

## The Body Keeps the Score

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# The Body Keeps the Score

by [better\\_off](#)

## Summary

*"Something Aloth has learned about himself in his 60 years is that he is not...good with feelings. Not that he doesn't have them, of course, but he finds the whole business of describing them so painfully subjective."*

How do you bear a past that follows you everywhere? Aloth has managed by not looking too close, but he's getting tired.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth is an anxious wizard, Edér is a restless veteran, and, on the watcher's turbulent trek, an unlikely companionship is formed.

## Notes

A Pillars 1 story, light on the romance, heavy on the emotional recovery. Our watcher is a female Hearth Orlan druid named Ren; she doesn't feature prominently in the story.

I originally had this fic rated Mature, which it *barely* earned in Chapter 2. I changed it to Teen after a bit of reflection.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# The Old Watcher

## Chapter Summary

*Edér drives his sword into the soft earth and hangs his lantern on the hilt. “Mind if I join you? I get antsy bein’ cooped up so much.”*

*“Actually, I—” Aloth falters, grasping for an excuse. What could he say? That he was enjoying his privacy among the haunted ruins? Iselmyr cuts him short: Let him sit. Yer own nerves are more o’ a danger tae yerself than this lad is. He clears his throat and gestures at the ground beside him.*

*“Actually,” he says again, when he’s sure he’ll speak with his own voice and not Iselmyr’s, “I would be glad for the company.”*

\* \* \* \* \*

In which Aloth is a better listener than he gives himself credit for, and Edér is easier to talk to than anyone has a right to be.

## Chapter Notes

Edér has a throwaway line when the watcher reaches Caed Nua, “I’d be havin’ more fun hangin’ from that tree back home,” i.e. “I’d rather be dead.” I started writing this chapter because I wanted a justification for Edér to say something so nasty.

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When he stumbles from the keep’s main hall into the sticky heat, Aloth’s chest is tight and his thoughts are a garbled mess. His breath comes in ragged gasps that belong not to exertion but to panic. The elf is dimly aware of a metallic stench rising from his armor, but he can’t bring himself to look down at the splatter of blood—not his—that marks the leather. Instead, he looks out at what’s left of the keep: a crumbling barbican, a neglected chapel, a dilapidated forum all silhouetted by the afternoon sun. The bright light makes him squint, but it clears his head.

It’s late in the day; the long shadows draw his feet forward through the grounds. His racing thoughts slow as he walks, replaced with a dull throb in his temples. Iselmyr is, for now, silent. Eventually, Aloth comes to a stop on the western side of the keep’s derelict craft shop and, leaning his grimoire against the brick wall, sits cross legged in the warm grass.

The events of the last two days replay in his mind: Gilded Vale, angry villagers; Iselmyr's intervention a cold gap in his memory. The orlan woman, Ren: a watcher. She's an escaped slave; says her mother was brought to Aedyr to serve a thayn. Aloth's mind drifts to Aedyr, to his childhood, his own mother...He shakes his head as if to cast the memories away. A deep breath. Think of the present; of the Dyrwood. Of yesterday: the crumbling temple and so many kith bones. The golden-haired folk man who seems, like him, to be seeking something. Then of today, the others—this watcher has strange taste in company—and Caed Nua in the morning light, and finally Maerwald's frail form crumpling as Aloth's own spell strikes true. Maerwald, succumbing to his past lives. Maerwald, awakened and insane...

\* \* \* \* \*

*Before the old watcher speaks, Aloth can sense that something is wrong. Maerwald's gestures are too swift for his age, too wide for the dim, cramped dungeon. Ren stands before him unafraid, flanked by Kana and Edér. Her voice is almost hopeful when she asks him about her awakening. Her ears point forward to catch his whispered answer. But when the orlan asks him about his own awakening, his movements stop. There is fear in his eyes when he turns his face to hers. Though he hasn't yet responded, the interaction seems to have drained him; when he does speak, it's in halting half-phrases. Aloth recognizes the look of someone wresting control from a past life. The old watcher mentions Defiance Bay and—Aloth catches his breath—the Leaden Key, but there's no time to process as he gasps and slumps over.*

*When Maerwald looks up again, his expression has changed. Edér's hand moves instinctively to the hilt of his sword. Dread settles heavy as a stone in Aloth's gut. Iselmyr is clawing at the confines of his mind, willing him to shout a warning. He bites his tongue. The violence in this man's eyes is sickeningly familiar, and he knows for certain what will happen now. Maerwald's head swivels on his neck until he's staring at Ren. The moment stretches on—why isn't she reacting?, Aloth thinks desperately—but just as Maerwald lunges, Ren shifts her weight. She dodges his spell and then she's upon him, spiritshifted and unleashing blow after blow.*

*Things are happening quickly now. Edér is overwhelmed with elemental blights. Durance calls something out, there's a blinding flash, and they are all suffused in a warm, shielding aura. Kana's deep voice cuts clear through the chaos. A gunshot shakes the room and nearly knocks Aloth to the ground. His ears are ringing terribly. He sees Ren strike Maerwald with a mighty bear paw; she has an edge, but he can tell she's tiring. From his vantage point, he has a clear shot to cast a lancing spell, to end this, and he takes the shot, then the hot scent of magic fills the air and Maerwald falls in a spray of dark red.*

*For a solid minute, the room is silent save for the sound of breathing and a distant drip. Aloth's ears are still ringing. Dazed, he looks down to see that he is covered in what can only be Maerwald's blood. Then Edér spits.*

*"As enlightening as this all was," he growls, "I reckon I'd be havin' more fun hangin' from that tree back home." The temperature in the room seems to drop. Immediately, regret writes itself onto the farmer's face, but before he has a chance to say more, Ren rounds on him, eyes flashing. She jabs a furred finger in his chest. Her entire body is glowing faintly like she's*

*about to spiritshift, and, for a moment, Aloth thinks she will attack. Instead, she drops her hand and looks Edér up and down.*

*“I know your game,” she says. Ren is half Edér’s height, but she seems to tower over him. “You’re pretending not to care. You think I never played that one before?” Edér says nothing. The ringing in Aloth’s ears will surely deafen him. Kana tries to interject, but the watcher seems not to hear. She’s staring daggers at Edér, who stares back defiantly. “You only say what you feel when you can play it off as a joke.”*

*At this, Edér opens his mouth, but Ren jabs his chest again with her finger. “No, listen to me,” she growls. “Know what I think?” She lowers her voice to just above a whisper. “I think you’re acting like a jackass because the alternative is living with the reality that you hurt all the time.” Edér blanches, the anger on his face replaced by shock.*

*“N-now, that ain’t—I’m not,” he stammers. “That—that ain’t fair.”*

*The watcher’s gaze softens. Her face flickers with what might be pity. “Edér, I know you were hoping for answers about—” she pauses. “...about your brother. I’m sorry.” Suddenly, he can’t meet her gaze.*

*They’re silent as they make their way to the surface. Tension hangs like fog in the air. Aloth can sense Edér behind him, stony-eyed and still simmering as they clamor from the stairwell into the main hall. Things filter back into his awareness, slowly at first, then all at once. He recalls the old watcher’s mention of the Leaden Key; he feels the shock of Maerwald’s death and Edér’s anger. Worse, he senses the burgeoning grip of panic in his chest. He is far from home and covered in blood, and he does not want to be here, guarding secrets from these strangers, any longer.*

*Ren catches his eye and beckons as she approaches the steward, but Aloth has reached his limit. Only Iselmyr’s obstinate voice is powerful enough to disrupt his own stream of thoughts, both are telling him to get away. He mumbles something about fresh air and makes a beeline for the door.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth isn’t sure how long he dozes off, but when he wakes, the sun has nearly set and Edér is standing across from him, holding a lantern and wearing an unreadable expression.

“Wondered where you’d gone off to. Would’ve found you sooner, but no one felt like going farther today. The others are settin’ up camp in the main hall. Watcher figures it’s safer there than outside...now that all them skuldr are taken care of.” Edér drives his sword into the soft earth and hangs his lantern on the hilt. “Mind if I join you? I get antsy bein’ cooped up so much.”

“Actually, I—” Aloth falters, grasping for an excuse. What could he say? That he was enjoying his privacy among the haunted ruins? Iselmyr cuts him short: *Let him sit. Yer own nerves are more o’ a danger tae yerself than this lad is.* He clears his throat and gestures at the ground beside him.

“Actually,” he says again, when he’s sure he’ll speak with his own voice and not Iselmyr’s, “I would be glad for the company.”

The two sit awkwardly for a few wordless moments. By the lantern light, Aloth can see that Edér’s face is covered with a layer of grime. He looks tired. On his right hand, a large burn has begun to blister; he traces it with a calloused finger and winces. Aloth absently thumbs a buckle on his armor and wonders what to say.

“You got a bit of a stain there, huh?” says Edér by way of an icebreaker. He cracks a sheepish grin and nods at Aloth’s chest. Aloth looks down and starts; he’d forgotten about the splatter of blood (now deep brown and cracking) on his armor. He allows himself a chuckle.

“Oh! Yes, I—” But his voice catches in his throat as he’s struck by a terrible thought: what if Edér is angry at *him* for killing Maerwald? Hadn’t Ren mentioned that Edér wanted to speak with the old watcher? And hadn’t Aloth dealt the killing blow? Iselmyr’s presence, ever vigilant, vibrates in his limbs.

“About that,” Aloth begins again. If his face or voice belie his panic, Edér appears not to notice. “It seems you had business with Maerwald that perhaps my actions have, ah, hindered.” Edér smirks. “I acted quickly to end the fight. I didn’t intend to prevent you from asking...whatever it is you were going to ask.”

Edér waves his hand dismissively. “You saved our skins is all. And here I thought you were some Aedyran dandy ‘fraid of a little dirt.”

Aloth opts to ignore the phrase *Aedyran dandy* (pledging to give it due attention later) and says, “What was your business with the man? Er, if it’s not too forward to ask.”

“Just some...stuff. About my brother. Would’ve been a dead end anyway.”

“Then,” Aloth says cautiously, “you aren’t angry?”

Edér barks a laugh. “Angry? You mean at my god for starting a fight? Or my neighbors for finishing it?” He *sounds* angry.

Confused, Aloth stammers, “I apologize. I thought perhaps I, or the group, that is—” he’s tripping over his words. “That is, the watcher seemed to upset you earlier.”

“Nah, it’s not her either. Ain’t a sin to speak your mind.” Edér peers over at Aloth. “I’m not angry *with* someone. I’m just—it’s just that—” He clenches and unclenches his fists in frustration. He looks, Aloth thinks, abjectly miserable. The man buries his face in his hands and heaves a sigh. Without raising his head, he croaks, “’s just been a long couple days, that’s all.”

“Ah.” Aloth tugs at the hem of his robe. “Yes. Well, on that much, I think we can agree.” Edér, face still buried in his hands, says nothing.

Aloth has no idea how to proceed. He's never felt the need to fill quiet air with conversation—in fact, he enjoys a comfortable silence. Edér, though, looks anything but comfortable. The elf spends a fraction of a second entertaining the idea of making more small talk before deciding against it. He settles for feigning interest in a large iridescent beetle now marching up Edér's sword towards the lantern. The beetle stakes a wide path around a drop of condensation. Aloth fidgets with his robe. After what feels like an eternity, Edér lifts his face and looks over at him, and Aloth is mortified to see that his eyes are shining with tears.

"I've been lookin' for answers about my brother for a long time," he says quietly. Edér's voice is hoarse, but he's unabashed. "Thought I'd quit dwellin' on it. But I heard about this old watcher and got my hopes up." He looks Aloth in the eye, and the elf can feel his ears turn red. Remembering his pretense, he looks back at the beetle. It slides a few inches down the blade.

Something Aloth has learned about himself in his 60 years is that he is not...good with feelings. Not that he doesn't have them, of course, but he finds the whole business of describing them so painfully subjective. Books, Aloth feels, offer a comforting certainty (although Iselmyr has other opinions). He thrives in intellectual pursuits, or else in privacy; he just doesn't *do* emotional conversations. Aloth knows this, and he has come to accept it. Yet, for the second time today, he finds himself party to the feelings of this unfamiliar man, at a loss. More than that, he's nearly awestruck by Edér's willingness to feel—his willingness to express what he's feeling.

"After the war ended, there were these, uh, these rumors," Edér continues. "People sayin' he didn't fight for the Dyrwood after all."

"Because you were Eothasian." It's not a question.

"That's right. The grief didn't end with the war. Never does. People wanted someone to blame."

Still staring at the beetle, Aloth asks, "Were they true?"

"I don't know."

Aloth's eyes follow the beetle as it opens its jeweled wings, lifts off the hilt of the sword, and makes a series of dizzy loops before alighting on Edér's arm. He looks up at the man's face and is startled to see him already staring back.

"I don't think he was a traitor, whatever side he fought for," Edér says with a wan smile. He looks down at the beetle on his forearm. "I was just lookin' for closure."

Almost to himself, Aloth murmurs, "I've often wondered if closure is even possible. We always carry our past experiences with us. Some of us can't even escape them in the next life."

"I don't envy Ren for her watcher lifestyle," says Edér. Iselmyr is mercifully silent. "It sounds stupid," he adds, "but...I don't know if I *want* to move on." Delicately, he scoops the beetle into a cupped hand.

For a split second, Aloth teeters on the edge of telling him everything: Iselmyr, his parents, the spellwrights, the Leaden Key—all the things he can't seem to leave behind. He thinks Edér would understand; he's almost certain. Instead, when he speaks, he surprises himself by asking gently, "What was he like?"

"My brother?" For a moment, Edér's gaze is far off in some memory only he can see. "He was...good. He never cared about bein' a hero, but somehow he always did the right thing. His name was Woden."

"Woden," Aloth repeats. He recognizes something in Edér's tone. "You looked up to him."

Nodding, Edér gives Aloth a meaningful look. "Ain't easy to be selfless in a place like Gilded Vale," he says. "Woden proved you still could." A smile plays at his lips. "He saw right through me more than once. Wasn't mean about it or anything. He just knew when I could do better."

"A rare quality," Aloth agrees. After a moment, he adds, "and not just in Gilded Vale." He wonders what it would be like to feel so warmly about a family member and does his best to ignore the pang of envy in his gut.

Edér clears his throat and says, "Sorry 'bout before. It ain't right to make all that everyone else's problem."

"It's quite alright. Ren is..." Aloth searches for a diplomatic word. "...candid. I assumed you would be angry at her for speaking out of turn."

Edér chuckles and looks down at his lap. "Naw. She, uh, she pretty much had me clocked on that one." He steals a glance over at Aloth. His eyes are still wet. "I miss Woden. A lot. I reckon I just don't wanna deal with that all the time."

Aloth is relieved: finally, they've arrived at something he can make sense of. "I believe I know what you mean," he says, nodding. "It is frightening to encounter a...an emotion you can't control." But Edér's expression turns puzzled.

"No, that ain't it," he says. "'S not that I'm *scared*. It just hurts." Edér is looking at Aloth curiously now, and suddenly he feels uncomfortably exposed. The man cocks his head. "What d—"

"Enow jabberin' for one night," Aloth hears himself say. "Best we'd be gettin back 'fore that watcher-lass has her claws on ye!" He winces. *Impeccable timing, as always*, he thinks. Edér arches an eyebrow but says nothing, just keeps gazing at him. He's wearing the same unreadable expression as when he arrived.

"Right," Edér says slowly. "I been chewed out enough for th' day. We oughta regroup, then." He stands and extends an arm, holding his flat palm parallel to the sky. Aloth looks on, bemused, until he sees an opaline glint shifting in Edér's hand: the beetle. For a moment, its shell is a kaleidoscope of moonlight, and then it lifts its wings and is gone in a buzz. Aloth stands too, and the two men make their way back across the grounds. It's been a long time since Aloth had anyone to talk to, and despite everything he finds himself eager to keep the



conversation going. He's surprised by the comfort he finds in Edér's relaxed replies. They're both smiling when they arrive at the main hall and set up camp with the others.

