he told himself, the justifications… He lost Felix long ago and didn’t even notice. Oh, Alexius…”

“I know you cared for him,” Taran said quietly.

Taran stood, offering the other man a hand up. Dorian took it, eyes still locked on his fallen master, expression so much like a lost child that Leliana almost pitied him. “Once he was a man to whom I compared all others. Sad, isn’t it?”

_Almost_ pitied him. “There is no time for this,” Leliana reminded them sharply. Cassandra and Varric were already prowling about the room as if waiting for the next attack. They understood what Dorian and the Herald could not: there was no such thing as safety. There was no such thing as time for _rest_. For _recovery_.

Dorian jerked his gaze toward her, then nodded once. He pulled away from Taran and leaned down to grab the blood-flecked amulet from around his once-mentor’s neck. “This is the same amulet he used before,” he said, mostly to himself, as he studied its winking facets. “I think it’s the same one we made in Minrathous. That’s a relief. Give me an hour to work out the spell he used, and I should be able to reopen the rift.”


As if in response to her horror, the hall began to shake. Cassandra gave a sharp cry, sword drawn again, turning. They all stared up at the ceiling in horror as bits of rock and dust scattered around them and, in the distance—drawing ever-nearer—a dragon screeched.

“The Elder One,” she breathed.

“Cassandra,” Varric said, voice tight “We have to…”

He didn’t finish; he didn’t have to finish. Cassandra nodded once sharply before turning to Leliana. “We’ll go on ahead and take out as many as we can,” she said gravely—in every sense. “Leliana, you’re the last line of defense. Give them what you’ve got.”

“Wait!” Taran said. He jerked forward, hand lifted to catch Cassandra’s arm. There was so much fresh anguish on his face, and Maker, she had forgotten how young he could be. How little he understood his own importance.

The world literally died without him; there was nothing more vital than making sure he survived this day.

“I can’t let you kill yourselves for me,” he said. “Let me fight with you. There must be another
“Look at us,” Leliana snapped. “We’re already dead. The only way we live is if this day never comes. Go,” she said, and Cassandra carefully pried herself free. She reached up one last time to press a hand over her heart, giving the Herald of Andraste—the last hope for their dying word—a faint bow. Then she turned on her heel and left the hall, Varric trailing in her footsteps.

Taran let out a soft breath, anguished eyes locked on the magically sealed door.

Leliana tilted her head toward Dorian. “Take him,” she said. “Guard him. Cast your spell. You have as much time as I have arrows.”

“But I,” Taran began, only to be hushed by some soft word spoken just below what Leliana could hear. It didn’t matter; she didn’t care whatever gentle lies Dorian told him, so long as Taran was saved. This horrible nightmare would come to an end. This long night would finally be over.

She readied her bow and drew back an arrow, listening to the tempo of battle just outside the doors. There was Cassandra’s cry; there was the solid thwack of crossbow bolts. There was the scream of a demon, and crumbling stone, and death, death, death.

Behind her, Dorian worked frantically to recreate the spell. In front of her, the door began to tremble beneath terrible blows. The horde would be upon them in moments.

“Though darkness closes, I am shielded by flame,” Leliana murmured. She tightened her arm as the doors flung open with a resounding crash. Varric’s limp body was flung into the hall, hitting the marble floor with a sick crunch and skidding to a far pillar. Dead eyes were staring, glowing red, consumed by lyrium even in his last moments.

She let the arrow fly as the demon pressed forward; it staggered back a step and howled.

“Andraste, guide me.” An arrow found its mark in a Venatori’s neck. Another skewered a gleaming eye. Leliana fought to keep her breathing even, her focus on the attack, as more and more pressed through the open doors. She spotted one spindly demon dragging Cassandra’s limp body by the ankle; the sight sent a flare of cold rage through her. “Maker, take me to your side!”

An arrow struck her and Leliana cried out, staggering back a step and howled.

She let one final arrow fly, already twisting the bow around to slam it into a Venatori’s face. She fought to keep hold of the bow, but it was wrenched away; her muscles screamed in agony and hot pain bubbled up from the deep gash in her side. They were on her now, surrounding her, overwhelming her like the sea she used to swim in as a girl: cleansing waters closing over her head and her eyes lifting toward the distant prick of sunlight as she let herself sink down beneath the waves.

“The night is long,” she breathed, smelling the salt, feeling the sand between her toes; she was being lifted on claws, impaled. Blood spattered the broken floor. “And the path is dark. Steel your—” She twisted around, wrenched free, ragdoll limp limbs caught in demon claws—but she couldn’t feel them. She couldn’t feel anything but the crash of waves, the golden sunlight, the breathless hope as the rift formed up up up on the high dais, swallowing Dorian and Taran whole.

A demon howled and a dragon screamed, and all Leliana could see was Taran’s pale face seconds before he was lost to time again. Blood dribbling down her chin, knees giving out beneath her, Leliana began to smile.
The dawn, she thought nonsensically, world lost in a flare of golden fire, the dawn, the dawn will—
Taran seemed strange in the aftermath of their return—distant yet hyper-focused as he arrested Alexius, offered safe haven to the mages, and arranged for their peaceful integration into the Inquisition. All throughout, he held himself as if he were made of glass and one wrong move might send him shattering. It wasn’t until the hubbub had died, however, and it was just the four of them left standing together in the vestibule that Dorian finally realized what was wrong.

“It’ll take the mages a few weeks to organize and make their way to Haven,” Taran said, looking paler, somehow—more fragile—than Dorian had ever seen him. “We may as well take our time getting back.”

He doesn’t want to look Leliana in the eyes, Dorian thought, fighting against the impulse to rest his hand on his Voice’s shoulder. They were rounded forward, defeated despite the fact that Taran had just won a great victory. That hurt more than he could have anticipated. He doesn’t want to have to tell her what she sacrificed.

Cassandra bristled at the idea, so goal-oriented she missed the subtle undercurrents in Taran’s voice; in the way he held himself, as if he were struggling against some terrible burden. “The others will want to hear of this…vision…you had,” she protested, loud and strident with her determination. “Not to mention the threat to the Empress Celene. We must—”

Varric cut in. “I’m with the kid,” he said. “We’ve been tearing back and forth across the countryside for weeks now. It’ll be nice to set a leisurely pace for once. Smell some flowers. Maybe help some villagers.”

“You,” Cassandra spat, upper lip curled, “would take any excuse to be lazy.”

“That’s me,” he countered. “The laziest dwarf in Thedas. Why don’t you go on ahead and see about the horses?” Varric added to Taran. “We’ll be right behind you.” He shot Dorian a speaking look the moment Taran’s back was turned—docile; Maker, he’s so out of it he doesn’t even care that he’s being managed—and jerked his head toward the Herald.

The message was clear: keep a close eye on him. He doesn’t need to be alone right now.

Varric didn’t have to tell him twice.

Dorian nodded once before sweeping up the bottom of his robe and following Taran down the wide steps toward their waiting horses. A few of the spies Leliana had sent ahead were standing at the gate with reins in hand; others were visible moving along the parapets, blessedly free of red lyrium.

Dorian hurried his pace until he was a few steps behind his Voice, only just aware of Varric’s low: “Seeker, get a load of the kid’s face. He’s three seconds from breaking down; a couple extra days on the trail won’t kill us.”

Breaking down. Yes, that seemed more and more accurate with each second that passed. There was a careful tension to the way Taran moved, as if he were scrambling to hold all the pieces of himself in place. He paused at the bottom of the castle steps, face tipping up—lost as the child Dorian remembered from the Fade all those years ago. Deeply hurt and wholly alone.

Only he wasn’t alone—not anymore. If only Dorian could think of the words to tell him that.
What do I say? Dorian moved beside him, fighting diverging instincts. He wanted to... He wanted to reach out. To slide his hand into Taran’s and brush his thumb over the rapid thunder of his pulse. He wanted to tug him around and wrap a soothing arm across his shoulders, pulling him close to press a kiss between his brows.

But he wanted to run, too; he wanted to yank up the cowl of his stupid Venatori robe and pretend like he wasn’t seeing such naked fragility on Taran’s face, because this—this—was the only hope for Thedas. This young man with more heart and bravery than sense held the whole world in his hands.

Held Dorian’s heart in his hands.

It was a terrifying thing to realize that if Taran was lost to them, Dorian wasn’t the only one who would suffer. The whole world would mourn with him, and that thought was so big and so horrible that it was all he could do not to cover his eyes like a child and pretend away his fears.

“It looks so strange,” Taran said quietly, eyes still fixed on the sky.

Dorian made a questioning noise, caught between the urge to comfort and to flee, comfort and flee, unable to do either.

“The breach. It looks almost... small now. Like something we really can defeat. Right?” He turned, facing Dorian. Cassandra and Varric were still some paces back, giving them space, and Taran was close—closer than Dorian had intended, and yet somehow still not close enough. He was starting to fear Taran would never be close enough; there would always be some small, hungry thing inside of him wanting more. “You saw it too. You saw what the future was like, if we fail.”

Pause. Swallow.

“If I fail. So many people, Dorian. If I can’t do this, there are so many people who are going to die. I- I didn’t realize that before. I didn’t think... what if I can’t do it?”


Taran dragged his hands over his face. “No, I’m sorry,” he said. Then, with a thin laugh, “It doesn’t help anyone for me to talk like this. I should just... I have to just...” He turned again, looking up, small against the sheer breadth of the task that was required of him. A backwoods boy from the ass end of Ostwick tasked with saving all of Thedas from the bloody void; it hardly seemed fair. “It’s smaller,” Taran said again, a false strength to his tone that Dorian could easily see through. “And now that we have the mages on our side, we can make sure that... what we saw... never happens. I can do this.”

I have to do this, he may as well have said, the bravado an empty shell filled with so much pain and fear.

Dorian cleared his throat again, forcing himself to reach out, to brush his fingertips along Taran’s gleaming armor. Even if his Voice couldn’t feel the caress, couldn’t take comfort from the gesture, at least it was given. That was a start, wasn’t it?

“Cassandra’s right,” Taran added. “We should hurry back to Haven. I need to— They’ll be expecting me to—” He shook himself out as if pushing away a particularly unpleasant dream and jerked forward, striding toward the horses with false purpose. “I have to report in.”

Do something say something do something say something; Maker damn you don’t just stand here and watch. “Wait!” Dorian said, jerking forward to follow. He nearly stumbled over the long ends of the Venatori robe, feeling like he was failing at every turn. Taran so obviously needed some
comforting word, some reassurance, some...some...something, and Dorian was left fumbling in his
wake like a thrice-taken fool. Shaken himself by the unfolding realization that the man he loved
could never truly be his—not when he belonged so completely to all the bloody world.

“Wait,” Dorian said again when Taran stopped to look at him, surprised. He curled his fingers
around the shaft of his staff, hyperaware of the frantic race of his pulse. The way his heart ached.
The...urges he felt, to fall into those bloody arms and damn the consequences. “I... Taran.”

“Yes?” Taran said. Those warm brown eyes swept Dorian’s face, as if he were searching for
something.

Dorian swallowed, ignoring the way his whole body flushed in response. “If it’s all the same to
you,” he managed to say, scrambling hard for that old casual insolence that used to come so easily to
him, “a slower pace would be most welcome.”

He blinked. “It would?” he said.

“Well.” Dorian shrugged a shoulder, feeling exposed as a raw nerve himself. What they had
experienced had been a shock for them both, and he wasn’t entirely certain it was the sort that would
fade into nothing with time. “It has been a rough few days traipsing here or there as fast as our horses
can take us. A leisurely stroll back to Haven wouldn’t be amiss after...”

He let the word hang there, unfilled. Because what more could he say? After. From this point on, his
awareness would always be bisected into before and after the moment he’d been forced to come to
grips with just how necessary the other half of his soul had become to the sheer survival of the entire
known world. That sort of thing left its mark on you.

Taran was still studying him, brow puckered, eyes sweeping over his face and then down his body
as if trying to take his measure. Dorian’s skin prickled in awareness at the perusal, but he held his
ground, keeping his expression as neutral as possible.

He actually saw the moment Taran relented, those warm brown eyes softening even further as he
came to all the wrong conclusions. “Right,” he said, “the spell. I didn’t even think about that—you
must be exhausted.”

Dorian was worn down, true, but that hadn’t been the point. Still, he was never one to look a gift
horse in the mouth. “Dreadfully exhausted,” he agreed, leaning on his staff in a showy bid for
support. He heard an almost imperceptible snort behind him as Varric and Cassandra rejoined them,
but he ignored it. If Taran needed some external excuse to slow his pace—to take care of himself—
then, well, Dorian would happily play the fool all day. Anything, anything to help his young Voice
shoulder the burden that had been so unfairly given to him. “It takes a lot out of you, you realize.
Time magic. Being dreadfully dashing. Saving the day. That sort of thing.”

Cassandra grunted in annoyance, but Taran just nodded as if all that made perfect sense. It was so
painfully sweet how much he seemed to care. “You’re right,” he said, looking between the three of
them now. “If Cassandra thinks it will be okay to delay our report by a few days...?”

Cassandra held her ground until Varric elbowed her none-too-subtly in the side. She scowled down
at him, but her expression instantly relaxed when she looked back toward Taran. It filled Dorian with
a strange sort of pride to realize that even the hard-as-nails Seeker had a soft spot for his Voice. Even
she was not immune. “It will be fine,” she said. “One of Leliana’s men will go ahead and report. We
can take our time crossing the Hinterlands again.”

“Do you know what that means, Seeker?” Varric said with a crooked smile. “More rams and rebels
and foul-tempered bears than you can shake a shield at.”

“I will shake you at them instead,” she threatened. “Perhaps then you’ll be of actual use.”

“Seeker! You wound me!”

“Not. Yet.”

Dorian looked away from the bickering pair with a shake of his head, attention turned back (as ever; as always) to Taran. Taran had drifted a couple of paces away at Cassandra’s agreement, eyes tracking back up to the breach. His long lashes flickered as he studied its jagged edges, as if he were committing it to memory anew. Or perhaps comparing it to the breach of that terrible future world?

What must it be like to realize how many people were willing to die for you? What must it be like to stand there and watch as three of your closest friends and advisors did just that?

Dorian couldn’t imagine how it felt, so he didn’t even try. Instead he stepped next to Taran, deliberately letting their shoulders jostle—drawing him back into the moment and away from painful thoughts. That was the best thing he could do for Taran now. “So. Are you ready for what’s next?” he asked, though Maker knew Dorian wasn’t anywhere close to ready for any of this.

Taran glanced at him, still looking terribly worn around the edges, still fragile, still hurt. But his lips quirked a little at the corners, as if he couldn’t help but smile when Dorian was near. “Sure,” he said, so painfully young it almost broke his cynical heart. “Bring on the next adventure.”
There was nothing quite like a lazy evening in the Hinterlands.

The night was cool but no longer fully cold this far away from the Frostbacks, a large bonfire keeping the camp pleasantly toasty despite the occasional breeze. Sparks danced up toward a wide open sky, and massive trees loomed over the small scattering of tents in silent sentinel. They looked, Varric mused, like friendly giants leaning close to hear a rollicking good tale. Each rustle could be them whispering to each other: shush shush shush.

He laughed a little at himself, kicking out his legs closer to the fire. You’re in luck, he thought, and tipped his head back to watch the way their branches shivered under the weight of the last snow. A more storied group of travelers you’re unlikely to meet.

A dwarf, a Seeker of Truth, a Tevinter mage, and the Herald of Andraste walk into a glade: it sounded like the start of a real banger of a joke. Too bad he hadn’t figured out the punchline yet.

Varric glanced over his shoulder as a shadow passed over him. It was Taran, dressed down from his usual gleaming armor, still looking drawn despite the last three days taking it slow across winding fields and rolling dales. There was a new cut on his cheek slowly healing with the help of elfroot, and a weary set to his shoulders that Varric didn’t care for. The boyish enthusiasm that had buoyed the rest of the Inquisition’s spirits for so long appeared to have reached a low tide.

He offered a crooked smile at the kid and Taran paused just long enough to nod and smile back, but yeah, shit, it was a small, wan little thing, there and gone in a moment. Whatever he’d seen—in that bleak future Varric very much did not want to hear details about thank you very much—had been bad enough to leave its mark. No telling how lasting the scar would be, but he did know one thing: it was going to take more than a few days of pretty scenery to get Taran smiling again.

“Herald,” Cassandra murmured, skirting the fire on her way back from the stream. She at least seemed more relaxed than usual. Her shoulders were a skosh less squared, her jaw a touch less statuesque. She’d pulled her hair down to wash it, the long end of that crowning braid a loose loop over one ear as it dried. Hell, Varric figured, give her a few more days and she might actually crack a smile; fighting bears truly suited her.

“Cassandra,” Taran said in low greeting. They passed, the Herald raising his gaze up toward the wide starry sky, darkening into shades of indigo the farther away from the breach you looked. A complicated expression crossed his face before he turned to watch her go, those tawny brows drawn together. “Cassandra,” he said again, this time calling her attention.

She turned, expectant.

“I was thinking…” He hesitated, then looked out into the darkness. Varric heard the soft fall of canvas as Dorian slipped out of his tent, but Taran didn’t appear to notice. Or, if he had, he was ignoring the other man for once. “I… I’m going to go for a walk.”

It hadn’t been what he’d wanted to say, clear as nug piss, but Cassandra nodded just as seriously as if Taran had given her some sacred order. “As you say,” she murmured before turning back to wind her way toward her own tent.

Taran watched her go, frustration visible in the tight set of his shoulders—then shook himself out. He
turned on his heel, heading off into the darkness: alone and unarmed and increasingly, worryingly contained. Varric watched him go. A walk to clear his head just might do him some good—and the air was thin enough here that they wouldn’t have a problem hearing any calls for help.

But not everyone saw things the way Varric did.

Dorian made a soft noise and started after him—though whether to mother hen Taran back into the safety of the camp or to offer to watch his back, Varric couldn’t say—crossing just past where Varric had sprawled by the fire. Feigning intense interest in the bonfire, Varric reached back to snag the trailing end of the mage’s white robe, yanking him to a stuttering (and rather undignified) stop. The last thing the kid needed right now was someone crowding his space.

“Sparkler,” Varric said before Dorian could do more than sputter down at him. “Pull up a log. Share your company.”

“I would think Bianca is company enough for you,” Dorian sniffed, beringed fingers tugging at his robe; Varric simply tightened his grip and strained his neck to smile beatifically up at him. “Judging by the way you shower her—and your own marksmanship, mind—with praise.”

His smile widened. “Neither of us are much for false modesty,” Varric said. He gave another tug when Dorian’s gaze drifted back toward the shadows that had swallowed Taran just moments before. “Come on. Sit. Bullshit with me. If we’re in this long haul together, we may as well get friendly.”

“As tempting as your offer may be, I’m afraid I’m—” But he couldn’t even finish the excuse, because they both knew Dorian wasn’t busy. None of them were; that was the whole void-taken point of being out here amongst all this…nature.

Going slow. Smelling the flowers. Giving the kid time to reorient the shape of his universe before he had to face the rest of the Inquisition with a whole passel of mage allies in tow.

“Might as well give in, Sparkler,” Varric said, giving one final tug. It was hard enough to pull the line of straps just a little cockeyed. Truth be told, he kind of preferred it that way; it made Dorian look a little less refined, a little more approachable. More real, somehow, with his huff of annoyed breath and the way he stalked like an angry cat to sit next to Varric by the fire, all piss and vinegar and none of those smooth manners in sight.

Dorian crossed his legs beneath him and came very close to crossing his arms. He couldn’t have been more obviously put out. “There,” he said. “I have pulled up a log. I am ready for your bullshit.”

Varric tipped his head back with an unselfconscious laugh. The other man was so wound up by…something…that his mustache was practically bristling. “You know,” he said, letting their shoulders bump once in a friendly way, “I like you. You remind me of someone I knew back in Kirkwall.”

He let out a little huff, but there was a curl to the corner of his lips, as if he were reluctantly sinking into the camaraderie. “I’ve read excerpts of your book,” he pointed out, “and while I’m flattered, I have a hard time seeing myself in that Champion of yours. He was so…” He flicked his fingers. “Nice.”

Varric grinned. “That he was. Generous, too. Self-sacrificing to an almost fanatical degree.”

Dorian snorted, even as he shifted uncomfortably. Something about that had hit close to home; Varric stored that observation away, even as he continued blithely, as if he had little more interest
than in hearing himself talk. “No, you don’t remind me much of the Champion. The kid does. Taran.” Dorian shifted again, dark eyes darting up toward where the Herald had gone before dropping deliberately to the fire again. Interesting. “He’s got the whole bleeding heart thing down. That’s what pulled Hawke into the center of every mess in Kirkwall. Well,” he had to add, “that and my big mouth, I guess you could argue.”

“This is all very fascinating. I am endlessly fascinated,” Dorian said, sounding anything but.

Varric just ignored him—his audience didn’t always have to be willing to play its part, after all. “Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I’d told more stories about merchant princes or shipless pirates and fewer tales of an unlikely folk hero. Would he still have gotten yanked into the middle of all that shit? Would he and his Voice even now be living out their lives in Hightown, happy as you please?”

Dorian shifted again, staring fixedly into the fire. Interesting.

“Or would Hawke have found himself pulled into the eye of that shitstorm no matter what I did? Like the kid here.” He jerked his chin toward where Taran had gone, as if Dorian needed the confirmation. “It’s crazy to think that it won’t much matter what people like you or me or even the Seeker and the rest of the Inquisition leaders do or say—that kid’s stuck right in the center of history, whether he likes it or not. He’s got that one thing I never figured I’d believe in: destiny. And all we can do is try to give whatever help we can and hold on for dear life.”

The other man had been growing increasingly stiffer and stiffer with each word, his jaw hardening and entire body coiling tight. Something was definitely going on, and it had to do with the Herald. But what?

“That’s all very…poetic,” Dorian muttered, shifting as if weighing the impulse to stand.

Varric hummed absent agreement, watching the subtle shifts and ticks of his expression for the right tell. It was obvious Dorian was anxious about Taran, but what was the source? Had it sprung from visiting that bleak future and seeing what life would be like without him? That was possible, but… but no, he’d been a squirrely little shit before Redcliffe, vacillating wildly between insulting the Herald and cozing up to him.

Was it fear of him? Guilt for what his countrymen were doing? Sheer cussedness? Unwanted attraction?

Dorian began to stand. “Well, this has been charming, but I think I’ll go for a walk before I turn in for the—ah!” He squawked, undignified as a cat with its tail underfoot as Varric snaked a hand out faster than he could blink and yanked him back down.

That nice line of buckles was certainly cockeyed now. It was enough to make Varric grin, even as Dorian scowled.

“I was telling you,” Varric said, “who you reminded me of.”

“You were holding me hostage just to hear yourself talk,” Dorian countered. He yanked angrily at his robe, trying to pull it to rights. The usual smooth manners were all but gone, replace by that raw, pulsing nerve Varric had been sensing just under the surface. Just out of sight: a rocky shoal for the unwary ship, and yes, yes, Taran wasn’t the only party member nursing some unknown hurt.

Except Varric could trace a clear line between the kid and the fresh hell he’d just survived. It was obvious what was making him so upset. The trick there was going to be figuring out a way to make
him forgive himself.

Dorian was different. Dorian was slicker, more experienced, more prone to smiling as he lied. Dorian had also been acting twitchy for longer than his jaunt into the future, and Varric was tired of sitting around waiting for all the clues to fall into place. Much better to grab the man by the collar, turn him upside down (metaphorically, naturally) and try to shake the truth free.

…Maker’s beard. He was clearly getting too old for this shit if Aveline’s typical methods were looking good to him.

“Well?” Dorian demanded. He was outright scowling now, bristling in place. “You’ve got my blighted attention; talk.”

Varric hummed a thoughtful breath, mentally thumbing over all the new and old clues, piecing them slowly together. “Fenris,” he said, watching Dorian’s face. “You remind me of Fenris. You know: crabby elf, Tevinter, hated magisters.” Pause. “Hated all magic, really.”

“Yes,” Dorian said, cuttingly dry. “I can certainly see the connection.”

But Varric just waved that off. “Ignore that part. The rest of us sure as shit did our best to. No, what I mean is—” What did he mean? Yes, Dorian reminded him of Fenris in many ways, but it was damnable hard to put his finger on what those similarities were. Fenris could be smooth and mannered like Dorian, but he didn’t have the tendency to peacock. He could be defensive, but his response was more raw, more physical, more likely to get important bits severed.

It wasn’t the shared country of origin that was pinging Varric, or the way they spoke, and it certainly wasn’t the way they held themselves. Fenris had always been wound tighter than a Chantry brother in a bawdy house—tightly leashed and ready to explode into action at any moment, except in those rare moments Varric witnessed him, unseen, with Aidan. Dorian, by contrast, was as loose and flowing as a mountain stream: ever-changing and difficult to predict and unwilling to stand firm on anything…except in those moments Varric witnessed him, unseen, with Taran.

Varric slowly ticked his gaze toward Dorian, watching with dawning comprehension—and horror—as Dorian anxiously tugged at the front of his robe. He was clearly on edge, but it wasn’t because he was angry with Varric. That was just the easy excuse he was hiding behind.

No, Dorian had been acting strangely ever since he had found them, especially when the Herald was near. And he’d been all kinds of worse over the last few days, practically shadowing the kid, going into fits when Taran wandered off alone, looming protectively as if he could somehow stand between Taran and all the shit he’d have to face, day after day, hour after hour, for the rest of his short, brilliant life.

He’d thought Dorian was acting so off because he’d been thrown by seeing that strange future world. He’d figured Dorian was so protective because he’d had a front row view of the apocalypse that would apparently be theirs for the taking if Taran died before he could save all their miserable hides.

He’d figured he knew exactly what Dorian was feeling, thinking, experiencing because the rest of the Inquisition had that same sort of nervous protective instincts to one degree or the other.

But holy fucking shitballs had he been wrong.

Dorian looked up, clearly sensing Varric’s increasingly horrified regard. He frowned, reaching up to touch his own face with a kind of vanity that would have had Varric splitting a side laughing if this weren’t so bloody serious. “What?” he demanded, finding nothing wrong. “Why are you looking at
me like that?”

He couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it before. In retrospect, it was so obvious he wanted to cover his face and groan (and curse, and curse, and curse.) “Maker’s furry nutsack,” Varric said, staring at the Tevinter mage who watched Taran Trevelyan whenever he thought no one was looking as if he hung the moon, “he’s your bloody Voice, isn’t he?”

The electric shock on Dorian’s face—the reflexive horror—the panic—was all the confirmation he needed.

Great. This was all just…great.

“Who did I piss off to have this kind of bad luck?” Varric demanded, pinching the bridge of his nose as the implications of that bombshell all came rushing to him at once. He’d seen what kind of havoc this sort of thing played with good people; he didn’t want to go through that again. He didn’t want his friends to go through that. Taran was a good kid, and Varric didn’t want—

He didn’t—

He—

He slowly dropped his hand, the sheer magnitude of Dorian’s not-confession sinking in as he stared at the other man. This wasn’t just some naïve apostate twisting himself up into knots over a runaway slave. (And look at how badly that had gone before it all got sorted.) No, no this was a hundred thousand times worse.

Andraste’s tits, a Tevinter altus was Voice-bonded to the Herald of Andraste. There was no bigger potential shitshow in Thedas, and that was counting the hole in the sky. And here he was, sitting smack dab in the middle of it all—again.

“Shit, Dorian,” Varric said, staring. Dorian just stared back, unusually pale. “Shit. What are you going to… Shit.” No other word seemed to fit quite as well.

Seemingly shaken free of his horrified paralysis, Dorian’s hand fell on his arm, gripping tight. “You cannot tell anyone,” he said, voice dropped to a barely audible hiss. Dorian glanced over his shoulder toward the tents, then back out toward the yawning darkness, as if one of their party might be hovering nearby eavesdropping. He leaned even closer. “Not Cassandra, not Leliana, not Josephine, not…him.”

And that had Varric straightening, scrambling up, staring at the other man with swiftly rising horror. “He doesn’t even know?”

“Hush!” Dorian hissed again. This time he was grabbing at Varric’s coat, dragging him back down to the patch of grass with something very much like panic in his eyes. “Keep your voice— Someone might hear you.”

“I hate to break it to you, Sparkler, but they bloody well should.” Though, all right, that wasn’t entirely true. This kind of shitshow had to be unraveled slowly, carefully, or it was liable to set the whole world to burning.

Fuck.

Fuck.

He let Dorian pull him back down, head spinning. Half the world still protested the idea that Taran
was anything more than a heretical upstart, but the other half had taken to looking toward him with increasingly unsettling religious fervor. Maybe it was a good idea to keep this under wraps for a while. “Or maybe not,” he had to admit, too overwhelmed to even try to parse this whole thing out yet. “But at least he should.”

Dorian was already shaking his head. “I can’t,” he said. Then, before Varric could do more than glare, “Varric, I can’t. I can’t do that to him. To either of us.”

“Do what?” Varric shot back. “Tell a lonely kid there’s someone at his side who gives a shit about him? Who—” It felt too awkward to say the words loves him, even though he was increasingly certain it was true. It explained so much about the way Dorian looked at Taran sometimes, with something like shock and hope and fear in his eyes. Andraste’s tits, he’d been an idiot not to have put the pieces together before now. “Who has his back? Who sees him as something more than the Herald?”

But Dorian would not be swayed. “You give a shit about him,” he countered. “You have his back. You see him as more than the Herald. So does Cassandra. So does that hairy Warden fellow. So do a lot of us who know him. This is different. This is...this is dangerous.”

“I’ve seen just how dangerous it is, up close and personal,” Varric reminded him. “But you know what didn’t make it any safer for anyone involved? Lying about it. We have to get in front of this shit before it ends up hurting everybody.”

The kid most of all. He already had a target painted on his back—he didn’t need this kind of surprise springing up on him when he least expected it. And there was no way it wouldn’t close around him like the steel jaws of a trap, not if Dorian insisted on trying to keep it secret. It didn’t take a hard life and a wild imagination for Varric to know that shit like this? Always came out in the open at the absolute worst time. “Dorian,” Varric said, meeting his eyes. “You have to tell him.”

Dorian was already shaking his head. “This isn’t... Whatever you are imagining,” he said, “whatever little picture you have in your head about Voices and all that, this isn’t as simple as that.”

“Simple?” He tilted his head back, staring up at the hole in the sky. “Andraste’s tits, Dorian. Whoever told you the saga of Aidan Hawke and Fenris was simple was either lying or drunk.”

He ignored Varric’s protest. “Tevinter is...it’s different.”

Well, there was an interesting understatement.

“The way we—they—approach Voices is different. And Taran is...” He let out a harsh, frustrated breath, looking out toward the darkness with a complicated expression crossing his face. Like there were a thousand and one things he wanted, needed, to say, and yet not a single one could encapsulate the golden-eyed boy who willingly took the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I couldn’t bear to see him touched by that.”

“So don’t.” Varric spread his hands when Dorian shot him a glare. “I’m not being facetious here, Sparkler. Whatever shit your people pull in Tevinter—and after hearing some of Fenris’s more hair-raising tales, I’m ready to believe about anything—doesn’t have to touch the kid. Not if you don’t want it to. You’re here to make Tevinter a better place, yeah? That’s what you said?”

Dorian hesitated a long minute, almost as if sensing a trap. Finally he sighed and tipped his head back, firelight casting dancing shadows across the graceful line of his throat. “Yes,” he said. “I may hate a good deal of what it does, but I still love my homeland. I would like to make some sort of difference.”
“All right.” He spread his hands. “Who says you don’t start here? With a—” He cast a quick glance around to make sure no one had stumbled near, because whether or not he believed Dorian should keep this secret, it still was Dorian’s secret to either keep or not. “—with your Voice.”

Dorian just shook his head, still staring up at the stars. There was a strange sadness settling over his features now—a pall, as if he were looking into a bleak future. “I want to believe that would make a difference,” he said. “Or at the very least, that people would be willing to look past who the bloody Herald has attached himself to, but I can hear it now: the whispers. The accusations. The idiots claiming that just because he is my…you know…I have some sort of control over him. His decisions. His triumphs and failures, and how long would the Inquisition last if its figurehead was so tainted?” Dorian rolled his head to look at Varric, that stark sadness in his eyes. “How many holy assassins would be sent after the both of us? How would either of us hope to survive together, when the odds against any of us making it through each fool mission we take is so miniscule?”

“Leliana’s a damn fine spymaster,” Varric pointed out. “She’ll keep the Herald safe.”

“It only takes one bad day for that to prove itself a lie. I was raised in Tevinter, remember: my country has made an artform out of the subtle assassination.”

Varric was silent for a full minute. Then: “Tevinter is tits over ass—you know that?”

Dorian laughed—a harsh, hard thing, but there nonetheless. There were shadows beneath his eyes, Varric saw, and a slope to his shoulders he hadn’t noticed before. Dorian was usually so very good at presenting a clever façade; seeing it turn to rubble now made him like the other man more than he had in all their time together.

Even if he was an idiot.

“You know,” Varric said, “if the world didn’t end when someone blew a hole in the sky, then it’s not going to end when you tell him the truth about what you mean to each other.”

“Tell him the truth. Even ignoring everything else,” Dorian said, “I wouldn’t know where to start.” He pitched his voice up higher, mocking: “Oh, hello there. You know, funny thing: I’ve been watching you in your dreams like a right pervert since you were still in short pants.”

Varric shook his head. “The Fade is weird as shit,” he said, feelingly.

“Also,” Dorian went on, “my whole family would love to see you in chains. Metaphorical, of course. We don’t bind our unum vinctum; we just go right to the source and break their spirits! And one more thing, as much as I absolutely adore you and am certifiably mad over you, everyone else in this Maker-forsaken land wants the both of us—”

He cut off with a start when Varric grabbed his arm, straightening as if a shock had run through him. He didn’t have to ask what Varric had seen—the firelight easily picked out Taran’s form as he made his way back to camp.

Taran was far enough away that he couldn’t have heard any of their conversation, but Dorian went still as a statue anyway, looking anywhere but at the kid. Flat-out ignoring him, as if he hadn’t been messily spilling his guts just a few seconds ago, and it took all Varric had not to roll his eyes. This was going to be even worse than Hawke and Fenris; he could just feel it.

“Good walk?” he called to Taran as the boy grew nearer. He had a handful of elfroot and a smudge of dirt across one cheek. He didn’t look any happier than when he’d left, but there was a greater sense of peace about him. The quiet night, it seemed, had done him some good.
He paused by the fire. “It’s a nice night out,” Taran said. “But I think it’s time for bed now. We’ve
got an early morning.”

“We’ve got no such thing,” Varric protested with a wide smile. Dorian still wasn’t looking over, the
coward. “We’re taking our time, remember?”

Taran tilted his head, firelight catching glints of gold and red and bronze in his hair. “I suppose
you’re right,” he said. “I should still get on to bed anyway. Goodnight, Varric. Dorian.”

“G’night, kid,” Varric said. He gave Dorian a subtle kick when it looked like the mage wasn’t going
to say anything.

Dorian stirred, casting him a murderous look from beneath his lashes before flicking his gaze up
toward the Herald. His smile was markedly casual. “Oh, yes,” he said. “Good night.”

Taran hesitated for just a beat too long, then bobbed his head and moved away, elfroot drooping in
his hand. If Varric wasn’t mistaken, his shoulders had rounded forward again and even his romantic
soul couldn’t be blamed for sensing an air of wistful hurt.

Varric turned a glare on Dorian, but Dorian was too busy watching as Taran rolled back the flap of
his tent and slipped inside with all the easy grace of a young warrior. He could almost swear he
heard the ‘Vint sigh like some sort of lovelorn fool, and Maker’s furry nutsack, he seriously couldn’t
believe he was about to go through all this bullshit again.

Feeling a hundred times older than his mumblemumble years, Varric tipped back his head and
groaned. “You know,” he said, to no one in particular—to the whole bleeding universe itself. “I
think I figured out the punchline. And it looks like this time, the joke’s on us.”
“Inquisition troops rounding the bend,” Krem said, casually leaning against the stone wall with his arms crossed. His head was tipped back as if to catch the last rays of the dying sun. Anyone who didn’t look twice would think he was lost in some sort of daydream; not a single soldier paid them any mind as they passed by. “Judging by the hullabaloo, it’s either good news or the Herald.”

Bull didn’t even lift his head, one big thumb sliding along the edge of his blade. “Both,” he said, then grunted in satisfaction at its clean slice. He set the whetstone aside and sheathed the massive greatsword in a showy ripple of muscle (Krem rolled his eyes; several feet away, two of the Chantry sisters tittered and blushed), sucking the welling drops of blood from his cut thumb. He didn’t even bother glancing over. “Looks like they made it back in one piece. That’s good.”

“You sure about that?”

He meant it mostly as a jab—a reflexive attempt to rile up the boss—but Bull took the question dead serious. He turned his head and squinted across blinding snow, ignoring the last of Cullen’s men winding up their relentless, endless exercises. A few had broken away to greet the small party, buzzing with palpable excitement, and they all reminded Krem of a hive of bees circling desperately about one particularly attractive flower.

Krem cocked his head, smiling to himself. Tall, broad, brown-eyed and sweet: yeah, Taran was an attractive something all right.

“No,” Bull said.

Krem glanced over with a start, an instinctive part of him wondering whether the qunari had taken up mind reading somewhere along the way. But Bull was standing tall and staring across the practice fields toward Taran and his crew. His brows were drawn down into a familiar (worrying) frown, and his fists had fallen to his hips in what the Chargers liked to jokingly call his thinkin’ pose.

That? Was never a good sign.

“What’s up, chief?” Krem asked, at full attention. Forget pretending to relax; there was real tension coiling through his muscles now, awareness sparking like a line of signal fires through his blood. They weren’t so firmly entrenched in the Inquisition that he felt anything close to comfortable yet. Even though he sensed that the Herald, the Ambassador, and maybe the Commander were good eggs, there was something off-putting about their Spymaster. (Which, to be fair, possibly came with the job.) And there were so many people coming and going at any given time that keeping track of them all had become a full-time job.

He wasn’t ready for anything to go seriously wrong on top of all that. Not yet, at least.

“Dunno,” Bull said. He snorted at Krem’s incredulous stare, those huge shoulders pulling up into a shrug. “Sometimes it’s just a hunch. A gut feeling. And my gut’s telling me something’s not quite right.”

Krem crossed his arms again. “Your gut’s probably telling you it’s hungry,” he said. “It’s getting big enough that it’s got to be fed on the regular, yeah?”
“Aw Krem,” Bull said with a crooked smile, “now that’s just hurtful. You’ve gone and hurt my feelings.”

“I’d have to have found them first,” he countered, flicking his gaze toward the ever-growing crowd hovering (buzzing, buzzing, buzzing away) about the Herald. They were nearing the main gates, bypassing the bit of wall he and Bull had been so studiously decorating for the last hour or two. Krem instinctively shifted, giving Bull the opening to half-turn toward the little procession without looking like he was looking. “So what do you think?”

Bull hummed beneath his breath. “I think someone needs to buy that kid a beer,” he said. “Preferably someone tall, dark, and dangerously pretty.”

Krem pushed away from the wall. “Well,” he said, rising to the bait, “I guess that’s my cue.”

He snorted and didn’t try to contradict him. “You won’t be able to get within ten feet of him for the next six hours,” Bull warned.

But there were some things even the qunari didn’t know. “Yeah?” Krem said, quirking a single brow as he backed up toward the wide-open doors. “Wanna take a bet on that?”

He didn’t give Bull a chance to reply; Krem turned on his heel with a final flashing grin and jogged to catch up with the crowd. Now that he’d gotten them square in his head as bees, he couldn’t seem to hear anything but buzzing. They followed about the Herald in a thick knot; Krem had to get creative with the use of his elbows to squeeze in anywhere close, and part of that was Varric finally spotting him and giving up his own spot by Taran’s right flank.

Krem dashed off a quick salute in thanks and let his arm jostle Taran’s. He was out of his armor and looking fresh-faced—and visibly anxious. Shit, Bull had been right after all. (Not that Krem had actually doubted it for a moment.) “Hey, handsome,” Krem said, dropping his voice low enough to pass for a playful come-on.

Taran looked over, a little smile quirking at the corners of his mouth. On his left, that new Tevinter altus nearly tripped over his own stupidly complicated robe. Ha. “Hi, Krem,” Taran said. “Where’s the rest of your team?”

“Probably holding up the walls of the bar,” Krem said, then cocked his head toward the Singing Maiden. “Wanna go check?”

“I can’t,” Taran said, though his eyes couldn’t have more plainly been screaming yes, yes please. He looked…tired. Worn. There were violet-bruised shadows beneath his eyes and a vulnerability about him that made him look even younger than his age. It was a rare reminder that this boy—this chosen of Andraste who charmed rebels and always had an ear for the outcasts and who was slowly on his way to becoming an actual friend, given enough time—was in fact younger than him by a handful of years. That, if Krem wasn’t mistaken, he hadn’t actually hit his twentieth year yet. Crazy to think about that, considering how much the world was coming to depend on him.

Krem pushed all that away. No use dwelling on it now. “See, you say you can’t,” he said, offering a crooked smile, “and all I hear is sure, Krem; lead the way.”

“He can’t,” the too-pretty ‘Vint snapped, leaning around Taran to shoot Krem a glare. Their paths hadn’t crossed much—Dorian hadn’t lingered in Haven long enough for Krem to make it a priority—but he was pretty sure they already didn’t like each other.

No, scratch that, he was certain they didn’t like each other. The ‘Vint was looking at him with a
frosty sort of disregard and, well, it wasn’t exactly the first time some upper-class asshole countryman had given him that particular brand of stinkeye. Krem set his jaw and glared back. He knew who he was now; he was comfortable in his own skin. He wasn’t willing to take bullshit from people like this anymore.

“Dorian,” Taran said quietly, dropping a hand to the ‘Vint’s—Dorian’s—arm. The other man swung his gaze up to Taran’s, a complicated series of emotions flickering in those dark eyes. He was guarded enough that Krem couldn’t quite read him, but perhaps not quite as guarded as Dorian probably would have liked.

Dorian swallowed and inclined his head slightly. When he looked at Krem again, that coldness was mostly gone, but there was still a light of…what? Jealousy? Possessiveness? Indigestion? He mentally made it his top priority to crack this particular nut with Bull before Dorian proved to be a problem. “That is to say,” Dorian corrected himself, clearing his throat and sounding lighter, more relaxed…and yet no less anxious, unless Krem was missing his mark. “The Herald will have to make a full report to his advisors. A great deal happened to us these past few weeks.”

Krem didn’t miss the way Dorian stressed us. Neither, it seemed, did Varric. Still walking a few paces behind them, he started coughing delicately into his fist.

Whatever else was going on, Krem now knew with complete certainty that Dorian? Was jealous. Though whether he was jealous of the Herald’s time or attention or the power that came from being at his side, Krem couldn’t say. Did Dorian look to advance his own standing by climbing on the shoulders of the Herald? Was he using Taran? It was something an altus wouldn’t think twice about doing.

Krem narrowed his eyes. He may not have known Taran terribly long, but damn it, he liked the kid. He’d be damned if he let some power-hungry ‘Vint use him to further his own schemes. Not-so-subtly, Krem knocked his shoulder against Taran’s and looped a friendly arm around his shoulders, bullishly (ha!) riding out the way Dorian’s eyes narrowed into a piercing glare. Take that, asshole.

If Taran noticed, he chose to ignore it. “Dorian’s right,” he said, not protesting the friendly gesture. If anything, he listed toward Krem, greedily drinking in the show of physical affection. Sometimes the kid reminded him of small animals that hadn’t been held enough—hungry for touch yet uncertain how to go about asking for it. “I’ve put off this report long enough. I need to talk to Leliana—I mean, I need to talk to all of them.”

His gaze flicked down and Dorian made a low noise.

Something was going on, and Krem was increasingly certain Taran needed a few drinks and, more importantly, a few hours surrounded by the Chargers and their bullshit. Whatever they’d been looking to gain by taking their sweet time crossing the Hinterlands, it hadn’t been enough: Taran clearly hadn’t gotten what he needed.

“Well,” Krem said, subtly tugging Taran off-course, away from the path that would lead up to the chantry and toward the old tavern instead. “Unfortunately for you—but fortunately for me and my drinking buddies—Leliana’s out for the evening, meeting with one of her groups just north of here. She won’t be back until late tomorrow morning.”

“Oh?” Taran said, something like relief, then guilt, flashing across his face.

Krem tightened his grip, ignoring the way Dorian glared. “Yup. So it looks like your evening suddenly got freed up.”
“Well someone still needs to check in with the others,” Dorian protested, sounding suspiciously peevish. Yeah, Krem was seriously getting under his skin; Dorian’s glare kept dropping down to that casual arm around Taran’s shoulders, then away. It would have been funny if the man wasn’t such an obvious snake. “He can’t very well go off gallivanting with you when there’s work to be done.”

Behind them, Varric sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Taran stiffened in reflexive shame, beginning to reluctantly pull away, but Krem just tightened his grip and smiled. Fuck you, he tried to beam straight into Dorian’s head. He’s a human fucking being, not your puppet. It was a damn shame how quickly everyone around here seemed to forget that. “Well, it’s a good thing you were there with a front row seat of everything that happened over the last few weeks,” Krem said, tossing Dorian’s earlier words back at him. Prick. “I’m sure you can sketch out what they need to know tonight, and Taran can fill in the details tomorrow when everyone’s back at Haven.”

Dorian didn’t seem too thrilled with that idea, but Taran brightened a little—likely at the idea of avoiding for another night whatever painful confrontation had him coiled up so tightly. “Are you sure that would be okay?” he asked, twisting around to look at Varric, then Dorian.

Dorian opened his mouth. Closed it. Hesitated. The fact that he so obviously didn’t want Taran going off with Krem—and yet seemed to want to shield Taran from whatever he was so obviously dreading—raised him a couple of notches in Krem’s opinion. Maybe he wasn’t completely terrible after all. “…could give them the bare bones, yes,” he said slowly.

Taran smiled; Krem smirked; Varric shook his head and moved up to snag Dorian’s sleeve, tugging him toward the chantry. “Come on, Sparkler,” he said, dry amusement threaded through each word. He added something to Dorian in a low undertone that sounded suspiciously like made your bed, now lay in it.

Krem didn’t waste time trying to puzzle out what was going on. He’d fill Bull in on the details later and let that wily bastard spit out the answer. Instead, he led an unresisting Taran off the branching path toward the tavern. Some of their bees were still buzzing about, but they’d been split by the division of their party, some following Varric and Dorian, some heading toward the Singing Maiden. Krem trusted that Sera would be able to chase them off after a round or two. She was good at using her big mouth and brass manners to scare away any hangers-on.

Tonight, Krem vowed, starting to chat Taran up with a bit of friendly warmth and reflexive flirtation—he really was awfully pretty, with all those muscles and those warm brown eyes—only the true friends of the Herald would be allowed within ten feet of him. Whatever fresh hell Taran had been through, it was still haunting him, and it was clear from the way he sunk into Krem’s side that he needed something none of them had been arsed to give him yet.

Well then, Krem thought, ushering the Herald into the golden warmth of the tavern, where Dalish, Rocky and Stitches were already lifting their tankards in greeting, good thing he has us, then.

FEYNRIEL:

When Dorian was in a snit, his dreamscape reflected back the darkest shades of his mood.

…it wasn’t exactly subtle.
“Um,” Feynriel said, ducking beneath the low doorway and into the library proper. There were spikes of ice hanging in jagged edges from the domed ceiling and a fine layer of frost covering every visible surface. Dorian’s beloved books glittered beneath their frozen shells, and even the fireplace danced with twisting blue-white flames that gave off nothing but cold.

Dorian sat in his usual chair, glaring down at a book with a very telling title: GET YOUR BLOODY HANDS OFF HIM YOU FILTHY LOUT. He looked two seconds away from ripping out the pages with his teeth.

“So,” Feynriel added after a short stretch of silence. “Things aren’t going so well with your Voice then, I take it?”

Dorian looked up with a glare, and Feynriel rook a quick step back, both hands raised in defense. “Not that it’s any of my business!” he said. “In fact, forget I asked. Or said anything. Or even shoved myself into your problems.” He started to take slow steps back, ready to leave Dorian to whatever mood had overtaken him.

But Dorian sighed and tipped back his head, staring up at the spiky ceiling with a curious—and unusual—sort of vulnerability. “No,” he said, voice throatier than usual. “No, please, don’t allow my horrid little mood to run you off. Here.” He closed the book over his thumb and it disappeared in a puff of smoke. The crackling blue flames began to slowly bleed gold. “See? All better.”

“Um, sure,” Feynriel said. He hesitated before giving a mental shrug and moving to take his usual place, chair forming beneath him with a thought. It was chillier than usual, too, as if Dorian’s bad mood had infected everything in this corner of the Fade, including the elements firmly under Feynriel’s control. He’d stumbled across that now and again with the strongest of magic-users, and it shouldn’t have surprised him to see that Dorian’s will carried such weight here.

He tucked a loose strand of hair back and folded his legs up under him, offering his friend the closest thing he could muster to a smile. “So,” Feynriel said, valiantly ignoring the shelves of books with their telling titles, the dark moodiness of the library, the threatening spikes of ice still doggedly clinging to the ceiling. “How have you been?”

Dorian laughed. It was still somewhat bitter and a touch too harsh, but it softened the tight lines about his eyes and loosened the iron-clad set of his shoulders. Dorian sank back into the chair, spreading his hands wide as if to say look at me. “I appear to be at war with myself,” Dorian said dryly, “and I can’t for the life of me figure out how to call a stalemate. My Voice,” he added, tilting his head toward Feynriel. “He’s…”

He trailed off, eyes dropping, as if carefully shuttering away the true depths of his thoughts.

Feynriel fought the urge to shake his head. If he had seen Krem die in the Fade, only to find him again by some miracle, he wouldn’t be snarling and snapping and dragging his feet. Nothing—not even his own awkwardness, not even his occasionally flagging sense of self-worth—could keep him from Krem’s side. Dorian had experienced a true moment of divinity; how, how was he still conflicted?

He leaned in, sharp elbows digging into bony knees, and studied Dorian’s face. “What is he, Dorian?” Feynriel asked, low but insistent. “What am I missing?”

Dorian sighed and dragged his fingers back through his hair. “He’s absolutely wonderful,” he said, defeated. “And absolutely unobtainable. And it is taking everything I have to stay here in my bed
and not stomp my way across the camp to make sure that Tevinter harlot didn’t try to follow him back to his room tonight.”

The rising indignation in Dorian’s voice would have been funny if the whole situation weren’t so baffling. “Wait,” Feynriel said, confused. “There’s another ‘Vint around? Trying to seduce your Voice?”

“All but,” Dorian muttered darkly. He pushed himself up, beginning to pace. Tension coiled through every line of his body, winding through him like a lightning storm. His heels clicked against dark marble and his brows knit together; even his mustache practically quivered. “It’s…I have not been entirely forthright with you,” he admitted after a few long minutes of tense silence.

Feynriel’s brows climb. “Oh, really?” he said—and only their long friendship kept his tone from going as dry as the Wastes.

Dorian waved him off as if sensing the sarcasm anyway. “Yes, yes, make fun. But the thing is…” He took a deep breath and turned to face Feynriel. “My Voice is Taran Trevelyan.” Pause. “The Taran Trevelyan.” Pause. “As in, the Herald of bloody Andraste?” Pause. “…Feynriel, please tell me you haven’t been sleeping through all of this nightmare.”

“Oh, this isn’t the flat stare of someone who doesn’t know what you’re talking about,” Feynriel said. “This is me being too nice to say no shit to your face. Of course your Voice is the Herald of Andraste,” he added, standing himself. Considering the topic of their conversation, pacing around like a madman was starting to have its charms. “I was there with you when Haven was destroyed; I saw him as the hole was punched into the world. Only one person survived that, and it wasn’t some backwoods yokel who managed to get really lucky. Besides,” Feynriel added with a faint shrug at Dorian’s shocked look, “it’s you. Who else would you be bonded to but the Herald?”

“If you’re saying that because of my family,” Dorian began.

Feynriel just waved him off with a laugh. “I’m saying it because you’re the most melodramatic arse I’ve ever met in my life,” he teased—and that, finally, was enough to earn a rusty laugh.

Dorian swiped a hand over his face, fingers trembling. He truly was out of sorts—lost, Feynriel would have said, if Dorian were the sort of man who allowed anyone to think anything of the sort.

He opened his mouth to admit that he was nearly positive his own Voice had joined the Inquisition—Krem’s dreams were filled with half-familiar landmarks and an anxious sort of awareness that made Feynriel believe the Chargers had settled in on a particularly dangerous assignment—but Dorian was already turning away and moving to the far end of the library. It melted beneath his feet, shifting, stones going rougher and walls dissolving down into a familiar high bannister. The balcony overlooked miles of roughened terrain, most of it lost to shadow. A queasy green light filtered over everything they saw, spilling from the core of the breach and pulsing like a living heartbeat: thrum thrum thrum, its steady cadence making his skin crawl.

Dorian didn’t seem to have that problem. He tilted his face up toward its green light, watching it with a strange sort of softness to his expression. As if it weren’t some gibbering nightmare image. As if it weren’t the greatest threat they’d ever faced.

As if it weren’t the bloody end of the world.

His lips twisted into a small, absent smile. “You know,” he said, more or less to himself, “it’s remarkable how so dangerous a thing can be so beautiful at the same time.”
Feynriel blinked, then reluctantly squinted up at the breach. He fought to see it through a new pair of eyes, looking for any kind of beauty at all, but... but no, no, no, it just made his stomach twist and his own heart begin to pound. “You have a strange idea of beauty,” he said, turning away from the sight as he wrapped his arms around his middle.

“Perhaps,” Dorian was willing to admit. “But in this case, can you really deny it? The way the light pulses. The way the center moves. The way it...calls to you, soft, like a barely remembered song.”

*That* had him straightening, attention zeroing in on Dorian. “Wait,” he said, “what?”

Dorian sighed and turned away from the strange vista, walls beginning to knit themselves together again. Feynriel reached out, catching one of the bricks as it began to take shape; it crumbled the moment it touched his fingers, falling to the parapet in a shower of dark sand. All around them, the walls Dorian had begun building with his mind collapsed in on themselves, spreading across the floor in a growing desert at their feet.

Dorian shot him a sour look, but Feynriel was grabbing at his arm, intent. “Dorian,” he said, “*what did you say*?”

“Nothing to get so worked up over,” Dorian scoffed, trying to wave him off—then sighed, letting the breath out on a gust when Feynriel doggedly hung on. “Oh, *what* is your problem?”

“The breach,” Feynriel said. Then again, when Dorian just lifted his brows. “Dorian, the *breach*. The *light*. You said it, it calls to you? Like a—”

*Like a song.*

He tilted his head toward that awareness of burning, twisting light, and felt nothing but quaking fear. He strained to listen and heard nothing but silence. And yet, far across the Fade, his own Voice hummed like a struck chord, making everything inside him vibrate in return, and, and, and, oh *Maker* they were the two biggest idiots in the whole bloody void.

Feynriel gave a startled laugh, shaking his head. “I can’t believe neither of us thought of it,” he said. “Our masters would drown themselves in shame.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Dorian demanded, voice tart... but he tilted his head when Feynriel *just looked* at him, lips parting as he so very obviously began working it through.

All those weeks and weeks ago, the Fade had exploded into light the very moment Dorian’s Voice had been silenced, lost to him. *Found* in the waking world, but nowhere else. They’d looked, Feynriel doing what he could to boost Dorian’s natural ability, but so far their search had proved fruitless. Taran’s presence in the Fade had been irrevocably lost the very day the breach had torn open the sky, as if he’d been swallowed whole in that moment of violence.

Which...yes. *Exactly.*

Dorian groaned. “You’re right,” he said, getting it. It was small comfort to think they probably would have figured it out earlier if the whole bloody world wasn’t threatening to end. The constant threat of death was terribly distracting. “Of course you’re right—and yes, yes, fine, they would throw themselves off the highest cliffs in horror at our idiocy. Taran wasn’t ripped from the Fade by the breach at all.”

“He *is* the breach,” Feynriel agreed with a laugh. “Or, well, sort of. It’s of a piece, at least. That’s why you can hear it humming. He’s still...” *Calling to you.*
Both of them turned to look up at that huge, bright gash across the sky. Even trying to imagine it as a piece of the Herald, Feynriel was reflexively frightened. It was horrifying to look at, like something that was never meant to be thrust into this world. And yet, looking up, Dorian’s lips were parted in a breathless sort of smile, and it had been a long, long time since he’d seen his friend so happy.

“Oh,” Dorian said, quiet. “There you are.”

Any small hope in Feynriel’s chest that he wouldn’t have to find his way closer to the tear in the sky evaporated. “I’ll help you get there,” he said. “As close as possible.” As close as he dared, at least. “If he’s really in the Fade for you to find, we’ll discover him.”

“It really shouldn’t matter, now that I can see him in the real world whenever I want,” Dorian admitted softly. “But out there, because of who he is…I have to share him with bloody everyone.” He gave a little puff of laughter, as if ashamed of himself. “When I’d really rather be terribly selfish about it all and keep him to myself.”

“You don’t have to explain that to me,” Feynriel said, thinking of the way he felt whenever he saw Krem. Truthfully, that was a big part of why he’d delayed leaving Tevinter so long, even after realizing Krem was likely headed to Haven. Once he found him—once he could look into his eyes—once they shared space and Feynriel had to reveal himself as the utterly hopeless arse that he was—then Krem wouldn’t be uniquely his the way he was in the Fade. He’d have to make a conscious choice.

…it was only right that Feynriel gave him that choice, which was why his bags were packed and he was boarding a ship within the week, but still. Still. It frightened him thinking of how much could change.

How much worse would it be if it was more than the Chargers demanding their piece of Krem? What if it were the entire known world?

Feynriel pushed that thought aside even as he reached out, offering his hand to Dorian. “Come on,” he said, fighting to smile against the complicated emotions filling his chest. Fear and determination and bittersweet loss and hope. Joy for his friend, shadowed with creeping vines of worry worry worry, because no matter how he teased Dorian, it was hard to escape the knowledge that the other man was striding into a sea of traps, each ready to trigger at the slightest misstep.

It was bad enough loving your Voice more than life itself. Would Feynriel have the strength to do it with all the world watching?

He didn’t think so.

But then, thank the Maker, he wasn’t the one who had to. So he simply smiled and tried his best to sound reassuring as he added, “Let’s go find that Voice of yours.”
Feynriel hesitated on the edge of Dorian’s awareness, flickering softly as if fighting to remain corporeal. He’d been visibly struggling the closer they drew to the breach, fear and awe and something very much like reverence flitting across his narrow face under the sheer weight of power bearing down on them.

At the awe-inspiring breadth.

Maker. He’d spent his nights since the incident fighting not to look toward the wound in the sky, but now, so close he could feel its rhythmic tug deep in his belly… It was like nothing Dorian could have imagined. A great eye opening in the vast night sky, staring down into each small and petty part of him as he rose up up up to meet it. He could feel his own pulse racing rabbit-fast in response, but hope outweighed the fear and curiosity drowned the caution. He could very nearly hear Taran now, the way he used to hear him before the explosion—humming deep within his blood and calling him like the tides.

I’m coming, he thought, dark robes whipping about him as he rose toward that burning green light. Taran, sweetheart, I’m almost there.

The edges of the breach roiled and billowed like an oncoming storm, lightning skittering across the edges. He could feel the touch of a hundred thousand demon eyes, hungry against his skin, and that should have had him blanching away in terror. He was smarter than this. But Dorian simply set his jaw and fought against the tide of magic, as if he were swimming upstream—straining to reach that indefinable point of light both a hundred leagues and just an arms length away.

I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m coming.

“I,” Feynriel choked, voice gone hazy with terror. He sounded very much like he wanted to scream. “Dorian, I can’t—”

Dorian didn’t turn to look at him; his eyes were locked on the light pouring from the heart of the breach. They were so close he felt as if he were breathing in its energy. It shot through his blood—his bones—piercing his skin and shifting through as if he were made of glass. He couldn’t shake the feeling that if he lifted his hands before his face, he’d be able to see that light through the tracery of veins.

“Dorian!”

“Go,” Dorian said, taking pity on his friend. Feynriel may have been the most powerful dream-walker in ages, but he wasn’t tied to Taran Trevelyan the way Dorian was. He had nothing he was straining toward—no reason to bear the sheer maddening heft of the breach staring down into the heart of him. He had no one waiting on the other side. “I’ll be fine.”

It was a testament to how much Feynriel cared that he didn’t immediately slip away. “If you need me,” he began, voice trembling. He sounded, in that moment, like a child huddled against the dark, chased from dreams by the skittering-soft husk of demon laughter. “If you need anything at all…”

Dorian risked one glance over his shoulder, surprised to see how far Feynriel had already fallen behind. He seemed little more than a speck in the distance, golden hair floating in mermaid strands about his face as he stared up at Dorian with anxious eyes. Green light chased shadows over
handsome, half-elven features, turning them alien. Unknowable.

“I’ll call for you,” Dorian promised, though he already knew he never would. He wouldn’t need to. The demons skittering and clawing over each other at the corners of his sight didn’t frighten him; the pulse of breach-light didn’t make him quake and quaver. Taran was there. There at the heart of it all, dreaming mind as bright as it ever was, and Dorian—

Dorian turned back to the roiling green light—the eye—willfully flying up into its center. Feynriel forgotten, waking world forgotten, everything that had ever mattered forgotten...except Taran. It was as if parts of him were slowly being stripped away by the journey through the breach until all he had was that thin line connecting him to his voice in the darkness; his promise in the fade; his—

The world was lost in glaring white.

Dorian was lost.

In.

The.

Silence.

There.

Was.

Nothing.

And then, sucking in a breath, he was jolted back into sensation, into some semblance of the world again—feeling sand beneath his fingers and the ice-cold-shock of waves crashing about his thighs. The frothing water rose past him, lapping greedily against a wet knife of shoreline before drawing back toward the sea, only to surge forward again.

He looked up, disoriented, as a gull circled overhead. It called out, cry echoing strangely in his ears. The afternoon sun was high and hot against his shoulders, and for the first time in weeks, the breach was nowhere to be found.

That came to him with a start. He scrambled to his feet, wet robes slapping against skin, and stared around him. He was standing at the edge of the Waking Sea on a familiar curve of coast. The day was unusually beautiful, but he knew that jagged cliffside; he knew that cavern pressed like a giant’s thumbprint into the rocks. If he climbed his way up, he’d see endless rolling grassland and the crumbling Trevelyan House crouched like some lumbering beast on its back, the occasional cracked and boarded window only hinting at the true rot inside.

He’d somehow fought his way back into his Voice’s dreams…but where was Taran?

Dorian stepped away from the shoreline (waves crashing about his ankles and dragging the heavy ends of his robe back toward the sea) and absently waved his hand to change into something fresh. Only—only nothing happened.

He stumbled on the next step, startled, staring down at himself. His soaking wet robes were dotted with grains of sand and bits of kelp, feeling as cold and miserable as the real thing. Usually, in the Fade, a single thought could make just about anything disappear in a puff of smoke, the world shaping around his will, but now, here, nothing.
Dorian frowned, lifting his beringed hand and focusing on a single grain of sand pricked against his palm. He imagined it gone; he imagined it growing to a smooth golden orb; he willed it into smoke and water and a bloody fistful of diamonds, but nothing, *nothing* worked. It remained stubbornly there, as if he’d somehow stumbled headfirst into the real world by mistake.

If he couldn’t feel Taran’s presence all around him, trembling like a struck chord, he might have believed that to be true.

“Well,” Dorian said, hushed. Even his voice sounded different in this Fade-not-the-Fade, as if each word were underlined by strings of light. “This is bloody well disorienting.”

But there was nothing for it but to keep going. He brushed his palm against his already-ruined robe as he began picking his way down the shoreline. Taran was a bright glow somewhere around a bend in the beach, away from the cavern where he’d witnessed his sister’s murder. Calling to him in that subtle yet familiar way Dorian had thought he’d never feel again.

And Maker, *Maker*, he hadn’t realized how silent his dreams had been until this moment of reconnection. Even though he saw Taran every day in the flesh, there had been something vital missing, some part of him lost and hurting and—

Dorian pushed the tangle of emotion away, willingly giving himself to the moment. To the hyper-realism of this strange corner of the Fade, deep in the heart of the Breach. Each rushing wave was a soft hush; each shell caught the light, winking up at him like a shard of memory. It was all *so very immediate*, the heat of the sun a palpable thing, that he wouldn’t have been surprised to discover he’d been teleported through time and space again.

The sensation only strengthened as he skirted the sharp bit of jutting rock and the beach opened up again. It spread wide from the high point of the inverted v created by the cliffside, scattered with dark rock and glistening pale shells. The practice blade made a soft *hum* as it sped through the air, fast as a bird’s wing; Taran’s breaths dictated the rhythm of the sea. The sun shone down like a single focused light, and it should have been unnerving how the whole of the Fade strained toward his non-magical Voice as if Taran could somehow tap into its deeper power…

…and yet all Dorian could think as he stood there, watching the muscles of Taran’s back flex with each movement, was *ma aureum. Bese ma mortali*.

He was even brighter here than in the waking world, a burnished light seeming to cast from his skin. Bronze hair stuck to his scalp and the back of his neck, beads of sweat dripping intricate patterns down his spine as Taran lifted the wooden blade in counter, counter, strike—moving with a grace that belied his size.

Dorian began to smile, fingers curling reflexively at his sides as if he only had to reach out and touch. He took a step forward, foot scuffing against stone, sending it clattering. *Maker*, he—

Taran whipped around at the sound, sword still held aloft—green-bathed-*steel* now, the Fade responding instantly to Taran the way it refused to do for Dorian—brown eyes going huge as they landed on him.

As Taran saw him, in a way no ordinary man should have been able to do.

“Dorian,” he said, visibly started, the word rolling like distant thunder. He could actually *feel* the kiss of electricity against his skin—feel the sudden shock of fear and horror—feel the unnatural tightening of the air as Taran’s palm glowed and *Maker*, this wasn’t supposed to be able to *happen*. 
“I,” he croaked, fascinated and afraid all in one, because if Taran could see him now, what the void did that mean? What did— He was just— There was no way they could—

_Bivenium, bivenium._ The word echoed like a curse in his mind; he could feel the horror of it settling low in his gut. No, it wasn’t possible. Something like this didn’t just happen: a sudden turn in their road, a break in their connection, a— “I…”

This couldn’t be right, this couldn’t be right, this couldn’t—he couldn’t—he had to—Maker.

Taran took a step forward, lowering his sword, and it was as if a cord had been cut, freeing him from his horrified paralysis. _Bivenium._ Dorian squeezed his eyes shut in denial and suddenly he was hurtling back as if he had been flung off a cliff, the caw of demon laughter ringing in his ears.

He jolted awake with a strangled gasp, his heart racing so fast it hurt. He half expected the room to filled with green light as rifts broke over his head—half expected shades to claw their way from the ground. Just outside his window, he could see the breach shudder and buck, cracking just a tiny bit wider…or was that his own terror talking?

Dorian forced himself to look away, staring up at the ceiling as he struggled to breathe, feeling Taran’s eyes on him in that strange, unsettling, all-too-real place.

Taran didn’t belong there. It shouldn’t have been possible. It wasn’t possible. It was—

It—

_Taran._

“Venhedis!” he gasped, flinging the blankets aside and scrambling out of bed, nearly falling. His bare feet slapped against the cold floor, but the shock of it only made his jerky movements faster. Dorian grabbed for his robe, laid carefully out for the next morning. Shock-numb fingers wrangled delicate cloth, yanked at buckles, threatened to unravel silken thread as he struggled into his clothes, heartbeat counting out the seconds in triple-time.

_Taran._ Taran had seen him (how, how, how, how, HOW had he done that? It shouldn’t have been possible; it wasn’t natural; it couldn’t be fucking good if the Fade was reaching through an untrained boy, _malum._) And if Taran had seen Dorian wandering blithely through his dreams, he was sure to be curious—sure to want to get to the bottom of it—sure to be awake and knocking on his door at any moment, and if Dorian couldn’t find a way to play it off as some strange dream…

He wasn’t ready to explain this, no matter how that meddling dwarf prodded. Not when his world was still spinning on its axis and his heart was filled with fear.

A seam ripped as he yanked the robe into place, but he hid the tear with a buckle, already moving to throw his blankets up over his bed. He usually didn’t bother making it (that had always been what elves were for), but he smoothed the sheets into the semblance of order now, even has he grew increasingly aware of time slipping away.

He heard the sound of someone running—a startled guard saying, “Herald!”

Dorian swallowed a yelp and practically threw himself at his chair, transformed into a reading nook the last time he had been here. (Which, Maker, already felt like eons ago.) He snagged his book and flipped it open to a random page as he fell back, smoothing his mustache and trying to make some sense of his tangled hair just as a sharp rap rattled the door.

_Taran._
“Come in,” Dorian said with as casual a manner as he could manage—strangled and far too breathy, but close enough his Voice might not catch on. At the last moment he snapped his fingers and sent a flicker of flame toward the waiting wick; soft candeleight cast over the pages of the book. His lie was ready and waiting: *I've been awake reading all night; I couldn’t possibly have stumbled into your dreams; what nonsense.*

There was a beat of silence, of stillness, before the knob turned and the door creaked wide enough to show the young Herald standing at the evil ‘Vint’s doorway (that’s how the story would no doubt be told around the camp later), wearing—Maker preserve them—nothing but a loose pair of sleeping bottoms. Taran’s toes curled awkwardly in fresh snow, and a soft dusting covered his hair and oh yes very bare shoulders, as if he’d come running from dreams all the way across the Inquisition camp.

Dorian did his level best not to stare as he closed the book with a snap. “What in the void?” he said, managing to sound convincingly worried and confused and not at all like he’d been traipsing through this boy’s mind not five minutes ago. He stood, already tutting, and grabbed the blankets off his bed. Which gave the added bonus of masking his hurried attempts to make it. “If you are trying to catch your death, there are more pleasant ways.” He hurried over, ushering Taran in and sweeping the blanket around him. Taran’s eyes were wide, a little wild, and it was all Dorian could do to keep up the charade as he forced a teasing smile. “Wine, for instance. Come, sit down. Your feet must be ice.”

“I,” Taran said, looking down at his own feet as if seeing them for the first time. There was still a bit of the Fade about him, even now—a crackling energy about his fist, a dazed uncertainty in his gaze. How confused he must have been; Dorian hated himself for making it worse, even as he urged Taran to sit on the bed and grabbed a fresh pair of socks. “I…were you…?”

Taran wet his lips, watching as Dorian pushed the door closed, then crouched gracefully before him. It was a secret thrill to be able to reach out and touch that forbidden skin, his fingers curling around Taran’s ankle as he urged up his frozen foot. He didn’t allow himself to linger as he slid the sock on, but his mind was busy cataloguing each sensation nonetheless.

The hollow of his anklebone. The soft crinkle of leg hair. The thrumming pulse and delicate sinew and impossible perfection of every little part of him.

“I had a dream,” Taran managed, each word perled out slowly, as if he were busy sorting through the thoughts tumbling chaotically through his head. “And I could have sworn I saw you there.”

You weren’t supposed to, Dorian thought, keeping his eyes down as he let Taran’s left foot fall only to gently catch the right. You never could before. *What does it mean that you can now?* Maker, but that couldn’t possibly be good. It couldn’t be safe—for Taran, for Dorian, for any of them. “Oh?” he said, keeping his voice airy. “I do so hope it was a good dream.”

“No,” Taran said, then gave a little growl, reaching up to tangle his fingers in his own hair. Dorian dared a quick glance up, taking in the glow of candeleight on bronzed skin (bare, bare, bare; it was entirely unfair how gorgeously near-naked his untouchable Voice was) and the way Taran snarled his copper-brown hair. “I mean…yes. I mean… It wasn’t really a— It was just—”

Taran sucked in another breath, closing his eyes and letting his hands drop. Dorian—with nothing left to do—slowly rose, reluctantly losing the single point of contact. That damnably comforting brush of skin on skin.

Taran bit his bottom lip, as if he were mourning the loss of contact too. And maybe that was why Dorian gave in to his inner demons and sat on the bed next to him. Or maybe it was that worry for him, bubbling up from deep within his gut. Or the faint flush that colored Taran’s cheeks, or the way
he instinctively tipped toward him as if drawn to Dorian’s warmth, or—

There were a million reasons he wanted to be close to Taran, and a million reasons why he should continue to resist. But when their shoulders brushed and Taran ducked his head as if he wanted to be even closer, Dorian could actually feel his resistance breaking apart like ice after a long thaw.

*Look at you,* he thought, curling his hands into tight fists on his lap to keep from reaching out. His eyes kept from dropping to Taran’s full lower lip by sheer willpower alone. *Bloody unfair is what you are.*

“My dream,” Taran murmured, clenching his own fists. “It was *so real,* Dorian. I could have reached out and touched you.”

A shiver worked its way down his spine. “That isn’t how the Fade works,” Dorian managed. He even smiled, as if they weren’t dancing around the corners of some deeper truth. “Not for a non-mage. It was just a dream.”

“It didn’t feel like a dream.” Taran looked down at his lap, brows knitting together. His fists opened and closed, opened and closed, the sheer power of his capable hands obvious. The mark had gone quiet, only a faint scar visible—bisecting his palm like a second heart-line—but Dorian could still feel that hint of electricity in the air. It made the hairs along his arms stand up; it made his stomach pool with unexpected heat. “To be honest…it hasn’t felt that way for a long time. Not since the…Since I first came to Haven.”

Taran wet his lips, looking up so quickly that he almost caught Dorian watching him with open hunger. “Sometimes I think the explosion changed something in me,” he confessed—voice low, as if it were some kind of dirty secret. As if Taran had any idea just how frightening and terrible this all truly was. “Not just the mark, but…deeper. I…”

He hesitated, then glanced toward the windows, lowering his voice even further—tipping toward Dorian until their shoulders were pressed together and he could all but feel the puffs of Taran’s words against his skin. “I hear things, sometimes,” he confessed. “When I sleep. When I’m near a rift. Sometimes when I’m just…by myself, not doing anything. I hear things, and sometimes I swear I almost see them too, like shadows of shadows out of the corner of my eye. It scared me the first few times, until I realized whatever it was didn’t mean me any harm.”

