Hidden Depths

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by SilverInk

Summary

“I’m sorry, Eivor, I shouldn’t have tried to fight Kjotve in your stead.” He knew she couldn’t understand him, but he felt he had to explain himself. The words were pouring out of him now. “I wanted to help you, I wanted to see him die both for your sake and mine, but it was about your family’s honor and it wasn’t my place. I hope you can forgive me, please.”

She squeezed his hand and touched his cheek, just a light brush of her fingers, and shushed him gently. She said something soft and comforting, and he tried to breathe evenly. His breath was wheezing from the effort of speaking.

He felt gentle hands on both sides of his face and she pressed a very brief kiss to his forehead. Then she left the healer’s hut.

After the fight with Kjotve, Hytham heals and recovers. Over the next months, he and Eivor become closer than he would've thought possible…

Notes

Originally posted on AO3. I'm SilverInk on there too, I'm not stealing her identity! If I was reposting a fic that I'd downloaded/otherwise stolen, I prob would've been able to make the summary the same, but I don't remember what I wrote so I'm pretty sure it's not gonna be the same as on AO3 :(

I guess once AO3 comes back online we can prove whether I'm the real og SilverInk or not lol XD

Idk if this is the right way to use the warnings, but I felt like maybe an ableism warning might be necessary, since there are themes of a character getting used to a disability and worrying that he will be useless or his mentor/father figure will think he's useless now. All unfounded worries, so more internalized ableism i guess? But I figured I might as well tag it.

“All that matters is that Kjotve dies this day,” Hytham had said. He believed that, he truly did, but as he watched Kjotve throw Eivor across the fighting ring, he didn’t think he could continue to just watch. This needed to end, quickly. Basim was nowhere to seen, so he had to rely on his own instincts, and he couldn’t let Eivor face this foe alone.

Kjotve’s back was to him, he was basking in the cheers of the crowd, and Hytham took his chance. He leaped from the edge of the ravine, flicked his wrist to engage his hidden blade, and then —

Kjotve turned just slightly more, and Hytham’s blood ran cold. He had seen him. Kjotve turned fully to face him, and Hytham heard someone shout his name, and then he caught Hytham in midair and threw him with terrifying ease against the rocky wall.

He couldn’t stifle a cry of pain as he hit the ground. Pain stabbed through his ribs with a sickening crack, and his chest and back ached sharply. He wanted to scream, but it was like all the air had been knocked out of his lungs, and he couldn’t get his breath back. But, Eivor seemed to have gotten a second wind now, and Hytham watched through blurred vision as she struck Kjotve with her heavy axe.

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Hytham drifted in and out of consciousness. He was aware of Basim picking him up off the frozen ground, as carefully as possible, but it still jostled his ribs and made him cry out.

“I have you, Hytham,” Basim told him in Arabic. “Be strong, my son.” Hytham nodded and held onto him tightly, feeling a few tears run down his face.

Sometime later, he woke in the healer’s hut to the harsh smell of herbs in his nostrils. It made him cough several times, and pain stabbed sharply through his chest and side and it was a struggle to get his breath back. The healer woman, with strange tattoos on her chin, approached him with a bowl of salve and some bandages and said something in the Norse language that he didn’t understand, but she smiled softly and touched him gently as she did. He tried to take shallow breaths.

Then he felt something pressing hard against his ribs and he couldn’t breathe, *he couldn’t breathe*, it was like the first moments after Kjotve had thrown him against the rocky wall. He tried to struggle away, but he felt strong hands on his arms holding him in place and then the pressure finally lifted and he gasped for air, which was its own agony. He sobbed at the pain, hot tears run down his face, and wrapped his arms protectively over his damaged chest. He tried desperately to control his breathing again. He heard sharp voices in the background, and he soon lost consciousness again.

Moments or hours after, with the first hints of sunrise shining through the windows, Hytham woke to see Eivor sitting next to his bed. She was speaking to the healer, again in Norse words which Hytham felt as if he ought to know. If he thought hard enough, he probably did know. He was so exhausted, still.

She glanced briefly down at him, and her face lightened when she saw he was awake. His torso felt hot, but the rest of him was so cold. His ribs were wrapped tightly in bandages, he realized.