The group sleeps inside, exposed to dust and spiders but shielded from the elements. Aloth lies awake long after the others, gazing at a shaft of moonlight pitched against the vaulted ceiling.

Iselmyr's voice rises unbidden in his mind: *'Twere close calls with that farmer. I conne ye felt it. But we cannae hide forever, not with this lot.*

Aloth wrinkles his nose, annoyed. "Then what do you propose we do?" he hisses in what he hopes is an inaudible whisper.

*The watcher-lass is lookin' fer answers same as you. Mayhap she'll lead ye to 'em. Ye're already doing the same for the Key.*

"Maybe..."

*Mayhap, lad, she could help ye find 'em.*

"And if she's not as progressive as you seem to think? If the rest of her motley crew are after our heads?"

*There's nye shame in askin' fer help. She's uncharacteristically gentle. They'll get wise to us in time. Better it happen on yer own terms.*

Aloth squeezes his eyes shut. He knows there's wisdom in her words, but he can't help but think that if she were gone, he would spend far less time exchanging panicked whispers with no one. Still, he feels strangely lonely when she retreats and he's left with only the shadows for company. When sleep comes for him at last, it's restless and uneasy. Aloth dreams of an iridescent beetle circling his head, its wings a deafening drone. He tries to speak, but the beetle's buzz drowns out his voice. To the side stands Edér, smiling warmly at something Aloth can't see, just out of reach.

# Defiance Bay: The Storm

## Chapter Summary

*"It's been...nice, uh, traveling together. Havin' someone to talk to." Edér's voice sounds oddly shaky. Aloth is acutely aware that their legs are still pressed together.*

*"It has," he agrees. He looks over at Edér and sees that the man's cheeks are flushed. His heart leaps in his chest. Surely, Edér is saying what he, Aloth, thinks he's saying. Why, then, is he so afraid to believe it?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth and Edér both want to be closer, but sometimes closeness cuts like a blade. A storm strands our party at the Goose and Fox, our boys fumble a little too much, and an old memory makes an unwelcome appearance.

## Chapter Notes

I *\*would\** apologize for the exceptionally long update time, but honestly? It's probably going to stay that way. Thanks for your kind words and patience.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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They've been in Defiance Bay for a few days when the rain starts. It's light at first—an autumnal grey vapor that makes Iselmyr tease Aloth for pulling his hood down against the droplets. Within a few hours, though, the mist has become a relentless downpour, and even the watcher must concede that they're better off delaying their tasks and discussing their leads until the storm has passed. The evening dissolves seamlessly into dawn, then evening again, and the rain shows no signs of stopping. For now, they wait for the watcher's word.

Aloth is disappointed by the setback. He's become increasingly anxious to track the Leaden Key as the watcher's evidence against them has grown more damning. Guilt closes like a fist around his gut—how could he not have known? But then, he thinks, they never told him much. Even more disappointing, though he can barely admit it to himself, is how the rain will disrupt his evening walks with Edér.

It has become their unspoken routine in the nights since they spoke at Caed Nua: in the pockets of quiet, they wander off together and exchange stories. Edér talks about Gilded Vale, his family, and, sometimes, the war. Aloth talks too, about the Cythwood, his years in the

Academy, and his travels. But the weaving and dodging exhausts him; he can never speak freely for fear that he might pique some perilous curiosity in Edér. Aloth has always struggled to tease anything substantial from his knot of secrets. So, mostly, he listens.

He can sense that their dynamic has changed since, in their chaotic flight from the Temple of Woedica, he told the group about Iselmyr. Edér had lagged behind then, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and given him a searching look.

“You alright?” he’d asked. “Takes guts to share somethin’ like that.” Aloth had inclined his head and offered a small smile.

“This, coming from the man who cried in front of me the day after we met.” Edér’s face split into a wide grin then.

“I should’ve known you never do anything without thinkin’ it through.” With that, he’d squeezed Aloth’s shoulder and strode on ahead, leaving the elf in a daze, tracing the spot where Edér’s hand had been.

Tonight, the party is holed up at the Goose and Fox, clutching mugs of ale or wine and having exactly the kind of boisterous conversation Aloth prefers to avoid. And, in fact, he’s nearly made it up the stairs when the watcher intervenes.

“Sure you don’t want to join us tonight, Aloth? I think a certain yellow-haired farmer would be thrilled for your company.” She gives him a pointed look and says, with mock-formality, “Might Master Corfiser not enjoy some company this evening as well?”

By now, Aloth knows that no demurring or polite excuses will keep her from seeing what he refuses to say. Besides, she’s right: though it pains him to acknowledge, he *would* enjoy Edér’s company. He gives her a petulant scowl as he turns around to join the group, now seated on the long wooden benches that populate a corner of the crowded dining room.

Aloth scoots awkwardly into a gap on the bench between Edér and Durance (who, Aloth notes, seems to be deliberately keeping his distance from the Eothasian). A pretty aumaua barmaid thrusts a cup of amber liquid into his hand and whirls off, skirt trailing behind her. The rain has forced throngs of people inside, and the inn is full to overflowing. The noise and movement make Aloth dizzy and overwhelmed. *Keep yer head, lad*, Iselmyr cautions him. *Just a bit o’ jawin and off to bed.*

Around him, the other members of the watcher’s party chatter. He lifts his cup to his lips and drinks deeply. The ale is sour, but it warms his stomach and loosens his limbs. After a few minutes, Aloth’s shoulders relax and he settles into his place among the others, content to let his attention drift as they carry on.

He gazes around the tavern and makes eye contact with Ren. She winks. Another day, Aloth knows he would blush and wither (or else be subjected a smart remark from Iselmyr), but tonight he just smiles back, feeling happy and safe and a bit stupid. It might be the ale, he thinks, or it might be the sturdy pressure of Edér’s leg against his. The man, sitting close beside him on a bench, is presently trying to coax Ituumak from Sagani’s side with a bit of jerky, cooing at the fox while Kana distracts Sagani with a barrage of questions about

Naasitaq. Edér whirls his head around surreptitiously, catches Aloth's eye, grins, and returns his attention to Ituumak. Aloth blushes. It's probably the ale.

Outside, the storm bears down on the city, slicking cobbled streets and rattling window panes. Eventually, the watcher yawns and announces she's off to bed. The others trickle away after her—Ituumak trotting ahead of Sagani, Kana humming jovially, and Durance wild-eyed and mumbling—until just the two of them remain. Edér looks over at him.

"I'd take a campfire in the woods over this kind of place any day," he says. "Haven't seen a crowd like that since the Reaping festivals in Gilded Vale."

"Really?" says Aloth. "I would expect you to miss home." There's no excuse now for them to be sitting so close together now, but he can't bring himself to move. Edér snorts.

"Member when you called Gilded Vale a mud hole?" Aloth winces. "You hit the nail on the head."

"I have no fondness of home either. Traveling is far more interesting."

"Right. Better views. Better pay." Edér glances over at him and adds, "Better company." Aloth chokes on his ale.

"I-indeed?" he sputters, thumping his chest buffoonishly. Edér appears to be stifling a laugh. When he regains his composure, Aloth snaps, "Considering your neighbors' bloodlust, that's a very low bar."

"Hah! You're right about that. Just meant it's been...nice, uh, traveling together. Havin' someone to talk to." Edér's voice sounds oddly shaky. Aloth is acutely aware that their legs are still pressed together.

"It has," he agrees. He looks over at Edér and sees that the man's cheeks are flushed. His heart leaps in his chest. Surely, Edér is saying what he, Aloth, thinks he's saying. Why, then, is he so afraid to believe it?

Edér meets his eyes with a steady gaze, and Aloth feels the man's fingertips brush his knee. He can't say how long they stay that way, eyes locked, caught in the moment like flies in amber. Finally, Aloth clears his throat.

"Well! I am rather tired," he says, cursing his cowardice. "I think I'll retire for the evening."

"Guess it's gettin' late," agrees Edér. "I'll follow you."

Together, the two of them rise from the bench and make their way in silence from the dining hall up the long wooden staircase.

"Hey," Edér whispers as they reach the top of the stairs. For what must be the fifth time tonight, Aloth's stomach flips over. "Hey!" Edér catches his wrist playfully. Aloth looks down at the man's fingers and tenses. A deep discomfort is welling up from below his ribcage. His thoughts catch in a web of social mores, courtship rituals, etiquette—Aedyran

values he'd never much cared for. But he's now painfully aware of how kith back in Aedyr would react to such impropriety.

"Forgive me," Aloth says, drawing his hand from Edér's. "I..." How often does he find himself searching for a reason to push someone away? Aloth folds his arms across his chest, and Edér's eyes widen, mischief melting from his face so quickly the elf wonders if he imagined it.

"Oh." He sounds like the wind's been knocked out of him. "Oh hel, Aloth, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. We were, uh, getting along, and it seemed like you—" Edér cuts himself short when he catches Aloth's eye. "I mean, I just got carried away." That guilty voice could break anyone's heart, thinks Aloth miserably, even as he takes a step back. He feels a spark of anger that he knows is Iselmyr, ever frustrated with his inaction. Edér continues, "I really do like spending time with you, is all, and I thought...I mean, I didn't think, guess that's kinda my problem; I just—"

"Edér." Aloth resists the urge to stare down at his hands. Edér is looking at him intently, brow still furrowed with guilt and concern. Everything he can think to say terrifies him; it all feels too raw, too open. Although he recoils at the vulnerability, far worse is the thought of leaving Edér in the dark. Of leaving Edér in pain. He steels himself with a breath.

"I forget, sometimes, that we share a language but not a culture. Aedyrans are far more formal in their...couplings. For better or for worse, it takes a great deal of energy—or a great deal of alcohol—for me to leave these sensibilities behind.

"More than that, isolation has been a necessity since my awakening. It's simply not safe to risk someone else knowing of Iselmyr, even when I..." he swallows. "...When I wish to know them better." By now, cautious hope has leaked into Edér's expression. Aloth's insides wriggle with what's either discomfort or giddiness. "Believe me when I say my reluctance is not for lack of interest." Edér lets out a long breath.

"It's a relief to hear that. I was startin' to think maybe I really was as dumb as folks take me for." There's genuine hurt under his crooked grin.

"I'm sorry to have caused you grief," Aloth murmurs. Edér shakes his head.

"Like I said, it's a relief to know how you feel, and I'd like us to be closer. But if you don't want to" —he clears his throat— "*couple*, well, I'll like you all the same."

"No!" Aloth says, far too quickly. "That is, I do. Ahem, wish to be closer." He uncrosses his arms and lets them fall to his sides. "I only ask for your understanding."

"Course," comes Edér's whispered reply. Emboldened, the elf steps closer. Edér gives him an uncertain smile. It suddenly feels to Aloth...not urgent, exactly, but very important to continue closing the space between them, so he steps forward again and touches Edér's arm.

The man looks down at the slender hand like it's woken him from a dream before fixing his eyes on Aloth's. He appears to be holding his breath. His face is close now, and Aloth finds himself leaning closer—near enough to see the bit of dust in his blond eyelashes, to notice

the faint white scar on his upper lip. He realizes Edér must be leaning in too, because suddenly his lips are much closer, parted slightly, and Aloth can feel the warm wind of his exhale. At last, Edér's lips meet his own.

The hallway is quiet but for the shifting of fabric and limbs as they adjust to one another. Edér's hand finds Aloth's jaw and urges him closer. When their mouths part, the elf buries his face into Edér's chest to hide his grin. He feels strangely light, as if he might float away. Edér pulls him into an embrace, breathing into his dark hair. For a moment, they just stay that way, wrapped up in each other, until Edér pulls back and gestures to his room.

"D'you want to...? No pressure, o' course, only it's a real public place to kiss." Aloth considers his options. A shapeless but familiar fear snakes into his mind. He knows this feeling; it won't leave him until he's alone. Less familiar is Edér, despite his easy grin and kind eyes. Still, Aloth *wants* to trust him.

Then there's the issue of Iselmyr. She's never been shy in her opinions of Aloth's romantic life (or, more often, lack thereof), but with his nerves wound so tight, she's dangerously unpredictable. Resolved, Aloth looks back at his waiting companion.

"I do. But, I believe I need a moment with Iselmyr." He grimaces and adds, "I'd rather she didn't make an appearance." Edér smiles.

"You can just...knock when you're done then." The man steps into the room and lets the door close, leaving Aloth alone in the quiet hallway.

Focus. He just needs to focus. Iselmyr's presence swells in his mind.

*Look at ye, she squawks. Ye've warmed right up to this 'un!* She sounds practically gleeful.

"He is gentler than most."

*Aye, an' more strapping, too.* Aloth rolls his eyes. *Now say what it is ye're thinkin'.*

"I must ask you not to intervene tonight," he whispers. "Please. Let me do this alone." At his own words, Aloth feels a flare of anger in his gut that doesn't belong to him.

*I look out for us both, lad. But ye'd conne that already were ye not so busy runnin' away. How long has it been since you had anyone? Since ye had even a friend?*

"It would be easier if I didn't need to worry I'd be interrupted," Aloth replies icily.

*And watch ye lose yer head o'er each wee choice?*

"At least they would be mine."

*Ye cannae pretend I'm nere a help!* Her voice becomes sneering. *What would ye have done to them village folk? To yer auld man?*

"I—I would have come up with something!" Aloth snaps, dropping his whisper altogether. "You've never given me a chance." He steadies himself with a deep breath. "You want me

to...be with Edér?"

*Aye, I want ye to show the lad ye can work yer tongue on more than funny spell words!*  
Aloth's lips curl with distaste.

"Then you have to promise me you won't interfere. At all. No matter what." His eyebrows furrow as Iselmyr sulks.

*I'll nye stand twix ye and a kindling touch*, she says at last. Then, in a tone laced with venom, she adds, *but if it all goes to shite, dinna call for no help from me*. With that, Iselmyr recedes into his mind like a sinister fog. Aloth can barely sense her; she feels less present than she has in years. A good sign, he thinks, doing his best to ignore her foreboding parting words. He raises his knuckles to Edér's door and knocks once. The man greets him with a coy smile.

"Did you two come to an agreement?" Aloth grits his teeth against her inevitable quip, but Iselmyr says nothing. Whatever her doubt, it seems she'll hold her end of their bargain.

"She won't be bothering us," he replies. "Of that much I have made certain." He peers past Edér into the room. "May I?" Edér nods and steps back to allow the elf in, closing the door behind him. Aloth flushes when he sees that he's shed his armor and shirt.

"You alright?" Edér asks. Aloth nods, wide-eyed. "Is this...alright?" He nods again and places a shaking hand on Edér's chest. He shifts his weight, anxious, but then Edér's warm hand closes around his own and he pulls him into a kiss.

It's less chaste now—less timid. Edér pushes his fingers through Aloth's hair and a desperate noise escapes his throat. Edér grins into his mouth, nips his bottom lip, and pulls him back towards the bed. Aloth nearly trips after him, shrugging off his own armor in a few fluid movements, and tumbles into the bed. He reaches out to Edér's face and, with a tenderness that surprises him, traces the man's hairline. Vaguely, he curses himself for avoiding this, fearing this. Edér beams at him, and then they're kissing again.

It's not as careful as Aloth would like, when their hands find each other at last. There's fumbling and awkward pauses and nervous laughter. They can't seem to coordinate their bodies—never quite moving in time or breathing the same rhythm. All the same, when at last Edér stills with a shuddering gasp, Aloth follows close behind.

After, they sit on the edge of the bed together, not quite leaning into one another. Edér, loose-limbed and utterly relaxed, gives Aloth a radiant grin that he can't bring himself to return. The ease of their closeness has left him, and the shapeless fear, subdued as they'd touched, coils through his thoughts once again. He'd been relieved by Iselmyr's promise to stay away, but he feels unpleasantly naked without her, like his mind, too, is undressed.

"You wanna tell me what you're thinkin'?" Edér says. He taps Aloth's forehead teasingly. "You got that look, like you're...well, like you're thinkin' real hard." Aloth forces a smile.