*It scared me the first few times.* Dorian dug his fingernails into his palms, struggling to hide how badly he was quaking. Maker. *It scared me the first few times,* as if they weren’t talking about the veil and demons and an untrained, unguarded mind tossed willy-nilly into the center of it all. It was a shock and a blessing Taran hadn’t been possessed already—he was floundering unprotected in dangerous waters, and oh, oh void, oh *great bloody void* Dorian could lose him at any moment. Just…*poof,* the thing that made Taran *Taran* gone, subsumed by the darkness he was carrying around inside his gloriously golden mind.

Outside the window, the breach churned; inside, Taran’s hand glowed the faintest green, responding. Or was the breach responding to *him*? Was there truly any way of telling?

*No no no no no no no no no.*

“Taran,” Dorian managed, even though all he wanted was to go gibbering out into the night. He didn’t know what to say; he didn’t know what to do. His Voice was the Herald of bloody Andraste, and he was in terrible danger, and every option Dorian could imagine held its own perils. If he took Taran’s hands between his own now and confessed everything, the Inquisition might crumble. Their faith in their shining figurehead was still a fragile thing, and he wasn’t fool enough to think the
armies that were gathering under their banner would all be perfectly content to accept a dirty ‘Vint whispering poison into the Maker’s Chosen’s young ear. Besides, if they decided to ignore the political calamity and bond anyway, there was no telling whether the bond would help protect Taran…or just open him up to further danger.

*Bivenium,* a part of him whispered, like a nightmare long-forgotten. *Bivenium, bivenium, bivenium.*

On the other hand, if he said nothing—if he took the comfortable coward’s way out and held his tongue—was he leaving Taran exposed to a growing threat Dorian was in no position to truly understand? Would he lose him, and by extension rob a desperate Thedas of their one shining hope, all because he was too bloody frightened to act?

His head was spinning. It hadn’t *stopped* spinning since he’d clapped eyes on Taran, and what Dorian wouldn’t give for a few weeks of peace and quiet where he could sort through the dreadful tangle of his own heart.

But he didn’t have the luxury of time. So instead he reached out to take one of Taran’s hands in his, squeezing gently—giving comfort. “Perhaps,” Dorian said slowly, feeling his way through the unseen traps laid all around them, “if your dreams are troubling you, it would be wise to spend time with a few mages. Learn how to shield yourself as best you can, so if the whispers prove a threat…”

And when in all of magic had shadowy presences lurking just out of sight been anything but a demon?

“All right,” Taran said, trusting. Then, naturally: “Will you teach me?”

He closed his eyes. Drew in a steadying breath. Expelled it slowly. That was far too much temptation for any sane man to carry. “It may be best,” Dorian said slowly, selecting each word with care, “if you found your teacher elsewhere. Vivienne, for instance. She attended one of the south’s lovely little Circles: she must know all sorts of Chantry-sanctioned methods of shielding impressionable minds.”

The bitterness was creeping around the edges of his words, and Dorian winced before glancing up with a wry look. “In Tevinter, we do things a little…differently. You may have noticed.”

“I may have noticed,” Taran echoed with an endearing quirk of his lips. They were still holding hands, and that single point of contact was just…much, much too much. And yet Dorian was anxious for *more.* For everything. Maker, he could feel the steady pulse of Taran’s heartbeat as he squeezed his fingers; he could feel callouses against his much smoother skin. He couldn’t stop himself from wondering what those sword-rough hands would feel like skimming up his flank, gripping his hips, yanking him *close.*

Oh, you are *nothing* but *temptation,* Dorian thought, watching from beneath his lashes as Taran’s perfect mouth shaped words he couldn’t even be arsed to listen to. Something about Vivienne and the Circle and and and blah blah something. He should be paying attention.

He *was* paying attention.

Just…not to what he was supposed to.

“…feel like a naughty child,” Taran was saying as Dorian forced himself to let go of his hand. Taran’s eyes flickered up, disappointment clear, even as the younger man tried to hide it. He cleared his throat. “I like her. And I respect her. But she’s a little, ah…intimidating. I’m not sure I’d survive a day as her student.”
Dorian forced himself to huff out a little laugh, as if his skin weren’t prickling with Taran’s sheer proximity. There was a bead of water threatening to fall from his temple, he saw—melted snow making its way across lovely skin as if the whole universe was dead set on testing him to the breaking point. “I will take your word on that,” Dorian said. His voice didn’t sound quite right. Strangled, almost. “Seeing as I’ve spent less than an hour in her presence at this point.”

“Oh.” Taran blinked, then laughed. Their shoulders brushed as he shifted, the bed (bed—Maker’s sake, why did he think sitting next to Taran on the bed was a good idea?) creaking subtly. “You know, it’s funny: I forget sometimes that you haven’t been with us all that long. This is your…what? Second night sleeping in Haven?” He spread his hands wide. “Somehow it feels like I’ve known you a lot longer than I have. Like maybe I’ve known you—”

All my life, he could have said. Maybe he was going to say, but Dorian cut them both off before he could finish. “Yes, well, ah, Solas then.” Taran was too close. The things he was saying were too…Too close. And Dorian wanted to reach out and touch him so badly. His tanned skin, his rumpled hair, his parted lips, all that skin. There were golden freckles all across the impressive width of his shoulders, and Dorian wanted to gather them with his tongue.

I love you so much, he thought, fighting to ignore the way Taran looked at him, surprised by the interruption. If he were a less selfish man, he’d make some excuse to stand and move to the window. If he were a more selfish man, he’d press in for a kiss and damn the consequences. Wasn’t it just bloody dandy that he somehow managed to be paradoxically both too good and too bad to do anything but burn from the inside out with petty jealousy and want and love and fear and—

“Dorian,” Taran said.

“Solas did keep you alive right after the, ah, explosion,” Dorian said quickly, finding a point to study that wasn’t melting snow making its lazy way down Taran’s chest. They hadn’t been alone together like this since being thrown back in time—and Maker alone knew that had been enough to keep Dorian’s wandering thoughts from getting ahead of them both. Venhedis. “And he has some vague hobo apostate connection to the spirits and all that…” He flicked his fingers.

“Dorian,” Taran said.

Dorian plowed ahead, wishing he had the willpower to at least stand. That had to be a bad sign, right? That he couldn’t even bring himself to step away from the edge of perfectly maddening temptation? Clearly he was going to have to station the dwarf at Taran’s side as constant chaperone. Being alone with his Voice was out of the question if he could be so easily flustered. “His methods, granted, are likely to be a little unorthodox, but considering the situation, I’d say that unorthodox may be just what we—”

“Dorian,” Taran said with a half-laugh, half-groan. He caught one of Dorian’s hands again, squeezing gently, waiting until Dorian sucked in a breath and looked at him again. And oh, oh, it was like being punched in the chest with years of pure want. Emotions he couldn’t even begin to categorize—hidden away, kept secret, kept safe for so long—unfolded like origami birds in his chest, fluttering with the wild pulse of his heart as Taran squeezed his fingers again and said, utterly unselfconscious: “If it’s all the same, I’d rather have you.”

He couldn’t form the words to respond to that. He could barely even breathe. Oh, this boy, he thought, dazed, shaken to his core with just a few simple words. Maker save me from this boy.

And then Taran’s eyes dropped once again to his mouth with all the subtleness of inexperience and youth…and it was all he could do to remember why he needed to keep his distance in the first place.
If it’s all the same, I’d rather have you.

The words echoed in the heavy, heady silence between them. Taran waited, breath held.

Dorian was like the tides that swirled along familiar cliffs of Trevelyan Manor. Quicksilver, beautiful, dangerous: lapping invitingly at the shore one moment and luring the unwary into deeper shoals the next.

His lashes brushed dark cheeks as he closed his eyes, almost as if Taran presented just as much temptation. The feeling was indescribable, even more powerful than the mark, and Taran shifted closer on the bed until their hips brushed.

Bed. They were sitting on a bed together, holding hands, and oh Maker, nothing in his sheltered nineteen years of life could have prepared him for this. For warm, soft fingers threading slowly through his. For the erratic beat of his heart and the answering quick puffs of Dorian’s breath. For the feeling of being wanted desperately and yet being shoved away every time he came close.

Well, he was close now. Close enough to watch a flush of color stain Dorian’s cheeks and slowly spread like spilled wine across his face, his neck, delicate and absurdly pretty and all but begging Taran to trace its path with his tongue. Dorian was just so… So Dorian. There was no other word that could encapsulate the same level of frustrated, anxious need.

Dorian, he thought, squeezing his fingers tighter, waiting not-so-patiently for Dorian to slowly lift his gaze to meet his. Please, Dorian, let me in.

He wasn’t sure how to go about all this—it wasn’t exactly as if he’d had any practice. But he wanted—oh how he wanted—and Dorian was shifting to face him, finally meeting his eyes, a liquid heat in his gaze that instantly set fire low in Taran’s belly. They both swayed forward as if compelled.

“Dorian,” he said, voice tangled and thick; husky. Dorian visibly shivered in response. “I’d like to— May I—”

Kiss you, touch you, have you. The overlapping desires were overwhelming in their intensity. He couldn’t find the words to ask for everything he wanted.

Dorian sucked in another quiet breath, face tilted toward his in maybe-invitation. Lips parted and slick, glistening in the light pouring from the breach, and, and, fuck, Taran hoped the small jerk of Dorian’s chin was permission given, because he was reaching up to cup the delicate line of Dorian’s jaw in the next moment, tipping close without coherent thought and bringing their mouths together at last at last at bloody fucking last.

And, oh. Maker.

Lips against lips. Breath against breath. Utterly devastating. A kiss couldn’t possibly be this good. It couldn’t feel this right. Dorian’s mouth was so unbelievably soft, parting against his as Dorian gasped in response. His pulse raced against Taran’s rough fingertips as if fed by the same electric current that was busy setting Taran alight, moan trapped in his throat, body surging closer. He tasted like nothing Taran had ever experienced, and Taran wanted nothing more than to chase each ragged breath with his tongue. His teeth. Heat was pooling low in his gut at this first simple brush of their
mouths and his skin felt too tight, constricting, confining; it took everything he had to pull back from the kiss before it could deepen.

Even so, he didn’t go far: hand cradling Dorian’s jaw, fingertips learning the ragged race of his pulse before slipping up to brush against the close-cropped hair of his temple. Lips just a breath apart and heavy-lidded eyes locked, question and answer circling there between them in endless loop.

*I’ve never wanted anyone like this before,* Taran thought, letting Dorian see everything exposed on his face: no secrets left between them. *I didn’t realize it was possible.*

Dorian groaned quietly, squeezing his eyes tight. He reached up, elegant fingers curling around Taran’s wrist as if he meant to pull him away. *Permission denied.* But he didn’t pull away; he didn’t lean back; he didn’t say a word. He simply brushed his thumb over Taran’s racing pulse again and again, each serrated breath blisteringly hot against Taran’s parted lips. Not moving back, but not pressing forward either.

It was…confounding. Even as inexperienced as he was, Taran could tell Dorian wanted to kiss him again, badly—he was practically panting, each short, harsh breath a puff of heat against his lips—but he wasn’t. He wouldn’t. Something kept pulling him back, just like in Taran’s dream.

(It had seemed so real, Dorian staring at him across the familiar bend of shore, eyes wide and dark, lips parted just like they were now.)

“As if chasing the lingering taste of him,” and fuck, fuck, he couldn’t wait for Dorian to finally make up his mind; he had to be kissing him.

Taran sucked in a breath, free hand falling to Dorian’s waist. He twirled his fingers through one of those elaborate buckles and yanked him closer, thrilling at the way Dorian fell against him with a choked-back moan. One of those elegant hands caught against Taran’s chest, fingers spreading wide over the bare muscle; Dorian shivered, hips shifting, half-leaning over him and locked in place.

He was hard; oh Maker, Taran could feel it against his thigh, hot as a brand. He wanted to… To reach down and cup that straining heat, rubbing the heel of his palm along the flushed head. He wanted to twist his body and rock up his own hips to show Dorian just how… How much he wanted. It was an elemental ache, a thrumming pulse, a—

“Taran,” Dorian murmured, eyes opening—pupils blown wide and lips parted in welcome.

Taran waited—for permission, for instruction, for anything—but Dorian just wet his lower lip again and stayed silent. As if that was all he was willing to give of himself: Taran’s name, breathed like a prayer.

*Why are you holding back,* he wanted to demand. *What aren’t you telling me?* But he couldn’t force Dorian to be honest any more than he could force himself not to want him anyway. So instead, he relented, muscles tightening (blanket falling back to bare his flushed skin) as he drew Dorian close.

“Tell me to stop,” he said, slow and serious so he could be sure Dorian heard, “and I stop. Okay?”

“Bloody void,” Dorian said on a broken laugh, but that was all he managed before Taran was pulling him closer (always, always closer) and licking hungrily into his mouth.
Dorian jolted against him at the first liquid glide of their tongues, a strangled noise caught against Taran’s lips. Taran hummed in agreement and swallowed Dorian’s moan, hands spanning down lean muscles to brace his hips. He closed his eyes, instantly overwhelmed—entire body throwing sparks as he tangled their tongues together, stroked deeper, deeper, lost in a flood of sensation.

Those trim hips jerked within his grasp, but Dorian wasn’t pulling away. It was as if a flame had been set to kindling and now they were both ready to burn. He pushed closer, greedy fingers spanning Taran’s bare shoulders before stroking down his chest, mapping his skin as if memorizing the feel of him. The shape of his muscles, the tension coiled in every line of his body, the—

Fuck he was hard.

Taran growled, nipping at the clever flick of Dorian’s tongue. He caught it between his teeth, sucking away the sting and riding out the unsteady buck of Dorian’s hips. That was all the encouragement he needed—surging forward, hands gripping the heady curve of Dorian’s ass, lips wrapped tight around his thrusting tongue as Dorian all but lost his mind against him; shuddering, rising up, wriithing and always always pushing in for more.

Overwhelmed in the best of ways, Taran tightened his grip on Dorian’s ass and hauled him up and over, muscles tightening as he easily lifted the older man. Dorian jolted against him, breaking the feverish kiss as he was spilled messily across the mattress, Taran rising over him—pushing between his spread thighs with a quirk of his brow. Taran slapped a hand out to brace himself against the mattress, looking down into Dorian’s flushed face. His other hand remained between them, anchored tight against Dorian’s hip and slowly slowly sliding up—never breaking eye contact, breaths coming in quickening pants as he caught Dorian’s thigh and slooowly urged it up up up around his hip.

Spreading Dorian wide open and aching beneath him.

Dorian’s cheeks were deep rose, his lips slick and his eyes blown wide and black. He sucked in an uneven breath as Taran settled his full weight on the point where their hips ground together—erection pressed ohfuckgood tight against Taran’s—one leg hooking over his thighs. “What are you doing to me, you impossible boy?” he muttered in shaken Tevene, hips giving a shallow, inadvertent roll.

Taran huffed a laugh, his own skin hot enough to catch fire. He knew he had to be flushed a cherry red, and he didn’t care—he didn’t care. Maker, he had Dorian spread out like a present beneath him, watching him with a scalding intensity as he hooked his other leg around Taran’s waist, pulling him closer. Biting his lip against something that sounded suspiciously like a whimper when their hips ground together with the movement.

It was taking everything he had to stay still, to not dive into another messy, headless kiss. To not lick deep into Dorian’s mouth and keep kissing him and kissing him, riding the deepening rhythm of their bodies as nails scored his naked back and his heart threatened to beat out of his chest.

I want you so much, he thought, carefully shifting his weight to free a hand. Taran dragged his knuckles along the sharp line of Dorian’s jaw, loving the way the other man all but melted at the touch. He felt…fuck, powerful right now. Cradled between Dorian’s thighs, feeling the mad race of his pulse, somehow the center of this incredible man’s world.

Forget the mark; this was what it felt like to be chosen.

He wet his lower lip—shivering at the way Dorian followed his tongue with dark eyes. “I—I’m not doing anything you haven’t done to me first,” Taran answered, also in Tevene. Who’d have thought that he’d be so grateful for Cassius’s fanatical lessons? “And better.”
Dorian let out a long breath, reaching up to tangle his fingers in Taran’s hair. He pulled him down slowly—carefully—until their foreheads rested together; another perfect point of contact, and yet not nearly enough. He wanted more. He wanted everything. “You have no idea the…impact you have on me,” Dorian began before trailing off. He let his grip loosen, brows drawing together as if beginning to second-guess his words.

Taran leaned in before Dorian could withdraw, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the point of his chin. Down his jaw. Against the thunder of his pulse and just behind his ear. Taran flicked out his tongue, catching Dorian’s earlobe between his lips—his teeth—riding out the sudden jolt of Dorian’s hips as he sucked a red mark against the tender skin.

Mine.

He couldn’t help the possessive response flaring deep within his chest. Within his heart. Within everything, everything, every little part of him thrilling as Dorian tilted back his head and groaned, those clever fingers going tighttighttight in his hair.

Whatever second (third, fourth) doubts Dorian had been harboring dissolved in the face of renewed heat. His hips were moving in tight unsubtle circles, rubbing up against Taran as his back arched in welcome. His breath came in short, harsh inhalations and every third exhale was a cry as Taran traced his way down the arc of his neck—tongue trailing, teeth scoring, lips pressing soft kisses and hard sucking bites in turn.

I want you, I love you, I want you, I love you. He’d barely known Dorian a fortnight and yet he was filled to bursting with emotion. It was impossible and overwhelming and fucking wonderful—and if he felt a little less, he may have mistrusted it more.

But now, here, tangled hot and slick between them, there was no room for doubt. There was only room for the shift of his body and the deliberate hard thrust of his hips.

“Venhedis,” Dorian cried, far, far too loud. Loud enough that anyone passing by could surely hear, surely know. Taran had a sudden image of Solas looking up from a book or a dream, a faint frown between his brows. Or, Maker, Adam stalking by huddled against the cold, doing a double-take as he passed Dorian’s window.

The mental image of the herbalist’s outrage was enough to have Taran laughing against Dorian’s skin, pure joy bubbling up inside him. He’d never felt this way before—he’d never even known he could. Dorian, still shuddering, turned his face against the pillow and laughed with him, as if Taran’s joy were infectious.

I do, Taran thought, snickering against the curve of Dorian’s neck, light as a feather inside. I do, I do love you. He pressed that knowledge in soft kisses against warm brown skin. He whispered it with the brush of his tongue. He surrendered to it completely, unquestioningly, letting the revelation unfold piece by piece until it was all but filling him—until he was thrumming with awareness of his own love.

It didn’t matter that they’d only had a few weeks together. He knew.

He knew.

Slowly, Taran lifted his head to look down at the man he loved. Dorian was still flushed and laughing quietly, so beautiful it made Taran’s breath catch. Dorian was more relaxed than he’d ever seen him, boneless in his pleasure and simple joy, utterly given over to it. There was no more resistance on his face, in his gaze as he turned his head to look up at Taran with wide dark eyes—
bottomless pits of black swallowing up the faintest rim of rich brown. No desire demon could have ever proved as deep of a temptation as Dorian Pavus was now: lips kiss-red and parted, fresh marks blooming against his skin, lashes sweeping low as his gaze went heavy-lidded and welcoming. One leg tightened around Taran’s waist, even as Dorian canted his hips up—dragging their cocks together in a slow, breathless, agonizing grind.

Dorian caught his lower lip between his teeth. Taran unconsciously mimicked him, staring down with words of love poised at the very tip of his tongue.

“Taran,” Dorian said, voice husky. He reached up to cup the side of Taran’s face, the warmth of his thumb counterbalanced by the cool press of his ring a second later. Hot and cold, soft and hard, all the conflicting, confusing, wonderful sides of him right there beneath Taran, so welcoming, so hopeful that it made his heart ache.

“Dorian,” Taran said, reaching up to curl his fingers around Dorian’s wrist, holding on even as Dorian ruffled his fingertips against the messy ends of his hair, “I—”

His words were lost, stolen, snatched away forever by the sudden call of a trumpet. Three full-throated blasts, followed by a long note. It filled the air like a halla’s call, and Taran’s heart instantly lurched into freefall.

He pulled away. “I have to go,” he said, hating the instant loss of warmth. “They will be expecting me.” He wished he could stay exactly where he was for the next age, but he had responsibilities now—people who depended on him, who for some mind-boggling reason looked to him for wisdom.

(People who were older, wiser, and Maker-damn-it really should have known better, but Taran figured that reckoning was for another time.)

Dorian blinked as if slowly coming back to himself, rising up onto an elbow as he watched Taran scramble awkwardly to his feet. A single black brow rose, and that was all it took for Taran to realize just how impossibly disheveled he looked. He debauched in the best kind of way, hair a haystack, bare chest and arms pebbling in the cold, perfectly respectable pajama bottoms straining against a… Um!

He felt the flush crashing over his features, and Dorian had the gall to laugh. It was full-throated and wonderful, more than enough to make him shiver in response. It was truly unfair what Dorian could do to him. “I may not have thought this through,” Taran admitted, shifting back and forth on bare feet. He’d hardly felt the cold on his single-minded sprint through Haven, but now he couldn’t seem to ignore the absolute torture of frozen stone against the balls of his feet. There was actual frost climbing up the far wall, and, Andraste’s blood, but he wanted to dive back into that warm and welcoming bed more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life.

…of course, Taran thought, feeling lightheaded as Dorian pushed himself up, the collar of his robe pulled down to reveal a tempting swath of bare shoulder, most of that’s probably the company I’d be keeping.

“I assume all that hullabaloo is something important?” Dorian asked. He shifted to the edge of the bed, near enough Taran that he could actually feel his pulse leap. It unfair what this man could do to him; the casual, almost indolent wave of his hand nearly had Taran dropping to his knees to press open-mouthed kisses along his, ahem, well, anyway. It almost had him doing something.

He cleared his throat and carefully backed up, urging his blood to cool. ‘Maker’s Chosen’ or not, Taran was relatively sure this wasn’t what Mother Giselle meant when she said she looked forward
to witnessing his excitement for the cause. “It’s, ah, yes. That was the signal for a large group incoming. Allies,” Taran added quickly, taking another instinctive step back when Dorian stood. “There would have been another two blasts if was an enemy force. Almost probably a lot more yelling.”

Dorian chuffed a quiet laugh, reaching up to tug his robe straight, then push his fingers through his mussed hair. It was almost like magic the way the silky strands fell back into place, and Taran sighed and shoved his own unruly mop back, feeling like a hopeless rube—again, like always.

“Uh, do you have something I could wear back to my room?” Taran asked, watching the elegant transformation with part jealousy and part… He wasn’t sure how to categorize the emotion. Disappointment at the sight of his work disappearing? Relief that Dorian was letting them sink back into something a good deal safer and more familiar? He had a lot to think about, and it was so bloody hard to think of anything when Dorian was near, watching him from beneath his lashes as he said something about…sleeve length and material and something something something.

Lips were moving; a bruise was blooming low at the column of his throat; Taran was young and desperately horny. It was all a lot to take in.

“—if no one looks too closely,” Dorian finished, slipping past Taran to reach for his cloak. Their shoulders brushed as he passed, and Taran’s breath caught. In the silence, he could hear the subtle way Dorian’s breath caught too, and it felt so bloody good to know he wasn’t in this all alone. Dorian was floundering next to him, as turned around and confused and, yes, desperately yearning as he was. There was no mistaking the smolder in his eyes, even as Dorian kept a careful arm’s length between them, cloak outheld.

Some demon of temptation briefly overwhelming sense, Taran let their fingers brush together as he took the cloak. He watched the way Dorian’s gaze flicked up, the smolder brightening, those lips parting. The indrawn breath was felt as much as heard, and Maker but he wanted to push the other man back against the cold stone wall and—

Another horn blew, shattering the shimmering haze taking over Taran’s thoughts again.

He shook himself out, gratified when Dorian had to do the same. The air was so charged between them that he swore he was no longer cold despite the lines of frost spiderwebbing across the floor. “Thank you,” Taran said, voice husky. He pulled back to put a safe distance between them again, all too aware of how easy it would be to lose himself. The last few minutes was like that dream again: bizarre and impossible and yet all too real.

Dorian had kissed him. Dorian had pulled him close. Dorian wanted him just as badly as he wanted Dorian. And right now none of that should have been the first thing on his mind.

He was really the worst sort of pseudo-religious figure. If Andraste had chosen him, clearly she had a devilish sense of humor and timing.

“So, are you going to answer?” Dorian asked. He leaned back against a crate and crossed his arms over his chest, watching with some amusement as Taran fumbled with the complicated buckles of his cloak. Damn thing seemed to be made of some slippery material that was bound and determined to slip through his fingers. “Or are you planning on leaving me in suspense?”

“I’m sorry,” Taran said, yanking at what seemed like a truly wasteful excess of cloth. “I’m pretty sure I was too busy watching your mouth and thinking about fornication to actually hear a word you were saying.”
Dorian barked a laugh, straightening from his indolent lean. “You know,” he said dryly. “You never fail to surprise me.”

Taran looked up from the fifth unnecessary buckle. “I don’t know why,” he said. “There’s nothing surprising about me. I’m really pretty ordinary.”

“Taran,” Dorian said—and the soft, melting way he said Taran’s name carried a depth of meaning, of emotion, that had a shiver working its way down his spine, “I can promise you that you are anything but ordinary. Now, hold still,” he added, clicking his tongue and moving close. Dorian batted Taran’s hands away and reached for the line of buckles, making quick work of the utter hopeless mess Taran had made of his cloak. “You’re ruining the lines.”

“Thank you,” Taran whispered, meaning so much more than the cloak. This man may have only been at his side for a few weeks, but he felt Dorian’s presence in his blood, in his bones. In the very essence of who he was, tangled up in the burn of the mark and his lonely seaside home and distant memories of his sister’s haunted eyes.

Dorian was a part of him now—there’d be no shaking him free, even if he wanted to…and there were no words that could come close to capturing how Taran felt about that. About him. Desire, curiosity, affection, even blooming love: none of them felt deep enough to hold all of this.

Dorian must have sensed a fraction of what he was thinking; his ears went red and he cleared his throat, hands suddenly going clumsy as he gave the borrowed cloak one final tug. He stepped away, eyes unable to meet Taran’s—and yes, that rosy glow was spreading across his cheeks, too. “There,” he said, voice suspiciously throaty. “You’re perfect.”

Taran might have argued that, but there was a certain sort of weight to those words too, as if Dorian were saying far more. So instead he just coughed into his fist to clear the bur in his own throat and said, “All right, well. I guess I’d better go…Herald.”

“Wait,” Dorian laughed as Taran stepped back toward the door, long ends of the beautiful robe swirling at his feet. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Oh,” Taran said, then paused. Cocked his head. “Which question?”

It was so wonderful to see Dorian grinning like that, all flushed and happy and fond. Taran didn’t think he’d ever grow tired of it. “The question I asked when you were busy staring at…my mouth, was it? Thinking unholy thoughts?”

“Oh!” Taran grinned. “Sorry, could you repeat the question, then? I promise not to look any lower than your eyes.”

Dorian gave a soft tsk. “I see how it is, then. Well, then. If I must repeat myself, I…” Somewhere in the distance, what sounded suspiciously like an incredibly grouchy Cullen called for the Herald of Andraste. Dorian’s smile faded at once.

Damn.

“Dorian?” Taran prompted.

For a long beat, he could have sworn Dorian wasn’t going to answer. Then: “I said,” Dorian finished, slower and far more cautious, “that we should likely talk, and asked when you might next be free.” He tilted his head, glancing at him, then away, as if battling renewed doubts. A faint frown was starting to draw his brows together again, and Taran could all but see Dorian closing off. “That is…if you wish.”
“I wish,” Taran promised at once, taking a step forward. “I really, really wish.” He couldn’t miss the sound of raised voices, Haven coming alive despite the late hour. It must have been the mages; damn it, Enchanter Fiona had the worst timing—this was not going to be wrapped up quickly or easily. “Once we’ve closed the breach,” he had to add. “We’ll talk then. Okay?”

Dorian kept his eyes down, frown still there. But he nodded despite the obvious slow withdrawal—the quicksilver tide of his affections turning again. Damn damn damn. “Very well,” he murmured. Then, with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes: “Now, off with you,” he said, shooing Taran away, toward the waiting night full of endless responsibilities. “Go get decent before you shock your true believers.”

“Once we’ve closed the breach,” Taran said again, as if the repetition could make it so. Who knew when he’d be able to find the chink in Dorian’s armor again. He stepped out into the night, borrowed cloak swirling around him, green light streaming down from the hole in the sky. He found it in himself to smile, as if his head weren’t tumbling with its own doubts and worries and endless, frustrated hope. “Well. Good night, Dorian.”

“Good night, Taran,” Dorian said. He wet his lips, gaze flicking toward a guard hurrying past, steel plate boots crunching against fresh snow. “Herald.”

Then, without another word, he closed the door between them, leaving Taran alone and uncertain in the lazily falling snow.
Well shit, Hawke, Varric wrote, doing his best to ignore the steady drip drip drip of water on ancient stone, I hate to say it, but the world’s pretty much gone to the void. Sky’s tearing itself open, red lyrium’s showing up where it’s got no business being, and everything’s resting on the shoulders of a single Marcher boy younger than I’m pretty sure either of us has ever been. Don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so scared.

He paused, letting the quill flick back and forth beneath his chin as he studied the slanting script. The whole letter was filled to the brim with similarly grim observations—end of the world thoughts. So much for Varric Tethras’ patented smart-assery: his secret letters to Hawke were getting dourer and dourer by the day. ‘Course, he added with forced cheer, he’s also got a loyal dwarf biographer tagging along in his wake, so I’m sure this shit’ll end up just fine.

“Right,” he muttered with a rusty laugh. “Because I’ve never seen the best laid plans go tits-up before.”

Varric dipped the nib of his quill into the inkpot, using the brief pause to scratch at his jaw (damn; needed a shave) and listen to the howling going on just up the dungeon stairs. The whole mountainside was practically crawling with rebel mages—the Inquisition’s new partners, thanks to some quick talking from Taran—tension coiling higher and higher as the whole lot of them readied for…whatever it was the inner circle had been locked inside that war room for hours now ironing out. Varric figured if Cassandra had her way, he’d be the last to know, as usual.

Well, joke was on her: this time, he didn’t give a good damn about the hair-raising details. He already knew everything he wanted to. Taran was going to lead an army of mages to zap the hole in the sky, Varric was going to stick anything that crawled out in the meantime with crossbow bolts, and the whole thing would be over in time for a round of cards. Deal. Done.

He sighed and rubbed at his eyes, doing his level best to ignore the muffled shouts. It hadn’t taken a full hour before he’d fled the safety of his usual perch only to be driven from one safe haven (ha!) to another. The tavern, the stockrooms, the stable, even the apothecary’s lab—every single nook and cranny of the old temple compound was overrun by mages. Finally he’d been forced to extreme measures, gathering his portable writing desk and dragging everything down to the one place he could be sure of privacy.

The bloody dungeons were cold and damp and damn dreary, but at least here a dwarf could write morose letters to his best friend in peace.

“Shit, Hawke,” Varric sighed, taking up his quill again and beginning to write. To tell you the truth, it’s starting to really feel like it’s do-or-die, and of course everything’s falling apart in the most spectacular way possible. Learned something about the kid that’s going to change everything if it gets out. If they survived whatever came next, but he wasn’t going to turn this letter into a goodbye no matter how tempted he might be. And it’s the kind of secret that, from what I witnessed with you lot, always gets out. I could really use your help here, Hawke. You and Broody may just be the only people I know who could be trusted to get us out of this bloody nightmare—
He gave a low snarl and dragged his quill across those last few lines in jagged slashes, blotting them out. No. No. No, absolutely not: no matter how desperately they needed advice on this whole crazy Voice thing, he was not going to ask Hawke to wade back into the fray. He’d been through too much already—and besides, Fenris would (rightfully) eviscerate him for getting Aidan embroiled in this kind of mess.

*Whatever you do, stay safe*, he wrote instead. Last he’d heard, the two of them were somewhere up around Weisshaupt—laying low from the prying eyes of all-too-interested Seekers, digging into some Grey Warden mystery (connected with all that hoopla about the Wardens disappearing? Shit, knowing Hawke, probably), and hopefully getting a little rest out of the bloody spotlight. *This time, Hawke, it isn’t your fight. And I’ll be damned if I see you get dragged down into the muck. I’m not willing to lose you again.*

Varric tossed his quill aside with a disgusted sigh. He was obviously too bloody morose to be trusted tonight; better to burn the letter and start over from scratch. There was no telling how much time they had before they took on the breach, but surely not even Cassandra would refuse to give him a few minutes to dash off a hasty: *off to save the day; keep each other safe, and if I never see you again, you were the closest I ever came to a real family.*

He moaned and tipped his head back to stare up at the dark, jagged stone ceiling. Maybe if he got drunk he’d roll his way through moody and back into something tolerable again?

“You sound like a dwarf with a lot on his mind.”

The unwelcome voice wasn’t exactly the balm his bad mood needed. Varric narrowed his eyes, glaring up at the ceiling now as Dorian picked his way across the uneven flagstones.

“Gotta say, Sparkler,” Varriec muttered, “you’re probably the last person I expected. I can’t help but wonder how you knew where to find me.” He’d paid good gold to some young recruit to guard the dungeon door against unwelcome visitors. (And considering his mood, nerves jangling hard enough to give him the bloody shakes, *unwelcome visitors* meant anyone with a pulse.)

Dorian pushed back a crate and took a seat, careful to keep the ends of his robe from trailing in dankly gathered puddles. Flickering torchlight caught in the surprising tangle of his normally immaculately styled hair. “Oh, I have my ways,” he said, setting a bottle and two glasses onto the table. Varric reached out to snatch the letter before curious eyes could take anything in; he folded it up and shoved it deep into one of the pouches at his side to be destroyed later. “Besides, Sera’s already chased anyone with sense from the smithy, Solas is barricaded in his room, and Vivienne has commandeered Ta—ah, the Herald’s room. There’s nowhere left to hide on this whole bloody mountain.”

Varric didn’t miss the stumble. Andraste’s tits, could Dorian be any more obvious? “I’d ask why you were so determined to find me,” he said, reaching out to take one of the glasses Dorian filled. “But I’m afraid you’ll tell me.”

Dorian just waved that off with an airy gesture. “I have no ulterior motive,” he lied through his teeth. He leaned back, one leg crossing the other, and took a sip of the wine as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

Varric had been in a lot of games of Wicked Grace in his life. He’d sat across from good players and bad—canny bastards who knew how to play the long game and impatient louts who came in swinging whether their cards spelled victory or not. There was an art to bullshitting; a subtlety. Usually he would have said Dorian Pavus excelled at that sort of deceit.
Seemed like the world was set on proving him wrong on a whole host of levels lately.

“All right,” Varric said, eyeing him, “what’s going on with the kid?”

The mage arched a single brow as if to say what? No! how could you possibly think… But he didn’t bother maintaining the paper-thin pretense for long. Dorian sighed at Varric’s level look and visibly deflated, shoulders rounding forward and eyes dropping in shame.

Well…shit.

“It is possible,” Dorian said as he toyed with the edge of his wine glass, “that I may have made a bit of a tactical error.”

“Tactical error,” Varric repeated. He set his own wine glass aside; the last thing he needed was something in his hands if he got the itch to throw.

Dorian hummed and swirled the wine in his glass, eyes on the sloshing liquid. Now that Varric was looking—really looking—the other man looked like shit. His hair was a mess, there were shadows beneath his eyes, and a light stubble darkened his jaw. It was as if he’d rolled out of bed at some ungodly hour in the morning and hadn’t bothered with his usual level of perfection before stepping out of doors.

This was really, really bad.

“What did you do?” Varric asked, voice gone utterly flat.

He flushed, color staining his cheeks and ears before he abruptly pushed his wineglass back onto the table. Fine red sloshed, spilling over his fingers and the cuff of his sleeve, and oh shit the world really was ending, because Dorian barely even flicked the growing stain a glance. “I went to see him in the Fade,” he confessed.

And that…

That was…

…actually, that didn’t sound all that bad. “Okay,” Varric said slowly. “You’re going to have to explain to the dwarf why that’s got your nuts twisted up in a spiral. I thought stalking each other through your dreams was all part of the whole…” No point actually saying the word Voice. Not when there was any slight chance of being overheard. “…thing.”

Dorian groaned and covered his face with his hands, digging the meat of his palms against his eyes. “No; that is, yes, though what a charming way to put it. But see, he hasn’t exactly been in the Fade since the whole, well.” Dorian looked up, brows lifting significantly. “Event. But a good friend of mine, Feynriel, was able to help me find—”


“I’m sure he would be charmed by the description,” Dorian said dryly. “I suppose you met him when the Champion saved his life?”

Funny how the world could be so big, yet end up so very small at the same time. “Climbed into the kid’s dreams to help shake him free, yeah,” he said. “Weirdest shit I ever saw. Well,” he had to admit, “until lately.”
Until there were giant holes in the sky and demons pouring through tears in the veil and human boys turned Maker’s chosen turned religious leader turned… Varric didn’t quite know yet. The early coal of faith burned uncomfortable and almost embarrassing in his chest; he’d never thought of himself as much of an acolyte. “So, Feynriel helped you find who you were looking for,” he said. “I’m still not hearing how this is different from how things usually run.”

Dorian rubbed at his jaw, brows drawn together as if he were only now realizing he hadn’t shaved himself baby-smooth this morning. If Varric didn’t have a sense things were about to take a turn toward the worse, it might’ve been a real hoot to pass over a mirror and let him take in the full effect. “Even ignoring how I found…him…no, it isn’t so very unusual. Except I didn’t just see him in the Fade.” Dorian let out an explosive breath, grabbing for his wine glass again and taking a deep sip. His voice was grim when he added, “He saw me back.”

Varric tilted his head.

Paused.

“So,” he drawled, slowly leaning in and squinting up at Dorian. “I take it that’s not…?”

“Fastevass!” Dorian growled, slamming the cup down again. “Remind me never to pour my heart out to a bloody dwarf!”

Varric lifted his hands palm-out. “Hey, it’s not my fault all this weird Fade shit just blends together for me. So he saw you gawking at him like a creeper. How’s that different from how things are supposed to run?”

“A mage can see his unum—his Voice,” Dorian corrected himself sharply, “in the Fade when he dreams. Yes, fine, but that is because the mage is aware of the Fade. We enter it the way others do not. To a Voice, any potential awareness of the visits are swallowed by dreams. Only another mage can sense you in their dreams, and that’s… That is…”

He sputtered into speaking silence.

“Bad,” Varric finished. “Judging by your expression, I’m going to take a guess that it’s bad.”

Dorian raked his fingers through his hair, twisting the ends. The reason he looked so disheveled? Maybe. Either that or he’d only just rolled right out of that nebulous dream world Varric would give a great deal never to have to fuck with again. “It is…frankly catastrophic,” he said, voice gone flat. “Bivenium—a mage-mage pairing—is vanishingly rare. Certainly none have ever been permitted to survive.”

“Uh-huh. Sounds tragic. But you-know-who isn’t a mage.” No matter what he could do with that glowing green hand of his.

“No,” Dorian agreed. “He’s not.” He paused. “Or at least, he wasn’t. But he was at the center of a terrifyingly powerful spell, and it did change him on an elemental level. And he does have an undeniable connection to the Fade now…”

Which, following the logic of what Dorian was saying, meant that whether he was born that way or not, Taran Trevelyan—hopeful savior of the whole bloody Maker-taken world—was something very like a mage. Like a…what was it? Bivenium? The way Dorian said the word reminded Varric of how he felt about red lyrium.
This, this was, this was not good.

Varric swore quietly, creatively—thoroughly hating his life.

“I panicked when he saw me,” Dorian added, spreading his hands as if in agreement. As if he were saying in that one elegant gesture: yes, yes, we are all very fucked. “Popped awake at once. Funny thing, he came racing to my room not ten minutes later, wide-eyed confused and looking for answers.”

Well, at least something good was coming out of all of this mess. “So the kid knows now,” Varric said, relieved that that ticking bomb at least had been taken care of. “Silver lining. The three of us can put our heads together and try to come up with a way to…”

Dorian cleared his throat. Flushed. Looked away.

Varric narrowed his eyes. “So the kid doesn’t know now,” he corrected. “So you didn’t even bother to tell him.”

“It is all very complicated,” Dorian said.

“Sitting on your bloody thumbs doesn’t make it less complicated,” he said. Suddenly he wished he were back in Kirkwall watching Hawke and Anders and Fenris all circling around each other (with Carver in a distant, grumbly orbit). That may have been a slow-motion disaster, but at least it felt reasonably contained. This…he couldn’t see how this went anywhere good for the whole of bloody Thedas. “Maker’s beard, Dorian. We’re about to go marching into void knows what. Don’t you figure now is the time to tell him, rather than actually waiting for the Inquisition to come crumbling around our ears first?”

Dorian shifted in his seat, visibly ashamed. Funny—if anyone had asked Varric just a week ago, he would have said that was impossible: Dorian Pavus knew no shame. Worse than that though, he looked guilty. “It is possibly…a little worse than simply holding my tongue at this point,” Dorian admitted. Quiet, like maybe it would all be easier to confess that way. Like he had some dirty little secret he’d rather not spill, and yet was nearly desperate to share.

Hm.

He sat back and looked Dorian up and down, up and down, carefully taking him in this time. The flushed cheeks. The disheveled hair. The averted gaze. The confession: He came racing to my room not ten minutes later.

Varric groaned, loud and long, and grabbed the bottle of wine by its neck. Forget glasses; he was fast reaching the point where he needed to chug the whole thing in one go. “I don’t want to hear any more,” he said. “No details. No confessions. No new ulcers. You are officially on your own.”

“You said yourself you’re his bloody biographer,” Dorian pointed out, crossing his arms. It was a purely defensive gesture, the color high on his cheeks because, yeah, he knew he’d done wrong. There was keeping something as huge as oh hey you’re my soulmate from the kid, and then there was rolling around and getting frisky without bothering to share that one big honking world-changing detail. “Isn’t it your job to hear my tortured confessions? Get all the dirt you can?”

“Despite what Rivaini always claimed, I never much went for peddling smut.”

Dorian arched a brow. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I have read the Tale of the Champion, you realize.”
“Oh,” Varric said, dwarf enough not to blush. *Busted.* “Well, fine, but that was an isolated case.”

“Cassandra is remarkably free with her library if you know the right way to ask.”

There was no winning this. “All right, so I peddle smut,” Varric said, exasperated. “That doesn’t mean I want to hear *any* details about you and the kid doing…” He paused, something occurring to him. “Wait. Wait, wait, you didn’t actually have sex with the Herald, did you?”

“Oh *now* you want details,” Dorian said waspishly, but he quieted at whatever he read on Varric’s face, brows pinching together and hands folding, as if he were fighting to keep himself still. “No,” he admitted. “Though it may have been a near thing.”

Maker save him from reckless, idiot mages. “Right,” Varric said, “so, *you do* plan on telling him before that *near thing* becomes an *absolute inevitability*, right?” he demanded. “And *you do* plan on giving him plenty of time to digest that information, and work his way through the options, and maybe—oh here’s a thought—discuss the ramifications of a bond with the advisors?”

Dorian shifted in his seat. “We didn’t almost *bond*,” he said, voice going a little strangled over the word as if he were wrestling down a whole host of conflicting emotions associated with the idea: joy and horror and fear and longing and *Andraste save them all.* “We almost had *sex.* The two are quite distinct.”

“No, they’re not,” Varric said.

“…yes,” Dorian replied. “They are.”

“No,” Varric said, because dwarf or not, he’d had too much of a front row seat to the epic crazy that was Aidan Hawke and Fenris to not know these sorts of things. “They’re not. I wouldn’t call myself an expert on the matter, but from everything I learned, that kind of, ah, intimacy is a pretty sure path to a bond.” At Dorian’s horrified look, he had to add, “So I take it that’s not how it’s done in Tevinter?”

Dorian stood, restless, his fingers snarling through his hair again. He didn’t even seem to notice the way his robe was dragging through the brackish puddles, which was all the proof Varric needed that shit? Was really bad. “No,” he breathed, sounding equal parts horrified and curious—the scholar in him, Varric supposed. “No, not at all. A mage bind himself to his *unum vinctum* via a series of complicated rituals that draw on both the magic-user and his source to…”

He huffed out a sharp breath and turned on his heel, pacing. “Blood magic,” Dorian ended.

Well, of course. Varric had no idea why he was surprised. “Charming country you’ve got,” he said. “Real keeper.”

“I never tried to claim some of our practices aren’t a problem,” Dorian snapped, visibly on edge. Each strike of his heel rang out in the darkness, seemingly echoed by growing unease in the crowd of mages milling above their heads. If Varric were a more paranoid man, he’d assume the two were related—but no. They’d know if someone had managed to overhear: Leliana would already have eviscerated them both. “And I never, *never* intend to take Ta—to take *him*—as an *unum vinctum*. I would never do that to him.”

“Hey,” Varric said, reaching out to snatch Dorian’s sleeve as he sailed by. He gave it a sharp tug, pulling the other man to a stop—facing him. Dorian was practically bristling with a thousand and one unnamed emotions, but clear in his eyes was the horror of that thought. “I know. I never thought it for a second.”
"You love the kid," he could have said, but he didn’t have to. It was so obvious in the coiled lines of tension in Dorian’s body. In the sheer horror at both the thought of taking him as *unum vinctum*… and the possibility that he may have accidentally bonded him the gold old-fashioned Ferelden way instead, without Taran’s knowledge or approval.

“Come on,” he added, giving another tug. “Sit down. Drink some wine. We’ll figure this shit out.”

To Varric’s surprise, Dorian actually listened. He sighed and moved to drop back onto the crate, shoulders hunched forward and brows knit, looking all kinds of lost and anxious. He took the newly-filled glass Varric shoved into his hands and nearly drained it in one swallow before pushing it back onto the table.

The only sound was the drip drip drip of water and the muffled roar of the rebel mages milling about above them.

“It’s strange,” Dorian admitted after a long stretch of silence. “Growing up, you did hear whispers about the barbaric way the rest of the world did things. Romantic nonsense about gazing into eyes and sharing soul-deep kisses and other…rather repulsive tales.”

“Repulsive?” Varric echoed, brows lifting.

Dorian gave a humorless laugh. “If you’d met my father and Lucia, you would understand.” His expression subtly shifted at his own words, going searching, almost sad. He waved away whatever bittersweet memory had put that look there after just a moment, however. “I always figured those overly romantic tales were meant to be titillating,” Dorian confessed. “We all did. Are you sure that’s really how it…works here?”

“The mage asked the dwarf,” Varric said. He spread his hands at Dorian’s waspish look. “I know what I witnessed and nothing more. Of course, there are several hundred mages milling about outside who could probably answer any of your questions—”

“No,” Dorian said, horrified.

— but that would be the world’s shittiest idea, considering. So.” He paused, then blew out a sharp puff of breath, weighing his options. Dorian clearly needed someone who understood how Voices worked outside the Tevinter Imperium. Someone who could have some useful insight as he fumbled along this path with Taran—while trying to figure out what to do about this whole potential *bivenium* thing.

There was Vivienne, of course…but no, Madame de Fer clearly had her own agenda. Besides, what could a devoted Circle mage be expected to know? Solas was a good bet, but, well, something about him was mighty off-putting. Varric wasn’t sure he was willing to trust a secret this big to the strange apostate. Which meant…

“Shit,” he sighed, reaching into his pocket to brush his fingers across the letter. There really was only one person Varric knew he could trust with this sort of thing. And considering everything Hawke and Fenris had been through together, he couldn’t imagine anyone having more useful tips for handling the damned confusing world of Voices.

He’d just have to take his lumps when Fenris inevitably eviscerated him for dragging Hawke back into the center of this mess.

“If Cassandra doesn’t kill me first,” Varric muttered beneath his breath.

“I’m sorry,” Dorian said, blinking out of his own deep thoughts. “What was that?”
Varric waved it away. Above their heads, he could just make out the pealing bells beginning to chime. Not a warning of attack; an announcement. Had the inner circle finally made a decision about when and how to tackle the breach? “I’ll explain later,” he promised, hopping off his own crate. He quickly packed up his writing desk, snagging it and the bottle (no sense letting good wine go to waste) before jerking his head toward the door. “Come on, Sparkler,” Varric said. “We can fix your mess of a love life later. Right now, it looks like we’ve got a whole bloody world to save.”

Chapter End Notes

AKA Dorian is in desperate need of Sex Ed.

I should note that sex is not necessary to form a bond. There are asexual, aromantic, etc. bonded pairs all through the world. For sexual pairs, however, physical intimacy can very easily lead to a bond...which is something Dorian wouldn't have known. As Dorian said, they do things quite differently in Tevinter, and romantic feelings for an unum vincum are NOT encouraged.
The world was holding its breath.

Or maybe that’s just how it felt because she could hardly breathe. Cassandra couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so anxious before battle. Not even facing dragons gave her this sick swooping in her gut as she stared up at the breach, watching the way it twisted and turned midair. It bathed the ruins of the old church with sickly green light, casting everyone—everything—in an otherworldly glow.

“Well,” Taran said quietly from just a few paces behind her. “I guess this is it.”

She curled her hands into fists at her sides. “Yes,” she murmured. “This is it.”

“It’s funny,” he added as he moved to stand by her side—shoulder-to-shoulder, as the equal she had no doubts he had become. “The last time we stood here, you still considered me your prisoner.”

Taran tipped his head toward hers, offering a crooked smile.

Despite the roiling in her gut—despite the sheer weight of all those eyes staring expectantly down on them—Cassandra had to chuckle. “And are you so certain I do not still consider you my prisoner?” she teased. “It seems to me you are still by my side, surrounded by a powerful force.”

“If you’ve playing a long game on me, Seeker, then you’re more nefarious than Varric.” Taran smiled back, a shadow of her own nerves on his face. He looked…tired. Worn.

But then, Cassandra supposed, that was no real surprise—they’d all been running full-tilt ever since the rebel mages appeared, planning for this moment. For one final victory. Still, she couldn’t help but ask, “Are you ready for this?”

Taran looked away, face lifting up up up toward the heart of the breach. His muscles were tight, tension coiled through every line of his body, but there was a determined air to the set of his jaw. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. “I’m ready for this,” he said quietly as Solas moved to rejoin them—returning from his inspection of the swarm of mages lining the path. “I’m ready for it to be over.”

“By the Maker’s will,” Cassandra said, dropping her hand to the hilt of her sword. She began to turn to her soldiers.

“Your mark,” Solas suddenly said. He was turned toward Taran, a frown between his brows; Cassandra whipped around just in time to see Taran’s hand flare with that same green light. It broke across the face of his palm, gleaming like a spell waiting to be cast—brighter, she thought, than it had been in a very long time. “Ah,” Solas continued as if reading some hidden emotion on the Herald’s face. “Does it hurt?”

Cassandra frowned. “It has not hurt him before; why should it start now?”

She had a sense that the two of them exchanged a look, but it was there and gone so fast she wasn’t able to call them on it. Well. So be it, then. Even if the mark did bring Taran some measure of pain, they were nearing the end of this, weren’t they? Either the combined power of the rebel mages funneled through Taran allowed him to close the breach or…
Or what, that insidious voice in the back of her thoughts whispered. *There is no plan B here.*

“I’m fine,” Taran assured both of them. He curled his fingers into a glowing fist and offered a nearly-convincing smile. “Don’t worry about me. Let’s finish this.”

She wanted to protest almost as much as she wanted to take his assurances at face value. In the end, Cassandra bowed her head in agreement and stepped back, allowing Taran to move forward alone, toward the breach. Dorian, she noticed, was standing just off to the side and very nearly vibrating with some unable emotion. He kept stepping forward as if preparing to move to Taran’s side, and Varric—standing by the mage with his crossbow cocked—kept snagging his sleeve and dragging him back. Bull was stationed on the other side of the open space, Sera nocking an arrow just past his shoulder. Vivienne, Blackwall, Cullen, Leliana—they were all there, ready and waiting for whatever came next.

*Let’s finish this.* For better or worse, good or ill, success or death, Cassandra had to agree with the Herald. This time of fear and darkness had gone on long enough.

“Mages!” she called, turning to face the anxious line of them. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder along the old promenades, staves in position.

Solas moved by her side, lifting his own staff to catch their attention. “Focus past the Herald,” he called, voice lifting naturally to fill the room. “Let his will draw from you.”

A hum filled the air—low at first, like a distant echo, but growing and growing with each second that passed. The staves began to light with a dim glow that gradually brightened, casting wild shadows on downturned faces. Taran’s footsteps sounded loud as a drumbeat as he moved slowly toward the breach, and Cassandra turned with her sword in hand, tipped forward on the very edge of battle. Ready to fight any demon that tried to break through.

He seemed so alone standing there at the storm’s apex. The ends of his leather-and-mail coat shifted and swayed, then began to flap about his thighs as that strange humming intensified. A cold wind knifed through the broken stone, and the breach twisted, crackled.

This is it, Cassandra thought, gripping her sword so tight her fingers ached. Taran thrust his hand up, bronze hair whipping about his face, fingers splayed wide as green fire erupted from his palm. *This is the end, one way or another.*

Lightning sparked from Taran’s fingers as he took a step forward, then immediately two back as if he had been shoved. There was a sharp cry from where Dorian and Varric stood, and Cassandra jolted forward.

“Wait!” Solas hissed, grabbing for her elbow. His staff was still lifted, keeping the mages at the ready.

Taran lowered his head, hand outstretched, and pushed forward another step. Another. It was as if he was fighting against a strong gale, each step dearly won. His shoulders were hunched forward and he started to curl in on himself as if in agony, but he kept going—light poured from his fingertips, bleeding into the breach. Or was the breach bleeding into him? Maker, she couldn’t tell anymore.

Step after step after visibly agonizing step.

“We are killing him,” Cassandra murmured with growing horror, and Solas, damn him, didn’t contradict her. Instead he tightened his grip, keeping her back as the Herald struggled to move forward—power flowing from him, into him, making him the literal heart of the maelstrom as the
breach all but twisted and screamed above them.

Then, suddenly, Solas brought his staff down hard against the ground. A half-breath later, a hundred staves struck stone as one, and sheer power filled the room in a flash of brilliant green-and-white.

Cassandra flung up a hand to shield her eyes as the entire world exploded into light. She could see nothing but blinding white painted against the backs of her lids, a dark shape imprinted there, standing strong despite everything. Taran, Maker, Taran was at the core of this, this, this madness. Power flowing around her like an undertow, threatening to drag her under. She sucked in an unsteady breath and tried to force herself to open her eyes, but it burned: the dark corona of Taran’s shape outlined against the blistering void was the last, the only, thing she could see.

And then with a crack of thunder, the light exploded outward again—throwing her back, back, through the air as weightless as if she hadn’t been head to toe in steel plate. Cassandra sucked in a breath, instinctively curling to avoid a blow to the head seconds before she slammed into stone. The reverberation had her juddering, skidding, tumbling wildly over rock and rubble. She heard a hundred cries as mages fell around her, their spells snuffing out as one.

The air went still.

Silent.

In the absence of light, there was nothing.

Blinking against the afterburn, Cassandra turned her head. Solas lay not far away, staff gripped in loose fingers, one arm flung over his eyes. Her sword—where was her sword? Where was—

Taran.

She sucked in a second, harsh breath and forced herself to focus past the ringing in her ears. She shoved herself up onto her elbows before scrambling to her feet, a fine dust (pulverized stone stirred by the explosion) falling around her. Cassandra took a step and nearly went down again, dizzy and disoriented. There were small fires flickering in forgotten corners—soft groans growing louder as the dazed mages began to come to themselves. And at the heart of the detonation…

*Please,* she prayed, turning toward where the Herald had been. *Please, please be all right.*

A soldier, swaying on his feet, staggered into her way. Cassandra pushed past, feeling her heart begin to lurch and race. Across the way, Dorian was scrambling gracelessly up, a look of stark terror on his face. The ground beneath their feet crackled and snapped, the stone a charred pit with a slumped figure in its center—kneeling beneath the scar (healed; healed; the breach had been healed, but oh Maker, what of its healer?) and horrifyingly motionless.

And then, as if sensing their fear, Taran lifted his head—and smiled. It was weak, his cheeks chalk-pale, his eyes bloodshot from strain, but the familiar expression sent relief crashing through Cassandra. She reached his side seconds before Dorian, her own hand trembling as she thrust it forward.

Taran reached out with his good hand (the one bearing the still-glowing mark curled protectively against his chest) and let her pull him to his feet. He swayed there, almost falling before Dorian gave a faintly unhinged laugh and slid close, taking the other man’s weight.

“Look at you,” Dorian scolded quietly, one arm braced across Taran’s back, the other hovering as if he wanted to press his fingers against the strong thud of his heart. Like he needed tangible proof that Taran had survived intact. Maker take her, but Cassandra could relate. “Covered in dust and dirt like
“Did I do it?” Taran asked, twisting his head to peer up at the scar. All around them, people were climbing to their feet, murmuring in relief—then talking excitedly over each other—then beginning to cheer. Here and there pockets of celebration broke out, and Cassandra felt herself grin wide enough it felt like her face might crack in two. “Is it closed?”

“You did it,” Cassandra said, and very nearly laughed like a girl. “It is over.”

The cheers rose and rose and rose around them, filling the old temple. Listing against Dorian’s side, fingers curled tight around the glowing light pouring from his fist, Taran gave a shaky smile. “Oh,” he said, and reached up to brush his hair back—his fingers left a smudge of dirt across his forehead. “That’s good.”

“That’s good, he says,” Dorian tsked, reaching up as if to wipe the smudge away. He stopped midway, then covered with a broad gesture any fool could see beyond. “As if he didn’t bloody well just save us all.”

“That does, I think, remain to be seen.” Solas stepped past Cassandra, leaning in a bit to peer at the Herald’s face. None of them missed the way his eyes dropped down to the curled, glowing fist.

Varric—just behind Dorian—snorted. “Listen to that,” he said, settling Bianca back into her harness. His smile was wide and careful as the cheers echoing through the mountainside. “A regular optimist. You know what this calls for, Seeker?”

She crossed her arms, willing to play along. Taran was beginning to straighten, no longer leaning quite so heavily on Dorian—almost as if growing self-conscious of all those hundreds of eyes on him as mages and templars and soldiers and scouts alike hugged and cried and yelled up at the scarred heavens as loud as they could. “And what,” she said as icily as she could manage beneath the weight of her own giddy joy, “does this call for?”

The grin twisted into a lopsided smirk. “A victory like this? Shit, it calls for a party.”

“A celebration!” Bull’s voice boomed over them. The rest of the inner circle was closing in, forming ranks around Taran. Almost as if they were creating a wall between him and the increasingly chaotic crowd. “Krem, order the boys to crack open some barrels of rotgut. We’re going to get shitfaced tonight.”

Taran gave a soft laugh. “A party?” he said, glancing toward Cassandra. He raised a single brow in question.

And, well, standing beneath the newly healed sky, surrounded by cheers and cries and the ever-growing chaos of sheer relief, what could she do but agree?

All of Haven was alight.

Bonfires had been lit across Cullen’s training yard, spitting sparks into the night sky. Music soared high above the peals of laughter and stomping feet as Inquisition forces danced—drunk enough, happy enough to be listing here and there with face-eating grins.

There was food and wine aplenty; Josephine had managed a miracle, opening crates Cassandra
hadn’t even realized they’d had. The valley echoed with the sounds of their merriment, and everywhere she looked there was another grateful soldier, another jubilant scout.

*We survived,* their eyes seemed to say, filled with almost manic light. *The Herald saved us after all.*

Cassandra pushed past the chantry doors and scanned the grounds before glancing up toward the skyline. Taran sometimes took to the roofs whenever he needed time to regroup away from the pressure of...of *everything.* Something told her he might have fled up there tonight to get away from all those fervent gratitude. He would—

*There.*

She gave a faint shake of her head and peeled to the right, dodging around a drunken soldier slurring his way through one of Maryden’s songs. The hut was the farthest back from the fires, turning the nightfall a deep blue contrasted with those distant strands of gold. It was also chilly, and Cassandra glanced up just in time for a snowflake to land on her cheek. She brushed it away, boots crunching in snow as she wended her way to the pile of crates that would be her ladder up to the rooftops.

A dark shape stepped away from the wall as she neared—threatening enough that she impulsively reached for her sword. But it was only Bull, his big arms crossed over his chest. “Seeker,” he said quietly in greeting.

Cassandra lifted her brows. “Am I granted passage or should I turn back before there’s a scene?”

“Aw, now, don’t be like that,” he said with an easy grin. “The boss is just looking to clear his head. I’m doing what I can to make sure he’s got the room for it.”

Taran’s voice drifted down from above. “It’s okay, Bull,” he said. “Cassandra’s always welcome.”

The Bull tilted his head, those massive horns casting strange shapes across the snow. “You heard the boss,” he said. “Alley-oop.”

He made a cradle with his hands as if to hoist her up, but Cassandra side-stepped him and began to climb the crates. She had to push her sword back so it didn’t tangle up around her legs—and fine, yes, maybe it would have been quicker and a bit more graceful to take the Bull up on his offer, but within just a few minutes she was stomping up onto the lip of the roof, high enough to see deep into the valley where Inquisition bonfires glowed like distant coals.

Taran was sitting on the far edge of the roof, another dark shape beside him. She took a step forward and Dorian half-turned to look at her. He was more polished than he’d seemed before, some of that exhausted worry filed away and his usual glossy exterior back in full force. Still, she couldn’t help but think she spotted cracks along the surface of that calm as he cocked his head and waited for her to cross to them.

*Something is going on here,* she thought, noting the way Dorian subtly shifted away from Taran’s side, putting an inch or two more room between them. *Interesting.*

“Cassandra,” Taran said in greeting, smiling warm enough that she had to smile back. “Beautiful night.”

“I do not wish to intrude,” she said, standing there awkwardly.

Taran swept the space next to him clear of snow. “You couldn’t intrude. Did you hear anything from Solas?” he added as she moved to sit next to him. “Does he have an update about the breach?”
“Solas confirms the heavens are scarred but calm,” she said. Thank the Maker there would be no bad news tonight. “The breach is sealed. We’ve reports of lingering rifts, and many questions remain, but this was a victory.”

“I tried to tell him,” Dorian agreed easily. He leaned back on his hands, face tipped up toward the sky. Snowflakes fell slowly, gently around them, catching in dark hair like a crown of stars. “But will he listen to me? Of course not.”

Taran laughed and lightly bumped his shoulder against Dorian’s. “I listened,” he protested. “I’m just…seeking a second opinion.”

“Bah!” Dorian shot Cassandra a glance, brows arching, as if to say can you believe this boy?

She simply shook her head. Whatever mild flirtation was forming here seemed harmless enough. Still, she was compelled to warn him: “Word of your heroism has spread.”

Translation: you are the Herald of Andraste. You saved us all. The world has its eyes on you.

Taran chuffed a laugh, trying to shrug it off. “Don’t they know I fell into this? Almost literally.”

“Perhaps you’re too close to judge,” she countered. At his quick look she pressed, “We needed you. We still do.” There’d be no rest for any of them, but Taran least of all. He’d climbed aboard a pedestal the moment he stepped forward to close the breach and save them all. Everything in his life would be bisected between the moment before and after he moved from man to idol: he had to understand that.

And yet…what harm was there, really, in allowing the boy one more night of being human?

She sighed and looked out across the mountainside, watching distant shadows shift and move between pockets of moonlight. In the darkness, it was so easy to trick the eyes into believing the mountains themselves were moving—marching, as if the trees had taken up arms. “We’ve yet to discover how the breach came to be, and that is only the most conspicuous of our troubles. Strange days, and more to come.”

“Strange days,” Taran echoed.

“Seeker,” Dorian began, but Cassandra leaned forward, lifting a silencing hand. “Hush,” she said, and squinted her eyes against the trick of shadows and lights. Of course the mountainside wasn’t in flux, but… But it did seem as if there truly was movement. Darker shapes streaming down from the high passes like a slow-moving avalanche, and was it a trick of the valley or was that the muffled thud of marching feet?

“Taran,” she began, climbing to her feet.

In that moment, a blazing arrow arced into the air, streaking across the sky. It was followed by a second, then a third: the signal for an invading force? By the Maker.

“What—” Taran began, startled. He scrambled up to his feet as the warning bells began to toll, cutting through the sounds of merriment. All across Haven, musicians lowered their instruments and dancers lurched still, turning their heads toward the gates where the solid thud thud thud of a distant-but-closing army echoed like a racing heart—no longer hidden beneath the sound of their merriment, but growing, growing, growing.

Cullen raced out of the temple, sword already drawn. He grabbed a passing soldier and the two shared a handful of words before he pushed past and raised his sword high over his head. “Forces
“approaching!” the Commander called, his voice carrying far and wide. His words were picked up by others and carried aloft, the sibilant hiss of whispers an undercurrent to his clear, bold cry: “To arms!”

“What the…” Cassandra began, drawing her own sword. Then, “We must get to the gates!”

“Boss!” Bull had rounded the small house to stand just beneath them, big arms lifted. “Jump down.”

Dorian scrambled up, grabbing the dragging ends of his robe. “Are we really—” he began, but Taran was already throwing himself off the edge of the high roof, tumbling down into Bull’s waiting arms. Bull caught the Herald easily, swinging him to his feet before turning back to Cassandra and Dorian with a questioning look. All across Haven, people were running, panicking, as the dark shadows of the mountain burst into light: a hundred thousand torches lit as the element of surprise was lost.

And above, circling, roaring, a—

—dragon?

“By the Maker!” Cassandra gasped. She didn’t allow herself to think, dropping into Bull’s waiting arms with all the trust of long soldiers-at-arms. She should have known better than to assume they were safe. She should have known the world wasn’t done throwing troubles in their wake.

She only hoped they survived the night so she could repent her folly at leisure.
It seemed impossible that this was happening—here, now, after everything they had already been through. And yet at the same time, it was so bloody typical that he wanted to scream. Dorian cursed as he stumbled after Taran and the others, fumbling his staff free. It was only blind luck that he had the damned thing on him this time of night; if he’d been able to bring himself to leave Taran’s side even once since the closing of the breach, he wouldn’t have.

Maker, and what would he have done then?

*It doesn’t matter, you bloody fool,* he told himself fiercely, weaving his way through the streaming crowd of panicked revelers. The bells were clanging and half-drunk men were scrambling for their swords. Fire all but swallowed the mountainside; it was like watching a nightmare unfold in slow motion, each newly revealed piece more horrifying than the last.

A dragon’s scream split the night. A bloody fucking *dragon.*

“There!” Cassandra called, nearly knocking one of Leliana’s scouts to the ground as she shoved their way clear to the gate—like the prow of a particularly stubborn ship slicing effortlessly through dark seas. She pointed, and Dorian just made out a heavy furred ruff above crimson fabric. Cullen turned as if sensing them, expression grim. Next to him stood a frightened-looking Josephine and an equally grim Leliana.

Whatever was happening—whoever had chosen this night to attack the fledgling Inquisition—it was bad. It was very, very bad.

They all moved to greet the Herald. “What’s the report?” Taran demanded as they hurried to his advisors. He looked past them toward the gate, as if he could see through its thick wood to the vanguard beyond.

Cassandra was at his side in an instant, expression pinched. “Cullen?” she said.

“One watchguard reporting,” he said, looking between the two of them. He barely flickered a glance toward Dorian and the Bull, hovering just behind Taran at either shoulder like a Ferelden’s loyal mabari. “It’s a massive force, the bulk over the mountain.”


“None,” Cullen said, grim.

She turned back to him, brows lifted. “None?”

“Wait,” Taran said. The word was quiet, but it carried a queer weight to it—thrumming with power. Dorian turned to stare at him—they all did—as he brushed past Leliana and stepped toward the gate. He tilted his head, staring at it as if looking through glass. One hand began to lift slowly, green light curling about his fingers.

“Uh, boss?” Bull said, shifting in visible discomfort.
Dorian turned a glower on him. “Hush,” he hissed, only to suck in a sharp breath when the big gate suddenly bowed inward—toward Taran. “Taran,” he yelped, stumbling forward a step as the gate bulged against its iron bracings. There was a flash of light, followed by a short pop like blackpowder.

“What the void,” Cassandra began, but Taran simply shook his head and reached out to place his hand over the worn wood as the door shuddered one final time, then went still.

For a moment—for a breath—everything seemed so very quiet. Then a reedy voice called from the other side: “I can’t come in unless you open!”

“It’s a trap,” the Bull advised, but Taran was already fumbling for the latch. Cullen shared a look with Cassandra, and it was a credit to how much they’d come to trust their Herald that they didn’t hesitate before joining him, helping to lift the heavy wooden bar and throw the iron bracings. The big doors creaked open, revealing a half-dozen bodies scattered across the snow, faces twisted in near-comical expressions of surprise. A final soldier—a final Templar, and what the bloody fuck was this all about?—staggered toward them drunkenly.

One step, two, blood spattering behind him in a gory trail before he collapsed to the side with a groan of metal…leaving a strange apparition in his wake.

The boy was thin as a scarecrow and nearly as gangly, one bare fist curled around the bloody hilt of his dagger. A huge-brimmed hat covered all but the pale point of his chin, lank blond hair catching in the snow-flecked breeze. He lifted his face as Taran and Cullen moved forward, and Dorian caught a flash of violet shadows and big, sunken eyes as the boy looked up and then away. “I’m Cole,” he said. There was a dagger in his other fist, also dripping blood. Venhedis, had this boy dispatched all the men fallen here? “I came to warn you. To help.”

“You came to help?” Taran echoed, sheathing his sword. Dorian had to swallow a squawk of protest; Taran was far too quick to trust newcomers—the shiffter, it seemed, the better. And yet there was something more to the way he was studying Cole. There’d been something more to the way he’d responded moments before the gate had begun to buckle, as if he had sensed him. As if whatever power flowed through Taran had recognized something in this Cole fellow.

Dorian shivered and tried not to think through the implications.

Cole was looking at Taran earnestly through his lashes, daggers now sheathed at his sides. He took a step forward, only to still when Cassandra and the Bull took their own threatening step closer—protecting Taran. He wet his lips. “People are coming to hurt you,” Cole told Taran with complete sincerity. Then, bashful, “You probably already know.”

“What is this?” Taran asked. “What’s going on?”

The boy’s voice dropped to a low murmur as he said, “The Templars come to kill you.”

“Templars?” Cullen demanded, stalking forward; the boy immediately scampered back, skittish as a colt. His eyes were huge in his face as he stared at the commander. “Is this the Order’s response to our talks with the mages? Attacking blindly?”

“It’s all right,” Taran said, faintly glowing green hand extended to Cole. “You can trust us. Please, tell us what you know.”

Cole gave a slight shake of his head. “The Red Templars went to the Elder One,” he said, as if the words made any sort of logical sense. He moved closer to Taran, ignoring the way the Bull tensed;
the way Dorian gripped his staff. His attention seemed riveted on the Herald, eyes imploring him to understand. “You know him?” he said. “He knows you. You took his mages.”

He spun, pointing, voice gone low and breathless. “There.”

Dorian’s heart stuttered in his chest as he turned to look, half-expecting…Maker, he didn’t even know what. Some monster from the old tales, hissing and cackling and ready to swoop in and take Taran from him. There was movement, and a flash of deep, unsettling red in the heart of the churning mass of enemies, but whatever the Elder One was, he was still too far away to be clear.

Still, a shiver worked its way down his spine.

“He’s very angry you took his mages,” Cole whispered.

And then, as if on cue, the dragon roared, its cry echoing through the valley. It had yet to attack, but it was only a matter of time, wasn’t it? Taran went still, body coiled tight. Visibly horrified by the monsters come to take Haven, to claim his life, to steal back what was stolen. With each second that passed, death crept ever-closer.

“Cullen,” he said, a note of desperation in his voice as a dark shape crouched amongst the horde, long tail whipping eagerly, “give me a plan. Anything.”

“Haven is no fortress,” Cullen warned. He seemed very pale in the moonlight. “If we are to withstand this monster, we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can.”

Dorian sputtered, not understanding. Get out there? Did Cullen honestly expect them to, what, wave their swords and staves at an entire army? At a dragon? But Taran seemed to understand—and agree with—whatever Cullen was suggesting. He gave a curt nod and drew his sword.

For his part, Cullen turned away from the gates, his own blade catching distant firelight as he lifted it high. “Mages!” he called, voice rising. The other two advisors broke off, rushing toward the tents and the Chantry, respectively—as if all bloody four of them could read bloody minds. Bloody void.

Cullen strode toward the gathering troops. “You have sanction to engage them. Inquisition, with the Herald—for your lives!” He turned, blade raised, eyes flashing, backed by a fierce wall of sound as their bedraggled army raised their voices in solidarity. “For all of us!”

For all of us, Dorian thought, fingernails digging into the wood of his staff. The strange boy was gone—dissipated like smoke—and Cassandra was pointing toward the north. “They will need us at the trebuchets,” she said, already in motion, Taran beside her. Bull cast Dorian a quick look and a shrug, then jogged to follow, loosening his giant axe as he went. Dorian cursed beneath his breath and fell in step, trying to take in the chaos of the night. It was complete madness, flaming spheres arcing toward the mountainside, swords rattling against armor, screams punctuating the war drum beat of his heart. His foot skid in red-black snow as they moved along the wall, and he caught an impression of staring eyes and a twisted-wide grimace.

The forward guard had already breached the outer defenses, it seemed.

“There!” Taran cried, peeling off from the group to rush a hulking shadow. It turned, features twisted up into a snarl…body caked in shards of red lyrium. The thing—no longer man, not quite beast—roared and flung itself toward Taran, and the spell ripped from Dorian’s fingers before he even knew he was casting.

It exploded in licking flames and deepest shadow, catching the creature’s forward momentum and
sending it scuttling back. Taran leapt over the catching fire, sword up and swinging down hard. The reverberation was deafening, glorious, but Dorian didn’t have time to concentrate on his Voice’s swordwork: the shadows were moving all around them, abominations pouring out of the night.