He shivered slightly, and even that hurt his crushed ribs. Dear God, he missed the warm, sunny Abbasid Caliphate, or the Mediterranean…

“Hytham,” Eivor sounded relieved. Smiling softly now, she said something else that he didn’t understand, and Hytham shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Eivor, I don’t know what you’re saying,” he said, upset, and now it was her turn to tilt her head to the side in confusion, because, of course, he was speaking Arabic. She exchanged a few words with the healer, and he caught Basim’s name. Eivor started to stand and placed a hand lightly on Hytham’s shoulder. Fearing she was about to leave, he gripped her hand, seized with a sudden mad urge. “I’m sorry, Eivor, I shouldn’t have tried to fight Kjotve in your stead.” He knew she couldn’t understand him, but he felt he had to explain himself. The words were pouring out of him now and he had to get them out. “I wanted to help you, I wanted to see Kjotve die both for your sake and for mine, but it was about *your* family’s honor and it wasn’t my place. I hope you can forgive me, please.”

She squeezed his hand and touched his cheek, just a light brush of her fingers, and shushed him gently. She said something soft and comforting, and he tried to breathe evenly. His breath was wheezing from the effort of speaking. Her brows drew together slightly.

“Basim.” She tapped the edge of his bed, then pointed emphatically toward the door then right in front of her, scanning his face for understanding, and Hytham thought he knew what she was saying. She was going to bring Basim here. He nodded and sank back into his pillows, groaning in pain again.

“My dear Eivor. My dear. Thank you.”

She let go of his hand, and then he felt gentle hands on both sides of his face and she pressed a very brief kiss to his forehead. Then she left the healer’s hut.

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“Basim, what does… yabibti? Mean?” Eivor asked, later. It seemed that the fear and pain of the injury had robbed Hytham of all but his first language, and Basim had been able to comfort him and speak to him. As upsetting as it was to see such a brave and intelligent

young man in such a state, it warmed Eivor's heart to see the affection between them. It was clear that, in private at least, they treated each other almost as family.

Basim looked at her, his brow slightly furrowed.

"I think that's what he said, anyway." Eivor sighed. "He was tired and slurring his words, and struggling to catch his breath."

"*Ya habibti*?" Basim said, and yes, that sounded more like what Hytham had said. Theirs was a strange and very beautiful language, Eivor was realizing. Maybe she would try to learn it, though she wasn't sure her mouth could even make some of those sounds.

She made some sort of assent, and Basim laughed softly, his face unreadable. "He called you that?"

"He did," Eivor said. "What does it mean?"

"*Habibti* means — " Basim paused for a moment, thinking, and continued, " — my dear. Darling. It is often an endearment we call someone we are fond of."

Eivor was moved. She hardly knew Hytham, yet he called her such a word? Maybe he felt a connection to her after that fight with Kjotve, as she did to him. That fight had been both their calling, and Hytham, thinking her doomed, had tried to end it himself.

"He is dear to me as well," Eivor told him. "I scarcely know either of you, but you've quickly become important to me. Especially after Hytham sacrificed his safety to help me the way he did." Something in Basim's face tightened, and it looked like a combination of disapproval and worry.

Basim inclined his head. "He asked me to apologize to you. He regrets trying to kill Kjotve. He knows it injured your honor and he… begs forgiveness."

So that was what he had been so desperate to tell her, before she'd left. She'd heard Kjotve's name, and he'd sounded so upset and determined to speak with her, and looked so sick and unnaturally pale that it almost broke her heart to have to leave. But, of course, he was clever and seemed to understand her pointing and gesturing to mean she was getting Basim, and that Basim would help him. She'd hated to feel so helpless and completely unable to make sense of her friend's words.

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The next time Hytham woke, Basim was by his bedside, reading aloud from a scroll he'd brought from Constantinople, a story of ancient mythology. He was finally warm, and he smiled a little, but as he inhaled deeply, he felt that now familiar stab in his chest and hissed, in pain and frustration both.

“Easy, easy,” Basim told him. He touched Hytham’s forehead, then ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you want something to eat or drink? It has been two days. You must be hungry.”