"Never let it be said that you're not articulate," he replies. He turns to face Edér. He wonders how the man would react if he described the anxiety twisting in his ribcage. The idea is nearly unthinkable. "I suppose I am distracted. Forgive me; I have little to say."

Edér shrugs and turns away, apparently unphased, and looks for something to occupy his attention. Aloth only half-watches him scan the room, so it barely registers when Edér's eyes fall on a missive resting among his things. The envelope is sealed with red wax stamped with an indistinct symbol. A key, perhaps.

Aloth realizes what's happening as Edér pulls the missive from atop his grimoire. He blanches and makes a strangled noise, then yanks the letter from Edér's hands with graceless panic. "Don't you know not to read other people's mail?" he snaps, willing himself to sound angry rather than guilty. Edér, utterly oblivious, grins and makes to steal it back. Moving with impressive speed for a man his size, he lunges playfully at Aloth.

It happens in a moment. He is being lunged at by a large man, and he has been here before; suddenly, he is a child cowering on the floor of his Aedyran home. There's no time to think, just raw animal instinct, and so he flinches, bracing himself for a blow....

...But the blow never comes. Instead, when he opens his eyes seconds later, he sees Edér pale-faced and wearing a strange expression. It takes Aloth a moment to realize the expression is fear. The man reaches out to touch his cheek, and his hand is trembling.

Aloth knows he can't explain the missive, much less his overreaction. He feels nauseous. He has allowed Edér far too close; he has been too trusting—mistakes he can't afford to make again. He has been a fool. He can scarcely remember the last time he was lunged at. *Because Iselmyr was there*, sings a bitter voice in his mind. This time, he was alone. He stands up abruptly and stumbles backwards off the bed, heart pounding in his throat.

Edér's eyes haven't left him. Brow creased, he opens his mouth in a soundless question.

"I really should go," Aloth says. He begins tugging his clothes on.

"Aloth," whispers Edér. His voice is hoarse.

"The evening was nice," he says to his unlaced boot. "Lovely. But it's *quite* late."

"Aloth, what—"

"Thank you for, ah, that is, I mean to say—good night, Edér." With a last frantic look around the room, he scoops his grimoire into his arms and scrambles out the door.

In the hallway, he sinks to the ground. The crowded tavern feels like a lifetime away. He lets out a long breath and notices for the first time that his face is wet with tears. And then his limbs tingle and an old energy strains his chest and her voice is on his lips once more.

*Lad! Get ahold o' yerself.*

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you planned that from start to finish," Aloth says. He's too tired to be angry.

*Ye conne I didn't. I told ye before: I look out for us both.* She sounds subdued—almost tender. Aloth hates it: he hates being treated like a frightened animal. Edér's face swims in his mind, wide eyed and full of concern. He feels pathetic.



*Take a breath an' take stock o' yer circumstance*, she says. *Ye're no worse for wear*. Aloth can't summon the energy to argue. He closes his eyes and leans back against the wall, breathing deeply, and makes a silent bargain with any god that's listening that he'll join the priesthood if it means never looking Edér in the eye again. Aloth doubts he's ever been more exhausted, but the thought of sleeping is laughable. His eyes drift to the door at the far end of the hall. It's ajar.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Aloth approaches the door to the balcony, he finds the watcher already there, leaning over the railing into the rainy night. Her ears twitch at his footsteps. Aloth pauses at the threshold, uncertain, until she jerks her head to beckon him. He steps up to the railing and looks over at her. Dark circles ring her yellow eyes, and Aloth knows this isn't her first sleepless night. For the first time, he appreciates the gravity of what their travels mean to her, personally. The strange net that's ensnared them all and set them on the trail of the Leaden Key would never have been except that Ren is a watcher. Awakened. His heart wells with empathy.

"Can't sleep?" Ren ventures. Aloth shakes his head stiffly. "Me either." She gives him an appraising look. He knows he would look a mess even if his shoulders weren't still trembling. His left boot is unlaced, his shirt is untucked, and he's digging his fingernails a bit too hard into his grimoire's leather cover. "Want to talk about it?" Another stiff shake of his head, almost imperceptible. "Yeah," she sighs, "me either." She turns back towards the railing and says nothing more.

They sink into an agreeable silence. The storm grounds Aloth: the sharp smell, the drops on his face, the steady tattoo of rain on the tin roof. His eyelids feel very heavy. He rests his chin on his hands and, thinking that he should go to his room soon, allows his eyes to close.

When he opens them again, a brilliant dawn has unfurled in the eastern sky. The watcher is nowhere in sight. For a moment, Aloth feels only the impossible newness of the day. The events of the previous night seem very distant, and he wonders if he dreamed them. But then he remembers the scratch of Edér's beard—the fear in his eyes—and a wave of dread crashes over him.

Aloth gazes out at the cloudless sky and resolves to focus on their mission alone. He knows they'll stall no longer. The storm has passed. Their journey continues.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter takes place after "Never Far From the Queen" but before the next main storyline quests or any companion quests.

# The Midwife and the Memory

## Chapter Summary

*The watcher nods to the adjacent table, and Aloth notices for the first time that it is occupied by a cloaked folk woman darning a sock. Her wrists are strung with tiny bells. At the watcher's mention, she pauses her handwork. Her long hair—dark and streaked with grey—veils her face, but Aloth has the distinct impression that she is looking up at him. Given the noise of the bells, it's strange that he didn't notice her earlier.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth is not doing well. Things between him and Edér are tense, and his strategy—ignoring it and hoping it goes away—is not working. The party goes to Dyrford, the watcher makes a new friend and a shaky promise, and Aloth has a very enlightening conversation.

## Chapter Notes

This chapter was very challenging to write (when I drafted the fic, I had only a single vague sentence about Grieving Mother under this chapter heading), so I am very happy to post it in its completed form now. Thanks to the handful of people who have subscribed, commented, or left kudos on this work. They make my day every time.

Check the end notes for the specific in-game quests referenced in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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*The village of Dyrford is still in the dusk's shifting light. Townsfolk have retired to their homes for the day, leaving dirt roads quiet and empty save for a lone figure kneeling on a dry patch of grass. A soft breeze carries the liminal scent of Préauton. On the leaves, a blush of reddish orange. The only sound is the ringing of bells—distant, as if heard through a wall, or in a memory. It is, as far as anyone can tell, a peaceful evening in a peaceful town.*

*But there is something wrong about the village of Dyrford. The air is soured by a malevolence that seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It poisons the space between people, making them distant and tense. They avoid eye contact. They keep to themselves. It's hard to pinpoint and harder to talk about, and so the people of Dyrford don't talk about it at all. Silently, the barkeep and the breadmaker and the cobbler and the aging priest all bear the vague haze of dread that has settled into their lives, and, over time, have grown so accustomed to it that they can't recall how it was before.*

*On the patch of grass, the solitary figure shifts. Their build suggests a folk woman, but any identifying characteristics beyond this are hidden by loose, drab clothing. A hood, drawn close around her face, casts a shadow on her features. Her tunic is simple and unornamented. In fact, the color of her garb so closely matches the dirty ground beneath her that anyone looking in her direction would likely not see her at all. A string of tiny bells hangs from each of her thin wrists, their sound sweetening the air as she rises, alert, and begins to walk.*

*Something unusual has ridden in on the evening breeze. She can sense it. It bears the spiritual imprint of soul energy: an aura, and a powerful one at that. It's still distant, but even from far away, its presence eclipses the town's foul atmosphere and threatens to overwhelm her. She feels dizzy. She's walking quickly now, seeking a new vantage as she allows her intuition to guide her towards the aura's source. This is an energy she recognizes. It's been years since she felt it last (how long? she wonders; time means so little to her now), but the emotional signature is unmistakable. This is the aura of a watcher.*

\* \* \* \* \*

No sooner has the watcher crested the hill into Stormwall Gorge than the group is set upon by a pair of adragans. They're traveling later than usual with miles to go yet, and they'd lapsed into weary silence as they'd followed their long shadows eastward along the path. Still, they're quick to react: Edér leaps into the fray with Pallegina close behind, Ren begins reciting a druidic incantation, and Sagani and Aloth each assume a distant vantage point. The party has been traveling together long enough now to trust each other and, more importantly, the watcher. They move as a team, anticipating each other's strategies and planning accordingly.

But the adragans move quickly too, and, though they're outnumbered by the watcher and her companions, they're not outmatched. The party is tired from traveling so late; they're not at their best, and their foes have the upper hand in the unfamiliar terrain. Before long, a torrent of wild magic strikes Sagani square in the chest and she folds over, unconscious.

Pallegina runs to her aid with Itumaak dashing after her, leaving Edér alone against their foes. Alarmed, Aloth aims a petrifying curse at the closer adragan, but he can't get a clean shot; they're all moving too fast, and the adragans double down on Edér with renewed ferocity.

Aloth falls further back to regroup. He knows they shouldn't be traveling so close to sundown, when beasts and spirits are most active. Still, adragans aren't violent by nature, and they certainly don't attack unprovoked. He wonders why the forest spirits are hostile to them, especially with the watcher, a skilled druid, leading their way.

By way of an explanation, Ren shouts, "Aloth, ruins!" as he steps backward. And indeed, when he looks behind him, he sees a ring of stone columns surrounding a circular inset. The structure is distinctly Engwithan and, it strikes Aloth, undoubtedly important to the adragans. A rare flash of inspiration takes hold of him, illuminating in his mind the way forward. Aloth turns towards the ruins and runs.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She'd been a girl, really, the first time she sensed an aura, no older than thirteen. She had just begun her apprenticeship with the local midwife. They were at the market buying herbs the day it had happened. The aura had appeared without fanfare—a haze in her periphery—and at first she had taken it for a mirage: a trick the evening light played with the nearby adra column.*

*Only it couldn't be that. No mirage she could think of would stay so fixed as she moved. And there was certainly no trick of the light that would cling to one person the way this shimmering fog wrapped itself around the dwarven merchant. She'd stared at it long enough to earn a rebuke from the midwife, who'd shooed her away with a waving of hands and an apologetic look at the merchant.*

*The man and his strange haze had hung in her mind. She was sure no one else had seen it, and, more, she couldn't shake the feeling that it meant something—that its color, shape, and movement were somehow an expression of the man's soul. It was taboo, she knew, to study such things; the soul was the domain of animancers or registered ciphers, and even they were restrained by the Palatinate's hand. To study or manipulate the soul independently, as a rogue cipher or a watcher, was strictly verboten.*

*Still, she hoped she would see an aura again. It was beautiful.*

\* \* \* \* \*

In the years that follow, Aloth will falter when asked about the fight with the adragan outside of Lle a Rhemen. He'll say he doesn't know whether it was he or Iselmyr that had moved his feet to the circle of stone—that, in fact, in that moment it had been impossible to tell himself apart from her. He will say only that it was as if he was watching himself from above as he sprinted into the ruined henge.

He'll think, years later, that the flash of emotion in his gut was not inspiration at all but hubris, and that it didn't so much illuminate his surroundings as blind him.

In the moment, he thinks nothing, just feels the rush of the wind on his face as he runs and the frantic thrill in his limbs when he sees one of the adragans peel away from Edér and dart after him. He sprints until his boot lands not on grass but on ancient stone. The adragan is within range in moments, and he whirls around just in time to dodge a wicked volley of wild magic. Iselmyr and he are one consciousness now; he barely registers the incantation he shouts, even as his scepter burns in his hand. A fan of flame sweeps across the adragan's face and shoulders, but she lunges forward undeterred and sends out another wild blast.

Aloth rolls to dodge her magic, but it's much too close a call; he has little time to move before she strikes again. As her next blow comes closer still—so close, in fact, that he catches the scent of his own hair singed by her spell—he staggers to his feet and tries hard to ignore the increasingly apparent truth: despite his best efforts, Aloth is slipping.

It had started after that night at the inn, with Edér. At the thought, Aloth feels a sinking in his stomach that has nothing to do with the adragan closing in on him. He'd been furious with himself for allowing his only real connection to slip away, but worse still was the careless, feral part of him that seemed to have been knocked loose by the incident. He's accustomed to

losing control to Iselmyr (not that he likes it), but the last few weeks have been different; his blunders today are the latest in a string of foolhardy moves. As if to prove it to himself, he looks up at the adragan, who's advancing in jerky strides. Aloth pushes the memories out of his mind and raises his scepter again.

She's in close range now, the branchlike claws of her hands swinging viciously out at his face, his chest. Aloth draws his stiletto, but he knows he's already lost: hand-to-hand combat has never been his strong suit, and his magic is nearly exhausted. The adragan shows no signs of tiring; if anything, their proximity has made her fiercer. It's all he can do to swerve her blows and stay on his feet.

Finally, her strike makes contact. She catches Aloth's armor with a jagged claw and drags him to the ground. His chest slams into sharp stone, his scepter clattering down the steps into its sunken center. His surroundings swim in and out of focus. The curved pillars loom over him like the fingers of a massive hand. He tastes blood.

The adragan rears back as if to strike again and then, suddenly, a blade sprouts from her throat. Aloth blinks. Her entire body spasms and, with a sick wet sound, the blade withdraws and the adragan topples forward to reveal Edér in a fighting stance, both hands gripping the hilt of his now-bloodied estoc. The fight is over.

Aloth comes crashing to his senses: he is on the ground; he is injured—nearly bested by a wild spirit; he has been horribly, humiliatingly reckless. And Edér, now standing over him, has just saved his life. Squinting against the last rays of sunlight, Aloth looks up. He knows his wounds are superficial, but he feels fairly certain that if Edér looks into his eyes, the embarrassment might just kill him. Edér is breathing heavily as he lowers his blade. He avoids Aloth's gaze.

Further off, he sees the watcher looking down at the other felled adragan. She nudges the creature's twisted arm into a more natural position with her boot. Sagani, on her feet again and flanked by Pallegina and Itumaak, walks up behind her. Together, they make their way to the stone circle, toward Aloth and Edér.

Aloth struggles to his feet as the watcher approaches and stops in front of him. He expects her to shout at him for being rash, remembering how she'd admonished Edér after their fight with Maerwald. Instead though, she looks him up and down and says "y'alright?"

He wipes the trickle of blood from his lip. "Quite," he manages. "No bones broken."

"Good. If we're all up for the task"—she turns to the rest of the group—"we can still reach Dyrford before we run out of daylight." They nod their assent. Aloth looks out at the others over Ren's shoulders. He's careful to avoid their eyes, but their looks of concern bore into him. Only Edér spares him his gaze, looking instead toward the path to Dyrford Village.

"We should move," he says gruffly. "Ain't got time to waste." Without turning back, he sheaths his estoc and begins along the path.

The weary silence overtakes the group again, and they make the rest of their trek without speaking. By the time they arrive in the village, the sun has set, the streets are deserted, and

Aloth's body is aching from the fight and their journey both.

At the inn, Aloth doesn't wait for the watcher to debrief them or make arrangements; he just shoves a small stack of coins across the counter to the innkeeper, hikes the narrow staircase to his room, and collapses in the bed.

Thoughts of today's fight make him grimace and burn with regret. This is his newest ritual: whether to make peace with himself or punish himself, he spends his last waking moments turning over the day's events in his mind until their hard edges and sharp peaks have been smoothed by his anxious attention. And, when his unease releases him at last, he thinks of Edér.

*Edér.* He still can't believe how close he came to having something like companionship only to ruin it all with his nervousness and secrecy. Aloth can't tell if the man is angry or embarrassed or something else entirely, just that whatever fragile thing they'd built had shattered that night in Copperlane. The morning after, they'd set out for Heritage Hill without so much as looking at each other, and Edér hasn't spoken to him since. And now he, Aloth, is coming undone. He rolls onto his side and squints at the wall.

Feeling angry at nothing in particular, he says "You know, for all your talk of action, your stunt today could have gotten us killed." Iselmyr makes no response. Aloth isn't sure why he's provoking her; after all, it's he, not she, whose recklessness has gotten them into so much trouble lately. He shouldn't pick a fight. He *knows* he shouldn't pick a fight. And yet:

"Now you have nothing to say? Nothing to do?"