Despite the nightmare quality of their pitched battle for survival, they all soon fell into a steady tempo. Dorian hung back flinging spells as best he could while Taran, Cassandra, and the Bull waded into the heart of the melee. Screams split the night and swords clashed as they pushed their way to the northern trebuchets where a small team of scouts worked desperately to keep the giant machines firing.

“We’re here to help!” Taran called, turning on his heel and taking up a defensive posture. His expression was fierce, beautiful, and Dorian’s heart might have lodged in his throat at the sight if he could manage to beat back sheer panic long enough to admire his Voice.

The girl turning the crank looked up, a dark hank of hair falling over one eye. “Thank the Maker!” she said, muscles straining as she worked. “They’ve been coming at us in regular waves, and I can’t—there!”

Dorian caught a flash of red out of the corner of his eye and expertly pivoted, sending up a wall of flames. Sparks hissed as they fell into melting snowbanks, and from somewhere near came a hollow scream. He began to ready his next spell, only to lose it when a red-streaked terror pushed through his fire, Templar armor pitted and cracked, surcoat burning around him. He only just lifted his staff in time, deflecting the first blow. It echoed through his body like a struck chord, sending Dorian reeling back—feet slipping on blood and melted snow, breath caught high in his throat.

He very nearly fell, balance all but lost, as the Templar reared back to strike him—huge, huge, filling his vision like a fiery hell, worse than any demon from the Fade. Dorian sucked in a sharp breath, preparing himself for agony—

—only to let it out on a gasp when a strong hand grabbed the front of his robe and shoved him back, Taran stepping between Dorian and the red Templar. He lifted his sword in an effortless arc, sparks scattering at the sheer weight of the blow—blocked, metal clanging, Taran’s muscles tense. Taran gave a low snarl and shoved, using momentum to send the Templar stumbling back two steps, three, greatsword briefly falling.

That was all the opening Taran needed. He lunged forward, his own greatsword swinging, and cleaved the Templar’s head clear from his body. Lyrium cracked and fell, scattering about them as the hulking beast collapsed in a halo of its own blood, Taran standing over it with his sword ready for a second blow.

Dorian let out a puff of breath, shocked and elated and frightened and and and so bloody in love he could barely stand it. He wanted to fling himself into Taran’s arms and kiss all over his stupidly brave face; some echo of that must have been in his eyes, because when Taran turned with an, “Are you all right?”, he actually blushed all the way up to his hairline at whatever he saw there.

Taran bit his lip, lowering his sword. He looked instantly bashful and sweet and interested, and Dorian may have decided to hell with the battle and flung himself into his arms if the scout manning the trebuchet didn’t choose that moment to shout:

“Keep them back—we’re ready to fire!”

Taran looked toward her and nodded, then lifted his sword again. “No rest for the wicked,” he told Dorian with a quick almost-smile before launching back into battle. Dorian shook himself out, forcing his thoughts to clear, and the steady tempo of battle overtook them again—broken here or
there by shouts of “Flank them!” or “Kill the warrior!” and underlaid by Taran’s commands and the Bull’s loud, echoing, absolutely insane laughter.

The qunari was actually enjoying the bloodbath; he was completely barking mad.

Finally, finally, the scout called, “Centered and clear!” There was a crack and the sound of gears grinding, then: “Firing!”

Dorian turned just as the trebuchet launched a ball of flame high into the air, arcing with deadly precision toward the gathering horde. There was a moment of near-stillness as they all held their breaths, broken by a distant boom! Screams, cries, howls of outrage and terror: they were all enough to make the scout grin fiercely as she looked back toward them.

“They felt that!” she said, shoving back her hair before doggedly beginning to load another shot. Meanwhile a second flaming ball arced through the air, aimed higher this time. Dorian watched, breath held, as it sailed toward the distant snow-capped peaks. The impact reverberated through the valley, cracks of rock and ice almost deafening...followed by a strange shushing noise, like a thousand voices whispered at once.

“What,” he began, but he needn’t have asked. Within moments, a heavy sheet of snow and ice detached from its peak, tumbling down the mountain toward the gathered Templar army. That strange shush became a shout, then a roar, and Dorian gave a cry as the deadly avalanche raced toward their foe. It didn’t seem possible, and yet—and yet—it was happening right before his eyes: hundreds of Templars lost in a crushing sea of white, the flames of their torches snuffed out as if by the Maker’s breath.

“Thank the Maker!” Cassandra cried, her voice almost lost beneath the deep boom of familiar horns—the sudden overwhelming roar of triumph. Haven all but shook with the ululation, hundreds of voices lifted in cheers as the invading army crumbled beneath a single well-aimed blow.

The Bull dropped his hand on Taran’s shoulder. “It isn’t over, boss,” he warned—and as if his words were prophecy, a sudden screech rent the air. It overpowered the cries of celebration, transmuting them into panicked screams as the dragon launched out of its prison of snow, dark wings beating the air. It spiraled up up up, neck snapping back and mouth glowing forge-bright.

“Get back!” Cassandra yelled, grabbing for Taran’s arm and yanking him away as a stream of fire erupted from the night, consuming the second, more northern trebuchet. It exploded in a brilliant fireball, far far too close for comfort, the dragon swooping in before rising up for a second attack. Its scales caught the light cast off the burning trebuchet, revealing its massive size, its twisted features, its familiar-yet-not visage.

An archdemon? No, it couldn’t be possible.

“Get back,” Taran echoed, sounding dazed at the sight. Each beat of the oh, Maker, yes, archdemon’s wings blew flurries of snow and sparks around them. “There’s no fighting this. Run!”

Dorian didn’t need to be told twice. He spun on his heel, only waiting long enough to be sure Taran was by his side before sprinting down the winding path toward the gate. Strange, fiendish Templars they could face, an army of monsters they could find a way to outsmart, but a bloody fucking archdemon? “Today is now well beyond making sense!” he cried, ducking as the dragon swooped past, flame trickling from the corners of its maw like liquid gold.
They passed the burning shell of the blacksmith’s shop on the way to the gates, Harritt battering desperately at the door. “Blasted shoulder!” he snarled. Turning, distraught, he said, “Herald! Help me with this door!”

“There is no time,” Cassandra warned, but Taran was already veering toward Harritt—because of bloody course he was. The older man stepped aside quickly as Taran swung his greatsword, crashing through the crates that had fallen to block the door. Debris scattered around them from one huge blow, two, three, and the door to the flaming forge swung wide.

Harritt cast Taran a grateful, soot-streaked smile. “Thanks, Herald,” he said, shouldering his way inside.

“Uh, boss,” the Bull said, eye following the dragon as it criss-crossed the sky, burning buildings, fortifications, their entire bloody home in its wake. “We better get a move on.”

“Let us help you,” Taran said to Harritt. “You need to get to safety.”

But the blacksmith just waved him off. “You go on ahead,” he said. “Just grabbing essentials! Won’t die for the forge.”

Taran opened his mouth to protest, and Dorian reached out to grab his arm. “If we stay here, we all die,” he urged—begged. He would beg if he had to. He would knock Taran over the head and drag him to safety, because in this moment, nothing else mattered so much as knowing Taran would make it out of this okay.

Please, Maker, let him be okay.

Thankfully, it didn’t come to that. Taran hesitated just a moment more before jerking his chin in agreement and letting himself be swept up toward the gates. They were busted open, desperate fighting already in progress just around the bend. One of the Inquisition soldiers called out for help and battle renewed: vicious, bloody, terrifying, that dragon swooping overhead setting Haven alight around them. Dorian planted his feet and threw himself into desperate defense, praying—praying—for the chance to survive every moment that passed.

The next few minutes bled together in a haze of heat and ash and terror, with wave after wave of twisted monsters pouring over the spiked walls. It seemed like they barely stumbled twenty feet before they were faced with another knot of invaders, another soul in need of rescue. The tavern was glowing like a distant coal, desperate shouts barely heard over the crackle of flames. Dorian was so focused on building a wall of ice between his Voice and the oncoming horde that he almost missed Bull shouldering his way inside the desiccated building, Cassandra and Taran following in his wake. He almost missed the rescue of Flissa.

We’re going to die, he kept thinking, stepping over bodies of allies and enemies alike, caught up in the riptide of battle. Then, spotting Taran’s exhausted but determined face: No. I won’t let him die.

They saved Adan. They saved Minaeve. They barely made it in time to save bloody Threnn, and the whole time Dorian had to swallow back words of protest as the Inquisition burned around them. They were running out of time, Haven overrun by the forward guard, that beast spiraling high overhead as if to admire a job well done.

“There is nothing left,” he tried to protest, grabbing at Taran’s shoulder. His fine armor was dented and spattered with blood. His handsome face was drawn with exhaustion. “Taran. Taran,” he repeated, holding on when Taran would have pushed on toward the heart of the burning camp. Those copper-brown eyes met his, and Dorian gave in to the impulse to cup the curve of Taran’s
jaw; he brushed his thumb across the light rasp of stubble, wiping away a streak of gore. “There’s no one left to save but yourself.”

“That isn’t true,” Taran said, and his voice was rough with smoke. The whole world was burning, and there was nothing left of the life he’d built but ash. Maker, he looked so young. “There’s always someone.”

_There’s always someone._ Someone who needed him, someone who looked to him, someone who depended on him. What had the Inquisition done to this boy, piling the responsibility of so many lives on such young shoulders? It wasn’t _fair._

Dorian swiped his thumb across Taran’s cheek again, willing him to see the emotion no doubt brimming in his eyes. He was too exhausted himself to keep it in check. _Venhedis_, why should he even try? If they were going to die today, what point was there in keeping secrets? “Then save me,” Dorian said, quiet, as if the world had fallen away and it was only the two of them left standing here. “If you have to save someone, save _me._”

Selfish, selfish, selfish, and a ploy to draw Taran into the safety of the chantry, but Dorian didn’t care—how could he when he could actually _see_ Taran soften in agreement? He leaned his head to press his cheek against Dorian’s hand, lashes flickering closed; giving himself in to the inevitability of retreat. Then Taran nodded and gently pulled away. “All right,” he said, sheathing his sword. Several steps back, a wary Cassandra and Bull followed his lead. “I’ll save you, Dorian.”

There was a note of determination in his words and his jaw set as he led them into their waiting tomb.

Chaos reined even here, but Dorian couldn’t miss the flash of lank blonde hair and awkward limbs as the strange boy from before appeared to welcome them—at Chancellor Roderick’s elbow, of all places. The Chancellor looked rough, his body hunched forward as if in incredible pain as he gestured them and another small knot of fleeing Inquisition soldiers inside with a, “Move, keep going! The chantry is your shelter.”

They slipped inside, the horror beyond the walls instantly muffled. Taran turned. “Chancellor,” he began…

…only to freeze when Roderick collapsed mid-step, one hand pressed to sodden robes. The strange boy caught him easily, as if he’d been waiting for this moment. One skinny arm wrapped around the older man’s waist.

“He tried to stop a Templar,” Cole said, carefully helping Roderick away from the now-barred door toward a stool partway down the transom. Cassandra rushed off deeper into the chantry, murmuring that she would return with help. “The blade went deep. He’s going to die.”

“What a…charming…boy,” Roderick managed dryly.

Taran moved as if to follow them, only to be brought up short by Cullen’s arrival. “Herald,” Cullen said. He sounded grim.

“Commander,” Taran said as he turned his focus to the former Templar. Searching for good news? Maker knew there wasn’t any to be had. “What’s our situation?”

“Our position is not good,” Cullen said. “The dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.”

From his place crouched by the dying Chancellor’s side, Cole offered, “I’ve seen an archdemon. I was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”
In the Fade? The idea was utterly ridiculous, unless the boy had been in the physical Fade, which was even more ridiculous. But before Dorian could protest the idea, Cullen was already shrugging it off roughly. “I don’t care what it looks like,” he snapped. “It has cut a path for that army. They’ll kill everyone in Haven!”

Cole wasn’t finished. “The Elder One doesn’t care about the village. He only wants the Herald.”

Dorian felt a flash of protective fear—of rage. He opened his mouth to protest, only to go silent when a huge hand dropped to his shoulder. The Bull had sidled up behind him (and Maker’s blood, but that beast moved quietly when he wanted) and was shaking his head, one finger over his lips.

Not now, he seemed to be saying, but if not now, then when? It was clear enough they were all running out of time.

“If you know why he wants me,” Taran was saying, turned to face Cole, “please just say it.”

Cole shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “He wants to kill you. No one else matters, but he’ll crush them, kill them anyway.” He hesitated, then cocked his head and added, “I don’t like him.”

“You don’t like...” Cullen began, then stopped, exasperated beyond words. He let out a harsh breath and refocused on Taran. “Herald, there are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

“We’re overrun,” Taran said. “To hit the enemy, we’d bury Haven.”

Cullen’s expression turned grim. “We’re dying, but we can decide how. Many don’t get that choice.”

No, Dorian wanted to say. No, no, no. He tensed, and Bull tensed with him, grip tightening. What does he think I’ll do? Dorian wondered as the Chancellor and Cole spoke in riddles about some... summer passage and Fate or whatnot. What could I possibly do now that would matter?

Some insane dark force had come for his Voice, and he was all but helpless to stop it. Nothing in all his life had prepared him for this. There was no magic, no cleverness, that made this bearable—because Dorian didn’t have to be told that Taran would sacrifice himself to save everyone if he had to. It was written all over the other man’s face. It was in every line of his body.

It was not fair.

“I don’t know, Herald,” Roderick was saying. “If this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. You could be more.”

Taran shook his head, but not in denial. He looked like he was actually considering what the old man was saying—taking this hope of escape at face value. “What about it, Cullen? Will it work?”

“Possibly,” Cullen said. “If he shows us the path. But what of your escape?”

Taran, tellingly, did not reply. Bull’s grip on Dorian’s shoulder tightened.

Cullen’s expression was softer than he had ever seen it, sorrow and understanding there as Taran’s suicidal plan became clear to all. Maker, were they all really just standing here accepting this? Perhaps you will surprise it. Find a way...” He couldn’t seem to finish. Instead he turned to call out to the men waiting anxiously at the other end of the transom. “Inquisition, follow Chancellor Roderick through the chantry. You three—” He rattled off his orders to a trio of grim-faced soldiers, who all nodded and rushed past, out through the doors and into the night. Madness, madness.

“They’ll load the trebuchets,” Cullen told Taran. “In the meantime, keep the Elder One’s attention...
until we’re above the tree line. If we are to have a chance—if you are to have a chance—let that thing hear you.” And then he strode away to gather the rest of the lost lambs deeper into the church.

Roderick rose unsteadily, resting most of his weight on Cole’s skinny shoulders. The hand clasped over his wound was slick and dripping with blood; it left a brilliant red trail in his slow wake. “Herald,” he said, meeting Taran’s eyes one last time, “if you are meant for this, if the Inquisition is meant for this, I pray for you.”

“Thank you,” Taran murmured, bowing his head as if accepting benediction. The Chancellor shuffled off to lead what remained of the Inquisition to safety, past Cullen and his small knot of soldiers. And for some bloody reason the three of them were remaining behind instead of taking their chances on living another day.

Bull was still gripping his shoulder tight, as if he could sense Dorian winding up into something dark and afraid, but once the three of them were alone, Dorian no longer let that control his tongue. “What are you even thinking?” he hissed, drawing Taran’s startled attention to the two of them. “What’s the bloody point of sacrificing yourself like some hero of a bad melodrama? We should go with them.”

“Dorian,” Taran said—gently, as if trying to find a way to let him down. “I know you’re upset—”

Dorian violently shrugged off Bull’s grip and stepped forward, into Taran’s space. He was bristling, long past upset. “Oh, you know that, do you?” he challenged. “And what, pray tell, gave it away? You do realize that this is utter madness,” Dorian added before Taran could respond. “You are being asked to distract a dragon, possibly an archdemon—because yes! Of course! That is a thing that happens! Why not, the world is already falling to pieces—and call an avalanche down on your own head so a handful of soldiers can muddle through the mountains to—”

“Dorian,” Taran said again, reaching out for him.

Dorian batted his hands away. “They are asking you to commit suicide,” he hissed. “They are asking you to die for them, on the far chance that they might manage to slink off into the night. Because, oh, why not? You already saved the bloody fucking world by closing the breach; why not let you throw your life into the void for them too?”

“Dorian.” Taran gently—gently—caught Dorian’s flailing hands, curling their fingers together. He was even closer now—close enough that Dorian could feel the heat of him, the indescribable tug of the unforged bond humming bright and hopeful between them—and his expression was cracked wide open. Vulnerable, letting Dorian see absolutely everything. The fear that matched Dorian’s own, the hope, the determination as strong and steady as the Frostbacks themselves.

Maker, this boy. He had a spine of pure steel and heart just made to bleed. Maybe this point was inevitable; maybe if he wasn’t stepping forward to die for the Inquisition today, he would have done it in a week’s time. A month’s.

Our time has been running out from long before we met, Dorian thought, and the idea—the inevitability—of that made his tense muscles loosen. The fight went out of him in a rush of breath as he met Taran’s eyes and saw himself reflected there.

There’d be no convincing Taran not to do this mad thing, but that didn’t mean Dorian couldn’t be by his side when the clock finally ran down. If he was so determined to throw his life away to save everyone else, well then…Dorian supposed he could play the brave hero too.

“Dorian,” Taran began again, but Dorian simply shook his head before he could continue. There wasn’t time for this, he knew. The end was bloody fucking nigh.
“Don’t,” he said. “You don’t have to. Maker knows I couldn’t stop you. So…” He took a breath and tightened his grip on Taran’s hands, trying to content himself with the short time they’d been given. It was so much more than he’d ever thought he’d have, after all. “I will go with you instead. Help you distract this archdemon or Elder One or whatever nonsense and save the bloody day.” He pasted on a smile that felt, strangely, almost real. Saying the words out loud made them feel more settled in his skull; he was doing this. They were doing this.

Death somehow didn’t seem so very frightening when he was looking straight into his soulmate’s eyes.

“So we need to be noticed?” Dorian said, trying for a bit of levity. He began to pull away. “Happens to be a specialty of mine. In fact—”

He stopped, startled, when Taran tightened his grip, not allowing Dorian to pull away. There was...fire in the other man’s eyes, burning bright. Love, without anything left to hide it, as if all the fumbling excuses had been stripped away in their last few minutes—and oh, Andraste, at least there was that. “Dorian,” Taran said, stepping even closer—so close he could taste his breath. Their clasped hands were caught between them, Dorian’s curled fingers pressed tight against Taran’s chest. He could count each beat of his heart, could feel the moment his own fell into easy tempo, as if this was the way they were always meant to be. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. I…”

But he trailed off before he could finish, gaze flicking away, over Dorian’s shoulder, as if he couldn’t bring himself to meet Dorian’s eyes.

“Whatever you want to tell me,” Dorian said quietly, “can wait until we’ve all survived this.” Even though they both knew that wasn’t going to happen, it was enough—this was enough. It had to be.

Taran shook his head, refocusing on him. He’d never looked so beautiful, or so sad. “No,” he said. “It has to be now.” Then he sighed and leaned forward, brushing their mouths together in the softest of kisses.

It was like a whisper, a prayer, a single breath shared between the two of them. The subtle glide of their lips leading to a shared inhalation—soft soft soft—and the inevitable brush of tongues. Hot, yet not erotic, each kiss melting into another. Another.

Time...time didn’t matter. Slowed, quickened, who cared? The circling archdemon and the Elder One’s army could have been a dream for all he thought about them now, here, pressed against Taran and hungrily taking each kiss to tide him over until the end. There had been so many years of wanting and not having: venhedis, but it felt good to finally let go of everything that had kept them apart and just be. Here, with Taran, no more walls between them.

...well. There was one left, he supposed. One truth he’d kept to himself. But what good would it do to tell Taran they were soulmates minutes before they were to die?

Better keep it to yourself, Dorian thought, knees going weak as the kiss lingered long and slow and sweeter than anything he’d ever felt before. It hurt, almost; it made his whole body sing. Better to take that to the grave.

And then Taran was pulling back just enough to look at him. His expression was so wistful, so sad, it broke something inside Dorian to see it. He’d give anything to banish the shadows there. “Dorian,” Taran said slowly—roughly—voice strung tight with whatever regret he was feeling. “I just... I needed you to know...”

“It’s all right,” Dorian tried to sooth.
Taran kept going, dogged. Stubborn until the very end. “I needed you to know,” he repeated, keeping Dorian’s gaze locked on his. Shining in that way he always had. “I love you. And I’m so sorry.” He loosened his grip on Dorian’s hands, wrapping one strong arm around his waist, his free hand cupping the line of his jaw, keeping Dorian focused on him. His thumb brushed once across Dorian’s lower lip. “I wish I could have been a better Voice for you.”

Dorian froze, shocked. *He knows.* The thought was distant, frantic, wrapped in layers of confusion. How, *how* had Taran found out? What had given him away?

And more importantly—what the *fuck* was he doing?

“Taran—” He tried to pull away, but Taran held him, gentle but firm.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, absolutely torn—and that was the moment Dorian finally heard the Bull sneaking up on those ridiculously silent feet. He felt a flash of horror, of loss, as he suddenly pieced it all together. Taran had no intention of letting him die; Taran was determined to face this Elder One alone. He was about to *lose his Voice,* and no, no, no, no,

“No,” he managed, seconds before a giant fist came crashing down, catching him across the back of the skull. Pain blossomed bright, and his knees buckled, but Taran was already holding him—catching him easily against his broad chest as Dorian sank down down down into darkness. Nothing left but a pinprick of light, and Taran’s anguished face as he looked at him, saying goodbye for the final time.

*I can’t lose you,* he thought, aching, weighted down by a lifetime of regret. *Please, please, not again.*

And then, nothing but darkness.

Chapter End Notes

PS: For the curious, this is the point where Taran figured it out. He was thinking about how insane it was that he felt SO MUCH for Dorian in such a short time and...

*I do,* Taran thought, snickering against the curve of Dorian’s neck, light as a feather inside. *I do, I do love you.* He pressed that knowledge in soft kisses against warm brown skin. He whispered it with the brush of his tongue. He surrendered to it completely, unquestioningly, letting the revelation unfold piece by piece until it was all but filling him—until he was thrumming with awareness of his own love.

It didn’t matter that they’d only had a few weeks together. He knew.

*He knew.*
“Keep moving!” Cullen cried over the roar of the oncoming storm. He was leading the charge up the hidden mountain pass, away from the chantry. Haven was already a glowing coal in the distance, red Templars only just visible as they swarmed over its meager defenses.

Cassandra hesitated at an overlook, staring down down down at the home she’d helped build. Gone, now. Everything gone.

“Seeker,” Varric said from just behind her. He sounded as worn—as heartsick—as she felt.

“It this right?” she asked, not bothering to look back. The Inquisition troops were streaming by behind them, moving along the pass Counselor Roderick had unearthed. It seemed impossible that the Maker would swoop in and save them in this way…but then, of course, the Maker had been doing the impossible through his Herald from the very beginning. Hadn’t he? “Fleeing Haven. Leaving the Herald to fall. Are we doing the right thing?”

She scanned the ruin and spotted the sole remaining trebuchet. There was movement down by its base: a flash of steel and steady swordwork. Taran, standing alone against the endless waves of corrupted Templars, giving the rest of them the time they needed to escape.

Dying for them.

Maker.

There was a soft crunch of snow as Varric moved to stand beside her. She glanced over, catching sight of Bull just over the dwarf’s shoulder, Krem hovering anxiously behind him. Dorian’s unconscious body was folded within the Bull’s huge arms—and that didn’t feel right, either. Were they truly on the path they were meant to walk?

“This is what the kid wanted,” Varric was saying, though he didn’t sound convinced. He rubbed at his face, digging his knuckles against his eyes as if he could grind away everything they’d witnessed in the last few terrible hours. “He—”

“He is a child,” Cassandra snapped, turning on him. Varric looked up at that, something dark flashing in his eyes—something sharp and canny that she could easily cut herself on if she wasn’t careful. Good. Let him be angry. She needed something, someone, to fight, even as Taran fought all of their battles for them far, far below. “And all children think themselves immortal.”

Varric set his jaw. “He is a hero,” he countered. Before she could say anything (scoffing, because damn his idiotic archetypes anyway) Varric added, flipping their argument on its head in that maddening way he had, “You should know—you’re the one who pushed this on him.”

A few steps away, Krem cleared his throat. “Not to throw myself on your swords,” he said, “but shouldn’t we keep moving?”

“Boss wouldn’t want us to die up here,” Bull pointed out, “anymore than he wanted us to die down there.”

But Cassandra wasn’t willing to be sidetracked. She took a furious step forward, crowding Varric back. The jut of stone beneath their feet wobbled, small rocks tumbling down the sheer mountainside
toward the battle far below. (The battle she by all rights should have let claim her.) “The Maker chose him,” she said. Child or hero, innocent or Chosen; it was strange the way her own thoughts about Taran Trevelyan could twist so easily. He was like forged steel in her mind, glowing bright and ever-malleable.

But what weapon would she make of him? Maker, had she turned some Marcher boy into a shield to protect the rest of them from this Elder One?

No, no, no.

“Bullshit,” Varric said, echoing her doubts in that way he had. “You chose him. The same way you wanted to choose Hawke.” Cassandra stiffened, but Varric wasn’t through. “You’ve been searching for some sadsack to lead your dying cause even before the Conclave. Admit it: if I’d been able to lead you to Hawke, he would’ve been the one down there, ready to lay down his bloody life for the rest of us.”

“I was not looking for a martyr,” Cassandra contested hotly.

Varric barked a harsh laugh. “Bullshit,” he said again—and it was all she could do to keep from grabbing him by the scruff of his neck and hurling him off the mountainside. “I could tell what you were after the minute your goons first dragged me into that room. I knew this was where we’d end up, and I wouldn’t have given you Hawke for anything.”

She took another threatening step forward, so close her cold armor bumped against his chest, pushing him back. More rocks scattered down the sheer cliff face. “Are you implying,” Cassandra began, furious at all the hours, days, weeks wasted, “that you knew where Hawke was all this time, and you simply refused to—”

“Hey,” Bull snapped, harsh enough to drag their attention to him. His one eye was narrowed, and all his usual jovial ease was gone. “Get your shit together. We’ve got to move before—”

“Boss!” Krem jolted forward, pointing, as a dark shadow fell over them. Its shape was chillingly familiar, and Cassandra whipped around with her sword in hand as the dragon soared past.

It was huge, mammoth wings spread wide, tail lashing against the storm as it hurtled down toward Haven. It passed close enough that it might have seen them had it only turned its head, the line of Inquisition soldiers and scouts only barely hidden by the secret path’s winding route. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The worst—the part that left her chilled and small and frozen in horror—was the twisted shape perched at the archdemon’s shoulders. Half-man, half…Maker, she couldn’t even say. It was too monstrous to be real.

“Andraste save us,” Krem whispered, just as Varric said, “Maker’s furry nutsack.”

Bull, as usual, was the most concise. “Well. Shit,” he said, shifting the unconscious Dorian in his arms as the dragon swooped down on the final trebuchet in a brilliant bloom of flame.

Cassandra’s fingers curled tight around the hilt of her blade, white-knuckling it as she watched in wordless horror. The Elder One dropped to the ground in a flutter of black cloth, Taran sprawled several dozen yards away. He stirred, stumbling up, visibly favoring his left side. Hurt. Wounded and weaponless and oh Maker helpless as the dark figured closed in on him. “We should do something,” she managed, even though there was nothing to do. Even if they took off running now, there was no way they could make it to Taran in time.

“Yeah,” Varric said, standing by her side, eyes fixed on the figures so far below them. “We should
do something.” He didn’t move. None of them did as the Elder One advanced.

She watched as Taran faced off against the twisted monster. Watched as the dragon landed behind him, cutting off his retreat. Watched the flames flare higher, sparks swirling like newly fallen snow as the creature pointed a single skeletal finger at the Herald.

_You_, he seemed to be saying, though there was no real way to know for sure. _Death has come for you._

“What do you figure he’s saying?” Krem murmured, echoing her thoughts. They were not alone on their little overlook, Cassandra realized with a start as she glanced over. Other soldiers, scouts, had begun to slow their escape to watch as Taran faced down the man who would kill them all. There was a part of her that was _so proud_ of how far he’d come so quickly. There was another part that ached with the inevitability of loss.

She shook her head. “I do not know,” she said.

Varric reached out, reflexively grabbing her arm. “Seeker, _look_!” he gasped, and she jerked her attention back down to Taran at the sudden flare of red and green light. It swirled between the two opposing forces, terrible in its beauty. The rift magic poured from Taran’s palm as he keeled over, crumpling protectively around his own hand as if in agony. He…he _fell_, hard to the snow, red sparking around the green as the dragon snarled and the Elder One glowed like the heart of corrupted lyrium, advancing slowly.

“He’s killing him,” Varric said quietly, saying what they were all thinking. “Maker’s breath, kid, _run_.”

“He won’t,” Bull said—and they all knew that too. Taran wouldn’t run, wouldn’t try to save himself, so long as he thought keeping this Elder One’s attention would give the rest of the Inquisition the time it needed to escape.

_And we took it_, Cassandra thought, hating herself for being safely up here, tucked away in this hidden mountain path. Hating that _nothing_ she did now could save the boy who had already given so much. _I took it._

The red light died as the creature closed his fist. Even at this distance, she could feel his palpable rage as he stalked toward Taran and grabbed his wrist, yanking him up—up—up—until his feet dangled far off the snowy banks. Green fire still spit from Taran’s palm, and he looked so small compared to the monsters flanking him: demons in the dark, come to take him at last.

“Maker preserve him,” Cassandra prayed, watching steadfast. She owed Taran that much, at least—to be witness to his final moments. To remember him always. “Guide his way.”

“No,” Varric said, though Andraste alone knew what he was protesting. “No, _no_. Come on, kid. Fight. You can still _fight_.”

There was a soft cry from behind them, shushed and echoed simultaneously when the Elder One whirled and _flung_ Taran toward the trebuchet. He hit hard, high, crumbling down to its base in a boneless sprawl. For one horrible moment, Cassandra thought it was already over—but then Taran struggled up, pushing himself to his feet with obvious pain.

_Fight_, she thought, taking up Varric’s chant. _Fight him, Taran. Fight him for us all._

Taran glanced around, then darted to the side, grabbing a forgotten sword. He held it aloft as if he could hear her thoughts, hear Varric’s whispered pleas, hear the collective held breath of the entire
Inquisition as they watched him face down the dark. He spat something back at the Elder One, straightening with a will of iron. Shining in the fitful light.

The chosen Herald of Andraste.

Up on the peak, a single flare lit the sky: Cullen’s signal. The last of the troops had gathered around at the lookout, safe for now. Taran turned his head, looking up into the darkness—for one incredible moment, she felt… She felt as if he could see her. As if their eyes were meeting again (for the last time) over the yawning chasm that separated them. She almost imagined she saw forgiveness in his warm gaze.

Then, suddenly, he straightened and faced down the Elder One again—muscles coiled, chin lifted, sword pointing down the madman and his dragon. Taran said something—Maker, how she wished she knew his final words—and spun, kicking out sharply.

“What,” Cassandra began, not understanding.

Bull gave a cheer. “The fucking trebuchet!” he hooted as the machinery squealed, chains loosening, weight swinging. It launched in a measured arch, throwing its boulder toward the far mountainside with deadly aim. “The boss tricked him in the end; got him right where he wanted him!”

“Maker’s ruddy asscheeks,” Krem said with a laugh as the huge boulder crashed into the distant peak. The impact was incredible, followed by a moment of pure, weighted silence. Then, crack crack crack, followed by a hush like a hundred voices whispering at once—a thousand—a hundred thousand as an ice flow was knocked free and snow began to topple down the sheer cliff face toward the teeming army…and Haven.

“Yes,” one of the scouts whispered, then another: “Yes!” All around them, excitement bubbled as the Elder One whipped around to stare at his coming doom: a wave of snow ready to bury him in his new tomb.

Varric’s fingers dug into Cassandra’s arm, hard enough to ache. “Run, kid,” he said, voice a broken croak. “Ah, fuck, run.”

“He’ll never outrun it,” Cassandra said, watching as Taran dropped the blade and fled. The dragon took a step forward, snapping at his retreating form, but Taran dodged away, slipping on pools of freezing blood and vaulting over corpses. He looked once over his shoulder, though she couldn’t trick herself into believing he saw anything but his own death now. It rushed toward him in a white roar, drowning out the dragon’s bellow as the creature snatched its master up in its claws and launched into the sky.

“Damn it,” Krem said as both monsters escaped—but Cassandra and Varric only had eyes for the small figure of their Herald, racing to snatch just a few more seconds away from the Maker. The avalanche was nearly upon him, crashing over the gates of Haven and crushing everything in its wake.

She sucked in a breath and fumbled for Varric’s hand, feeling a strange moment of solidarity in this loss. He was right. Maker, he was right. “I did this,” she said, stunned, heartbroken, as the Marcher boy she’d plucked out of prison and forced into the fray faced his last breaths. “I brought him to this.”

“Yeah,” Varric said, utterly merciless in this moment of truth. “We both did.”

Then, quietly, as the sheer wall of white overtook Taran Trevelyan, burying him with all those who
had fallen before him this night: “...shit.”

Cassandra could only close her eyes against the roar of the avalanche—the distressed murmur of the crowd—the guilty, aching, *lost* recriminations ringing in her own head—and quietly agree.

Haven had fallen.

The Herald was lost.

The night was at its darkest.

And there was nothing left to do but wait for the end to come at last.
Krem

Chapter by delazeur, Khirsah

Krem looked out over the sad groupings of tents dotting the mountainside. Inquisition troops were still scouting the area, but after what felt like forever, Cullen had finally given word that they could camp “for a short time”. Maker only knew how long that would be. If he was smart at all, he’d be huddled in his cloak next to one of the small fires, trying to get some rest.

Instead he was…here, standing sentry at the edge of the makeshift infirmary tent, watching the stars in the wounded sky.

“You know, Chief,” Krem said quietly, reaching up to brush stray snowflakes from his hair, “from here, it almost looks like there never was a breach.” Wouldn’t that be nice? To be able to pretend that none of this shit had happened—the Conclave, the tear in the sky, the sodding demons everywhere, the fall of Haven, the death of…

The death…

Shit.

Some feet back, hunched with his elbows on his knees as he watched over the unconscious ‘Vint, Bull snorted. “Look harder, Krem,” he said. There was a tired, weary note in his rumbling voice. Mournful, if Krem wanted to put fancy words to it. (And Maker, he really, really didn’t want to be thinking along those lines. Not yet.) “Scars’re there if you look hard enough.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” Varric added. He was on the ‘Vint’s other side, tipped back on a crate as he worked over his crossbow.

Krem turned to look at him, taking in the way moonlight cast harsh shadows across his face; the way exhaustion and grief made him look old. Old and frail and barely holding it all together, dexterous hands pulling levers and coils by route. The tie that usually held back his hair had been lost somewhere along the way—all thanks to the howling winds that ripped through the pass, no doubt—and lank gold strands fell about his cheeks, swinging forward in a curtain to shield Varric’s face as he dropped his chin.

Well, that was fair enough. Krem wasn’t sure he’d want some punk staring and silently cataloging his shades of loss, either.

He moved away from the mouth of the tent, ignoring the quiet murmur of argument just past the way. Ignoring, too, the blond-haired boy crouched over Counselor Roderick in the adjacent tent, white hands fluttering like strange birds over the dying man.

Instead, he focused on Bull, and Varric, and…and him, the ‘Vint wrapped up snug as you please in a pilfered blanket, features lax in sleep. It was only a matter of time before he struggled his way back into consciousness.

“He dead?” Krem asked coldly, more to be a shit than anything else.

Bull flickered a glance toward him, something knowing in that one beady eye. “Nope,” he said easily.

Krem snorted. “I’m sure he would be if you hadn’t’ve snagged him from whatever swoon you found
him in,” he said, crossing his arms. He wasn’t sure why he was trying to pick a fight about it. Maybe he was hoping for sheer spite to keep him going. To distract him? One of the two, at least; he couldn’t slow down long enough to investigate his own churning emotions. Not if he wanted to outrun this terrible night. “Maybe you should just leave him when we move on,” Krem added sourly. “Let those red lyrium bastards have him.”

Varric made a torn noise low in his throat; Bull just fixed him with a surprisingly gentle stare. “Can’t do that,” he said placidly enough, leaning his weight forward, hands dangling between his knees. “Promised the boss I’d get him out of this in one piece. I plan to make good on that.”

Krem automatically opened his mouth to sass back, then paused as the words sunk in.

Wait. What?

“You promised Ta—” *fuck, don’t say his name; not here, not now, not yet, “the boss you’d drag this useless ‘Vint out of Haven?”* When could that have happened? And…why?

Bull shrugged a shoulder. “He wasn’t particularly useless until I cracked him upside the head,” he said. At Krem’s startled noise, Bull added, “There was no dragging him anywhere without it. He wasn’t going to leave the boss’s side.”

“That should have been true of all of us,” Varric pointed out. He was still bent over his crossbow, hair still shielding his face—but his shoulders were hunched forward and he looked the perfect picture of misery, every bit of him drained dry. As if the guilt of it all was eating him up inside.

The worst of it was, Krem wasn’t sure he was *wrong*.

But he couldn’t focus on that right now. Instead, he pounced on this new mystery, the promise of distraction a welcome respite.

“Why would the boss ask you to do that?” The question felt disingenuous even as he asked it. He remembered watching the two of them together, in the short time leading up to the attack. Taran’s wide smile whenever Dorian so much as looked his way. The earnest, awkward way he spoke of him. The stolen glances, and rare touches, like they were in some sort of romantic melodrama.

It couldn’t have been more obvious that Taran was carrying a torch for the ‘Vint. Krem supposed he just hadn’t realized it was *that* serious. Forcing Bull to take out Dorian, then haul him like a sack of turnips around had lost Taran two potential allies in the fight—was his fledgling crush really so powerful that he was willing to risk that? It seemed insane to consider, and yet… “He was so far gone, then?”

Varric made another torn noise; Bull just hummed low in his throat. Krem scowled, sensing they were keeping something from him. Well, fine. Fuck it. It was all in the past now anyway, wasn’t it? “Never mind,” he said, turning away to look out over the sad little Inquisition camp scattered far and wide across the crest of the mountain; up above, stars winked around the jagged scar in the sky.

It was going to be a cold night. They had supplies thanks to the caches a paranoid Leliana kept all along the various passes leading to Haven, but it wasn’t nearly enough to see all of them through in anything approaching comfort. More than one soldier would huddle blanketless around the fire tonight; Krem wondered, aching, how many would never wake from that frozen slumber?

He shivered, wrapping his arms instinctively around his middle, letting the cold quiet of the mountainside seep into his bones. Even surrounded by the remains of the Inquisition army, the world seemed still, as if everyone was holding their breath—waiting for a miracle that wasn’t coming. He
“It was about soulmates,” Varric said suddenly, disrupting the silence and the darkening spiral of Krem’s thoughts. Krem turned back, startled—shocked. What the fuck? “Maker’s beard, it’s always about bloody soulmates. No matter where I turn.”

A crate creaked as Bull shifted. Now he was staring down Varric with a mild frown. “Not sure that was your secret to tell,” he chided.

Krem’s head was whirling too fast to pay attention to the way Varric shrugged and muttered, “Doesn’t matter now, does it? The kid’s dead.” Because…because that all made no sense, and yet it made perfect sense. Soulmates. Shit. The ‘Vint had been mucking with Taran’s head after all, making him think he felt things he had no reason to feel. Using power over his…

Unum vinctum.

The word—one he hadn’t thought in a very long time—sent a shiver of horror down Krem’s spine. “You knew about this?” he asked Bull—no, demanded of him, voice going clipped with the growing simmer of anger. Unum vinctum. Unum vinctum. There wasn’t a single person he knew growing up who hadn’t lived in fear they’d be hunted down and dragged before some, some mage. Forced to bond with them, to be their fucking pet. Chained all the way down to the soul, and fuck, fuck, the minute Dorian fucking Pavus opened his eyes and gathered his wits about him, Krem would deck him good. It figured the ‘Vint would think he had any right to—

Bull stood, the crate groaning in protest beneath him. “Sit down, Krem,” he said, gesturing Krem forward.

Krem showed him his teeth. “Thanks, Chief,” he said; each word felt like he was spitting acid, fury and shock swirling sick deep in his gut. “But I think I’ll just—”

“Sit.”

There wasn’t any special stress on the word. No emphasis that underlined it, italicized it, made it stand out in any way. And yet Krem moved to obey the way he usually only obeyed Bull in battle, sitting on the crate Bull had so recently abandoned, his hands curling into fists on his knees. Angry, but also fighting back the hot burn of tears again for no good reason he could figure.

It was stupid. The fury, the… Okay, Krem, be honest: the panic that had spiked inside of him at that old word he thought he’d left far behind him. Rising like a haunt from the shadows, proving that even here at the end of the world, he wasn’t safe. It didn’t matter that no one had ever given him reason to believe he might be an unum vinctum—the fear was a part of life back where he grew up, and it looked like there was no real escaping it, even now. Because if a Tevinter mage had tracked Taran Trevelyan down out in the ass-end of nowhere and tried to chain him mind, heart and soul, then what guarantee was there that something similar couldn’t happen to Krem? To any of them?

Guard your dreams carefully, child. He could almost hear his grandmother’s shaking voice reaching out across the years. For there may well be someone hiding there watching your every move.

He shivered and turned cold eyes on the sleeping mage.

“Talk,” Bull said. Gently, like he understood. ‘Course, he would understand, wouldn’t he? The idea of having someone climbing up inside your head wasn’t alien to the Qunari—it was just they chose to submit themselves to the whatever-they-were-called who mucked about with your brain, your personality, your free will. They chose the Qun, or they walked away. Krem hadn’t actually known
many who’d been chosen for the unique fucking honor of being some ‘Vint’s kept pet, but he sure as shit knew they hadn’t been given the choice to walk away.

He opened his mouth, then shut it again when the words got tangled up in his head. Maker, how was he supposed to explain? To describe what it was like being a kid and watching as your best friend was taken away, as if it were a fucking honor? To know that there could even be another magister out there somewhere, watching him trip through dreams every night, biding his time before claiming Krem as his own?

There wasn’t any romance in that. No matter what you called it—unum vinctum or Voice—there wasn’t any parity, any balance, any way to build trust. The power was always in the mage’s hands, and how could that ever be anything but a crime?

“So,” Krem said, voice coming out rougher than he intended. “Taran was his unum vinctum.”

“Voice,” Varric clarified. He shrugged a shoulder at Krem’s glare. “What do I know about it, right? I’m just a dwarf.”

“Yeah.” Krem curled his hands into loose fists. “That’s right. What the fuck do you know?”

Varric had the gall to laugh at that. It was a rusty sound, aged and well-worn. He balanced the crossbow on his knee and rubbed his free hand across his face. “Don’t let it deceive you, kid,” he said dryly. “I’m something of an expert on the matter. Entirely not by choice.”

He wanted to demand to know what the fuck Varric was talking about. Dwarves, dwarves were the only lucky ones. They never dreamed, so they didn’t have to worry about eyes in the dark, watching their every move. They didn’t have to worry about some stranger claiming pieces of themselves like they had any right.

But Varric just shrugged a shoulder. “There are some things I kept out of the Tales of the Champion,” he admitted. “But believe me: unum vinctum, Voice…you’re not going to be able to come up with a horror show I haven’t heard before.”


“It’s your job to be creepy as shit?” Varric countered easily. The moment of levity broke when he glanced back at Krem and read…whatever it was there was to read on his face. “Look, kid,” Varric added. “I get it. It’s fucked up in Tevinter. It’s fucked up in Ferelden. It’s fucked up pretty much anywhere you go because—hey, surprise!—the idea that two people can be spackled together by magic is seriously fucked up. And it’s left its share of heartache in its wake. Believe me, I am not a fan.”

Krem blew out a breath. “But you knew about Dorian?” he demanded. “You knew he was trying to claim Taran? And you didn’t do anything about it?”

Bull rumbled disapprovingly, shifting from foot to foot. “Do something?” he said, arms crossing. “And what would you suggest we do? The boss knew how he felt. Was it my job to tell him he was wrong to feel it?”

“But he was wrong to feel it!” Krem was on his feet, voice risen to nearly a shout. He had to swallow back the urge to go in swinging, even though he didn’t have a target. That buzzing anxiety was building, building, building inside his chest—just knowing he’d come so close, yet again, to the claiming of an unum vinctum left his skin crawling. Quieter, he added, “Because he didn’t feel it at
“Kid,” Varric said. The way he was looking at Krem sucked—there was understanding there, but exhausted pity and annoyance and empathy and care, too. It was all jumbled up—all f*cked up—and Krem could already tell there was no arguing with him: Varric had already made up his mind, just like Krem had, years and years ago. “Remind me to tell you about Anders someday.”

Bull put out a conciliatory hand. “Moot point, anyway,” he said. “The boss knew who Dorian was, he made his choice, and now here we are.”

“Here we are,” Krem echoed, frustrated but willing to swallow it all back again. Now wasn’t the time to fight about free will versus magical enslavement. Now wasn’t the time to argue over the sheer maddening, terrifying imbalance bred into the whole system, as if the ancient magisters had brought something far more insidious than the Blight into the world. (Guard your dreams carefully, child. For there may yet be someone hiding there watching your every move.) Taran was gone, and whatever Dorian’s intentions, he was still here. Alive, thanks to his…his Voice. F*ck. F*ck.

As if drawn from the Fade by that thought, Dorian shifted on his makeshift bedroll and made a soft, groggy noise—a cry, broken down the middle as if torn from his chest.

Instantly, Varric and Bull’s attention snapped away from Krem and to the ‘Vint. Krem froze, watching with held breath as Dorian shifted, turning his face against his pillow. His brows were drawn together and his lips were moving as if he were fighting his way out of dreams. Nightmares. Something. Long-fingered hands clutched at the blankets that had been tucked around him and, f*ck, the noise he made went straight to Krem’s heart. It didn’t matter that he didn’t care much for Dorian; it didn’t matter that he didn’t trust him further than Krem could kick him. He couldn’t help but respond to that torn little sound, heart breaking in slow motion, feeling the depths of Dorian’s loss even as he tried to deny its source.

Unum vinctum, a quiet part of him whispered, watching as the mage clawed his way back to reality. Unum vinctum, unum vinctum.

He curled his hands into loose fists, watching as Varric crouched by Dorian’s side the moment the man’s dark eyes popped open. They were wide and a little wild, panic clear as he tried to struggle up. “Maker, no,” Dorian said, fighting against the covers cocooning him, “Taran.”

“Hush,” Bull said, resting one big hand on Dorian’s chest as he tried to push him back. “You’re gonna hurt yourself. You—”

But Dorian refused to listen. He snarled and shoved at Bull’s hand, trying to push it away. “No,” he said; the word was thick on his tongue, and his pupils remained blown wide. He was nowhere near recovered, and yet he fought with a violence that had Krem drifting closer, hovering at Bull’s side. He figured the Chief could take him, but, well… There was something chilling and fierce about the way the ‘Vint struggled to rise to his feet. “No, damn it, let me up. Taran.”

“Is dead,” Varric said, somewhere between soothing and pragmatic. He had a firm grip on Dorian’s other side, holding on tight. The crossbow had been set aside, and there was something wild in his own eyes—like a dim reflection of Dorian’s pain. Crazy, Krem thought, that they had all known the Herald so little and yet felt his loss so deeply. “The Herald—the kid—Taran is dead. Buried under a mountain of snow, and tearing yourself apart won’t—”

Dorian shoved back, fighting the firm grips holding him down. His usually neat black hair was a wild snarl across his forehead, caked in dry blood. Each breath came alarmingly fast. “No,” he said, “no, no, I saw him, I saw, I, I…vnehedis I know what I saw, and—”
He broke off to gulp in a serrated breath, practically hyperventilating as he sat there—pinned down by their gentle care, fighting against the truth he hadn’t yet had time to come to grips with, utterly gutted and bewildered by loss. It was a strange thing, to see a mage so ripped apart by the death of his unum vinctum. It made Krem feel uncomfortable, witnessing such raw emotion, unable to bring himself to turn away. Frozen himself as Bull and Varric gently eased a struggling Dorian down as if all he needed was time to grapple with the enormity of his loss, and then…

And then what? And then he’d realize they were speaking the truth and Taran really was dead? And then he’d be able to come to grips with the horror show they all witnessed, standing on that distant peak as the Herald died for them?

Ha, Krem thought, wrapping his arms around himself to ward off the chill, good luck with that. The image would never leave his mind. How much worse would it be, he wondered, if some part of him was convinced he had any kind of claim on Taran at all?

And yet.

Yet. Something was niggling at the back of his mind, even as they urged Dorian back, speaking gently over his fumbling, shattered protests. Something was there, blooming, slowly taking form—but not exactly taking shape. Not until Varric sighed and grabbed at one of Dorian’s flailing arms, tucking it gently back against his chest.

“I don’t know how to help him,” the dwarf said, raw. So fucking raw it was like sandpaper over Krem’s nerves. “You figure we need to knock him out again? At least until a healer can come by?” He winced. “I know, I know. It’s shitty to even wonder.”

Shitty, maybe, but also a revelation. Krem sucked in a startled breath and stumbled forward—all but flinging himself into the fray. “Wait,” he said, grabbing at Bull’s shoulder as if the big qunari were about to bring a meaty fist across the back of Dorian’s skull. Again. “Wait, wait, wait. Listen to him.”

“Krem,” Bull said, tone full of censure. You don’t understand, he may as well have added, but Krem just shook that off, reaching past the two of them to cup Dorian’s jaw in one sword-calloused hand.

It was strange to touch this man so intimately—to be so close, those unfocused dark eyes settling on his—but looking past the fumbling confusion, he could see so very clearly. And what he saw sent a spark of pure understanding bursting inside him. “You saw him, didn’t you?” Krem said, breaking through the chaos. “While you slept.”

“Krem,” Bull said again, but Dorian had come alight at that question, grasping onto it with two greedy hands. He strained forward, eyes locked with Krem’s, practically vibrating in place.

“I saw,” Dorian said, and stuttered to a stop again. He gave a sharp huff of breath, almost a growl. The cold, the fear, the confusion, the blow to the skull—whatever it was that had him tripping over his own thoughts made him sound insenstate with grief, but the light in his eyes was too focused now for that. Krem may not have liked him, but he believed him.

That thread of hope continued to spread ever-outward.

“Taran’s alive,” Krem said, certain. “Dorian saw him.” He ignored the looks Bull and Varric shot him—the looks they shot each other over his head—as he reached out to take Dorian’s hand. It was a small gesture, simple enough, but he felt something like electricity down his spine when the mage’s clammy fingers closed gratefully over his. He tugged Dorian up again, past all lingering resistance.
“Tell us,” Krem said. He perched on the edge of the makeshift cot, feeling close to his countryman despite everything that separated them. Dorian had seen Taran, and Krem believed; for now, that was all they needed to be brothers. “Where is he?”

Dorian shook his head. He scrubbed at his face with the meat of his palms, trembling hard enough that Krem could feel it. He thought about reaching out to lay a reassuring hand on Dorian’s shoulder, but despite everything, they weren’t really close. Maker, he didn’t even like the bastard very much. “He’s,” Dorian began, then sucked in another breath. Krem couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone this shaken. “He’s somewhere…dark. And cold. Or at least he was until he came…conscious.”

He let out a sharp puff of breath, looking up to study each of their faces in turn. Bull had gone back to crossing his arms over his big chest, brows drawn down into a frown. Varric looked… Well, like shit, but there was something sparking, like fearful hope, in his eyes.

“It was… It was strange. It was… The closing of the Breach, it changed, bloody, just, everything. And he…Taran…” Dorian wet his lips.

“You’re sure about this?” Bull asked gravely. “Grief can do funny things.”

Varric snorted a harsh laugh. “Nothing funny about grief,” he said. “And nothing funny about Voices, either. I guess…Maker’s beard, I guess if Dorian says he saw the kid, then he saw him.”

“Somewhere dark,” Krem echoed. “And cold.” He didn’t bother to look out toward the mountaintop they were perched so precariously atop, winter winds howling up flurries of snow. The whole bloody range was dark and cold; finding Taran would be like searching for a nug in a warren.

Dorian began to rise. “I have to,” he began, seconds before his knees buckled under him. He fell back into the cot with a surprise whuff of breath, swaying against the steady hands Varric automatically shot out.

“You shouldn’t try to get up,” Varric chided, doing his best to guide Dorian until he was laying down again. To his credit, Dorian fought back with a flash of bared teeth, keeping upright even if he couldn’t rise under his own steam yet. “We haven’t been able to get a healer in to see you yet; after a blow like you took, you really shouldn’t be doing much of anything.”

The ‘Vint laughed, humorless. “The blow I took, hm?” he said, then shot Bull a pointed glare.

Bull shrugged a shoulder. “The boss asked me to,” he said philosophically. “Promised to keep you alive.”

“Yes, quite,” Dorian gritted out. He was sounding more himself again, as if all he needed was faith and a chance to drag the tattered ends of himself together again. “And when he is here, and safe, and whole, believe me, he will be hearing about that.” He gestured toward Krem. “Help me up. I’ll find some spare elfroot and…and we can be on our way.”

Krem shot him a look at the order, but he stood, reaching to take Dorian’s arm despite Varrie’s beleaguered sigh. Neither Varric nor Bull moved to stop him as he helped the mage to his feet again—one arm going around his waist when he swayed weakly. The small tent had been filled to choking with despair only minutes ago, but now there was real hope. Crazy as it seemed to rest so much on the snatches of a vision stolen from the Fade…Dorian had seen Taran. He knew he was alive, at least for now—lost somewhere in the frozen night.

And they were going to find him.

Still: “Where are we going to look?” Krem demanded, helping Dorian hobble toward the entrance of
the tent. Behind them, Varric slung Bianca over his shoulder and hurried to catch up, and Bull sighed and lumbered a few steps behind. As rescue crews went, they were more than a little motley, but… Well, Krem couldn’t think of anyone more determined to find the Herald come void or death. “He’s your unum vinctum; do you have some kind of bead on him?”

“He’s my Voice,” Dorian said quietly, intently, with an underlay of quiet reverence that had Krem shooting him a startled glance. Dorian’s jaw was set and fine lines branched from the corners of his eyes. He still looked terrible, utterly undone, yet focused like a lodestone on some distant point. As if he was being called back to Taran despite everything. Despite reason itself. “We’ll head toward Haven. We won’t stop until we find him.”

*If he really is still alive,* a quiet, misanthropic part of Krem wanted to say, but he couldn’t voice the doubt. He couldn’t really even believe it. Hope was a funny thing, burning brighter and brighter inside his chest as he helped the man he detested set out to track down the dead-yet-not, lost-yet-found, bounded-slave-yet…Voice. Whatever the fuck *that* meant in the long run.

Krem sighed and tightened his grip, helping Dorian step a little faster. “Let’s get you some elfroot first,” he muttered, gaze sweeping out across the windswept mountainside, already searching. “Because I am *not* carrying you the entire bloody way.”

Behind him, smothered in an abrupt cough, Bull gave a not-too-subtle laugh—as if he could read the way Krem was already melting toward the damn bloody ‘Vint and this whole bloody crazy cult he’d found himself flung head-first into. The Herald of fucking Andraste risen again; void, he could already sense the shitstorm that would come their way once they found Taran and dragged his ass back to camp.

“Yeah,” Krem muttered beneath his breath, just loud enough the Bull—who had ears like a bloody cat—would hear him. “Let’s see who’s laughing when it’s the whole bloody world who wants him dead.” Because a deranged magister they could maybe handle with enough manpower, skill, and luck, but Krem had read his history books. He knew how this kind of shit went down. What happened to the chosen one and his inner circle.

What was coming for them around the bend.
Cold.

He was so cold.

Taran shuddered, wrapping his arms tighter around himself as he trudged through the thigh-deep snow. The sky was dark overhead, lit only by distant pin-pricks of starlight. The moon had gone into hiding sometime during his long trek, and mountain peaks formed forbidding sentinels; they watched from the shadows, whispering with each pull of the freezing wind.

You’re going to die. You made it all this way, survived everything, only to fall in this graveyard of ice and stone.

Maker. He could no longer feel his face. His hands. His feet. He stumbled, barely catching himself in time. If he fell, he wasn’t convinced he’d be able to get up again. No, no, he’d just lay there, entombed in snow, staring up at those tiny points of light as he finally drifted away like ash. He would waste every miracle that had somehow saved his life—the Chantry explosion, the trip back through time, Corypheus and his corrupted dragon—and belie Cassandra’s faith that there was a plan behind every second, third, fourth chance he had been given.

I’m no one special, he thought, gritting his teeth as he forced himself to take another step. Another. Void, but he was so tired; it took everything he had to keep going. But I can’t let them down.

They had so much faith. How, how could he give in to exhaustion, to give up, when he knew they believed so strongly? Cassandra. Varric. Leliana.

Dorian.

“Dorian,” Taran whispered. His voice was a rough croak, swallowed by the rustling of leaves and the whisk whisk of driving snow. He curled his hands into fists, pushing through the rising drifts, and let that name light a fire in his chest. Dorian, Dorian, Dorian, Dorian. He had to keep going, keep fighting, keep trying for Dorian. Maker. Would Dorian even forgive him for what he’d done?

No, he couldn’t think about that now. He could barely think at all beyond hurt and fear and longing: the avalanche had seeped everything but animal instinct from his bones, leaving him flayed down to the quick and focused only on his own survival. Later, if he made it out of this, he would worry around the edges of the choice he’d taken from the man he loved. He’d have space to feel regret, to ache with something beyond the bitter cold. But now…

Now there was one step. And then another. And then another. Taran let his thoughts drift as his body continued its mindless grind toward safety; he let himself be filled with the memory of Dorian. The vision of warm eyes and dark hair and soft, soft, soft lips pulled into an almost-shy smile. The velvet of his voice, falling into its teasing cadence. Didn’t matter what he was saying—Taran’s mind couldn’t form the words anyway—but the music of it always struck a chord deep inside him. Funny. He’d never thought of the way someone spoke like a melody before, but when Dorian was on a tear, the lilting rise and fall of his words was an aria; an opera. A work of art in every sense, and oh, oh, he would give anything to hear Dorian’s voice again.

To see himself reflected in dark brown eyes.
To find him waiting at the edge of his dreams.

“One step,” Taran croaked, forcing himself to move. The world was going steadily darker, though damned if he could tell whether it was the oncoming storm or the strength sapping from his body. Didn’t matter. Either way, he had to keep pressing on. There had been signs the Inquisition had come through here, some unknown time ago. If he could just keep moving, he had a chance. A hope for another day, another miracle.

He had to have faith, too. He had to believe in this, if nothing else.

Those mountain sentinels seemed to lean in, threatening, blocking all but the faintest pinpricks of light. Didn’t matter. He’d keep walking in total darkness if he had to. Just one step. “And another. And another. And—”

Taran didn’t feel the moment his boot caught on a hidden root; he’d long since lost all sensation from the hips down. But he did feel that strange jerk, followed by a moment of sheer weightlessness as his body hovered, leaning precariously forward. Taran lifted his head, the cold wind making his eyes burn, and swore he spotted flickers of light in the distance.

But hope and flame extinguished at once as gravity caught him about the throat and yanked him down into his waiting tomb. The breath left him in a harsh whuff, knocked out of his exhausted body by the heavy crunch of snow. It stung his eyes, filled his throat and lungs—blocked out the very world in a sudden hush as he was dragged down down down into the bank, like drowning.

In the confusion of pain, delirium, he almost thought he was. He tasted salt on his tongue and heard the distant call of gulls. The Waking Sea pulled at his water-logged body, easing it out farther and farther away from shore, and oh, oh, at this distance Trevelyan House was little more than a distant light. A monster crouched on the hillside bellowing fury as he was swept away from its hungry maw.

I escaped, he thought, dizzy with fear and triumph. The water was so cold around him he couldn’t feel his limbs and he was certain to die out here in the depths…but at least he’d managed to break free of the curse that held his family in its terrifying grip. Josselyn, I did it. I made it.

A wave crashed over his head as if in response, pushing him down—deeper, darker, all light gone as the frozen world closed its fist around him. He fought to suck in a breath, to push himself up, but he was trapped. Spent. Lost to the sea (the snow, sapping what little remained of his strength) and the endless waves (mountains leaning in, each breeze a husking laugh) and his own fear: he hadn’t escaped after all. The sea would have him, and the waves would bear his bones back to shore.

Back beneath the watchful eye of the manor.

Back, back, always back; there was never any hope of freedom, because all roads always led home.

Except… “dorian,” he whispered, reaching out; blind. Numb, bone-white fingers dug clumsily into snow. Muscles bunched and quaked, and, Maker, he felt so heavy. So wrong inside his own body. If he could just give up, give in, then he’d float effortlessly away. It would be so easy.

“dorian,” Taran managed again, throat raw. He coughed on the word, sputtering. Drops of blood spattered steaming brilliant red against the churning snow as he struggled to get his feet beneath him; struggled to push himself out of this frozen grave; struggled to drag in one breath, and then another, and blink away the film of ice caked along his lashes. He hurt—hurt, deep down, like he was being flayed from the inside out—but that, somehow, felt good. It felt real, the way nothing else did, his mind latching on to the idea that if he was in pain, then at least he was alive.
And he had to be alive. He had to *stay* alive. He had to make it back, because… Because they believed, and they loved him, and, and Dorian was…

Dorian…

*Dorian.*

His world was spinning out of control, snow already falling madly around him as Dorian doggedly made his way out of camp. Krem was at his side—and wasn’t that an unexpected twist?—with Varric and Bull just a step or two behind. He could see Cassandra making her way toward them, mouth set in a grim line, and…

*Kaffas,* Cullen and Leliana and even Josephine followed just behind.

“They’re going to try to stop us,” he muttered grimly, trying to move faster—as if that would accomplish anything.

Krem shot him a quick look. “It isn’t as if they don’t want him to be alive, too,” he pointed out, but Dorian was already waving that off, heart slowly turning to ice in his chest. Because yes, yes, of course they wanted Taran to be alive, but they wouldn’t *believe.* He wasn’t even sure Bull and Varric truly believed what he saw. (Taran, huddled and hurt, unconscious in the driving snow. Lost, Maker, somewhere in these mountains and *needing him.*) But at least they were willing to humor him in his supposed madness.

Cassandra? Cullen? Far too practical to let something like dreams shake their certainty, even if it was the dream of a Voice calling across the Fade.

“I am not giving up,” Dorian said beneath his breath, more to center himself than warn his fellow ‘Vint. “They will not reason me out of this. Taran *needs*—”

“Dorian,” Cassandra called, voice cutting through everything with simple command and efficiency. Krem glanced over his shoulder as she lead the approach, his dark brows drawn into an uncertain frown. Funny, how the Seeker had that effect on people. “Where are you going? What the *void* is this?”

He wanted to keep moving—one step in front of the other, over and over again until he found his Voice lost somewhere out there in the frozen dark—but Dorian knew he’d only waste more time if he let this drag out. The Inquisition’s remaining leaders had been huddled together arguing over this or that when they’d spotted this rag-tag group leaving camp; a part of him had to wonder what *they* thought this was, even as he brushed that away as irrelevant. They could think whatever they wanted so long as they gave him freedom to keep moving. “I am going to find Taran,” he said, as simply as he could.

The look Cassandra and Cullen shared was gently pitying. Josephine’s hand lifted to cover her mouth. Leliana looked…

Well. Leliana looked as Leliana always looked: grim and scheming. There was some comfort in her consistency, he’d have to give her that.

Dorian crossed his arms, hating the way he still wobbled on rubbery legs. That would be
Cassandra’s reason for refusing to let him go, he was sure of it. You are weak, you are hurt, you had a terrible blow, you are not thinking clearly.

“Dorian,” she said—gently, damn her. “Taran, he…he did not make it.”

“He is dead,” Leliana added, ever-direct.

Josephine shook her head. “We should go back to the tent,” she said, voice low. “We are being watched.”

Dorian barely flicked his gaze past the ring of advisors, taking in the curious stares and haunted eyes on the broken Inquisition. He could just make out a few rising murmurs: where are they going? What are they doing? Are they running away? Maker, we are all doomed.

Cullen gestured. “This way,” he said, and reached out to take Dorian’s arm—most likely to help him back to the safety of his sickbed.

Bull intercepted, gently—almost sheepishly—knocking the commander’s hand aside. “No can do,” he rumbled. One big shoulder lifted at the ring of shocked looks. “We’re on a rescue mission. Can’t just stop now.”

“Look,” Varric added, both hands lifted in an appeasing gesture. “There’s a simple explanation for all of this. Thing is, I got the impression we are running on something of a timetable, so…”

So it seemed he wouldn’t have to stay and fight this battle after all. Pleased—touched—soul-deep fucking grateful—Dorian turned back toward the howling night with its ring of jagged mountains and frozen wastes. He started walking, a little faster than before as he trusted the strength of his own legs more and more; to his surprise, Krem stayed at his side even as Varric and Bull faced off against the advisors, holding them back.

Dorian cast the other man a look, brows raised. Krem shrugged. “I said I believed you,” he pointed out. “I didn’t say I thought you’d be able to save him. Not on your own. If I pushed you right now, you’d fall over faster than a shit-faced nug.”

“Your vote of confidence is inspiring,” Dorian said. “Truly.” The jab was weak because his voice was weak because his heart was weak, but the moment of near-normalcy was enough to have his shoulders loosening.

The funny thing was, he felt better with Krem by his side. Not because he liked the other man—he most certainly did not—but because… Well, wasn’t that a complicated nut to crack? Because Krem was his countryman?

No. No, he brushed that possibility aside before it could really even take form. He loved his country, yes, but Tevinter hardly inspired blind loyalty in him. He wanted to take it by the scruff and fix it; Krem seemed all too happy to fuck off and let it rot.

So no, it wasn’t that. It was more… Well. Krem had been Taran’s friend (was. Krem was Taran’s friend), right? Maker knew Dorian had been jealous enough of the easy way they’d slotted together, both near enough of an age that he felt his own age sharply in comparison. He could see them, back in Haven, if he closed his eyes: laughing together, teasing, all the tension that ran like veins of ore through his Voice fading as Krem threw a companionable arm around his shoulders and led him off to find some fun.

When he looked at Krem now, he saw a prickly stranger, sure, but he also saw a friend. An echo of that friendship tolled through him, as if… As if for a moment, Dorian was Taran, weary from a long
day of carrying the whole bloody world on his shoulders. Krem looked over at him, dark brows raised, and reached out to touch his arm—to steady him—and Andraste take him but he was so grateful to have this island of normalcy in the driving sea that had become his life. He was—

He—

—he was so fucking cold.

Dorian staggered, nearly falling into the thigh-deep snow, shocked by a sudden flash-point chill that had his whole body going numb in an instant. Krem cried out and caught his arm just in time, and the both of them struggled, stumbled, swayed there in an awkward attempt to keep from going under. Cold cold cold. Unnaturally so, as if he’d been tossed head-first into a shock of frozen sea. He sucked in a breath, lips numb, and was barely conscious of a strong arm going around his waist.

“Dorian,” Krem was saying—his friend was saying—swimming in and out of focus as he leaned closer. There was a shout behind them, followed by the sound of metal clanking as the others ran to catch up, and he wanted so badly to shout at them to leave him be because… Oh, Maker, because suddenly, in this shocked-still moment, he felt Taran.

Near.

So very close.

Blossoming inside him; inches away from death.

His heart was racing rabbit-fast in his chest and Dorian thought he might choke on his own ragged breathing. He was disoriented—overwhelmed—and this, this, this wasn’t normal. This wasn’t supposed to happen to him, to anyone not already bonded; he’d never, never heard of anything like this before, and yet oh Maker yes, he could feel that flicker of Taran’s awareness superimposed over his own. It was like seeing himself reflected back in colored glass, details subtly shifted yet bone-deep-familiar, and,

“dorian,” he rasped, fingers curled in snow, fighting fighting always fighting.

“Maker’s breath, Dorian.” Cullen’s voice seemed to come from a long ways away, and he tried to shake it off—tried to shake him off—terrified that the ring of faces clustered around him were focusing the wrong bloody way.

There, he wanted to shout, hand flailing out only to be caught by a well-meaning Cassandra as he was hoisted up in strong arms. Pulled away from this necessary path. There, there, I’m over there!

Close. Venhedis, Taran was so close. He’d made it this far all on his own, clawing his way back to him (dorian); determined to find his friends (dorian), refusing to ever ever give up (dorian)

“stop,” Dorian tried to say, twisting around even as Cassandra grimly carried him back to camp for his own bloody fucking good, the worry and pain like a heartbeat etched across her face. She thought him mad, clearly—driven to the edge by grief, and Maker, he’d laugh if it didn’t hurt so much knowing Taran was right there and they were leaving him to die all over again. “stop, no, stop.”

“Seeker,” Varric began, trotting to catch up. A score of eyes were on them now, murmurs rising up up up like smoke into the frozen, star-filled night. In the distance, a lone wolf howled. “I’ll admit, I’m way the fuck out of my depth here, but if Sparkler says he saw something, then…”
Her grip tightened. “Don’t you think I want it to be real?” she said, sounding ancient. *Hurt*. “But we left him, Varric, and we cannot—”

*It’s all right,* a strange, him-not-him part of Dorian wanted to say; warmth blooming in his chest—forgiveness, affection. *I wanted you to go. I couldn’t have faced him knowing the rest of you were in danger.*

Dorian shoved at that thought even as he clung to the feeling, fighting to clear his head of this…whatever it was. Kaffas, he would try to understand it later; now, he had a battle of his own to face. He gathered what remained of his strength. “He is my *Voice,*” Dorian said, loud—loud enough that it seemed to echo, swept up by the howling wind and carried across the sad little groupings of tents.

Cassandra froze mid-step, staring.

He used that shock to his advantage, jerking free of her grip and stumbling back into the snow. His legs threatened to give out beneath him the moment he dropped, but he grit his teeth and steadied, drawing himself back to his full height to face her—to face Cullen and Josephine and Leliana just behind her, Krem and Bull grim shapes just off to the side. They, at least, had not given up. “Taran is my *Voice,*” Dorian repeated, quieter, feeling that strange dissonance of self wanting to creep back again (*Taran, near, cold, dying*) and keeping it back by force of will. He couldn’t let himself be consumed again, no matter how sweet the act of drowning might be. Taran needed him now more than ever, and he. Would. Fucking. Fight. “He is alive. I know he is alive, because I saw him in my dreams, but he will not survive the hour if we do not *go to him* now. He’s close.”

So close. Maker, but he could all but hear the beat of his heart.

“He’s *close,* and we can find him. Together, we can bring him home.”

“*Dorian,*” Cassandra said, a complicated maelstrom of emotion in her eyes, in her voice, in every line of her body. She looked shaken and yet disbelieving, even as she so clearly *wanted* to believe this was more than grief driving him. Looking over her shoulder, he could see echoes of that same emotion in every face, and void take them all but he wanted to shake the fire back into them.

*We can’t give up on him,* he thought, that frozen-numb feeling creeping over him again. Taran; it had to be. Oh kaffas, how could he possibly survive another moment in such cold? *We can’t leave him to die twice.*

She flinched, and Varric turned away with a low noise—it wasn’t until then that Dorian realized he was speaking aloud. Well, fine, good. They all had to face just what their continued survival had cost, but, “If you just let me take you to him,” Dorian begged, meeting her eyes and holding them captive, “you can save him in return. Please,” he added, quieter. “Cassandra.”

Cassandra’s eyes shone too-bright, tears pricking the ends of her lashes and threatening to roll down scarred cheeks. She seemed suddenly to shift like smoke, even as her form stayed solidly the same: or maybe it was his perception of her that shifted? Either way, the hard-edged Seeker Dorian had known dissolved into the bright-eyed idealist Taran admired, *loved,* so much, and Dorian didn’t even need to wait for the tight jerk of her chin to know her answer.

He could have kissed her then, but instead he clasped her shoulder in a gesture between soldiers before moving past toward the solid wall that was Cullen-Josephine-Leliana. Cullen was already shaking his head, full of denial (Maker, but this all must have seemed like madness to him), but to Dorian’s shock he only reached out to take his elbow as he fell in beside him—heading back out into the frozen dark.
“I didn’t realize he was your Voice,” Cullen admitted in a low undertone, quiet enough no one else could possibly hear. “If I had known, I would have…”

He stopped, swallowed, staring ahead as they moved. Leliana and Josephine hung back, but the rest fell into step: a regular search party. “I would never have stood in your way,” he finally settled on, serious as the grave, the weight of some tragic history coloring his voice.

Dorian didn’t have time to ask. He wasn’t sure he wanted to ask—there was self-recrimination there, and layers of ancient pain, and a hint of longing that sparked something similar within his own chest.

Whatever Cullen had been through, it had hurt him, changed him, shaped him, and all Dorian could do in this moment was nod in silent acknowledgement and leave that kernel of recognition lying between them. They moved out past the Inquisition camp and around the jutting rocks that protected the meager line of tents, and Dorian let himself focus past the moment as he scoured the night for the man he loved and would not lose.

He tried to open himself up to that unexpected connection, but either the moment had passed or Taran was too weak to respond. Or… Or, Maker, there were a thousand and one reasons why he couldn’t sense Taran flickering there at the edges of his consciousness now. Fixating would change nothing, and he had to keep moving, had to keep searching, had—

“There!” Cullen suddenly shouted some unknown stretch of time later. His grip tightened on Dorian’s arm, and Dorian’s heart gave an unsteady lurch as he stared out into the night, following the line of Cullen’s pointing finger. Snow danced and swirled, the wind catching the ends of his robe and blowing mussed hair into his eyes, but if he squinted, he swore he could see…something. “It’s him!”

"Maker, please."

Cassandra was already running, plowing effortlessly through the high drifts of snow. “Thank the Maker,” she breathed. Bull was alongside her in a moment, practically flying over thigh-deep banks. Standing by Dorian’s other side, golden hair flecked white, Varric cursed and covered his face, almost as if he couldn’t bear this single stretching moment between hope and despair: because if they were right, then, oh, Taran was saved. And if they weren’t…

It was too cruel to fathom.