“Two days?” Hytham rasped, and Basim nodded. His throat felt horribly dry. Basim helped him sit up — a painful process, though thankfully not impossible — and propped more pillows behind him, then got him some water. It was cold and refreshing.

There was a knock on the door, and Eivor looked in. “Basim, I brought you something to eat — Hytham!” She saw he was awake, sitting up, and she smiled. Her expression turned cautious, and she added, “Do you — do you understand —” She gestured between herself and him and Basim nodded. Hytham was confused for a second before remembering Eivor sitting by his bed and not understanding a word she said. He hurriedly shook his head.

“Yes, I — I know what you’re saying.”

“Good. I was worried for you. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

His whole body ached, and he had to consciously remember to take very shallow breaths, but it was far better than being half conscious and unable to speak Eivor’s language. Hytham gave her a genuine smile. They were small, but he had things to be grateful for.

“Thank you, Eivor.”

“Here,” Basim set the plate Eivor had brought on Hytham’s lap. “You eat this, I’ll get my own.”

“Are you sure?” Hytham asked, and Basim just nodded dismissively.

“Yes, eat. You need it more than I do.” He ran his fingers through Hytham’s hair again, scratching his fingers over his scalp lightly as he spoke, and Hytham relaxed into it and agreed. It was strange to have Basim be physically affectionate with him in front of someone else, but Hytham felt fragile and in need of reassuring touch, and Basim seemed to know it.

He took a few bites of food, and when he looked up, Eivor’s fine, sharp features had softened and she was smiling in that crooked way that was so charming. Having her attention on him suddenly made him remember what he’d tried to tell her before she’d left to get Basim, and his chest tightened with ice in a way that had nothing to do with his injuries. He looked away and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Did Basim ever tell you — ” Hytham paused to drink some more water when his voice broke “ — did he tell you what I tried to say? Before you went to get him?”

“Yes, he did.” She gave him another small smile. “He said that you regretted trying to kill Kjotve. That you knew it injured my honor, and you wanted to apologize.”

“Is that all he said?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “You were trying to say more, weren’t you?”

She was very clever. He had asked — almost begged — Basim to give her, word for word, his apology. Basim was an excellent translator, so it should have been easily doable. Perhaps he had wanted to save Hytham some additional vulnerability by rephrasing it, and perhaps he should leave it that way, but this felt important for her to know.

“Yes, I was,” he said. “I need to ask your forgiveness for interfering in your fight for your family’s honor, for stealing that from you.”

“Hytham, there’s no need — ” Eivor started, shaking her head, but Hytham held up a hand.

“Please, I must say this.” She fell silent and nodded for him to continue. “I was afraid for you, afraid that Kjotve would kill you and then get away and that it would reflect badly on myself and the Hidden Ones, and I couldn’t just watch and do nothing. But it was not my place to intervene, and I feel as if I betrayed you.” He felt frustratingly out of breath and took a few heavy, wheezing breaths before he could continue. “I hope you can forgive me, but I know how important honor is to your people, as it is to mine, in my country.”

“You did not *betray me*, Hytham,” Eivor said, her raspy voice almost a growl, low and fierce, and it surprised him into looking up at her. Her face was intense. She reached over and gripped his arm, and her hand felt strong and steady. “That was no betrayal, it was pure courage. The way I see it, we were allies against Kjotve. It’s true you broke the rules of the holmgang, but you have not grown up with the custom like we have, you don’t know the rules like we do. This has tied us together in some way, and I feel forever indebted to you for the way you threw yourself at him. It helped me gain the upper hand, and I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same if you had been the one to fight him.”

Hytham felt his throat close up with how earnestly she was speaking, and he raised his free hand to the back of his neck. He’d half expected her to be furious when reminded of the extent of his actions, and this full forgiveness was shocking. And, no one had ever said such things to him, spoken about his bravery in this way, and he dug his blunt nails into his neck. “I’m sorry,” he managed after a moment, “I don’t know what to say.” He shook his head and turned his arm in her grip, and found himself holding her hand now. He hoped his own hold on her, weak though it was in his current state, would say what he couldn’t with words.

“You don’t have to say anything else,” Eivor told him softly.