Iselmyr is a blaze of pain behind his eyes when she barks back, *Ye want me in charge? Fine, lad; I say tha' fall ye took addled yer brains for ye to be spewin' such shite. Now quit yer jabberin an' rest.*

She snaps his eyes shut and says nothing else, leaving Aloth to simmer in the unfamiliar room. Through the wall, he can hear the creak of a bed as someone turns over. He thinks again of Edér. Eventually, he is swallowed up by sleep, deep and dreamless and absolute.

\* \* \* \* \*

*After that day in the market, she'd learned quickly the nuances of aura reading. She had observed how an aura's color revealed its owner's temperament; how its depth and richness spoke to the age and strength of its owner's soul. Over time, she'd learned, too, how subtle changes in an aura's movement reflected a soul's history, both in its past lives and its current one. Some kith wore their auras like mantles: draped proudly around their bodies, billowing in the shifting energy. Others, though, drew their auras tight: less an expanse and more a shroud, dim and spiritless. And others, still, were capricious, with auras that flickered first dull, then brilliant—now small, now expansive. She could read them all.*

*She had never been prideful by nature, but she has come, in her age, to feel a quiet dignity in her ability to interpret these differences. By now she knows she is standing within the watcher's aura, and vague premonition tells her they will meet soon. There are other auras too, new energy coasting into her awareness in the watcher's wake. It's early in the morning:*

*still dark and still very cold. She settles into the chill in the southeast corner village and waits.*

*When the orlan woman approaches, she knows who it is. The weak light of dawn has just begun trickling into the edges of town, but it bends, prismatic, around the orlan's small frame as she walks. She knows, too, that this woman can see through her illusions, which she casts so often and instinctively as to forget they're there.*

*The orlan woman—the watcher—can see her. And she approaches not with malice or suspicion, but gentle curiosity. Beneath a veil of trepidation, she feels what might be hope.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth wakes early to the shrill chirp of birds outside his room's window. He blinks the sleep from his eyes and, as he stretches, takes a mental account of his aches and injuries: sternum, bruised from the adragan's blow; bottom lip, split and swollen from his fall; palms, raw and scraped. He could have fared worse, he knows. He *has* fared worse, and in better circumstances. Still, the voice in his mind is relentless as it curses his inattention, his stupidity. He dresses quickly and goes downstairs.

Mornings have always been Aloth's favorite time of day: when the din of the world fades away and he can bask in the smooth, careful geometry of his own thoughts. Today, though, he descends the stairs to find the watcher already up, leaning over a steaming mug and chewing her bottom lip. She brightens when she sees him.

"Aloth! Just the mage I wanted to see."

"Well, technically a wizard is not—"

"That's great, friend. Get enough sleep? Restful evening, I hope." Her casual tone isn't enough to mask the piercing look in her eyes. Aloth shifts uncomfortably. "Listen, I'm glad you're up. Do you have a minute?"

"Actually, I rather hoped to take a walk. Alone."

"It's important." She's still giving him that look. It occurs to Aloth that they haven't really spoken since well before yesterday's altercation in Stormwall Gorge. Heat rises in his cheeks.

"If this is about my...about the adragan," he begins, "Please consider this my formal apology. My actions put the group at risk. You have my word that it will not happen again." For a moment, Ren just stares, wearing a small, confused frown. Then she clasps her hands.

"Aloth," she says slowly, "We were *all* tired yesterday. I'm just glad we got out alive. I'm not angry with you." Her frown deepens. "You know that, right? No one is angry with you. I'm, well, *worried* about you." Aloth freezes. This, somehow, is much worse.

"Worried?" he squeaks. "Whatever for?"

"You don't seem like yourself lately. You're normally so..." she gestures vaguely, "fastidious. Attentive. Engaged. I don't want to assume anything, but I can't help but notice

you're spending less time with Edér lately too. It's hard to miss." She bites her lip again.

"I'm sure I don't need to remind you that I share my consciousness with someone distinctly less *fastidious* than myself. If you're so worried about my behavior—"

"Aloth."

Speaking louder, he says, "then perhaps we should go to the sanitarium to sort out my interloper once and for all." At this, she heaves a sigh.

"You know that's not what this is about. But even if it were...are you so sure the sanitarium folks will be able to"—she makes quotes with her hands—"fix' you?"

This is not a possibility Aloth has allowed himself to consider. "I'm certain someone will be able to help. Why, who knows what research they might be—I mean, these are *trained* scientists," he finishes lamely. He screws up his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. Doesn't the watcher understand why he *must* visit the sanitarium? Surely, she of all people recognizes the impossibility of an awakened life. Iselmyr's voice rattles in his skull. Finally, he says, "What choice do I have?"

Instead of answering his question, Ren leans in and says, "I've been thinking about it. All we really need to do here is follow our leads at Clíaban Rilag. It shouldn't take more than a day."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but...I think you should stay at the inn." Seeing Aloth's expression, she holds up a hand. "Hear me out! This way, you'll have time to rest, the rest of us will get in and out, and then we can all be on our merry way. I don't want to spend any more time in Dyrford than necessary. Did you hear the Aedyran talking about his missing daughter last night? Something's off."

"Lord Harond. Indeed." Aloth mulls her proposal over. He's embarrassed by her suggestion, but he's not so proud that he doesn't see the logic in it. And hadn't he wanted for time alone just minutes ago? Still, he's impatient to visit Brackenbury and put his business there to rest. "And when we leave Dyrford?" he asks.

"Back to Defiance Bay. I know a mage—"

"*Wizard.*"

"—who has business at the Brackenbury Sanitarium." The watcher smiles. "I think I owe it to him to make the trip. Besides," she adds, eyeing the spot where Lord Harond had stood the previous night, "this place gives me the creeps."

"Very well," says Aloth. "I cannot pretend I'm at my best. Perhaps a longer rest is in order. And, Ren?" She looks up expectantly. "Thank you. For...your concern."

It's agreed: they will spend no more time in Dyrford. They will not, as they so often do, lend their aid to any stranger that asks for it. The others will go to Clíaban Rilag, do what they must, and then they will all go, finally, to Brackenbury. To the sanitarium.



In exchange, Aloth will sit out their trip to the ruins. He will miss the latest in both the Leaden Key's messy trail and Edér's hunt through his brother's past (though, considering where he stands with Edér, he doubts he'd be privy to any new developments either way). Aloth is nearly lost in thought again when Ren taps him lightly on the shoulder.

"Aloth?" she says. "There's one last thing. I found a...friend. Out in the village this morning. She's staying here as well." The watcher nods to the adjacent table, and Aloth notices for the first time that it is occupied by a cloaked folk woman darning a sock. Her wrists are strung with tiny bells. At the watcher's mention, she pauses her handwork. Her long hair—dark and streaked with grey—veils her face, but Aloth has the distinct impression that she is looking up at him. Given the noise of the bells, it's strange that he didn't notice her earlier.

Stranger still, he can't seem to *look* at her. Aloth can't understand it: he keeps trying to focus on the woman, but his gaze slides off her like water from oiled leather. He's not an expert in illusory craft, but his studies have given him experience enough to know that this, whatever it is, is no magic he's seen before. Iselmyr stirs uneasily.

*Something funny about this bird.* For once, they're of the same mind. Aloth turns back to Ren, who seems to be waiting for something.

She looks from Aloth to the woman and says, "She's a little, uh, peculiar. I think you should try to talk with her. It might help."

"Help who? Me? Or her?" The watcher merely shrugs.

"I'm going to round up the others. We'll leave as soon as we can, and we'll be back in a day—two days, tops. Enjoy your rest, Aloth." Looking again at the cloaked woman, she adds, "And your conversation." With a final nod, she rises from the table and walks away, and then Aloth is alone with the stranger.

\* \* \* \* \*

*In the tavern, she draws the caul close around her and waits while the watcher speaks to an elven man. The world is a haze. This is the price of her Sight: over time, the boundaries between kith and their souls' energies have degraded, leaving her field of vision—and her own soul—a chaotic blur of shapes, formless and indistinct. The effect is all the more powerful in the halo of the watcher's overwhelming aura. Despite the comfort she feels in her presence, she knows she'll be relieved when the watcher leaves and the psychic white noise is quieted.*

*Still, she waits. The watcher speaks gently to the man as if to placate him. He's close enough to reach out and touch her, but he doesn't notice her. No one does. She can see that his soul is a flicker of anxious light, darting out only to retreat when it brushes up against anything else. Flinching. She has seen it before, in children: souls tempered by the heat of violence. How long has the man's soul borne the mark of his past—of his shame, his fear?*

*There is something else, too, the twinned energy of another presence in the aura. It's indisputably the same soul, but sharper in form and brighter in color. An awakening. Most*

*curiously, the two energies seem to be at odds, the anxious flicker and sharp spark each pulling and resisting the other in turn.*

*The watcher motions to her. The man looks, but the caul holds. He is like her: someone who has found it safest to hide himself from the world. When he looks at her, what does he see? In her mind, she seeks out the small, precious hope she felt earlier and holds onto it.*

*The watcher is rising to leave now, and leaving, and now gone, and the whole world is a haze, and she is here, sitting across from the elven man. She finds the hope, and she holds on tight.*

\* \* \* \* \*

From across the table, Aloth peers over at the woman. If she's aware of his presence, she gives no indication; she merely continues darning. Nonplussed, he clears his throat and rises from his chair, resolving to make good on his plan to take a solitary walk. As he turns to go, though, he realizes with alarming certainty that if he leaves the woman's presence, he will not be able to find her again.

Had the watcher wanted him to keep an eye on her? Or was it the other way around? He sits back down and tries to recall the last time he felt so confused. But, maddeningly, the more his thoughts drift and his eyes wander, the more clearly he can see the woman.

It's another enigma: her visage, strangely slippery when glimpsed directly, is easier to focus on in his periphery. Her face is still covered by a curtain of hair, but from the corner of his eye, Aloth can see clearly the bells on her wrists and the gauzy fabric of her cloak. She's still darning the palm of a glove (but wasn't it a sock before?), her thin hands working nimbly at the fabric. He finds himself focusing on the ringing of her bells. The sound is almost watery, as if it's vibrating through something thicker than air.

He ought to make conversation, if not for her then at least for the watcher, who seemed determined that the two of them should speak.

Feeling very stupid, he clears his throat, looks at her (or tries to), and says, "Good morning." She pauses her darning. A good sign. Emboldened, Aloth continues: "Yes, hello. You are a friend of Ren's, correct? Of the watcher's? Very pleased to meet you. My name is Aloth Corfiser. And yours?" And, for good measure, he leans forward in his seat in a mock-bow.

The woman is eerily silent as she sets aside her knitting (but wasn't it darning before?), tucks her hair behind her ear, and folds her hands in her lap. It can't take more than a few seconds, but they drip impossibly into one another until Aloth feels certain that time itself is slowed by her mysterious aspect. Finally, she looks up to meet his eyes, and, like the fog has broken, he sees her clearly for the first time.

The woman—dressed in black, Aloth realizes, and not drab grey—looks thin and old. She looks old the way a ruin looks old: not aged, but weathered. Eroded. Her face is lined, her eyes sunken and hung with dark circles. Aloth thinks in some corner of his mind that, like a ruin, she is also beautiful. Most of all, though, the woman looks sad. For a moment, he just stares, mouth agape, before he remembers himself.

“Hello,” he says again, when his senses return. “What is your name?” The woman meets his eyes, but says nothing. Her lips are pressed into a thin line. Aloth wonders if she’s mute. Or perhaps she speaks another language—is she Glanfathan? “Do you speak Aedyran?”

She tilts her head slightly as if to look at him more closely. As she does so, Aloth feels as though he’s been caught in a sudden gust of wind. The sensation rolls over him—no, *through* him—and his over in an instant. The woman appears not to notice.

Aloth tries to pretend he doesn’t find this unsettling. He can still feel the sting of yesterday’s humiliation, and he’s determined to guard his ego against additional bruises. He *must* find out what there is to know about the stranger. She spoke with the watcher, so she speaks Aedyran. Why doesn’t she respond? He tries a more direct approach.

“Ren seemed to believe we had something to gain by speaking. Do you know what that might be? What business might we have with one another?” The question appears to rouse her; she takes on the confused frown of someone who has been woken unexpectedly in the middle of a dream. When she speaks, her voice is a bell, slow and resonant.

“The watcher...believes we are alike,” she says.

Aloth has no idea what she means. What could he, elven gentry from Aedyr and a trained wizard, have in common with a folk woman from a backwater town in the Dyrwood? Unless she means that she, too, is awakened?

Apparently she senses these thoughts, because she says, “Not awakened. Afraid.”

“Afraid? I’m—well, I’m afraid I don’t follow you,” he stammers.

“I am sorry,” she says, “I cannot explain. But”—she extends her hand, and the air fills with the chime of bells—“perhaps I can show you. If you would permit it.”

*Mind what ye get tangled up in, lad*, Iselmyr cautions. She’s right to be hesitant. The woman is a powerful cipher, unpredictable at best and dangerous at worst. But, as if in response to Iselmyr’s warning, the watcher’s last remark rings out in his mind: *It might help*.

Aloth is tired: of unraveling, of feeling out of control, of the way Edér meets him with stony silence. No matter how he tries, stability eludes him. He’s lost. Though he’s loath to admit it, he *does* need help. He nods at the woman.

“Very well,” he says. She nods in return, and then, for the second time, tilts her head, leaning in slightly, and just...looks at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The man’s soul is a tightly wound coil as she wills her senses into it and wills her own soul open to him. It’s imprecise—empathy always is—and vaguely painful: every memory a wound and every wound a memory unfolding in front of her. All around, the world is still a haze, but in the soul of the stranger, a different world begins to take shape.*

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a particular way Aloth looks at an unfamiliar spell when he first encounters it. Normally, learning a new spell takes diligent study and practice—transcribing the runes, repeating the incantation, understanding the principles of the magic and the school it belongs to. Casting a spell is more than just saying some magic words. The flow of energy must be exact or the spell will do nothing (or worse, blow up in his face).

But, every so often, Aloth has found that if he looks at a spell the right way, he can *see* it. Or rather, see the magic encoded in it. It's never when he's trying for it, and he's given up on trying to predict it; it just...happens. The runes reveal their hidden meanings and the spell rises, unbidden: an ancient language he didn't know he spoke.

She is looking at him that way now: like he's a rune that holds some secret, living magic. She looks at him like the answer is somewhere beyond his body in front of her—not past him but *into* him in some fundamental way. Aloth ought to feel exposed by the sheer intensity of her gaze. Is this how *he* looks, he wonders, when he pores over a new set of runes? Instead, though, it's her that looks vulnerable—totally unguarded—and Aloth can't shake the feeling that he's intruding on something. Her kohl-rimmed eyes are very round and very, very sad. He fights a bizarre impulse to take her by the hand.

This time, when the sensation strikes, Aloth is ready; he bends with the gust of energy as it washes through his chest. And then he sees his own memories through her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She sees only flashes: a happy elven child in his mother's lap; the same child older and anxious, pacing his room; the sound of his parents shouting—his mother crying. The tile floor of his kitchen and the bright-hot pain of his father's boot. A voice on his lips that she knows, intuitively, isn't his; the fear of connection; the pain of isolation. Hooded figures. There are other flashes too, things she recognizes: the midwife's hands, and then her own. Silver adra, the exhausted face of a new mother, the glassy eyes of a hollowborn child. Unbearable grief.*

*It's too much. She can't separate what's hers from what's his—can't tell up from down—and she comes careening back to the present with a gasp.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth hears her sharp inhale at the instant he comes to his own senses. Her retreat leaves him winded and confused, like a drowned man washed ashore. He looks up and sees that she, too, is struggling to adjust: for a few moments, her glamour is destabilized and her whole person is blurry and out of focus. Then her edges sharpen and she's there, looking into his eyes, same as before. She blinks.

"I...see," she says.