“Taran,” Dorian whispered, taking an unsteady step forward. He watched as Cassandra skidded down to her knees next to a snow-wreathed shape—rock, beast, human, it was impossible to say—hands already tenderly brushing away the blanket of white. Bull pulled up short, one hand outstretched. He seemed oddly hesitant, hovering a moment before crouching down and carefully (gently, sweetly, almost tenderly) turning the form over and

Taran.

Dorian choked on his breath—his sob—his laugh—one hand jerking up to stifle the noise. It was, it was Taran, his cheeks bone-white and his hands crusted with frozen blood. He seemed so still and small as Bull cradled him close; he seemed young, younger than ever before, as Cassandra fumbled at her side for a potion and brought it to his lips.

“Shit,” Varric said, wiping at his eyes. He was laughing, too, and crying openly. His shoulders shook with the force of it, the tears streaming down his cheeks as he looked up at Dorian and Cullen. The grin stretching his face was half grimace, too, as if he were still grappling between relief and fear. “Shit, Sparkler, that boy is either the luckiest son of a bitch alive or he’s… He’s…” He couldn’t
Or he’s what, Dorian wanted to ask, but he was damned if he could find the will to do anything but tremble in place and watch as Taran’s unconscious body was carefully lifted. Bull was holding him cradled against his chest, Cassandra and now Krem hovering at his sides, watching Taran with strange expressions on their faces. Grateful and glad, yes, but something more, too. Something… shining. As if they were feeling even a quarter of the overwhelming joy bursting like dying stars within Dorian’s chest.

As it happened, Cullen finished Varric’s thought for him, words quiet but somehow chilling: “He’s blessed,” he said, a reverence there that had Dorian’s skin prickling. He glanced once at the other man, but Cullen was already leaving him to weave unsteadily on his feet (straining to feel the echo of his Voice again, hands curling into fists with the need to touch him, cup his face, brush back the fall of his hair and breathe in this moment of perfect joy), stripping off the fur-lined red coat he was never without.

Dorian watched him go, aware of Leliana and Josephine whispering behind him; aware of the growing murmurs turning into shouts turning into triumphant cries echoing across the camp; aware of Varric, still crying, shaking his head and falling in at his side as Taran (Taran, Taran) was brought back to them once more from the edge of death.

A bloody miracle.

“A bloody miracle,” Varric said, echoing his thoughts. His voice was choked with a complicated mix of joy and gratitude and worry and…and, yes, reverence. He looked at Dorian, meeting his eyes, grim. “I’m glad for you both, kid,” he said. His tear-lined cheeks looked worn, his eyes tired. “I really am.” Then, gaze fixing forward as the miraculously alive (the undying; the reborn) Herald of Andraste was carried back to them with Cassandra and Krem and Cullen trailing in his wake like the most devoted of disciples: “And really fucking sorry for you both.”
It was pure torture sitting a respectful (safe) (mind-breakingly awful) distance away as others fussed and fretted over Taran’s unconscious body. They seemed to come in droves, even though the rational (rational? Ha!) part of Dorian insisted there weren’t really all that many people crowding the small tent. A couple of healers, a couple of followers, an advisor or two, void-damned Mother Giselle watching him through narrowed eyes…

Dorian dug his nails into the meat of his palms and did his best not to shove them all away. He was hyperaware of every breath Taran took, even all the way across the tent; he could feel it, down to his bones, in a way that was thrilling and terrifying and awe-inspiring and and and bloody well impossible. Even if he closed his eyes, he could echo every inhale, every exhale, as if their hearts had found a singular rhythm.

But we are not bonded, he had to tell himself, breathing in and out. Feeling Taran all around him. This simply cannot be happening.

And yet the universe seemed intent on proving him wrong as each minute crawled by and he still felt the other man just beneath his skin.

It was possibly the only thing that kept him sitting in his tucked-away corner; it was definitely the only thing that let him grind his teeth instead of baring them at Giselle’s suspicious stare. That awareness of Taran growing stronger and stronger as healers worked their magic and friends hovered and advisors finally—finally!—began ushering everyone out.

“We have done everything we can,” Leliana said, one hand firmly on the mage’s shoulder, propelling her toward the tent-flap. Every time it was pulled back, a gust of frozen wind carried a flurry of snow and a score of curious stares from outside. “Now, we wait and let him wake on his own terms.”

“I will alert the others,” Cassandra decided. She carefully set Taran’s hand over the pile of blankets they’d stolen from only Maker knew where and stood. At full height, the crown of her head nearly brushed the tent’s tall peak. Bull had been forced to crawl as he’d helped carry Taran inside near an hour—more?—ago. “Dorian,” she added, turning toward him. “Come.”

He stiffened, hands reflexively clenching tighter. He could feel the spark of something gathering low in his gut, magic tingling along the webs of his fingers. He would be damned if he’d leave Taran’s side now.

Before he could say as much, Cullen straightened and dropped a hand to the Seeker’s shoulder. “No,” he said, gentle but firm. “He must stay; the Herald will need him when he wakes.”

The surprising show of support had the spell fizzling out, shock swallowing stubborn fear. Dorian’s brows twitched together as he stared at Cullen, baffled. Just a few feet away, Cassandra was doing the same. “What are you saying?” she demanded, as blunt as ever. “You cannot be suggesting that we leave the two of them alone when…”

She paused, jaw hardening, and Dorian could practically feel the four remaining Inquisition leaders not looking his way. Leliana stood sentry at the tent’s entrance as Josephine fussed over Taran’s pillows. Cassandra stared straight at Cullen, and Cullen…
Well. Hm. Cullen actually was looking right at Dorian after all. Strange. There really was something
strange about the way he was taking all of this.

“You heard Dorian as clearly as the rest of us,” Cullen said. “And you know what it means.”

“Yes,” Cassandra said, lifting her chin. “But I’m starting to believe you do not. Or has the Templar
Order so drastically changed its opinion on the dangers of allowing such unions?”

Cullen’s gaze dragged back to Cassandra, holding it, and it must have been a trick of the lighting, but
for a moment, he almost seemed…sad. Hurt, in some way, as if her words had struck a blow neither
of them had been expecting. “No,” he said slowly. “But then again, I am no longer a Templar.”

“This is all a moot point until the Herald is awake,” Josephine said, distracted. “I think we can trust
Dorian to do nothing until then.”

Leliana said nothing.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Dorian said, finally standing. He felt shaky on his own legs, still, though
whether that was from residual exhaustion or banked fury, he couldn’t say. “Is it worth the risk?
Leaving the Herald alone with a wicked, evil ‘Vint—what will everyone say?”

Josephine sighed and finally straightened. “That is the problem,” she said, gentle enough that he
didn’t really take offense. “We do not know what everyone will say, especially considering…
everything.” She gave a discrete gesture between him and Taran, and it was amazing, really, how
none of them seemed willing to say the words.

Dorian opened his mouth to force the issue, but then, once again, Cullen beat him to the punch.
“Taran is Dorian’s Voice,” he said sharply. “That means something, and nothing that they say, or
think, or do, should change that. Will change that.” He pulled back, crossing his own arms
defensively over his chest as the three women stared at him. His strong jaw was set, shadows like
violet bruises beneath his eyes. “None of us have the right to intervene.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

Leliana held up a hand as if to silence the others. “We will not solve this now,” she said. She did not
cut her gaze toward Dorian, but he could feel her awareness of him nonetheless. It couldn’t have
been more obvious that she was trying to take this argument out of his earshot.

“Come,” Josephine said gently. “There can be no harm in letting Dorian stay.” Not with so many
prying ears around, she may as well have added.

He wouldn’t let himself be offended by their caution. It only made sense—Taran was the blasted
Herald of Andraste, after all. People had a terrible habit of putting men like him on a golden pedestal,
and trying to tear them down again should anyone so much as sense the humanity behind the holy
façade. It didn’t matter how unfair it was; he could sense the tide turning that way inch by inch with
every muffled murmur of the milling crowd.

“Go on then,” Dorian said, keeping all that worry off his face and out of his voice. He made a
shooing gesture, smiling inside a little at Cassandra’s affronted glare. “I promise not to anything too
dreadful while your backs are turned.”

Leliana and Josephine shared a speaking glance, but they said nothing, instead slipping one after the
other out of the tent. Cassandra was next, though she obviously wanted to say a great deal. She kept
her tongue, however, shooting one last look back toward Taran (features lax in sleep, sweet, dark
lashes a smudge of coal against his cheeks) before grumblingly exiting the tent.
That left Taran, Dorian…and Cullen, who was turning back to Dorian one final time.

“That I’ll do what I can to support you,” Cullen said. Now that they were alone, his shoulders rounded subtly forward and the melancholy weariness was writ loud and clear across his face. He looked terrible, as if he’d aged a decade in a span of hours—but was it only the harrowing night they’d all barely survived, or something more? “But I cannot promise things will go smoothly once people know.”

Dorian studied the shadows blooming beneath the commander’s eyes, the pale gaunt cheeks, the defeated curve of his body—and took a (dangerous) stab in the dark. “Know this from experience, do you?”

Cullen’s head jerked up, some strange expression flashing across his face. Guilt and fear and longing and loss and pain pain pain, as if Dorian had pressed his thumb to a bruise that refused to heal. Ah, Maker, he thought, feeling his own stomach bottom out in response. He hadn’t even really thought he was right—it didn’t seem possible—and yet Cullen may as well have shouted confirmation across the Frostbacks. He had been the Voice to some unknown mage, and somewhere along the way, he had lost everything.

“I’m sorry,” Dorian murmured, reaching out. He gripped Cullen’s shoulder and kept his gaze, doing his best to make sure the other man understood how deeply he meant that apology. “I…didn’t mean to remind you of your loss.”

Cullen pulled back. “Loss,” he said; his voice was uncharacteristically rough. “No, don’t look at me like that. I don’t deserve—I didn’t lose anyone. She…”

He hesitated, jaw clenching as if he wanted to swallow back the impulsive words. Cullen glanced toward the tent-flap, everything within him coiled tight as a closed fist, and Dorian half expected him to go bolting. Why should he stay? They were hardly friends.

But maybe that was changing, Dorian realized with a slow curl of surprise as Cullen sighed and stayed, warm eyes cutting back to him. Maybe there was fertile ground for something richer, deeper here between them: a bond of understanding no one else could have, because there was something more genuine in the commander’s cracked-open expression than he’d ever seen there before.

Funny, he thought, how this whole bloody soulmate business created unexpected bonds wherever he went.

“She’s alive,” Cullen admitted, raw. “As far as I know, and I feel like I would…know. If she wasn’t. We met at the Kirkwall Circle, years ago, and she was…” He let out a breath, glancing over at Taran’s sleeping form, something complicated flitting across his face. “You know, it’s funny. She was from the shores of Ostwick, too. He reminds me of her sometimes, except, with Aria…” His lips quirked. “Her strength was different. She was a hurricane.” Pause. “Is. She is. Maker’s breath.”

There was almost too much to say in response to Cullen’s confession, and yet Dorian had no idea where to start. In Tevinter, mages spoke rarely of their unum vinctum except as acquisitions to be made. This…this ran so much deeper, meant so much more, and he was ill-equipped to meet raw honesty with raw honesty.

He cleared his throat. “Where is she now?” he tried, hating how uncertain he felt. “This hurricane of yours?”

Cullen’s gesture was wide and shockingly helpless. “Somewhere. I don’t even know. She left.” Pause. “She had every right to leave.” Pause. “I pushed her into leaving.” Pause. “We were bonded,”
and oh kaffas, was Dorian not expecting that bomb to drop, “but I never made her feel like I cared, that I wanted her to stay. I was too…”

He gestured again, as if cutting off his own words. This confessional moment apparently had its limits, but even those few words painted a stark image for Dorian. A Templar and a mage, trapped in one of those horrid circles together, bonded even as their positions, their very natures, were at war. No matter that he could tell something even deeper and darker lurked in their shared past: that horror was enough to make anyone crumble.

Cullen was pulling away, visibly embarrassed to have said so much—despite their unexpected closeness, they weren’t friends yet. “I will leave you two alone,” he said, moving toward the tent-flap. “I just wanted you to know you…have my support, whatever that can buy you.”

“Wait,” Dorian said before the commander could flee. He still felt as if the ground were moving under his feet (Cullen, former Templar, leader of the Inquisition troops…bonded to some rebel mage from Ostwick; what were the bloody chances?). “Wait,” he added, quieter, when Cullen paused and turned his head to look at him. Dorian did his best to peel away his own habitual masks, his own walls and shields and protections. It was small, but it was a start, and that sort of stark faith and honesty deserved some measure in return. “I’d like to talk more later, if you want. But for now, I just—you should realize…”

Dorian hesitated over the words, then gave a mental shrug and plunged ahead. It was literally the least he could do. “As a mage on the other side of one of these…hellishly complicated affairs, I can promise you: if you cared, she knew. She still knows.”

For a moment, he thought he’d grossly overstepped. Cullen was frozen in place, hands clenched into tight fists at his sides, face like carved ice. But as he watched, uncertain, Dorian could see the fissures. He could see the way those big shoulders shook, those clenched hands trembled—and, well, wasn’t this a visceral reminder that he wasn’t the only one to suffer pain and loss and fear in the heart of this whole soulmate thing?

Cullen finally gave a sharp nod, jaw clenched against whatever tidal wave of emotion he was swallowing back. Then he pushed through the tent flap, leaving a trail of swirling snow in his wake. Flakes drifted slowly to the ground as the heavy flap of cloth fell back into place, muffling the howl of the wind across the Frostbacks. Leaving him alone with his Voice.

His Voice.

Dorian closed his eyes, breathing in unsteady breaths. He felt as if he’d barely had a moment to collect himself since the warning bells rang out over Haven. He’d barely had time to grapple with the fact that Taran was alive (alive, thank the Maker), was safe, was…aware of who he was to Dorian, despite every fumbling attempt Dorian had made to keep it from him.

Taran knew, and in knowing, he had done everything he could to ensure Dorian survived the night.

“Well, then,” Dorian said to himself. Ridiculous how the very thought filled him up with pure emotion—gratitude and fear and love chief amongst them, swimming in his chest and making him feel so full he feared he might spill over at any moment. Had he ever felt anything like this? Maker, had he even thought it possible? “It looks like we’re alone at last.”

“dorian?”

The voice was small, rough, but it had Dorian spinning around so fast he nearly tripped himself. Taran was stirring beneath the ridiculous pile of blankets, lashes flickering as his eyes groggily
opened, hair sticking up around his face in adorable tufts. Dorian felt something powerful stutter inside of him, nearly knocking the breath from him. He stumbled forward a step, watching as Taran knuckled at his eyes with curled fists: a child, briefly, in his confusion. “dorian? are you—where—?”

Maker. Maker. He would kill anyone who tried to hurt this boy. He’d rip them into pieces with his bare teeth if he had to. “I’m here, sweetheart,” he soothed, fumbling his way to crouch gracelessly at Taran’s bedside, one hand cupping the curve of his jaw. Taran turned instinctively into the touch, blinking up at him with dazed-looking eyes. He immediately began to smile at the sight of Dorian, and kaffas, but if that wasn’t a punch straight to the chest. “I’m right here.”

“dorian,” Taran sighed happily. He reached up, hand fumbling a bit as if he hadn’t quite gotten full control over himself yet, and touched the back of Dorian’s wrist. That sweet smile only grew. “…hi.”

“Hi, he says.” Dorian laughed, but it caught, stuttered, midway through, coming out more fragile than he cared for. Taran dropped his hand with the beginning of a worried frown, but Dorian just tipped forward and pressed a kiss to the faint pucker forming between his brows, desperate to soothe it away. “No, no, no, sweetheart,” he said, sliding his fingers up into Taran’s hair, practically crooning. He felt wild with gratitude—nearly split into pieces by the depth of his live—and he shivered as he pressed another kiss to Taran’s temple, the crest of his cheek. “As if he hadn’t almost been buried alive.”

Taran turned his face, tilting it up for a real kiss, the frown melting away like snow. And void take him, could Dorian possibly do anything but chuff a quiet laugh and catch his cheeks between his palms, giving him that kiss—soft and slow and breathlessly sweet, all of him tipping forward into the headlong rush of pleasure. If he hadn’t already been hopelessly in love with this boy already, now would have been the moment: with Taran’s hands lifting to brush wondering fingertips along his throat and up to curl into his hair. With the soft puff of breath against his lips, followed by a liquid parting, a slick brush of tongues that was more question than heat. With the sound Taran made, as if he were falling just as hard, just as fast.

I love him, Dorian thought, heart pounding madly in his chest, fear fading away in the face of fierce certainty. I bloody well love him, and he loves me.

And if that wasn’t enough…

Well.

They would deal with that later.

He let himself sink into the moment, troubles—worries—fears for their future—all slipping away. Void take it. This was what mattered: the hot puff of breath against his lips as they parted just enough to fill their lungs before sinking back into the endless train of kisses. The slick wet filthy-yet-sweet sound, the blistering curl of Taran’s tongue against his, the way his hands fisted in Dorian’s robes. His hair.

He was unschooled but so very eager, coming alive beneath Dorian in a way that shouldn’t have been so bloody enticing. Dorian tried to squelch his own response and keep things slow, but oh, oh it was almost impossible when Taran made that noise in the back of his throat, licking deep into Dorian’s mouth and arching in instinctive invitation.

Danger, Dorian’s mind whispered, even as the rest of him hummed with avarice. If they bonded now—if Dorian pushed his way into that little cot and straddled Taran’s waist and claimed him down to the bone—then no one could ever take him away. Herald of Andraste be damned. And he wanted
Oh, how he wanted—

—but no, no, fuck, no.

He finally broke the kiss, before it could progress too far and get out of hand. Even so, Dorian was panting lightly, feeling restless beneath his own skin. Not exactly turned on, but…close. Awareness hummed all around him, through him, and he really did want nothing more than to climb inside that little cot and press himself to Taran’s side until they merged: inseparable.

Dangerous, dangerous thoughts. Dorian swallowed them back even as he pulled just a little bit away, smiling down at the way Taran lifted up off the makeshift pillow, trying to chase him back into another melting kiss. His eyes were closed and his cheeks flushed; he looked happy, despite the fact that he’d very nearly died ten times over this night.

“You,” Dorian murmured, brushing back a tangle of bronze hair, “are ridiculous.” He had no idea which of them he meant; it didn’t seem to matter. He was happy to be ridiculous with this man. (He couldn’t believe that this was where his life had taken him. Was there ever a time he thought it could be possible?) “Also, I am very mad at you.”

Taran blinked up at him, settling back against the pillow with a soft puff of breath. He looked so…so bloody perfect. This close, Dorian could count the faint golden freckles spread across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, like grains of sand on tanned skin. “If it’s all the same,” Taran began, his voice sounding much stronger now that he was fully awake, “I’d like to skip past the scolding and go straight back to making out.”

“Making out,” Dorian tsked. He rose to sit on the edge of the cot, fussing at the covers Taran had pushed aside. “There will be nothing of the sort; you’re weak as a kitten and, oh yes, just barely survived having a mountain fall on you.”

Taran snagged his hand, bringing it up to press a soft, meltingly warm kiss to the inside of his palm. “I’m sorry if I scared you,” he admitted quietly.

“Taran,” Dorian said. He had to fight to keep from toppling over into the bed with his Voice; it took everything he had not to curl protectively around him like a particularly lovelorn dragon. “You didn’t just scare me—you very nearly killed me. If I had lost you like that…”

He had to take a breath to collect himself before that remembered panic clawed its way out of his chest again. “We shouldn’t talk about it here,” Dorian finished, curling his hand in Taran’s when the other man simply gripped it tight. “Not in the middle of camp, with so many… We can talk about it later.”

“I’m sorry.” Taran pushed himself up, ignoring Dorian’s instant tutting. He caught at Dorian’s anxiously fluttering hands, lifting them together to press a kiss to his knuckles. Despite the wild bedhead and the relative youth of his face, he seemed very…wise in this moment. Mature in ways Dorian wasn’t sure he was ready to deal with—because it was one thing to think of love in the abstract and another to face the unflinching reality of it. The willingness to kill and be killed; the knowledge that he would do anything to protect this man from harm…and Taran would do the same, without question.

It was dizzying, overwhelming: fear and conviction tangled up in a ball inside his chest as Taran tugged him closer, into the bed after all—half-sprawled across his broad chest and feeling more complete than he ever had in his life.
“Dorian,” Taran said, old beyond his years eyes locked on his, keeping his gaze steady. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to tell you like that. I never meant…” He trailed off, then laughed, rusty-sounding.

“Well, to be honest, I never meant for any of this to happen. Holes in the sky and magic beneath my skin and some twisted magister out for my blood. All these people looking at me like I have the answer when I don’t. I don’t. I’m just fumbling around from here to there, trying to keep everything afloat, and then you—”

He brushed his knuckles along Dorian’s jaw, eyes searching his face. “I wanted to tell you, but there was no time. And I am so sorry I hurt you, but I didn’t know what to do, and I couldn’t face that thing if you were…”

He took a ragged breath when Dorian tipped close, letting their foreheads rest together. Dorian supposed he should be angry about the way he had been carted out of Haven—saved, without a choice in the matter—but it was all still too raw for him to feel anything but gratitude that they were both here, now. He slid his hand free and cupped the back of Taran’s neck, fingertips brushing up into the soft ends of his hair. “Later,” he soothed. “We can talk about it—and you can make it up to me—later.” Though: “…when did you know? About, ah, this thing we should be very careful not to say aloud lest the wrong pair of ears overhear and Leliana and Josephine take turns whipping me back and forth across the Frostbacks.”

That startled a laugh out of Taran. He tipped his face close, catching Dorian’s mouth in a soft kiss—just one, which melted almost instantly into another, then another. Dorian shivered and gripped the back of Taran’s neck, holding on for dear life as his lips instinctively parted for the tentative brush of Taran’s tongue. It was…Maker, hot, and good, good enough to have him gasping. He pressed up into it, letting Taran slowly (slowly, slowly, maddeningly slowly) deepen the kiss, swiping into his welcoming mouth and stealing the low noises he couldn’t seem to swallow back.

He was tipped back by it, coming undone in Taran’s arms, instantly forgetting where he was—who he was—why he really bloody well shouldn’t be doing this here of all places. Logic and reason fled like shadows before the sun and Andraste preserve him he was kissing back like a Chantry sister snuck out of vespers: eager and fumbling and filthy-hot, catching at Taran’s tongue with his teeth and scraping the curious flick of it. Swallowing around the groan and the thrust, the husking breath and those void-taken wet noises making his toes curl and his blood combust.

He felt like a teenager again, fingers grabbing desperately onto whatever he could manage, jaw aching as he opened himself up wide he could, aware that if he got caught, something terrible would happen and just not caring as his whole body went up in flames with just the barest touch. Taran’s hand fell to Dorian’s thigh, gripping hard, and that was enough to have him bucking up like he’d never bloody well done this before, hard, hard, and panting and—what the bloody void was he doing?

Dorian whined deep in his chest as Taran sucked once, hard, on his tongue. He’d fallen back somewhere along the way, with Dorian sprawled half-across him, and oh, it would be far too easy to swing his leg around and straddle Taran’s waist. Only the sound of raised voices gave Dorian pause; beneath him, Taran stilled, turning his face from the kiss to look at the tent-flap. His cheeks were flushed bright pink and his lips were wet. He looked so good Dorian had to pull back and cover his face in embarrassed horror.

Fuck, he was hard. He was hard, and he had been necking like teenagers with the Herald of Andraste, not ten feet away from the straggling remains of the Inquisition. If they’d been caught, Leliana and Josephine wouldn’t bother whipping him back across the Frostbacks—they’d bloody well find the highest peak and throw him off.
“This,” Dorian said, voice husky, “you, are terribly dangerous.”

“Yeah?” Taran asked, looking back at him with a shy, pleased smile that did terrible things to Dorian’s incredibly pervy insides. His heart insisted on swooping and diving in response. “Well, kissing you is more so. That’s when I knew,” he added when Dorian opened his mouth for a flippant remark. “That first time we…you know…before the mages arrived. When we kissed, and you were looking at me like you are right now, I just, I knew. It all made sense, how I was feeling.” He reached out, trying to tug Dorian closer, tongue darting out to wet his lower lip. “How you made me feel.”

Dorian shivered. “Oh,” he breathed, feeling like every heroine from every romance serial he’d ever snuck into the pages of a dusty old history tome. He thought he might burst, and if Taran kissed him again, there’d be no stopping them this time—he would lose his head and just keep kissing and kissing, rubbing up against all those delightful muscles until either someone found and stopped him from defiling their blessed Herald or, well, anyway.

Their faces were three inches away. Two. One. He could feel Taran’s breath hot against his lips, and oh Maker he ached.

Dorian pulled back with a breathless laugh, dodging the kiss. It took all his strength, but he managed to roll up onto his feet again, trembling hands smoothing down his robes to hide the extent of his, ah, well, anyway. “That is… That is good to know,” he said. “Though I should have told you earlier.”

“Yes,” Taran agreed. He rose up onto one elbow, watching Dorian with a crooked little smile.

Voices were still rising and falling just beyond their tent, the growing argument a much-needed reminder that they weren’t anywhere safe enough to be having this conversation. “But we have time now.”

“We have time now,” Dorian said. Somehow, through some miracle, that was actually true. “And I promise you that I will—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, fumbling into silence as the tent-flap was twitched aside. Mother Giselle stepped in, pausing at the threshold with one hand holding the canvas back just far enough that Dorian could see Josephine tensely rolling out a map as Cassandra and Cullen whisper-shouted some intense disagreement.

Snowflakes swirled inside on a cold breeze. Dorian shivered, though a good half of that was the frozen stare the good Chantry sister sent his way.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked in her heavy Orlesian accent, a single brow arching.

“But of course not,” Dorian immediately answered before Taran could. He wanted nothing more than to shoo this old crow away and curl back around Taran—to test the limits of their common sense and bloody well talk about everything that was happening around them—but he recognized this for the sign it was. There would be no real talking (or anything else, really) out here, exposed in the center of the Inquisition. He should content himself with the moments he was given and wait for his chance for more. “I was just leaving.”

Taran pushed himself up, frowning. “Dorian,” he began.

Taran didn’t have the years of experience painting pretty lies on top of secret desires, so Dorian took the lead. He waved an airy hand. “I need fresh air, anyway,” he said. “And you, I am sure, need sleep. Do be sure he gets it,” he added in an off-hand way to the sister, pushing back the tent-flap and stepping outside before Taran could stop him. It felt like being torn in two, letting the heavy
canvas separate them, but…

But he bloody well needed to get used to it, didn’t he? If the way the huddled groups of Inquisition soldiers and scouts were now looking at him now—from the corners of their eyes with renewed interest and suspicion—were anything to go on, he was going to have to get used to quite a lot in order to stay by this man’s side.

Straightening his shoulders, keeping the wealth of crushing emotion he felt off his face, Dorian lifted his chin and strode away from his Voice’s tent as if it were the easiest thing in the world…still intensely aware of that steady heartbeat beating in time with his own.
Leliana

Chapter by delazeur, Khirsah

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maker, if you are still watching, if you can still be bothered to care, guide me now.

Leliana sat hunched several feet from her bitterly arguing companions, gaze trained on the Herald’s tent. Inside, the biggest, newest problem facing Thedas was slowly unfolding like a poisonous snake…and judging from the others’ reactions, it would be on her shoulders to see this threat resolved.

Handled.

Eliminated.

Maker. Maker, damn you, guide me.

The Herald of Andraste Voice-bound to a Tevinter mage. There would be no coming back from that. There would be no holding this fractious, fractured Inquisition together—and on the heels of the destruction of the Inquisition would come the end of the world. Nothing else, nobody else, could face down this terrible darkness. They needed to hold strong no matter the challenge.

No matter what she had to do to ensure it.

A blade in the darkness? A drop of poison warming wine? How would she be forced to kill the love of a young man’s life? Would she do Dorian the honor of looking in the eyes as he bled out for the sake of all Thedas-kind, or would she slink in cowardly grief—the last shreds of the girl she’d once been lost on the wind?

She didn’t know. She couldn’t see her path. Void, if only she could think with all this racket.

“Choose a direction,” Leliana snapped, interrupting the flow of angry words. She felt like her chest was a battleground and her mind filled with ever-darkening clouds. She could practically feel the hot steam of blood on her hands already. “Anywhere but back where we came from. And then let us end this.”

Please let us end this.

“It is not that simple,” Cullen and Cassandra snapped as one, united for a single shining second. They were facing off across the makeshift table, one of the desperate armfuls of maps they’d managed to sneak out before Haven’s fall weighted down by shards of broken stone.

Leliana tried not to read too much meaning into those jagged pieces of rocks, but her trained eye saw a weapon in everything. “Then we make it that simple,” she said. “What else can we do?”

“We can fight back,” Cassandra said, even as Cullen growled, “We can do the sensible thing and retreat.”

Cassandra sucked in an outraged breath as if this were the first time he’d suggested as much. It wasn’t. Leliana had lost count of the number of times they’d cycled through each stage of this
argument, their voices rising and falling, drawing worried, weary looks from their beaten-down men.

What a nightmare they were living.

“Retreat?” Cassandra demanded. “We cannot retreat. If we pull back, there will be no one to stop this, this monster from taking over the world.”

“And if we try to face him now,” Cullen said, crossing his arms, “we will all die. I have lost too many men today to be willing to throw more bodies at that creature until we have a plan.”

Josephine, bless her conciliatory heart, tried once more to stop the fight before it could devolve back into useless shouting. “Please,” she said. “We are all exhausted. We need time to consider every option before we—”

“What is there to consider?” Cassandra demanded, slamming her fist down on the table. Snow fell lazily around them, catching in the twists of her braid, like the snowdrops Morrigan had once begrudgingly allowed the Warden to weave through loose strands of dark hair. Strange that she was looking back and thinking fondly of the Blight as a simpler, easier time. The Maker’s sense of humor truly knew no limit. “We are the Inquisition. We formed to fight back, to do whatever must be done. We cannot falter now. The Herald—”

“The Herald needs time to recover,” Cullen pushed back, “just as much as the rest of us. The least we can do is give him time to draw breath after he survived a whole bloody mountain falling on his head.”

Cassandra sucked in a breath as if to shout, but when she spoke next, her words were soft. Almost reverent. “You mean,” she said, leaning her weight against her hands, “when the Maker brought him back to us. When he defeated death.”

Leliana jerked her head up. She wasn’t the only one—both Josephine and Cullen were watching Cassandra now with curious looks in their eyes. Frozen, as if she had said the one thing they had all silently promised themselves to avoid.

The ensuing silence rang heavy with meaning. No one looked back toward the Herald’s tent, despite the fact that it hung heavy in their awareness—a northern light reorienting the landscape of their universe. Forging new paths they would be bound to follow, no matter how hard the remains of their conscience fought against this bloody inevitability.

I do not believe, Leliana wanted to say, but the lie tasted sour on her tongue because... because she did believe, she believed with everything she was, and that frightened her, angered her, more than she wanted to admit. When she was younger, faith was like a garment she slung over her shoulders, wearing it close to her skin. Now it felt more like armor, limiting her field of motion even as it protected her, and... And Maker, once upon the time she had thought she was chosen. Was she really ready to don the holy armor and fight alongside someone who actually appeared to be so?

Was she really ready to break him so he could more easily fit into the image of the shining figure the Inquisition—the world—so desperately needed him to be?

Yes, she told herself, hands curling into fists, nails biting into her palms. Yes, yes, yes. Whatever must be done.

Josephine let out an uneven breath, sweeping back a fall of dark hair. Even she looked shaken down to her core. She had been very willing to use rumors of Taran’s holy calling to their advantage
before; would she feel the same way now that the world seemed determined to twist itself to fit their carefully cultivated lie? (Was it a lie?) “Whatever Cullen means,” she said, “we must make our decision. I agree with him.” She lifted her chin when Cassandra turned a heavy glare on her, facing the other woman head-on. “We are not strong enough for another fight. Not yet.”

That broke the delicate uncertainty of the moment, launching them back into full-out war. Leliana… was glad. Relieved, despite the fact that she’d been silently praying for an end to this bickering just moments ago. This, at least, was familiar. Comfortable. Real. Taran…what Taran represented…what Taran could mean to the rest of the world…what she’d have to protect at all costs…

The ground kept shifting under their feet. It was soothing to at least be on solid ground again, no matter how cold or inhospitable.

A blade in the dark or poison warming wine. An end to this before it can destroy us all. The Herald will learn to survive his grief.

After all: hadn’t she been forced to do the same?

“We must press our advantage,” Cassandra was saying, voice rising again as the argument bloomed like coals in a bellow. “Now is the time to strike, when our enemy is weakest.”

“When we are at our weakest too,” Cullen countered, rounding on her.

Josephine threw up her hands between them. “Please,” she said, and Leliana looked up just in time to see a figure slip at last from Taran’s tent. She tilted her head, ignoring the fight to watch as Dorian straightened his robes, hands moving restlessly—anxiously?—over the fine fabric. He lifted his face, tipped up toward the sky; snowflakes caught on his dark hair and lashes as he silently studied the stars.

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, watching him, muscles tense. A blade in the dark or—

He was cast in shadow and striations of light, the fire catching on bits of silver and gold woven into his robe. Other eyes were drawn to him, and whispers rose in a susurrus wave, underscoring the need to act fast, to act now, to finish this before it could finish them. And yet Leliana couldn’t seem to force herself to move: squinting and trying to see in Dorian the Warden she had cared so deeply for. Solona had loved—still loved—Alistair with everything she was. She had fought to be by his side, fought to make sure he was happy, fought to create a world where they could be happy together. What would she say to the Tevinter mage in love with the Maker’s chosen? What advice would she give Leliana about the impossibility of allowing them to have the happiness she and Alistair had gone through so much to claim?

You can’t deny him the other half of his soul, Leliana, she might have protested. It is in the Maker’s hands.

Well. Perhaps. But the Maker had put it in her hands, and the danger this man represented—the pure, unadulterated threat he posed to the Herald, the Inquisition, the entire world, just by being who he was and loving who he loved—wasn’t something she could ignore. Common sense said it was kinder to kill him before things got out of control, but.

But.

Maker save her, why couldn’t she force herself to just get it done?

Leliana looked away, cursing beneath her breath, feeling the weight of the star-studded sky pressing down against her shoulders. Justinia would understand. (Justinia would never understand.) The
Maker would forgive her. (The Maker had abandoned her.) She had to do what she must, for the survival of them all. (She couldn’t stand to watch the Herald suffer the way she had suffered; void take her, he was just a child.) She—

She—

Fuck.

Leliana drew a serrated breath, curling in tight on herself, ripped to pieces. She could sense the breaking point finally coming, within and without, the argument winding up to a point of frustrated inevitability.

“What would you have me tell them?” Cullen was yelling loud enough for the whole camp to hear. “This isn’t what we asked them to do!” Out of the corner of her eye, Leliana watched miserably as Dorian made his way from the Herald’s tent, heading toward a small cookfire where Blackwall, Bull, and Varric sat in hunched shapes about the coals.

Bull looked up, catching her eye, and Leliana quickly looked away. Damned qunari saw too much.

“We cannot simply ignore this. We must find a way!” Cassandra said, slamming her fists down again. The jagged rocks scattered and jumped.

Cullen gestured sharply. “And who put you in charge? We need a consensus, or we have nothing.”

“Please,” Josephine begged, “we must use reason! Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we’re hobbled.”

“That can’t come from nowhere!”

Cassandra threw up her hands. “Enough! This is getting us nowhere.”

Cullen dragged his fingers through his hair. “Well, we’re agreed on that much,” he said. He looked a good decade or more older than his age, worn about the edges as if these last few hours had been steadily seeping his strength. Maker, could she relate. She felt as if she were balanced on the edge of some horrible fate: darkness on one side, light on the other. A decision away from tipping the blade, and oh Maker how she missed Justinia now.

“What would you advise, my friend?” Leliana whispered into her folded arms. She drew her legs up tighter, curling in on herself, hyperaware of the Herald’s tent on one side of her and Dorian sitting by the fire on the other. Hyperaware of the dark thoughts swirling through her, of the doubt, of the fear, of the cold calculus of war…and the impossible hope of mercy.

She looked up, watching the stars, feeling so very cold and lost inside: trembling on that terrible edge.

And then, a voice.

A song.

Shadows fall, and hope has fled. Steel your heart: the dawn will come.

Leliana closed her eyes against the sudden hot prick of tears. She sucked in a breath—sharp, painful—and dug her nails into her palms, because oh Maker, for a moment… For one shining moment, that voice sounded like her old friend’s. Dorothea, Justinia, whatever name the world seemed fit to give her: here, at last, her warm hand falling to Leliana’s shoulder as she stared into the void.
It felt like an answer to a prayer. It felt like another miracle, piercing her chest as Leliana looked over and saw in a wash of tears, not Giselle, but the Herald standing by her side. The light from the fire caught in his hair, his eyes, warming his skin until he glowed like the Maker’s chosen ought. Gilded-bright and shining strong and so very good—and in that one moment when he sensed her staring and met her eyes with so much empathy it felt like she might shatter, Leliana gave up struggling. She gave up fighting.

She simply…believed. And chose to let fate take them where it may.

“The shepherd’s lost,” she sang, adding her voice to the rising tide. Mourning her lost friend even as she silently let go the piercing pain of her grief. She knew—she knew what Justinia would have wanted. What Taran needed. Maker, perhaps what Leliana herself needed to feel whole again. “And his home is far. Keep to the stars: the dawn will come.”

Others took up the song—Cullen, Cassandra, even Josephine brimming with renewing light. Across the way, Dorian stood, his expression reflecting shades of worry and longing and fear as he looked around at the growing surge of, of, of worship. It felt like being back in the Chantry, sensing the rising tide of faith lifting into a single combined voice, and there was no way he and Taran would be able to survive this, but she would be damned if she didn’t do everything in her power to change the course of history with them. To save them, as long as she could.

I will protect you, she vowed, feeling that horrible moment of indecision—of fate—pass. Her muscles uncoiled and her chest felt lighter than it had in an age as she lifted her face to the stars and sang her heart out, making every word a promise to the both of them.

To the Inquisition itself.

“Bare your blade and raise it high. Stand your ground: the dawn will come.”

The mountain echoed with their voices. People were dropping to their knees in front of their chosen Herald—crying, singing, laughing with the relief of faith. The fear was beaten back bit by bit by bit as devotion took its place, the shining light of Taran Trevelyan leaving little room for doubt.

Some ways away, Bull was silently shaking his head. Solas stood toward the shadows, watching with narrowed eyes. Krem sang, full-throated, caught in the moment. By Dorian’s side, Varric dashed tears from his eyes, mouth forming quiet curses even as he hopelessly reflected back the fervent light building, building, building inside them all.

There is no stopping this now, Leliana thought, bursting with fear and gratitude as she watched the man—the boy—the figurehead she had sworn herself to serve cast an increasingly anxious look around his growing horde of apostles, searching desperately for an island in the storm.

His eyes fell on Dorian, and he made as if to go to him—but there was a score or more of kneeling disciples between them, singing with everything they had: keeping them apart. And Dorian…

Dorian, proving more clever, more selfless than Leliana had been willing to give him credit for, looked away. His hands were curled into desperate fists as if he hated himself for not going to the man he loved, but he kept apart, kept their connection secret, kept them both safe—at least for now.

Good, Leliana thought, rising to her feet as the song reached its crescendo, loud enough to shake the very heavens. That at least will buy us time. Because they needed time, needed space, needed another half-dozen new miracles to take this fledgling sense of faith and turn it into a movement that would shape the world…
…without getting shattered in the process.

_The night is long_
And the path is dark
Look to the sky:
For one day soon,
The dawn will come.

Chapter End Notes

Part II will get rolling very soon with a familiar half-elf dreamer and some very special guest stars. (Hint: Their names rhyme with bawk and benris.)

Thank you SO MUCH for all of your comments--they keep me going through this monster fic. :)

P A R T  I

T H E  E N D
“Stupid…Inquisition,” Feynriel muttered beneath his breath as he made his (admittedly shaky) way around the snow-encrusted rocks. It was cold—colder than he’d been in a very long time—icy wind knifing down the face of the Frostbacks. It sent his cloak flying and long strands of hair whipping into his eyes, no matter how hard he tried to keep it neatly tucked out of his way.
It was a mess. He was a mess. This whole bloody thing was one terrible mess after another.


“Stupid,” he said, louder, spitting out a hank of hair, one hand falling onto the precarious pile of rock. “Inquisition. Always. Moving!”

Three years. He’d been chasing after them from the ruined husk of Haven to…this place, wherever the void he was…for three years. Or, okay, maybe just a week, but it certainly felt like three years, with him huddled up beneath furs every night to dip into this dream or that, adjusting his path to mimic theirs. His latest dreams seemed to indicate they’d finally settled down in some old ruin of a castle, but Maker alone knew where that was, and he—

He—

Feynriel yelped, awkwardly leaping back at a sudden flash of dark movement out of the corner of his eye. He whipped around, feet instantly tangling up in the heavy robes he’d donned, arms thrust out to keep from falling on his ass as, oh void, a bared blade leveled threateningly close.

It was huge, monstrous really, the steel catching distant sunlight and spearing it back in brilliant bursts. Feynriel stared at the obscenely sharp tip hovering just a few inches from his throat before letting his gaze slowly, slowly lift along its length to the hooded figure that held it.

Oh Maker, he though, fear and—surprisingly—annoyance making his whole skinny frame shake. I can’t believe I’m going to die in the literal asscrack of the world.

It was almost funny enough to make him laugh. Instead, he sucked in a breath, trying to focus on appearing far more innocently harmless than he was. “Oh,” he said, voice cracking just a little from nerves. “Um, hello. You know, if this is highway robbery, you’re going to be very disappointed.”

The highwayman growled—actually growled!—and advanced a half-step closer. The tip of his blade kissed Feynriel’s bared throat.

Risk a fireball or go with a cone of cold? The former required a bigger movement, which could give him away, but the latter wasn’t as satisfying—or as warm. And whether it was roasting logs or roasting thieves, Feynriel could certainly use something to toast his backside. “All right,” he said, beginning to move his fingers in the subtle beginnings of the spell, keeping his gaze locked on the cowled figure’s face: the better to keep his attention. “You can try riffling through my empty purse, but don’t say I didn’t warn—”

“Fenris,” another voice interrupted, sharp with surprise. Feynriel froze, a single spark jumping from finger to finger as a second figure pushed its way around the pile of boulders into view. He was cloaked, too, deep green hood pulled up to disguise his face in shadows. “What’s going on?”

“This…boy…was attacking our camp,” the man, Fenris, growled in a, oh, hey, surprisingly familiar voice.

“I was doing no such thing,” Feynriel protested, both hands lifting slowly even as the corner of his mouth began to twitch into a smile. Because yes, yes, that was a familiar voice, and a familiar honking giant sword, and a familiar shadow hovering by the swordman’s side as Aidan Hawke turned in surprise, taking him in for the first time.

Feynriel grinned and gave a small wave—aborted when Fenris growled and pushed the blade right against the bob of his Adam’s apple.
Aidan reached up to yank back his hood, revealing rumpled black curls, familiar silvery scars, and comically wide grey eyes. “Feynriel?” he said—then laughed, reaching to touch his Voice’s wrist. “Fenris, wait, it’s Feynriel. Remember him? From the alienage?”

The sword thankfully lowered. “No,” Fenris grumbled, but he did sheath the monstrous thing on his back. Its hilt stuck up a good two feet taller than the crown of his silver head as he pushed back his own hood, revealing an all too familiar scowl. “I don’t.”

“It’s what I get for being so bloody forgettable, I suppose,” Feynriel said cheekily, already falling forward to grab Aidan in a crushing hug. Fenris actually tensed as he reached for him, but Aidan was reaching back, laughing—that kind, familiar sound that made him want to laugh, too, feeling warm inside for the first time in weeks. “I had no idea you two were so close!” Feynriel happily let himself be enfolded in the bigger mage, squeezing back tight. It had been years since they’d seen each other in person—since Aidan Hawke and his friends had saved him from the Fade and Tranquility—but less than a month since their paths had crossed in dreams.

Still. Maker, but the real thing felt so much better to squeeze.

“I thought you’d decided to go to the Wardens instead.”

“We did,” Aidan said, practically lifting Feynriel up off his feet for one breathless moment before setting him back down again. Fenris had retreated back a few steps, arms crossed, but he didn’t look quite so hostile anymore. Or, well, he didn’t look quite so murderous anyway. “We were almost there, too, when I received word from Varric that the Herald needed us right away. We turned right back around and headed to Haven.”

Fenris snorted. “A lot of good that did us,” he said.

Feynriel had to wince. “I guess it’s a good thing neither of us managed to arrive before it was razed to the ground,” he said. “A lot of people died there.”

“How do you know?” Aidan asked, though it was clear enough by his face that he had an idea. “Have you…heard word? From anyone?”

“No,” he admitted slowly, “but a loss like that…it leaves a mark on your dreams. You know.”

Aidan sighed and scrubbed briefly at his face. Feynriel almost reached out to touch his shoulder, but Fenris was already unfolding silently and stepping close, deep green eyes locked on his bonded. “Yes,” Aidan said, sounding suddenly so very tired, as if just the memory of what had happened in Kirkwall was enough to take the wind out of him. “I suppose I do.”

Fenris dropped a hand to the small of Aidan’s back, and Aidan looked over with the faintest of smiles. Almost instantly, its twin touched Fenris’s lips, softening the harsh lines of his face in a moment that felt far too intimate to bear witness to.

Far too…raw.

Feynriel cleared his throat and looked up toward the sewn-together sky, doing his best not to look as painfully awkward and out of place as he felt. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ve been trying to follow the Inquisition from Haven on their wild goose chase, always at least ten steps behind. I guess you’ve been doing the same?”

“More or less,” Aidan agreed. “It’s been slow going for us, though, since we don’t have much to go on. Just rumors and the occasional daft hermit and…you know,” he added, voice dropping flat in obvious amusement, “you can look again. I promise we’re done being disgusting.”
Fenris grumbled something that had Aidan snickering, and Feynriel couldn’t help but laugh along as he looked back at them. There was a sliver more space between them, but only a sliver, and… Maker’s buckteeth, but Fenris was actually ducking his head and grinning.

This…this was nothing like the surly elf he’d known. It was a little bizarre, like looking at a distorted mirror image, but it also felt good to see. Promising, like the phantom whisper of his own ridiculously romantic dreams of Krem.

Would Krem look at him like that someday, up through his lashes, one big hand on the small of his back? Would it feel like they fit so perfectly together, like they were moving in synch, as if each step they took was all part of some longer conversation no one else could hear?

He wanted that. He longed for it so badly he ached, and yet he’d been so bloody busy chasing the Inquisition from here to there that he hadn’t been in Krem’s dreams in longer than he cared to think about.

Later, Feynriel promised himself, clearing his throat as Fenris subtly tilted his head back toward the big rock. Aidan nodded once, and Fenris slowly pulled away, casting Feynriel a single hard look before slipping out of sight. Snow crunched beneath his feet; Aidan, the absolute sop, watched him go.

“Gag,” Feynriel said, deadpan. “I am gagging.”

“With jealousy, maybe,” Aidan teased, hitting a bit closer to the truth than he intended. Though really, Feynriel couldn’t begrudge the two their happiness: they’d certainly paid for it in blood and tears. “Fenris is going to pack up camp while you and I catch up. I assume you don’t mind us tagging along on your way to find this blasted Inquisition?”

Feynriel brushed a sheet of snow off the top of one of the flatter-looking rocks and idly hopped on. He instantly hopped off again, hissing, “Cold cold cold!”

The corners of Aidan Hawke’s grey eyes crinkled as he grinned.

Feynriel pointed at him. “Don’t start,” he warned, laughter wending between each word. “I happen to be a particularly feared mage in some corners of Tevinter.” He dropped a hand to the stone, sending a subtle blaze of heat through it—enough to chase away the chill, at least, leaving a melted circle about two yards around its base. Feynriel gave the rough surface one final pass before hopping back up, more elegantly this time. He crossed his legs with faux primness and offered Aidan his hand.

Aidan took it, letting his staff rest against the rock before hopping up next to him. Their shoulders brushed, and Feynriel felt a strange sense of familiarity and uncertainty all at once. They really had only been in each others’ physical presence for…Maker, what, a full day? If that? As well as he knew Aidan by now—and as much as he cared for his long-time friend—these little moments of contact were like earthquakes at the foundations Feynriel’s ordered world.

Everything is changing, he thought, before shaking his head and forcing himself to concentrate. “We’ll be heading north-west,” he said. “The Inquisition’s already reached their destination. Skyguard or Cloudhold or something like that: some old, conveniently abandoned castle they intend to fix up.”

“An old, conveniently abandoned castle in the middle of the Frostback mountains,” Aidan mused, leaning back on one hand. “Just waiting for them in their greatest hour of need. It seems…”
“Unlikely?” Feynriel offered.

Aidan flashed a smile. “I was going to say poetic. Like something out of one of Varric’s stories. Ah, speaking of Varric…”

Feynriel straightened, startled. “Oh!” he said, understanding immediately. “Oh, of course, I’m sorry. Yes, he’s all right. He made it out of Haven alive and is currently settling in to his new home. I spotted references to him in a few of the Seeker’s dreams.”

Some of the tension threading through Aidan seeped out at his words. “Good,” he said, visibly relieved. “Good, I’m glad he made it. Not that I’m surprised. If he could survive Kirkwall with the lot of us hanging like a string of monkeys around his neck, that dwarf can survive just about anything.”

“Speaking of the lot of you,” Feynriel began. “Where are… I mean, how is everyone?”

A single black brow arched. “You mean you haven’t been keeping tabs?” Aidan asked, then waved off Feynriel’s sputter of protest. “Aveline is still in Kirkwall, keeping the peace with Donnic. Merrill’s helping elven refugees who’ve been displaced by the war. Sebastian’s in Starkhaven, and Isabela is out raining down hell on whoever’s lucky enough to get in her way.”

“Don’t you mean unlucky?” Feynriel asked.

Aidan grinned. “You don’t remember her that well, I take it.” He continued as a hot flush made its way up to Feynriel’s ears. “Carver and Anders left after the… Well. After everything that happened with the Chantry. They send cryptic letters now and again, and we’ve managed to meet up twice since, but Anders has to keep a low profile. Everyone knows his face, now.”

The way he said that—sad, grim, tired—had a shiver working its way down Feynriel’s spine. “And you and Fenris are together,” he said, changing the subject.

“Of course,” Aidan said, as if it couldn’t possibly be more obvious. Which, Feynriel figured, fair enough. “I tried convincing him to stay with the Wardens while I came back here, but he wasn’t having any of it. If I snuck away to spare him the danger, I’m certain he’d chase me down within a week.”

“A week,” Fenris scoffed from just behind them, startling them both into nearly tumbling off their now-cooling rock. He shifted the heavy-looking pack strapped over one shoulder, green eyes moving between them. “As if it would take me more than a day to follow your trail.”

Aidan was instantly smiling, reaching out to pluck the bag from Fenris’s shoulder; Fenris resisted, dark brows arching, creating an interesting moment of tug-of-war that ended with the elf relenting with a scoff that tried to sound more aggrieved than he clearly was. “Fenris,” Aidan said, settling the pack easily across his own (swordless) shoulders, “has convinced himself I’m as stealthy as a druffalo.”

“It didn’t take much convincing,” Fenris said flatly, and Feynriel had to turn away, one hand muffling his laugh.

“See how terribly he treats me?” Aidan protested, clearly nothing but pleased at the playful banter as the three of them fell into step together, moving slowly, inexorably toward the Inquisition’s new home. Their new home, if all went well. “Some Voice he is.”

The last was said with an undercurrent of something deeper, warmer, and Fenris actually flushed, looking away with a soft clearing of his throat. He looked happy, too, the sharp edges still there, but
dulled somewhat. Or maybe it was more that all those hollow places had been filled in.

Whatever it was, it left an ache deep in Feynriel’s ribcage—thrilled for his friends, but wishing that every step didn’t lead him just a little bit farther from his own happy ending.

_Someday,_ Feynriel promised himself—promised the distant specter of Krem, who he hadn’t seen in his dreams for so very long. There was just too much to do, too strong a purpose, to be so selfish. Yet, Aidan and Fenris by his side, the Inquisition somewhere in the steep hills of the Frostbacks, Feynriel _promised_ himself that he’d find his way back to his own Voice again…before the whole bloody world managed to rip them apart for good.

Days passed.

Snow fell.

He _may_ have gotten them lost a time or two.

But eventually—inevitably—the three of them reached the mountain peak that had been haunting Feynriel’s dreams and there, _there_ was the crumbling old castle: beautiful in the sinking sunlight, red-gold fire glinting off its half-boarded windows. It looked, Feynriel decided as they paused to stare down at their destination _finally_ within reach, like a battered old dragon unspooled in slumber. It had seen one battle too many in its time, but there was still beauty in the way its scales caught the light. There was still grace in the protective curl of its tail.

_Home_ something inside him whispered, and he turned his head just in time to see Aidan whisper the word. He couldn’t even say what called to him, but something about this place made him feel grateful tears prick hot against his lashes, and Feynriel had to turn away before he could see that moment of kinship in either Aidan or Fenris’s eyes. Despite everything, he’d never much believed in fate.

And yet standing here, staring down at Skyhold, Feynriel couldn’t help but feel as if he were being slowly tugged weft and weave into something much bigger than himself—into something that _mattered._ Him and Aidan and Fenris and Dorian and his Herald and…and all of them, _all_ of them, woven like threads into some greater tapestry none of them were yet able to see.

It was exhilarating. It was terrifying. He wanted to run screaming even as he took an unsteady step forward, leading the way down the mountain pass toward the waiting castle. It would be full dark by the time they reached the drawbridge, and he wanted some warm food and a chance to rinse off the dust of the road before he forced himself to grapple with all this… _whatever_ he’d found himself mixed up in.

“All right,” Aidan said, echoing his thoughts in that way he had. “Let’s go see what fresh trouble we can get ourselves into.”

Fenris huffed a breath; Feynriel just shook his head. Aidan, for his part, laughed—and Feynriel found himself chuckling along, even as his heart fought to burst right out of his chest. Because yeah, it felt a hell of a lot like they were marching into some crazy unknown _yet again,_ and this time, there was a good chance not even his dreams could save him from the fallout. He was just going to have to trust that everything would turn out right in the end.
Maker help them all.
“I shit you not,” Varric said with a laugh, one friendly elbow digging into Krem’s ribs. “That’s what she wanted. Three goats and a sheaf of wheat. No more, no less.”

Krem playfully pushed the dwarf back. It was getting late in the afternoon, dipping steadily into evening. The stars were beginning to peer out beneath their blanket of clouds, and the last bit of gold framed the high peaks of their new mountain home beautifully. The air was cool, but never quite cold—some sort of magic that lingered from the time this place was built, no doubt. “Three goats,” he parroted back. “And a sheaf of wheat. To woo someone.”

Varric lifted his brows and spread his hands as if to say: well now, what can you do?

“You’re full of shit, then,” Krem decided, still grinning. The banter was familiar, comfortable. Hanging around the likes of Varric was almost like spending time with the Chargers—come to think of it, the nimble-fingered dwarf would fit right in with their motley crew. He made a mental note to bring the idea up with Bull, later. “Full of nothing but bull and shit.”

“Every word of it is true,” Varric said. He clasped one hand over his heart, even as he winked as they passed the duo of guards watching the inner gate. One of them, blond-haired and round-cheeked, laughed and pretended to wave him off. “If you ever get the pleasure of meeting Guard-captain Aveline Vallen…don’t ask her. Or do,” he added thoughtfully, “but be ready to run. Fast.”

Krem shook his head. Varric was full of more stories than an old doxy and just as happy to share them over a tankard. Too bad he was so shit at lying—or maybe he just didn’t care to pretty up his lies to pass them off as truth. Maker knew it was amusing taking in the crap he was willing to shovel. “If I ever find my arse in Kirkwall, I’ll be sure to do that.” Krem stopped, tilting his head toward the small knot of guards gathering at the outer barbican. “You want to join us for game?”

Varric scratched at his chin, glancing down that way. Snow was beginning to fall in soft, silvery flakes. “You go on, kid,” he said after a moment’s thought. “It’s getting on, and I promised the Inquisitor I’d join him for dinner.”

The Inquisitor. A shiver worked its way down Krem’s spine at the title. It was still so new, none of them quite knew how to say it naturally yet. None of them quite knew how to react yet. The title—their shining leader, who may or may not be fucking divine—the convenient castle, everything was just…a little too much to take in. To really get your arms around.

If you sat and thought about it too long, it left you dizzy. Funny how becoming part of history in the making felt a hell of a lot like falling off a cliff. “Go on, then,” Krem said, fishing up a smile as he backed away toward the inner gates. “Enjoy your dinner; I’ve got coin to win.”

Varric offered a crooked smile. “May the Maker shine on you,” he said faux-gravely. “And may Scout Harding take mercy and not fleece you for everything you’re worth.”

He could have made some off-color joke about how Scout Harding could fleece him of anything she wanted, any time she wanted, but he figured that sort of banter was better suited to Bull or one of the Chargers. Varric was getting to be a good friend, but there were still things he didn’t know about the dwarf, and he didn’t want bawdy tales to spread.

Instead, Krem spun around on his heel and headed through the inner gates, smiling at the guards as
he passed. Once he stepped out of the gatehouse and onto the high, arching bridge, the cold slammed into him. It was like being hit upside the head with a maul, if the maul was covered in icicles and ready to freeze his arse off, Maker.

“Shit shit shit shit shit,” he muttered to himself, hurrying across the snow-blanketed stone. He didn’t look over the sides, didn’t take in the sheer drop to spiked rocks hundreds of meters down. Instead, he focused on the torchlight already making the barbican glow with warmth; he could hear laughter over the howl of the wind. “Shit shit shit shit shit.”

Krem shoved open the far gatehouse door and flung himself inside, shutting it behind him with a clang. One of the guards—a boy barely older than their Inquisitor—looked up from his mug of steaming tea.

“Cold,” the kid said by way of greeting. “Cold as balls.”

“Cold as balls,” Krem agreed, brushing snow off his shoulders. Funny how quickly he’d gotten used to the relative warmth inside the main castle walls. “Everyone already gathering?”

A shriek of laughter, drifting down the steps, was answer enough. The kid shrugged a shoulder. “Enough to get a game started,” he said. Then, lifting his mug, “Want some tea?”

Krem would rather gargle nug piss than the swill they’d managed to scrounge up. He smiled and backed toward the steps, trying not to look like he was beating a hasty retreat. “Thanks,” he said, taking a step up. “That’s nice of you to offer,” he said, taking another. “But I think I hear money that’s waiting to line my pockets.” Step, step.

“Suit yourself,” the young guard said, closing his eyes as he took a long sip of his watery old tea as if he’d never tasted anything sweeter. Or maybe he was still stuck in the post-thank-the-Maker-I’m-alive appreciation of every little thing that came his way. Whichever it was, Krem was more than happy to swing around and make his way up the steps to leave him to his solitude.

A raucous game was already underway when he made his way to the top of the guardhouse. A table had been set up near the wide windows that looked down on the outer gate, but fires roared in flanking fireplaces, keeping the cold at bay. One of the guards stood at duty at all times even as the others lounged around the makeshift table. Cards fell like scattering leaves as Scout Harding fanned her hand for everyone to see. “Looks like the take’s mine again,” she said in that sly-sweet voice that was half a stammer, half throaty cockiness. She tilted her head in welcome as Krem stepped toward the group. “Too bad about your terrible luck.”

“Some day,” Blackwall grumbled, corners of his mouth ticked up into a wry smile, “your luck’s going to run dry. And I’ll be there, make no mistake.”

“You’ll be there…what? Helping me carry home all my winnings? Arse-bare-naked if you keep losing as bad as you are now,” Harding sassed back, a brow arching. The whole table erupted into laughter, Blackwall loudest amongst them.

Krem shook his head, grinning, and skirted past the currently full table to join the guard by her station. Scouts and soldiers would come and go as the night wore on, duties calling them here or there. Sera might even make an appearance, which was usually Krem’s cue to cut his losses and run—there was no telling how wild the evening would get when she joined the party. “Nice night,” he greeted the guard—a pretty older woman, somewhere past fifty, with the occasional streak of black in her silvery hair.

She glanced at him, dark eyes bright. “Nice night,” she echoed. “Anything going on with the inner
Funny how people both expected him to know all the gossip and be willing to share it. “Nope,” Krem said with an easy smile. He was no Ben-Hassrath, but he knew how to keep his damn mouth shut. Most of the time. “Unless you count rumors that Madame de Fer has taken to sacrificing unwary stonemasons who try to work on the hall when she’s resting.”

The guard didn’t so much as blink. “Good for her,” she said easily. “A woman like that needs her sleep. It’s hard work being that alluring,” she added at Krem’s lifted brow.

The words Vivienne and alluring crashing together in his skull was almost enough to have him going cross-eyed. He shook his head to push the dissonance away. “Uh, right,” he said, breaking eye contact to look out into the snow-driven night. It looked pretty awful out there, the swirl of white seeming to grow with each second that passed. Funny how storms seemed to sweep down from the high peaks with little warning. It made standing watch a fool’s errand half the time. Why, there could be strangers right there just under their noses and Krem wouldn’t be able to—

Krem paused, squinting, as the black smudge of rocks seemed to move closer. They were clumped close together, a trio of jagged ends rising above them like the hilts of blades or staves, and he was already putting his fingers between his lips and whistling shrilly before the guard had so much as managed, “Are those—”

“Strangers approaching the gate,” Krem said, turning and skirting around the table. Technically it wasn’t his job to play welcoming committee, but Bull would want to know all the details later (the nosy gossip) and besides, he just… He just felt safer, giving them the once-over himself. Just in case.

There were a lot of just in cases ever since Haven.

“What’s the story?” Harding called after him, tipping back in her chair, but Krem was already thundering down the steps. The strange young guard from before was halfway out the gatehouse door, tugging sharply at the edges of his uniform. His lips were shiny-wet from tea.

“Are we expecting anyone?” he asked Krem, as if Krem should know.

Krem just shot him a look. “Three of them, looks like,” he said, watching as they drew nearer. One was trudging ahead of the others, determinedly breaking up deep trenches of snow. The one in the middle seemed to be holding his own, but the smaller one, toward the back, kept wobbling and tripping and yanking at his cloak. It was almost cute. “Two mages, if the staves are anything to go by. More rebels?”

He was mostly talking to himself, but the kid nodded along thoughtfully. He took a step forward as the first of them neared, one hand lifting. “Halt,” he called; his voice sounded reedy in the knifing breeze. “Who goes there?”

It sounded like something he’d heard a hundred times before and had always been eager to say.

The man in front—the warrior—glowered at them from beneath the hood of his cowl. The second man stepped to his side, one hand lifting to push back his hood a little. “We’re here to see Varric Tethras,” he said in that funny flat Ferelden drawl. “He sent for us.”

“Sure, sure,” Krem said, looking between them dubiously. The first man, an elf, also (more reluctantly) pulled back his hood, and Krem was surprised to see the silvery markings tracing his chin. His gaze jerked over to the speaker, noting the mirrored scars, and recognition instantly flared to life. “Oh, fuck me, you’re the Champion of Kirkwall.”
The two exchanged a look. “I hadn’t realized my infamy stretched so far,” the man—the Champion—bloody Hawke—said dryly.

“I don’t know about that, but Varric won’t shut up if you get enough drinks in him,” Krem said. The Champion of Kirkwall; Maker, but the world was getting smaller every day. “Sometimes even when he’s dry as a bone. Come on,” he added, gesturing toward the gatehouse door—no need to open the portcullis for this. “Come in. He just headed into the Keep; I can take you to him.”

“Wait,” the young guard said, looking a bit dazed and starstruck. A Herald of Andraste and a Champion of Kirkwall; all they needed was the Hero of Ferelden and they’d have a matched set. “I know who the two of you are, but what about that one?”

He pointed to the smaller figure, standing a few feet back as if hiding and very nearly swallowed up in the flapping ends of his cloak. Now that Krem’s attention was drawn to him again, he found his gaze stalling, catching…though he’d be damned if he could say why.

“Oh,” the Champion—Hawke—said, half-turning, “this is—”

The smaller figure stumbled forward. “No one,” he all but yelped, and something…something about the timbre of that voice had a shiver working its way down Krem’s spine. It was an unexpected pulse of warmth, of awareness, like fingertips brushing skin. The boy paused and cleared his throat as four pairs of eyes swung to look at his way. “Um. That is to say… I’m Feynriel. But really I’m no one important. Obviously.”

He could practically hear the delicate blush curling like creeping vines around those words. He could imagine the way it painted (fair? dark? impossible to say with that damned hood up) skin. Ridiculously adorable.

Krem tilted his head, watching as Feynriel shifted from foot to foot. The accent was Marcher—Kirkwall, if he had his guess—but there was a lilting quality there, too. A sweetness that made unexpected warmth bloom deep inside. “I’d hate to be contrary, but considering the company you keep,” Krem said, his own voice unexpectedly throaty, “I have to disagree. You must be very important indeed.” He couldn’t help but offer a slowly curving, downright flirtatious grin. “I mean, just look at you.”

What are you doing? the rational part of him demanded. The rest of him was apparently determined to go into full-out riot. His pulse was thundering, heart tripping hard and fast in his chest as he watched the shadowy figure with a feeling of…

Maker. He didn’t even have words to describe it; he wasn’t particularly sure he liked it.

“I’m wearing a cloak,” Feynriel said, that voice sending another shiver down Krem’s spine. “You can’t look at me. I mean, um,” he added with a glance toward Hawke. “Not really. You know. Because of the hood and all.”

“Well then,” Krem said before his brain could catch up with the rest of him, “why don’t you take it off and let me look my fill?”

Feynriel choked on a breath; Hawke grinned; Fenris coughed into his hand. Krem flushed, the smooth words sounding all kinds of cheesy and wrong once they got out of his head and, no, seriously, what the bloody void was wrong with him? He flirted now and again, sure, but he wasn’t the Bull—and besides, a pretty voice didn’t mean anything; he needed to get a fucking grip on himself is what he needed to do, and fast.
He took a step back, toward the door. “Why don’t we,” he began, voice strangled—

—then stopped, fennec-snared and breath catching like something out of one of Cassandra’s secret stash of novels as Feynriel reached up with trembling fingers and pushed the hood back from his face. It fell in a dark fold just as another wind wove between them, swirls of silvery flakes catching in long, loose blond hair. They look like stars Krem thought nonsensically, something going tight in his chest as he met huge blue-green eyes. They were tip-tilted, framed with surprisingly dark lashes, and big enough to nearly overpower the thin, pale face.

Two bright, hot bursts of color touched the high (high, high) cheekbones, and as Feynriel reached up to shove back a wind-blown coil of hair, Krem caught sight of a delicate jaw, a golden constellation of freckles, and subtly pointed ears.

His breath came out on a whoosh.

Holy shit. The boy was beautiful, like something out of a painting: all glowing light and unbearable sweetness, something unfamiliar coiling tight in the pit of Krem’s stomach as he stared and stared and stared, barely aware of Fenris’s annoyed grumble and Hawke’s quiet, “Oh, hush you.”

“Um,” Feynriel said, staring back at Krem as if just as bowled over. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Krem said; then, crazily, he began to laugh. He wasn’t sure why—couldn’t even begin to explain the feeling that was bubbling and fizzing out of him like a volcano of pure elation—but something about this single frozen moment was at once perfect and terrible and fucking hysterical. He was falling ass over teakettle over a pretty face while the Champion of Kirkwall looked on with a growing smile, and oh, oh void, Bull was going to dine out on what an ass he was making of himself for months if he heard about this. “Hi everyone,” Krem added, trying to course-correct. He forced himself to look away from Feynriel, turning to the gatehouse door. Black dots swam in front of his vision as if he’d been staring at the sun.

And hey, why not? He sure as fuck felt dazed enough.

“Follow me. I’ll lead you to Varric. And Taran.”

“And the Inquisitor,” the young guard whispered, standing at attention as the four of them tromped by. Krem glanced once over his shoulder and instantly regretted it, vision filled with Feynriel’s huge blue eyes still locked on him, as if he were half as dazed by Krem as Krem was by him.

(The idea, absurd as it was, made him instantly warm.)

“So it’s official then?” Hawke asked, stepped into the gatehouse. He shook snow out of his dark hair, gaze darting around in open curiosity. By his side, Fenris was also taking in his surroundings, though there was a distinct wariness to the way he eyed everything. “They really did name the Herald Inquisitor?”

Krem held the opposite door open for them. “It makes sense,” he said, even though he’d been violently opposed to the idea of springing it on Taran before. He’d been overruled, of course, watching as his friend reeled briefly with the shock of it all before rallying to meet the ever-growing expectations of the crowd. That had been Taran’s story from the beginning though, hadn’t it? Being pushed over and over and over again beyond his comfort zone, beyond anything he wanted, beyond his own humanity…and somehow, someway, meeting every demand head-on. “He’s the only one who could do it.”

“I’m sure Dorian’s thrilled about that,” Feynriel said under his breath as he passed, and that was
startling enough (he knows Dorian? a part of Krem whispered) that Krem jerked his head up just as Feynriel glanced over, passing within a hands-breadth of him.

So close, so close, he could smell the snow and pine needles clinging to dark robes.

Their gazes caught, held. Froze there for what could only be a moment and yet felt like an endless fall. There were a hundred shades between blue and green, and they were all in this boy’s eyes: so bright it was like submerging into mountain waters. But not frozen, wintry: Feynriel was pure springtime, sweet and bright and tangling insistently around Krem’s thoughts like a fresh shoot of curling vines. His cheeks bloomed with delicate color and his lips—

Why are you looking at his lips, you dolt?

Krem jerked away, abandoning the door to bang closed on the wind, and hurried to the front of the group, leaving Feynriel paces away. “This way,” he said, sounded strangled. He strode across the high-arching bridge, leading the trio through the second gate and into the magic-becalmed courtyard. Even then, he didn’t tarry, making a beeline for the crumbling stone steps leading up to the recently refinished double doors. “They should be in the great hall, still. Varric’s taken to planting himself there so he can keep an eye on all the comings and goings at Skyhold.”

“Sounds like Varric,” Hawke said dryly, hurrying to keep up. Behind him, Fenris snorted. Feynriel remained silent.

He couldn’t believe he was straining to hear, just in case this stranger said a word.

Krem slapped his hands against the big double doors and pushed, muscles bunching and releasing in a satisfying way. The great hall was still a mess of crumbling stone and plaster dust, but someone (Josephine) had hauled out a giant carved wooden throne to slap up on the far dais and the windows had been patched with fragments of stained glass discovered deep in the cellars. There was no central design, no method to the pattern of clear and colored glass—it was pure, rainbowed chaos, light spilling in radiant streams that never failed to take his breath away. Krem found himself peeking over his shoulder to see how Feynriel was taking it (contrasted beautifully with the carved columns that marched down the central hall, pale, pale wood unblemished to keep from making the place a riot of conflicting shades, feeding down into a matching wood-and-white herringbone floor).

“Oh,” Feynriel breathed, eyes going wide as he looked up up up. He was framed by the big doorway, snow in his hair, so damn pretty it was almost irritating. Krem rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the prickling response under his skin, and watched him even as Hawke made a beeline for the nearby corner with laughing: “Varric you asshole!”

Krem was distantly aware of a flurry of movement, of an embrace, of a gruff, “Took your time, didn’t you, kid?” but his eyes were locked—frozen—trapped by that delicate uplifted face. By the fan of dark lashes. By the way Feynriel’s lips parted in wonder as he was as transfixed by the simple beauty as Krem had somehow known he’d be: responding the way Krem always did inside, secretly, whenever he ticked his gaze up to that tangle of light and felt his soul take wing.

Ridiculous. Too poetic. Romantic in the extreme, and that wasn’t the person he was willing to let himself be. He wasn’t the kind of guy who became…enraptured by strange men, no matter how pretty the packaging. No matter how shy or awkward or sweet or—

Unexpectedly, inexplicably perfect.

He drifted closer, unable to help himself, and Feynriel’s lashes flickered, his throat working as if he could sense Krem pulling close. He felt this too, whatever it was: that assurance was the only thing
that kept from driving Krem completely out of his skin as he stepped within a pace of the intriguing stranger who somehow was anything but strange.

This man who somehow spoke to the very core of him.

A few feet away, Hawke and Fenris and Varric were talking, catching up, comfortable as age-old friends, and Krem shouldn’t have felt this way about somehow he’d just met. He shouldn’t, he shouldn’t, it was utter madness.

“…hi,” Feynriel breathed, cheeks a whorl of pink, chest rising and falling rapidly as he stared up at Krem with eyes so blue it was like seeing the color for the very first time. His lips began to curl into a shy smile that Krem would have given anything to kiss.

And then, as if from a thousand miles away, Krem heard what Varric was saying—

“Need you and Broody to teach them all about Voices. Maker knows I’m drowning in them now. They’re coming out of the bloody woodwork.”

—and it all at once made sickening, horrible sense. This feeling, this sense of coming alive one atom at a time: it wasn’t real. It wasn’t some kind of unexpected, dizzying love at first sight. It was a trap.

And Feynriel was looking to be his captor.

Krem pulled back just as Feynriel seemed ready to reach forward, those delicate shoots of emotion freezing in his chest. Maker, but Feynriel was the perfect sort of bait, wasn’t he? All his life, Krem had been tense and waiting, ready to defend himself if some fucking mage dared try to lay claim on him—and here he was ready to go tumbling into that long fall after one fucking word.

No wonder Feynriel looked so happy; he probably thought he already had his unum vinctum tied around his finger.

Well. Not bloody likely.

“You,” Krem said, leaning just close enough that the mage could feel the hot puff of his breath against his cheeks, “can go to the fucking void.” And then he turned sharply on his heel before he could be tempted again by the sight of him, slamming out of the hall as if the damn half-elf had sprouted horns and a tail right there, right before him.