“Your words mean a lot to me, and your forgiveness is such a great relief. Somehow, you have become very dear to me in the short time I’ve been in Norway.”

Eivor ducked her head like she was trying to hide her sudden smile. “Basim did translate something to that effect for me,” she said, and yes, Hytham remembered calling her *my dear*, but he hadn’t asked Basim to tell her. Before he could ask what she meant, or do anything more than give her a confused look, Eivor nodded to the forgotten plate of food on his lap. “You really should eat. You’ll need it to get your strength back.” She stood. “I will leave you to rest and eat, but I will come again tomorrow to check on you.”

“Thank you, I would like that.” He smiled, and Eivor nodded.

“Let Valka know if you need more blankets or food or water,” she added, glancing across the room toward the healer woman with the tattoo on her chin, where she was joined by two others, maybe apprentices.

“I will. Thank you, Eivor.”

“Now rest, and I’ll see you later.” She gave him another charming, crooked smile, and left the healer’s hut, leaving Hytham to finish his food alone.

For the rest of the day, Basim did not return. The healer, Valka, changed his bandages, and it was a slightly less painful process than the first time had been, but it still brought tears to his eyes. He thought he heard Basim’s voice late that evening, speaking with the healer as he was trying to fall asleep, but he couldn’t be sure and he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

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The next morning, after breakfast, Eivor came to see him again. Hytham hadn’t expected to see her again so soon, but he was glad of it and glad to have pleasant company. He had asked one of the apprentices about Basim, but she knew nothing.

“We have a trader in town today,” she started, smiling, after taking her seat next to him. “From Baghdad.”

Hytham’s mouth fell open. “What, really? This far north?”

Eivor smiled wider at his surprise. “Yes, really. But it’s a little cold for him — ” she raised an eyebrow at Hytham’s own pile of blankets and furs, and he couldn’t help but laugh a little, then groaned quietly at the pain “ — so he will be leaving by midday. However, I bought something for you. To aid your recovery.” And then she brought out a small pouch, and when she carefully opened it and held it out to him, the smell was incredible. They were ground spices that smelled warm and *flavorful* and instantly reminded him of home, and Hytham sighed, smiling.

“I will feel better in no time at all eating this. I will add it to all my meals from now on,” he said, and Eivor smiled wider, pleased and rightfully proud of herself. “Thank you, Eivor, truly.”

“Of course,” she shrugged. “I figured you could use something familiar, a taste of home, after all you’ve been through here.”

Suddenly overwhelmed by how thoughtful she was, Hytham wiped a hand over his mouth briefly. His beard felt slightly overgrown. There could be no ulterior motive here, nothing for her to gain from him, unless she was perhaps the greatest schemer he had ever met, and with how her whole clan loved her, he didn’t think that was true. How badly he had misjudged her at their first meeting. She was warm and generous, not merely hungry for glory in battle.

“*Ya Allah* Eivor,” he half laughed, “do you always put yourself to so much effort to make newcomers feel welcome?”

She laughed and shrugged.

“I do if I like them, and they find themselves injured going up against an enemy of mine.”

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The spices, when added to the stew the healers gave him for his next meal, were delicious. They had the perfect combination of heat and flavor that Hytham had been missing ever since he came here, and he savored the way it almost made his mouth burn.

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The next evening, Hytham made his longest journey on foot since his injury, out to a bench in the yard by the healer’s hut. He had only really felt well enough to leave the bed to relieve himself, or to wash in the bucket of warm water that Valka would bring him, but now, he decided it was time to push himself a little. One of the healer’s apprentices helped him to stand, and then he walked outside slowly, on his own, then sat on one of the benches nearest the entrance. He sat up a little straighter, and it helped ease his breathing slightly, but the frozen, icy air seized his lungs tightly and made it difficult to breathe in its own way. Valka stepped outside with a great fur in her arms and draped it over his shoulders, and Hytham smiled and murmured his thanks. It was the fur of a white bear, he thought, seeing a huge paw that was bigger than his own hand drop into his lap. Sigurd had told him and Basim of the ferocious, giant white bears of his homeland during their travels together, and Hytham had privately thought he must be lying, or exaggerating…

She sat beside him on the bench, and Hytham turned to her. “How long do you think it will be until I am fully healed?”