Aloth, for his part, does not see. There had been a vision of a frightened young boy in a home fraught with conflict. Him. His home. Why had he been thrust back into a childhood he hasn't thought of in years? Was it, somehow, meant to prove what the woman had said—to show that they were alike? Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

“The vision I saw,” he begins, hesitant, “the—*my* memories. Did you see them too?” The woman’s fearful expression is answer enough.

Aloth closes his eyes. He’s met his share of traditionalists (*bigoted pricks*, thinks Iselmyr) who’ve disapproved of his mother’s haemneg enough to turn a blind eye to his father’s abuses—some who’d even said, in so many words, that he deserved them. But far worse than vitriol is pity. Aloth can’t stand the way some people look at him when they find out: the medic at school whose eyes had welled up in a hollow imitation of empathy, or the handsome older man who, when Aloth had agreed to join him in his room after too much wine, had touched him like he was made of glass. Why should he be reduced to a past he’s never had a say in?

And why, he thinks, should it be shared freely now with some stranger, friend of the watcher’s or not? He clenches his fists as he looks up at her, unable to conceal his frustration.

“I hardly think it fair for you to just—just *barge into my personal history* without so much as a warning.” He’s surprised by the strength of his own anger.

“I am sorry,” she whispers, and she truly sounds it. “When a link is made, I have little control—I cannot guide the Sight. I only meant to show that we both feel—that we—” Something clicks in Aloth’s mind.

“The other things,” he says. “The mother...and the hollowborn. They were *your* memories?” She looks away.

“It is hard to distinguish which are mine. But yes.” The woman touches the bells of one wrist with a shaking hand. “I believe what you saw was a piece of my own past.”

At her admission, Aloth softens. Though the vision had been fragmented, he can still feel the terrible sadness that had flooded her memories. Still, he’s filled with suspicion—a painful history doesn’t absolve her of invading his own past.

Iselmyr must agree, because she says, “*Good an’ well, lass, but yer judgment’s as bust as yer memory if ye think I’ll trust ye after all yer fiddlin’ mind tricks!*” Aloth flushes and clears his throat. “What I *mean* is, a disguise hardly engenders good faith, especially followed by such an, ah, intrusion. With all due respect, if you wish us to trust each other, why begin with deception?”

“The caul.” At her words, the air around her ripples. “A psychic glamour....It is not meant to deceive, merely to hide.” Aloth doesn’t see the difference, but he declines to point this out. “You must understand,” she adds, drawing her brows together in worry, “The caul is not for others. It is for me. I hide because I am afraid.”

“Of what?” asks Aloth. She looks down sadly.

“It was...my own doing. The past has followed me since the Legacy began. My actions—a history I created for myself....I was afraid, then, too.” Aloth can’t begin to guess what she’s talking about, but by now he is resigned to her halting, cryptic speech.

She goes on, but Aloth has the sense that she's forgotten he's there. Her hands sweep the air in an animated show of desperation.

"Before, I could control the link. I could curate the memories." Every movement disturbs the space around her—the thing she calls *the caul*—and sends the bells on her wrists ringing. "I could craft them. Now, I am at their mercy. Even the caul is fickle. Perhaps the loss is deserved....a part of my penance....or perhaps simply claimed by Rymrgand...." She trails off.

"I still don't understand how this makes us alike," Aloth presses. She looks over at him, briefly surprised to see another person. "I'm no cipher; even my magic isn't illusory. And your memories bore little resemblance to mine." *Except that they were both unpleasant*, he adds internally.

"It is inexact," she says. "The memories share not material substance, but an empathic quality. We are alike in pain. In grief. I believe this is why the watcher wanted us to speak." She peers up at him. "I wonder: are you hiding too?"

"Am I..." Aloth frowns. "No! I'm not hiding. At least, not like you." Iselmyr snorts. "*Aye, and I'm her Royal Majesty the Héamcwyn! Ye've done yer share o' duckin' an' dodgin' lad; best not deny it.*"

The woman is unperturbed by Iselmyr's interruption. Leaning forward slightly, she says, "The caul is not so subtle as it first appears. The skilled—even the merely sensitive—are attuned enough to their own souls that it has no effect." She shakes her head. "No, there are other ways of hiding. Anger and violence, humor, passivity...all of these can mask—not identity, but emotion."

"Mask...an emotion?" Aloth's throat feels tight. By now, he's deeply uncomfortable with their conversation's trajectory; this stranger has learned more about him in a morning than anyone else has in years. But, alongside his discomfort, a hunger has emerged. He *wants* to talk with the woman. He wants to understand what connects their shared vision to the relentless tension chipping away at his peace of mind.

*Not awakened*, she had said. *Afraid*.

"You are no stranger to anger weaponized against you," the woman says, and Aloth forces himself to meet her eyes. He can detect no trace of pity. "Even in childhood, you must have known that the root of such anger is shame. Shame, fear...sadness..." She stares off, unfocused, as if remembering something long past. "I have seen the auras. Anger turns the soul's energy outward and conceals its core from others. It cannot live without shame, fear, or sorrow. This is the nature of the caul as well. They are blunt instruments. But the soul can also be concealed from itself." She sighs. "It seems we both know this."

"You said before that you couldn't distinguish your own memories," Aloth ventures. "I can see how *your* soul is 'concealed from itself.' Your memories are lost. But..." He pauses.

Aloth is a quick study. He knows what she is suggesting. On some level, he has known for a very long time; he is all too familiar with deflection, avoidance. "But I *do* remember," he

says at last, in barely more than a whisper.

“There is always a cost,” the woman intones. “To remember...or to forget.” As she speaks, she begins to move her hands again, almost absently, so that the bells ring in time with her words. “When one cannot safely share pain, one learns to hide it. When one cannot contend with a pain, one learns to escape from it.” She gives him a penetrating look. “Have you never sought security in isolation? Shelter from fear in ritual? Or else in rash action?”

“I—” Aloth is dumbstruck. In his mind’s eye, he sees the recklessness that has plagued him these last weeks. Beyond it, he sees the strict routines, rigid and lonely, that have shaped his life for years. And still beyond, the fear that forces his hand at every turn. Was *this*, after all, what the two of them shared? Souls transformed by suffering? Lives shaped by fear?

“There is always a cost,” she says again. “Kith trade pain for pain. Your soul, mine, the war and the Legacy...all cycles in our world. Here is what I can offer you, friend of the watcher: a soul may tell me its history, but,”—her voice sounds grave, earnest, and somehow more *real* than before—“only *you* know if the cost of hiding exceeds the cost of enduring what there is to endure.”

“I see,” Aloth says, and he finds that he means it. For a moment, neither of them speaks. Their conversation has left him feeling tired and confused, but also, he notes, relieved. At midday, the tavern is still mostly empty, and Aloth has a strong hunch that anyone who looked their way would see only him, alone at the table. Eventually, he breaks the silence.

“Er,” he begins. He realizes he still doesn’t know her name. “Permit me one more question.” The woman nods in response. “How did you come to know all this?”

“I am....a practiced listener. All souls tell stories. I listen.” The finality in her voice tells him their visit is over. But, as he rises to leave, she adds, “Thank you. For seeing me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Aloth sleeps in. He’d spent the remainder of his day walking a path on the outskirts of the village, trying to make sense of his encounter with the strange woman and determined not to let her slip from his memories. Her words seemed to have dispelled his anxiety, at least for the time being, and it had felt liberating to tackle a new challenge unburdened by fear. In the evening, he’d retired to his room and slept soundly through the night.

His room is flooded with sunlight by the time he rises and hurries downstairs. The new day brings the promise of the group’s return and their visit to the sanitarium, and, despite the watcher’s cautions, Aloth is eager to make the trip. In the tavern, he sees no sign of the strange, nameless woman. Whether she’s merely undetectable or genuinely absent, Aloth doesn’t know, but he has the sense that they’ve not seen the last of each other. With his grimoire for company, he selects an empty table and waits.

It’s mid-afternoon when the party returns to the village. Edér, Pallegina, and Sagani retreat to their rooms, and so the watcher alone finds Aloth at the table, fingers steepled and lost in thought. She slides onto the bench next to him and nudges him lightly with her elbow.

“Hello, Aloth.” She’s smiling.

“Welcome back,” says Aloth. “I trust things went smoothly at Clíaban Rilag?” She snorts.

“Things never go smoothly,” she says. A beat, and then: “So....did the two of you talk?”

“Actually, we did,” says Aloth. “You were right, by the way.” She raises her eyebrows inquisitively. Aloth smiles and adds, “It did help.”

“Help who? You? Or her?” Still smiling, Aloth shrugs. He wonders if Ren knows where the woman has gone, and he opens his mouth to ask when Itumaak bounds down the stairs, followed by Sagani. Pallegina and Edér trail behind her, looking tired and disheveled. Ren rises.

“Ready to go?” she says. Edér offers a humorless smile.

“As we’ll ever be,” he drawls. The watcher directs her attention to Aloth. She’s wearing an expression he can’t read, and he’s unsettled by the abrupt end to their friendly chat.

“Go?” he says. “Go where?”

“We’ve got one last errand in town,” Ren explains. “Aloth, you should come for this one. You too,” she adds, nodding to the cloaked woman (how long has she been standing there?). With that, she hoists her bag over her shoulder and marches out the door, the others trodding along behind her and Aloth scrambling to catch up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sagani fills him in as they walk.

“We’ve been busy,” she says. “More to do than just visit Clíaban Rilag. The watcher’s been investigating that missing girl. It reeks of foul play—almost like the whole town’s in on it.”

Pallegina chimes in, “Ac. The subject makes people here very tight-lipped. We have uncovered a lead at the curriery.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Aloth sees the woman walking just behind the watcher. He notes, unsurprised, that no one else seems to notice her. Edér lags behind, quiet and surly. He returns his focus to Pallegina and Sagani.

“The curriery? And what is it we expect to find there?” Sagani blanches and looks to the watcher.

“Best if you hear it from her.” And she’ll say nothing more about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the curriery’s back chamber, the air is thick with the alkaline stench of leather cures, but tinged with something else. Something worse. Aloth’s eyes water as he gazes around the room. Behind him, Sagani holds a hand over her mouth. Silently, the others file into the space



and allow their eyes to fall on the small trapdoor by the northwestern wall, open to reveal a ladder. And then Aloth realizes what will happen next. He looks to Ren, stricken.

“Aloth,” she begins. For once, she looks truly uncomfortable. “I promised we’d go back to Brackenbury. And we will, really.” She won’t meet his eyes. “I’m not in the habit of breaking promises.” He knows what’s coming before she says it. “But...we can’t leave Dyrford yet. We can’t—I can’t let this go on.” Her voice is a plea. “You understand, don’t you? This whole town is sick.”

“Of course,” he lies easily. She’s right, after all. How could they leave a wrong unrighted? “I understand completely.” Aloth knows she’s right. Still, his stomach sinks as she turns back to the trapdoor.

Not for the first time, he finds his gaze drifting to Edér. Edér pulls his eyes from the trapdoor and looks back at him steadily, as if he’s a thing in the distance. For a moment, Aloth is sure he sees something else cross his face—empathy, or regret, or perhaps just sadness—and then he blinks and it’s gone. Edér looks to the watcher for instruction, his face a mask.

The party begins filing through the trapdoor. They will go to Brackenbury soon, Aloth assures himself. First, they must face the unknown wickedness that waits for them in the bowels of Dyrford Village. Bracing himself for whatever they might find, Aloth descends the ladder into the darkness below.

## Chapter End Notes

For this timeline to work, the party would complete "Undying Heritage" and then head to Dyrford to complete "Through Death's Gate." They haven't visited the sanitarium and thus haven't completed "The Man Who Waits" or Aloth's side quest. I concede that this would be a weird way to do it, since you'd have to leave Defiance Bay, but that's the power of fanfiction, baby 😊

The quest they're dealing with in Dyrford—the one that concerns Lord Harond and Aelys—is, of course, "Blood Legacy."

# Defiance Bay again

## Chapter Summary

*Edér looks over at Aloth, who stares determinedly at a loose thread on his pants leg. “You don’t gotta keep everything to yourself,” says Edér. Then, more gently: “but I understand why you would.” And to Aloth’s surprise, the larger man reaches over to clasp his shoulder.*

*Aloth opens his mouth instinctively to make what he knows will be a vain defense, but he thinks better of it. Instead, he nods. Edér is right—it is eating at him—and, more importantly, Edér is here. How is it that Edér is always here?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Aloth's visit to the sanitarium leaves him feeling anything but resolution, but he finds that, if he can only let them, things fall into place on their own terms. Case in point: he and Edér. Our boys wander through a series of vignettes in the city. Sadness, old memories, new growth. On the horizon, the next chapter of the watcher's journey looms.

## Chapter Notes

Guess who's back? This is the first chapter I wrote when I began conceiving this story over a year (!) ago. It has changed immensely since its first drafts, and I'm excited to bring it to you now in its finished (well, as much as anything is ever finished...) form. Your views and comments, as always, fill me with joy, gratitude, and humility.

You know the drill: check the end notes for the (spoiler-y) references to in-game events in this chapter. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A brilliant sun illuminates the tidy streets of Brackenbury. Outside, daylight warms the cobbled walkways; inside, it pools on fine wood floors and makes shapes under windows. Only the lower level of Brackenbury Sanitarium is spared. The dingy patient ward has all the warmth of a tomb, and from the offices—windowless and dim—it would be impossible to guess if it were midday or the dead of night. It’s in one such office that Aloth Corfiser now sits, picking bits of fuzz from an ochre-colored couch and retracing the steps (and missteps) that have led him to this point.

In the end, they’d chosen a small group to scope out the sanitarium: the watcher and Edér were to follow Aloth into the office of the resident expert on awakened souls, while Kana and Sagani would roam the patient ward searching for signs of the Leaden Key. It’s a pragmatic plan, true to the watcher’s style, but Aloth has mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, he’s

been aching to resolve the issue of his awakening, and he's relieved to do so in the privacy of a smaller group. On the other, Edér would be there.

In the horrors below Dyrford Village, the cold silence between him and Edér had melted away at last. But what's taken its place is an uneasy alliance: a friendship of stiff smiles and polite, idle chatter. Though ought to feel like progress, the lingering tension gnaws at Aloth. More, he *misses* Edér, and he doesn't know how to talk about it.

Aloth is practiced in avoidance and is resigned, failing this, to Iselmyr's trespasses. But here is a problem he cannot hope to resolve except by confronting it—by talking openly with Edér. He's paralyzed.

"Aloth?" The watcher's voice jolts him back to the present. "Are you ready?" The animancer, an eccentric Vailian woman named Bellasege, is hovering behind her holding a mass of copper bands and wearing an expression of poorly concealed enthusiasm. Aloth nods grimly.

"I believe I am. Erm," he adds, as Bellasege begins affixing the copper to his wrists, "Are you quite sure this is safe?" She gives Aloth a look that he suspects is meant to be comforting, but has rather the opposite effect. Aloth closes his eyes. He's beginning to doubt how prudent it is after all to seek answers at the sanitarium, but it's too late to turn back. When Bellasege tells him to talk about his awakening, he screws up his face in concentration and wills himself to remember.

Nothing comes. Aloth's thoughts are a wash of white noise and buzzing copper.

*Of course*, he thinks. He's exhausted himself for years trying to forget his awakening. Why should memories of it make themselves known now? But then the watcher murmurs an encouragement and, at the sound of her voice, something stirs within him. His thoughts carry him to the academy, to his home, to the angry eyes of his father. Mechanically, he opens his mouth and begins to speak.

The next few minutes are available to him only as foggy, half-remembered things—waking dreams in which he plays a starring role. When he comes to, Iselmyr's energy is crowding his senses and, behind the watcher's patient face, Edér is lighting his pipe. He smiles cautiously when Aloth catches his eye.

He'd spoken, he knows, of his home, his father, and his awakening. Though the details of his own words elude him, the memories are alive in his mind with new clarity. He feels faintly sick. From behind a delicate adra scope, Bellasege pores over him and babbles happily about scientific progress. The watcher is speaking quietly to him, and as his senses return, he realizes that she is speaking to Iselmyr too. Whatever Bellasege's experiment accomplished, it could not free Aloth from his awakening—Iselmyr is still here. For all he knows, he's stuck with her.