Desire itself, leaving him shaken to the core.
“You,” Dorian said feelingly, head bowed, muscles tense, fingers digging tight into cold ceramic, “are a demon. A smiling, beautiful, absolutely wicked demon come to drive me out my wits.” A bead of water dripped from his chin; another wended its way down down down the exposed line of his neck, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Maker. He could feel every inch of skin as if it were brand new. “You are determined to unmake me.”

Taran—the, oh yes, demon—just laughed. “I didn’t make you take off your clothes, Dorian,” he pointed out, leaning over to grab another jug of water. His chest brushed against Dorian’s shoulder when he moved, sending hot tracers of awareness spiraling through him; the soft rasp of hair against bare skin was nearly enough to have his hips pushing up like a boy half his age. It would have been embarrassing if it wasn’t already so damn overwhelming. “I didn’t make you get in that tub.”

“Yes, well, I think you fail to realize just how weak I am in the face of your particular brand of temptation,” he said, half-turning his head so he could glimpse all that glorious sun-kissed muscle. Venhedis. “Because, as I said: you are a demon.” A demon with particularly beautiful shoulders. All that sword-work made his Voice broad and strong; it was impossible to watch muscle work and not think about being tossed over one of those big shoulders and carted off to do unspeakable things. “And I must admit, this is one possession I do not have it in me to resist.”

“Don’t let Mother Giselle hear you talk like that,” Taran teased. He glanced up, catching Dorian looking, and instantly began to smile. And oh, Maker, it was Dorian’s favorite smile, too—all wicked and sweet and bashful rolled into one, hazel eyes dilated dark because Dorian wasn’t the only one suffering here. (The deliciously prominent bulge in Taran’s thin sleeping pants was testament enough to that.) “She’ll chase you out of Skyhold with a switch.”

Dorian snorted, leaning back against the edge of the tub even as Taran pressed closer. “She’d have to catch me first.”

“I don’t know,” Taran murmured. His eyes were dropping to Dorian’s mouth, the smile fading as something warmer—headier—took its place. “You’ve never seemed particularly fast to me; I’ve caught you plenty of times.”

He would give anything to be kissed right now. He could feel the hairs along his arms standing up, could feel the coils of pure want (of power, the unfinished bond ever-straining toward his Voice) tightening low in his belly. He had to clear his throat before he could talk. “Well that’s obviously because I’m always waiting for you to catch me.” The teasing lilt that should have underlined his words was missing—it was all thick need now, Taran’s proximity making him dizzy with it. Hungry.

And... And fasta vass, why not give in to the demon smiling so prettily down at him? Good sense had abandoned him the minute he dropped his robe in a puddle around his feet.

Decision made, it was so natural to lift his face for a kiss even as Taran leaned down to steal one, neck arched and lips falling open the second their mouths brushed. He tasted the hot puff of Taran’s breath before the slick brush of his tongue—sweet, oh Venhedis, so sweet and hot, twining against Dorian’s in silent question.

Far be it for him not to answer.
Water sloshed, droplets spattering across the tile as Dorian turned deeper into the kiss—spine arched, half-twisted-around in the deep basin as he groaned in unmistakable welcome. He lifted one arm back over his head, fingers digging into bronze-brown hair as he yanked Taran closer—closer—always, always closer—and sucked greedily at the unsteady thrust of his tongue.

Fuck.

The kiss went wild instantly, the clawing need that had been growing in Dorian’s belly since the moment he walked out onto his Voice’s balcony and saw the tub innocently waiting there (Taran already bare-chested and ready to wash off the stress of the day) roaring into full force. It took so little to set him on fire these days: he was dry kindling just waiting for a stray spark, everything coming blisteringly, painfully alive with just a touch. A whisper. A glance.

He was too bloody old to be this bloody eager, and yet, he thought—hips pushing restlessly up as Taran dropped a big hand low on Dorian’s belly to hold him still—here he was. Abso-bloody-lutely gagging for it.

Taran rumbled a growl deep in his chest, slicking his tongue against Dorian’s in the most vicious tease. Callouses rasped against a dark trail of hair as Taran’s splayed hand slid down further, further, dipping deep below the water. It was incendiary, his scarred knuckles so close to the rigid (throbbing) thrust of Dorian’s cock. So close, and yet not nearly close enough. Sometimes Dorian thought he really would go mad with the howling need to be touched.

To be—not to put too fine a point on it—thrown down on silken bedding and bloody well fucked.

He tore his mouth away, gasping in great gulping lungsful of air. He felt full to bursting, skin a fragile shell around the utter enormity of everything he was feeling. Lust, of course—of course, burning through him and all but out of control—and love and devotion and that sense of…of vibration deep in his core. Like a tuning fork being struck, the unformed bond leaping to life the further they let themselves push.

Now, it seemed to be saying—demanding—louder and louder every time they let themselves creep up to the edge. You both want this. Do it now.

“Taran,” he managed, voice gone weak and breathy—utterly wrecked. His lips were wet with Taran’s spit, and he wanted to swallow him down until he tasted, felt, saw, breathed nothing else. He pushed his hips up again, restless, water splashing around him. Maker, he ached. If Taran touched him now (calloused fingers wrapping tighttighttight around the stone-hard shaft of him, fuck) he’d come like a man half his age: instantly and filled with grateful shame.

Taran’s panting breath was hot against his skin. He kept his hand on him, pushing hard enough that Dorian could feel it in his bones. All that strength—it was maddening to think about what it would be like if they could finally do more. If Taran could haul him out of the bath, water sluicing down his body, and lift him into his arms. Drive him back until he hit the cold stone wall with a muffled thud, cry caught, swallowed, devoured by Taran’s hungry mouth. Trim hips forcing his thighs wide and all those bloody muscles just, just, fuck just rippling and shining and—

Taran gave a choked laugh, pulling back to look at him. Putting some likely much-needed distance there so they could cool down…whatever that meant between them anymore, anyway. “Wherever your brain just went,” he teased, voice nice and husky and certainly doing nothing to cool anything in Dorian down one whit, “I’m pretty sure it was filthy.” He arched a playful brow, cheeks beautifully pink—flush with desire. “Want to fill me in?”

Dorian blinked away the red haze of yesMakerwant and pretended to wave his Voice off. Things
had been getting a little too intense there. A break in the tension was good. Necessary. (Utterly unhelpful, if the past couple of weeks were anything to go by.) “If my mind was going anywhere it shouldn’t,” he husked, “you’re clearly to blame. You are a corrupting influence on me, Taran Trevelyan.”

“Right,” Taran agreed, pressing a grin against Dorian’s shoulder. His lips were hot against his skin and far, far too tempting still. (Always.) “Because you were a saint before we met.”

“A shining temple of virtue.” He tipped his head, instinctively exposing the line of his neck in welcome—shivering when Taran immediately mouthed down to the hollow of his throat. Fuck, he was so hard it was impossible to think about anything but coming. His legs were already spreading wide again, knees knocking against the edges of the tub, water rippling. He wanted to lean back—back against the solid wall of Taran’s body, back against the cold bite of metal—and slide his hand into the water. He wanted—

Taran gave a soft puff of breath, pulling back to look at him. The smile was still toying at the corners of his mouth, but his eyes were midnight-dark. Danger, Dorian tried to tell himself, shivering helplessly in response. He was all but quaking, skin prickling, flashing hot and cold, hold and cold. A look like that was all too serious; it really was dangerous, especially considering how on edge Dorian felt.

“Taran,” Dorian began, trying to tip back into the playfulness of the moment.

Taran stood abruptly. “Lean forward,” he said.

That wasn’t what he’d been expecting. “What?” Dorian said, instinctively doing as he was asked. He tipped toward the water, back bowed, hips edging forward…and froze at the sound of cloth hitting stone. Wsst. Soft, barely a whisper, and yet it had him jolting up with a startled, squawking, “What!?"

Taran dropped a (big) (powerful) hand to the back of Dorian’s spine, keeping him from sliding back against the rim of the tub. “Hold on,” he said, as if he weren’t about to drag them both howling into the void. Dorian craned his neck around, catching a mind-numbing flash of bare thigh as Taran swung one leg over the ledge. His knee brushed Dorian’s shoulder.

“Taran,” Dorian hissed, horrified and shocked and coming painfully alive in one impossible burst of heat. He sucked in a breath, shuddering in place as Taran swung his other leg over the lip of the tub and began to crouch down behind him—lightly nudging him forward to make room, the water level rising dangerously with their combined weight. It splashed over the edges, hitting the cold stone of the balcony floor, and Dorian swore he could feel his brain detaching, leaving his body.

He and his Voice—the Voice he had been instructed under pain of, well, bloody extreme pain, not to bond until Josephine and Leliana managed to defuse what was certain to be grave political consequences—were both naked. Alone. Out under the moonlight in a steaming bath just off the bloody Inquisitor’s suite, nothing but time and solitude and opportunity on their side for once.

There was a bed not fifteen paces away.

There was—oh venhedis—the impossibly hard, blisteringly hot thrust of Taran’s naked cock against the small of his back, and oh, oh, this was certainly how he was going to die: cooked from the insides by his own out of control hormones.

“This…” Dorian said, hyperaware of Taran’s chest against his back, of Taran’s thighs bracketing his hips, of Taran’s arms around his waist and his breath hot against his skin. “You… I…”
Oh, wonderful. He was practically gibbering now. The men he had taken to bed in the past would have laughed at him now—would have enjoyed seeing his easy way with words utterly wrecked. But Taran simply pulled him back deeper into the curve of his body, holding on as if he never meant to let go. As if he needed Dorian just as desperately as Dorian needed him: hearts tripping at the same frantic pace, lungs filling with shared oxygen.

Maker, this boy. This incredible boy.

“Don’t you get tired,” Taran murmured, pressing his forehead to the base of Dorian’s skull, “of giving everything to everyone, and getting nothing but you must wait and we need time in return? I don’t even mean about sex. Well.” He gave a soft, huffing laugh and shifted his hips, Dorian settling more fully within the valley of his thighs. If Dorian just leaned forward and lifted up, he’d be able to feel the hard ridge of Taran’s cock pressing between his arse cheeks—rubbing temptingly along the tight pucker of skin, oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. “It’s not entirely about sex. Some of it’s about sex. I mean,” Taran said, willfully unravelling Dorian’s brain one thread at a time, “I really would like to have sex with you.”

Dorian dropped his head forward and moaned feelingly.

“But I also just want it to be our decision,” Taran continued. He dropped his hands to Dorian’s waist, flattening his palms against hot (hot, hot, burning from the bloody inside out) skin and slid them up, callouses won from now near-constant swordplay rasping deliciously over flesh. “I want for us to be able to decide whether the right time is now or whether we want to wait.”

He paused, then sighed and pressed his lips to the knot at the crest of Dorian’s spine, devilishly tempting hands lifting off him—arms wrapping like an anchor around him again. Their bodies pressed tight—tight—and yet some of the building tension slacking just a touch and Taran added on a whisper: “I really don’t want to wait until the world ends for real to be yours.”

And oh.

Oh.

That just about broke Dorian’s heart.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured, twisting half-around. There wasn’t much maneuverability in the old tub, but he gave it his best try, sliding his arms around Taran’s shoulders, his neck, and pressing their foreheads tightly together. Though his body still thrummed with awareness, the sharp edge of it was dulled by his need to… To… To bloody well show this man just how much he cared.

(To show him just how much he wished he could defy the world for him.)

“What matters most,” Dorian said, voice low and intimate; trapped in this space between the two of them, “is that right here, now, you are. You are mine. Do you understand that, amatus?” He slid a hand down, flattening it against Taran’s bare chest—fingertips criss-crossing new scars. Maker, but it seemed like every day brought a fresh batch of them, visible and not. “You are my heart. You are my soul. You are my ridiculously gorgeous smile. There,” he added, tipping back to admire the faint twist of lips he got in answer to that. It was a small thing, but it felt like an incredible victory. “That is the smile I mean.”

One big hand dropped again to his waist, anchoring Dorian. He was straddling Taran’s lap now, water splashed this way and that over the lip of the tub. It was more awkward than he’d normally like, without near enough room to maneuver, but oh, Dorian couldn’t fault the view. In this position, he was actually taller than his young Voice, head tipped down as Taran’s face tilted up, the
moonlight catching in his eyes. The wind knifing down the Frostbacks was so very gentle within the protective shell of Skyhold, a few errant snowflakes falling around them—melting the moment they touched the steaming heat of their shared bath.

Out here, exposed, the breadth of the world at their feet and *this man* looking up at him like he hung the stars…Maker, but was there anything more clearly worth fighting for?

He reached up with his free hand—his other still braced against the steady thunder of Taran’s heart—and brushed his knuckles down his jaw. “You are mine,” Dorian murmured again, tipping closer. His cock (still hard; around Taran, it seemed he was rarely anything else) pressed against Taran’s stomach, cockhead rubbing enticingly along, *venhedis*, all those abs. Shameful the way that made him shiver and curl his toes. “And I am yours. You know that, yes? I would think I have made it *stunningly* obvious by now.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Taran said, lips beginning to quirk into something like a real smile. The way he was *looking* at Dorian was impossible—wonderful—intoxicating. Who needed lyrium when there was this feeling bursting deep inside his chest? “I’ve always been more of a hands-on learner. Perhaps I could use a few more examples?”

“A few more examples, he says,” Dorian teased. His tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip as Taran slid his palms around, *down*, to squeeze the full globes of his ass. “As if… Taran!” He bucked forward, hard, whole body coming alight as calloused fingers slid along the crease of his ass, spreading him briefly open oh Maker, and fuck fuck fuck, it was dizzying how quickly they could pivot from hot to heart and back again, everything tumbling together in an endless ball of longing. He reached back to grab Taran’s wrist, panting shocked and needy against the curve of his jaw. Aching in the worst way for *more*. His traitor body was hungry for it, aching, and Andraste take him but it would be so easy to shift his hips and feel Taran’s cockhead pressing hot against his opening. To rock back, forcing himself to relax around the delicious intrusion, as Taran slid inside the welcome clench of his body and—

“*Festis bei umo canavarum.* You will be the death of me. Maker, it was so true. His heart was very nearly pounding right out of his chest. “This is… You are… I…”

Taran turned his face, kissing his chin before mouthing sweetly to the arch of his neck, so very warm and alive and welcoming beneath Dorian that it was its own sort of madness. “I am?” he teased, before gently sinking teeth into bared flesh.

Dorian moaned, riding the sudden hard thrust of Taran’s hips against him, feeling himself once again ready to unravel at the way that one powerful shift of the warrior’s body lifted him so bloody easy—

—only to suck in a serrated breath at the whisper of displaced air against his cheek, followed by an all too familiar *clank* of a knife sparking stone a few feet away.

*Where*, Dorian thought, jerking his head up; Taran was already launching into action, grip on him going tight as he swung Dorian up and out of the bath, following in a graceful pivot. Water sluiced down their bodies, gathering in pools around their feet as Taran nudged Dorian behind him protectively.

Which, no, *fuck* that.

Dorian snagged for the staff leaning against the balcony doorframe even as Taran grabbed his greatsword, neither weapon ever far away. The dagger was lying a few feet to their left, green-blue poison drip-drip-dripping from the tip, and if Dorian hadn’t already been filled with rage, that would have done it. There was no telling whether the blade was meant for him or Taran—they’d been mid-
motion, shifting quick enough that either could have been the target—but in its shining steel he saw that criss-cross of fresh scars, he saw Taran bleeding and pale, he saw his potential loss over and over again on repeat in his mind, and there was nothing he’d like more in this world than to tear this would-be assassin apart.

With his teeth.

“Kaffas,” he snarled, sending a streak of green-black energy toward the moving shadow.

Taran strode forward, still naked as the day he was born, water dripping on the flagstones as he moved to corner the man—careful, a small part of Dorian noted, not to block his spellwork on the way; by now they’d fought together enough that it was almost second nature.

“Who are you?” Taran demanded, even as he swung that giant blade. It arced through the air, faster than thought, big muscles bunching and releasing. The assassin barely ducked and rolled out of the way in time, escape cut off as Taran rounded toward the stairs—forcing the man back into Dorian’s field of vision. He had a wonderful shot for his next spell, and Dorian took great delight in the sharp yelp of pain. “Answer me!”

The nondescript man looked around desperately for an escape. He had messy brown hair and sunken eyes; the (no doubt stolen) scout uniform fit him poorly. Someone from the Chantry? Any one of the thousands protesting the Inquisition’s ongoing friendship with the mages? Anyone at all who had heard of Taran and Dorian’s relationship and swore they’d rather die (kill) than see their Herald with a ‘Vint?

There were so many reasons for someone to want them dead—really by this point, there was almost no good to come of asking.

But of course, Taran the white knight with his bleeding heart pinned to one sleeve would always, always need to know. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, sounding hurt even in his fury—wounded by the hatred if not by the act itself. And oh, that hurt Dorian’s heart. Hurt it enough that he almost hoped the assassin would answer, would give some shame-faced shape to his animus.

For a moment, he thought it might even happen. Taran had swung again, deliberately herding the man back. His shoulders were tense and any of the ease he’d inhabited just minutes before was long gone—those stolen moments intended to relax him after a brutal day wasted. It was for that reason, mostly, that Dorian sucked in a satisfied breath when the tip of a dagger poked out the front of the man’s throat. Blood misted across the flagstones and he gasped, hands flying up, eyes locking with Taran’s: wide and scared and fervent even now.

One of the fanatics, Dorian decided, lowering his staff even as the assassin slumped at Taran’s feet—Taran, who, Maker bless his too-big heart, actually dropped his blade to catch his would-be killer. The wickedly sharp blade protruded from the back of the man’s neck, and Leliana stood there in his shadow, another knife already in hand.

She quirked a red brow at Dorian, eyes dropping down his naked body in question before sliding back up. He just shrugged.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Taran said without looking up. He was tugging the blade free, one hand cupping over the wound. He’d need another good scrubbing to get off all the blood spilled tonight; somehow Dorian doubted this bath would be as lighthearted. “I had it under control.”

“You were going to try to take him into custody,” Leliana said flatly. It wasn’t a question—it was what Taran wanted to do every time someone tried to take his life. Pretty soon, the dungeons would
be filled to bursting and not even Josephine could hide the truth of them all. “That would have been unwise. The rumors are bad enough.”

He looked up, jaw set. “I don’t care about rumors,” he said, still young enough, independent enough, not to understand exactly who he was to the world.

Dorian sighed and grabbed two of his light robes. He tossed one to Taran, too inured to the sight of blood to wince when the sleeve slapped against the corpse’s paling face. They all knew the spells needed to lift those kinds of stains by heart. “I believe what Leliana is trying to say, amatus,” he said, trying for casual, “is that her men are already taxed to their limit trying to keep our liaison a secret.”

“Then they can stop,” Taran said stubbornly. He stood, robe clutched in one hand, and flipped the blood-soaked dagger back to Leliana; she caught it easily, eyes never leaving his. “This has to stop. I’m allowed to have a life.”

“Many of the Chantry do not see it that way,” Leliana said evenly.

“The Chantry can go to the void for all I care!” Taran snapped back in a rare show of temper. Then he sighed and turned away, setting his sword down. He ignored the robe Dorian had offered—laying it gently on the bed with a deference for the fine material Dorian couldn’t help but appreciate—and began dressing in his usual clothes. His working clothes, Dorian couldn’t help but notice. It seemed their small respite from the cares of the world was long over. “I don’t mean that,” he admitted. “It’s just… I’m so…” Tired, the set of his shoulders spoke for him. Tired of fighting so hard just to keep the world from falling over the brink. Not even twenty yet, and already so very ancient.

Dorian moved to him silently, resting a hand on the small of his back. The tension radiating from those tightly knotted muscles made his stomach clench in response.

“I know,” Leliana said after an audible hesitation. It was so unlike her that both of them turned in surprise. The usual stoic mask was gone, red brows drawn into a frown. “I understand. I am even sympathetic. We all are. You didn’t choose this.”

“Neither did you,” Taran said, taking the peace offering with good grace.

Her smile was wan. “That isn’t exactly true. I did choose this. What’s more important, I chose you.” Leliana didn’t stay to explain that, however. She crouched to wipe her dagger clean before stepping back toward the stairwell. “I’ll send someone for the body. I’ll also send word that the war council will be meeting soon. You’re right that something must be done.”

She was nearly gone, halfway down the first set of steps when she paused and turned back, tilting her head. From this angle, it would have been all too easy to miss the teasing lilt of her eyebrow. “Oh, and you have visitors who just arrived. I believe they are here to see to your…education. The Champion always did have impeccable timing.”

And with that—leaving them both gaping in surprise after her, a dead man pooling traitor’s blood at their feet—Leliana was gone.
It was good to see the dwarf again. Even better to see Aidan smiling the way he was—big and bright and warmer than any sun. The two were already lost in their own little world, trading stories faster than Fenris could keep up.

“And then, I shit you not,” Varric said, giving Aidan a sharp poke in the side, “he flew in riding a void-taken archdemon!”

“Is this before or after you saw a mountain fall on the Herald?” Aidan asked dryly.

Varric waved a hand. “You think I’m making all this up—"

“I do seem to recall you had a talent for embellishing a good yarn.”

“—but I’m telling you, Hawke, this shit’s gotten weirder than anything even I could imagine. I mean, glowing hands, gaping holes in the sky, Templars melded with red lyrium? Red lyrium, Hawke.” He gestured wildly toward his own face. “Just stuck on there like some kind of glowing red goiter. Weird as balls.”

Aidan laughed and lightly bumped their sides together. He looked relaxed for the first time in weeks, months, longer, the dark shadows beneath his eyes seeming to lift away bit by bit the longer he was here. This? Was good for him. They should have come long ago. “True enough,” he said easily, casting Fenris a quick glance and smile that still, always, had coils of warmth unfolding in his chest. “So does this mean I’ve been replaced as the hero of your story? An odd Arishok battle or two can’t hold a candle to this.”

Fenris turned his back on them to hide a private smile of his own as Varric (loudly) protested. The grand hall was mostly cleared out, save a flicker of movement up on the far back promenade and a pair of guards stationed at the heavy door just below. He was aware of muffled banging drifting through the door to the right of the makeshift throne and the general sense of life moving on beyond these walls. But for the moment, here, now, the place was theirs.

He tipped his head up, taking in the crumbling old statues and hastily patched stained glass. Banners hung from a quarter of the archways, matching fabric spilling from a box of crates lining one wall. The whole place spoke of the beginnings of things. Even though the Inquisition had been going strong for some time now, he got the sense that it wasn’t until its Inquisitor was named that true progress had begun.

He wondered what this Inquisitor—this Herald—this mysterious driving force would be like. They said he had unspeakable power in the palm of his hand. They said he could walk from the Fade and face down archdemons and build empires with a single closed fist.

The thought had Fenris shifting anxiously, fingers twitching subtly back toward his greatsword. He glanced over toward Aidan again, trusting the relaxed joy flowing through their bond but needing to see him standing there all the same. Over Aidan’s shoulder, he could just make out the fourth member of their small party—quiet for the first time since they’d stumbled across him out in the wild.

The boy, Feynriel, had retreated back into a shadowy corner, arms crossed tight over his chest. His head was down, blond hair pulled free to veil his face, though it was obvious enough something was bothering him. Fenris considered going to ask what was wrong, but the impulse toward open
kindness—an unexpected side effect of being around Aidan for so long, he was damn sure of it—still set awkwardly inside him.

Instead, he deliberately turned his back again, giving both the boy and Aidan-and-Varric some semblance of privacy…which was why he was the first to notice something was subtly wrong.

Someone slipped into the hall and paused to whisper in one of the guard’s ears. The guard stiffened, then turned on his heel and hurried out. Fenris watched, tensing himself, as the second guard gestured down toward them in question.

Eyes fixed on them; vaguely familiar eyes. But then the hooded figure shook her head and moved along the wall—along the shadows—each step calmly measured yet quick. She was rushing while fighting any appearance of being in a hurry, and Fenris was certain he wouldn’t have even noticed her if he hadn’t already been on high alert. Varric didn’t flick a glance her way, and Feynriël seemed lost in his own world. Only Aidan hesitated, looking over at Fenris, sensing his growing unease.

“Fenris?” Aidan said, interrupting Varric’s story. His voice was low, soft, but Fenris felt it down to his bones. What’s wrong, the intonation implied, as clear as if he’d said the words.

“I am uncertain,” Fenris replied, watching as the shadow slipped into the far doorway to the left of the throne. “Varric, where does that door lead?”

Varric tilted his head, catching the direction of Fenris’s gaze. “Oh, the kid’s been given a room up that way,” he said, as if the kid weren’t the figurehead (the actual leader? Only time would tell, he supposed, whether the advisors actually let this new Inquisitor impact the course of history on a grand scale) of Thedas’s latest greatest hope. “Nice enough view, but it’s more pain than pleasure, if you ask me. Stairs,” he added, as if that explained everything.

“Ah,” Fenris said, eyes locked on that single closed door. Something was happening through that door, up those stairs. He couldn’t hear anything, but the hairs along his arms were standing up, and he had to fight back the urge to grab Aidan by the wrist and drag him out of Skyhold.

Danger, the part of him that never fully quieted whispered. Danger, danger, danger.

Aidan’s knuckles slid subtly along his spine as he moved closer. “Do we need to intercede?” he asked, sotto. It didn’t matter whether he’d seen the cloaked figure or not—Aidan would be reading the shifting eddies of tension coiling through Fenris. The desire to flee, to fight, to protect, to confront.

“You catch something, Broody?” Varric added, coming up on his other side. Fenris was ridiculously gratified to notice that Varric was already losing Bianca in her straps. It had been a long time since they’d fought together, and yet that old battle-trust was still burning strong.

Yes, he almost said before hesitating. What had he actually seen? He’d become increasingly paranoid after they’d been forced to flee Kirkwall. Perhaps he was overreacting. “I am…uncertain,” he said again, gaze ticking back toward the main hall doors, where the second guard was slipping back into place as if he’d never gone. “It seemed—”

The Inquisitor’s door banged open and a man stalked out, black hair dripping at the ends. He tugged at his robe, looking caught somewhere between amused and wildly out of sorts. “That can all wait until later, of course,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder at the shadowed woman—yes, familiar; venhedis, where had Fenris seen her before? “Now, I think, it is far more important to…”

He stumbled to a stop, words trailing off as he took them all in.
Fenris had a stark impression of hyper-intelligent dark eyes, a ridiculously curled moustache, Tevinter-style robes. He was already bristling—even though he knew this must be the ‘Vint who’d taken up with the Inquisitor in secret—but the man’s gaze snapped past him to someone over his shoulder. Aidan?

“Faste vaas,” he said, eyes widening. Then, sailing past the three of them with a laugh and a flourish of dark robes, he added, “Feynriel, Maker, but it took you long enough!”

What, Fenris thought, pivoting to unabashedly stare as the showy mage swept Feynriel up into a hard embrace. He actually lifted the boy off his feet with it, and Feynriel gave a breathy squeak, hands pinwheeling before he managed to grab purchase against muscled biceps, his own robes twitching as he awkwardly flailed.

Wild, loose blond hair fell all around them as the ‘Vint grinned and hugged him tighter. “Look at you,” he tsked, laughing, the last of his annoyance all but gone. “Blowing in here wild as any Avvar and smelling worse than a goat. I should have known you prettied yourself up in my dreams.”

Feynriel gave him a weak shove as he was dropped lightly to his feet again. There was still a shade of something dark in his eyes, but he was smiling again, at least. So strange to think this alienage brat from Kirkwall knew one of the Inquisitor’s inner circle. “Well, I had to live up to your example, didn’t I, Dorian?” he said. Then, eyes darting over Dorian’s shoulder, he added in a low undertone: “Oh! Is that him? Your Voice?”

Your Voice. Not the Herald. Not the Inquisitor. But your Voice, as if that took precedence. Fenris supposed in this strange company, it actually did.

He turned back toward the dais, curious despite himself to see this man who was shaping nations and making Chantry sisters tremble in fear. A tall, surprisingly broad-shouldered figure was stepping out behind the hooded woman, brown eyes fixed on Dorian and Feynriel, brows lifted in curiosity. He was handsome, if boyish, with a scattering of golden freckles and shaggy bronze-brown hair and—

And—

And Maker take his hide, melt away some of the height and add rounder cheeks and Fenris was suddenly catapulted back several years, onto a lonely beach where he’d gone to die. He could practically taste the salt in the air, feel the biting cold, memory churning up shards of the past to pierce his present.

“Taran?” he demanded, startled, shocked, rocked back on his heels. The pieces were clicking together for him faster and faster—like a whole damn mountain coming down on his own head—as the boy he once knew blinked over at him out of the face of the man before him, an echoing recognition in his widening eyes. “Taran Trevelyan. The Inquisitor from Ostwick.”

He should have known. He should have put it together before now. He should have realized that his world was anything but simple, and it would drag every thread of this tapestry together, weft and weave, until it all formed some great bloody unfathomable whole. Void.

Taran blinked rapidly, then grinned, sudden and blindingly sunny. If Fenris hadn’t recognized him before, he certainly would now. “Fenris!” he said, practically bounding up: a boy again, all the gravity the Inquisition had placed on his shoulders shrugged off with a laugh. He came close—close enough that Fenris tensed in preparation—but Taran didn’t grab him up in the welcoming hug like Dorian had Feynriel.

No, Fenris thought, as Taran came to a stop just before him, vibrating with joy and beaming bright
enough to eclipse the sun, no, this boy knew him. Knew him from a time when he was at his darkest, his lowest; he wouldn’t reach out without permission.

And, feeling ridiculously pleased at the realization that came on the heels of that: he remembers.

“Taran,” Fenris said, letting himself smile back, just a little. “It is…good to see you.”

The words felt wholly inadequate to the emotion, but Fenris was all too aware of eyes on the two of them. He glanced over, and sure enough, everyone watched them with unabashed confusion and curiosity: from Aidan’s cocked head to Varric’s lifted brows to Feynriel’s slow blinking to Dorian’s…what, was that jealousy? Bah, idiot man.

The hooded woman lifted her chin, looking between Taran and Fenris with a measured assessment that cooled his blood, and he had a vague memory of crossing paths with her in the Kirkwall Chantry. What had she called herself then? The Nightingale?

Taran either didn’t notice or didn’t care that they were the center of attention. Or perhaps the boy had simply been forced to grow accustomed to the feeling; that, too, was a chilling thought. “It’s good to see you too, Fenris,” he said, practically vibrating with joy. “And looking so well. I take it things are… Are… Uh.” His gaze ticked toward their small crowd of friends, finally noting their presence. “…well?”

Fenris glanced back toward Aidan, feeling that strong tug of memory—the present and the past converging. He’d left Kirkwall, certain that he had killed the man he loved. Despondent, despairing, he hadn’t even cared when the ship bearing him across the Waking Sea broke apart and he ended up washed onto a desolate shore. Fenris remembered so very clearly the ice of waves breaking across his huddled form and the desperate hope that each breath would be his last.

And then…a boy. Standing silhouetted by the sun, young and kind and thoroughly unexpected.

Fenris wet his lower lip, throat constricting as Aidan instinctively moved toward him, drawn by the kick of his pulse and that long-ago taste of despair. “I am…well,” Fenris said, rougher than intended. He turned at the whisper-soft brush of Aidan’s knuckles against his spine, impulsively taking the other man’s hand. He didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding. “This,” he said, “is Aidan Hawke.”

Taran’s brows shot up, and Fenris could actually see him shuffling around the puzzle pieces. Fenris hadn’t talked much about why he’d left Kirkwall, but it was clear he’d been running from heartbreak, and the path their many conversations had taken over the months they’d shared (Fenris taking work as Taran’s swordmaster, of all things, running the boy through constant drills on the moors overlooking the endless sea) must have given their fair share of clues.

Aidan, Maker bless him, offered his free hand and a genuine smile. “Hey,” he said, as casually as if he met Inquisitors every day. “It’s good to finally meet you.”

“Yes,” Taran said. He looked between Fenris and Aidan even as he took the offered hand, and Fenris could see the moment he understood. That return smile grew, transformed, became so dazzlingly bright again it was difficult to look at. Fenris had to turn his face away, feeling, just, much too much. “I am so glad to meet you, too.” Then, with a laugh: “Champion.”

Aidan groaned playfully, and that seemed the cue everyone needed to shuffle in to join the conversation.

“Hawke here seems to think I found myself a new hero,” Varric said with a crooked grin, looking
between the two of them like a proud father.

“You know each other?” Dorian said at nearly the same moment, casting a quick, dubious look toward Fenris. He held up both hands at whatever he saw in Fenris’s eyes before frowning over at Feynriel. “Wait. You came together? You know each other?”

“Leliana,” Aidan said in greeting, a secret, impish smile playing at the corners of his lips. “It’s good to see you again.”

Taran straightened, surprised. “Oh!” he said. “You know Leliana?” Then, before Aidan could answer: “No, no, of course; I guess that makes sense.”

Dorian snorted. “No, it does not,” he said—dramatic, flashy, and instantly becoming the center of attention...exactly as he wanted, an annoyed part of Fenris whispered. “Is there anyone here who does not already know each other?”

Taran pointed toward Feynriel. “He looks new to me,” he said. “But I’m guessing that’s Feynriel.”

“Feynriel, Hawke, Fenris,” Leliana said, voice clipped—perhaps a little amused? It was tough to say with her, but she was clearly not inclined to linger on the moment. Fenris found he instantly liked her. “Taran, Varric, Dorian. And I am Leliana. Now that all of us are acquainted,” she added, turning to Taran, “you wanted a council called?”

“I did,” he agreed...then visibly hesitated, glancing toward Fenris. “But, well. I don’t want to be rude.”

Dorian waved him off warmly. “I will take care of getting Feynriel settled,” he said. “We have far too much to catch up on to miss you for at least another hour or three.”

“I can take care of Hawke and Fenris,” Varric added. “Show them around, introduce them to the others. Curly’s here, you know,” he added to Hawke. “Knight-Captain Cullen? Well, Commander Cullen, now that all the weird shit in Kirkwall is behind us.”

“Yes,” Aidan said dryly, letting Varric usher him a few steps away with a single glance toward Fenris. He could feel the amusement running through each word, making him want to smile in return. “I’m sure now that we’re all with the Inquisition, the weird stuff is far in the past.”

Feynriel glanced back toward the far door, then softly cleared his throat. “I’ll be... I need air,” he said, slipping away. A frown grew between Dorian’s brows as he watched the half-elf go, worry clear enough in his expression that Taran edged closer.

“Do you need me?” he asked, sotto, one hand lightly touching the other man’s arm before quickly falling away—as if he was all too aware that they were in public. That whatever they’d managed to build together had to be kept behind closed doors and thick walls. As if there was danger in the subtle caress.

Fenris set his jaw, even as Dorian tipped his chin up toward Taran’s with a smile. “No, amatus,” he said, and there was no mistaking the tone of his voice. Fenris recognized it instinctively—felt it, every time he thought of Aidan—and even though he was strongly inclined to dislike this showy, flashy Tevinter mage...he felt his shoulders beginning to relax.

Magic, it turned out, didn’t ruin everything it touched. Sometimes, it even burned away the impurities to leave something heartbreakingly beautiful in its wake.

Maybe it would be that way with these two.
(Or, a sullen part of him whispered, maybe Dorian would prove himself a snake and Fenris would be able to strike off his head, throw Taran over the pommel of a horse, and ride him and Aidan away from all this Inquisition madness.)

The thought almost made him smile.

Dorian pulled away, visibly reluctant, and settled his robes. “I’ll be with Feynriel,” he said with a grand wave of his hand; his rings glittered in the dull light. “‘Getting air.’” He stepped away with a quick, questioning look cast in Fenris’s direction. Hawke and Varric were already nearly to the big double doors.

Taran watched his would-be lover go for several full beats before sighing and turning his attention back to Leliana. “I assume Josie’s already in there?”

Her thin lips quirked. “When is she not?”

He laughed. “True enough.” Then, tilting his head toward Fenris, “I’d like to catch up, once you’re settled.”

“Yes,” Fenris agreed, because it would be good to hear the story of how a lonely Ostwick boy had come to lead the known world. Venhedis, the last they’d seen each other, the lad had still been using a wooden practice blade as often as not. He felt unexpectedly old now. “If only to see what a mess you have made of my teaching.”

Taran grinned sunnily at that as, down at the other end of the hall, Aidan and Varric fondly heckled Cullen as he made his (flustered) way past. “You’ll be horrified,” he promised. “I can’t wait.” Then, with a parting wink, he followed Leliana in through a nearby door, leaving Fenris alone on the dais.

He turned once, slowly, taking it all in. The unornamented throne. The patched stained glass. The pillars showing signs of being rebuilt, and a roof that had been neatly—but not completely—repaired. The banners and the signs of life blooming everywhere: hope a palpable thing in the air, despite all the darkness in the world.

Something good was happening here, Fenris decided, finally moving to rejoin Aidan and Varric at the other end of the hall. His footsteps echoed on stone, underscoring their teasing jibs and laughter, and he felt wonderfully light inside despite his usual natural cynicism.

Something good would come of all this. Something right.

Or we will all die trying, he forced himself to add with a private smirk—and even that felt hopeful in its own twisted way.
Feynriel

Chapter by delazeur, Khirsah

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Feynriel wasn’t worried that Dorian would have trouble finding him. There weren’t many people up on the battlements, other than the occasional guard, and he was sure he was visible from miles away. Ages away. The whole of time and space and place might as well have been unfolding beneath his feet in welcome.

He reached out, trailing his fingertips along the old stone, and swore he could feel it humming against his skin.

This place—this strange, abandoned fortress—had magic in its bones. Maker, but what it must have seen. He wondered if he could unravel even a quarter of its magic while he was still here. Tease the ends free and tug until the whole mystery unspooled at his feet in a sinuous line.

You’re distracting yourself, Feynriel thought, even as he let curiosity carry him away from the memory of Krem’s expression changing, his eyes darkening. His words. You’re grasping for any excuse to think of…of bloody well anything else.

True. He was compartmentalizing neatly, the way life in the alienage had taught him. He was fiercely suppressing, the way life in Tevinter had taught him.

What a funny blend of impulses and influences he was, Feynriel thought, trudging up steps lightly dusted with snow toward an overlook that promised to give him a view of the entire castle. The pigments that had colored his life were so disparate that he could all but feel the different textures of their brushstrokes, colored bold and bright, soft and muted, strange, strange, strange. He had never really belonged anywhere—this time, not even his soulmate wanted him—and he always seemed to end up so very…

“Oh!” Feynriel said, startled. He came to an abrupt halt, one foot slipping on the top step, forcing him to scramble for purchase. The—oh, yes, very strange himself—man standing at the highest point of the crumbling wall turned smoothly at the sound, expression settling into polite curiosity as he looked down at Feynriel. Funny, but a part of Feynriel insisted on whispering that the man didn’t actually seem at all surprised to see him—as if he had seen Feynriel coming from ages away. “I’m… sorry to interrupt.”

“Not at all,” the other man said, gesturing with one graceful, long-fingered hand for Feynriel to join him. The parapets were far colder than the magically warmed courtyard below, but he was dressed in simple tunic and hose. A bedraggled cord hung around his neck, the jawbone of some beast caught up in its weaving. He smiled, and it didn’t touch his eyes. “I come here sometimes to escape the caw of ravens.”

Feynriel hesitated. The elf’s voice sounded familiar—like Merrill, a part of him noted—but that familiarity was more off-putting than relaxing, because as modestly clad and unassuming as this man tried to be, Feynriel was certain absolutely nothing about him was as simple as it seemed. “You come to escape the caw of ravens,” he asked, relying on instinct even as the rest of him scrambled in response to this unlikely cypher, “or you come to listen to the stonesong?”
He wasn’t sure where he’d heard that term before—or why he was saying it now—but it felt true on his tongue, the way the Fade sometimes twisted itself around him to show what he hadn’t realized he’d been looking for.

The man startled, eyes sharpening. Seeming to flash silver for an instant—less; easily doubted and dismissed—before he offered a quizzical smile. “I am not familiar with the phrase,” he said as Feynriel cautiously moved to stand next to him. “Is it a quote, perhaps?”

*Liar, liar, liar.* “It’s something,” Feynriel said. He wet his bottom lip, deeply uncomfortable. There was something off-putting about the way the man was studying him; there was something even *more* off-putting in the realization that he wasn’t supposed to notice anything was amiss—and that this man knew he knew.

*Run,* he thought, but he smiled instead, crooked. Playing along, the way both the alienage and Tevinter had taught him. He’d survived this long facing much worse, after all. “I’m Feynriel, by the way,” he said.

“Ah,” the other man replied, as if that meant something. (And, crazily enough, Feynriel thought that maybe it did. Maybe this stranger knew him—knew of him—had found a way to spy into his life and thoughts. Maker, but that wasn’t a pleasant realization.) “And I am Solas. A pleasure to meet you, Feynriel.” The lilting voice masked a thousand hidden meanings—Feynriel was sure of it. “And to share this corner of Skyhold, of course.” He shifted closer.

“The quiet corner,” Feynriel agreed, edging back less subtly than he’d like. He couldn’t put his finger on what about Solas made him so uncomfortable—the smile was perfectly friendly, if detached; the tilt of his head spoke of mild curiosity and nothing more. But the stones where all but trembling beneath his feet, as if the Fade were pushing against the air between them, growing *thin*.

Solas half-smiled. “Where you might listen to stones,” he said as if it were now some inside joke between them.

He stepped closer and Feynriel *felt* the air tighten against his skin. His fingers curled in instinctive response, a spell licking across his palm, ready to—

“Ah, *there* you are!” Dorian interrupted, sailing up between them as if he couldn’t feel the crackling electricity building there. “I thought I’d have to hunt you across the Frostbacks themselves, which would have made me very cross. Solas,” he added with a dismissive flick of his gaze.

Solas tilted his chin, the smile so subtle it was barely there—and yet to Feynriel, the layers of amusement and gentle mockery were obvious. “Dorian. Come to claim my new friend?”

Dorian arched a brow, turning to Feynriel. “Making friends already, are you?” he asked. “My, you have changed.”

“I will leave you to it,” Solas added, pulling away. It was crazy to think the shadows edged toward him as he retreated, wasn’t it? This was not the Fade, no matter how out-of-his-own-skin Feynriel felt. “Perhaps I will see you later, Feynriel.”

*In dreams,* Feynriel almost said, catching the words before they were detonated like qunari gunpowder between them. That uncanny instinct that came from Fadewalking kept his mouth seamed in a tight smile, and he gave an awkward wave to distract from just how unsettled he felt.

Solas turned and left. Dorian effortlessly took his place, and the whole world seemed to settle back into its expected shape—the air no longer a fragile thing against his skin, the stone just *stone* again.
“So,” Dorian began.

Feynriel interrupted. “Who was he?” he asked, glancing over to the steps even though he knew Solas was gone.

“Solas?” Dorian blinked. “In a literal or figurative sense? Honestly, either way, I hadn’t given it much thought.” Feynriel met his eyes, and Dorian frowned at whatever he read on his face. “Was he bothering you? He can be a bit of an ass, true, but Solas is mostly harmless. Odd, but then, it’s the Inquisition: we’re all a little odd.”

It was more than that with Solas. Feynriel knew that, deep in his bones. But there was no point in alarming Dorian when all he had so far was a creeping sense of dread. “True enough,” he said, forcing himself to smile the way he knew Dorian wanted him to. “No odder than you, of course.”

“You wound me,” Dorian protested, smiling back. Strangely, it seemed just as forced as Feynriel’s felt. “To the quick.”

“I’m certain you’ll survive.”

Dorian spread a hand over his chest, one brow lightly quirking. “Well, it’s true, I may find a way to muddle along somehow—especially now that you’ve finally found us.”

“Yes,” Feynriel said—and something about those words (you’ve finally found us) threatened to cut the bottom out of his easy compartmentalization. Because what he’d done was finally find Krem—

…and now, of course, there was one fewer in the world.

You, he’d said, eyes narrowing, can go to the fucking void.

Maker.

Feynriel turned away, facing out toward the Frostbacks, trusting his Tevinter training to keep his expression serene even as his heart broke again in slow motion. The cold wind felt good against his cheeks, tangled mess of his hair lifting about his face in pale strands, like drifting smoke. A single breeze could send him scattering.

A hand fell to his shoulder, squeezing tight. “What happened?” Dorian asked, soft. Seeing through the mask of serenity, because obviously his masters had taught him the same damn tricks.

Feynriel sighed and curled his fingers against cold stone. He leaned back into the touch, unexpectedly greedy for it. Maker, how sad was it he could recall in perfect detail each and every time he’d experienced more than fleeting contact in the last few years? A few days with Aidan and now Dorian had overwhelmed his touch-starved body; he felt ridiculously close to flying apart at the next kindness. There were tears on his lashes. Tears. As if he’d ever had the luxury of crying over his fate.

“I never told you the name of my Voice,” he said. His voice, at least, was perfectly even. Detached. “I don’t know why not. Maybe because I knew he wouldn’t want you to know.” He glanced over, meeting distressingly empathetic eyes. Dorian, for all his pretense at self-absorption, was remarkably maternal at his core. “He’s not particularly fond of ‘Vints.”

Dorian lightly squeezed his shoulder again before dropping away—but he didn’t go far. Their arms
brushed when he stepped up to the parapet next to Feynriel, gaze ticking out over the jagged maw of the Frostbacks. “Well,” Dorian said with faux lightness, “I must say, there aren’t many who are overly fond of us.”

“One or two of you have your charms,” Feynriel said. Then, because it made the most sense to get it out there as quick and painless as possible: “My Voice is Krem.”

That had Dorian startled out of his attentive friend routine. He jerked back, eyes going comically wide, mouth literally falling open. It would have been funny if Feynriel wasn’t feeling so melancholy. …no, truthfully, it was still a little funny anyway. “You— You are—” Dorian sputtered. He sounded, suddenly, very much like he had back in the great hall, bemoaning the Fate that had criss-crossed all of their paths over the years leading up to this single fateful moment. “You are, to borrow from Varric’s rather colorful vernacular, shitting me right now.”

Feynriel wrinkled his nose. “Yeah,” he said, “that does sound like Varric.”

Dorian waved that away impatiently. “No, we are done being arch at each other,” he said. “Are you really saying that you…and Krem…and all this time…I…” He blew out a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. His shoulders were shaking, but Feynriel couldn’t tell whether Dorian was laughing or mentally shaking his fist at this strange pull of fate.

Either seemed just as appropriate right now.

“Well. It is official,” Dorian finally said. He sounded exhausted. “The Maker is real, and he has an absolutely dreadful sense of humor. To think,” he added, turning back to Feynriel, “all those years ago, you and I just happened to meet at a party, where I just happened to ask you about Voices.”

“You didn’t happen to do anything,” Feynriel pointed out. “You asked me about Voices because I was the only non-Tevinter there.”

Dorian waved that off. “Semantics,” he said. “Do keep up with my slow-motion breakdown, please. Now, as I was saying, I just happened to ask you about Voices. And there we were, years ago, discussing Taran and Krem without ever saying their names. And here we are now, those two bloody thick as thieves and—and oh,” Dorian added, avalanche of words slowing. Feynriel could actually see the moment he realized. “Oh. Krem is not fond of Vints.”

“No,” Feynriel agreed quietly. “He’s really not.”

“And,” Dorian continued, “he’s not terribly fond of Voices. Or, well, unum vinctum. But I imagine the distinction feels rather academic to him. Though not, I am willing to bet, to you.”

His heart twisted, just shy of too painful to bear. “Well, I can’t exactly blame him for hating me,” Feynriel said quietly. “Considering.”

“No,” Dorian countered, that terrible empathy back in his eyes again—only this time it was a thousand measures worse, because for all that Feynriel had been watching Krem from afar for years, Dorian actually knew him. Understood him. Had some kind of real relationship with him. And the fact that Dorian was so quickly putting together the pieces was all the proof Feynriel didn’t really need that there was no easy solution here. Even if he were the sort of man to plead for his case, he was damned for trying.

No, worse. Because he’d be damned if he did try.

Dorian’s hand fell on his arm again, that point of contact (so rare to be touched like this, anchored firmly in the waking world, accepted) a shockwave. Feynriel could feel his foundations shake at the
impact. “Feynriel,” he began again, quieter, fiercer. “No. No, no one with an ounce of sense could ever hate you. You are annoyingly un hateable.”

He gave a watery laugh, but Dorian pressed on, grabbing for his other arm and holding Feynriel still—as if he could sense Feynriel retreating from the pain of that lie. “No, I am deadly serious, Feynriel. There are precious few people in life who I can say are decent, kind, and dreadfully good. You may muck about willy-nilly in dreams—"

“Yes, thanks, that’s exactly how I would phrase that,” Feynriel interrupted, scrabbling to hold himself together.

“—but I have yet to see you abuse that gift. To use it for selfish gain or overt harm. Considering how many years you spent being circled by the absolute worst Tevinter had to throw at you, well.”

Dorian gave him an unbearably, wonderfully fond little shake. “That says something about who you are. And who you are not. Krem would be a fool to hate you.” Feynriel couldn’t keep himself from flinching, trying to pull away. Instead of letting him go, Dorian slid his hands up to frame his face—so gentle it reminded Feynriel of his mother; long-dead, now, in that squalid little hovel they’d called home all his life.

He closed his eyes, hating the burn of tears even as he gave himself over to them. He slid up his hands to curl around Dorian’s wrists, taking comfort in the solid metronome of his pulse. If this were the Fade, he’d dissolve the stone around them and take them somewhere beautiful, serene. Some mountaintop lake or endless vista. Someplace with enough melancholy beauty to offset the storm raging deep inside him.

But this wasn’t the Fade; he had no control here. He couldn’t even control himself, a tear tracing down his cheek no matter how hard he fought to rein it in.

Damn it, damn it, damn it.

Dorian brushed it away with his thumb, casually affectionate the way no one else had ever really been with Feynriel. “No,” Dorian said, voice low and earnest, “he’d be a bloody fool not to love you to absolute pieces.”

“Dorian,” Feynriel began, gently breaking away. It was all too much.

Dorian let go, but he didn’t stop talking; Feynriel wasn’t entirely sure the man knew how to. “Because you are ridiculous and sweet and charming and passably pretty even when you do look like you’ve been living in the back end of a cave for three solid weeks.”

Feynriel gave Dorian a little push, laughing, startled—feeling that tight knot of sadness closed up tight within his chest until it hurt to breathe, and yet breathing anyway. No matter what Dorian tried to say, he really couldn’t blame Krem for hating him on sight. He’d known it was a possibility, hadn’t he? He’d thought he’d prepared himself; braced himself. Armored himself against the harsh reality.

Not all soulmates were meant to be.

And yet, Maker, the way Krem had looked at him…

“I’d like to see you after hiking across the Frostbacks for days on end,” Feynriel said, trying his best to banter back. To give his friend this small reassurance that yes, of course, everything was okay. He wiped quickly at his cheek with the end of his sleeve, erasing the last evidence of his moment of weakness. “With nothing to check your reflection in but the occasional frozen stream or an angry
elf’s greatsword.”

Dorian flicked his fingers, some of that tension loosening about his eyes. Still worried, clearly, but he was taking Feynriel’s cues the way he always did—letting Feynriel lead in this. Funny, how a self-proclaimed self-centered altus could be so incredibly kind, himself. (Not that he’d ever let Feynriel say as much.) “I’ll have you know I trapse here and there in Taran’s wake constantly,” he said. “Take three solid weeks on the Storm Coast and see how you fare. I’ve mastered the art of looking like sheer perfection wherever I go.”

*Taran.*

The way Dorian said his Voice’s name made that fist of pain clench all the harder. He fought to keep it off his face, fought to keep smiling, to not let Dorian see. It wouldn’t be fair to force Dorian to censor himself, just because his heart was full when Feynriel’s was lying in pieces all around him.

Still, it was an unexpectedly difficult pill to swallow. It took every bit of skill Feynriel had picked up living in Tevinter since his boyhood…and even then, he had a sinking suspicion Dorian saw right through him. “How is he?” Feynriel forced himself to ask. It wasn’t as if he’d be able to avoid seeing the two of them blissfully happy or anything. Or, Maker, Aidan and Fenris. He was *surrounded* by happily matched pairs. “Being named Inquisitor. That’s…quite a lot.”

“Yes,” Dorian said, watching Feynriel thoughtfully. “It is. They ask too much of him, but.” Again, Dorian spread his hands, light catching on his rings. “What can I do?”

“Kidnap him,” Feynriel said. “Knock him over the head and drag him somewhere warm.” He gave a flashing smile—forced, perhaps, but increasingly easy—at Dorian’s arched brow. “Like I said, I’ve been traveling with Aidan and *Fenris.* Some of that is bound to wear off.”

His friend laughed and all-too-casually reached out to clasp his shoulder. “No doubt,” Dorian said, grip firm, warm. Kind, kind, so very kind; the show of friendship had Feynriel’s eyes burning anew, but he fiercely swallowed back the instinct and smiled up at Dorian, trying to telegraph just how okay he really was.

Or at least, just how okay he was going to be…eventually.

“But you’ve been tempted to try anyway,” Feynriel pressed, and Dorian laughed—a league of weariness in the sound despite the lingering smile. Tellingly, he didn’t deny it.

They made their way slowly around the outer ring of the keep as they caught up—trading stories and settling back into a comfortable groove.

Feynriel glanced around as they walked, taking in Skyhold through snatches of banter…and very nearly stumbled over thin air when he caught sight of something *big* looming in his periphery. In the courtyard below, an all-too-familiar qunari (thanks to his many appearances in Krem’s dreams) was watching them with a single keen eye, arms crossed over his massive chest. The sight of the Iron Bull wasn’t much of a shock—he knew Krem’s commander was here, of course—but the way the other man narrowed in on him, expression thoughtful, assessing, was. Had Krem warned the Chargers about him already, or was the qunari spy simply *that damn good?*

Either way, it took everything Feynriel had not to duck behind Dorian like the worst kind of coward.
He wasn’t sure he was ready to face the Bull. Or the other Chargers. Or, well, any of it. The unsettled feeling wasn’t quite the same as when Solas had looked down at him with that steady, even stare, but it made him anxious all the same.

*I’m sorry,* he felt compelled to shout, though he had no idea what he’d be apologizing for. For wanting Krem? For being a dreamer? For existing?

All of it, maybe; he’d never been very good at seeing himself as anything more than that little unwanted half-elf boy who screamed himself awake at night.

The big, horned head cocked, as if he could read his thoughts. Feynriel flushed and looked away, feeling suddenly naked, exposed. He bit his lip and kept his eyes focused on the stones in front of him, even as Dorian’s hand fell to his shoulder once more and gripped tight, as if the other man could sense the storm roiling inside of him.

Or maybe he simply felt the way Feynriel was *shaking.* *Get yourself together; idiot.*

“What’s wrong?” Dorian asked—then gave a harsh, deeply empathetic laugh. As if he understood all too well the hollow dissonance ringing through Feynriel and shredding every last one of his walls. “Aside from the bloody obvious, I suppose.”

Feynriel didn’t get a chance to answer. From below, a rumbling voice bellowed up, incongruously bright: “Dorian, introduce me to your pretty friend!”

Dorian scoffed. He leaned over the edge of the wall, glowering haughtily down at the—Feynriel saw with a quick flick of his gaze—now-toothily-grinning qunari. The assessing look was long gone, but Feynriel didn’t dare try to read whatever judgment the man had come to in his eye. He wasn’t sure he ever wanted to know. “Hmm. Here’s an idea,” Dorian called back, pressing a fingertip to his chin as if in thought. “Why don’t you go bugger yourself instead?”

“But Bull just laughed. “Can’t!” he said, rocking back onto his heels. “Still won’t reach far enough around. You come and find me when you’re ready,” he added, and Feynriel could all but feel that assessing gaze on him, heavy yet gentle as a touch. “I’ll buy you a drink. Talk to you about the crew.”

And then, without another word of explanation, he turned on a heel and sauntered away—whistling, as if he didn’t have the power to shake Feynriel’s world to ashes.

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Chapter End Notes

So, what do you think? Any opinions on Bull being added to the Feynriel/Krem romance? *cough*

Next chapter: sex ed. No, really.
“Okay, so,” Hawke said, sounding hysterically anxious. Not that Varric could blame him—with so much riding on this (including the actual literal fate of nations, which, hey no pressure there), he was surprised his long-time friend hadn’t made a break for the door. In fact, if he were a lesser dwarf, he might have had money running on it. “Voices. Bonding. Soulmates. It’s all, ah, a little complicated.”

“Astonishing,” Dorian drawled. “The way you state the obvious paints such a useful picture. I’m so very glad they frog-marched us in here for this.”

Fenris, sitting slightly off to Hawke’s left, curled his upper lip in something very like a snarl. Taran shot Dorian a chiding look.

Dorian had the grace to blush—which was proof enough for Varric that soulmates not only existed, but were too bloody powerful for their own good. He was glad dwarves never had to worry about shit like that; craziness. Absolute craziness.

“Right,” Dorian said, rubbing at his chin. “Apologies, of course.”

“Sure,” Hawke said with a wry smile. “Of course.”

They’d commandeered the main level of the Herald’s Rest, chairs pulled around in the most preciously awkward semi-circle Varric had ever seen. Hawke at the helm, looking equal parts unnerved and amused. Fenris just past him to his left, arms crossing over his chest as he glared daggers at Dorian. Taran next to him, hands clasped, elbows on his knees, leaning forward as if he wanted to absorb everything as quickly and completely as possible. Dorian next, of course, leaning back and looking ready to bolt at any second. Maker’s furry nutsack, even his mustache was quivering with obvious discomfort. And then, rounding out the not-so-merry group, that weird little half-elven kid they’d snatched out of some demon’s maw a few years back.

Funny, but Varric had figured they’d never see Feynriel again. He had some vague sense that Hawke kept in contact with the kid—and that the kid had weighed in to bring Hawke out of his, well, ah, anyway… That he’d helped bring Hawke back in some vague way Varric still didn’t understand. But him showing up here? Now?

Weird. Shit was weird. And it was just going to get weirder if all this going on below him was any indication.

Sitting well up above the action, leaning against the third story landing and listening in like the nosy
busy-body he never pretended he wasn’t. Varric shook his head and took mental notes; for posterity. If the Tale of the Champion was anything to go by, the whole world was going to eat this up with a spoon.

“All right, so the first thing we need to get out of the way is this: because Voices have been a forbidden subject throughout much of the Chantry-controlled world, actual concrete information is hard to come by. Most of what I know comes from my father, and he, well. He studied what he could, and collected whatever scraps he could get his hands on, but much of it is hearsay and legend.”

“Oh, marvelous.”

“Dorian,” Hawke began.

Dorian waved off his words; he never could hold his tongue when he was this keyed up. “I only mean to say, hearsay and legend on your end,” he gestured between them, “and absolute monstrosity on mine. It’s a wonder any of us made it this far, to be perfectly frank.”

Fenris leaned forward. “Keep interrupting,” he said, “and not all of us will.”

“Can we not—” Taran began, looking between the two, even as Hawke said: “Oh look, a conveniently timed distraction!” as the door banged open. Feynriel simply sank down in his seat as if he could will himself to disappear.

Varric leaned over the edge of the railing, craning to see who’d stormed so unceremoniously into the middle of this whole mess. He caught a flash of grey bicep and a horn: figured Bull wouldn’t be able to keep away.

“Bull,” Taran said, startled. “I’m sorry, but the Rest is closed right now.”

Bull stepped inside—and into full view—letting the door slam shut behind him. He glanced around the circle, a smile toying at the corners of his mouth. His gaze didn’t linger anywhere, but Varric swore he could see Feynriel sinking even further into his chair, as if willing it to swallow him whole.

“Not here to drink, boss,” Bull said. He strode in, grabbing one of chairs neatly tucked against a table and swung it around to join the circle—literally muscling his way in as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Why, Dorian actually snorted and made room for him.

Hawke tilted his head. “What are you here for?” he asked.

Bull offered a flashing smile. “I’m here to learn about Voices,” he said, getting himself nice and comfortable, “same as everyone else.”

Hawke flicked a glance toward Fenris and something indecipherable passed between them. Funny: Varric could remember a time when these two weren’t able to read each other so clearly. He could remember when the air was fraught around them, when Fenris all but hissed and spit whenever Hawke stepped too close, lingered too long, pushed against the constant tension flowing like an undertow between them. It was crazy how different things were; it was crazy how things had changed. How they had changed.

The fact that Fenris had relaxed his reflexive hatred of all things magical was proof, he supposed, that there was hope in the world after all. (Or that soulmates were more powerful than any sane being should fuck with.)
“But, Bull,” Taran was saying, brows puckered together lightly. “You’re not… Are you… Um…”

“Nope,” Bull said easily. He leaned back, hands threaded over his bare belly, legs kicked out: the very image of relaxation. “Guess you could say I have a vested interest in the topic, though.” His eye didn’t tick toward anyone—he was too good for that—but Varric watched with open interest as Feynriel’s cheeks heated redder and redder, those delicately pointed eartips the color of spring radishes.

Huh.

*Interesting.*

Hawke shot Taran a look; Taran glanced toward Dorian in question; Dorian looked to Feynriel; Feynriel visibly died a little inside. Fenris just looked annoyed. Finally, clearly deciding not to make an even bigger show of it all, Hawke shook his head and got back to the business at hand. “All right then,” he said. “So, as I was saying: everything I know, I learned from my father or from tales Anders picked up in the Circle, so there are certain to be gaps or just plain inaccuracies.” He began to talk through all the things Varric had heard before: the way his father had procured lyrium one night. Taking it with his father watching carefully over him, to guard his dreams from demons. The search for his Voice, and finally hearing it (hearing Fenris) calling to him in the dark.

Everyone remained silent, rapt, as Hawke talked. Finally, he paused and drew a breath, looking around the circle. Beside him, Fenris looked visibly uncomfortable, but he wasn’t protesting: this was why they were here, after all. Still, there was no missing the way Hawke subtly dropped his hand between them and Fenris, shifting, allowed their fingers to brush in encouragement. “Dorian,” Hawke said; his voice was a little rough. “Why don’t you tell us a little bit about what it’s like in Tevinter?”

All eyes shifted to Dorian.

Varric strained his neck to catch sight of them all, curious where this was going to go. Voices, he knew (sort of), but the rest? Judging by the way Dorian subtly tensed, he wasn’t thrilled at the idea of sharing anymore.

Taran leaned in, one hand falling to Dorian’s shoulder, and whispered in his ear. From this angle, Varric could just make out the shape of those words: *It’s all right. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, amatus.*

Sweet. They were so Maker-taken sweet; it gave him ulcers just thinking of all the shit the world was going to pour all over them when the word finally broke about what they meant to each other. It wasn’t fair.

Dorian reached up, briefly, and brushed his fingers across Taran’s before speaking. “In Tevinter,” he said as Taran’s hand fell away, “they teach you from childhood about *unum vinctum.*” Fenris visibly bristled at the word. “Any child from a good magical family is surrounded by *vinctum*… They remain close to their mages but aren’t… It isn’t quite so romantic as it is down here.”

He looked around quickly, then down. Tense. He was so tense Varric could see the strain of his muscles. *What must this be like for him?* Varric found himself wondering, surprised and unexpectedly moved by empathy. For Taran, all of this was new, but for Dorian? He’d been raised in some mirror-shade version of this: everything he had experienced with Taran was breaking new ground, going against his cultural conditioning. That had to take remarkable strength—and a remarkable toll.
“Were there, um, *vinctum* in your house growing up?” Taran asked, so quietly Varric had to strain forward to hear. He’d turned toward Dorian, their knees brushing together. All of him focused now on the other man with a steady, undeniable warmth.

Dorian shot him a quick glance, expression a complicated tangle of emotion behind the most fragile of shells. “But of course,” he said. “Both Mother and Father were bonded. I can barely remember a time when their *vinctum* weren’t there. But it was very much like having a blood-loyal servant following you about,” he added. “Or a particularly useful piece of furniture. My family was closer to ours than usual, but most mages would not be vulgar enough to be seen as fond of their *vinctum*. They weren’t family.”

*They were barely considered people.* Dorian didn’t have to say the words for them to ring clear as day. Everyone except Bull shifted in response. Hawke reached over and thread his fingers through Fenris’s, their matching scars a visible echo—a full-throated counterpoint to a world where mages and Voices weren’t bound in all things.

“What were their names?” Taran asked.

Dorian looked up, meeting Taran’s gaze; catching there. The tension threading through his body loosened minutely. “Delectus and Lucia,” he said, then paused. Tilted his head. “You know, it is strangely good saying their names. I wonder how they are faring?”

“Were you close?” Taran reached over again, absolutely shameless in his open affection, and took Dorian’s hand between two of his own.

Dorian’s gaze dropped to the place where they touched, a little smile toying at the corners of his mouth. “Oh, *kaffas*, no. He was a dullard and she was an ogre. But…” He paused. Drew in a breath. Let it out slowly. “But I do hope she is well. In the end, despite all the mess, she was kinder to me than my own family. When we’re done sorting out this whole saving the world nonsense,” he added, looking up through his lashes to meet Taran’s eyes, “I’d rather like to go back there and fix what went wrong with my home. With my family. Starting with *them*.”

“We will,” Taran promised. “That’s the wonderful thing about the Inquisition: we can make things better. The world doesn’t have to be like this.”

Spoken like a true idealist. Funny thing was, as cynical as Varric like to think himself to be, the kid’s words sparked something inside him, too. He felt it, glowing bright and warm as a coal…and he wasn’t the only one. He could *see* it on the faces of every member of the Inquisition, every time Taran stood in front of a crowd, or walked among his men, or make some world-shaking decision colored so obviously by his endless wells of empathy: a hundred, a thousand faces looking up, shining back in the first stirrings of hope.

There was some crazy darkspawn magister looking to rip the world in two, and yet when their Inquisitor—their Herald of Andraste—promised that he was going to find a way to make things right again…somehow, it was crazy-easy to believe him.

“Starting here,” Taran said, quieter, grip tightening. “We can change things from here. For Tevinter, for mages, for elves,” Feynriel and Fenris both looked up at that, eyes on the boy, “for everyone. This is our chance to get things right.”

“Hear hear, boss,” the Bull said. He leaned back, chair creaking under his weight. “Assuming you don’t get hung up by your heels for bonding to a pretty ‘Vint, ‘course.” He winked at Dorian’s flat look, effortlessly breaking that building sense of breathless tension.
That kid, Varric thought, shaking his head. For a moment there, as the world had focused down
down down on that little circle below, he could have sworn he was ready to charge into battle—to
fight for some shining cause. Years with Anders and he hadn’t felt moved once to revolution, but
now…

“He makes disciples when all he wants are friends,” a soft voice at Varric’s elbow offered. Varric
startled, jerking around with a hiccupping heart as Cole slipped out of the shadows and moved to
crouch next to him—specter-pale in the dim light, floppy brim of his hat covering everything but the
point of his chin. “He doesn’t know how to stop. That’s why he needs this so much—the bond is a
bridge that keeps him human. He doesn’t want to forget he’s flesh and blood.” Cole tipped his head,
angling up to peer at Varric. His eyes looked queerly washed out in the dark. “Hi.”

Varric forced himself to settle, annoyed that he’d been so spooked. He went out of his way to treat
Cole as normally as possible—the way he tried to treat Taran as normally as possible—and he hated
to think that the kid could read the unease roiling in his gut. “Hey,” he said, ticking up the corner of
his mouth in a smile. “Come to learn all about soulmates?”

“No,” Cole said, blinking at him slowly. “No one here knows anything.”

That earned a surprised guffaw, barely muffled in time. Below them, the ‘lesson’ was continuing,
with Hawke talking once more about lyrium and visiting the Fade and all the wackadoodle ways the
mind played tricks on you when you were hunting up your Voice for the first time. “Well,
considering Hawke’s the best expert I could find,” Varric said dryly, “I’d say we’re well and truly
screwed.”

“You didn’t think of Solas,” Cole said. “Why? Because you wanted a reason to bring Hawke back?
But Solas could help more than anyone. He remembers when it all went wrong.”

For some reason, that sent a shiver up Varric’s spine. “I’ll be sure to ask him,” he lied. It wasn’t that
he didn’t want to use all the tools at their disposal, but something about the way Cole said that—*he
remembers when it all went wrong*—sent silent alarms winging through him.

Solas was… Solas was a good guy. Weird, and a little too pedantic, and sometimes smugger than a
nug in heat, but generally affable enough. Varric liked him. Considered him a friend.

He just wasn’t sure he trusted what his take on all of this would be, and wasn’t *that* rich—that
Varric, a dwarf with less Fade-sense than anyone here, was making those kinds of judgment calls.

Varric shook his head, wrapping his arms around the long post as he leaned over to get a better view
of what was happening down below. He caught sight of Hawke just as his old friend tipped his head
back on a laugh: loud and warm and rumbling and *familiar*. Sorely missed. And yeah, he figured as
Hawke caught sight of him (not at all surprised, as if he’d known Varric was there all along) and
subtly winked before refocusing on his ‘students’, yeah maybe he *had* settled on bringing Hawke
and Fenris here because he missed them. Maybe there was *something* personal in his decision to
overlook all the other mages—the scores and bloody scores of them wandering about the camp—to
draw these two members of his little found family back into the fold. And maybe there was
something downright selfish about that choice.

But sitting up here, watching them, he couldn’t help but believe he’d made the right call. Having
Hawke and Fenris here felt right the way little else had these past few months. It felt like things were
almost back to how they were supposed to be. (And that maybe, just maybe, he could breathe a little
easier knowing for a fact that Hawke was safe.)

“So, uh,” Taran was saying, down below. “Bonding. It’s initiated through… sex?”
Bull gave a playful wolf-whistle and Feynriel about near disappeared into his seat, he was slumped down so low. Dorian fussed at his mustache. “Oh, as if you weren’t thinking it too,” he muttered to Bull. There was his usual airy defiance there, but bright spots of color on his cheeks gave him away. He was embarrassed that they even had to ask.

Hawke ignored the rest of them and kept his focus on Taran, expression friendly and open. Warm, the way even Solas wouldn’t have been able to manage—and that was all the proof Varric needed to reassure himself that he’d made the right call bringing Hawke-and-Fenris here, selfishly or not. “It can be,” Hawke said. “But it’s not a requirement.”

Taran shifted awkwardly in his seat, very obviously not looking at anyone else. “Um. Okay,” he said. “What about… Can you, um, have sex without…” He trailed off, practically squirming under the ring of attention, Dorian all too straight-backed by his side.

“He’s embarrassed,” Cole said, completely unnecessarily, leaning closer to Varric so his ghostly whisper could be heard, “because he wants Dorian to—”

“Yup!” Varric interrupted quickly. He didn’t exactly need a Fade spirit or blood magic or even two working eyeballs to fill in those rather obvious blanks. Below, Hawke was trying to explain that intense intimacy did lead to bonds—each word carefully chosen to avoid oversharing as Fenris looked on—but that intimacy could be sexual or emotional, depending. “I think pretty much everyone at Skyhold has picked up on that, kid.”

Cole shook his head sadly. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “He wants it to, because he thinks he lost everything: his family scattered to ash, long ago. He thinks this will make Dorian his new family. But he’s too late, and oh, he wishes he could save them and this part of himself, too.”

The shiver down his spine was now a full-blown shudder, and Cole’s big, limpid eyes had all but swallowed up his pale, pinched face. “All right, kid,” Varric said, interrupting whatever was about to come spilling out next. He liked the kid—liked him a lot; wanted to help him, protect him, support him—but there were lines that didn’t need crossing, and it felt like they were inching toward a pretty important one. He clapped a bony shoulder as he rose, smiling friendly but expectant until Cole stood, too. “Let’s give this lot their privacy. Maybe grab some grub while we’re at it—what do you think?”

Cole blinked big, lamprey eyes at him. “I like food,” he said simply.

“Yeah, me too. Especially now that we’ve got some halfway decent cooks joining up.” He tipped his head toward the far door—the one that would lead out to a series of parapets and unclaimed rooms left half in ruin—and waited until Cole took the first step before following him out. A big part of him was dying to hear more of the all-too-earnest conversation drifting up from below, but the rest of him knew when to cut and run.

Hawke and Fenris had this handled. They could answer Taran’s questions, help the kid out, and maybe keep this whole ship from capsizing; if anyone could do that, he was sure that it’d be them. As for what Cole had said, well…

*There’s no such thing as fate,* Varric reminded himself, even as a growing part of him couldn’t believe a word of that anymore. *We have to just take each day as it comes.*

They’d be fine. This whole thing would work out. They’d save the world. They’d all end up happy. Dorian and Taran would get their bond, and Hawke and Fenris would stay here and be safe. Hell, maybe Carver and Anders would be able to stop running for once and sneak their way in and live in something approaching normalcy, and Isabela could blow through Kirkwall and collect the rest of
their family and bring them where Varric could make sure they were okay and…

And this was going to work, damn it. They were all going to get their bloody fucking happy ending.

He looked over as he let the door shut behind him, catching Cole’s thoughtful gaze on him. “Don’t, kid,” he warned, feeling the now ever-present beat of anxiety thudding like a war drum in his chest. He needed to hold on to that dream of happiness just as long as he could. “Not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Cole echoed like a raven—like a harbinger of doom to come. And, mocking his desperate hope, a hollow wind blew through Skyhold, sounding to Varric’s paranoid ears like a thousand damning voices:

Not ever again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your feedback! I really, really appreciate it.

One of the things that drew me to writing these stories was a desire to play with what it means to be a soulmate. I want each soulmate pairing to come at it from a slightly (or, sometimes, hugely) different angle. I started pondering introducing Bull into Feynriel/Krem because I've not really had a chance to explore a platonic soulmate relationship.

So because I totally understand not enjoying surprise!poly, I want to be as clear as I can without spoiling it entirely: I see Bull and Krem as 100% platonic. Feynriel is demi-sexual and is only sexually attracted to Krem. Bull's going to keep his pants on.

I don't do love triangles. This isn't a traditional threesome I'm considering. It's hard to explain without spoiling, but it isn't going to be Krem/Feynriel/Bull. It's more...Krem/Feynrel & Bull. Because there's a lot of layers of trust and affection and love and family that can be built there, and that intrigues me just as much as Krem and Feynriel making out does. *G* (And like, hey, 100% Krem/Feynriel makeouts are in the future.)