Valka looked at him, her brows furrowing slightly. “You are healing well. As well as you can,” she said, delicately.

“As well as I — ?” Hytham stopped. She was looking at him still, and he had a frightening thought for a half-second, then tried to dismiss it. But — he had to ask, now.

“You mean I am not going to heal?”

“I thought you had already been told, but you will never fully recover your former vitality. You are healing well, but you will never be *fully* healed.”

Hytham's throat closed with fear. Did Basim know about this? He must. Someone had been told, but not him. Perhaps Basim had wanted to wait to tell him until he was more healed, so he could focus on recovery. And then… what would have happened? Hytham rubbed his fingers over the rough pads of the bear's paw in his lap. Would Basim have dropped Hytham as his apprentice? There were other things he could still do for the Brotherhood, he knew, but Basim wanted to train someone to be a skilled warrior, like himself. Surely it would be better for him to find a new apprentice, to find Hytham a new mentor for whatever his new life in the Brotherhood would entail.

The thought of it broke Hytham's heart.

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Eivor found the chance to visit Hytham again several days after her last visit, and this time it was with important news. She and Sigurd had learned of his father's plan to give in to King Harald, and Sigurd wanted to take the Raven Clan to England. Basim had been there to witness the discussion and might have told Hytham already, but it felt important that Eivor tell him herself.

As she got close to the healer's hut, she heard voices, one she instantly recognized as Basim's, calm and collected as always, and the other Hytham's. She'd hoped his mentor would keep him relaxed during his recovery, but he sounded agitated by their conversation, his voice tense and clipped like it had been when he'd objected to sharing the secrets of the Hidden Ones with Eivor.

The door opened.

"Eivor. Come in." Basim almost sounded tired. He'd clearly heard her approaching, even from a distance, and Eivor looked from him to Hytham, who was half propped up in bed with an arm thrown over his face.

"I apologize if I am interrupting," Eivor started, "but I wanted to let you know myself, Hytham, that our Raven Clan is planning to leave for England in only a few days. I don't know if the two of you will go your own way or if you will join us, but you would be very welcome. If you decide against it, I will be sad to see you go, but I am glad to have met you either way."

Hytham pushed himself to sit up, more easily than even a few days ago. "Thank you for telling me, Eivor." His voice was soft, and he sounded worn out, but his face had more color than she'd seen in it since his injury, no longer ghostly and sallow but now the same vital, warm brown as Basim's. A good sign indeed.

"We will go with you," Basim said, looking not at her but at Hytham. Hytham nodded, and gave a genuine smile to his mentor, then to Eivor.

“We will.”

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The journey lasted a week, but with the polar bear fur blanket that Valka had insisted he take with him, the medicines Basim gave him, and the now occasional bandage changes, Hytham survived it. He had pushed himself enough that he could sit up and walk to the ship unaided, then rested well before the journey. Despite his improving health, it wasn’t an easy journey. The ship was crowded and he had to sleep whenever he could, usually leaning on Basim’s shoulder or, when they had the luxury to lie down, his chest or lap.

A few times, Eivor sat with them as well, talking with them to pass the time, and she told them the story of how she and Sigurd had hunted Hytham’s polar bear and she had skinned it herself many years ago. Now that she pointed out the imperfections, especially in the bear’s ears and one of its paws, he could see them, but he never would have noticed otherwise.

At some point, Eivor fell asleep next to Hytham, her head leaning against his shoulder, still wrapped in the polar bear fur. Trying to disturb her as little as possible, Hytham drew the fur from around himself and tried to lean forward with an arm around her waist to wrap it behind her and around her shoulders as well. Eivor sighed in her sleep, and he shushed her gently, pulling the fur around her as much as he could. Then he leaned back and got as comfortable as he could against the hull of the ship, tipping his head back to look at the stars, and rested his cheek against the top of Eivor’s head. Both her arms wrapped around his, and he started to feel warmer already. It felt good to do something for her, after all she had done for him while he’d been healing from his wounds.