He passes the remainder of their time with Bellasege in a sour mood and, in a fleeting burst of spite, spirits her notes away while she's distracted. When they split up to find the others and explore the building, Aloth ducks into a damp hallway alone and breathes a sigh of relief.

Bellasege had called the experiment “a success,” Aloth thinks as he walks the patient ward’s corridors. As if he were merely a spectacle: a thing to be studied—understood, even—but never helped.

“This was a mistake,” he whispers to the darkness. *Dinna conne what we expected.* It’s Iselmyr’s thought and his both. If an expert in awakenings couldn’t help him, who could? It was better simply to stay hidden. As if in response, though, the memory of another voice cuts clear through his regret. It’s resonant and familiar and wreathed in ringing bells, and it says, *There is always a cost.*

It’s *odd*, muses Aloth. In Dyrford Village, he had talked with an interesting stranger. At least, he *thinks* he’d talked with an interesting stranger. But, though he can recall fragments of the conversation, he can hardly remember anything about her. There’s only a vague sense of her movements—fluid, like vapor—and a memory of tiny bells ringing. Her words, too, are all but lost, save for when cryptic half-sentences float to the top of his mind.

*There is always a cost.* Aloth remembers how he’d felt after their conversation: lighter, unburdened. And then he remembers that there was *more* to what the stranger said, something about *him*, specifically. Something important. He strains to recall it, and it’s within reach—it’s on the tip of his tongue—

The padding of quiet footsteps interrupts his thoughts. Someone else is here. He can just make out Sagani’s silhouette against the opposite wall as she turns towards him and presses a finger to her lips. Moments later, she’s in front of him, nocking an arrow and taking aim at some unseen enemy at the end of the corridor. Itumaak growls. Just when Aloth thinks the silent wait is worse than any foe, the watcher comes tumbling around the corner, her face contorted with shock and exertion.

“We need to leave! *Now!*” she shouts, and then an animated patchwork of flesh and essence lurches into the light behind her and the fight begins.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the fight is over and their business done, Aloth walks out of the sanitarium with a purpling bruise and a nagging feeling. The group disbands for the day, but he remains in Brackenbury, pacing the sidewalks and trying in vain to collect his thoughts.

The words of the strange woman in Dyrford hover just outside his reach. He can’t shake the feeling that, if only he could commit them to memory, he might find some semblance of inner peace. When Edér finds him on the bench outside the Charred Barrel, Aloth has been staring at the same page of his grimoire for 20 minutes. He doesn’t notice the other man until he waves his hand between Aloth’s face and the page. Aloth starts.

“Edér!” He arranges his face in what he hopes is a polite smile. “What an, er, pleasant surprise.”

“Can I sit?” Edér asks. He gestures at the bench, and Aloth moves over to make space. “Glad I found you. I was thinkin’ I might owe you a thanks.” Aloth draws his brows together.

“Why should you be thanking me?”

“For today.” When Aloth’s expression stays puzzled, he holds up his arm to reveal a long, jagged cut. “One of those animancer’s experiments gave me this. Was about to get a lot worse when a hex of yours solved the problem. So...thanks.”

“As I recall, you did the same for me on the path to Dyrford Village. Consider it a debt repaid.” Aloth bites his lip. Until now, he’s avoided mention of the long silence between them after their night in Copperlane for fear that their tenuous new alliance would shatter. “I never thanked you properly for that, incidentally,” he adds. He knows there’s more to say, but he can’t seem to find the words.

“Don’t mention it,” Edér says, waving his hand. “I was in the area. Didn’t even have to go out of my way. Besides....” Edér looks over at him. His jaw is set, but when he speaks, there’s no bitterness in his voice. “We weren’t talkin’ much then, were we?”

“Ah. No, I suppose we weren’t.”

“Seems like there’s a lot that went unsaid.” There’s a pregnant pause. Aloth fidgets anxiously. When he speaks at last, his voice is unnaturally high.

“I am sorry, you know, for that night.” Edér raises an eyebrow. “For leaving,” Aloth amends. Edér draws his pipe from his mouth.

“I won’t pretend it didn’t hurt,” he says. Aloth winces. “But it’s alright. I never thought it was malice. You looked twice as bad as I felt.” Tapping the ash from his pipe, Edér frowns. “Mostly I was just confused. It’s a little easier t’make sense of now.” He sounds cautious.

“Oh?”

“It is.” Edér shifts, and his face is in shadow. “I didn’t know. ‘Bout your, uh, your parents, that is.” Aloth scowls and opens his mouth to respond when Edér adds, “Guess I’m not the only one whose past has been followin’ me.”

At this, Aloth stops short. He suddenly feels old. Shouldn’t fifty years be enough time to wash away a memory? He’s so much older than the rest of them with still so long to go. The thought makes him unbearably weary. Finally, he says “It was a long time ago.”

“Ain’t it still eatin’ at you though?” asks Eder, in the voice of someone who already knows the answer. Aloth winces again—this, somehow, is painful to hear. He can’t imagine a life in which he’s free to talk about his childhood. In fact, it strikes him, thanks to Iselmyr, he hardly even thinks about it. And what had happened when he’d sent her away that night in Copperlane? Without her interventions, Aloth doubts he’d survive.

Edér looks over at Aloth, who stares determinedly at a loose thread on his pants leg. “You don’t gotta keep everything to yourself,” says Edér. Then, more gently: “but I understand why you would.” And to Aloth’s surprise, the larger man reaches over to clasp his shoulder.

Aloth opens his mouth instinctively to make what he knows will be a vain defense, but he thinks better of it. Instead, he nods. Edér is right—it *is* eating at him—and, more importantly, Edér is here. How is it that Edér is always here? Aloth has never met anyone so consistent, but here he is, solid as ever, gazing at him almost timidly and gripping his shoulder with a broad, tanned palm.

It's the first time they've touched since the night at the inn. Aloth shuts his eyes against the memory. He doesn't want to think of that closeness, of how much he craves closeness or how much it frightened him. He doesn't want to think of the reason closeness frightens him. For a moment, they just sit there, the two men, Aloth relaxing under the weight and warmth of Edér's hand.

When Edér breaks the silence, his voice is low. "It shouldn't have happened to you, awakening or no." This is painful to hear. Aloth wrinkles his nose.

"It shouldn't happen to *anyone*," he replies, defensive again despite himself. The memory of his awakening sets an icy dread creeping through his veins. He ignores the feeling and forces the memory away.

"Aloth..." Edér begins. "It wasn't your fault. You know that, right? You were just a kid." He speaks carefully, like he's not sure how his words will fall. Irritation flares in Aloth's stomach. Somewhere, some wiser part of him thinks: *Why am I angry about this?*

"Edér, there's a reason I haven't spoken with my parents in nearly forty years." His face feels hot. "I don't wish to dwell on it."

Aloth's thoughts are racing. Hadn't the stranger in Dyrford spoken of anger? Hadn't she called it a mask? But Aloth can't bear to think of what he might be masking. He sees by the pained look on Edér's face that he has more to say, and he braces himself for pushback, but, after a pause, the man just nods.

"I understand. Wasn't tryin' to ruffle your feathers." He pulls his hand away.

"Don't let Pallegina hear you." Edér flashes a weak grin before furrowing his brow.

"Only..." He fiddles with his pipe. "I'm here. If you want to talk."

"I appreciate the sentiment," says Aloth doubtfully. His shoulder feels cold where Edér's hand had been.

"'Bout anything!" Edér insists. "It doesn't have to be all serious all the time. I miss...uh, our talks. And all. I know you're real solitary, and I didn't mean to make things weird. I just..." He trails off. Aloth is surprised by the earnest uncertainty in his voice. He's surprised, too, that Edér has missed him.

"Edér?" he says. The man gives him a look of mingled worry and relief. "I would like that a great deal. To talk, I mean." The worry melts from Edér's face. He breaks into a genuine grin, kind and open.

“I’m glad to hear it. That’s—that’s real good to know.” For a moment, they both seem to be at a loss for words. Aloth just stares at Edér, thinking vaguely that, in the fading light, the man’s hair looks like spun gold. Eventually, Edér clears his throat and stands to go, saying, “Reckon I’ll turn in for the night. But...I’ll see you in the morning?” Still lost for words, Aloth just nods.

He stays on the bench as day turns to dusk and dusk to night. It’s only after Edér is long gone and the air has turned cool that Aloth remembers what the strange woman had said to him in Dyrford Village. *Only you know*, she’d insisted, *if the cost of hiding exceeds the cost of enduring what there is to endure*.

Aloth thinks that, somewhere deeper than he cares to look, he already knows the answer. He knows well the cost of hiding. Could there be another way? Some part of him stirs, hopeful. As he rises from the bench to go, Iselmyr speaks.

*An’ here ye thought ye were scuppered, lad! Ye could ha’ fared worse.* She sounds almost smug, but Aloth does not feel annoyed. He tugs thoughtfully at a lock of hair.

“Yes,” he murmurs. “I could have fared worse.”

*Tweren’t so bad after all, is what I’m thinkin’.*

“No,” Aloth agrees. “You’re right. It wasn’t so bad, after all.”

Aloth and Edér fall together in pieces after that, one conversation at a time: incremental, inelegant, but, eventually, whole.

\* \* \* \* \*

It turns out there is still much to do in Defiance Bay. The party’s scrapes in Heritage Hill have earned the watcher a reputation, and nobility and commoners alike petition her for favors and tasks. More, Hadret House’s mysterious patroness, Lady Webb, has set the watcher to winning over the Crucible Knights in time for the duc’s animancy hearings. Aloth finds the endless courying tedious, but the errands give him time to settle into his new rapport with Edér. Things have shifted—he breathes easier in conversation now.

Today, their errands have brought them from Brackenbury to the streets of Ondra’s gift in pursuit of an errant scrivener. Aloth and Edér had volunteered to pair off (not without a pointed look from the watcher), and, as the two of them turn out an alleyway into the open, they find themselves behind quite a different pair—a wide-eyed folk girl and a man who is unmistakably her father. He has the same dark hair and pointed chin, and he’s laughing as the girl tugs at his hand. Aloth’s eyes track the happy child as Edér, oblivious, lists every dog he’s met since leaving Gilded Vale.

True to his word, the man never forces the subject of Aloth’s past. Still, it’s as though a dark corridor in his mind, long sealed away, is now freely passable. In front of them, the man is beaming at his daughter as she points to the ocean. Next to him, Edér seems to be waiting for an answer, but as Aloth watches the father and child, he finds he can’t look away. And so it is that they find themselves walking that corridor today, both hesitant, but both trusting.

Edér bumps his shoulder into Aloth's as they walk to catch his attention. "It's nice to see, huh?" he says, nodding to the pair.

"It's always a relief to see a child in the Dyrwood spared a hollowborn fate."

"That what you were thinkin' about?" The man is more perceptive than he gets credit for, thinks Aloth. He concedes with a small, sad smile.

"They make it look effortless," he murmurs. "And shouldn't it be?"

"The world takes all kinds. I gotta figure raisin' kids is hard. Beyond anyone to know what they're doin' the first time around."

"Mm. I believe my father was doing what he thought was best, albeit in a misguided way. I doubt he ever intended his harm to be so...lasting. In fact, I rather think he wanted my mother's affection—perhaps mine too." Aloth shrugs. "Regardless, I never saw him as anything but a terror."

"Makes sense. You're not alone in havin' to live with the consequences of someone else's mistakes." Edér thumbs the Eothasian pendant at his neck. "But that doesn't make it easy. Or fair, for that matter."

"And you?" Aloth wonders. "While we're on the happy subject?"

Edér chuckles. "Mostly we got along. Thing about growin' up in Gilded Vale is no one's got their hope ridin' on you to turn out special. So it's hard to be a disappointment." He grins and adds, "Guess I still managed though, if you count the attempted hanging."

"I'd assumed your parents played no role in that particular incident," says Aloth.

"That'd be a sharp assumption. To answer your question, though: nah, my folks never did anything like that. Quiet house, 'cept when me and Woden were bein' rowdy. Which was most of the time." He runs his hand through his beard thoughtfully. "Was this kid, though, down the street, name of Betri, whose parents...well, they were just nasty people. I never asked Betri 'bout the bruises, but everyone knew." The memory makes him frown. "Wish I woulda done somethin', looking back."

"It wasn't your responsibility," Aloth says. "You were a child." Then he smiles. "I'm beginning to sound like you." That makes Edér chuckle.

"Careful. I reckon if you sound enough like me, folks'll look at you funny."

"Because I look like an 'Aedyran dandy?'" Aloth chides, fond despite himself.

"No, because *I* sound like me and folks look at me funny." It's Aloth's turn to laugh. Edér looks at him and smiles one of those easy, open smiles. "You remind me of him. Betri." Catching Aloth's wary expression, he adds, "Nah, not 'cause of that! It ain't the family stuff. Honest."

Still faintly suspicious, Aloth asks, "then what?"



“Betri was smart. Really smart. In Gilded Vale, if you knew how to read, it was ‘cause the priest taught you with the prayer book. But Betri, he would sneak into the temple and teach himself.” He chuckles. “He even used to argue with the priest about how to interpret verses. Once he had that down, he learned to write—letters and such, mostly, for other folks in town.”

Aloth tries to imagine growing up in Gilded Vale, one among a gaggle of children in a small home. He can’t decide if this would have been better or worse than the isolation of his family’s Cythwood estate. “What became of him?” he wonders.

“Eventually he got a job as a courier for some Goldpact Knights passing through.” Edér looks over at him, suddenly coy. “What I’m sayin’ is...” He clears his throat. “Seems like you’re that way too. Keen to make sense of things, that is. I don’t just mean readin’ books—you’re sharp. Resourceful.”

“Yes, well, desperation has a way of breeding ingenuity.” Aloth can’t quite hide the edge of cynicism in his voice. “I was prepared to do anything to get as far away from home as possible.” Edér must notice his tone, because he shakes his head.

“It’s more than that though, ain’t it? You can’t tell me it was desperation that had you ranting about the comatose orb—”

“ *Chaotic* ”

“—’s what I said, ‘chromatic orb,’ for a solid ten minutes yesterday.” Aloth is surprised by this observation. He stops walking and stares at Edér in wonder. Edér goes on, “Nah, I see you come alive when you’ve got a challenge to chew on. You got a head for solvin’ problems like no one else.” Aloth feels heat rising in his cheeks.

“Do you...really believe that?” Turning to face him, Edér takes Aloth by the hand.

“Would I lie to you?”

“Perhaps if it would lengthen your list of familiar dogs.”

“Don’t cheapen it,” Edér reproaches, but he’s smiling. Abashed, Aloth just smiles back.

This time, when they kiss, there’s no urgency or nervousness. They just lean into one another in the daylight, each clasping the other’s hand, as if they’d been planning on it. Around them, commoners and merchants walk the street. Aloth does not care. It feels, he thinks, a bit like coming home.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the thick of their business with the Lady of Hadret House, the watcher is summoned to Caed Nua to meet with a guest. She makes the trip with Edér, and, a day later, she returns alone.

“A Saint’s War veteran’s been getting harassed by the Dozens.” she explains, when Aloth wonders about Edér’s absence. “Name of Odeyna Fyrgest. I told her we could lend a hand.

It's lucky Edér came along. He was the right man for the job."

Nearly a week passes before Edér rejoins the party in Copperlane, scattered throughout the district prodding merchants and commoners for leads about a series of disappearances. He approaches Aloth in the marketplace holding a stone the size of a fist and wearing a faraway look that Aloth doesn't recognize.

"Welcome back," Aloth says, cheered to see him. "How was your visit?" Edér doesn't respond. He stares down at the rock, turning it over in his hands. "...Edér?"

"Huh? Oh." Edér meets Aloth's gaze with a smile, but the distant look doesn't leave his eyes. "Was alright. Weird, you know, talkin' about it. After fifteen years."

Aloth nods knowingly and says, "I imagine some memories are difficult to revisit." Edér, though, seems not to hear him. He holds up the rock.