Okay, I hoped this helped! I hate to say "trust me", but trust me!
He’d just put away his newly-sharpened blade when Bull strode up to join him.

“Krem!” he said, just a little too loud, just a little too gleeful, grinning like he had a secret he couldn’t wait to share. Not that this was anything new. For all that Bull was a qunari spy, he sure loved to gossip like an old auntie.

“Chief,” Krem said, barely flicking his gaze up. Best not to encourage him. “Good day, then?”

“Good enough.” He took a seat on an overturned barrel, the wood creaking and groaning in protest. Bull’s gaze idly flicked around the practice yard and Krem found himself following suit; checking and re-checking and checking again to make sure their people were safe, like always.

The rest of the Chargers were all scattered across the yard: running through exercises, cooling down with stretches, or (like Krem) seeing to the upkeep of their weapons. Dalish and Rocky were good-naturedly arguing over something-or-another, taking the occasional playful swipes that anyone else would have interpreted as attempted bloodletting.

In fact…

Krem met the worried gaze of one of Cullen’s men—good lad, if a little too nervous for his own health—and waved him off with a smile. The kid’s shoulders visibly rounded forward in relief. No one wanted to get in the middle of Charger business, which was exactly how Krem liked to keep it.

“Could even say,” Bull continued idly as if there’d been no lull, “it was illuminating.”

“Uh-huh.” He wasn’t going to rise to the bait. If Bull wanted to fill him in (and he obviously wanted to fill Krem in) on all the gory details, he would. He might even get around to doing it faster if Krem didn’t act like he much cared. “I’m sure it was.”

Bull leaned back, letting the poor barrel groan and creak beneath him. Krem was just waiting for the day when the latest barrel or crate or chair or what-have-you went sprawling out from under the big lug. Either that or shattered under the weight of his bulk. Even though Krem knew for a fact those muscles weren’t just for show, he couldn’t help but flash back to his very first instructor and the way the man sniffed over swordsmen who favored bulk over finesse.

_Savages_, the man used to say. It amused Krem sometimes to wonder what he—what all of them—would say if they got an eyeful of the Chargers now.

A grey blur caught his attention, swinging into his immediate periphery, and he glanced up as Bull leaned in close—close—closer—that familiar shit-eating grin spreading wide. “Really illuminating,” he said. “The sort of shit you don’t just hear every day.”

“Uh-huh,” he said again, amused but refusing to show it. “That so?”

Sometimes it was a game to see who would crack first. Sometimes it was a different sort of game to needle Bull just as much as he could. And sometimes—

“Learned all about Voices from the Champion of Kirkwall,” Bull said, blowing every bit of Krem’s faux nonchalance out of the water. “That pretty half-elf, Feynriel, was there.”
—and sometimes Bull played mean and fucking dirty.

Krem shot up, ready to stalk away, but Bull’s hand darted out lightning-fast; he grabbed Krem’s shoulder and pushed just hard enough to have him thumping back onto his arse again. None of the Chargers seemed to notice. Or maybe they just thought this was another one of Bull-and-Krem’s little spats, rolling in like a summer rain. Maybe they, like Krem, never thought the Chief could get so, “Maker-fucking low,” Krem snarled, showing his teeth. “You know that? Absolute void-level low. None of this is your bloody fucking business.”

He could feel the heat in his cheeks, burning up his ears. He wanted to fumble back for his sword and start beating the dumb qunari over the head and bloody shoulders with it, emotions stirred up like a swarm of Sera’s bees.

Krem had been doing his level best not to think of Feynriel. Not think of him, not stumble across him, not acknowledge to himself that Feynriel even existed. The nights were a particular hell. He couldn’t shake the feeling that if he let himself sleep, Feynriel would be there, waiting for him: ready to snatch him up and bind him in shackles and drag him back to Tevinter—fuck fuck fuck. It was like spiders crawling all over his brain; he couldn’t shake the fear.

And here Bull was *grinning*, like this was the biggest Maker-damn joke in the world.

“Chief,” Krem said, voice low. He leaned in a little, keeping his gaze locked on Bull’s. He could feel that cold-hot-cold rush of fear and rage (and *longing*, damn it, which just went to show how dangerously seductive all this was). “You’re a bastard. You know that?”

“Sure,” Bull said easily enough. His voice wasn’t teasing anymore, and his expression had settled into something a little more serious. Understanding? Fuck if Krem knew. “Doesn’t change facts, though. And I figured, well, if an expert was willing to share a quick-and-dirty primer on this whole Voices shit, then I should be there to hear it.”

He dragged a hand through his hair, nails scraping along the scalp. “*Why?*” Krem demanded, fighting to hang on to angry. Angry was so much easier than all the other emotions fighting for dominance inside of him. Angry kept him on his toes, kept him ready for anything.

Angry kept him from thinking of surprisingly soft, pale skin and a blush the color of springtime.

Bull spread his hands. “Seemed like the thing to know.”

“You going to take all that back to the qunari? Help the arvaarad find creative new ways to bind and chain their saarebas?” Which…was a horrifying thought, now that it had popped into his head. The qunari hated magic, kept their mages sewn up tight, but…*Maker*, what if the arvaarad and saarebas were bonded? What if that was part of what kept the saarebas from rebelling? Not chains, but some sick Fade-driven perversion of *love*?

Fucked up, fucked up, that was so bloody *fucked up* if it was true: and he thought Tevinter was the bottom of the shit-heap.

But Bull was shaking his head, as if he could read a quarter of the horror spiraling through Krem. “Nah. Not getting in the middle of any of that.” He leaned forward again, resting an elbow on his knee as he studied Krem seriously. “I wanted to find out what I could about all this—about *him*—for you.”

Oh.

Oh.
That was unexpected. Though, Krem realized, straightening and staring back at Bull with a hot flush of gratitude, it probably shouldn’t have been. Bull was a good leader; he was a good friend. He cared about the Chargers deeper than he probably wanted to admit even to himself, and, well, fuck: he’d literally given an eye for Krem before. Was it really a shock that he’d put himself out there to protect him from this?

“I see,” Krem said slowly. He wasn’t sure how else to respond.

Bull shrugged a shoulder. “Didn’t learn a whole lot about Voices, really. That Hawke kid,” Krem was almost startled into a snort at Bull calling the Champion of Kirkwall a kid, “he’s doing his best, but it’s clear whatever cobbled-together shit he’s picked up has too many holes to make head or tail of it all. And Dorian, well: ‘Vints don’t know their asses from their elbows about all this.” He smirked. “No offense, Krem.”

“None taken,” he said. Because, well, yeah. Fucking ‘Vints, right?

“But that boy,” Bull continued on blithely, running all over any goodwill he’d just won, “that Feynriel: he’s a good egg, huh?”

Krem bristled, standing, and this time Bull didn’t try to stop him. He leaned back instead, studying Krem with a faint quirk of his brow, as if daring him to argue back. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Krem said, trying to paint his meaning crystal clear in those words: keep the fuck out of this.

“Nah,” Bull said blithely, “you don’t know what you’re talking about. Oh, stop that,” he added, when Krem turned to stalk off. He snagged him by the back of his armor and pulled him back, easily catching one of his wrists when Krem whirled to take a swing at him. He was actually laughing, the asshole, ducking the second wild swing from Krem’s off-hand. “Come on, Krem, you’re going to hurt my feelings.”

“I’m going to hurt a lot more than that,” Krem vowed, but Bull just caught his other wrist, locking his hands between them as effortlessly as if Krem were a child. It was maddening, his heart racing (from anger, he reassured himself, struggling to ignore the rabbit-fast pulse, not fear) and blood rushing in his ears. He seriously considered head-butting the damn qunari. “I will kick your ass if you don’t stay out of my bloody business!”

Bull gently tsked, moving his legs with surprising grace when Krem shuffled around to kick him. They had to look ridiculous—had to be drawing eyes if not a crowd—but Krem’s thoughts were too busy tumbling one over the other for him to notice. Because…because…because Bull knew, and Bull had been there with Feynriel, and there was no one he trusted more than Bull (crazy, crazy, crazy) and if Bull was saying…

If he was suggesting…

FUCK, it didn’t even bear thinking about. “You fucking asshole,” Krem snarled, showing his teeth.

“Sure,” Bull agreed easily, not reacting to Krem’s panicked fury. If anything, he gentled, thumbs running soothing circles against the thrumming pulse in his wrist, eye steady and understanding and maddeningly knowing. As if he could see right into Krem’s head, his heart, into the messy tangle of want and fear and want and anger and want want want. “But I’m always going to be looking out for you, so you may as well get used to it.”
And that…

…that somehow had Krem deflating, muscles gone weak and all the air leaving his lungs in a
defeated *whoosh* of breath. His knees wobbled and he would have collapsed back into the grass if
Bull wasn’t there to give him a literal shoulder to lean on—big and broad and as dependable as a
mountain. His Chief and friend, always there to have his back, and, “*Fasta vass.*” Krem whispered,
slipping back into Tevene despite himself.

A qunari spy had his back. A qunari spy was looking into this whole *unum vinctum*…this whole
*Voice*…thing. A qunari spy was determined to make sure he was safe and happy and whole, and
damned if that didn’t bring tears to his eyes.

He turned his face to hide it, glowering at Grim, who was watching them from a distance with open
interest. The man just shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Bull lightly patted his back. “You good?” he said, as if he weren’t practically cradling Krem against
his bulk.

Krem drew in a serrated breath and straightened, all that toxic fear and angst that he’d been storing
up over the last handful of days (over the years, ever since he’d learned a mage could one day come
for him, claim him, own him) beginning to melt away. Not gone—it took more than a pep talk to
scrub away that kind of antipathy—but…better. He felt *better*.

And that, he figured, was its own sort of danger, because he couldn’t seem to stop himself from
asking, “So…you, uh, like Feynriel then?”

*Maker.* Could he be any more ridiculous?

Bull began to grin, slow and steady. “What’s not to like?” he said, then shrugged when Krem
snorted. “I’m serious. Sure, okay, he trained in Tevinter—but there’s not much Tevinter about that
one. The way he talked about Voices made that pretty damn clear.”

“He *talked* about—” Krem began, startled.

But Bull was already shaking his head, shooing Krem back to his seat. “Didn’t say a word about
you. Barely said a word at all, actually. Shy boy, your Feynriel.”

“He isn’t *my* anything,” Krem muttered, shoulders inching up about his ears even as his stupid heart
gave another stupid little lurch.

Bull’s grin widened. “That so?” he said, far too casually. “Then I guess you wouldn’t mind if I tried
my luck with him. Pretty little thing like that would look good bouncing his way on top my—” He
cut himself off on a laugh at whatever flare of murderous rage he read on Krem’s face. “Take it you
wouldn’t like that very much, then.”

“Do whatever you want,” Krem lied, feeling the jealousy curling and curdling inside of him. “I don’t
care.”

“Sure,” Bull said, smug as a cat with a bowl full of cream. “I can see just how little you care written
all over your face.”

This… This was so stupid. Krem swiped a hand across his face as if he could brush away the
feelings like cobwebs, hating how easy it was for Bull to get him riled up. They’d been together long
enough that the qunari knew every button to push, but as much as they ragged on each other, usually
Bull was better about backing off after a few swipes. This felt different—deliberate—like he was
being herded slowly but surely, and he hated that feeling. If he didn’t trust Bull so much (with his life, and so much more), he’d probably be throwing punches right about now. “Why are you doing this?” he demanded, going straight for the real issue here. He forced himself to square up and face the Bull, gazes locking. *Cards on the table*, right? “Why does it matter to you? *I’m the unum vinctum*—Voice—what-the-bloody-fuck ever; so what are you doing sticking your nose in the middle of all of this? It’s better if we all just leave it alone.”

Bull tilted his head with a faint smile, as if he’d been waiting all along for them to reach this point. “You’re wrong there, Krem,” he said—voice serious despite the lingering smile. “This sort of thing? It doesn’t go away, and it doesn’t get better if you just close your eyes and pretend it doesn’t exist. Not for someone like you.”

“You don’t know that,” Krem protested, even though, well, fuck…yeah, Bull did. Bull knew him better than anyone in this world or beyond.

Bull didn’t even bother dignifying that with a response. “So when I realized what shit was going down, I decided to start watching the boy. Taking his measure. It’s funny, the things you notice about someone when they don’t realize they’re being watched. The little things they give away whenever they interact with the people who know them best.”

Krem crossed his arms over his chest. “Stop being creepy,” he muttered.

Bull just flashed a toothy grin. “Funnier all the things they say about themselves when they think all the attention and oxygen in the room is being sucked up by someone, something else. I watched for a while, took his measure, but it wasn’t until Hawke’s little class that I got my answer. The kid’s quiet as a Chantry mouse, sure, but his face, his whole body’s, got a way of screaming out the truth.” He snorted. “Must’ve been hell for him in Tevinter.”

He didn’t want to ask.

He didn’t want to *want* to ask.

He didn’t—

He—

“Tell me about him, then,” Krem said between gritted teeth.

And maybe because he could sense the tension—the fear—the damned hope he couldn’t seem to crush no matter how hard he tried—Bull didn’t string him along or make him beg. “Kirkwall kid,” he said, “born and raised. That accent gives them away every time. Alienage, probably, by the way he holds himself. Haunting, once you know what to look for.”

He closed his eyes, no longer fighting the image of Feynriel that sprang to mind at Bull’s words. The bits and pieces that had been imprinted already on his thoughts rose like specters as Bull talked: watercolor impressions bleeding together to form an indelible whole.

“One parent’s foreign. Probably not around much, if at all. Abandonment issues. Grew up poor and hungry. Never had enough of anything; never had many friends. It’s the way he looks at Hawke and Dorian,” he added when Krem opened his eyes in question. “*Hungry*, like he’s storing up every second for a long winter. Kid’ll come crumbling apart if you ever touch him. He needs that, you know,” Bull added matter-of-factly. “For someone like you to just reach out.”

“You’re trying to guilt me into being bonded?” Krem demanded, a riot of emotion blooming inside his chest. Because Maker’s breath, but the image Bull painted was stark and felt undeniably true.
He’d only allowed himself to be near Feynriel once, had only caught his eyes across Skyhold a handful more times than that, but he’d felt that silent starvation humming like a plucked wire between them. Feynriel was easily the prettiest boy he’d ever seen—gossamer-delicate as the inside blush of a petal—but he was the saddest, too. Closed off and alone on the fringe of every group, lighting up only when Dorian reached out to put a casual hand on his shoulder.

And, fuck, the way he came alive then…

Krem re-focused on Bull’s face, the burst of that image fading away again, leaving something uncomfortably breathless in its wake. Andraste-taken magic making him feel things against his will. “Nah,” Bull finally said, fingers threaded together loosely as he leaned in, like he had the greatest secret in the world. “Something like that’s your call. Whether you want to be with the kid or not isn’t my business in the end. But here’s the thing: you’re one of mine. I’m always going to be looking out for you. And I’m going to make damn sure you don’t just go running in the opposite direction because of some wrong-headed shit you were spoon-fed as a kid.”

“Says the guy who swallowed the qun whole,” Krem muttered, one part touched and one part shaken. Because the thing was, he did trust Bull more than anyone in this world, and if Bull was saying he should look closer… Maker. Even if it went against everything he’d ever thought, it was hard to ignore. “I guess I didn’t realize you thought much about this kind of thing.”

“I don’t,” Bull said with a flashing grin. “Unum vinctum, Voices, what-the-fuck-ever: none of that’s for me. But hey,” he added, “neither is rubbing my tits with cinnamon oil and letting nugs dangle off my nipples—”

“What,” Krem demanded, horrified.

“—but I’m not here to stop anyone from having a good time.”

And that—

That was just—

That was—

…what?

Krem stared at the Iron Bull for a full five seconds before slowly crumpling forward, elbows on his knees, head cradled between his palms. His shoulders jerked once. “I hate you so much, Chief,” he said on a strangled laugh. He felt bruised inside and yet weirdly okay—only the Bull could pull him through a wringer of emotions like this and leave him coming out the other side better than he was before. Because...because all right, yes, he was touched that the Bull had gone through so much trouble to scout Feynriel out for him. He was touched that he’d studied him with his canny ben-hassrath eye, that he’d done the one thing Krem wasn’t sure he, himself, was capable of doing: looking at this whole clusterfuck clearly, honestly, soberly, with an open mind not clouded by years of fear and hate.

He wasn’t going to go rushing into some soulmate’s arms like a romantic cliché just because his boss had given him the OK, but it…it helped, a lot, to know that Bull had his back. That Bull had looked this whole situation over and decided he was going to be all right.

That he had friends in his corner that cared for him that much.

It took the sting out of some of his fear. It took the bite from all those years of dread every non-mage of a certain class felt living in Tevinter, seeing the hopeless shells of unum vinctum with their pretty
gold collars and knowing: *but for the grace of Andraste go I.*

His worst fear had come true. And if he could trust the Bull—which he did, with all his heart—then maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Slowly, Krem looked up into Bull’s smug, playfully smirking face. “All right. I’ll talk to him. Maybe get to know him a bit.” That *smug* dialed instantly up to eleven. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to actually do anything about it, you know.”

“Sure thing, Krem,” Bull said, crossing his arms over his chest with that *insufferable* smirk on full display. “It’s your call. Like I said: I’m not going to get in the way of a fun night of glistening pecs and dangling nu—” He cackled, ducking away when Krem swung playfully for him, the utter ridiculousness of the moment making him laugh too. Remarkably light, remarkably free. *Hopeful,* if scared still, as if maybe…

…maybe this all might somehow work out after all.

*All right Feynriel,* Krem thought, swiping at his boss with his other good fist, *I’ll give you one shot.*
“Stand still, my dear, or you’ll ruin the lines.”

Feynriel paused mid-reaching up to scratch his nose. It was itching like mad—and had been for the last ten excruciating minutes. He’d wrestled with himself over whether he dared interrupt Lady Vivienne’s work to rub a sleeve across it, but something (he preferred to call it a blend of pragmatic self-preservation and existential dread) kept him from trying.

When the stately mage finally turned her back for more pins, however, he’d finally taken the opportunity to put himself out of his misery. And now…this.

Standing there, on a stool, robes billowing around him like he was a child raiding his father’s closet, Vivienne arching a brow over her shoulder as his sleeve bobbed less than an inch from his face.

He could feel his cheeks heating even as he snatched his hand back down. “Sorry,” Feynriel muttered, feeling awkward and gawkish and all of six years old. Vivienne may have been doing him a kindness, but he was getting increasingly tempted to fling himself over the balcony and go streaking out the grand hall utterly starkers.

And wouldn’t that be an interesting footnote in Varric’s latest tale, he thought, standing completely still as Vivienne turned back to picking through a colorful box for the proper thread. The stool was cushioned and soft beneath his feet, and the sun was streaming in through her large window, casting his face in golden light.

Honestly, there was a small part of him that was enjoying this. He’d never much had people fussing over him growing up. His mother did her best, but raising him alone in the alienage, there hadn’t exactly been extra time or energy in her day to do more than cuddle him close against her bony side, lips against his temple and breath soft in his hair.

As for Tevinter… Well. Not the cuddliest of people. At least not in the circles he’d been forced to swim in, with magisters and archons and duels and not-so-secret blood magic going on behind every door. If someone came at him there with a pair of scissors and a friendly-but-firm, You must let me do something about that robe, my dear; you’re practically in tatters… He’d be expecting pins to be pricking more than fine cloth.

“So tell me,” Vivienne said, turning back to him with a pincushion shaped like a curled-up dragon in one hand, “why did you go to Tevinter for study?”

The question startled him into shifting position, which earned a soft cluck of disapproval. Feynriel obligingly shifted back before answering. “I’m surprised you don’t know that already,” he said slowly as Vivienne swept back a fold of wool and began pinning the decorative border in place. “Pretty much everyone I’ve met in the last few years has read the Tales of the Champion.”

He showed up three times in that book—twice as a damsel in distress that Hawke courageously rescued, and once as the plucky former damsel turned white knight in return…though the chapters about Hawke’s, uh, illness after Fenris left Kirkwall were briefly sketched at best.

“Perhaps,” Vivienne said, “but I prefer to hear such things from the horse’s mouth.”

“From the horse’s mouth, huh?” Feynriel joked. “Hopefully I’m not the bog unicorn.” He flushed
when she just ticked her dark gaze up toward him, clearly waiting. “Oh, um,” he fumbled, “that is…
There’s not much more to tell that wasn’t already covered in Varric’s book. I started having
nightmares and found myself falling into the dreams of other people. My mother was worried for me,
so she asked Hawke and his friends to help. They’d already saved me from some slavers some time
before, so she thought she could trust him.”

Vivienne hummed thoughtfully, fingers flying over the folds and pleats of the robe. “She didn’t feel
like she could trust the local Keeper?”

“No,” Feynriel said, flat. When Vivienne looked up at him again, brow arched, he simply shrugged a
single shoulder. There were parts of the story he was willing to fill in, but the way his mother had
been treated by the Dalish wasn’t one of them. “Hawke had saved me before, and he and all of his
friends were known around Kirkwall for helping people in need. They were the best choice.”

She tugged the hem gently. “His friends,” she mused. “Do you perhaps include Anders in that?”

This was just going from bad to worse. Feynriel could feel himself tensing up, muscles going tight in
response to what he couldn’t help but read as censor in her voice. “I do,” he said. “And I’m sorry,
but I’m not going to get into any kind of, of, of spat about whether what Anders did at the end was
right or wrong: he helped save me, and I’m always going to owe him for that.”

They could have so easily decided he wasn’t worth the effort, or couldn’t be trusted with the power
uncoiling insidiously inside of him. They could have left him Tranquil the way that Keeper
had recommended, or just killed him outright and saved themselves the trouble.

Instead, they had gone into his dreams and fought back the demons that had him in their clutches,
and they had his undying loyalty for that. All of them.

Feynriel startled when a cool hand rested over his closed fist. Vivienne met his eyes, standing but not
letting go of him; there was a surprising amount of empathy in her open expression. “My dear,” she
said, “you should never apologize for defending your friends. It is a most noble thing.” She patted his
hand, kind. “I won’t press the matter any further—I have the sizing down perfect.”

Vivienne laughed at whatever bald shock she read on his face. “You squirm more than Taran getting
his latest fittings. Here,” she added, setting aside the dragon pin cushion and carefully, gracefully,
expertly loosening the robe so Feynriel could slip out of it. He grabbed the end of his braid to keep it
from swinging wildly as he ducked past yards of warm cloth, already reaching for his trusty clothes
folded and laid aside for him. “I’ll make notes and send this to the seamstress. You’ll have plenty of
nice, warm things to wear soon enough.”

“Thank you,” he said, voice muffled by his old tunic. He yanked it down over his head, tugging the
rough-spun green fabric into place. He’d still been wearing the loose hose for his modesty, but the
rest of his clothes were pulled on now with remarkable speed—and not just because it was incredibly
awkward to be partly naked in the Inquisitor’s grand hall. “I appreciate everything. You really didn’t
have to do this.”

“Oh,” Vivienne said, laying the new robe over her arm and giving him a speaking up-and-down
glance as he buckled his worn belt and started toward the door, “but I promise you I did. Until later,
Feynriel.”

He gave an awkward wave, stepping backwards into the doorway. “Bye,” he said, grateful to be
dressed and grateful to be gone and grateful, surprisingly, to have been fussed over and interrogated,
even if Madame de Fer scared the shit out of him. He pushed the door shut and let out a long,
unsteady breath as ravens cawed from somewhere high overhead. The heavy peace of rows and rows of books was all around him, and Feynriel began to turn without looking, already deciding he’d check the usual corners to see if he could find Dorian.

Feynriel made it half a step before he walked face-first into a leather-and-metal wall.

“Ow!” he yelped, far too loudly. Quills scratching over parchment stilled; more ravens joined into the raucous chorus of laughs. A hand grabbed his arm as he wavered, keeping him from toppling back onto his skinny arse. A wonderful smell filled his lungs: sweat and leather and metal and oil for cleaning blades. Some kind of wild herb. Spindleweed?

Familiar, the way that dreams were often familiar for him. He knew without looking who it was. Maker, but he could feel it in his bones, and he was so afraid to look up lest he see scorn in those eyes again.

Krem quickly set Feynriel back from him—giving them both space to breathe. To think. “Feynriel,” he said, low voice sounding a bit rough. Feynriel had been in Skyhold for a little while now, but this was the first time Krem was actually speaking anywhere within his hearing. It made his toes curl in response. “Hello.”

“Um,” Feynriel said, swallowing hard. His face felt hot and stuffy, like it was swelling up with his earnest embarrassment. Was that possible? Oh Andraste, it wasn’t, right? It was totally all in his head. “Hi?”

“…hi,” Krem echoed after a terrible silence. He cleared his throat and shifted back onto his heels, almost as if he felt just as off-balance as Feynriel. (As if his heart was racing even a quarter as fast.) “So, uh. What were you doing?”

Running from Vivienne didn’t seem appropriate, even if it was partially true. “Getting new clothes?” He hated how uncertain he sounded—felt—was. Someone like Krem deserved a partner who was confident and powerful and, just, a thousand times better than Feynriel could ever be, even if he spent the rest of his life fighting to measure up. It wasn’t fair…but then, Krem wouldn’t be Krem if he wasn’t so unbelievably wonderful. “Apparently I’m a disgrace?”

Could he?

Perhaps?

Not talk?

In questions?

Krem crossed his arms over his chest, keeping that careful distance between them. It was a wall, a shield, and Feynriel couldn’t help but feel it acutely. “Who said that?” Krem asked, then immediately shook his head as if forcing away the thought. “Never mind. Look. Feynriel. Bull came to talk to me and—”

“Bull?” Feynriel interrupted, startled. The huge qunari hadn’t approached him since calling up to him that one time on the parapets, but he’d been, just, everywhere. It seemed like everywhere Feynriel went, he was tripping over that horned shadow. “What did he say? What does he want?”

The last came out a little too plaintive, but he couldn’t seem to help himself. It didn’t take a lot to make him feel off-balance, and having a qunari spymaster dodging his footsteps certainly did that and more.
Krem cocked his head, studying Feynriel thoughtfully. “The Chief’s been getting to you, huh?” he asked. There may have been a curl of a smile there, but it was hard to say: Krem was pretty guarded when he wanted to be. “Sorry about that. He takes his duties seriously.”

“Duties?” Feynriel asked—literally stumbling when Krem reached out to grab his elbow. The contact was so sudden, so wonderful, that he may have melted right then and there if not for the toneless “Excuse me” as one of the mages moved past.

He let Krem tug him out of the way—he would have let Krem take him just about anywhere—but the contact was fleeting. Feynriel tried not to show just how much that one simple touch had affected him, though he was sure it must be emblazoned scarlet-red across his stupidly pale cheeks.

“Yeah,” Krem said. “Group mother hen. Look, anyway,” he continued. “Chief wanted me to give you a shot. To listen to what you had to say. So I’m here, listening.”

Oh. Oh. “And he couldn’t warn me I needed to prepare something?!” Feynriel yelped, just a little too loud. Several pairs of curious eyes swung their way again, and this time both of them were blushing hard. “Sorry,” Feynriel added in a quieter voice.

Krem rubbed the back of his neck. “Look,” he said, “we should get out of here. Go somewhere with fewer…” He swung a single finger around to indicate the various mages watching with rapt, knowing interest. “I know a place. Follow me. You can, uh, prepare whatever you want to say as we go. Ten minutes should be enough time.”

_Ten years wouldn’t be enough time_, Feynriel thought, despairing, but he nodded at Krem’s expectant look and followed in his wake when the other man began to move. It didn’t matter that he felt off-balance and uncertain: Krem was talking to him. Krem was given him a chance to…to explain, if nothing else. Krem didn’t hate him. Not out of hand, anyway. Not without giving him a fair shake.

That was so wonderfully Krem. So honorable. So good.

And the Iron Bull had encouraged him to go through with it?

Feynriel followed Krem down the steps and through Solas’s rotunda, feeling a strange fizzing hope building up inside of him. The next time he saw the Bull, he was going to thank him. Or at the very least not go skittering away like a socially anxious fennec.

The wind picked up as they moved across the parapets, the warmth of the inner courtyard bled away out here on the edges of Skyhold. Feynriel wrapped his arms around his middle, following Krem past a knot of Cullen’s guards, up a flight of stone steps, and across a recently repaired archway. There were signs all around them of Skyhold being put back together one stone at a time; piles of rubble were becoming less and less common with every day that passed, and those gaping holes in ceilings and walls were showing signs of being boarded up, tended to, healed.

He reached out as they moved up a final set of stairs toward the far end of the keep, fingertips brushing across cold stone. The pits and grooves were covered in flakes of ice, warmth seeped away where the spell had failed. Each gust of wind was biting, whipping his braid out in front of his face and stealing his breath. Out here, the Frostbacks rose high and unimpeded—Skyhold thrust out over cavernous space, making him feel like he was teetering on the edge of some great danger.

Feynriel flattened his palm against the stone, feeling it hum beneath his fingertips, and took his strength from its subtle song.

Krem stepped out onto the crumbling tower and moved to its edge. Each gust of wind made his hair
flutter back—made him even more handsome than before. His jaw was tight and his shoulders stiff. They were alone up here, the rest of the world a league away.

“So,” Krem said, not looking back. “Now’s your chance. Talk.”

*Talk.* As if there was anything Feynriel could say that would express even a tenth of what he felt.

“Um,” Feynriel managed. He leaned into the wall, other hand creeping up to grip the end of his braid, too unsettled to even bother pretending he wasn’t. One of the first things he’d been taught in Tevinter was how to keep a neutral expression no matter the provocation. He’d been terrible at it. He’d never been good at hiding the feelings burning inside him—it was one of the reasons his mother had encouraged him to keep to the alienage as much as possible. There were vendors in Kirkwall, stalls, stores, whose casual dismissal of *some half-elf whelp* made his blood boil and his heart plummet. He never would have been able to take that with his mother’s stone-faced acceptance.

Just like now, he knew—*he knew*—that every ounce of hope and fear and quiet longing was clear on his face, if Krem so much as turned to look at him.

Maybe it was better, Feynriel figured, that Krem didn’t seem to want to look.

“I’m not… I don’t…” Maker, he was already fucking this up pretty royally, wasn’t he? “I’m not sure exactly what you want to hear.”

“You trained in Tevinter,” Krem said. He rested his hands on the broken teeth of the battlements, staring fixedly out at nothing.

Feynriel sighed. “Yes,” he said, “but only because I had to.”

That earned a low, startled noise from Krem, his weight shifting from foot to foot. “What?” Feynriel said with a sad little laugh, the old bitterness at least ungluing his tongue, “you think people born outside of Tevinter actually want to go there? Well,” he had to add, fair, “I’m sure some do. I guess if you frame it like…*mages free to use magic* or something, it sounds appealing. But I don’t really care about being, you know. Powerful. I don’t want to be. If I could just be normal, I would.”

“And instead,” Krem said, still facing resolutely forward, “you’re some unheard-of talent. Unlucky you.”

“It was,” Feynriel said. “I am. Look,” he added, when Krem *finally* swung a surprised glance his way, “I’m not like Dorian. He’s… Well, just look at him. He’s elegant and clever and good at dealing with, with, with people and talking and all that stuff. He *likes it* when everyone is paying attention to him. Me? I’d rather hide in the curtains.” He gave a choked laugh. “*I have* hidden in the curtains, many times. It’s how Dorian and I met the first time. I’m not…” He tightened his grip on his braid, yanking it lightly. “You have to have noticed I’m not very good at anything except, you know, dreaming. It’s the one thing I’ve ever been able to do well, and I can’t even enjoy it because it makes people so stupidly fixated on me.”

Krem turned fully, propping his hip against stone. His arms crossed over his chest, but despite his closed-off body language, he was looking at Feynriel with real interest. “Explain,” he said.

*Explaining* felt a hell of a lot like *complaining*, but it had been long enough, hard enough, that he didn’t let that stop him. “They wanted to make me Tranquil because of what I can do,” Feynriel said. “Or, the Keeper Mom wanted to help me did. Either Tranquil or dead, because it was easier. It was Hawke’s decision to even let me live—he’s the one who pushed me toward Tevinter. Other than the Dalish, the magisters had the most experience with this thing I do: somniari. And when I had to
choose between the Dalish and Tevinter, well.” He gave a little, awkward shrug. “I decided to go with the people who hadn’t just tried to lobotomize me.”

“…I suppose that makes sense,” Krem said slowly.

But Feynriel was just getting started. “So I went to Tevinter, and I proved what I could do, and I found someone to teach me. But even though I was learning, I was also… People wanted to use me. All the time. They wanted me to be a tool they could use to slice memories, feelings, histories into and out of people. They’d try to befriend me, to trick me, to use me. It didn’t take long before I realized that there was nobody there I could trust; everyone had another motive, and I was just dangerous enough to be a threat, yet interesting enough to be a toy. It’s hard to start thinking of yourself as any kind of special whatever when pretty much everyone you meet assumes they can manipulate you into doing the most abhorrent things. And Maker,” he added, warming up to it now, “don’t even get me started on some of the things they said to my face about elves, or Kirkwall, or hedge mages, or…”

He threw up his hands, realizing his voice had risen and risen as he went along, but in this moment—for once—not caring. It felt good to vent it all out, to let loose some of the frustration that had been curdling inside of him. Dorian tried to listen, but he didn’t really understand. Despite his progressive ideas, he was still so thoroughly a result of his upbringing.

Feynriel could sense that Krem got it. Krem was straightening, frowning, looking angry, too—not with him, but for him, which was such a novel experience that Feynriel wasn’t quite sure how to feel in the face of it. Within just a few minutes as Feynriel sketched out the miserable years (years!) he’d spent deflecting petty comments and manipulations, Krem had swung from wary antagonist to infuriated ally. It was a heady thing.

“I hated every minute I spent being judged and found lacking,” Feynriel said. He rubbed at his arms, feeling those eyes on him again now.

“Then why did you stay?” Krem demanded. It wasn’t as confrontational as it could have been—his anger was still directed outward, away from Feynriel and toward the people who’d made both of their lives a hell. “Once you learned enough to keep the demons back, why didn’t you…” He gestured broadly.

Feynriel tilted his head. “Sign up with a mercenary band and see the world?” he asked. When Krem just shrugged a shoulder, he had to offer a small, crooked smile. “Maybe I would have if the Chargers had been around. But… I mean, it was shit, wall to wall,” Feynriel said, “but it helped that I knew what I was working toward. Being somniari… It means more than going into dreams and snooping around.”

“The way you’ve been snooping around in my dreams?”

He felt the flush like a tidal wave, drowning him in instant regret. “…yes,” Feynriel had to say, quiet, hating how true that was. Because, yeah, he had gone into Krem’s dreams; he’d watched him in his sleep like a right proper creeper, seeing glimpses of Bull, the Chargers, his private feelings and thoughts and life and grargh it was funny how something could be flipped from romantic to show its ugly underbelly so quickly. “The way I’ve, um, been snooping around in your dreams. I’m sorry,” he added, because it had to be said. “I won’t try to offer excuses, but, um. I promise I don’t anymore. I won’t. Not unless you invite me first.”

Krem didn’t look at him. Maybe he couldn’t look at him. Maybe he never would again. Maybe—Oh, Maker, maybe—
Maybe he’d hate him forever; maybe Feynriel had already blown any chance to explain, to prove himself, to, to, to be better, and, and, he just, he couldn’t, he…

Krem gave a faint nod, but didn’t say anything.

“…um,” Feynriel said, quiet. Almost too quiet to hear. The relief of that single gesture was immense. It indicated forgiveness, but it gave him permission to go on, to try to salvage this. And that, in this moment, seemed like the greatest kindness possible. “Um, so. But. I-I was able to… When I realized I could…”

Could he, like, learn to speak in full sentences sometime soon?

He pressed a subtle hand to the erratic race of his heart, feeling like one of the swooning maidens in Varric’s more lurid novels. He was bloody lightheaded, just from being here with Krem. It was too ridiculous for words. “When I realized I could help people,” he forced himself to finish, “then I knew I-I had to complete my training.”

“Why?” Krem asked, but the word was quieter, lacking confrontation. Gentle, almost, as if somehow Feynriel had fumbled across just the right thing to say.

But how to explain why without sounding like the pathetic dreamer he was?

“…I was a half-elven alienage brat with no father,” Feynriel began slowly, not letting himself overthink the words. The truth, right? There was no room for flashy Tevinter lies here. Krem deserved raw honesty. “My mother was the only one who ever cared about whether I was alive or dead. Until Aidan Hawke and his friends swooped in and saved me—twice. For nothing more than kindness.”

He tangled his fingers around the end of his braid again, needing something to hold on to. He’d never even spoken these words to Dorian before. He’d never let them fully take flight within his own thoughts: they were too painful, too raw, too real. Too much the core of the man he was shaping himself to be. “I’m not brave,” Feynriel said, “and I’m not very strong. I’m not some kind of magical genius. All I’ve got is this weird throwback talent and…and a promise I made myself that I was going to be like that, too. I was going to help people. I was going to save people who couldn’t save themselves.”

“You want to be a hero,” Krem said.

But that wasn’t right. Heroes were in stories and fairy tales; that wasn’t what he wanted. “No,” Feynriel murmured. “I don’t care if anyone remembers me. I’m used to not being seen. I just want to make things, people, lives better than I found them.”

It sounded so silly out loud—as if he could change the world through dreams—but Krem looked at him fully then. Dark eyes meeting his, expression showing cracks along the edges, that stony façade slipping into something almost…surprised. Pleased. Wary yet warm.

“I see,” Krem said, his voice just a little huskier than normal. Then, straightening, “Thank you. I’ll—I should go.”

“All right,” Feynriel whispered, uncertain what to feel. What to think. He stepped back, giving Krem room to slip by without having to pass too close.

But Krem surprised him. He stepped with Feynriel, closing some of that distance between them. One hand reached out—hesitated—then lightly touched the small of Feynriel’s back. “Come on,” Krem said, hand on him, only a few miraculous feet away. His cheeks were flushed, ears red. “On second
thought, the Chargers are going to be descending like vultures on the Herald’s Rest any minute. I should, ah, buy you a drink or something before there’s nothing left. As thanks.”

“Thanks for what?” Feynriel asked, too light-headed to truly care. His feet stumbled along, entire body singing at the contact. Was it possible to die from happiness? Did he care? He had no idea if this meant he could talk to Krem again, or if he was being given a chance, or or or whatever, and right now it didn’t matter.

That one lingering point of contact was his whole world.

“Thanks,” Krem said slowly, still touching him, walking at his side with that deepening flush to his cheeks and eyes set straight forward, “for not being what I was always afraid you might be. Now c’mon,” he added, before Feynriel could do more than shoot him a startled look. “That’s Bull heading to the tavern now. If we don’t beat him there, we’ll have to fight the barkeep for attention. Bloody arse always makes a show of it when he first arrives anywhere; you’ll see that soon enough.”

“Okay,” Feynriel said—hopeful, happy, over the bloody moon. He couldn’t keep the smile from stretching shyly across his face, and the whole world could invert itself and start raining demons around their head: for now, he had hope.

And for a boy like him, that was a rare and powerful thing.
“And you, Josie,” Leliana said at last—at last—carefully folding the scraps of paper her network of spies had sent her, tucking them discretely out of sight. “What have you to report?”

Four pairs of eyes swung Josephine’s way: three endlessly patient and one, Cassandra could only assume, showing tell-tale signs of strain. Her fingers itched to be holding a sword, and she wanted to be out there again: criss-crossing the Hinterlands or slogging through the Storm Coast or even, Maker help her, getting lost in the Greens.

This stretch of inactivity was steadily wearing down her patience, and it wouldn’t be long before she started taking Bull up on his incessant requests to see what you’re really made of, Seeker.

Maker. Why had she shouldered her way into today’s council meeting again? The talk-talk-talking in circles was only making her more agitated; nothing was bloody well getting done.

Blissfully unaware of the frustration mounting inside of Cassandra, Josephine straightened, quill poised over a pile of papers, candles casting golden light across her cheeks. She looked tired and ever-so-slightly frazzled—which, on anyone else, would no doubt be the equivalent of rent garments and howling in the square.

“I have heard no news of the carts of grain expected from the Reaches,” she began, meeting their eyes with a forthright earnestness that indicated she thought at least a couple of them gave a damn. “And our supply of dawnstone has been interrupted by encroaching skirmishes to the west. If we wish to continue manufacture of—”

Oh, Andraste take them all. If this was what Josephine considered important news, Cassandra could only imagine the utter bullshit she had weighing down her desk.

“Is there any news on the Winter Palace?” Cassandra interrupted, ignoring the chiding look Leliana cast her way. Let her glare—there was only so much Cassandra was willing to take. The council had been meeting for over three hours now, and while every issue brought before them was (arguably) important, she found she was increasingly unwilling to allow the advisors to beat around the bush.

There was work to be done; Maker take this noble’s hurt feelings or that priest’s demands or bloody supplies of dawnstone—as if Taran didn’t line his pockets with the stuff every time he left Skyhold. If Cassandra had her way, all that inconsequential bullshit would be pushed aside so the Inquisition could focus on what truly mattered.

In this case, protecting Empress Celene whether the blithering fool wanted it or not.

Josephine tilted her chin, casting Cassandra a wary glance, as if she could sense her boiling impatience. “That is…increasingly complicated,” she said. “The date of the ball has been set for some time, but obtaining an invitation is proving more difficult than anticipated. The Empress claims to value the work we do,” Josephine added, looking amongst the grave faces surrounding the war table, “but she hesitates to commit to a show of friendship. She fears an invitation might be seen as an endorsement when, well…”
Josephine trailed off, quill flicking in counterpoint, as if to fill in the silence.

Instead, Taran finished for her. “When the Inquisitor is Voice to a Tevinter altus,” he said. “She doesn’t want to risk offending her court by condoning me.”

Josephine inclined her head; Leliana frowned. “You would think her own safety would rank higher than her prejudice,” she said, crossing her arms.

“And it will,” Josephine quickly assured them. “She is only doing this now, so that she may distance herself from us—from Taran,” she added at Taran’s low noise, “later, if necessary. I am certain that with a little more subtle pressure, the invitation to Halamshiral is forthcoming. For all of us, naturally.”

“Wonderful,” Cullen said, _sotto_ and blisteringly sarcastic.

Cassandra wasn’t any more eager to subject herself to a night of dancing and backstabbing and _Orlesians_, but there were more important things at stake than either her comfort or Celene’s politics. She still had nightmares about that future world Taran and Dorian had told them of. The thought that they could be careening toward that dark path made her want to wade in, sword swinging, and cut down any obstacle in her path. “Work faster,” she said, grim. “Make whatever assurances are required, and get us those invitations. We must be there no matter the cost.”

Taran leaned forward, resting his weight on his hands as he studied her. “Hold on,” he said. “No.”

She turned to him, brows raised. “No?” Cassandra echoed. She wished she could say she was surprised. Taran had proved to be an excellent diplomat, an inspiring leader, and a true friend…but even though all common sense dictated that he put this thing between him and Dorian aside and focus on the future of Thedas, time and again he showed his humanity—his youth—in his refusal to bow to dreadful necessity. “Taran,” she said, falling back into their now-familiar argument, “you know it is not possible for you and Dorian to—”

“No,” he said again, firm. They’d had this fight so many times before that Cassandra could practically take both sides of the argument. But this time, Taran looked as tired as she felt; war-weary, the shadows of the room collecting in violet-cast blooms beneath his eyes. “Cassandra, I get all the reasons why this is inconvenient for the Inquisition—”

“Inconvenient,” she echoed. That wasn’t the word she would have chosen. Disastrous, if Celene’s posturing was anything to go by. Fatal, judging by the sheer number of assassins they had to catch every day—some targeting Taran, others Dorian, in increasingly creative and heartburn-inducing ways.

She was all for romance, all for love conquering every obstacle in its path…but not when lives were at stake. Not when kingdoms trembled and threatened to shatter around them. Not when this wall they’d build against them and the end of the world felt so terribly thin.

Not when Taran’s life was on the line.

There was blood on her sword, still. The woman who’d come to Skyhold thinking she could kill the _puppet Inquisitor_ dancing at the end of Tevinter strings wasn’t the first, and Cassandra knew she wouldn’t be the last. But, Maker, the hatred that burned in those blue eyes seconds before they clouded over… The way the assassin bared blood-soaked teeth as the breath whistled from her punctured lung…

She had endless nightmares that took the shape of shadows moving across the wall, and Taran was
so determined to be *in love* that he refused to see the very real danger he was in. That they all were in. Because whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was living his life on a very public stage, and none of them had the luxury of choosing happiness over duty anymore.

“I’m sorry, Cassandra,” he said, quieter but still, always, forever willfully refusing to relent. “I’ll do whatever I can—you know I will—but this… This is where I draw the line. Dorian is where I draw the line.” Taran hesitated, then gave a faint shake of his head, visibly swallowing back whatever it was he’d been about to say and instead settling on: “I need this, Cassandra.”

She ached for him—she really did. It was unfair the amount of sacrifice the world demanded of this untrained boy, hour after hour, day after day. He wasn’t some king’s heir raised to blindly accept his fate: he was an Ostwick nobody. The youngest in a long, sad, broken line of semi-nobles. He should have had such a different life.

And yet the Maker had chosen Taran, and that meant that no matter how she empathized with him, no matter how she grieved for the life that must by necessity be snatched from his hands, she could not relent. It was her *duty* to hold strong and make certain Thedas survived this storm.

“We cannot jeopardize this mission,” Cassandra said, forcing her gaze to never waver. Perhaps the betrayal would hurt less that way. “You have seen the future; you know what Corypheus wants. We *must not* allow him to achieve his aim, no matter the personal price.”

The Inquisitor straightened, meeting her eyes, earnest. Young, young, so heartbreakingly *young*.

“Ask anything else of me,” he said. “This isn’t a price I’m willing to pay. We’ve waited long enough.” Then, as if he couldn’t stop himself: “I love him.”

“That does *not* matter,” Cassandra snapped, and she hated the way everyone flinched back at the unrelenting coldness in her voice. She hated even more that she meant every word. Yes, fine, she wanted them all to be happy, but happiness couldn’t be bought with the blood of innocents, and the fact remained that if Taran followed his heart now, then the Winter Palace might well be closed to them—and with it, any chance of saving the Empress and thwarting Corypheus. This was not a moment to be kind. “I am sorry,” she added, quieter. “I do feel for you both. But we cannot allow it.”

Josephine delicately cleared her throat. “Perhaps this is not the best of times to—” she began, ever-diplomatic.

Leliana cut her off. “No,” she said, “now is exactly the time. We have been dancing around this for too long.”

She was right, of course: ever since the escape from Haven, when Dorian had dropped his little bombshell, they had all been tiptoeing around this...this latest complication. There had been a fight, in that long-ago tent, about whether Dorian could be permitted to stay by Taran’s side; now, looking around the ring of grim faces, Cassandra wondered if any of them had changed their minds.

“You know where I stand,” she said, keeping her back ramrod straight. She would not shrink away from this.

Josephine sighed. “It...has proved more difficult than I had hoped,” she admitted, flushing when Taran looked at her. “We are still able to make alliances because of the good work we do, but... There are powerful families—necessary connections—that remain beyond our reach.”

“They fear you,” Leliana added, voice flat. It was impossible to tell whether she was siding with Josephine and Cassandra or simply laying out the facts. “They fear that you will be controlled by him—perhaps that you already *are* being controlled. Bringing the mages in as full allies was a bold move
“That wasn’t because of Dorian,” Taran said, looking between them. “That was my decision. You laid that at my feet, and I made a choice.”

Leliana inclined her head. “That is true,” she said.

“And no one is faulting the decision you made,” Cassandra added, giving the three advisors—giving Cullen, specifically—a challenging look. What Taran had done may not have been what she would have decided in his position, but the fact remained that he had thought quickly on his feet and diffused what could have been a dangerous situation. She would not hear anyone speak against it now. “But we know you; the world does not.”

Josephine hummed a breath. “And the world is…perhaps…not so very kind with its opinions.”

Taran remained silent.

“I have been working to counteract rumors that you have already bonded with Dorian,” Leliana offered after a beat of silence. “But there is a certain number who are immune to the effect of our counter-whispers. And of course, there are the fanatics.”

Cassandra curled her hand around the hilt of her sword. “There are the fanatics,” she echoed, flat.

“There will always be fanatics,” Taran said, quiet. “There will always be people trying to kill me. That’s what my life is; none of us should be surprised that people in the Chantry want me dead.”

Leliana hummed a breath. “Perhaps not,” she said, “but the threat grows exponentially with the fear, and fear grows with the more power you—and he—are seen to have. I received word,” she added before Taran could so much as take a breath to protest, “from an old friend of mine. He was an Antivan Crow.”

Zevran. There could be no doubt.

“He is no longer with the Crows, but he keeps his ear to the ground for…practical purposes.”

“What does he report?” Cassandra asked, already suspecting the worst.

Leliana ticked her gaze over to meet hers, and Cassandra swore she could feel icy fingers closing around her heart. “An offer has been made,” Leliana said. “It is only a matter of time before it is accepted.”

Josephine let out a shaky breath. “The Crows,” she whispered, then shook her head. “This goes beyond the Winter Palace. This goes beyond everything. We have to find a solution, and quickly.”

“I agree,” Cassandra said. “We must—”

Taran suddenly slammed his fist against the table, hard enough to send the metal pieces rattling. Even Cassandra startled back a step, gaze swinging sharply to him. It was on the tip of her tongue to censure him for being childish, but there was no hint of tantrum in his flashing eyes. Instead, there was something chillingly familiar: that look he wore whenever he faced down impossible odds. When the heavens and earth could move, but he would not.

“There isn’t a solution,” Taran said, “because this isn’t a problem to solve. This is reality—this is my reality—and we will not bend over ourselves trying to placate the bigotry of the masses. If they cannot accept my relationship with Dorian, then they do not have to accept it. I will move past them
—move through them if I bloody well have to—stop Corypheus, and do it all without their help.” He looked between them one after the other. “If you’re with me on that, then I will be glad to have you, but if you’re not, then I’ll find a way to do this without your support too.”

There was a long, stunned, echoing silence—so heavy it almost hurt to breathe. Cassandra stared at the young man she’d come to admire so much, taking in the subtle changes she hadn’t noticed being mapped across his face these last, impossible months. There were a few strands of silver at his temples, despite the fact that he’d barely reached his twentieth year. Those shadows beneath his eyes. A solid strength to his jaw and a power that came from more than the flickering green about his fingertips.

This—this was no mere boy. And this was no king’s heir, no trained noble, to bow beneath the weight of a crown, unasked-for or no. This was a hero from out of Varric’s stories, and he was asking for her to follow his lead into tragedy or triumph.

She just wished she could give him the full-throated support she so desperately wanted to.

Surprisingly, it was Cullen who broke the silence. He leaned forward, one hand resting white-knuckled about the hilt of his sword, the other braced against the table. He caught and held Taran’s gaze, something electric—powerful—passing between the two men. “May the void take them all,” Cullen said low, rough, each word a dark shiver down her spine. “What you have is more important than anything. I will support you in this, Inquisitor.”

“And I,” Leliana added, shoulders relaxing subtly as if she’d been struggling against the weight of her own opposition. “We have ways for dealing with whatever the Crows might send our way.”

Josephine bit her lower lip. “I…yes, of course, I will stand with you if that is what you decide,” she said. “It is only…it will be all the more difficult to get the invitations we need for the Winter Palace, but— But we will find a way,” she decided, lifting her chin at the end. “Yes. I will make it happen.”

Her quill cut through the air as if to underscore her promise.

Taran let out a slow, uneven breath, the corners of his lips curling into the faintest ghost of a smile. But then he looked at Cassandra—then they all looked at her—and she could feel those walls building again between them.

I want to support you, she almost said, then stopped, because…because was that actually true? If things were different and Dorian was not Tevinter, would she be giving them her full-throated support?

She liked seeing her friend happy, and yet.

And yet.

And yet the Seekers had words for the Voice-bonded, and none of them were particularly nice. She’d been trained in ways to separate dangerously powerful pairs; she’d learned how to silence their bond through an act of will, and she’d never hesitated to use that power when it was called for. Was she fighting so hard against allowing Taran and Dorian to become Voice-bonded because it was for the good of Thedas, or because it made things easier for her?

There were so many points of dissonance between her Seeker training—her place as right hand of the Divine—and her life now. Was it possible she was being just as closed-minded as the woman whose blood still stained her steel?

Cassandra closed her eyes. Gathered herself. Forced her shoulders to relax. Then looked up into her
friend’s steady gaze.

“I will stand by you,” she decided, pushing aside the quiver of fear that demanded she was dooming them all to that dark future Taran had foreseen, “if you and Dorian agree to wait until after the Winter Palace to formalize your bond.”

There was another long silence, steady and unbroken, as Cassandra and Taran stared each other down. His lashes flickered as he studied her face, her eyes, her stance—taking her in from head to foot as if trying to divulge the truth she barely wanted to admit to herself. She simply lifted her chin and let him see everything—the doubts, the fears, and questions still swarming within her. The prejudices that still lurked about the corners of her mind, even as she stepped farther and farther from the Seeker’s path she’d walked all her life. The self-recrimination and the hope.

Slowly, deliberately, Taran nodded. “I’ll have to talk to Dorian,” he said, “but…if he agrees, all right. After the Winter Palace. But after that,” he added, sweeping them all with a look, “there will be no more delays. This is the path I am choosing.”

“There will be no more delays,” Cullen agreed, firm.

“I will get started right away,” Josephine added, stepping back from the table as if she meant every word. “With this assurance, the invitations will not be so difficult to come by. We can—” She broke of at the sound of metal creaking and wood groaning as the giant war room door was slowly pushed open.

Cassandra and Taran both turned toward the sound, and Cassandra instinctively half-stepped before him—not blocking the swing of his sword arm, but there to act in an instant to defend him, should the need arise. Behind them, Cullen drew his blade.

The figure on the other side of the door paused at the threshold, locked beneath five pairs of eyes. He was filthy, as if he’d been traveling for days, grey-blue cloak dripping melted snow to the cracked stone floor. Red-gold whiskers had grown in, a little patchy from an obvious lack of a mirror, and there were still snowflakes in his lightly curling hair. He looked between them, brown eyes wide, mobile face expressive—brows creeping higher and higher and higher as he awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Rrrriiiight,” Alistair Theirin drawled, self-effacing humor lacing each word. “So I take it you weren’t expecting me?”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the story, Alistair! You're going to hate everything.

For those curious about the whole story, be sure to keep checking out Part of Your World by threehundreedthirtythree and Unchained Melody! Part of Your World tells the story of Solona Amell (first met in Fire Walk with Me) and Alistair during the Blight. Unchained Melody is Cullen's story, but it will weave through Fenris/Hawke during the Kirkwall years and eventually catch up to Taran/Dorian. Annnnd it is likely where the resolution of Feynriel/Krem will live, as we're heading into the final act of By Any Other Name.

AKA hold onto your butts because here comes Here Lies the Abyss!
“You know,” the Inquisitor said with a laugh, tipping back to look at the ceiling, “sometimes I forget just how weird my life is. And then something like this happens.”

Alistair couldn’t help but grin along. “Something like this,” he countered, “or something like me?” He leaned his elbows on the scarred old table, hands curled around his mostly-empty mug of ale.

The tavern—Herald’s Rest or Herald’s Nap or Herald’s Gosh-But-Sleep-Sounds-Nice-Right-About-Now—was empty but for the two of them. When Taran said he wanted a few minutes for them to chat, one-on-one, the fancy lady with the poofy sleeves had all but leapt into action, making sure it happened. All while Leliana gave him the side-eye and asked pointed questions about when he’d last seen the business end of a bath.

Really, it was like being right back on the trail with his Solona and their merry bunch of Ferelden-saving misfits.

Just the thought of her was enough to both warm his chest and make him ache, so Alistair gently pushed the conflicting feelings aside and focused on the Inquisitor—who was looking at him again, a strange expression in his eyes: like he was mulling over whether or not he should tell Alistair some vaguely alarming secret.

“What?” Alistair asked, nervous. Surprises were rarely good. “What’s that look for?”

“Well,” Taran said—then laughed, a subtle flush creeping over his cheeks. He turned his head, taking a long pull of his own ale as he studiously surveyed the closed-and-locked tavern door. There were even guards set out there to ensure their privacy. One in particular had sent Morrigan-level chills up Alistair’s spine. Whoever that Seeker woman was, she was scary. “It’s a little embarrassing to admit.”

“I went from sleeping with mabari to sleeping with a bunch of Templar recruits to sleeping with Wardens…and again even more mabari, so, you know, things cycle I suppose.” Huh. Now that he thought about it, his life really did seem to like going around in one big old—anyway! “I’ve seen a lot, and it takes some concerted strength of will to embarrass me. Besides.” He gestured around at all the eerily empty chairs and tables, quirking a playful brow to put the young Inquisitor at ease. “It’s just the two of us. And I promise I won’t laugh.”

Maybe the smile-brow-smirk was a bad idea: Taran was flushing harder now, his ears gone a bright
cherry red as he set his empty mug aside. It reminded Alistair of himself when he was just setting out to save the world, and boy was it funny how time flew? “Come on,” Alistair cajoled, leaning in on his elbows and giving Taran his best friendly-puppy-dog smile, “it can’t be that bad. And even if it is, that’s what this is supposed to be about, right? A little friendly bonding before we go off to stop the Wardens.”

That, of course, was his main focus here. It’d been the only thing on his mind as he criss-crossed the Frostbacks, dodging Warden-hunters and doggedly (ha!) making his way to the Inquisition’s doorstep. He knew he was going to be asking a lot of them, so it was important they trusted him fast, liked him even faster, and would be able to fight fluidly by his side.

Seeing a familiar face in Leliana was both good (friends! Actual friends!) and bad (yeesh, she didn’t look quite as friendly anymore!); seeing a familiar face in Cullen was mostly just bad, because oh hey awkward. But neither of them nor Scary Seeker Lady nor Intimidatingly Organized Poofy Lady really mattered in the end.

This boy. This boy was the one who needed to be on his side when they faced the Wardens. He would make whatever decisions would rock the world next, and if that meant Alistair had to push aside exhaustion to trade stories and drink ale and bat his pretty lashes, he damn well would.

(He just wished Solana was here to do it for him. She was soooo much better at the whole making-new-friends-in-unlikely-places thing. Zevran was somehow-still-living, breathing proof of that.)

“Or,” Alistair began after a beat when it became increasingly obvious that his charm wasn’t getting anywhere. “I could—”

“It’s just,” Taran said at almost the same time, all blurted out as if he had to get the words out quickly. There was a shuffling sound from up above, just loud enough that it could have been the wind or a sneaky elven assassin, “it’s just weird seeing you. Talking to you.”

He could work with weird. He worked with weird pretty much every day of his life. “Good-weird or oh-Maker-no-weird?” Alistair asked, gaze flicking up toward the upper landing once, subtly. He was pretty sure nothing was getting past the guards they had staked out around this place, but his hand subtly dropped down beneath the table, fingertips grazing the knife at his waist. Better safe than oops, dead. “Because I have been the inspiration for both of those before.”

Taran laughed and rubbed at the back of his neck, the exact same way Cullen did. Funny. He wondered whether the kid got the gesture from spending so much time with his Commander. On the crucible of danger, those sorts of subtle transferences happened all the time. Alistair would never recover from that one time he said ‘tis. “Well,” Taran said slowly, “a little of both. I mean, um.”

He blew out a breath as he sat back, cheeks flaming red and eyes bright with laughter despite the obvious dark circles beneath his eyes. “Oh, void, I might as well admit it,” the Herald, the Inquisitor, the bloody savior of all mankind, said. “When I was little, I told my brother I was going to marry you someday.”

In the aftermath of that fireball, a couple of things happened at once.

One, Alistair aspirated on his next breath, the air getting stuck in his throat as he sputtered and coughed.

Two, the kid ducked his head, bronze-brown hair falling across his eyes in a show of sheepish embarrassment.
And three, bright, booming laughter rang out from above both their heads as Aidan Hawke—not an
elven assassin after all—leaned over the uppermost balcony railing. “You have got to be kidding,”
Alistair’s old childhood friend said. With the shadows up above and his curly black hair dangling in
his face, he almost could have been the boy who’d first played pirates and knights with Alistair…and
taught him his first important lessons about the basic humanity of all mages. “Inquisitor, you can do a
lot better than that. I have it on good authority that Alistair Theirin smells like cheese and boiled
cabbage.”

Alistair snorted as he pushed back his chair, rising up even as Aidan tromped his way down. He’d
hoped their paths would somehow cross again. They’d been in contact about the Wardens, of course,
but there’d never exactly been much of a moment to catch up on so many years lost. “I’ll have you
know, I take regular baths and smell just as tolerable as any other man in my situation,” he said,
moving around the table to greet his old friend. “…the cheese thing’s still true, though.”

“You two know each other?” Taran asked, watching with clear bemusement as Aidan dropped down
the last few steps and enveloped Alistair in a hug. It was funny: it’d been literal decades since they
had been truly close, and yet Alistair felt an unexpected lance of warmth as he embraced Aidan in
return.

It didn’t hurt, he supposed, that Aidan reminded him so much of Solana.

“Childhood friends, believe it or not,” Aidan said, giving Alistair a light thump on the back before
stepping aside. He, too, looked welcomingly warm if a little worn around the edges. Sleep, it
seemed, was a luxury none of them could yet afford. “And later, he went and fell in love with my
cousin.”

“Lucky bastard that I am,” Alistair answered cheerfully. He moved back to slide into his seat, Aidan
pulling up another chair to join them. “The Amells are a good lot all around, it turns out.”

Aidan laughed. “True. We may be embarrassingly magical, but at least we’re pretty.” Then he tipped
his head toward Taran. “But speaking of falling madly in love…”

Taran (who had been visibly enjoying Aidan and Alistair’s back-and-forth) groaned and dropped his
head into his folded arms. “I was a kid!” he protested. “You had just saved Ferelden from the Blight,
and I wasn’t yet eight years old, and I thought, you know.”

Alistair hid a wince that Aidan caught anyway, damn the man. “You were seven, huh?” Aidan
 teased. He leaned his elbow on the table and propped his chin in his fist, looking too delighted for
Alistair’s own good. “All of seven years old when Alistair here fought alongside the Hero of
Ferelden?”

Taran lifted his head, and Alistair groaned. “I am so old,” he lamented, the whine ending on a laugh.
He had to laugh, right? Because even though he wasn’t all that old really (thank you very much,
Aidan Hawke), every Warden had a ticking clock inside them, and his was already going off. If they
didn’t manage to get to the bottom of this—if Solona didn’t manage her usual miracle—then he
wasn’t exactly going to have the chance to get much older. “I am so old, and so decrepit, and did I
mention yet that I am so very very old?”

Taran let out a puff of breath, but he was laughing, too. “That wasn’t what I meant,” he said, and this
was good, this was great, this was Alistair making friends and influencing people even without his
more charming better half. “I was just…”

“Gutting us slowly but surely,” Aidan teased. He pushed himself up, grabbing both their empty mugs
and heading over to the bar to refill them, snagging a third for himself. “So besides reminding us just
how long in the tooth we’ve become, what else have you been up to? Has Alistair been grilled about everything he knows yet?”

Alistair leaned back in his chair, feeling relaxed for the first time in weeks. Almost all the way to good despite the whisper of the Calling in his head. “Grilled and fried then grilled some more,” he said. “And that was just the advisors. I’m pretty sure the Inquisitor’s been thinking of ways to circle back with some questions once he got me nice and relaxed.” He arched a brow at Taran, who just shrugged, unapologetic. Something about that set well with Alistair: he was pretty sure he liked the kid. “Since Aidan’s crashed the party—”

“Hey, you two save the world: I stick my nose into places it doesn’t belong,” Aidan interrupted, rejoining them. “It’s what I do best.”

“—why don’t you hit me with those questions now?” Alistair finished.

Taran nodded, taking the mug of ale from Aidan with murmured thanks. His eyes were on Alistair, studying him, assessing him: not at all unfriendly (quite the opposite, actually) but full of a preternatural focus that was also so terribly familiar. He remembered the way responsibility and worry had hardened Solona, too—leaving all the delightful soft bits he loved so much, but turning those angles, those edges, absolutely lethal. Taran may have been a child when Alistair had fought for Ferelden, but he was now the same age as Solona when she saved it. Underestimating him would be a lethal mistake. “All right,” Taran said. “So why don’t you tell me again what’s been going on.”

What hadn’t been going on? “Oh, well, it’s been a barrel of laughs, let me tell you,” Alistair said dryly. “Quick recap: I went to the Warden’s, they said ‘blood magic,’ I said ‘shan’t,’ and I had to leave rather quickly. I wrote to some old friends,” he inclined his head toward Aidan, “who suggested there was this young chap up at a place called Skyhold who was in the business of helping people. So I avoided a couple of Warden traps, donned my second-best fur-lined cloak, and hauled my way to the Inquisition to see if you could help me stop them from mucking up this nice little world we’ve got here.”

Aidan winced. “That sounds like it must have been difficult.”

“Easier than a Blight, but not by much.” The Wardens tracking him down—trying to arrest him or kill him just for refusing to partake in blood magic, of all the bloody (ha!) things—was a mindfuck. He was married to the Warden-Commander of Ferelden; he sort of figured that made him immune to his own people wanting to get stabby. “Though at least back then Solona was with me, so maybe I take that back.”

“Solona Amell,” Taran said, sounding a little dazed at the thought. “The Hero of Ferelden. It seems…frankly incredible that I’m here talking to you. That she’s out there in the world.”

He had to laugh at that. “Says the bloody Herald of Andraste.”

Taran just waved that off, however, as if being the heir to their holiest of figures wasn’t anything to be impressed—intimidated—by. “That’s complicated,” he said. “I’m more interested in the Warden-Commander.”

Now this was a more comfortable topic of conversation. “You sure you want to get me started? I might not be able to stop. I’m thinking of setting up a little stall in the market. I could even make a sign: ask me about my wife.”

“Your wife,” Aidan interrupted, “but not your soulmate? Sorry,” he added, lifting his hands when both of them looked his way. “Nosy. I’ve just always been curious about that—it seems like in every
story, there’s a conflicting opinion.”

He squirmed a little in his seat. “Ah, that may have been on purpose. We did our best to seed various rumors; Leliana helped, actually.” At their twin curious looks, he tried to explain. “I… well, there was some resistance to the idea that we should be bonded Voices, you know—from Eamon in particular, since he wanted to make me king. Which bollocks on that, between the three of us and a lamppost. And, anyway, well, she’s, you know, she’s beautiful and smart and kind—she’s basically perfect and I don’t know what I ever did to deserve her.”

“And the two of you are…?” Aidan fished.


Aidan shot him a look. “You really haven’t changed a bit, have you? Bonded.”

He laughed, feeling at turns relaxed and tense; content and wistful. He missed Solona like a vital sense gone dark—the hole her presence left in his chest nigh-unbearable—but this strange calm before the storm was doing wonders to keep his mind off everything that had gone wrong in his life. “Oh, right. Yes. That too.”

“So, how is it?” Taran asked with a tell-tale longing threading through the words. Longing, and frustration, and a sliver of dogged determination.

There was clearly a story there, but now didn’t seem like the time to pry; Alistair pretended not to hear the questions Taran wasn’t asking. “It’s been, what, ten years?” he said instead.

Aidan squinted as if tallying up the grains of time. “Twelve, I think.”

Twelve? No. That couldn’t be possible. And yet, as Alistair focused on the years that had flowed past like a river… Maker. “Twelve. Wow,” he said with a disbelieving laugh. Bloody void, he really was getting old. Bonded and married for twelve years. “Well, it’s good. Strange at first. There’s being in love and then there’s being in love and being able to tell when the light of your life wants to kick you lovingly in the shins.” He grinned, crooked, looking between them—Aidan so newly bonded he practically shone with it, and Taran…yearning. So obviously, painfully yearning.

Slowly, Alistair’s grin softened and he added in a quieter voice, “It’s wonderful. Yes, strange at first, but you get used to it. It’s always there, humming just out of reach, but I can just—I can feel her there, under my skin.”

“Similar to the Calling?”

Alistair shared a quick glance with Aidan. “No,” he said slowly, searching for the words. “That’s a song stuck in your head that you can’t remember the words to. This is more…that feeling you get when you’re outside and it’s just about to start raining. That sort of tingly feeling, a something in the air that tells you a storm is coming.”

Taran shivered so subtly Alistair may have missed it if he wasn’t paying attention. He wanted to ask so many questions about that—or maybe elbow in and offer some unsolicited advice—but Aidan was frowning down into his ale with a thoughtful look.

“I know that face,” Alistair said. “It’s the stop talking about your wife, Alistair, and let’s hear about darkspawn instead.” He pretended to lean toward Taran conspiratorially. “They always ask about the darkspawn in the end. Always. Like we haven’t had enough of them by now.”
“We did get a little sidetracked,” Aidan pointed out, looking up with a wry expression. “My fault. It usually is—just ask Varric.”

Taran laughed. “That sounds an awful lot like my line.”

“Oh no,” Alistair joked, looking between the two men. “Are we all three of us the fuck-ups? How in Andraste’s name will we get anything done now?”


Alistair dropped a hand over his chest. “Yee-ouch. That hurt, Aidan. That was hurtful.” But he allowed himself to grow serious again. It was good to bond with the Inquisitor (and bonus Champion), but he also needed to keep his eye on the goal: the scary, impossible, blood magic-soaked goal. “From the beginning once again, then?”

“If you would,” Taran said.

Well. If nothing else, he was getting good at telling the tale. “All right. When Aidan killed Corypheus, the Wardens thought the matter resolved. But archdemons don’t die from simple injury. I feared Corypheus might have the same power, so I started to investigate. I found hints, but no proof. And then, not long after, every Warden in Orlais began to hear the Calling.”

“Anders told me a bit about the Calling,” Aidan admitted, “but it always sounded so…far off. Like something we could find a way to circumvent with time. But you’re saying every Grey Warden in Orlais is hearing that right now? They think they’re dying?”

“Yes,” Alistair said, resolutely ignoring the lilting song in the back of his mind. “And if all the Wardens die, who will stop the next Blight? That’s what has them so terrified.”

“So, terrified, they do something desperate. Which is, of course, what Corypheus wants.”

Taran tapped his finger against the scarred old table lightly, as if measuring the rapid-fire tempo of his own thoughts. “Is the Calling they’re hearing real? Or is Corypheus mimicking it somehow?”

Good question. Not even Leliana—who had become absolutely terrifying in the last few years, thanks—had asked that one. “I have no idea,” Alistair had to admit. “Before all this, I’d barely heard of Corypheus. I didn’t even know he was supposed to be a magister until I started digging around. But right now, all that matters is that the Wardens are acting like they’re going to die. And that has made them cross lines they never would have, otherwise. That has played them right into Corypheus’s hand—creating an army of abominations for him to control. I know. I saw it happen.”

The three of them were quiet for a long moment after that, the seriousness of that confession—the horror of it—filling the space between them until it was almost impossible to breathe.

Finally Aidan leaned closer, reaching out and unexpectedly touching Alistair’s arm. Silvery-pale scars traced across the back of his hand in elegant lines, matching the swirls of scar tissue on his chin and throat. Strange. Strange to see the literal proof of what their difficult lives had made of them. “And you, Alistair?” Aidan asked quietly. “Are you hearing the Calling?”

Maker, he wished he could lie or crack a joke. The empathy in his old friend’s eyes was too much—just too bloody much. “Yes,” he said, voice coming out a little strained. “When I’m talking or fighting, I can almost ignore it. But whenever things are quiet, I can hear it.”
“A song stuck in your head that you can’t remember the words to,” Taran said just as gravely, echoing Alistair’s words from before.

“That’s right,” Alistair said, then tried to crack a smile. “Damned annoying, frankly.”

“And because of the Calling, the Warden-Commander Clarel suggested blood magic?” Taran continued. “And sent men after you when you protested.”

Alistair tipped his head back, staring up at the distant ceiling with a sigh. “That’s right,” he agreed. “I evaded them and circled back to see what they were up to. They were meeting at a ritual tower in the Western Approach and, well…” Whenever he closed his eyes, he could still see the bodies falling, the blood rising, the demons emerging from the earth. “Let’s just say that it lived up to its name. Corypheus is controlling the Warden mages somehow, and he’s got a head start on his demon army. If we don’t find a way to stop him now, I’m afraid we never will.”

And perhaps Solona, off on her quest to find them a cure, would be the last Warden left alive. Chilling thought.

“And maybe we stop him,” Taran said, as if it were as simple as that.

Alistair laughed. “Maker, I remember being that young,” he joked, but when he straightened to look the Inquisitor in the eye, it was with real warmth. “The thing is, when you say it—considering all you and your Inquisition have already done—I almost believe you.”

“So where do we go next?” Aidan added, then shrugged a shoulder when both Taran and Alistair looked his way. “I’m already up to the neck in this whether I want to be or not,” he pointed out. “Fenris may kill me for it, but I have to see this thing through.”

“That I can understand,” Alistair said. “I have a lead on where they might be. There’s an abandoned Warden fortress—Adamant. If we can get there with even a quarter of the Inquisition’s strength…” He let those words hang between them, hopeful. Even after explaining everything (over and over and over again, in exhaustive detail) in the War Room, none of the advisors have given him a hint of whether this had been a fool’s errand. He’d worried, then, that he’d walk away from Skyhold alone against his former comrades-in-arms.

He need not have worried.

“You will have everything the Inquisition can muster,” Taran vowed, jaw set, looking—surprisingly—very much like Solona for an instant. It was just a flash, just a glimmer of the brave young woman he’d fallen so desperately in love with, but it warmed Alistair’s heart to the core.

And oh, Maker, how it made him miss her.

He swallowed, nodding, so fucking relieved he could barely muster the words. But, of course, that never lasted for long with him. Finally he managed to say with a trademark lopsided grin: “Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s wade recklessly back into danger and certain death. What?” Alistair teased, chuckling at the looks the Inquisitor and the Champion shot him. “It’s what we do.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: The road to Adamant, and everything that comes after. You probably noticed that
we have a Warden Alistair and a Hawke on deck...