He felt eyes on him, and he glanced over to where Basim sat on the opposite side of the ship and saw him watching with a slightly raised eyebrow that would have meant trouble for him if they weren’t surrounded by so many people. Hytham sighed and looked away at the stars again, knowing his face was flushing furiously. He hated feeling his mentor’s disapproval, but he knew he’d hate himself even more if he pushed her off of him just because his mentor gave him a *look*. How could he disturb a woman sleeping on his shoulder, especially when sleep was so hard to come by? He couldn’t do that, and he wouldn’t let this instance of disapproval get to him. She deserved to rest well, and he would give that to her.

Eivor moved closer to him, and her cold nose brushed against his neck. Hytham rested his cheek against her hair again and closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the tangible sensation of Basim’s eyes on them. They only needed to share warmth. This was no different than what he and Basim did for each other, Hytham told himself.

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The Order of Ancients had dug its claws deep into England since the Romans had left, as Hytham had learned during his training as an Acolyte, and he had advocated strongly for Basim to bring him with him as soon as Basim had told him of Sigurd's plan. He could help in some way, he was sure. But he didn't need to plead his case at all, it turned out, because Basim had never planned to find a new apprentice and he wanted Hytham with him. He believed in Hytham's capabilities even still, of course he did, and Hytham felt shame for ever doubting his mentor.

Once they landed in England, Basim gave Hytham the singular mission of learning all he could about the Order in England and eliminating them. He could not eliminate them himself, of course, but Basim left the details of how to accomplish this task up to him, and Hytham felt *excited*, eager to work toward the goals of the Hidden Ones again, especially now that he was in charge of his own mission.

Eventually, Eivor had a Hidden One's Bureau built for him in their new village of Ravensthorpe, and when it was completed and furnished, Hytham decided to take a leap of faith, both literal and figurative. They had both initially been distrustful of each other, but Eivor had proved herself worthy of the hidden blade Sigurd had given her, and perhaps he could share another of the Hidden Ones' rites with her. It would be fitting to have her be the one to help him in his task to rid England of the Order, but he dared not hope for so much yet.

"There is a gift I wish to give you," he told her, "but I can't show you here. Will you walk with me?"

She tilted her head curiously. "I will. Lead on."

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The walk up the hill was more difficult than it should have been, though it was not too much for him. Hytham knew Eivor would be displeased if he were to injure or tire himself because he was doing something for her, so he walked slow enough that it wouldn't stress his lungs too much. Still, she noticed his heavy breathing, and although he tried to be strong in front of her and Basim, he confessed something he hadn't put words to before.

"There is a pain in my chest for which I have no remedy."

Eivor was as kind as ever. "Rest easy, then. As long as your mind stays sharp, you will recover."

"Of course." He hoped and prayed that that was true, that he wouldn't have to live this way the rest of his life. "But, I am reluctant to displease Basim."

"You would risk your health and your life to please him? That I do not understand."

They continued to talk as they walked, and Hytham teased lightly about his gift when she asked what it might be. Finally, as they neared the top of the hill, he told her about the rite of the leap of faith and its purpose to clear and center their minds, steady their hands, prepare and relax their bodies, and help them stay focused on their creed. The ultimate purpose of it was to give oneself over to the belief that death would not come before one was prepared to meet it, which Eivor already embraced wholeheartedly.

At the top of the hill now, Hytham looked out over the edge with Eivor at his side, her arms crossed over her chest, looking far more hesitant than he had ever seen her. Excitement thrummed through him now. This would be his first leap of faith since his injury, and this, he thought, could help him feel like himself again.

“I will leap first. On my word, you must follow.” He looked into her face, and Eivor’s brows were furrowed in skepticism. “Lean into your faith, into your strength, and take flight.”

“You want me to jump. From here?”

“Yes.”

“I’d sooner grow wings and fly away,” Eivor half-laughed, stepping away from the edge. “Thank you for the lesson, but — ”

“Wait,” Hytham interrupted her, “and watch.” She looked back up at him, and he shot her a quick, bold wink before running toward the edge of the drop-off and diving down, ignoring her shout of his name. It was fiercely exhilarating feeling the wind in his hair and his clothes, and he laughed when he landed in a soft patch of earth below. He felt something settle in his chest, as with every time he did this. Oh, how he had *missed this*.