"Odeyna gave me this," he says. Upon closer inspection, Aloth sees that it's not a random stone, but rather a fragment of masonry: the sort of thing that might have once been part of a wall or building. He's about to ask about it when Edér lets his hand fall to his side and says, "Where're you headed? I'll walk with you."

As they walk, Aloth catches Edér up on their tasks and attempts, again, to ask about his visit. But after they finish a lap of the market square, then a side street, then another, Aloth becomes increasingly sure that whatever happened between Edér and the other veteran at Caed Nua was not good. The man responds to his questions in dazed non-answers, and he seems equally unwilling to either talk about the strange stone or to set it aside.

Eventually, Aloth gives up and settles for walking in silence. The two watch their shadows lengthen in the afternoon light as they wind in and out of the streets of Copperlane. Nearly half an hour passes before Edér speaks.

"D'you ever feel stuck?" he asks. The question catches Aloth off guard.

"Oh, well I, ah...How do you mean?"

"I mean, since the war ended I've felt...stuck. Don't think I really realized how stuck until I listened to Odeyna talk about it." Edér's voice is still far-off, but his eyes, Aloth sees, are full of sadness. "Hearin' someone else say what I been afraid to, it woke somethin' up in my mind. I keep thinkin' how we all thought we'd come back to a new life. Find a new normal." As Aloth considers this, he's struck by a disturbing thought.

"Eothas was the god of redemption," he says. "It seems in his absence, the whole country is stuck."

"I've had that thought myself," replies Edér. "Makes sense in a cosmic kind of way, but it ain't much comfort day to day." He gives Aloth a furtive look.

"Sometimes I, uh—" He fumbles with the stone and drops it. It strikes the cobbled ground with surprising force, and a chip the size of a man's thumb breaks off. Edér scowls at the

offending cobblestone. “Well. I miss it. The war, that is.” Aloth stops walking and stares up at him, unable to hide his surprise. “Don’t get me wrong,” Edér adds, a little too quickly, “I—I don’t want to go back.”

Aloth’s voice is gentle when he asks, “Who are you trying to convince?” It’s not a challenge, just a question. Edér sighs.

“I *don’t* want to go back. And I sure don’t want another war...but I want a purpose. Like I said, since then, I’ve been feelin’ stuck. Can’t settle in.” He stoops to pick up the stone again. “It’s like it... *changed* me.” He doesn’t say, *broke me*. His thumb traces the stone’s newly jagged edge. “I don’t know; it sounds crazy.”

But Aloth does know. He knows deep in his gut and down to his very bones the restlessness Edér is describing. He has felt it since well before he left the Cythwood and ever since: the nagging unease in times of stillness, the emptiness where there should be peace. It’s the first time Aloth has heard Edér speak this way, but he’s lived with secrets long enough to know when something is going unsaid.

“Edér,” he says quietly. “Tell me about the rock.”

Without looking at Aloth, Edér speaks.

“Early in the war, people were confused. Didn’t feel like a battle with sides yet—it was just chaos.” His face darkens. “Round that time, there were some Eothasian temples in the Dyrwood that’d house Raedceran soldiers. I guess they figured they owed more to their god than to their neighbors. Or maybe they were just tired of gettin’ picked on.” He punctuates this comment with a shrug, but the action lacks all his usual nonchalance. “Of course, other Dyrwoodans saw ‘em as traitors and handled them accordingly, same as Cold Morn. Burned the temples, killed the people.”

Aloth is quiet. Edér is holding the rock now at eye level now, flat on his palm as if in reverence, or offering. The torchlight makes shadows dance on its surface.

“It’s from a temple of Eothas. Odeyna led a unit up towards New Heomar that made it their business to deal with—” he stops short. Under the stone, his hand is shaking. Aloth raises his own thin hands and cups Edér’s broad one. At the other man’s touch, Edér lets out a long breath. “...with traitors,” he finishes.

“Hardly a restful visit to Caed Nua,” Aloth murmurs. He twists his mouth into an anxious frown. “When the watcher said you were the right person for the job, I doubt this is what she had in mind.”

“She couldn’t have known what she was gettin’ me into.” Edér shakes his head. “Funny thing is, when Odeyna told me what her unit did, I wasn’t mad.” He looks at Aloth, and Aloth is relieved to see the dreamy haze has cleared from his face at last. Instead, his eyes are filled with tears.

“Just feels like all these years later there’s no sense to be made of it,” Edér says. “I got more in common with her than with anyone in a temple.” He gives Aloth a feeble smile as a tear

rolls down his cheek. “More sympathy from an Aedyran stranger than anyone in Gilded Vale.”

*Aye, an’ more friendly attention from ‘is soul on its last turn o’ the wheel!* Aloth snorts. “Go find someone your own age!” he snaps, but there’s no venom in it.

“Anyone ever told you you’re a good listener?” Edér says, a little sheepishly.

For once, Aloth is being entirely sincere when he says “I don’t recall that they have.” His lips twitch upward. “I won’t stand in your way,” he adds, “if you intend to be the first.” Edér laughs and pulls him into a wet, clumsy kiss.

Aloth becomes aware that the two of them are still cupping their hands around the temple fragment. He squeezes Edér’s hand in his as they pull away.

“Given its, ah, symbolic importance, I am sorry the fragment chipped,” Aloth says. Edér shrugs.

“I guess it is just a rock, after all.” With that, he tucks it into the pocket of his trousers.

The sadness around Edér, so thick when he’d rejoined hours earlier, is softer now: not absent but less oppressive, more breathable. The two walk back to the inn hand in hand in the fading light and talk of other, happier things. `

\* \* \* \* \*

They have only one day left to prepare for the Duc’s hearings, when, in Ondra’s Gift, a woman begs them to find her son. They agree and take to the tavern to question patrons. When this fails, they turn to street merchants for leads, then knock on doors. No one knows anything. Disturbed, they comb the piers for signs of the child.

It’s Edér that finds the body, facedown and bloated with decay in the shallows. At first, he doesn’t realize what it is; he turns it over gently and unthinkingly in the water with a muddied boot. When he finds the boy’s eyes, blank and open, staring back at him, he shouts and staggers backwards. The sound alerts the rest of the party, and the watcher’s face takes on a familiar haze as she approaches the lingering soul.

It’s too much. Aloth feels himself slip away: away from the corpse and its stench, away from his own body in front of it, away from the sick horror twisting his stomach into an impossible knot. The watcher might be there, standing knee-deep in the low tide over the body of a child, but Aloth is gone.

In the afternoon, he finds Edér sitting alone on a pier, legs dangling over the shallow water. His eyes are wet and bloodshot. He gives Aloth a watery smile when he approaches.

“Hel of a day, huh?” His smile turns sour as he looks out at the water. “Hel of a world we live in.”

Aloth nods—not in agreement, but in acknowledgement—and says, “Do you mind if I join you?” Edér doesn’t speak, but scoots over and pats the ground next to him. Aloth sits. Below,

a school of tiny fish glimmer and wink in the sunlight. Edér leans away from Aloth and spits into the bay.

“Hollowborns don’t live long, mostly,” he says. “You’d think if you’d seen one dead kid, you’d seen ‘em all.” He laughs a single, bitter laugh. “Guess it’s not one of those things you can get used to.”

Aloth reflects. He isn’t sure when it happened, but at some point in the ebb and flow of their daily conversations, they’ve moved beyond the need for words. So it is that he says nothing as he rests his hand on Edér’s and threads their fingers together.

They sit that way until Edér’s face is dry and the sun has dipped below the horizon. When droplets of dew begin condensing on the rivets of Aloth’s armor, he squeezes Edér’s shoulder and rises to go. Wordlessly, the two of them make their way through the districts of Defiance Bay until they reach the inn in Copperlane. Aloth is so dazed and exhausted by the day’s events that he’s hardly aware of the walk. Only when he and Edér sit down on the bed together does he notice they’ve retired to the same room.

Edér seems as surprised as Aloth by this development; he keeps looking around the room, then at Aloth, then at their still clasped hands like he’s expecting the scene to turn to mist. Finally, a tragic look of understanding overtakes his face.

“Sorry,” he says gruffly. “Wrong day. Long room.” Edér frowns. “Wait. *Long* day. Wrong—”

“Edér.” Edér looks at Aloth expectantly, mouth still hanging open. His hand feels warm in Aloth’s. Aloth smiles. “Will you stay?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, while Edér snores quietly behind him, Aloth remembers the animancy hearings, now just hours away. Aloth has never put much stock in his intuitions, but something in his gut tells him the watcher’s quest has reached a tipping point. So too, he thinks, has his web of secrets.

*‘Twas bound to catch up to ye, lad,* murmurs Iselmyr. *Ye’re runnin’ out o’ road.* Aloth doesn’t argue. “I suppose you think it’s time to come clean?” he asks, only half-joking. She won’t answer directly. Instead, she says *Something’s brewin, ye conne.*

The strange woman in Dyrford had spoken of “enduring what there is to endure.” All at once, Aloth knows he’s done running. The realization soaks into him like dye into fabric, fixed by the sleepy morning air. He falls asleep to the gentle wind of Edér’s exhale and the quiet conviction that, whatever tomorrow brings, he will face it at last.

The in-game events referenced in this chapter are, in order: 1) Two-Sided (obviously), 2) The Hermit of Hadret House, 3) Built to Last (the "errant scrivener" is Vianna), 4) the stronghold event with Odeyna Fyrgest, and 5) Brave Derrin. I think that's all! The rest is just junk from my brain.

# Twin Elms

## Chapter Summary

*They're quiet as they walk the path through Burial Isle, breaking their silence only to shout directives as they fend off beasts and shades. What is there to say? The watcher has led them this far; they will go with her to the end.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The party's journey comes to an end at last.

## Chapter Notes

Hello. I forgot about this fic. I had a breakup, started graduate school, got COVID, came out to my family...what a year. Here is the closing chapter for anyone still thinking about Pillars of Eternity. I am happy to finish this project at last. Check end notes for specific in-game references.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's amazing how quickly the city descends into chaos after the duc is assassinated. No sooner has the party stepped from the ducal palace than rioters are flooding onto the streets holding torches, knives, or makeshift clubs. The watcher leads them southwest, out of First Fires and through the streets of Brackenbury into Hadret House.

Aloth knows what they will find before they ascend the stairs: the air is thick with death. Still, his blood runs cold when he sees Lady Webb's corpse, bloodless and gossamer pale in the moonlight. The watcher's eyes glaze over as the rest of the party stands by. Somewhere in the city, a bell is tolling. Aloth shivers.

On the street outside of Hadret House, a sense of urgency overtakes the party again, and they begin to run in earnest. East into Copperlane, past the Hall of Revealed Mysteries and the now-deserted house of Pursnic they hurry. Light pours from windows of the Goose and Fox, but it's angry and wrong: the torchlight of a mob. Iselmyr's warning echoes in Aloth's mind at the steady rhythm of his soles on the cobblestones: *Ye'r runnin' out o' road.*

It's as they're dashing over the Aedelwyn Bridge that Aloth finally stops them. As he speaks, the watcher's annoyance melts away, replaced first by shock, then concern. Behind her, Aloth can see the others' reactions: Pallegina scowls, Sagani bites her lip, and Hiravias narrows his good eye. He can't bring himself to look at Edér's face. Instead, he looks back to Ren. Her expression is calm.

“I forgive you, Aloth.” She says it like it’s the easiest thing in the world. “But I want you beside me, not behind me.” Ren steps closer and places a small hand on his arm. “I’m not asking you to trade one master for another.”

Aloth releases a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “That would be an honor,” he whispers. Ren’s eyes linger on his for a moment. Then, with a last nod and a small, kind smile, she hoists her pack up over her shoulder and turns back towards the path. Speaking to the group now, she says, “We’ll have to travel through the night. We need to put more distance between us and Defiance bay.” With last glances at Aloth, the others pick up their things or adjust their weapons and turn towards the wilderness.

They trod the path. Leading the way, Ren and Sagani walk together, exchanging travel stories in low voices. Pallegina and Edér, both soldiers at heart, fall into step, solemn and steady. Pallegina’s hand never leaves the hilt of her sword. Hiravias plods along behind them, stopping occasionally to squint at a plant or print in the dirt.

Aloth drags behind. The space is a relief—he’s glad the watcher didn’t belabor his betrayal, but the guilt and sadness of his confession still feel too raw to face. In the peace of the night, the city’s riots seem impossibly distant.

He’s not sure how long he’s been walking when Edér slides up next to him and gives him a sidelong glance. At first, they’re both quiet as they hike through the darkness. Aloth wonders if Edér considers him a traitor and finds that the thought doesn’t frighten him—it only makes him very sad. It’s Aloth, speaking softly, that breaks the silence.

“I could appreciate your company more fully if I knew the reason for it.” Edér sighs.

“You been tangled up with them all this time, huh?”

“I’ve been rather trying to disentangle myself.” He puts his hands up in a gesture of finality, or perhaps apology.

“You know,” Edér says, “I don’t think I ever would have guessed. Could be that you’re awful good at keepin’ secrets. Could be that I’m just a little dense.” He chuckles and taps his own temple. Aloth looks over and sees that, behind Edér’s smile, his eyes—cast down at the dirt road—are full of uncertainty. “That night at the inn...the letter...” Aloth inclines his head.

“You must have questions,” he says. Edér stops walking and looks out at the path that stretches behind Aloth.

“Just one.” A beat. “I’m not mad, not suspicious of you or nothin’ like that. It’s just...we both know you didn’t have to keep that secret. You’ve been open ‘bout other stuff. I really thought you were done keepin’ people at arm’s length.” Still looking ahead, Edér shoves his hands in his pockets and clears his throat. The action seems to Aloth to take a century.

“You could have told us—” Edér’s voice breaks, “—told *me* any time.” He meets Aloth’s gaze at last with round, searching eyes. “So why didn’t you?”



Aloth thinks back to the night they first spoke on the grounds of Caed Nua. He thinks of all the times he came close to telling Edér everything and of the impenetrable fear that, like a bulwark, had prevented him. Protected him.

“This was unlike Iselmyr...or my parents. After all we’d learned about the Leaden Key, the watcher would have good reason to see me gone—or dead. You all would.” He’s surprised by the steadiness of his own voice. Whatever doubt had possessed him before is gone. “I suppose I was afraid.”

“What—you, scared?” Edér teases. Aloth cracks a wry smile.

“As a rule.” His smile fades under Edér’s lingering gaze. “Edér, I am sorry. Truly. For everything.” Shaking his head, Edér reaches out to take Aloth’s hand in his.

“Thanks.” He gives Aloth’s hand a squeeze.

Frowning, Aloth says, “For what?”

“You just...every time I think I got you figured out, there’s somethin’ new.” Edér chuckles. “And it ain’t like I’m an outsider; I get to—to be a part of it. Feels good to be trusted, I guess.” He beams at Aloth, and suddenly Aloth is filled with a warm, fluttery emotion he can’t place. *Oh*, he thinks. *Oh*. Edér goes on: “You never stop surprisin’ me, you know that?” And he draws the other man into an embrace without waiting for a reply.

“I should say the same for you,” whispers Aloth, when they finally pull apart. Some distant part of him becomes aware that they’ve fallen far enough behind the others to worry them, but he finds he doesn’t care. Edér just grins and kisses him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

It’s morning when the party reaches Twin Elms, exhausted from the sleepless night and worse for wear. It’s clear Thaos has been here: the Glanfathans whisper of a meeting between the amanenfath and a hooded folk man. The presence of more outsiders—the watcher’s party—draws suspicion from leaders and commoners alike, and they’re barred from pursuing Thaos into Elm’s Reach. Ren sets them up at an inn and sets about trying to gain access to the rest of the city.

So it is that their first days in Twin Elms are oddly leisurely. While the watcher bargains with the amanenfath and the others attend to business of their own, Edér lures Aloth into slow strolls in the afternoon light. On their second day in the city, the two venture into Hearthsong Market, where Edér buys a food neither of them have heard of—some kind of meat on a stick—and listens to Aloth question the herbalist about spell agents. They spend the evening on the inn’s balcony, soaked in moonlight and ale and laughing about nothing.