So who would you leave behind?
Chapter Notes

Alistair's part was written by the AMAZING threehundredthirtythree. Do you love it as much as I do? If so, check out Part of Your World! Seriously, I can't sing the praises of this fic enough. Her Alistair is the best Alistair. Do yourself a favor and READ IT! <3

Hawke:

It was late when Aidan crossed the Skyhold courtyard and made his way back to the rooms he and Fenris had been assigned. The night sky was going a bruised purple on the horizon, dawn just a couple of hours away. The stars had dimmed and the air was sweet, filling his lungs with the promise of spring.

He wanted to linger on the battlements and enjoy the quiet, but his head was ringing with everything he’d learned; his heart was pounding like the drums of war.

*My fault. This is my fault.*

It didn’t matter that he’d had no way of knowing who—what—Corypheus was the first time their paths had crossed. The fact remained that he’d failed to stop all this before it could begin, and the whole world was suffering for it. His friends, his family, *Fenris*: they were all hurting, and it was *his* fault.

Aidan stopped, staring blindly out at the knifing points of the Frostbacks, and tried to breathe through the crushing sense of responsibility. Maker, but he missed Kirkwall in moments like these. Things had been shit wall to wall half the time—with Meredith and Orsino at each others’ throats, Anders and Carver and Isabela and Merrill and…and bloody well *all of them* constantly in some kind of mess or another—but the chaos had felt more personal, then. More contained. If he screwed everything up, a city would burn (*a city had burned*) but the wider world would keep ticking along.

This. This was different. There was no escaping this.

He leaned his palms against the cold stone parapet and stared out toward the east, where his last living blood relative was hiding out in some Podunk little town. He wondered how Carver was doing right this moment. He wondered whether Anders was hearing the Call, like all the other Wardens. He wondered if he shouldn’t be there, with them, right now—back watching over his madcap little family where the stakes were high but not…this.

A whole castle at his back, slowly stirring to life as the Inquisitor’s order was passed around: *prepare for the fight of your lives.*

Aidan squeezed his eyes shut, letting his head fall forward. The fear and responsibility were like choking vines inside him, and *Maker* but he was afraid. One-on-one combat with the Arishok suddenly seemed like small potatoes compared to storming a derelict keep to face a darkspawn magister, his *dragon*, and an army of possessed Wardens.
Funny how life had turned into a skipping stone of bad decisions, one after the other leading him to this moment, to this precipice of responsibility and existential dread.

Funny how he and the people he loved seemed to keep being drawn back into its messy middle.

He felt Fenris long before he heard him, the worried tug at the back of his skull pulling Aidan from his thoughts. Aidan lifted his head, watching the horizon bleed a pale lavender as the night faded. There was a soft footfall behind him, then arms sliding around his waist; he let himself be tugged back into the warmth of Fenris’s body, muscles relaxing at the familiar-beloved spark of connection. Fenris dropped his head until his forehead rested against the base of Aidan’s neck. His breath was hot against Aidan’s tense shoulders.

“Something has happened,” Fenris murmured, voice gravel-rough.

Aidan shivered and dropped his hands to cover Fenris’s where they settled at his waist. “Something’s always happening,” he said quietly. Then: “We’re going to war.”

It was the simplest and yet most accurate way he could think to describe it. Already men were loading wagons in the courtyard below, and forward scouts were mounting their horses. By this time next evening, the whole of Skyhold would be bristling and ready to march, its Inquisitor at its head and Aidan and Fenris and all the rest of them caught up in his wake.

Fenris’s grip on him tightened. “We could leave,” he said simply. He wasn’t afraid—Aidan would be able to feel it if he was—but he was clearly sensing Aidan’s tangled knot of fear and regret. The protective way Fenris held him was, Maker, so very welcome, and a part of Aidan was tempted to agree.

Yes, he wanted to say, turning in Fenris’s arms to press their foreheads together, let’s get out of here while we still can.

But no.

No.

He couldn’t do that. He needed to see this through.

“And miss all the fun?” Aidan tried to joke, knowing Fenris didn’t believe his false levity for a moment.

There was a soft, disgruntled sound behind him—but then Fenris pressed his lips to the knot of Aidan’s spine, right where shoulders met neck. He lingered there, holding him tight as if trying to pour some of his own strength into Aidan…and, amazingly, it was working.

Aidan drew in a breath, feeling Fenris all around him. His steadfast determination, his love, even his bloodlust: it was all there coiling about Aidan like fine mist, and he let himself relax into the familiarity of it until he wasn’t sure where his thoughts left off and Fenris’s began. There was undeniable power in the relative simplicity of Fenris’s response to this oncoming conflict, whatever it might bring: excitement, determination, and a promise that was so blazingly clear in every line of his body and every color of his mind that the words didn’t have to be said.

I love you. I am here. I will see us through this.

He twisted his hand atop of Fenris’s, threading their fingers together. A cool wind blew, knifing down the Frostbacks and swirling through Aidan’s hair; he shivered, colder than he had any right to be. “I know,” he murmured, answering that feeling threading through the back of his mind. Knowing Fenris would understand. “I trust you.”
Fenris would see them through this. If Aidan faltered, or failed yet again to shoulder the full weight of his responsibility, then his Voice would be there. His Voice would always be there.

They stood there for what felt like a very long time, Aidan pressed back within the circle of Fenris’s arms, their fingers thread together, their breaths falling in easy syncopation as they watched the sun begin to climb: filling all of Skyhold with dazzling light as the preparations for the march on Adamant began.

*Three days gone.*

---

**Bull:**

The sun was beating down, sizzling hot and shining off hundreds—near a solid thousand—shining shields and swords. Puffs of red dust rose in their wake, snaking along the mountain road as the Inquisition arrowed its way toward the heart of Orlais. He could actually hear the pulse of the earth, pounding in time with marching feet: *thud-dum, thud-dum*, rising in his blood.

It was fucking glorious.

It was also fucking ridiculous, the pomp and circumstance of it all. He’d much rather be riding out with his crew and the Inquisitor. But then, he supposed, Cullen and his men wouldn’t be able to have their fun.

Bull glanced over his shoulder toward the long line of Inquisition troops, grinning to himself even as he wiped away stinging beads of sweat. They were on the steep decline of the Frostbacks, the mountain air no longer bringing its welcome chill. This deep into the day, on this hard of a march, it was hot enough to roast balls; he swore he could hear sizzling in a few of those shiny tin cans. He wondered whether Curly’s *curlies* were cooking in his own juices.

“What’re you grinning at, Chief?” Krem muttered from beside him. The other man was mounted on one of Dennet’s pretty roans, sword strapped to his saddle. He was sensible enough, at least, to have stripped down to traveling leathers—but then again, Krem had rarely been anything other than sensible. Smart. A good fucking head on his shoulders (not that Bull would say as much if pressed. Nah, better to keep things jocular between them; the eddies of gratitude and affection ran too deep to add additional layers of complication.)

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“How’re you grinning at, Chief?” Krem muttered from beside him. The other man was mounted on one of Dennet’s pretty roans, sword strapped to his saddle. He was sensible enough, at least, to have stripped down to traveling leathers—but then again, Krem had rarely been anything other than sensible. Smart. A good fucking head on his shoulders (not that Bull would say as much if pressed. Nah, better to keep things jocular between them; the eddies of gratitude and affection ran too deep to add additional layers of complication.)

“Just admiring the view,” Bull said. He scratched at his jawline, fingertips rasping against a dark growth of stubble. His eye caught on a fair head bobbing in time with his horses’ gait a few yards up, and he nodded toward it playfully, eyebrows already dancing. “Why? Aren’t you?”

Krem followed the line of his gaze and instantly flushed. *Cute.* Damn cute, to see his second so flustered. But what wasn’t cute was the way Krem shrugged a too-casual shoulder a second later and looked away, pretending not to be impressed. “Not particularly,” he lied.

Bull smirked. “Oh yeah?” he teased, loving the way Krem just got redder and redder. “Nothing around here you like? Nothing worth your time?” He’d spotted the two of them here and there since his last talk with Krem: awkwardly, earnestly getting to know each other bit by bit. Even from a distance (smiling like a proud Papa, Dalish liked to needle), he could tell the building trust was slow-going, but it *was* going. No doubt about that, this thing between Krem and Feynriel was going somewhere worthwhile. Bull was already mentally counting the days before he could start
integrating the little half-elf into the Chargers more fully. “Nothing you wanna ride up next to and chat up for a spell?”

“No,” Krem said, glaring daggers down at his own grip on the reins. Even his ears were pink; it was fucking adorable is what it was. “Stop it.”

He swallowed back a laugh and let his own gaze lift to that crown of blond hair, since Krem wasn’t going to bother looking. The sunlight seemed to gather there, catching on strands as pale as snow and others as warm as wheat. Someone (Dorian? Or maybe Vivienne, who’d taken a shine to the skittish boy) had braided his long hair into a complicated plait to keep it from blowing in the wind. Twisting braids looped down the line of his spine, only a few loose tendrils framing his sharp-boned face whenever he glanced from side to side.

Whenever he glanced *nervously* from side to side.

Whenever he…

Hrm.

Bull cocked his head, playfulness fading as he actually took in Krem’s soulmate. Feynriel was always a nervous sort, no doubt about that, but now that he was focusing on the boy, he could sense deeper layers of anxiety threading through the too-tight line of his body. He sat well astride his horse, but his spine was ramrod straight and the shoulders beneath his sky-blue robe were stiff.

He wasn’t looking around him, admiring the scenery, Bull realized. He was letting the thudding heartbeat of their march drive his own breathing ever-higher; he was letting each mile they passed (each mile they drew closer to battle) get into his head deeper and deeper, until all he saw were darkspawn-magisters in the shadows and archdemons in the sky.

Feynriel? Was *scared*, plain and simple, the promise of oncoming battle sinking into his core like a rock. Funny, but Bull hadn’t really considered until now that the kid probably hadn’t ever seen more than one or two pitched fights despite living so much of his life surrounded by vipers.

“Hey,” he said, moving closer to Krem’s horse. He gave Krem’s leg a little jostle. “About Feynriel —”

“Stop it,” Krem growled, pulling his reins to dance his horse farther away again. Judging by his sulky expression, he thought Bull was still teasing him. “Stop whatever innuendo you’re cooking up in that qunari brain of yours. You weren’t funny the first half-dozen times, and you’re not going to be any funnier now.”

Bull frowned. “That’s hurtful,” he said, momentarily distracted. “I’ll have you know I’m *hilarious*.” But that wasn’t really the point right now, was it? “Not looking to goose you this time, though. Just figured—your boy’s looking a bit peaked, yeah?”

He tilted his head back toward Feynriel, fully expecting Krem to catch on—and, more importantly, go bloody do something about it. That’s what people in the first blush of love did, right? They took care of each other?

But for once he underestimated his second’s own fear and stubbornness. Krem barely cut his eyes toward Feynriel before determinedly looking away—looking back down—his own shoulders rounding forward stiffly. “He’s not *my* boy,” Krem muttered, the denial as sharp as it had ever been.

The backslide caught Bull by surprise. He’d figured Krem and Feynriel were making real progress—actually getting to know and *like* each other, even if trust would take longer to build. This…this
didn’t sound good.

But then he caught Krem glancing around quickly toward all those Inquisition troops marching in orderly lines around them, and he realized...yeah, okay, this made sense. Krem was feeling eyes on him when there weren’t any, and the fact that they were heading deep into Venatori waters probably wasn’t making him any more relaxed about all this crazy magic Voice shit. He was clamped up tighter than a, well, clam.

Bull studied Krem for a moment, then shifted his attention back to Feynriel, weighing options. He could probably talk Krem around eventually—get him to loosen up again—but that would take time and would probably be better around a fireplace after most of the Chargers had already gone to sleep. Krem would be more relaxed then, less guarded, more willing to do what Bull knew he was dying inside to do.

And in the meantime, there was Feynriel, riding further up the line, seeming to shrink down smaller and smaller into himself as the fear grew with each mile crossed.

Decision made, Bull gave Krem’s horse a light pat on the rump. “Gonna go up ahead for a bit,” he said before breaking away, not giving Krem time to protest. How he figured it, Feynriel needed a friendly face now; if Krem wasn’t able to provide it, well, then, Bull would do his damndest.

He gave a little nod to various soldiers as he passed, secretly amused at how they shied away from him. Less amused, maybe, once he started to notice they were keeping their distance from the kid, too. The looks they cast him were as full of cautious concern as the ones sent Dorian’s way—as if Feynriel might whip around at any second and start bringing Tevinter curses down on their heads.

For his part, Feynriel was peering up at a high mountain pass, fingers curled too-tight around his reins, body impressively still. The pretty blues and greens of his robes were both pale and deep as seaglass, his pale throat rising like a marble column from their heart. Coming up to his side, Bull could feel the dread building inside him.

“Pretty, huh?” he asked, quickly side-stepping when Feynriel gave a startled yelp and jerked at his reins. His horse, startled, reared its head and swayed dangerously close to where Bull had been standing, hooves stomping up puffs of red dirt.

Wide, frightened eyes met Bull’s. Pale cheeks stained a subtle pink. “Oh,” Feynriel breathed, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—I didn’t hear you come up.”

Bull smiled, feeling something inside him gentling. Krem’s boy was sweet, no doubt: a spine of steel under layers of silk and fennec fur, that melancholy a grace note Bull found impossible to ignore. Something about Feynriel made Bull want to pull him aside and... Protect him or something. Shit, he didn’t even know. It was weirdly maternal, whatever this emotion was.

“You’re safe,” he projected, one hand lifting to rest against the bowed neck of Feynriel’s horse, close enough that Feynriel would be able to feel his heat, his presence, his reassurance. Nothing’s going to happen to you while the Chargers got your back.

“It’s like I keep telling the boss,” Bull said with an easygoing grin, pulling out every trick he knew to get the other man to let down his guards—to relax. A tilt of his head, a roll of his shoulders, a casual air that managed to be both jocular and comforting. He felt like he was trying to coax a wounded animal closer, using low tones and subtle movement. Void, maybe that wasn’t so far off the mark. “I’m silent as a cat.”

“A...very large cat,” Feynriel said—hesitant, but trying. And hey, what more could Bull ask for?
He grinned back, meeting Feynriel’s eyes, doing his best to radiate warmth. *You can trust me. You can trust us.* “Biggest and the baddest,” he said easily. “So anyway, I saw you riding alone and figured you might be wanting for company.”

“Oh,” Feynriel said. “I…yes, actually, that would be… But aren’t you…” He glanced once over his shoulder, obviously searching out Krem even though he made a passable effort of pretending he wasn’t. “I wouldn’t want to, ah, keep you from your friends.”

“You’re not,” Bull said, offering the one thing he knew best how to give: kindness. He waited until Feynriel was focusing on him again before saying with as much earnest honesty as he could manage, “I’m with a friend right now. That is, if you’ll have me.”

Usually he trucked in more subtleties, but Bull figured a kid like Feynriel needed it laid out straight. And lo and behold, he could see the reaction blooming on that pretty face: surprise, confusion, trepidation, hope, pleasure. The little smile grew, eyes casting down shyly but acceptance clear in every line of his body. The fear was still there, dug deep, but it looked manageable now; his impulse had been right this time. What Krem’s soulmate needed more than anything was, in fact, a friendly face.

Until Krem was ready to be that face, Bull was happy to walk in his stead.


Bull grinned, slow and easy, letting his big shoulder bump against Feynriel’s leg in a companionable way. The way the kid responded to even that simple contact was almost enough to break his heart: someone needed to tackle him down into a bear hug someday and not let go until that touch-starved look left his eyes. “Any time, kid,” Bull said, taking it low a vow. “Any time.”

*Two days gone.*

**Dorian:**

“Come to bed,” Dorian said. He leaned over the high-backed chair, hands sliding down Taran’s chest as he draped himself over his Voice. “You need to sleep.”

Taran reached up to squeeze one of his hands absently. “I need to finish this,” he said, distracted. Every hour of the march was spent in low-voiced conversations with this advisor or that, and every hour of encampment was given to huddling over maps and papers, quill busily working.

He looked exhausted. Gorgeous, but exhausted, the shadows like ghostly imprints on his skin. It had been a long time since Dorian had truly thought of his Voice as young—he’d long since proven himself a grown man, a hero, in every way—but worry and pressure and fear were well on their way to making him old if he wasn’t careful.

Dorian had seen the signs before, in Tevinter mages who let the pressures of family expectation ground them into the dust. He’d be damned before he let that happen to Taran.

“You need to pay attention to me is what you need to do,” Dorian tutted, reaching out to pluck the quill from Taran’s hand. He darted away before Taran could protest, letting it dance playfully
between his fingers. *This*, he knew, was what Taran needed to keep those ghosts at bay. Someone willing to stare down the face of crushing responsibility with him and say *not today*. “I am a delicate hothouse flower, amatus: I need tending.”

Taran turned in his chair, smiling despite himself—warming up the way he always did when he was focusing on Dorian. “Are you saying you need someone to water you and snip your leaves?” he teased.

Dorian let his brows bounce. “*Filthy.* I do love the way you think.”

He had to laugh at Taran’s blank expression, backing up toward the simple yet elegant camp cot that had been set up for them. Taran obviously hadn’t caught his own double entendre. *A man* he may be, but *experienced* he still was not. “I don’t get the joke,” Taran admitted, endearingly honest.

Dorian dropped a hand to his hip. “Come closer and I’ll explain it to you.”

He could actually see the struggle play out on Taran’s handsome face, but he kept his own features smoothed into playful coquettishness, even when his Voice stood and started to cross the tent toward him. “I really do need to get back to work,” Taran pointed out, eyes dropping to the quill in Dorian’s left hand. His gaze roved while it was down there, however, moving across a bared bicep, a strategic flash of chest, the cock of one hip.

Dorian did his best to hide a shiver. He could feel the heat trailing across his skin as if Taran were already touching him. His heart gave a pathetic little lurch, breath wanting to come too fast, too shallow, with every step that brought them closer together. He swallowed against a rapidly drying throat and took an unsteady step back, feeling the power balance subtly shift—teasing giving way to something darker and yet more hopeful.

*Kiss me, touch me, hold me.* They were less than a day’s march from Adamant Fortress and whatever fresh new hell awaited them there. This could be their last chance for days—longer—to be alone together. To be lovers in every way but the most obvious.

Taran stepped forward again, again, the mood in the tent swiftly changing. Void, but Dorian was getting hard just from those warm eyes on him, and he bit his lower lip and let himself be herded back until the backs of his knees hit the edge of the bed. And *still* Taran came closer, stepping up into his space—closer—until their chests brushed together and Dorian had to keep himself from swooning like a maiden at the glorious heat and strength of him.

He cleared his throat, reaching back and blindly tossing the quill onto the bed; one dark brow arched. “Oops,” he said. His voice was ridiculously rough, just from this.

“Dorian,” Taran said. His (big, strong, *wonderful*) hands dropped to Dorian’s hips, anchoring their bodies together, and it was all Dorian could do not to arch up against him like a greedy cat. He was hard—Maker, but he was hard—and he wanted to be *touched*.

(He wanted more than that—wanted to be flipped onto his stomach and licked open and *fucked*—but he was willing to make compromises if it meant Taran looking at him the way he was right now.)

“Tomorrow will come soon enough, amatus,” Dorian murmured, sliding his arms around Taran’s neck. Being this close set his senses alight. He was breathing harder than he wanted to admit, and he could *feel* the flush working its way up his cheeks to his ears. Venhedis, like he was some sort of calf-struck boy in the first flush of love. “I want to claim your attention tonight.”

“You have my attention every night,” Taran promised instantly, so bloody earnest it made Dorian’s
heart squeeze in response. “Every day and every night and every moment in between.”

It sounded like the beginning of some ridiculous bit of Orlesian love poetry…and yet said with such a matter of course than Dorian was instantly overwhelmed.

Taran loved him. Loved him. And Maker but he loved this boy in return: so much so that he would have spent his entire life keeping his distance if that’s what Taran had needed. But thankfully for his always-crumbling self-control, what Taran seemed to need most was Dorian right here, tangling his fingers into tawny hair and pulling him in for a breathless kiss.

Dorian let himself melt into it, lips parting in immediate welcome, tongue eagerly meeting the first gentle brush of Taran’s. Hot, slick, entirely too good: Taran had become a master at kissing him just the way he most wanted it, so sweet it was almost too much to bear before suddenly veering wicked.

Like, fuck, now, Taran’s fingers digging hard into his hips as he pushed forward, tongue stroking deep. Deep enough he could feel it in his bones, stomach clenching hard at the suggestive intrusion. Dorian moaned and let himself be guided back, trembling legs giving out the second the backs of his knees pressed against the cot’s edge. He fell back into a sea of silk and linen, instantly (shamelessly) spreading his thighs in welcome.

Taran followed him down, not breaking the kiss for an instant. He had full control of Dorian’s mouth, each wet thrust of his tongue sparking through him like an firestorm. It was incredible what Taran could do to him; he was arching up with short, helpless jerks on his hips within seconds, eagerly taking the full weight of his Voice. Experience had taught him this sort of thing could only go on for so long before he (He! A grown! Ass! Man!) had to roll away or risk certain unfortunate inevitabilities, yet for now—fuck, for now—he was nothing but flushed skin and writhing hips and greedy gasps against slick slick slick hot. His cock strained painfully against the front of his robe, pressed against Taran’s hip, and all it would take was a little more pressure and, fuck.

Corypheus could have crashed into their tent at that moment and he wouldn’t have noticed, everything inside him one pure, endless ache. He wanted, he wanted…

And he couldn’t very well bloody have, now could he?

Groaning for a completely new reason now, Dorian slid his hands down to Taran’s shoulders and reluctantly pushed him away. Not hard or far enough that there was any real fear of separation, but just enough to let him gulp in a few haze-clearing breaths and remember why flinging off all his clothing and letting the grand Inquisitor bloody well inquisit him wasn’t a good idea. “Well,” Dorian managed, voice rough, “it looks as if I have succeeded in getting you to bed, at least. All hail and huzzah.”

Taran rose up on one elbow, pupils blown wide and hair adorably mussed. “True,” he said, not sounding much better. The low rasp of his voice was enough to make Dorian squirm. “On the other hand, I found my quill.” He leaned up and snagged it from the folds of blanket, twirling it between his fingers with a playful arch of his brow.

Dorian let out a puff of breath, half laugh and half exasperation. “I will be extraordinarily put out if you go back to work after all the effort I went through to get you in my bed.”

“Yes, because it took so much coaxing,” Taran said with a crooked smile. He let the quill drop over the edge of the bed, snagging Dorian around the waist and lifting him in an effortless, absolutely devastating show of strength. Dorian’s world swam in and out of focus as he was turned and tucked easily against Taran’s side, the both of them now curled length-wise on the bed.
He kept one hand braced on Taran’s chest, hips tucked against his side (perfectly still despite the urge to begin arching again, searching for...more, anything, absolutely bloody everything) and face pressed between neck and shoulder. It was remarkable the way the world could reorient itself the moment he was in Taran’s arms.

It was also bloody terrifying. What would he do, what would become of him, if something ever happened to this absolutely irreplaceable man?

“Promise me,” Dorian said, words nearly lost against Taran’s skin. He hated himself a little for saying it, but he couldn’t swallow them back—not when everything inside him absolutely demanded they be said.

Taran shifted with a questioning noise, one big hand sliding down Dorian’s spine. The simple touch made him feel loved and wanted and protected and more afraid than he’d ever been before, because the world didn’t just hand out nice things to people like him, and he couldn’t think of a single story where a hero like Taran lived to the end of the tale.

“Promise me,” Dorian said again, squeezing his eyes shut, “that if the chance comes to save yourself, you will.”

“Dorian,” Taran said, trying to lift up onto his elbow to look down at him, but Dorian held on tight, refusing to let Taran shift their positions. He couldn’t look at his Voice—not when he was being so Maker-damned selfish. But he also couldn’t find it in him to be selfish. No matter what the world might need, Dorian needed Taran more, and that terrifying thought became all the more real the closer they came to whatever was waiting for them at Adamant Fortress.

“Just,” Dorian said, lips brushing against Taran’s kin, fingers curled tight in his tunic. “Just promise me, amatus. Just promise.”

The gentle hand cupping the back of his skull was so sweet, so tender, so devastating that he could almost feel himself beginning to crumble. He already knew what Taran was going to say, as if their script had been written long ago:

I’m sorry.

I can’t.

They need me.

Instead, Taran pressed his lips against Dorian’s temple and whispered, “All right,” and it was like hearing his Voice in the Fade for the very first time all over again.

One day gone.

Alistair:

You know, battles were always easier with you around, Alistair thought. He knew, even though they were bonded, that Solona couldn’t literally read his thoughts, but sometimes it made him feel better to think to her, as if she could. He could almost see her, looking earnestly at him with her big dark blue eyes, flipping her long black braid over her shoulder so it didn’t get in her way while she was trying to pay attention, smiling softly when she inevitably got distracted by just looking at him—and
if he didn’t stop thinking this way, he would lose too much time to reminiscing and be late to his own battle.

And Alistair couldn’t have that.

*I mean it, though. You always got us through. Somehow.*

Alistair, in the few remaining minutes before dawn, running a hand through his hair and awaiting the inevitable, put on his armor and tried to fight down the creepy-crawly feeling of *not-right-ness* tingling across his mind. Something about this battle felt wrong, more wrong than any battle he’d fought before, except the Archdemon fight.

And how bad off was he that he was *hoping* this feeling was the demon army and the thin Veil?

And hopefully, he’d be lucky this one last time and find Solona, wherever she’d gone off to. They could figure out the cure for the Blight, have a family, grow old, and be together—forever, this time.

But one way or another, the Wardens had to be stopped—with the Inquisition at his back and Aidan at his side, he should be feeling more confident about this, but there were drums beating at the back of his head, pounding out the rhythm of *this battle is not survivable.*

*You know, love, one good thing about the Blight is that it brought people together. I guess I can say the same about the Breach.*

He walked out of the tent, ready to face whatever came next—well, as ready as he *could* be, thoughts echoing with one horrible refrain:

*Time has run out.*
Fenris:

He could feel the dread in his bones.

Fenris watched the dark shape of Adamant fortress looming in the near distance—*growing* with every step their army took. It looked like a dragon perched on the edge of its crumbling cliff, black scales glittering in the fading sunlight. Ominous the way nothing had ever seemed to him before.

He watched the dark clouds billowing across the horizon; he watched the flickers of what must be spellwork and firelight brightening the high turrets; he watched as Adamant itself *waited for them* with the patience of death itself, and…

And he couldn’t remember ever being this afraid.

“‘Aidan,’” he said, low, but Aidan was a few paces ahead, speaking with his old childhood friend. The two of them rode side-by-side into battle, dark head tipped toward fair: the apostate and the would-be Templar turned Warden. It seemed an odd pairing from whatever angle you studied it, and it shouldn’t have bothered him. With a bond like the one he shared with Aidan Hawke, jealousy was a petty, forgotten thing.

Yet, he *was* jealous. Or maybe jealous wasn’t quite the right word. He simply wanted Aidan’s time, Aidan’s attention, in these last few minutes before the ax fell. He wanted to have those grey eyes on him and reassure himself that everything was going to be fine.

He was fine.

This was *fine*.

Fenris glared down at the pommel of his saddle, gauntleted hands curled into fists as the Inquisitor’s army swarmed ahead of him and the trebuchets lumbered behind. The steady clop-clop-clop of hooves echoed the drum of his heart, and this… This was no ordinary battle. This was the end of something big. Maybe the end of everything.

*Stop being a fool*, he told himself sharply—and startled when a hand brushed his elbow.

Fenris cut a glance over, both surprised and not-at-all-surprised to see that Aidan had broken away from Alistair and had fallen back to ride alongside him. Their horses were close enough that their knees almost brushed with each step, and his smile was warm and a little crooked. *Reassuring*, because of course Aidan had felt the discordant worry buzzing through their bond.

“I…am sorry,” Fenris began, voice filled with more gravel than usual.

Aidan let his touch linger a telling moment before his hand fell away, grey eyes softening. “There’s nothing to apologize for,” he said, just as a call went down the line: they were approaching the staging ground.

“You should be with your friend,” Fenris said, flicking his gaze toward Alistair.

“You should be with you,” Aidan countered. “Alistair and I will have plenty of time to catch up after the
battle’s over.”

The blithe way he said that—as if he wasn’t just as anxious as Fenris; as if he wasn’t bracing inside for what was coming their way whether they willed it or not—almost made Fenris smile. Such arrogance, he nearly teased…but then, he wanted that confidence himself so badly that he bit the inside of his mouth and simply inclined his head, settling in to the comfortable silence.

Before them, Adamant crouched, waiting. A darker smudge against the gathering clouds.

And Fenris did his best not to shiver in response.

Fire streaked across the sky as arrows rained down from the fortress walls.

It was dark now, fully night, the stars blanketed in clouds and roiling smoke. The trebuchets creaked and moaned with each load they flung toward the crumbling walls, and explosions lit this tower and that, the chaotic tempo of battle now well underway.

He stuck close to Aidan’s side as the huge ladders were pushed up, rising like beckoning fingers. Inquisition men clung to their metal-and-wood rungs, swords ready for the first wave of combat. Far to the front line, a wall of shields marched steadily toward the main gates, spiked battering ram at the ready. Rocks and fiery debris rained down upon the soldiers manning the ram, and up on the overrun turrets, Wardens and Inquisition troops clashed.

He could feel the bloodlust rising inside of him; he could feel his markings beginning to flicker in response to each heavy thud of the ram.

One.

Two.

Three.

Open.

“Follow me,” the Inquisitor called, drawing his giant blade. The Tevinter mage (who seemed to rarely leave his side) already had staff in hand, dark eyes sweeping the sudden tumble of soldiers flowing into Adamant’s broken gate. Varric shouldered Bianca some steps away, and Alistair unstrapped his shield, the Warden insignia bright despite his defection.

Aidan looked Fenris’s way, meeting his eyes one last time before the rush of battle claimed them both. “Be safe,” he said, the faintest crackle of lightning ringing his words. His staff was already alive with it, the arching golden flame dancing between his knuckles.

“And you,” Fenris said, meaning to add more, but they were out of time. They always, always seemed to be running out of bloody time.

The Inquisitor slipped forward, moving toward the heat of battle, and the rest of them followed. The qunari, Bull and his crew; the strange ghost-faced boy; the elf girl with the shifty eyes and too-big grin. All of them, all of them, followed in his wake as if pulled by his magnetic force, bracing themselves as they plunged into the courtyard and the frenzy of battle that awaited them.
And then, nothing. There was nothing but the strain of muscles as Fenris swung his sword. The hot spatter of blood against his cheeks. The sparks that flew each time his sword met its mate, and the rising animal gladness he felt with each enemy he brought down.

There were spells exploding here and there: the chaos of battle was both familiar and like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He felt out of his own skin—out of his own head—letting the flow of fighting carry him without bothering to break free. Each enemy felled led to another, and then another, and then another. There was an endless supply of them, and Fenris bared his teeth as he sprinted to meet his next opponent, taking the steps two at a time, barely aware of Commander Cullen calling out to the Inquisitor down below him.

“All right, Inquisitor: you have your way in. Best make use of it. We’ll keep the main host of demons occupied for as long as we can.”

Demons.

Fenris drove his sword into a Warden’s side, where metal joined metal. He could smell the telltale stench of sulfur and Fade nearby, but he couldn’t see the demons that had been called. Overhead, flaming stone barreled into the high fortress towers, sending shards of it tumbling around them like the first rain of spring.

The walls were clearly overrun, teeming with flares of bright orange light and swinging blades. Fenris cut his eyes toward them briefly before pivoting, driving his sword through a foe who had been making his way toward the Inquisitor. The boy—Taran, grown so much from the young man Fenris had tutored what felt like an age ago—spared him a quick glance. His expression was grim, but he nodded once in thanks.

Fenris inclined his head back, yanking his sword free. The Warden collapsed at his feet, blood bubbling out of his slack mouth, eyes staring heavenward.

Commander Cullen glanced up toward the walls and said something in a low voice before turning back to his men. He walked like he was barely aware of the hellfire around them, calling out loud and clear as he gave his orders. Taran, meanwhile, looked torn. He glanced between the high walls—where the fighting was strongest—and the main battlements.

Aidan touched Taran’s shoulder and leaned in to murmur something in his ear.

Almost reluctantly, Fenris moved closer. He couldn’t say why, but his whole body was tensing as if in preparation for a blow. That strange sense of impending disaster hung like a sword over his head, and he’d never wanted to run from a fight before. Never, never, except now he wanted to grab Aidan’s arm and flee this place before it could swallow the two of them whole.

He caught Aidan looking at him, worry clear on his face, and Fenris gave a quick, sharp jerk of his head.

“It doesn’t matter, he tried to telegraph. Because there was no going back now. The only way out was through; they had to keep moving forward or the whole world would burn.

“Our men need help on the walls,” Taran said, looking around at the small knot of followers who stuck close to his side. “I need to find Warden-Commander Clarel, but if we don’t clear the way, the demons will have us overrun.”

“We got it, kid,” Varric assured him, looking grimmer and more focused than Fenris had ever seen him. Funny: he’d fought side-by-side with the dwarf for years, but it wasn’t until this moment that he considered Varric anything close to a warrior. “We can break into teams, sweep the walls from all directions.”

Both Fenris and Dorian opened their mouths to protest at the same time, but Taran held up a hand to forestall them. “We don’t have time to argue,” he said, that thread of command like steel in his voice. “Each group needs a mage to help deal with the demons, and I am going to need Hawke when I face Clarel. He’s the most closely tied to all of this.”

“He’s right, Fenris,” Aidan said, trying to catch and keep Fenris’s gaze. “I need to see this through.”

And I need to be there to protect you.

He could sense Dorian bristling across from him, could sense the other man echoing his feelings like a distorted mirror. The Tevinter mage hovered close to Taran, one hand on his shoulder, dark eyes on his face. “Amatus,” he began.

Taran gently pulled away. “I know,” he said, not unkind, “and I feel it too. But there isn’t time to argue. I need you—Fenris and Cole need you—to do this.” He didn’t wait to let that beat of emotion carry over, instead turning to his patiently waiting companions. “Blackwall,” he said, “you take Solas and Sera to the northern wall. And Bull—”

“Take Bull with you,” Dorian interrupted. He set his jaw when everyone turned to look at him: straight-backed and terrible as any demon from Fenris’s past, and afraid. He could feel that fear echoing him, the familiar bile of it lingering at the back of his throat—and wasn’t it funny that here at the end, it was a magister that so closely reflected everything building inside his heart? “And the Chargers. We don’t need all four walls cleared: Cullen’s no doubt smart enough to target any opening we make without anyone holding his hand.”

“Dorian,” Taran said, reaching out.

Dorian pulled back sharply. “If you’re going to fling yourself head-first into danger, which I know you will, at least take a solid shield with you,” he said. “Bull and his Chargers were hired to guard you, no? Well let them guard you.”

“He’s right, boss,” Bull said, angling closer. He scratched at his jaw, huge maul resting on one beefy shoulder. “Don’t need all four walls covered, but your ass sure could use the extra padding. Me and the boys will get you three,” his canny gaze ticked over Taran, Aidan, Alistair, “safely there to shut this shit down.”

Taran looked like he wanted to argue—was perhaps on the verge of making it an order none of them would be willing to cross—but in the end, he did what only the best leaders could manage: he listened.

“All right,” Taran said. “It’s decided. Everyone, fight safe and smart. I expect to see you at camp when this is over; I’ll owe you all a drink.”

“Owe us a whole sodden barrel, then!” the elf girl called out before snaking one skinny arm around the bearded Warden’s neck. “Come on then, right? Let’s poke us some demon guts.” She tugged, and he went, the strange elf mage moving sedately at their heels.

Varric shot off a quick, two-fingered salute to Taran before winking at Aidan. “Don’t do anything too heroic when I’m not there to play witness,” he warned them both, then swung around to his group. “Seeker. First Enchanter.”

“Varric,” Cassandra said dryly, and the three of them left, weapons drawn, to help the men fighting a
losing battle on the southern wall.

Which left him. Fenris looked up to find Aidan watching him with a worried sort of frown, and he tried to reassure him—tried to reassure himself—but he couldn’t shake that feeling that this was the last moment he’d ever see the man he loved beyond…just…everything. Beyond revenge or life or light. Those grey eyes were solemn, his pale cheeks smudged with soot and flecked with blood from battle. One smear of garish red bisected his nose, and Fenris found himself pushing forward to meet him, big sword clattering to the ground as he reached up to cup Aidan Hawke’s face.

They didn’t have time for this; he didn’t care.

He pulled Aidan close, heart soaring at the desperate crash of their mouths. Aidan made a low noise in the back of his throat, fingers sliding up to snarl in Fenris’s hair. He gripped tight—tight enough to hurt—and kissed him with everything he had.

It was the battle with the Arishok all over again. It was the excruciating duel with Meredith. It was every Templar, every magister, every slaver and every void-taken fool who ever tried to come between them, all bound up into one, and he. Would. Not. Lose. Aidan. Today.

Fenris broke the kiss, panting harshly against Aidan’s parted lips. They were slick and bitten red and so fucking beautiful he couldn’t stand it. “Be safe,” he growled—begged—meeting Aidan’s gaze. Needing to memorize this moment just in case it was the last.

“You too,” Aidan whispered, thumb brushing Fenris’s cheek.

Just beyond them, Fenris was dimly aware of Bull saying to that alienage boy from Kirkwall: “You stick close to Krem and me. You’re an honorary Charger, yeah?” And as Fenris reluctantly pulled back from his lover, crouching to grab his sword, he caught the moment Dorian curled his fingers around Taran’s bicep and yanked him close.

“Remember your promise,” Dorian said—then leaned in to brush their mouths together so gently, so sweetly, Fenris had to quickly look away. This was a depth of intimacy he wasn’t meant to see.

Then Dorian pulled back with a stuttering sigh just as Fenris straightened, sword in hand, and the two groups began to fracture: Alistair leading the way up a crumbling set of stairs to the battlements high above, leaving Fenris, Dorian, and the strange-faced boy blinking owlishly at them down below.

Fenris studied his new companions, that sour fear a living thing in his stomach. “We will be quick,” he said, making the words a vow. “We will be decisive. This will be over soon.”

“Yes,” the boy, Cole, said, looking between them with a haunting air of sadness. “This will be over soon.”

Dorian:

This will be over soon. The words kept echoing in his head, somewhere between a threat and a promise as they fought. Spell after spell, shade after shade, that was all that filled his mind. Those simple, chilling words, spoken with Cole’s usual air of forlorn mystery:

This will over soon. This will be over soon. This will be over soon.
Swing.
Duck.
Counterspell.

*This will.* —a man dead at his feet.

*Be over.* —a demon turned to ash.

*Soon.* —Pride itself howling and lashing its chain as the three of them worked in a desperate unit to whittle down its health, struggling to keep from falling beneath the onslaught.

In the far distance, Dorian swore he heard the rattling screech of a dragon, but…but Maker, that was impossible, right? Corypheus and his archdemon couldn’t be *here*, now, in the midst of this madness. He tried to shoot a desperate glance toward the battlements where Taran would no doubt already be in the very thick of whatever nightmare had come next, but the sting of a chain lashing inches from his face jolted him back into the moment and his own dance with death.

Pride lifted back its head and bellowed its fury, thick hide sliced here and there by Fenris’s giant blade. Cole was on the thing’s back, stabbing a dagger down into the join of its neck and shoulder before seeming to disappear in a puff of smoke. The ground bubbled around them, the tell-tale stench of sulfur strong, and he needed to think of a plan to deal with the shades that would no doubt rise to support this massive demon. He needed—

He—

*Another* bone-rattling screech, and fuck, void, *yes*, that was the bloody dragon back again. Dorian turned toward its source, just in time to see it curl around the high reach of a tower, wings spread wide, neck arched down toward whatever faced it from below.

He took an instinctive step that direction, only to jolt back to himself when Cole cried out, “Dorian!”

Dorian turned, summoning a shield spell—too late. The shade lashed at him with brutal force, knocking him back into a helpless sprawl. His head connected with the crumbling stone, and blood filled his mouth as his teeth clacked hard. He gave a guttural gasp for breath, trying desperately to blink away the immediate fog that filled his vision; he saw a shadow move and this time barely got the shield up in time, the shade’s claws raking all too close to his face.

He could feel the pressure of it, feel the heat, feel…feel…just…Maker, he couldn’t think. It was all a blur, and he…

The shade shrieked again, raising its arm, and Dorian tried to force his mind to clear. He started to push himself up, staff trembling in his fingers, mind slippery with the blow as he searched for a spell, a spell, *come on*, a spell.

He watched, horrified, as the demon opened its mouth, ready to fall on him with all its power—and then a bright light caught his eye, at the very center of the creature’s throat. It pressed out seemingly in slow motion (though of course that wasn’t possible, not without the time magic they’d experienced in Redcliffe), a spray of blood and black ooze spattering his face and robe in a wet hiss. It took a stunned moment to realize exactly what he was seeing: the tip of Fenris’s blade pushing through the shade’s neck, ending its life before it could claim Dorian’s.

And then the shade melted into black dust at Fenris’s feet. The elf looked down at Dorian, expression unreadable, dark skin flickering with lines of pure lightning.
“Thank you,” Dorian breathed, too dazed to say more.

Fenris merely inclined his head before reaching into a pouch at his side (threaded, Dorian noted with the absent clarity of one hell of a head wound, with some kind of red cloth) and pulling out a healing potion. He tossed it to Dorian, who fumbled weakly to catch it, staff clattering to the ground.

The dragon screamed and Pride bellowed, falling to its knees, Cole sliding his dagger from its seeping eye socket. The whole world seemed to quake, air gone heavy as if being funneled down down down toward a single gravitational pull.

Taran is down there. He knew it in his very soul.

“Drink that quickly,” Fenris said, even as Dorian wrenched the stopper free and swallowed the bitter potion in one gulp. He thrust his hand down, and Dorian took it, the buzz of lyrium licking through him. Glass shattered at their feet as he was hauled up, staff once again in hand. There was blood matting the back of his head and haloed about the rock where he’d fallen, but the potion was acting quickly, giving him back some measure of clarity.

Another dragon scream, high above. Another shake of the ground beneath them, as if Adamant itself was crying out. He knew Taran had given them an order, but the wall was clear now and they had nothing left to keep them from racing to his side. Maker, let them be in time.

“We have to,” Dorian began, frantic.

“Find them,” Fenris finished, already sprinting away. Dorian spared one glance for Cole, who hopped down from the demon’s dead, withering form. The boy shook his head—mournful, as if he already knew something Dorian refused to believe—and Dorian pivoted away, racing after Fenris.

The wall was clear, Cullen’s men rising over it in a triumphant wave, already bearing down on their enemy, but Dorian and Fenris were focused up: up toward the highest part of Adamant, where the dragon was circling in clear chase of some quarry.

Be safe, be safe, Dorian chanted to himself, the words echoing the growing rasp of his breathing. The potion had done its job getting him back to his feet, but he was still woozy, still uncertain of his footing. He kept sliding in blood and demon ichor, Fenris like a point of light he was determined not to lose. The elf sprinted several yards ahead of him, moving up the broken stairs as if he felt no pain. It was enviable, both as a show of physical prowess and as a means to an end: Fenris would make it, when Dorian wasn’t entirely sure he would.

Another howl, closer this time. Dorian set his teeth and pushed himself faster, faster.

The battle was still going on around them, blasts of magic and arcing swords making a sort of obstacle course. He swore he spotted Dalish shooting yellow-green flames toward a spindly-legged demon, and yes, there was Grim grabbing a handful of Warden hair and yanking it back. They’d caught up with the Chargers, which was… That was good, wasn’t it? It meant they were close.

Except he didn’t see Bull anywhere, and if the Chargers had broken away from the main party, then Taran was that much more on his own.

The thought was terrifying, but not as frightening as the realization—standing there, looking around at the chaos, lost in the scuffle—that he had no idea where to go next. All this long, mad race, he and Fenris had been going up toward the source of the conflict, but though there was another level to the fortress, there were no steps to reach it. The courtyard they were in was overwhelmed and overwhelming, crumbling stone every which way, blood misting the air, cries echoing, magic.
sizzling, and fuck, fuck.

“Aidan!” Fenris bellowed, rough voice rising over the clamor. He looked as lost as Dorian felt, eyes darting around, panic clear in every line of his body. The markings were going crazy, flickering like distant heat lightning, and Dorian could feel the horror rising off of Fenris in waves—his movements were erratic, his eyes wild.

Sensing Hawke’s own fear?

Sensing Hawke’s death?

Maker. Maker. Where were they?

He spun around helplessly, ready to scale the damned walls if he had to. Then, “Krem!” Dorian called, spotting a familiar dark head. The warrior swung his blade, cleaving a spindly limb free; he was spattered in blood and looked grim-faced. Terrible. “Where is he?”

Krem barely had a moment to yell out a reply. “That way!” pointing toward a set of stairs all but hidden behind a broken tower. And then the demon was on him, tail lashing out and tumbling him to the ground, its twisted face leering close, close.

Dorian hesitated just a second, watching as Krem struggled to get his sword arm free. Fenris had no such compunction: he was already racing toward the steps. Cursing beneath his breath, Dorian turned to follow…then hesitated, glancing back. Blood spattered the demon’s face as its claws raked exposed flesh. Fuck.

“Be safe,” he muttered beneath his breath, lifting a hand and sending a spell slamming into the creature. It hit with a satisfying crunch, sending it scuttling off of Krem with a whimper. “Be safe, be safe, be safe.”

Krem was up on his feet the moment he was free, sword firmly in hand. He didn’t glance back toward Dorian, swinging forward with a hoarse battle cry as the world spiraled into madness around them. Adamant shook, groaned, the dragon bellowing its own rage so, so incredibly close. He was so incredibly close.

Hold on, amatus.

Broken stone skittered around Dorian as he turned and sprinted toward the hidden stair. Cracks appeared beneath his feet, and the whole thing seemed in danger of splintering apart as, ahead, something hard slammed into the fortress. He could see a wall of rubble rising ahead of him, and black wings above that, the demon dragon stalking forward with an intensity that could only mean one thing: it had its prey in sight.

Taran, he thought, nearly gibbering with fear, Taran, Taran. He stumbled against stone that seemed determined to shift like sand beneath his feet, making his way to the huge mountain of what had once been a tower, strewn haplessly across his path. One glance told him the only way over was up, so Dorian shouldered his staff and began to climb, bloody hands scraping across jagged rock as he made his way toward his Voice one painstaking step at a time.

There was someone calling out—someone yelling “Clarel!” in clear shock—the rasping Orlesian-accented voice mumbling under the steady rumble of a dragon. Dorian fought to hurry, knowing he was running out of time, and nearly stumbled across Fenris three-quarters of the way up. The other man had been caught in the rubble and was pinned, heavy stone across his legs. He was still weakly struggling, clawing at the rock to free himself even as other, larger stones fell around him from the
broken teeth of the tower above, threatening to crush him whole.

“Maker, hold still,” Dorian said, stopping for the second time even as his whole soul urged him to *keep going*. Fenris was nearly blind with animal panic, struggling, snarling, fighting his way free. A *losing* fight, if Dorian didn’t pause to use a breath of force magic to send that rock rolling away—and even then, it was clear the man’s legs had been nearly crushed, bone broken and in desperate need of a healer, blood a garish trail behind him.

And yet Fenris was already moving the moment the rock rolled free, clawing his way up that last bit of wall as if he would drag himself to Hawke if he had to. Dorian stumbled close, grabbing the other man by the arm—and nearly losing his head in the process when Fenris lashed out, clawed gauntlet tips passing *through* Dorian’s skin.

“I am trying to *help you*,” Dorian snarled, feeling that impossible pressure building building building inside his chest as he reached down again—daring much—and grabbed Fenris’s elbow. This time, the other man didn’t attack; instead, he allowed Dorian to loop his arm around his neck and haul him up, and together, stumbling, agonized, they made it over the final edge…just in time to see the dragon fall.

It spiraled down, screaming, wings beating, stone raining around it. It had crushed the walkway between the two main towers, Dorian saw in a moment of dawning horror. Now there was nothing but a bridge stretching out into darkness. Into the endless void, stone steadily crumbling as tiny figures fought to find purchase.

*Bull*, he realized, spotting the qunari snagging a fair-haired figure and hauling it over his shoulder. *Feynriel*. There, several paces back and struggling to run from the eroding edge was, fuck, *Hawke*. And behind him, *turning back* like the bloody idiot he was, was—

“*Taran!*” he cried, voice lost under the sheer howl of Adamant crumbling to pieces before his eyes. Taran had swung around and was hauling another figure—*Alistair*—back up onto the eroding bridge. The Warden stumbled forward, pulling Taran with him toward safely, but there was no safety, there was no happy ending, there was nothing, nothing but that yawning blackness and a sick certainty that *this* was finally the end.

Fenris jerked in his arms, trying to claw his way free with a broken sound—to make it to Hawke—but there was no point, no time, *nothing left* to do but watch almost in slow motion again (time, such a funny thing; they always seemed to be running out of it) as the stone bucked and shuddered beneath Taran’s feet…

…but before giving way in a crumbling wave.

Taran fell first, eyes wide with shock as the ground disappeared beneath his feet. He plummeted back, striking stone, jerking mid-flight as green fire erupted from his hand. Then Alistair, pinwheeling hard, then Aidan, clawing at the ground in unconscious mimicry of Fenris, then Feynriel—caught by one meaty grey hand and dangling mid-air for a terrible second as *Bull* *almost* managed to find purchase to pull them both back from the brink.

But no, no, the world didn’t work that way, and the two tumbled toward the growing eye of green light, spilling end over end in a violent dance as death rained from above and the ground swayed at their feet and everything Dorian loved was lost in a moment.

In a snap. Just. Like. That.

Green fire flared. The rift shuddered, stretching in silent accusation. In his arms, Fenris gave a
guttural cry that seemed to go on and on and on forever, stretching taut across the aftermath of crushing loss, of, of *despair*, thick on his tongue as he stared. Silent. Aching. Broken, too, somewhere deep inside.

And again, Cole’s voice, rising like a ghost in his shocked-still thoughts: *This will be over soon.*
Everything happened too damn fast to process.

There was the dragon…archdemon…whatever…too massive to really take in, no matter how much Bull wanted to slow down time and admire it. There was the Warden-Commander tossed around like a rag doll, the ‘Vint mage tumbling away into nothing, and, oh yeah, the fucking ground crumbling under their feet like the world just couldn’t be bothered to hold them up anymore.

Bull saw without really seeing Warden Alistair fall—the boss turning back after him like the madman he was—Aidan Hawke falling, scrabbling madly at the bridge as it disappeared under his feet.

He was aware of someone (Fenris?) screaming high above them and some crazy, crackling power screaming far below, and all he really had time to do was mutter, “Aw, fuck,” as time kept speeding by him in lightning-bursts, turning every millisecond into an act of pure instinct.

Bull lunged forward, eating up the ground in three big bounds. He caught sight of blond hair and blue robes, and he reacted without letting himself think, catching Feynriel by the arm as the kid began his long tumble into death and yanking him back to safety.

“No you don’t,” Bull said, grimly. He hoisted Feynriel over his shoulder, grateful for the arms locking around his neck even as he fought to outrun the inevitable. The ground was being eaten up behind them in giant bite-sized chunks, and he was not going to lose Krem’s soulmate: not today. Even if he failed to save the Herald and the whole sodding world, he wasn’t going to screw up that badly.

But each step he took was lower than the last, and no matter how fast he ran, the disintegrating bridge ran faster. He could feel the moment the stone gave way beneath him, knee rebounding off the cracked edge as his left foot found nothing but air. Gravity did the rest—yanking him down in a graceless sprawl, his big hands scrabbling madly for something to hold onto.

Bull was aware of the crackle of green magic far below and Feynriel desperately spitting out spells just beyond his ear, one pale hand reaching out in his peripheral vision. It wasn’t going to do any good, though; he could already feel himself falling, could feel death twining about his ankles and yanking him into the void. He gave up trying to grab for a solid purchase that wasn’t there and instead reached for that pale outflung arm, thinking: well fuck, maybe if I just throw him toward safety. Because if all the rest of them had to die, maybe at least Feynriel and Krem would get their happy ending. (Until the red lyrium ate their faces or whatever, but he was really trying to focus on the bright side and not the slow, inevitable end of the world.)

“Get ready to fly, kid,” he said, grabbing for Feynriel, but that other arm tightened stubbornly around his throat before he could get a solid grip, and the second it took to adjust was a second too long. They were falling, tipping end over end into the abyss, Bull’s vision dominated by piercing green light and fluttering blue cloth. He tried to twist around, wanting to face his death head-on even as he reached out blindly for a flailing hand as Feynriel lost his grip and fell away. Small. It was so small in his, fine-boned as a bird’s, and if he had the strength to fight the will of gravity, he would have yanked Feynriel close again.
He caught a glimpse of a frightened-but-determined face and figured, well, there were worse people to die with. It was just a fucking pity Krem was going to be left alone up there; maybe he’d take over the Chargers; maybe he’d find a way to save the world without the Herald; maybe he’d take up gardening or some shit. Whatever he did, Bull hoped he enjoyed whatever time he had while he had it and and and—

And—

And…

And seriously, how honking long did it take to fall to your death? His life wasn’t flashing before his eyes so much as it was slowly tap-dancing across his skull; it wasn’t like he wanted to get flattened into paste for Cullen to pry up sometime later, but Andraste’s tits, there was only so much self-reflection a qunari could take, and—

And darkness.

(Finally.)

And then…something else.

The rift swallowed him whole and spat him out the other side, the scream of the punctured veil maddeningly loud in his ears. Or was that his own bellow? His lungs were full of it, near-bursting with pressure, and his head felt suspiciously stuffed with cotton. When he hit the barrier, green fire erupted around him, and he thought, eloquently: Oh shit.

Then he was tumbling ass over teakettle toward a suddenly all-too-close ground. Which, hallelujah, but also, again, OH SHIT, because it was coming fast and hard and unstoppable. He instinctively reached to snag the more vulnerable Feynriel so he could shelter him with his body, a drum-beat of panic striking through him when he felt, fuck, nothing.

Now he had the opposite problem from before. The ground was coming fast, craggy and dark and painful, and Feynriel was—Feynriel—

Feynriel was nowhere; lost along the way; shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit.

Bull slammed into the ground with a bone-splitting sound, the pained grunt forced from his lungs. It lanced through him whippet-fast, setting his nerve endings alight, but he’d been trained how to fall so he could minimize damage, and his instincts responded without him having to spare it a second thought, shoulders rounding to protect his head and legs drawing in as he ricocheted off a glittering boulder to go tumbling inelegantly to a small chasm below.

Bang bang bang crunch…stillness. Bull landed in a curled-up ball, sword (loosened sometime during his endless freefall) clattering to the stone next to him. He sucked in an agony-shocked breath, letting the pain crash over him in a wave before he deliberately pushed it aside—shaking it off with a literal ripple of his muscles as Bull carefully rose up onto an elbow and did a quick mental assessment of the damage.

Not broken, not broken, bruised all to hell, probably fractured, definitely fractured, not broken and… yeah, broken. Fuck. He rolled over, favoring his one shattered leg, and breathed through the lancing pain even as he took in his surroundings. It was… Dark. Spooky. Stabbing black stone rising everywhere, with boulders literally floating some distance away. The sky was a heavy green, pressing in on his lungs and making him shudder.

But he wasn’t a paste smeared across the stones of Adamant, so wherever the fuck he was now, he
reckoned it was better than the alternative.

Hissing out a steady breath, Bull pushed himself up to sitting, then to a one-legged hop. It was going to be a pain to drag his bad leg through wherever he was, but he’d forced his last healing potion on the boss mid-fight somewhere back in not crazy-town, so unless someone had spares, he was just going to have to deal.

Speaking of the boss… Speaking of Feynriel… Speaking of, oh, anyone…

“Oooowww,” someone—the Warden Alistair, he was pretty sure—muttered, just around the other side of the stalagmite that had nearly broken his fall. “I’m dead now. This? This is definitely what dead feels like.”

“This isn’t what dead feels like,” another voice—Hawke—muttered back. “This is what probably should have died, but had a mountain dropped on top of me instead feels like.”

There was a rattling cough and a shifting of stone before Taran (thank every spirit and Maker and ancestor and what-the-void-ever) added: “As someone who has had a mountain dropped on top of me, I can verify this.”

“Funny,” Alistair muttered, scraping himself up; Bull limped around the rock formation just in time to see him pass a dusty hand across blood-matted hair. “Good to know I’m dying with such funny men.”

“Yeah, we’re a regular laugh riot,” Bull said, taking them all in with a single sweep of his eye. Herald, Warden, Champion: the trifecta of Thedas, all a little banged up but none of them looking too worse for wear. “Coupla questions, though. One: where the void are we? And two: where’s Feynriel?”

He probably should have led with that one, or maybe put a cap in just how hard he stressed the question, or…or…or, fuck, something. His head felt like his brain was still rattling around inside and his heart was beating a one-two-six-ten of panic and it was good to know he still had Taran in his sights, but void take him if he lost Krem’s soulmate, he’d—

He’d—

He’d tear this whole place apart brick by weird floating brick was what he’d do.

Taran’s brows were pursed together in visible concern, the blood streaking his skin making the expression dizzyingly macabre. “You’re hurt,” he said, moving forward to Bull—one hand fumbling at the various pouches he kept on hand, likely searching for an unbroken bottle of elfroot. “Badly. Maker’s breath, Bull.”

But Bull just waved him off. “Focus on the missing elf first, boss,” he said. “I had a grip on Feynriel most the way down, so he can’t have fallen far.”

“He’s probably unconscious,” Hawke said, looking around with instant distress. Oh, yeah, right: the two of them were close. “Maybe he hit his head coming past all these rocks. Feynriel!” His voice lifted on the kid’s name, echoing—echoing—echoing, but not a normal kind of echo. Not a high canyon walls sound. No, this was like a hundred dissonant voices catching Feynriel’s name and throwing it back at them at uneven pitches, fading as it snaked up into the sickly green-grey sky.

A soft laugh rattled through that sound, like bone scraping rock, and the four of them exchanged a quick glance.
“Demons,” Alistair said, quiet.

“Bloody fucking demons,” Bull agreed, silently losing whatever calm he’d managed to cling onto. He was starting to put together the one plus one equals absolutely screwed in his head, all the strange pieces colliding together into a whole he could barely believe. He almost didn’t want to say it, but swallowing back the words wouldn’t erase the truth: “We’re in the Fade,” he said.

“That’s not possible,” Alistair protested, a high note of panic in his voice; he already had his sword in hand, even though there wasn’t a fight to be seen. Yet.

Taran finally found two unsmashed bottles of elfroot—likely the last—and tried to push them into Bull’s hands. “I’ve given up trying to say something’s not possible,” he said. “And it looks vaguely like what I remember.”

“Feynriel!” Hawke called again, ignoring the demons chittering back the name. He was moving around the various spikes and pits of rock, limping subtly, eyes scanning for signs of blood—blonde hair—a limp hand flung out helplessly.

Or worse.

Shit. Bull refused to think about how much worse it could be. Instead he bent and—gritting his teeth—popped the bone of his left leg back into something like alignment. The pain was instant and incredible, scouring through him like a firestorm, but he swallowed back the instinctive bellow and held on tight, one big hand clamping the pieces together.

Taran was saying something, trying to crouch to help him, but Bull was too focused on each step of his driving plan to notice. One: Fix the shit that needed fixing. Two: Tear this hunk of rock apart until he found Krem’s soulmate and made sure the kid was in one piece. Three: Probably lose his mind with fear. Four: Push down the fear, and protect the four of his charges at all costs.

So, all right, one. He thumbed out the cork and swallowed one of the potions, letting it smash between his fingers. The rush of healing was immediate and exquisite; he swore he could feel himself knitting back together quick as rushing rapids. It wasn’t enough to top him off and bring him back to full fighting strength, but it was more than enough to give him the full use of both legs again. Bull straightened, twisting around a few times to test the cracked ribs even as he shook out his healing leg. Not great, not even good, but it’d keep him.

Okay. Two.

“I’m gonna help Hawke,” Bull said, tucking the second bottle of elfroot carefully into his own pouch and stepping back from Taran’s worried hovering. “You two stick close and try to figure out what you can. Start with how to get out of here,” he added, ever-helpful, fighting not to let the edge of panic show. “That’d be good.”

“Bull,” Taran began, but Bull was already moving off—in the opposite direction from the one Hawke had taken—scouring high and low. His head kept playing tricks on him as he skirted around jagged rock and tried not to focus on the nausea-inducing wells of gravity lifting what looked like ancient stone wall to bob effortless as clouds along the horizon. He kept swearing he saw movement; he heard skittering footsteps; he felt the pulse of rock beneath his feet like this place was a living thing, and void, what if it had swallowed the kid whole?

“Feynriel,” he called, loud as he could. There was a note in his voice he almost didn’t recognize—fear, fuck—and one hand actually shook as he pushed a bobbing mass of broken rock aside. It thrummed against his fingertips, sensation lingering like a deadened limb long after he’d reared back
in alarm. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Feynriel! Make a noise if you can hear me!”

He was only distantly aware of Hawke calling out Feynriel’s name at the opposite side of their makeshift clearing; the sound funneled strangely, as if coming to him from the bottom of a well. It made his skin crawl, and if this was what mages went through every night, it was no wonder the qun decided there was danger there.

*Stop,* Bull told himself, hating the way even his internal voice sounded weak. Young. More child-terrified than he could ever remember being. He stepped past a shadow of tumbled stone (*looks like grasping hands,* a part of him insisted) and around to a hidden path that wound sharply down down down into sudden pure darkness pooled like a basin of water in a divot of stone.

He stumbled, once, heart giving a sharp hiccup in response. The toe of his boot actually kissed the edge of that unnatural shadow, kicking it up like dust or foul mist or… Or like some kind of phantasmal force, swirling unnaturally just inches away from him. It clung to the ground here, concentrated on one spot: a black gash against the pitted stone, like oil poured into a shallow pan, only…alive. So very fucking disturbingly **alive.**

“Nope,” Bull said, taking a huge step back from the brink of that thoroughly disturbing miasma. Its edges trembled toward him as he retreated, almost as if it were reaching curiously for his boot again—for **him** again—and he watched with sickened horror as finger-like tendrils stretched long and hungry…before relaxing back into the roiling soup of of bloody demon shit or something.

“That’s,” he said, voice still child-scared, no matter how hard he tried to bear past that animal fear rising up in his throat. “That’s a whole lot of **no thank you** from me.”

He started to retreat, determined to look for Feynriel somewhere that wasn’t here, when he spotted… blue. Sky blue, pretty as anything, so incongruous here it took him a full three seconds to click onto what he was seeing. It flashed in the dead center of that sickly morass, like a flower planted in the heart of a corpse, and Bull only just realized where he knew that unexpected burst of color from before it was swallowed up again by the grasping dark.

Before Feynriel was swallowed up again.

He’d hate himself forever for the split second of hesitation—of **indecision**—that claimed him then. That scared mewling place in his heart was protesting that this wasn’t something he knew how to fight. This wasn’t something he could **survive.** But he shouldered that thought aside with a growl and forced his locked-up muscles to tip forward, letting momentum drag him back toward that grasping dark.

“I’m coming,” he muttered under his breath, determined—even as something colder than ice circled around an ankle, **tugging** him close. Fucking. Demons. “I’m coming, kid, I’m coming.”

He didn’t have on gloves—didn’t have on anything to protect his hands—but he wasn’t going to let that stop him. Gritting his teeth against the crawling **wrongness** of those whippet-thin shadow tendrils wrapping like living vines around his calves (his knees) (his **thighs,** crawling higher and higher with each second that passed), Bull plunged his hands into the living dark.

At first he felt…nothing. Not cold. Not Feynriel. Not jagged rock. Just empty space, like he’d gone elbow-deep into the abyss. And then… **those tendrils** against his fingertips, twisting about his wrist, tugging him deeper. Deeper. **Deeper,** fuck, shit, no, no thanks. Nope.

“Really hate demons,” Bull gritted out, forcing his legs into a rock-steady crouch—it was like stepping through freezing molasses, each movement dragged out taffy-slow—and pushing deeper
into that well of dark. Past the elbow, up to the bicep, nearly to the shoulder. His face was close to it now, and he had to tip his horns up (ha, he thought, mind tumbling with a hysteria he wouldn’t let himself indulge, horns up!) to keep from getting snagged and pulled face-first into that nasty demon shit: grasping, feeling, reaching, hungry.

At the first brush of fingers against his own, he bellowed and nearly yanked back, imagining clawtips against his skin. But then another hand curled around his wrist, squeezing, and he felt his heart squeeze back with weak relief. All right, okay, this was good; this was what he wanted. Now he just needed to,

“Liiiift,” Bull grunted, planting his heels and pulling with all his strength. Soft puffs of black miasma rose toward his face as he leaned back—searching like blind insects, desperate to swallow him whole—and Andraste’s metal soddin’ brassiere, he was going to be making nightmare fuel out of this for decades. More. His ballsack would be a wrinkled grey pendulum swinging like a desiccated nug between his thighs and he’d still remember the day he went fishing in demon guts and pulled out —

—Feynriel, finally.

He saw those grasping hands first, covered in shadow but familiar as his own already. Then the wrists, then the forearms, then he was pulling him out in earnest. The snaking tendrils reluctantly let Bull pull away, but they clung to Feynriel’s slowly revealed form with angry lashes; only strips of skin and wide, terrified eyes were visible. The shade swirled around skinny hips as Bull fought to yank him free, but there was resistance, as if something dark (something insidious) had hold of Feynriel’s legs and was trying to pull him back.

This…this was crazy, this was next level demon shit, and Bull could feel his muscles popping and quaking as he struggled to drag Feynriel to safety, needing… Bloody void only knew what he needed. Another five hands, to start.

“Boss!” he called, not caring if a whole new legion of demons heard him. That glistening shadow was beginning to take the form of grasping, long-fingered hands—a score of them, two score, tangling in Feynriel’s hair and tearing at his robes. There were fingers about the boy’s throat and claws digging into his flesh, and Bull was strong, but he wasn’t sure he was strong enough to save Feynriel from this. “Boss, could use a hand over here!”

He heard the scrape of metal against stone, and Taran calling over to Hawke. He was tempted to glance over, to check their progress, but he couldn’t—he wouldn’t—look away from Feynriel. They’d been dragged back down again, until Feynriel was ribs-deep in the hungry shadows. Darkness streaked his face like an oil slick, and his eyes were mottled black—his mouth full of the shit, as if demons were trying to force themselves down his pretty throat—but he was watching Bull with trusting intensity. Holding on for dear life, struggling as if fighting with everything he had even as they literally overwhelmed him.

And, well, shit, Bull wasn’t going to look away from him. Not for a single second; not when each point of contact could be giving Feynriel strength.

He was vaguely aware of skidding feet and a tumble of small rocks, then a curse. “What in the Maker’s name?” Alistair demanded.

“Aidan, freeze it,” Taran said, already swinging into the mess—because of course he was. Some of those dark tendrils fighting so hard to swallow Feynriel whole hesitated, trembled, then began to snake toward him as if drawn to the light pealing from his palm. “Alistair and I will strike at the same time while Bull pulls him free.”
“Oh jeez,” Alistair said, but he was stumbling down there too, sword out. A shadow wrapped possessively around Taran’s ankle and another was rising rising rising up toward him in an ever-thickening mass—a fucking face forming at the end, like something ripped right out of Bull’s childhood nightmares.

Cool wind touched his cheek. “On three,” Hawke said, the crackle of power in his voice. Taran ignored the monster reaching for him, sword lifted; on the other side of the pooling darkness, Alistair did the same. “One…two…three!”

The streak of blue was almost musical, ice crystals crackling, rapidly forming around the roiling horror. In that instant, both Taran and Alistair struck—Alistair driving his blade deep into its heart, and Taran taking a swing at the twisting face lifting up toward his. There was a scream that wasn’t a scream (that wasn’t even verbal, felt deep in his stomach) and a sense of the darkness retreating back as ice shards shattered around them.

The pressure dragging at Feynriel loosened ever-so-briefly, but Bull was ready. His muscles tensed and he pulled Krem’s soulmate free, wrapping an arm around his waist and yanking him back five full stumbling steps. Streams of darkness drifted from his pale skin, his hair, his robes, but they dissipated into nothing as Bull pulled him protectively away from its source; those oil-slick eyes blinked blue again, and Feynriel began to cough up clouds of mist that drifted around his face like the first breath of winter’s night.

“Fuck,” Bull said eloquently, bundling Feynriel up in his arms and carrying him away. He rubbed a big, soothing hand against his back even as he cast a worried glance toward Taran—but the boss was already breaking free of the darkness’ feeble grasp, helping Alistair up the rocky incline toward safety. Hawke watched the shadows as they passed, one hand lifted with another spell shivering in wait; it died on his fingertips as they were all, finally, free.

Feynriel pressed his face against Bull’s shoulder and shuddered, whole body wracked with terrible, aching coughs. Bull just bundled him up tighter, holding him cradled in his arms as he glowered around at this whole crazy, upside-down place: the Fade. Shit.

Taran touched his shoulder. “Is he all right?” he asked, quiet.

“Getting there,” Bull said, even though…was that true? Were any of them all right? “Don’t know what that shit was, but we’ll be giving it a wide berth from now on.”

“I’m not sure that’s an option,” Hawke said. At everyone’s sharp look, he pointed back down the path…then toward the right, where a second pool of shadow was slowly forming—bubbling up from the ground like the first warning of a spindly-legged demon, only somehow a hundred times worse. “It seems pretty intent on getting to us.”

Alistair still had his sword drawn, blade pointed down but ready. His freckles stood out in sharp relief against too-pale skin as he looked around, taking in the dark clouds pressing in closer and closer (and were those…faces…up there?) and the shadows writhing in eldritch horror and the whole fucking place practically straining toward them. “Oh, good,” he said, voice too light. “That’s…just great. Just very very great, right, okay.”

“We should get moving,” Taran said, edging away nervously.

“Sounds good, boss,” Bull said. “But where?”

Where, indeed? There weren’t any landmarks in this crazy place, other than the black blur on the horizon that seemed to move with his eye, forever in his periphery. And all around—all around—
there was demon-sign popping up like crazy. Like the fuckers really had had been called to them; like they were ringing a bloody dinner bell, saying, _come and get it boys! Fresh mages on the menu!_

He could hear the strain in every sharp pull of Feynriel’s breath, and Hawke was—

_Hawke—_

Huh. Actually, Hawke looked pretty okay, now that Bull was really focusing on him. Pale and freaked like the rest of them as they edged into a wary circle, but not struggling the way Feynriel the somniari so obviously _was._

Hawke seemed to feel his eye on him, because he looked over, brows raised—then, in that creepy way mages sometimes had, pieced together the thoughts tumbling wildly around Bull’s skull. “It’s not so bad for me,” he said, voice quiet. “I don’t have the same raw connection to the Fade that Feynriel does. Besides,” Hawke added, “I’m bonded. That gives me protection from demons. Even here, Fenris is with me: like a shield.”

Well.

Shit.

Probably should have smushed Krem and Feynriel’s faces together while he had the chance.

“So how do we _shield_ him?” Bull demanded, sounding angry—mostly out of frustrated impotence. Because yeah, sure, he could yank Feynriel out of trouble, and he could hold him close like he was trying to nurse the kid at his teat, but at some point, something in this whole crazy place was going to get the best of Bull, and that thought— That _fucking thought_ made him boil from the inside out.

Because he’d promised. He’d promised himself and he’d promised Krem (though maybe not in so many words) and he’d promised the whole sodding universe that he wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of Krem and Feynriel’s storybook ending, and _how could he keep Feynriel safe_ if—

If…

“Bull,” Feynriel said, quiet, hoarse. Bull looked down at him, taking in the pinched and drawn features, the darkness trying to swallow up those eyes. _Not all spirits can be seen_, Bull thought nonsensically…but shit, was it nonsense, or was Feynriel even now fighting against a plethora of demons _none_ of them could see? Somniari. An unprotected dreamer, trapped in the waking Fade. A light beaming into the darkness, drawing moths to the flame. There was fucked up shit and then there _was that_, and Bull could feel the weight of impotence settling around his shoulder as Feynriel visibly _trembled_, each breath leaving his mouth in a frozen-cold puff of mist.

In the periphery, the hungry darkness swept closer. The very sky seemed to press down, as if drawn to the unshielded dreamer. And what good was two strong arms and a nimble brain if he couldn’t even use them to protect his best friend’s soulmate?

“I’m so sorry, kid,” Bull said—not giving up, not giving in, but knowing all the same that if someone got them out of this mess, it sure wasn’t going to be him. “Promise I’m gonna do my best.”

“Bull,” Feynriel said again, reaching up. There were shadows coiling around his fingertips; his tracery of veins had gone dark. Next to him, Alistair cried out and Hawke sent a spell sailing toward some unseen threat, but Bull’s focus was pulled completely; he was lost in Feynriel’s eyes. He was…he was tipping forward into them, this place shredding him raw, his heart beating triple-time. Numb lips formed words he couldn’t remember even as he said them, as Krem’s soulmate—his best
chance at that storybook ending Bull so desperately wanted him to find—seemed to sink into darkness, lost within the circle of his own arms. Lost within a final whisper:

“Bull…it’s okay.”

And—

And no the fuck it wasn’t.

“Oh no you don’t,” Bull said, something white-hot flaring inside him. He tightened his hold, one hand lifting to grab at floating tendrils of black-and-gold hair—keeping Feynriel anchored as whatever spirit had claimed his shell tried to dissipate him within Bull’s own arms. His other hand cupped the line of Feynriel’s jaw oh-so gently, thumb brushing his cheek as if he could caress away the shadows gathering there like spiderwebs, everything inside him tumbling forward in his determination to save Feynriel no matter the cost.

Krem was waiting for them back home, and Bull wasn’t going to let him be waiting in vain. He wasn’t, he just, he, fuck, he was going to protect him no matter the cost and—

He sucked in a breath just as Feynriel let out his own, and in what felt like an age (but what could only have been an instant) three world-shaking things happened:

One: The demons that had been clawing their way inside of Feynriel’s skull dissipated, drawing away in a plume of smoke.