“Hytham! Pig-headed fool, are you injured?” came Eivor’s voice from above, and her worry warmed his heart, but even more, he wanted her to experience this joy.

“You see! My faith proved stronger than my fear!” He shouted up to her.

“That loam cushioned your fall!”

That was not the point, and she knew it. He shook his head. “Eivor! I have not seen this side of you before! Do not feed your fear, conquer it!”

It seemed that was the right thing to say, because a moment later, she leaped over the edge herself and landed on her back, just as he had. When she emerged from the thatch, she laughed, fierce and happy, and Hytham grinned at her. She had felt it, too.

“A perfect fall! And how did it feel?”

“You spoke true,” she said, almost breathless, still grinning wolfishly, “it was madness and vigor and a purging of fear. Thank you for showing me the way.”

“Of course. And thank you, Eivor… for hearing me out.” She could have left at any time, but she hadn’t. She was curious by nature, and he liked that about her.

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On the journey back to Ravensthorpe, he told her more about the Order of Ancients, how they desired to rule the whole of the land — not for the noble reasons Eivor and Sigurd desired to rule, and not respecting the honor that comes with rule — and he finally asked for her help in eliminating them from England. It would serve them both to eliminate the Order, as it would make Eivor's alliances easier to forge, and it would serve Hytham's Brotherhood, of course.

"I will talk to Randvi about this," she said. "It is a good idea, and I would like to help you where I can."

"Thank you, Eivor," he said fervently. His heart was speeding in his chest — it was all coming together, his second chance to prove himself and do something good in the world, and he was going to seize it with both hands. He took a slow, shaky breath. "You ought to start in Lunden where they are strongest," he continued. "They are strong also in Jorvik and Wincester. And when you are exploring the cities, keep an eye out for the Hidden Ones' symbol," he gestured behind him to the banner on the wall. "There were I believe six Bureaus throughout England, before the Romans left these shores, and if you can find them and explore them, it will help me learn more about the history of our Brotherhood."

Eivor nodded. Her eyes were focused and intense. "Of course, Hytham. I will speak with Randvi about Lunden." She turned to go, then turned back, smiling crookedly. "And thank you for today, Hytham."

Hytham grinned back and bowed his head. "I only showed you what you were capable of." He shrugged one shoulder, and Eivor's smile softened and she glanced at the ground between them. She looked almost *shy* suddenly, her pale skin flushing faintly pink, and he felt a little wrong-footed. He touched her arm lightly, and she glanced up. "Are you well?"

"Yes, Hytham," she said softly. "Perfectly." She looked over his face for a moment, before smiling softly again. "I shall see you later."

"Of course, Eivor."

***

"Eivor? Are you sure?" Basim was looking at him a little intensely, an eyebrow raised, and Hytham nodded seriously.

"Yes. She is a skilled warrior, and I have come to trust and value her. She is the only one I trust to help me eliminate the Order."

Basim nodded gravely, his face unreadable. “I trust your judgment, but be careful, Hytham. Do not become too attached, or too involved.”

Early the next morning, Basim departed with Sigurd, and Hytham was left to wonder at those words.

***

After a few days, during which she seemed to be kept busy with various tasks around Ravensthorpe, Eivor appeared on the doorstep of his Bureau again.

“Are you busy, Hytham? May I speak with you?”

“Of course,” Hytham answered, a bit distracted. He was in the process of rearranging the space slightly; Yanli had somehow come into possession of three fine lamps from the Abbasid Caliphate, and Hytham had begged and haggled for them all morning until they were a reasonable price. It helped that they were friendly by this point, as the only two who were true foreigners, far from home, in Ravensthorpe.

Now, he had hung two near the back of the Bureau and the third he was in the process of hanging near the entrance, using the tallest ladder he could find.

“Of course you are busy, or of course I can talk with you?” Eivor asked, amused, and Hytham laughed and shook his head at himself.

“I apologize, I am almost finished here.” He twisted the hook into the ceiling and attached the chain to it, then descended a few steps to pick up the lamp itself and hook it carefully to the end of the chain. It held. He descended the ladder and looked around the small space of the Bureau, and it looked so much like the Bureaus in Baghdad, near Alamut, that he smiled. It was the perfect mix of home, and his new life with the Norsemen.