Above them, Belāfa hangs low and luminous. Aloth cranes his neck to see it. He thinks of Ionni Brathr—destroyed by Ondra’s rage—and Cawldha, still circling the world unseen. Edér takes Aloth’s hand and squeezes it.

“Beautiful,” says Edér. “Hard to believe there’s another one up there just waitin’ to make a big mess of things.”

“Did you know about Cawldha?” Aloth wonders. “Before our travels?” Edér shakes his head.

“Nah. Didn’t get that kind of schooling. I doubt even the priest knew about it.” He looks up at the night sky. “He said Eothas was the Dawnstars. They’re the brightest, see. Just didn’t have a need to guess what else might be up there. Did you?”

“I did,” Aloth says. “I was taught at the Academy. It is considered necessary for wizards in training to understand such forces. But since the start of Waidwen’s Legacy...” He trails off, frowning. “My studies hardly seem important by comparison. So much is out of our control entirely.”

“If only Thaos thought like you did,” Edér chuckles. “Then we wouldn’t be risking our necks to stop him. Not sure he’s worth it.”

“Hm. I’m not either. But”—Aloth looks down at Edér’s hand in his—“I suppose if that were the case, I wouldn’t have met you either.” Edér grins.

“Hadh’t thought of it that way.” He puffs his pipe for a moment, then looks over at Aloth. “What’ll you do? When we run outta road?”

Aloth frowns thoughtfully. “The Leaden Key...I’ve spent so many years blindly following them. I never imagined the horrors they were capable of. I’m beginning to feel it’s my duty to the world to see them stopped.”

“Big responsibility.” He puffs his pipe. “You’ll wear it well.” Leaning into Aloth slightly, Edér says, “Will you miss me?”

“*Aye, sir, more’n ye conne.*” Aloth smiles and says, “She speaks for both of us.” He looks to Edér.

“Me, I’m planning to forget you soon as I get a chance.” Aloth gasps in mock-offense, then shoves him. With a mischievous laugh, Edér catches Aloth’s shoulder and pulls him close.

“Nah, you see right through me. It’s a miracle of Wael you stayed undercover so long, you know that?” In response to Aloth’s quizzical look, he adds, “‘Cause no one could ever forget you. It just ain’t possible.”

Aloth returns his comment with a kiss that makes even Iselmyr blush.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days pass quickly once they gain entry to the city’s restricted districts. Twin Elms is breathtaking in both scale and beauty, but there’s no time to enjoy it. Something has changed in the watcher; her pursuit of Thaos has become single-minded—almost obsessive. Though Ren’s reputation precedes her, the bids and pleas of the Glanfathans do little to sway her path. Even the party’s detour for Hiravias seems to annoy her.

In Elm's Reach, the party stands before twin Delemgans, who tell the watcher that only by traversing Breith Eaman can she catch up to Thaos, and only with the patronage of a god can she survive the journey. In Teir Evron, she petitions for Berath's favor and is offered a quest in turn.

It's bloody. Not for nothing is Berath a god of death. The watcher leads them to the Blood Sands and, while they need only slay one dwarf, the others of the Ethik Nôl don't take kindly to the slaughter of their priest. The Ovates of the Golden Grove are more understanding, allowing the High Ovate to simply wilt away when she recognizes that her time is past. Still, Aloth is relieved when the work is done.

Back in the temple, Berath is pleased with the watcher's work. Her safe descent into Sun in Shadow is assured.

\* \* \* \* \*

They're quiet as they walk the path through Burial Isle, breaking their silence only to shout directives as they fend off beasts and shades. What is there to say? The watcher has led them this far; they will go with her to the end. It takes barely half a day for them to reach the pit. Slowly, they come to stand around its perimeter.

Ren steps up first, giving them all something between a smile and a grimace before she turns and leaps. Then Hiravias, who faces away from the pit and allows himself to fall backwards with a cartoonish expression and an obscene gesture. Next is Kana, looking rather queasy, and Pallegina, with a hand on the hilt of her sword, until only Aloth and Edér remain.

They say nothing. There are no words. They have only a moment alone together before their collective future comes crashing into them at last, so Aloth looks to Edér and smiles faintly. Edér reaches up to cup his face with all the urgency of the moment and all the tenderness of the long path behind it.

He nods. Aloth nods back. Together, they jump.

## Chapter End Notes

There are basically no quests discussed here except for mainline quests (from Acts III and IV). The watcher opts to complete Berath's quest, "A Servant of Death," after praying to Berath in "Council of Stars."

Aloth and Edér briefly discuss Eora's moons: Beläfa, Cawldha, and Ionni Brathr (destroyed by Ondra, as revealed in the White March DLC). Canonically, Cawldha is not visible from Eora, but sometimes locks orbit with Beläfa and causes highly destructive tides.

# Epilogue: Port Maje

## Chapter Summary

*Five years have passed since the sun set on the watcher's journey and, with it, Edér's travels with her...and her companions. Gone, too, are his happy days as the mayor of Dyrford Village—however peaceful they were, he'd never expected them to last. Instead, he stands again in the long shadow of a god he'd once looked to for guidance.*

*Edér is adrift. The world is dark. A glimmer of hope appears in the unlikeliest of places.*

## Chapter Notes

Motherfuckin' double update!!! That's right: I wrote an epilogue. It contains minor Deadfire spoilers. I hope you like it. I love you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The watcher has been awake for only a few days when they reach the Engwithan digsite on Port Maje Island; she's still confused, still unsteady on her feet. Edér, for his part, is just glad to have someone familiar to distract him from the whirlwind of anger and confusion he's felt since Eothas began his long, destructive journey. Ren is a willing audience for his jokes and his cynicism both. After their initial conversation, she'd focused on the path in front of her and avoided talking directly about Eothas, a courtesy Edér secretly appreciates.

Still, the grief is palpable. Not all the crew survived their brush with the pirates, and each new loss feels all the more devastating in the wake of Caed Nua's destruction.

Initially, they believe the digsite to be abandoned. They encounter a few hungry-looking panthers—Ren waves them away with a murmured druidic spell—but the only evidence that kith have been present at all is the collection of empty crates and trappings. But as they round the first hairpin corner on the path to the center of the site, they discover the horrible truth: a column of ash in the shape of a man.

The digsite wasn't abandoned. It was visited by Eothas.

The ashen husk dissolves under Ren's touch. There's no soul for her to read; it's been sucked out. As they make their way to the center of the digsite, Edér sees that its eastern side is

marred with a massive footprint. He feels sick. Perhaps the watcher notices, because she calls back “All right over there?”

Edér winces, embarrassed. “Livin’ the dream,” he says. When Ren doesn’t respond, he adds “In all fairness to Eothas, not sure what I’d do if I got blown up. Might act out a little.” Still Ren says nothing. When he catches up with her on the central platform, he sees why. In front of her is a bizarre cage, occasionally creaking in the wind. He can hear kith murmuring from within the cage. *Not abandoned after all*, he thinks.

“Hello?” Ren calls out.

From within the cage, a woman with a thick Valian accent replies “Are the beasts gone?” The watcher assures her that they’re safe from the panthers, and the door of the cage swings open with a metallic groan.

One by one, they file out. First come two young men, whispering to each other in Valian and shriveling in the sunlight. Next, an older woman wearing a scowl and a round-faced blonde man with wide, curious eyes. They’re followed by a young woman with serious features who promptly introduces herself as Benessa. Edér recognizes her voice as the one that called out from within the cage. Finally, a pale, slight figure trots out behind her—it looks to be an elven man—and when Edér sees his face, the rest of the world falls away.

It’s Aloth Corfiser.

Before his mind can catch up, Edér’s jaw drops open. He begins to stammer something incomprehensible, but the watcher gives him a sharp look and he catches himself. Benessa introduces the elven man as Engferth, a promising young student from an academy in Salona. Edér meets the man’s eyes. His face is impassive.

Later, Edér can barely remember the rest of the events at the digsite. He knows that the three of them had explored the ruin’s interior, that they’d found more ashen husks and seen more of Eothas’s destruction. He recalls, too, the pillar of luminous adra—sickly as a rotted root—where the watcher reaches Eothas at last. But his mind is a wash of white noise and questions. What is Aloth doing? Why is he here? Does he know about Eothas? About Caed Nua? Had he ever tried to reach the watcher after their journey through Sun in Shadow? Had he missed her?

...Had he missed Edér?

The watcher’s meeting with Eothas leaves her with more questions than answers. The defiant is still stranded, the crew still injured and hungry, and Ren still a pale shadow of the watcher he once knew. They leave the digsite and make their way toward Port Maje without stopping to rest.

As they cross the island on foot, the man Edér knows to be Aloth Corfiser is tense, distant, and quiet. Edér hears him entreat the watcher not to ask questions. There is much to do in Port Maje, and they cannot afford missteps. They carry on as normal despite their fatigue.

It's easy, at first, to avoid the other man. Edér busies himself with hiring a crew and coordinating repairs during the day. At night, he drinks. But once their business in Port Maje really begins and the two of them must work side by side, Edér realizes he needs a new strategy.

First, he tries addressing him as a familiar, offering jokes and friendly smiles, but this goes nowhere. The not-stranger's eyes seem to simply look past him. Disheartened, he falls into step with the other man's act.

It's unsettling to behave as if the elf is a stranger. Despite their five years apart, Aloth is fresh in Edér's memory—the sound of his voice, the texture of his hands. He begins to wonder if his mind is playing tricks on him. What if this man is, after all, a stranger named Engferth? Or worse, what if Aloth Corfiser has forgotten him? But on the morning of their third day in Port Maje, on an assignment together in the harbor, Edér catches the other man staring at him, his mouth twisted into the little frown that Edér knows so well.

For a moment, he just holds Edér's gaze, eyes bittersweet and so, so blue. Then, to Edér's surprise, he winks. Edér winks back. The elven man smiles, then breaks his gaze. The two men are back to work without another word.

It's easier after that. True to form, the watcher is quick to involve herself in local affairs, but once the ship's repairs are secured and a crew is hired, she's even quicker to tie up their loose ends in Port Maje. They begin preparing the Defiant, now docked in Port Maje's harbor, for departure.

On a sunny afternoon, Ren pulls Edér aside.

"We'll leave tomorrow morning," she says. "The wind and the sea will be right for it. Edér, I'm leaving it up to you to alert the crew." Edér cocks an eyebrow.

"That the same crew you rounded up and briefed this morning? With all due respect, Captain, they don't need telling twice."

"A certain Mister Engferth was absent during my announcements," Ren says, grinning mischeivously. "I'm not sure if he's the seafaring type. He'll need your support."

"Right," Edér snorts. "My support. I'll go do that then." As he turns to go, Ren catches him by the shoulder.

"Edér?" The mischievous twinkle hasn't left her eye. "You'd do well to trust your captain's orders." He ought to scowl at her, but it's all he can do not to laugh out loud.

"Aye aye, Captain."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edér finds the not-stranger working at a tangled cord of rigging and sidles up next to him.

Without taking his pipe from his mouth, he says, "Captain says we're leaving Port Maje at daybreak."

The man pauses his knotwork. “Wonderful. I could do with a change of scenery.” A faint smile plays on his lips. “Was there something else?”

“Actually,” Edér begins, “There was. You remind me of someone I used to know.”

“Oh?” The elven man continues retying the knot in the rigging. His thin fingers are surprisingly deft. In fact, his whole person seems rugged and capable. It suits him, thinks Edér.

“Yeah, a, uh, good friend of mine. We met back in the Drywood. Quirky kind of fella, on account of he was a wizard. And an Aedyran. You know—real particular about things. Stuffy.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure he’d appreciate your judgment,” the elf points out. The corners of his mouth betray him with a twitch and he adds, more quietly, “But neither am I sure he’d disagree with it.” Edér grins.

“I knew you’d understand,” he says. “We got pretty close in our travels, but the time came for us to part ways. Haven’t heard from him since.”

“A shame, I’m sure,” says the man without looking up.

Eder shrugs. “He had his reasons. Funny thing is, I had him all wrong. Fella wasn’t half as stuffy as I thought. Hel, he was better in battle than most of the soldiers I fought with. Better company, too. In fact,” Edér says, pulling his pipe from his mouth, “he was full of surprises once I gave him a chance.”

The other man looks up from the rope and says “In my experience, kith always are.” He holds Edér’s gaze for a moment, his eyes at once familiar and strange, before looking off. “I had a surprising...friend, myself. He was a veteran of the Saint’s War—a Dyrwoodan who wore an Eothasian pendant with his armor. It always struck me as a contradiction.”

“Sounds like your friend was confused,” Edér says dryly.

“Perhaps,” agrees the other man. “But I came to think of it as a mark of authenticity.” Edér raises an eyebrow.

“You see, the Eothasian Saint’s War veteran wasn’t afraid of contradiction.” The man looks back at the rigging and begins undoing the next knot. “On the contrary, he saw that kith were full of contradictions, and”—he pauses to tug at a particularly stubborn length of rope—“he was willing to accept them all the same.”

Edér surveys his handiwork. The man who refuses to say he is Aloth has re-tied all but one of the ropes using more secure knots, and they look as neat as they do sturdy. Edér is impressed. “I wonder...” he drawls, “whatever happened to this friend of yours?”

The man traces a knot with his fingertips. “After our travels together, I began a journey of my own. I regret that my more recent work has required discretion. If we met, I would have

much to tell him.” A pause. “I often wonder if he still thinks of me. If he remembers me at all.”

“With all due respect, Mister Engferth, if you really are the pride of Selona’s academy”—the other man snorts—“I doubt anyone could forget you.” He knows he’s laying it on thick, but he doesn’t care.

“And if I’m not?” He looks up at Edér, lips curled into an anxious, familiar frown. There’s a strange tightness in Edér’s chest that feels almost like being home. *Oh*, he thinks. He’s missed this. *Oh*.

“Well,” Edér murmurs, “then I’d like t’hear how those animancers came to think otherwise. Reckon it’s a pretty interesting story.” The other man looks away and begins to fumble with the last knot. His ears are pink. Leaning in so that the elf can’t avoid his gaze, Edér reaches over and stills his hand. “Aloth,” he says.

At Edér’s touch, something in Aloth breaks: the tension in his face dissolves, and his eyes when he looks back at Edér hold all the joys and pains of their shared history. His face looks older, thinks Edér, less fearful and more confident. Aloth sighs. “Hello, Edér.”

“Aloth,” Edér says again, and draws him into an embrace. Aloth is stiff at first, awkward and surprised, but soon he’s gripping Edér fiercely and pressing his face into the crook of his neck. He’s shaking slightly under Edér’s hands.

“Forgive me,” Aloth says, his voice muffled by the fabric of Edér’s shirt. “Please believe that I wanted to explain everything. I didn’t know if you—if we...” He can’t seem to finish the thought. Instead, when he opens his mouth again, he lets out a giggle, and then another, and soon he’s laughing outright.

As Aloth begins to laugh, Edér can’t help but laugh too; the world is light and strange and very funny. For a minute, they stand there, hugging and laughing at Wael-knows-what. Finally, they step back, Edér’s hands still resting on Aloth’s shoulders and both grinning from ear to ear.

“Still full of surprises, I see,” Edér chuckles. “For the record, you’re unforgettable, pride of Selona or not.” His smile softens. “It’s good to see you again.”

Aloth is positively beaming. “Edér,” he says, “I have so much to tell you.”

## Chapter End Notes

These folks are working through very early mainline Deadfire quests: "To Hunt a God," "Stranded," "Skeleton Crew," etc. It's implied that they're caught up in some of the Port Maje-specific action, but none of that is really relevant to the fic.



This concludes my years-long endeavor to write my first (and, as of today, only) work of fanfiction. Thank you for joining me. You can find me blogging about nothing @floating-orb on tumblr. Private message me if you want to connect on discord.

## End Notes

This work takes its title is from the seminal work on the physiology and psychology of trauma by Bessel van der Kolk, which I highly recommend to anyone interested in trauma and recovery.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!