Two: Bull felt his head turn inside out, his heart upside down, his body lost in a sea of sudden light.

And, Three: Against all the odds, against every bit of logic, against the seeming rules of the universe itself, the exact moment Bull realized he’d give literally anything to protect Krem’s soulmate from the hungry mouths of the demons clawing through the Fade toward them, Feynriel stopped being Krem’s soulmate…

…and somehow became Bull’s instead.


Chapter End Notes

Obviously this isn’t the end of Krem/Feynriel. They are the romantic-pairing endgame. But I’ve always been interested in non-traditional soulmate bonds, and with Hawke/Fenris and Alistair/Solona providing traditional soul-bonds, I thought it was time to see other paths.

Also, a shielded dreamer is a lot more useful an ally when you find yourself lost in the Fade...
Interlude: Dorian

Chapter by Khirsah

Chapter Notes

I had the next full chapter nearly finished, but I felt like we were missing a glimpse of what was happening in the real world. So enjoy this short, angsty interlude while the full chapter chills with patreon!

Trigger Warning for references to suicidal thoughts.

This will all be over soon.

Lies. Lies, all of it. Because that one terrible moment of loss—Taran tipping back into freefall, eyes gone panicked-wide and Dorian too bloody far away to do anything but bear witness—would play behind his eyelids until the moment he died.

Longer. Venhedis, it would haunt him in the bloody void itself.

Dorian stood on the top of a mountain of rubble, staring down at the broken bridge. Its edges were jagged as teeth, the darkness beyond a sickening green-black, and…

And Taran was gone. Gone.

He didn’t even have to be bonded to feel his loss.

Barely standing by his side, one arm looped around his shoulders, Fenris made a sound that was more pained-animal than man. He was quaking—trembling—shaking so badly that it finally managed to tear Dorian’s shocked-still gaze away from the end of that empty bridge, if only for a moment. He saw himself reflected back in every line of anguish, every twist of despair, and wasn’t it funny? An hour ago, two, he would have said he and Fenris were as incompatible as oil and water; as different as night and day.

Well, look at them now.

“Lean on me,” Dorian said. Those wild green eyes were dilated hugely, the stricken, shattered grief almost too much to stand. Dorian had seen mages lose their unum vinctum before, but this was nothing like the polite porcelain mask worn over those broken bonds. This—this was violence personified. This was heart-breaking.

It gave him something to focus on, at least. A purpose. Step one: Keep Fenris together. Step two: Make it to the edge of that bridge. Step three: …

He hadn’t made up his mind what was supposed to come then. He just knew he needed to share space with Taran one last time, as if his ghost were still trapped teetering at the edge of the abyss, forever in freefall.

Dorian swallowed and tightened his grip around Fenris’s middle, beginning to pick his way down. Fenris was worse than useless, his shattered legs dragging against stone, his whole body locked in
violent shudders. He’d crumble to the uneven rubble if Dorian didn’t have a grip on him, and Dorian made it his sole driving focus to ease the other man down to safety one staggered step at a time.

Battle was still raging in small pockets here or there, high above on the unbroken parapets, but it all seemed so distant now. Almost academic. They were fighting to save a world that had been doomed, because Taran wasn’t in it. (The Herald, Dorian reminded himself. The Inquisitor with his rift-closing hand.) But no, no, that didn’t feel right. Fuck the rifts and fuck Corypheus and fuck it all to the void: Taran was gone; not some bloody savior of Thedas, but a nineteen-year-old Marcher who had barely been allowed to live. He was gone, he was gone, and Dorian was here, and he was gone, and—

Fenris staggered and sank to the ground, nearly dragging Dorian with him. They’d just reached the bottom of the broken tower—the far reaches of the bridge that stretched out into nothing—and all the color had seeped from his face. His head was down, silver hair falling across his cheeks, eyes squeezed shut. One fist opened and closed silently against stone, as if Fenris were trying to hold on to something intent on slipping like sand through his fingers. His mouth was open on soft, nearly silent cries: an endless keen of loss.

Dorian looked between him and the end of the bridge, feeling like he ought to stay, but…

But he had to see. He had to look down (down down down that endless fall) and see for himself if there were bodies haloed with blood at the bottom. If there was anything left this time, or if—

Swallowing convulsively, Dorian paused long enough to slide Fenris’s huge sword from its sheath. He tossed it aside as far as he could manage—though Maker knew if Fenris really did want to give in to the first pall of grief, the lack of his sword wouldn’t do much to stop him—and made his way alone down the rubble-strewn path to the very end.

That’s the way it loomed in his mind: THE END, like the last page of some terribly overblown tragedy. Our hero lost in the final battle, and how will his loved ones ever recover?

We don’t, Dorian thought, ignoring the groaning warnings of loose stone as he made his way to the jagged teeth of that bridge and looked down into the darkness. There’s no coming back.

He braced himself, teetering on the edge, a stray breeze catching the ends of his robes and snapping them around his legs. It’d be so easy to lose his footing and go tumbling off into nothing, but he braced himself as best he could (physically, mentally) and stared down the void, searching for some sign of his lost almost-lover far on the rocks below.

He saw…

He saw darkness. A subtle green haze, like living mist. And beyond that, nothing. Nothing. There was nothing where Taran had fallen; no sign of his passing, no answered questions, no sense of an end. Just darkness all around him: buffeting his robes and tugging at his center of balance and whispering on the wind. A freefall of his own, if he thought about it—and fasta vass, but that shouldn’t have been the gallows humor that had him choking back a cry.

Dorian jerked his hand to cover his mouth, staring down below and seeing nothing but a film of hot tears. His legs felt weak beneath him, and perhaps Fenris had it right all along: there really was no more point in putting one foot in front of the other, was there? Not when the world had suddenly grown so terribly hollow.

Not when…
When…

Oh, Maker. Taran.

This will all be over soon, Cole had said, looking up at him with pinched worry in his eyes. He had never been so very wrong. This wouldn’t be over. This wouldn’t pass. This wouldn’t all magically turn out to be fine in the end.

Hawke was gone. Alistair was gone. Feynriel was gone. Bull was gone. Taran was gone. And unless the Maker had some new miracle prepared, this feeling of empty, shattering loss would be there…would be with Dorian, with Fenris, with all of them—with the whole bloody world…for a very, very long time.
Feynriel was pretty sure this was what going mad felt like.

He sat huddled up under a rocky overhang, gangly arms wrapped around his legs, chin propped on his knees. His robes were sodden—heavy—bloody uncomfortable—and his hair was falling around his face in a yellow rat’s nest. Strands kept tickling his cheek or chin, making him jump at their spiderweb softness.

Because, oh yeah, it turned out the living Fade was crawling with actual spiders. Huge, honking ones that people like Bull saw as some weird qunari word instead.

And speaking of Bull…

He stood several yards away, arms crossed over his big chest, back to Feynriel. He was either watching Taran, Alistair, and Aidan talk to the totally-not-actually-Justinia or patiently guarding against Feynriel’s impending mental breakdown. Either way, he looked hulking against the sickly green sky, like some kind of giant horned mabari.

Or a really intimidating druffalo.

Somehow, despite all the terrible things that had happened today, that thought almost made him smile.

Bull’s shoulders twitched. “I can feel you thinking over there,” he said, voice a low grumble. It was one of the few things he’d actually said to Feynriel since…well, since. Since saving him, since bonding, since both of those two things tied messily up together. “It’s this weird as shit little glow in the back of my skull. Like I’m carrying around my own bit of sunlight back there. Swear I’m going to hear birds chirping any second now.”

He gestured without looking, fingers flicking toward the back of his head as if to illustrate just how maddening he found it.

“Yeah, well,” Feynriel said, “you’re like a bloody rain cloud in the back of mine.” Which wasn’t exactly true. Yes, he could feel Bull—sense him—hovering at the back of his thoughts, but there was nothing dour or dark about it. It felt more like the tang of ozone before a storm, but also the comfort of rain against a roof. Both exciting and soothing all at once, underscored by a tangled knot of emotions Feynriel was doing his level best not to acknowledge.

There was fear. And worry. And relief. And confusion. And a sour disappointment mingled with a fierce drive to protect at all costs. It was overwhelming. (Though perhaps, Feynriel had to admit to himself, not as overwhelming as it had been without Bull’s bond there to shield him. Then he’d been exposed to the Fade—a beacon shining out for every demon to take its swipe. He’d nearly been dragged under, subsumed; he would have been lost by now if not for…this.)

He pressed his cheek against his knees and closed his eyes, fighting to hold back the remembered terror. It had been so familiar; he’d instantly been cast back years, to when he was first lost in the Fade in the wake of nightmares he couldn’t hope to control. Aidan had saved him then, and Bull had saved him now. When, Feynriel wondered bitterly, would it be his turn to do the saving? Or would that time never come? Would he always be doomed to trip along behind greatness, never quite able to do more than reflect it back like an unhappy mirror? The apostate, unable to save himself from
demons. The scholar, unable to see his way through to this latest end of the world. The dreamer, utterly useless in the Fade until someone else came to shield him from harm. Maybe Krem was lucky he wouldn’t be saddled with such a weak little sadsack like Feynriel.

Maker. Krem.

There was no soft creak of leather or displacement of air as warning—just a rumble like distant thunder in the back of his skull seconds before a shockingly gentle touch brushed back a loose strand of hair, tucking it behind his ear. Feynriel opened his eyes, embarrassed to realize he was crying. When had that happened?

Bull’s eye dropped to the silent tears tracking down his cheek; his expression was impossible to read, but that endless roil of emotions weren’t. Bull felt…guilty. Deep, deep inside, like a wounded animal worrying a thorn in its paw. And thoroughly ill-equipped to handle this weird new turn his life had taken. And, yes, even now, he felt protective. Like he wanted to rip apart whatever was making Feynriel hurt…even if he was pretty damn sure he was the one who’d done the hurting.

Feynriel let out a low, shuddery breath. He couldn’t let that last bit stand; Bull had it all wrong. “This isn’t your fault,” Feynriel said, slowly straightening up. He uncoiled, muscles still aching from nearly being dragged down into…whatever that inky darkness had been. There were ghostly claw marks against his skin and his thoughts would be shredded with the memory for a long time, but none of that could be laid at Bull’s feet. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Gotta say, it doesn’t feel like that,” Bull admitted. He glanced once over his shoulder back toward the rest of their group, then sighed and settled onto the stone next to Feynriel. Shoulder-to-shoulder, though not quite touching, both of them facing out as the spirit wearing Justinia’s face spoke her strange warnings. “None of this would’ve happened if I’d gotten you all out of there before the bridge bucked out beneath us.”

Feynriel snorted, rubbing at his wet cheeks with the back of his hand. “Yeah, because you could foresee a dragon.”

Bull shot him a glance. “Archdemon. Least, that’s what the Warden’s been calling it.”

“Same difference. Besides, Warden Alistair also talks about cheese spreads like they’re one turn away from an orgy,” Feynriel pointed out. “I’m not sure I’m willing to accept him as the authority. But fine,” he added, huddling back into a comfortable ball again, arms around his drawn-up legs, “dragon or archdemon. Either way, there’s no reason you’d have seen that coming.”

“See, kid, I was going to argue back,” Bull said, half-turning toward him, “but you’ve gone and said the magic word.”

“What?” Feynriel said; he could feel himself beginning to flush as he looked over. “Dragon?”

Bull smiled—perhaps the first smile since everything had gone to the void to begin with. It was slow and wide and a little dirty. “Well, that too,” he said with a teasingly throaty chuckle. “But nah, I was more left wondering—what kind of experience you got with orgies? It tripped off your tongue so easy,” he added, letting his elbow nudge Feynriel playfully. “That’s gotta mean something.”

Normalcy. That’s what Bull was going for, Feynriel knew. But also... also, he was trying to guide the conversation away from his own guilt, embarrassed by how deep it ran and by how good it felt to know Feynriel didn’t blame him for ruining any potential future with Krem after all.

Bull wanted that reassurance desperately, but he wasn’t going to let himself have it. Not that Feynriel
had any bloody idea why—the qunari’s complicated tangle of emotions darted here and there like fireflies. It could be dizzying trying to keep up. Every time he thought he had a bead on it, things changed.

*Storm clouds were right,* Feynriel thought, grimly paying attention now. No more delicately trying to avoid the buzzing in the back of his head; it’s not like ignoring Bull had worked so far, anyway. And anyway, this was their future, right? They were bonded now, for better or for worse. Pulled together by the power of the waking Fade in a bonding Feynriel didn’t have a chance of understanding until later, when he’d had time to sort it all through.

(assuming they survived long enough for him to sort anything through.)

“I lived in Tevinter for years,” Feynriel said, settling on the easiest path forward. “Deep in the heart of the magisterium. It’s all blood and sex and backstabbing there. I mean, you’ve met Dorian.”

Dorian may not have been the pure product of his world that his father or mentors wanted him to be, but my he wore the trappings well.

“Sure,” Bull said, watching him with open intrigue. “But that pretty picture I don’t have a problem seeing. You? Strapping yourself in to one-armed silks and buckles? Twirling your mustache and showing your delicate ankles?”

Feynriel laughed—as he was pretty sure he was meant to—reaching up to push back the messy tangle of his hair. “I’m pretty sure you’ve got to expose more than ankle if you want to be taken seriously by any good orgy,” he said.

Bull’s eyebrows danced. “All depends on the ankle,” he teased. “Wanna show me yours so I can judge for myself?”

Andraste’s knickers, but Feynriel’s cheeks felt hot. He’d never been very good at this sort of banter, and he should’ve known better than to try to cross swords with the master. “Anyway,” he said, waving one hand as if to dissipate smoke—or the errant image of buckles and straps and the many mysterious things they might be used for. Other than Krem, his interest in and knowledge of such things had always been minimal at best. “I was trying to say you shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Funny,” Bull mused. “All I heard was cheese and orgies.”

“Who’s having orgies?” another voice—the Inquisitor, because of course he’d overhear—asked, coming to rejoin them. Feynriel had been so thoroughly distracted by his absolutely infuriating new bondmate that he hadn’t even heard them approach.

Judging by the gleam in his eye, said infuriating bondmate had. The asshole.

“And cheese,” Alistair added, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword, gaze darting nervously as if he expected a new wave of spider-whatver-demons to come pouring out of the darkness any moment. “I distinctly heard someone mentioning cheese.”

“It’s been how many years and you’re still fixated?” Aidan teased. There was a tightness around his eyes—a tension hovering around all of them—but Feynriel supposed they had all been through too much to let it overtake them now. *Three legendary heroes of Thedas, quipping their way into the void.*

As if to prove his point, Alistair laughed. *Laughed.* Trapped in the physical Fade, and they were joking around like their whole world wasn’t crumbling. “Well, I do like to be consistent.”

“We are running out of time, Inquisitor,” a low, Orelsian voice added. Feynriel scrambled to his feet,
hairs along his arms standing up. Bull heaved himself up by his side, eyeing the Divine Justinia…or whatever she really was…suspiciously. “We must finish collecting your memories so that you may leave this place.”

Taran glanced her way. “We will,” he promised, “once I’m sure everyone is ready to go on.”

“Then I will prepare the way for you,” Justinia said formally, inclining her head before drifting away—a beacon of light swallowed up by the oppressive darkness of the Fade. They all watched her go, silent and severe; the jocular atmosphere had once again shifted with her departure, as if the spirit’s absence had sucked the light from them as well.

Then Taran sighed and rolled his shoulders back once, as if forcing himself to focus. He looked at Feynriel. “Feynriel?” he asked, quiet. “Do you feel ready to press on?” Because of course Feynriel was the one holding everyone up.

He fought not to flush, arms wrapping tight around his middle. “I’m fine,” he said. “Don’t worry about me; I can keep up.”

“You were hurt,” Taran pointed out. “There’s no shame in needing to take a little more time to recover.”

Feynriel’s nails dug into his skin, blessedly hidden by the voluminous folds of his robe. “I’m fine,” he repeated. “It doesn’t really even hurt anymore.”

*Lie.* He felt scraped raw and ragged—just standing here was enough to have a prickle of sweat beading along his hairline. And yet, they didn’t exactly have a choice, did they? If they wanted to protect the people, the world, they loved from the Nightmare, their sole hope was to make it to the Warden-ritual-created breach where it was even now fighting to squeeze its way through, strike it down where it stood and claw their way back out over its twisted, blackened remains.

Simple. Right?

The Inquisitor studied him for a moment, then gave a tight nod. “All right,” he said, beginning to turn.

*Now or never.* Feynriel shot a quick glance around them, daring to lean gently with his mind against the gathered shadows. Justinia was far away and there were no dark whispers lingering in the gathering night. This was as safe as they would ever be. “Wait,” he said, very quiet, reaching out to catch Taran’s elbow. “I have to tell you something. All of you.”

They turned back to him, visibly surprised—all except Bull. *He* simply nodded to himself, as if confirming something he already knew.

Well. No point trying to hide it anymore, then. “You know I’m a somniari,” Feynriel said, quiet and quick. He didn’t want to risk being overheard—didn’t want to risk what he could only hope was still a secret weapon. “In the regular Fade, I can…change things. Interact with others’ dreams. That sort of thing.”

Bull shifted uncomfortably at the reminder, but Feynriel barreled on. “I’ve been training how to control the Fade for a long time now. I helped recover Aidan’s mind when his bond to Fenris snapped. I helped Dorian find you, Inquisitor, when we thought you were lost to the Fade.”

“It’s true,” Aidan said solemnly. “I’m still not sure the mechanics of *how*, but Feynriel helped heal me after… Well, after.”
“What are you saying,” Taran asked, expression serious.

Feynriel flickered his gaze toward Bull. “I’m saying that I had certain…abilities…in the Fade, even before I came to the living Fade. And now that I’m shielded against demon intervention…” He let the words trail off.

Aidan—the only other mage out of all of them—caught on quickly. “And now that your powers have quickened,” he said. “A bonded mage is more powerful than before. It’s part of why the Chantry is so determined to keep mages away from their Voices: they fear what fully awakened magic can do. And now you have access to your full strength.”

Alistair whistled, low. “I’m glad I thought to drag a Dreamer along with me when I decided to get booted arse-over-teakettle into the living Fade,” he said. “So, what now? Why the secrecy?”

“Because we’re about to face the Nightmare that’s been feeding off our world for centuries,” Taran said, eyes fixed on Feynriel. “And now we have the element of surprise.”

Feynriel gave a small, hesitant nod. “I’ve been trying to subtly push against reality here, testing to see what I can change without drawing any attention,” he said. “I’m pretty sure if I do anything big, the Nightmare will notice, but little things… It’s different than the usual Fade, but I think I can still do it. I know,” he added, sensing the brewing storm in the back of his thoughts, “I know I can do it. I just need to get close enough.”

“So that sounds like the beginning of a plan,” Bull said, crossing his arms behind Feynriel. “We converge on where the fucker is trying to chip its way through the half-open rift the Wardens left behind in Adamant courtyard. Me, Hawke, and Alistair will keep its attention. Boss, you and Feynriel circle ‘round the back to the rift. You go through to keep the rift stable, Feynriel fucks with its head, the rest of us do it in and all come pouring out. Heroes one and all.”

Taran was frowning. “I’m not sure I like the part where I rush through and leave the rest of you behind to fight,” he said. Overhead, the sky subtly began to darken; greenish lightning forked, and Feynriel swore he heard the soft skitter of feet against stone. They were running out of time.

“How ‘bout this, then?” Bull countered. “I toss you through if you try to get too noble? Rifts won’t close themselves,” he pointed out when Taran opened his mouth to argue. “Hawke, Alistair, me: we’re expendable.”

“I beg your pardon,” Alistair protested. Then paused. “I mean, of course, he’s right. But still: I beg your pardon.”

Bull simply waved that away. “You, boss? You’ve seen what happens to the world when you die. Right? It ends in a sea of pain and red lyrium. Do you really want to take the risk of that happening?”

Feynriel lightly touched Bull’s side, palm hesitantly flattening against an expanse of warm, grey skin. “Bull,” he said quietly, meaning: we need to hurry.

Bull reached down without looking, his own big hand settling over Feynriel’s. He could feel the callouses against his skin—the gentle pressure of his touch. Understood, he seemed to be saying without a word or glance.

Meanwhile, Taran sighed and shook his head. “I don’t like it,” he said, “but for now…all right.”

“Good to hear, boss! Now, let’s get our asses in gear; I think Feynriel’s sensing trouble coming ‘round the bend.”
“Something like that,” Feynriel agreed wanly. He subtly deepened the shadows around them, cloaking them as much as he dared. Rock softly groaned against rock as he shifted the earth, creating paths where there were none…raising walls of stone against chittering, searching fearlings.

Aidan dropped his hand to Feynriel’s shoulder and squeezed. “Always looking out for us,” he said with a warm, crooked smile—and Maker, but that little bit of praise crashed through him like a golden wave. Feynriel bit back his own beaming smile, feeling, just… Incredible. Useful. For once pulling his own weight and others, even just a little.

He knew he’d probably never be anywhere near as brave or good as these heroes of Thedas, but as he watched them shoulder their weapons and begin to move toward the faint slash of light in the far distance where the Nightmare held sway, he felt like maybe he might almost belong. If not in their same league, then at least… At least something.

Heart full, shoulders back, Feynriel took a step…and winced. Shoot, ow. He’d almost forgotten just how much he bloody hurt. It was a shame he couldn’t dream away his own pain; the best he could do was keep the path beneath his feet clear and fight to keep each wince off his face.

Typical, Feynriel thought, limping after his heroes. Absolutely bloody typical.

He took one agonizing step. Then another. Then another. One foot in front of the other, he reminded himself, thinking back to those hungry, hollow days when he was a kid. His mom fought so hard to put food on the table, but there were sometimes whole strings of days when there was no work and no relief from the that tight fist of pain deep in his gut. He’d learned how to swallow back any sign of suffering like all the others in the alienage; practically a bloody rite of passage, and—

He barely swallowed back a yelp when strong arms hoisted him up between one step and the next. The whole crazy upside-down world of this living Fade swung around him, dizzying, and Bull hardened his jaw as he settled Feynriel more comfortably against his chest. Feynriel’s legs were flung over one of Bull’s arms, his back cradled against the other; blond hair trailed behind them like a ragged banner.

“What are you doing?” he demanded in a low hiss. He tried to wriggle free, but Bull had a solid grip on him.

Irritation and worry flared from that dark stormcloud in the back of his thoughts. “No point in you suffering in silence until there’s no other choice,” Bull pointed out. “I’ve got two good arms and you weigh about as much as a newborn nug. Carrying you’s not going to be a problem.”

“Until we’re swarmed with demons and you have to use those arms for smashing in skulls,” Feynriel pointed out. “I can handle a little…discomfort. It’ll be safer for everyone if you’re on alert.”

Bull flickered a glance his way but kept stubbornly onward, carrying Feynriel like some bizarre prize. “Trouble comes, I’ll dump you on your pretty ass,” he promised, “don’t you worry. Good thing about a greataxe is it doesn’t take as many fancy buckles to hold it in place.”

Above, the sky rumbled, sickly green clouds roiling. Below, even the ground seemed to tremble, brackish water breaking around calves as they moved through the dim, covering what felt like miles with every step thanks to Feynriel’s subtle control over the Fade speeding them along. Feynriel opened his mouth to argue, but before the words could come, the Inquisitor was cresting the top of a crumbling set of stairs. He caught Feynriel’s eye—the flash of green on bronze-colored armor—and something about that…about the shadows around him…about the air itself…had Feynriel sucking in an unsteady breath.
He could feel it in the air, heavy against his skin. Something terrible was watching them. Had he pushed too hard? Had he sent them too fast, pulling the threads of the Fade around them until the tug of weft and wane trembled up to alert the great spider?

“Feynriel?” Bull asked, holding him tighter.

Feynriel instinctively curled against Bull’s chest, one arm around his big shoulders, the other half-lifting as if to cast a spell…and hesitating there.

_I should wait. See whether I’ve already given myself away. I’ll only be able to fool the Nightmare once,_ he thought before a deep, rumbling, powerful voice shook the very air around them.

“Ah,” it said, words dripping with self-confident amusement, “we have a visitor. Some foolish little boy comes to steal the fear I kindly lifted from his shoulders.”

Taran froze in place, wary eyes lifting to the darkening clouds above their heads.

“The Nightmare,” Aidan murmured, stave already drawn, the blue stone at its tip dully glowing.

The voice continued. _“You should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay, forgotten. You think that pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your mind with such drivel? The only one who grows stronger from your fears is me.”_

Alistair cleared his throat. “That… isn’t at all alarming,” he said.

Taran said nothing, head tilted. Waiting.

_“But you are a guest here in my home, so by all means, let me return what you have forgotten. All of you.”_

“Fucking…demons…” Bull muttered, grip against Feynriel tightening reflexively. But this time it wasn’t some protective spirit driving him—it was fear. Feynriel could feel it flaring bright and hot in the back of his skull, making his own heart race in response.

Not letting himself think about it, Feynriel brushed his fingertips soothingly along the rock-tight muscles at the back of Bull’s neck. _It’s all right,_ he tried to project, deliberately pushing a center of calm toward Bull as Taran gestured for them to move carefully forward. He tried to think about all the good things that had ever come in his life. His mother tipping her face up toward the vhenadahl. Sunrise across the rooftops and down to the Waking Sea. Aidan and his friends coming for him in the Fade, ending his own twisted nightmare. The first time he stepped into dreams and found a power he’d never had in any other aspect of his life. Seeing Krem for the first time. Looking up from the hungry darkness to see Bull’s fierce face peering down as the bond neither of them wanted burst into rose-colored light.

Bull shivered, muscles subtly relaxing. His grip on Feynriel gentled. “…neat trick,” he said after a few moments of silence, staring fixedly ahead. They’d crested the tall steps now and were able to see far down into a rocky crevasse below, a winding path leading along a sheer drop.

_“It seemed,” Feynriel began, only to be interrupted by a rumble of distant thunder and a low, mocking laugh._

_“Did the king’s bastard think he could prove himself? It’s far too late for that.”_

Up ahead, Alistair tripped over a stone, searching stare sweeping the sky. “Is he… Is he talking to
“Unless Father had a few more bloody secrets up his sleeve,” Aidan said grimly, “I’m afraid he probably is.”

“Your whole life you’ve left everything to more capable hands. The archdemon, the throne of Ferelden… Who will you hide behind now?”

“Ignore it,” Taran called back, continuing on doggedly. “He wants us to be weak. Afraid.”

Alistair gave a huff of breath, chin coming up. “Afraid?” he said—taunted—glare leveled toward the deepening horizon. “Really? Is that all he’s got? I’ve heard worse than that from Morrigan.”

Taran moved quicker. “Come on,” he said, skirting a right toward a half-hidden path. It wound its way down down down to a distant field where shadows moved in eerie ebbs and sways. Danger, Feynriel knew…but Maker, in this place, was there anywhere that wasn’t dangerous?

Nightmare spoke again, taunting. “Did you think you mattered, Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered?”

“Well this is going to grow tiresome quickly,” Alistair said to his friend, blond head tipped toward dark.

“You couldn’t even save your city. How could you expect to strike down a god? Fenris is going to die, just like your family, and everyone you ever cared about.”

Aidan cast a quick, murderous look toward the distant rift. Or was it so very distant after all? It felt as if they had been walking for only a few minutes, and yet it loomed so much closer than it had before.

A few more twists of the path and I’ll have us there in no time, Feynriel thought with grim certainty. “Get ready,” he warned aloud. Just ahead, Taran was stepping out into the open field of shadow.

And Aidan was muttering quietly to himself. “Of course a fear demon would know where to hurt us most,” he said, fingers curling tighter and tighter around his staff, until his knuckles bled ghostly white. “Even so…I’m going to enjoy killing this thing.”

“That’s the spirit!” Alistair said, then tilted his head. “You know, literally.”

Aidan shot him a glance. “You know, you’ve never been as funny as you thought you were,” he began, only to be cut off by Taran’s sharp:

“We’ve got company!”

Feynriel—tensed and waiting for this moment—quickly wriggled free of Bull’s grip. He dropped lightly to his feet, the impact barely enough to set his bones to aching, thank the Maker. Alistair and Aidan were already throwing themselves head-first down the path to join Taran in battle against skittering little fearlings, and Bull—

Bull hesitated. Just a breath, gaze cutting to Feynriel, but it was enough.

“Go,” Feynriel said. “Remember what you said? If Taran dies here, the whole world dies with him.”

Bull reached back for his greataxe without any of the eagerness Feynriel might have expected. He shifted a step toward where Taran’s battlecry could be heard, but he still stayed facing Feynriel, focused in on him with an intensity that was beginning to become familiar despite the odds. It was
the way he’d looked at him before, when Feynriel had been teetering on the edge of being subsumed by the darkness; that iron will dragging him from the grasping claws of demons and claiming him, body and soul despite everything.

A shiver worked its way down Feynriel’s spine, his chest feeling far too tight.

“Yeah, well,” Bull said gruffly, shoulders hitching in response to the tempest of conflicting emotion swirling through Feynriel (to, perhaps, his own unsettled feelings). “Truthfully? I’m starting to wonder if losing you’d feel that way too.”

Then, before Feynriel could answer—before he could do more than gape—Bull turned and charged down the path with a ground-trembling bellow, throwing himself into battle as if he hadn’t just shaken Feynriel’s world to its core.
Interlude: Cassandra

Chapter by Khirsah

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It felt like everything was falling apart. And the worst of it was…she was almost certain she was to blame.

Cassandra stood at the base of a broken tower and watched with an alien feeling of helplessness as Inquisition troops swept through the place. They moved with a focused confidence she couldn’t even begin to project, animated in the wake of their recent victory. Excited. Happy.

*How long will that last,* Cassandra wondered dully, watching as if from miles away, *when they hear tale of all we have lost?*

She wanted to wrap her arms around her middle the way she would have as a child. Defensive posture, defensive heart, all of her ready to come shaking to pieces at the next breath of wind. And yet she couldn’t let on just how completely her world—Maker, *the world* in its entirety—was crumbling around her. They still didn’t know for sure that the Inquisitor had been lost.

Taran. They didn’t know for sure that *Taran* had been lost. They had been through this hollow of uncertainty before, after all: she couldn’t give herself over to pain until she was certain. And yet…

*My fault,* she thought, moving blindly away from the remains of that tower, needing to, to, to find somewhere open, somewhere she could breathe. *This is my fault.*

Because she had fought so hard against Taran and Dorian bonding, and for what? So both of them were weaker when the final battle came? There was no telling what kind of edge the bond could have given them, in the face of that dragon. There was no telling what kind of understanding a completed bond could have given them all now, in the face of so much uncertainty.

Taran had disappeared in mid-air, along with all the others: he had to be somewhere. Some…some point in time, maybe. Another spell, like Alexius had cast? Another potential future? Would he come spilling back any moment with new warnings and a tired smile?

She let out a shaky—shaken—breath and finally gave in to the impulse, sliding her arms around her middle. It felt like she was about to come flying apart at any moment, and she just— She needed something to hold onto. She needed a tether, to keep her from spinning out into the void. She needed —

*Hope,* Cassandra thought, pausing and looking out toward the edge of that terrible broken bridge. Fenris had been collected long ago, carried limp and insensate toward the Inquisition camp. They’d be keeping him under close watch until all this sorted out, one way or the other. And as for Dorian, well…

She studied him, sitting there on the edge where Taran and the others had been lost: feet dangling over into darkness, elbows on his knees, eyes locked down down down to the ground far below. Next to him sat Varric, one hand on Dorian’s shoulder, a world of pain and worry in his weather-beaten face.

Varric would keep an eye on Dorian, far better than Cassandra ever could. He’d certainly be better at
offering the empty little comforts.

She began to turn away, defeated, then paused mid-step. Glanced back. Studied the two sitting there, in a perfect picture of shared pain and loss.

They wouldn’t want her there. They wouldn’t want to see her, now, after what she’d done. But maybe the spark of anger she’d ignite would be exactly what Dorian needed. Maybe, she thought, already turning on her heel and marching down the broken path toward those broken men, this was exactly what the Maker would bid her to do.

_I’m sorry_, she heard on the solid, rhythmic crunch of her boots against stone. _I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry._

“Dorian,” Cassandra said, coming to a stop a few feet away. Her voice sounded cold even to her own ears, and she winced internally. That…wasn’t the note she’d intended to strike. “Varric.”

Dorian didn’t stir, though his shoulders did tense. Varric, however, glanced back at her with sad, tired eyes. “Now’s not a good time, Seeker,” he said, grip on Dorian’s shoulder subtly tightening.

Now’s the only time, she didn’t spit back. Instead, Cassandra squared herself off—feet shoulders-width apart, hands balled up at her sides, chin lifted. Classic dummy pose, ready for whatever swing came her way. No, better than ready: she wanted it. She needed it. “Dorian,” she said again, stressing his name. “I would talk to you.”

Dorian’s head jerked, shoulders visibly tensing. He didn’t turn her way. But Varric did. He swung up onto his feet, so close to the edge that she felt her own stomach lurch in response. Those warm eyes of his were cold slits, and she swore she saw his fingers twitch toward where Bianca usually sat strapped to his shoulders. “I said,” he repeated, low, “now’s not a good time.” He took a step forward, another, practically bristling with protective fury covering an endless well of loss. Over Taran?

No, she reminded herself, watching him advance on her. _Or not only him. Hawke was his friend. Perhaps his closest friend._

He was less than a foot away from her now, deliberately edging into her space: challenging her the way she wanted, _needed_, to be challenged. “Can’t you see he’s beside himself right now?” he all but spat at her, voice low. “He’s hurt, and he’s scared, and he doesn’t need you getting in his face.”

He doesn’t need you. She hasn’t chosen you. She’d heard that often enough throughout her life, and she’d never let it stop her once. “I am not getting in anyone’s face, Varric,” Cassandra said bullishly. “I simply wanted to talk to him. To see if there’s anything—”

“There isn’t _anything_,” Varric countered. “Maker’s nutsack, Seeker, do you really think we’d be sitting here swinging our legs if there _was_ anything that we knew? Anything that could be done? Anything at all? Do you think we would just, what,” he gestured, motions violent, choppy, thoroughly unlike him, “stand by and let them… Let them be…”

Cassandra watched as the wordsmith himself—the famous silver tongue of Kirkwall—fumbled and failed to find a way to end that thought. And maybe it _was_ that, or maybe it was the way his shoulders rounded forward, or maybe it was the small break in his voice—or maybe it was some magic combination of all of these things—but she could actually feel the small stress fractures inside herself breaking. She dropped down without really thinking it through and wrapped a rough arm around Varric. A soldier’s embrace; an acknowledgement of loss; a confession.
I know, she said without saying a word, eyes squeezing shut against the burn of frustratingly useless tears. I know, I understand, and I truly am sorry.

He resisted a moment—because of course he did; this was Varric, and they always would be oil and water when forced together—before letting out a long, ragged sigh and allowing himself to slump against her. She was holding him up now, or maybe he was holding up her, and together they somehow remained standing as they leaned into a one-armed embrace. Lost and raw and hurting and hopeful, still, despite it all.

There’s no body, Cassandra kept reminding herself, thinking back to the moment she swore she’d witnessed Taran die before, only to come back triumphant despite the odds. There’s no body, so we cannot know for sure.

That hope was almost worse than the despair. It stretched it out, made it ache more rather than less. Almost as much as the guilt, the blame, the weight of responsibility.

She looked up, over Varric’s head, just in time to see Dorian turn to watch them. He was half-crouched in place, teetering just at the edge of a fall, and everything inside Cassandra wanted to call out to him. To reach out and pull him back, as if…

But no. No, of course not. She was reading too much into this.

Cassandra slowly pulled away from Varric’s warmth as Dorian stood. He looked a good decade older than she knew him to be, shadows painted dark beneath his eyes, features gaunt. Could he have saved Taran, if the two of them had been allowed to bond? Was he thinking of that right now, as he met her eyes so very coldly?

I should say something, Cassandra thought, even though she’d never been more uncertain of what to say. I should tell him...something.

Dorian spoke before she could find a word. “No,” he said clearly—sharply—voice a fragile knife’s edge, “I cannot feel anything. Not even like it was b-before.” He stumbled over the word, and Cassandra did her best not to flinch. “If Feynriel were still here, maybe he could help... But then, he’s gone too, isn’t he?”

A laugh. A laugh. It hurt to hear, all broken glass and cutting edges.

“Dorian,” she tried.

“They’re all just gone. Poof, into thin air, as if the very void had swallowed them. This is, what, the fourth time Taran pulled this disappearing act? Perhaps he should teach the rest of us how he manages it—assuming he comes back this time, of course.”

“Dorian,” Cassandra said again, helpless and hating the unfamiliar feeling.

He just waved her off, already moving—pacing, there by the edge: an apt metaphor if there ever was one. For one insane moment, Cassandra actually wondered whether Varric was taking notes for his next serial. “First time in Haven, at the explosion,” Dorian said, words starting to come faster, like the first warning rumble of an avalanche picking up speed. “Only to walk right out of the Fade, the only survivor. Still doesn’t remember how that miracle happened, of course.”

Varric was by her side, watching Dorian with a tight, worried expression. Small rocks and bits of gravel fell with each step, skittering off the edge to fall down down down to the ground a league or more below. “Dorian,” he began, gentle.
Dorian waved the words off with a hard chop of his hand. His rings caught the light, bright against bloody knuckles. “Took me forever to even know he’d made it. I thought he’d died in the blast, so far away, you realize—I was with Feynriel at the time and we… Well.”

Turn. Pace. Fingers raked through hair.

“And then, miracle of miracles! He’s alive. Only for both of us to be tossed around in time by Alexius. Rotten luck, right? Being snuffed out of the world twice. But at least I was there. The third time, at Haven again, I wasn’t because the bloody sod is too noble and self-sacrificing by half.”

Turn. Pace. Pain in every line of his body.

“Dorian,” she tried, but her voice didn’t want to come out right; the word was too strangled, too choked back, and Maker, she really was a child again. She was a child, watching with helpless hurt as the world unraveled around her. Dorian’s bottled-up rage and pain were too big, too adult, for her to get her arms around. She didn’t know what to say.

Turn. “But then, I knew. I knew. I knew he was all right. I could feel it, almost as if…” Pace. “As if we had bonded. As if we’d been allowed to—” He choked on the word, sputtering out a harsh half-laugh. “Allowed. Like children. Like we’re back in Tevinter, and the rest of you are our disapproving parents. Oh no, Dorian, you can’t possibly sully the Herald of Andraste. Bah,” he spat, whirling again, movements frenetic. “As if I didn’t know he was too bloody good for me. As if it wasn’t obvious. As if— But if I had— If we’d— Maybe I’d know for sure whether—”

She couldn’t take it anymore. She was certain she’d come flying apart if she had to hear another word. “Dorian,” Cassandra tried again, stepping forward. Varric, ever-alert to the changing riptides of emotion, caught the back of her armor and yanked her to a stop before she could drift into Dorian’s orbit. For once, she didn’t fight him. Instead, she held up her hands in something like surrender, praying they both could hear the sincerity in her voice. “I should never have interfered,” she said, quiet but clear: honest. “I had no right, and I cannot tell you now just how…”

“Sorry?” Dorian said, voice a whiplash. He spun to face her, eyes blazing bright, expression a map of love and loss and rage and pain and yes, even hope, as if he couldn’t bring himself to give up. Three times lost—Cassandra understood the urge to believe the Maker and Taran had one more miracle waiting for them. “Is that what you came here to say? You’re sorry for playing with our lives as if you had the right?”

“Yes,” he said simply—because that was all she had. The truth. “That is what I came here to say.”

Dorian stared at her, dark eyes burning bright…and then slowly deflated in the face of her brutal honesty. He dropped his head into his hands, turning away and moving blindly to sit on the ledge again.

This time, when Cassandra moved to join him, Varric didn’t try to stop her. Instead, he moved to Dorian’s other side, swinging down next to his left even as Cassandra took the right. She was close enough that she could feel the heat cast from his skin—could sense the sharp jerks of his shoulders as he fought to swallow back silent tears—and her own eyes burned as she stared down toward the faint shimmering scar tissue that had swallowed Taran whole.

I’m sorry. Those words were so small, so insignificant in the face of so much loss. And yet, as the three of them sat there on what may as well have been the edge of the world—defeated yet waiting like the lost children they had become for the first glimmer of hope—they echoed back until it was all she could hear.
I’m sorry. Maker. I’m so very sorry.

Chapter End Notes

The final, extra-long chapter of the Fade adventure is already up on Patreon. We're almost done!
TARAN:

It was almost beautiful down here by the water.

Taran stood at the shoreline, watching distant waves rise and fall, rise and fall. He could feel it thrumming through his body, even at so great a distance. It was like a familiar heartbeat; Maker knew he had heard it often enough growing up, the Waking Sea a metronome to his young life.

He wondered if that’s why this sea was here now, in the living Fade. Were his thoughts unknowingly shaping this place, the way Feynriel’s could? Was there more of him here that he had not yet discovered? He wondered if he would see a cave on the distant shoreline if he turned his head just the right way, looked through the swirling greenish-dark mist at just the right moment.

Were his siblings there? Were they waiting for him?

Was… Was Josselyn waiting for him?

The memory of his sister—faded and worn with time—made him shiver, and Taran turned away from the endless sea without another glance. He hadn’t thought of Josselyn in…Maker, in a very long time. Too long a time, considering how strongly she’d shaped his young life. But now, in this moment, it was as if he’d summoned her. He could practically hear the soft tune she used to hum. He could sense her calming presence, feel her fingers in his hair as she diligently worked to smooth out childish knots.

He wondered what she’d be like, if she were still alive.

He wondered whether the demons who’d driven her over the edge were here now, watching him.

He wondered whether they’d finally give him the chance to shove his blade through their hearts.

*Focus,* Taran told himself, and strode back with renewed purpose toward his friends.

Bull looked up at the soft crunch of footfalls. He and Feynriel and Alistair were sitting in a small clump just outside the creepy little graveyard, their backs firmly to the rows of stone. Aidan, meanwhile, wandered amongst them, fingers trailing sadly across familiar names. *Varric* carved deep into cold granite, visible even from this distance. There were words scrolled beneath that, but Taran didn’t want to know what little lies the Fade saw fit to feed them. He kept his gaze averted, refusing to let the demons win.

“We about ready, boss?” Bull asked, beginning to push himself up as Taran came to a stop before them.

“We’re ready,” Taran said firmly. They’d taken this last chance to rest, as if collectively sensing the beginning of the end. The rift was close; even though he couldn’t see it anymore past mountains of glistening stone, he could feel it itching at the palm of his hand. One final push and they’d be there… and the Nightmare would be waiting for them.
Bull was helping Feynriel to his feet. Alistair obsessively checked and re-checked his blades. And Aidan…

Aidan crouched before one of the headstones, back to the rest of them, fingertips tracing the words. Carefully, delicately, a tell-tale tremble to his hand.

Fuck. “Give us a moment,” Taran murmured as he skirted past the rest of the group and reluctantly stepped into the graveyard for the first time. Gooseflesh broke over his skin the moment he passed that threshold, and he had to fight the urge to turn and flee. This place… The rhythmic pulse of the sea… The feeling of hungry eyes on him… Everything, *everything* seemed designed to make them falter.

*There’s no chance of beating this,* despair whispered in his ears, and he had to fight back against it with all his might as he crouched down beside Aidan Hawke, letting their shoulders lightly bump together. “Hey,” Taran said, low.

Aidan didn’t look at him. His eyes were fixed forward, on the name dug clumsily into granite as if by an inexpert hand. *Fenris.* Taran didn’t even have to look to know what that gravestone said. “It seems wrong to leave these here,” Aidan said, mostly to himself. His fingers sparked with flame briefly, as if he could burn away the taunting words. “He’d *hate* knowing this even existed.”

Taran dropped a hand to Aidan’s shoulder. “They aren’t real,” he promised. And then, because they were in the living Fade now and he had no way of truly *knowing* that: “Those words can’t hurt him from here.”

“But they can hurt me,” Aidan said. When his gaze flicked to Taran’s, those grey eyes were dark, haunted. Gone were the forceful quips and determined optimism. Gone was the endless hope. That bright light had been drained from Aidan step by step, battle by battle, and this, *this* was the final straw. This unhallowed ground that would fester within all of them for as long as they lived.

Because it didn’t matter, really, whether it was real or not. It didn’t matter if it was designed to make them hurt—make them stumble—make them question everything. What mattered was that even though Taran *refused* to look at the words scrawled in a looping taunt just to his right, he knew exactly what they said nevertheless: Dorian’s name etched so deeply he’d see it in his dreams for as long as he lived.

And beneath it, in neat script: *The Herald of Andraste.*

Out of all the terrors in the world, it seemed Dorian feared *him* the most…and Maker, it hurt, it *hurt,* and it made him so *angry* that the Fade had forced him to see this. He wanted to rip this whole place down with his bare hands, pure wrath bubbling up in his belly.

He forced himself to straighten. “They can hurt us,” Taran agreed, jaw set, “but we can hurt them more. Come on,” he added. “We’ve almost reached the end.”

Aidan glanced back toward Fenris’s grave one final time, shoulders sloping forward. Then he sighed and nodded, pushing himself up to his feet. He was pale in the queasy green light, shadows stronger than ever before. More dangerous. “All right,” he said, turning and following Taran back to the rest of the group. “Let’s go kill a demon.”

Bull’s eye was on them both as they rejoined the team, one hand hovering protectively (possessively?) at the small of Feynriel’s back, the other curled around the heft of his ax. He lifted a brow at whatever he saw on their faces. “We all good?” he asked.
Alistair snorted. “Unless good has some new definition I’ve never heard before,” he said, somewhere between joking and testy, “I highly doubt it.”

“We’re ready,” Taran answered, because that seemed the safest reply. In truth, he felt more than ready to end this, one way or another.

He strode forward, moving away from the endless sea (the cave where his sister died; where his childhood died) and the taunting gravestones with their cutting truth. The others fell in behind him, and together they fought their way through the last of the fearlings up the far slope away from the valley and to the wide mouth of a tunnel where the Divine was waiting for them.

She shone with pure light now, human guise cast aside, and as they joined her, she lifted a hand. Taran watched as the shimmering barrier blocking their way rippled and faded—and with it, the last chance to turn back. He could feel the fear creeping through that winding darkness. He could sense it scuttling in the shadows, could hear it breathing as it lay in wait. Water fell from gleaming stalactites to brackish pools below, and in each drip drip drip came the muted hush of a thousand waiting deaths.

You’ll fail him, Inquisitor. Why do you think he fears you so much? You will always, always fail him in the end.

The spirit of the Divine tipped her head toward him. “You must get through the rift, Inquisitor,” she said, gesturing into the darkness. Beyond the first twists and turns of the cave, he could feel the gathering energy—the rift, waiting for him on the other side. “Get through, and then slam it closed with all your strength. That will banish the army of demons…and exile this cursed creature to the farthest reaches of the Fade.”

Please, Maker, let it be so, Taran thought, but he only nodded and stepped forward, into the dark. Here, the cavern walls rose steady above him, jagged bits of stone fitted together in elaborate patterns. Each step across damp rock reminded him more and more of that cave; of that night, long ago, when his demon-mad sister dragged him to what was supposed to have been his death. He could see it in her eyes. He could feel it in the claw-like grip of her fingers.

Josselyn had meant to kill him that night. Instead, Cassius had drawn his blade across his twin sister’s throat and began the nightmare that would chase them both to the very ends of their worlds.

I’m sorry, Taran thought, leading the way through that faraway Ostwick cavern as if he’d somehow stumbled back in time. I’m so sorry I couldn’t save you.

And, because he was no longer that scared little boy no matter how hard the Fade tried to strip flesh from bone: But I swear I will save everyone else.

The darkness seemed to lighten at that thought, the final bend in the cavern revealing a faint greenish gleam—the exit. It had to be. Taran’s palm itched in response, and answering green power leaked between his fingers. Everyone tightened their grip on their weapons, sensing the end.

“The rift,” Aidan said—loud. Loud enough that his voice echoed off stone walls, seeming to come at them from all sides. Shadows skittered away in response. “We’re almost there.”

Alistair sucked in an unsteady breath. “Great, Hawke,” he tried to joke. “Why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?”

“I dare them,” Feynriel said, quietly—then pushed past his hulking bodyguard to stand next to Taran. Shoulder to shoulder. Strength to strength. He looked over, eyes scared and jaw set. In his gaze
burned the endless possibilities of the Fade itself, sparking and spiraling out like stars reflected on a mirror-still lake. Power arced through every line of his fragile-seeming body, tightly coiled until he was ready to unleash it all: their secret weapon. “Are you ready for this?” Feynriel asked.

Maker, what a question. “I have to be,” Taran said, and led his friends into the nightmare’s lair.

ALISTAIR:

The rift was just visible high on the next hill. But between it and them was a massive freaking spider—monstrous, the size of a castle courtyard and tall as its highest spire. Its dozens—hundreds!—of ink-black eyes fixed on them as they stepped out onto broken stone, and Alistair swore he could see himself reflected back in their oil-slick swirl. He felt so small, so seemingly defenseless. Lost in its mammoth shadow.

The archdemon had been one thing, but this…

How the bloody hell were they going to make it through this?

I could really use your help here, Solona, he thought wistfully, readying his sword and preparing to die.

Before despair could take him, a soft hand brushed his shoulder. “If you would,” the spirit of Justinia said to them all, floating past and up toward that waiting death without a hint of fear, “please tell Leliana, I am sorry. I failed you, too.”

She was a shining light, a beacon; a single, insignificant spark against so much gathered dark. And yet as she grew closer, she burned brighter and brighter and brighter until Alistair had to look away—one arm flung up to shield his eyes against the supernova brilliance.

The night was engulfed in dazzling light.

There was a scream, mingled beast and woman, and for one moment he wanted to scream with them: to howl up at the sky. He lurched forward even before he could blink the brightness of the Divine’s death away, sword already swinging.

Faith led the arc of his blade; there was no other explanation for the way, even blinded, he cleaved through the waiting fearling. It screamed, blood spattering across jagged stone, and Alistair looked up just as the massive spider enveloped Justinia in its open maw, the both of them disappearing into the hungry night.

Gone.

They were gone.

But before he could so much as suck in a shattered breath, the darkness came alive. A score of fearlings swarmed the high chasm walls; the ground bubbled with deep miasma. And a creature made of bone and razor-sharp smiles swum down from the roiling storm clouds, its claw-tipped hands spread wide as if in welcome.

You cannot stand against me.
“You bloody well see if I can’t!” Alistair yelled back, and with a burst of speed, he threw himself into the waiting battle.

BULL:

Shit was crazy.

“Die!” someone snarled, a spell flying. Sparks exploded against stone, and the creepy bone-shard-guy (*an Aspect of Fear*, something told Bull, though fuck if he knew where he got that) hissed and disappeared in a haze of power.

He appeared again a few feet away, dark energy curling about his fingers as he grabbed for Feynriel’s arm.

Bull could smell the burn of skin—fuck a nug, but he could *feel* it exploding in vibrant pain in the back of his skull—and he was reacting before he even knew what he was going to do. It was pure instinct, pushing him into a blind rage: *protect protect protect* blaring with the liquid rush of his blood.

He swung his ax with a snarl, laughing at the spray of blood and ichor. He felt half-crazed with it, driven past any berserker fury he’d lost himself to before…safely tethered this time by that sunny brightness filling his mind.

*Feynriel won’t let me lose myself.* It wasn’t so much a coherent thought as a revelation, bursting through the renewed vigor of his swings. He was wild, primal, completely unafraid. *Stronger* than he’d ever felt before as he cleaved his way through every demon that damn *Aspect of Fear* threw their way.

One, two, three: bone crunched beneath his feet, and Bull bared his teeth in a red-tinged grin, even as a voice boomed above them:

**You will die in agony!**

“You will die with an ax up your ass!” he tried to yell, but this deep into a full-blown frenzy, it mostly came out as: “**RRRAWWWRRRRRGHHHLEEEE!!!!!**”

Still. Bull figured Fear got the point.

He pivoted as one of Feynriel’s spells darted over his shoulder, exploding the spindly-legged demon lunging for his throat into a spray of sizzling guts. It felt like dancing—like they were dancing together—reading each others’ minds with the kind of ease that might have freaked him the fuck out before all this Fade shit went down. Now? It was *glorious*, the battlesong wending about them: Bull protecting Feynriel’s flank, Feynriel guarding his, the both of them a whirling dervish of pure power as they blew like qunari gunpowder through the horde of demons.

It was so good, so *pure*, that Bull almost didn’t want it to end. But then suddenly he was turning with a laughing roar, ax lifted…and there was nothing left to *fight*. Taran was yanking his blade free of the *Aspect of Fear*, cheeks painted red and black, expression grim. There was something…

Hrm.
There was something off about the way Taran held himself, but Bull was still so strung up by the battle that he had to squint and shake his head to see past the red haze. Shit, what was going on? The sky was still a gathering dark, and all the demons were dead, so what was…

Feynriel touched his elbow, and that bright burst of spring sunshine burned away the last of the haze, pulling him back from the brink of Reaver fury. Bull blinked rapidly, shaking his head hard as his full senses came back into focus. It was like being drunk and then suddenly just…not anymore. Weird as fuck.

“ Weird as fuck,” he said, looking at Feynriel chidingly.

Feynriel just cast him a look and moved to join Aidan and Alistair and Taran as they stood staring up the sloping hill toward the open rift. There was nothing in their way now. No giant fucking spider, no demon army, no barrier, no gate, no nothing. Just an open expanse of ground and a waterfall of what looked a lot like blood pouring out of the sky, as if the Fade itself were bleeding out.

Slowly, Bull lowered his ax.

“What’re we waiting for?” he asked, moving to join his friends. He had a pretty good idea what the answer was already. The closer he drew, the more they all—the more Taran—came into focus. And the easier it was to see…

“Fuck,” Bull sighed, taking in the blood blooming against Taran’s side where his armor had all but been ripped away. “Boss, you’re hurt.”

AIDAN:

Boss, you’re hurt. As if it were as simple as that.

“It’s not a normal wound,” Aidan warned, reaching out as if to touch it. Even through the film of blood, he could see black veins snaking across Taran’s skin: corruption spreading in tangled vines. It was like the Blight, he thought, flashing to images of Aveline’s Wesley: pale, gaping, the darkness eating him from the inside out. “Maker’s nutsack.”

“We’ll worry about it later,” Taran ordered. He took a determined step toward the distant rift, only to stumble—nearly falling to one knee.

Alistair caught his elbow, righting him with a low, “Whoa, whoa there.” He shot Aidan a worried look.

“Is it the Blight?” Aidan asked, because he had to ask. They had to know. Had they made it all this way just to lose the Herald—and the only hope of saving the world—at the very end?

“…shit,” Bull murmured.

But Alistair just shook his head. “Don’t know,” he said, keeping Taran steady. “Don’t think so. But, well, you know, crazy Fade stuff; oogy demon; birthplace of the Blight itself, so…maaaaaybe?”

Taran tried to shrug them both off. “Then it’s a good thing there’s a whole host of Wardens waiting just on the other side of that rift,” he said. “The lot of you can hem and haw and figure out what that thing did to me later. Right now we’ve got to move.”
Distant lightning forked as if in agreement, and above them, the clouds roiled. It looked like the sky was pressing in on them, twisted shapes visible with each flash of light; Aidan felt his skin go clammy with the renewed terror and Maker, right—they had to get out of here now.

“I’ll help you,” he said, trying to loop one of Taran’s arms over his shoulders. The Inquisitor was hissing and gasping in pain, skin parchment-pale and damp with sweat. The threading corruption grew with each second that passed.

Bull shouldered him aside. “You help Feynriel,” he ordered, bending and hoisting Taran up. Ax and greatsword clattered forgotten to the ground as he held the Inquisitor in his arms, already loping determinedly toward the waiting rift and safety. “Follow close!”

“I don’t need any help,” Feynriel promised, grimly moving in their wake—but Aidan hadn’t missed the way Bull had helped him to even reach this point, and now there was an unmistakable pained jerk to his steps. “Go on, run. We have to run.”

Aidan caught Feynriel’s arm and looped it around his shoulders, catching the skinny waist and all but hauling Feynriel against him. “Running,” he agreed, already stumbling forward. It was awkward this way—would have been so much easier to just bolt for it on his own—but he’d be damned if he left Feynriel to stagger behind. Alistair jogged a few steps ahead, eyes fixed on the open rift ahead of them.

“Aidan,” Feynriel protested.

Aidan simply set his jaw and kept going. “You saved me from the Fade before,” he pointed out. “Let me help save you.”

“That was after you had already saved me!” Feynriel protested.

“You’re both very heroic!” Alistair called back to them. “Now stop arguing over who gets to be noble this time and run.”

And really, there was no arguing with that. Aidan and Feynriel swallowed back any further protests and ran, feet skidding over loose rocks as they barreled toward the waiting rift. It grew larger and larger as they approached, edges jagged from where the nightmare had been trying to force its way through. Aidan couldn’t hear anything, but he swore he could see flashes of armor and steel; movement just beyond the open wound of the Fade. Adamant courtyard, he was sure of it.

Which meant, oh Maker, they were close; they were going to actually make it; they—

Lightning forked from the heavy thunderclouds, striking the ground directly before him. Aidan could feel it seconds before it hit, sizzling through the air. That was likely the only thing that kept them from being incinerated. “WAIT!” he cried just as the night flashed white.

Alistair, already several paces ahead, skidded to a stop just as the bolt was loosed. He yelped and tumbled back as shards of blackened earth erupted at his feet. It scattered around the three of them in a steady rain, sharp edges tearing at exposed skin.

Up ahead—far ahead—Bull turned at the commotion. He was mere feet away from the rift, chest rising and falling with exertion. In his arms, Taran looked like death warmed over…eyes going wider and wider and wider as shadow funneled its way down between them, solidifying into one terrifyingly familiar spindly leg.

Spiders. Always the Maker-damned spiders.
“Run!” Taran cried, pushing at Bull as if he wanted to sprint back toward them. But another spider-leg was already descending, then another, then another, the Nightmare scuttling back from wherever the Divine’s spirit had sent it, ready to fight with its last breath. Hundreds of inky black eyes blinked steadily down on them, and Aidan felt Feynriel shrink back even as Alistair took a foolhardy step forward, shield and sword raised as if that would do any good at all.

“Oh Maker,” Aidan breathed. They were so close to the rift he could almost swear he felt the lyrium-bright burn of Fenris at the back of his skull, flickering there after being so long quiescent. He wanted to grab for that, wanted to hold on for all he was worth, but… But the Nightmare was staring down at them, standing between them and safety, and there was no way they were going to survive this.

But perhaps Taran and Bull could.

“We can’t let it get the Herald,” Aidan said, knowing he was condemning himself and the others to death. The Nightmare was beginning to turn, pulled by Taran’s will; Aidan sent a lance of fire its way, flames licking across oil-slick skin and cascading down in a shower of sparks. “Taran, Bull, go!”

“Feynriel!” Bull bellowed, and it was so obvious what would happen: Bull and Taran would charge in to save the day, and all five of them would die here—crushed beneath the Nightmare, the world lost with them.

Alistair grimaced and took a wild swing as one of the spider’s legs lashed out. Feynriel pushed out of Aidan’s arms, both hands lifted. Glowing a pale, otherworldly blue: the color of distant stars. Strands of blond hair began to lift from his shoulders as if by a breeze, and his robe (soiled from soldiering through this bloody hellscape fighting all manner of fiends for what could have been hours or days or weeks) fluttered as…

…as he slowly lifted into the air, threads of this endless world his to control.

Aidan watched, stunned, as Feynriel spread one hand wide. Streaks of pure light darted from his fingertips, lashing about the Nightmare’s legs and yanking it back toward them. Alistair cursed, ducking, shield glancing off the demon’s disgusting underbelly seconds before he was slashing up. Viscera spattered the ground in hissing black ooze, and Aidan was quick to send lightning arcing toward its many furiously blinking eyes.

Feynriel’s hair and robes swirled around him as if he were caught in a storm, but his gaze was steady as he held out the flat of his other hand and pushed. A wall of pure light burst from him—towering as high as Skyhold’s tallest parapet and moving through the demon…driving steadily toward the waiting rift.

Toward where Bull and Taran were making their way back into the battle.

All at once, Aidan understood. His heart gave a wrenching twist, but he nodded and gripped his short stave tighter, letting the storm build inside of him. No, of course, this was the only way. Even at his most powerful, Feynriel was just a dreamer, and a dream could not hope to defeat the Nightmare. But he could hold it captive for a time, perhaps, and keep Taran—kind, brave, stupidly self-sacrificing Taran—safe.

This wouldn’t all be in vain. Their deaths…their deaths would mean something.

Fenris, Aidan thought, letting the spell fly with a throat-rending scream, lightning exploding from him with enough power to shake the very Fade. I am so sorry, love.
FEYNRIEL:

It had been so hard to keep the full extent of his powers leashed during that first climactic battle. There were so many times he wanted to lash out with the crackling force building steadily inside him—to tangle the Aspect of Fear in his living web.

But somehow, deep inside, Feynriel had known it would come to this: staring down the giant spider itself, as if looking deep into the void. So he’d held himself back, and he’d bided his time, and he’d waited.

There was no waiting any longer. He was a living conduit for the untapped power of the Fade; he was the might of a million dreamers. He could feel the churning storm that was his Voice building in the back of his thoughts, and that only made him stronger—feeding his new sense of control as he reversed the flow of gravity and let himself be lifted up to meet the Nightmare’s many eyes.

Glowing white webbing strung from his fingertips to tangle its legs. A wall of pure power pushed past—through—toward the rift in a steady march as Aidan flung elemental might and Alistair howled and swung his blade. The spider shuddered and fought to free itself, voiceless in its fury. Shadows darted in, but Feynriel shoved them back before they could form, letting the wave of demons crash like waves upon a distant shore.

He couldn’t hold it forever; he couldn’t even hold it for more than a few moments. He was still only flesh and blood, and the Nightmare had fed well for so long. And yet Feynriel knew he didn’t have to hold on much longer. He could see Bull and Taran just past its hulking form, being steadily herded back toward the safety of the rift by Feynriel’s spell.

They were fighting it—fighting to get to the rest of them, to save them. (To die at our sides.) Taran was yelling something Feynriel couldn’t hear, and Bull… Maker.

It hurt to look at Bull. To see the raw, cracked-open shock and betrayal there as he heaved against invisible hands shoving him back to the world, to Krem, to a life well-lived.

I’m sorry, Feynriel couldn’t say. He wasn’t sure if Bull would be willing to hear him anyway. He hated that he was taking away his new Voice’s choice, but someone had to see Taran through; someone had to make sure the world survived.

Someone had to tell Krem that Feynriel—scared, weak, useless half-elven Feynriel—had managed to be a hero at the very end.

Alistair cried out in pain and Aidan darted forward. The demon was almost free again, and there was little that Feynriel could do about it. He glanced one last time toward the rift, where his Herald and Voice stood in silhouette: broad-shouldered and strong and like every storybook come to life. Swallowing back regret—I barely knew you—Feynriel pushed his palm forward, shoving Bull back through the rift and out into the world again.

Green fire flared, meeting the edges of his spell. Thunder rumbled as the Nightmare began to laugh, Alistair and Aidan’s screams a horrifying underscore. Taran pushed—pushed—his own palm out and licking green fire. He was bathed in it, subsumed by it, standing at the very edge of the rift and
fighting, still, always, to save everyone he could.

Green power streaked from the sky and slammed into the Nightmare, ripping through its flesh. It howled and Feynriel quaked back, struggling to hold on. His hair was whipping wildly around him and his limbs ached. He felt as if he were being ripped into a million pieces, but he bit the inside of his mouth and kept pushing, blue-white light intermingling with green, churning inside the ancient demon until it seemed to splinter beneath it; cracks darting along the skin, revealing that twinned glow that expanded and expanded and expanded until all Feynriel could see was a single figure standing there, palm lifted toward his, black against the endless bright.

And then the world seemed to explode outward in a conflagration of unimaginable power, and he felt himself falling—heard himself screaming—tumbling blindly through a sudden endless dark. Time seemed to stretch around him as he crumped ragdoll-limp to the stone, bloody and broken and barely alive. Alistair and Aidan were there somewhere, lost in this endless dream with him, hanging on by the slimmest of threads, and Taran…

Taran was gone.

Gasping—wheezing against shattered ribs—Feynriel turned his face toward where the rift once stood. Even in the growing darkness (demons whispering in fear and fury) he could sense it shrinking, closing, cutting the Nightmare off from the world. Locking it in here, with the three of them: so broken they could barely stand, and yet, for all that, triumphant.

The Herald lived; the rift had been closed; the demon army had been vanquished. And they were heroes after all. Krem and Bull would be so proud.

Yes, Feynriel decided, closing his eyes against the world, the life, the hope he had lost. He could find a way to die happy with that.

Chapter End Notes

Repeat after me: Khirsah only writes happy endings.
Chapter Notes

The fabulous ThreeHundredThirtyThree stepped in to write this chapter. Want to see more Solona and Alistair? Check out her fic Part of Your World to see how their story began! They will be major players in the FINAL VoiceVerse fic, An End Once and for All.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the battle of Adamant raged...

Far in the ass-end of Orlais, the last few members of the Ferelden Grey Wardens, who had only heard a few half-coherent whispers about the atrocities taking place at Adamant Fortress under the orders of Warden-Commander Clarel, were finishing off a small group of darkspawn.

Oghren gave a grim chuckle as he pulled his axe out of the throat of the hurlock who had been the last one standing. Barkspawn gave a happy ruff and jumped around in a circle. Getting these assholes down was a relief, and a step in the right direction toward their goal.

“Nicely done, everyone,” Solona said. “Take a few. Breathe, have some water.”

She’d been on edge the last few weeks, and she knew it showed. She hadn’t been eating, so she’d lost a fair bit of weight. She hadn’t been sleeping, either, the Calling in her dreams getting slowly too loud to ignore. Her hands had been shaking too badly to even make a half-decent braid out of the tangled mess of her hair.

She was sure she looked like a wreck, but she just couldn’t care. Whenever she reached out to feel the push-and-pull of Alistair’s emotions, it just got worse. Worry, fear, terror—all playing across his mind at various times, but it was the resignation that she’d felt this morning that frightened her the most.

“Hey,” came her Warden-Constable’s voice from beside her, soft but stern. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Thanks, Nate,” Solona replied, nudging him with her elbow. “Go talk to Vee, all right? If only so I can live vicariously through you.”

He chuckled and, with a nod, left her alone like she’d wanted.

She didn’t intend to be so stand-offish to Nate and the others, but she wanted a moment to really focus on Alistair, the way she hadn’t been able to do lately, with the Calling in her head and swords at her throat. She sat down on the stone, closing her eyes and trying to listen.

He was… closer than she thought he’d be. It was easier to thread the needle of his presence than it had been when he was still in Ferelden. Was he in Orlais, too?

Blood and panic and ruin and pain and death, impending dread, a sword dangling by a thread that’s ready to snap.
Maker’s mercy, what was going on? Solona tried to project calmness, *rightness*, a sense that everything would be okay, it would be fine, but Alistair wasn’t listening, he *couldn’t* listen.

*It’s here.*

She didn’t know *what* was here, or where *here* was, but whatever and wherever it was happening, it was *bad*.

She could feel him running—*go, go, go, keep moving or you’re dead*. She scrambled to her feet, charging a few steps forward, as if she could get to him and stand in the way of whatever was causing his terror as everything began to crumble.

She felt him *fall*.

Then she felt *nothing*.

Solona dropped to her knees, doubling over, her hands slapping the ground in front of her, catching her before she fell, too. The pain was too raw even for tears—she doubted the obvious, denied the undeniable.

“*No,*” she whispered. “*No, no, no, Alistair, no.*”

“Hey, Commander?” Oghren’s voice came from a thousand miles away. “You hangin’ in there?”

A doggy head and torso wormed its way under her arms, as if to say *I’m still here, you’re okay.* He whimpered as if he, too, could feel the loss. Or maybe he was just sad because his mistress was sad. Who could tell? Who could *care*?

She wasn’t okay. She wasn’t “hanging in there.” She never would be again.

*Doing paperwork by candlelight was rarely anything but an exercise in frustration, but the fire had dimmed hours ago, and Solona had too much work to do to get up and relight it. She could hear the other Wardens, her Wardens, very probably drunk, singing downstairs in the dining hall—even through the stone and wood of the walls, floors, and corridors, she could hear that it was obviously “The Ballad of the Grey,” Leliana’s song about the Fifth Blight.*

*One thing was certain: considering the lavish praise the song heaped on Solona, singing it had definitely been Alistair’s idea.*

*Smiling softly at the thought, Solona reached out, testing through their relatively-recent bond to see how he was. Sitting, relaxed, with new friends, belting out the song in his own gorgeous baritone, full of pride and love and about as much ale as was good for him. (He was too self-conscious to sing often, but Maker, did Solona love his voice.)

*He clearly felt the tingle of her concern, ringing back in acknowledgement: yes, I’m here, I’m fine.*

*And as much as Solona wanted to go downstairs and join them, these questions from Weisshaupt really needed answering.*

*She wasn’t sure how long it was later—though the candle was considerably lower—when she heard Alistair’s voice in front of her.*
“You know you can scale the Paperback Mountains tomorrow, right? They’ll still be there.”

She grinned but didn’t look up. “Paperback Mountains,” she replied. “That’s pretty clever.”

“Well, I thought so, anyhow.”

He moved—not drunk enough to stumble, but tipsy enough to give his movements a little extra fluidity—to standing just behind her chair, stooping to wrap his arms around her neck and rest his chin on her shoulder.

“Come to bed,” Alistair whispered. “We do have a bed now, so I can actually say that and you can come there.”

Solona chuckled. She didn’t need to look behind her or feel him through the bond to know that Alistair’s face was bright red.

“I—ah, not what I meant.”

Half turning her head and placing one soft kiss on his cheek, she said, “Oh, sweetheart. Yes it was.”

“Well, all right, maybe,” he conceded. “But is it so wrong to want my beautiful wife to spend the night with me instead of dealing with endless reports and requests and whatever else?”

“Not at all. But this one I really do have to finish tonight. Weisshaupt won’t shut up about it,” she said.

Alistair squeezed her tight, and she could feel the plea he was about to make, when she interrupted.

“Remind me: your last name—spelled with an ‘e-i’ or an ‘i-e’?”

“I never had an official last name. I am a royal bastard, after all, as someone told me once. Then you’re supposed to give it up when you join the Wardens, so…” He blinked, slowly, not understanding. “Why… is there something you need it for?”

“Weisshaupt wants me to name a Warden-Constable,” Solona explained. “I figured ‘Alistair Theirin’ would sound impressive.”

“They’re already angry that we’re married, among other things. Won’t that just… piss them off?”

“Darling, I have not yet begun to piss them off.”

Alistair grinned wickedly. “Then put ‘Alistair Amell.’”

Solona laughed, tempted to actually do it, and wasn’t that telling of how long she’d been sitting there, bored nearly to tears.

“Wait,” he said, after a beat. “You’re planning on naming me Warden-Constable? That… that’s a big job.”

“I have every confidence you can handle it,” Solona replied, bringing his hand to her lips for a kiss. “Besides, you’re already practically my second-in-command as it is. I tell you everything. I run anything I’m uncertain about past you. I trust you completely, and you’ve never given me even the slightest reason not to. You’re the ideal choice.”

He turned her chair so that she was facing him. Through the bond, she got the sense of being loved, overwhelmed, overcome.
Also: a running undercurrent of no.

She blinked at him, confused.

“Why not?” she asked.

“It’s… not just about being your second. I could handle that. I’ve been handling that,” Alistair admitted. “It’s about… being your successor.”

Solona took his hand and pulled him into her lap. She didn’t understand this, and she knew she needed to. This felt weighty, important. She could sense Alistair’s discomfort before the joke that proved it left his mouth.

“I’m pretty sure this paperwork would kill me in about five minutes.”

“Alistair,” she said, chiding.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair and pointedly not making eye contact.

“We haven’t talked about… you know, the Calling. What happens when… when one of us feels it.”

“It has been a bit hectic,” she agreed.

He forced out a laugh, though his emotions thrumming through the bond were just a wall of fear and sadness and pain. Talking about death and the inevitability thereof was never pleasant, but…

Maybe it will help if I explain? she thought.

“Wardens who are recruited during Blights don’t live as long,” Solona said, gently, keeping a hold on his hands. “I know that. I just want to make sure that… When that happens, I want to leave Ferelden in the best possible hands. Which would be yours.”

“No.” Alistair’s vehemence shouldn’t have surprised her, but it did. “If that happens, I’m going with you. You’re not facing the Deep Roads by yourself again.”

“Alistair… I love you—just, so much, and that’s very… devoted of you, but you’ll likely have years left when I start hearing my Calling. I want you to have them.”

“I don’t,” he said. “Not without you.”

He wrapped his arms around her neck, pulling her close and whispering in her ear.

“They’re not worth having without you.”

She felt two sets of hands pulling her up to a kneeling position, and Velanna checking her over for injuries, but it was like being underwater, blunted and silent and dead. She heard them talking about her, what they should do, how they could help, what this meant for them all, for the Wardens, for her.

And precisely none of it mattered.

You got it backwards, darling, she thought, as if Alistair could hear her now (he would never hear
her again, he was gone, gone, all gone, like he had never existed at all). The years aren’t worth having without you.

And that—that thought—was what made Solona Amell, Vanquisher of the Fifth Blight, Hero of Ferelden, and Commander of the Grey, break.

“Everyone,” she said, voice rough and hoarse, as though she’d been screaming for hours, “there’s been a change of plans.”

Chapter End Notes

Brace yourselves a bit for the upcoming chapters. The next (Dorian POV) chapter is already done and up for patreon, and I'm working on the Bull POV chapter now...and holy cheese, that bastard is good at making me weepy. But THEN happiness!

Works inspired by this one
Experimental Files by Sasskarian, Undisclosed Desires by Cinnamongirl

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