“It’s beautiful,” Eivor said softly from behind him, and Hytham turned to grin at her, briefly rubbing the short hair at the nape of his neck.

“Thank you. I wanted to bring some more inspiration from my homeland to the space. I wish I could have shown Basim before he left.”

Smiling wider herself, Eivor shrugged. “I’m sure he would love it as well. He would want you to make this Bureau your own, yes? Just as you are making your mission with the Order your own.”

“Yes,” Hytham said thoughtfully. “The other day, I told him that I had you to help me with my mission, and he seemed… less than pleased, though he accepted it.”

Eivor tilted her head to the side, crossing her arms over her chest. “Why, does he not trust me?”

Sighing, Hytham shook his head. “He has no reason not to. You are our host and have been nothing but good and honorable.” She smiled crookedly and ducked her head down. “Besides, it is as you said. It is my mission, and I would trust no one else to help me carry it out.”

“I appreciate that, Hytham.”

“Do you remember,” he started again after a pause, not quite sure why he was voicing this thought, “on the voyage to England, when you fell asleep beside me?”

Now, Eivor smiled even wider, her fine features softened. “Of course. I woke up with your polar bear fur around both of us, leaning on you so hard I was worried I was crushing you. That was the best sleep I had that entire journey,” she laughed.

“It was for me, too,” he smiled. “But, Basim gave me a similar impression of skepticism and displeasure that night when he saw us so close, and me wrapping the bear fur around you.”

Eivor’s brows furrowed. “He doesn’t want you to be close to me?”

Shrugging, Hytham shook his head. His mentor’s actions were often confusing even to him, but he tried to explain as much as he could. “He is… overly protective, perhaps? Concerned for me on a more… more personal level. Perhaps more than is needed, sometimes.” His face was burning, and he found himself studying the diamond-shaped shelves behind her elbow, half eager and half afraid to see where this change in the conversation would lead them.

After a brief, thoughtful pause, Eivor spoke. “Hytham.” Her voice was a low rumble, and she was suddenly closer. “I think perhaps I should say what I had come to say.” She looked uncharacteristically hesitant, and Hytham nodded. “I truly enjoyed spending the other day in your company. I have come to see that you are a man of contradictions, at once serious and deeply devoted to your cause, and also sweet, playful. You are both reserved and bold, vulnerable and strong.” Hytham swallowed and took a shaky breath, and Eivor looked at him seriously for a moment. “I trust you will let me know if this is unwelcome, and whether it is or isn’t, it will change nothing of the arrangement we have come to.” She stepped even closer to him, and Hytham tilted his head slightly to look up at her, his heart pounding.

Her warm, calloused hands cupped his face, and Hytham put his hands on her waist, and then she was kissing him. He sighed shakily into the kiss and returned it clumsily, clutching her tunic, and he would’ve been embarrassed by how clear his inexperience was if Eivor wasn’t so affected by the kiss. One hand moved into his hair and the other curled against his jaw, and she half sighed, half moaned, then groaned louder when his teeth accidentally bit her lip hard.

“I’m sorry — “ he gasped as he broke away, only far enough to be able to speak.

“Don’t apologize,” she nearly growled, and Hytham made a truly pathetic sound that he couldn’t quite strangle, almost a whine, low in his throat, and he kissed her again to cover it. She ran her fingers through his short hair, gentling him. Hytham moved to touch her hair as well, but the braids felt so intricate that he dared not do more than a light touch.

“Touch my hair if you want, I can redo the braids,” she murmured in the space between them. So he did. He tried not to completely ruin them, but he ran his fingers along the small braids along her scalp as they continued to kiss, and then when she moved down to kiss his sensitive neck, he gasped and could hardly help gripping harder.

She kissed from just below his jaw to his Adam’s apple, and Hytham couldn’t be quiet. He groaned. “Please, *habibti*, please…”

“Please what, Hytham?” She was grinning against his neck, like a wolf playing with her prey, and he shuddered.

“It has been so long,” he said, “it has been years since I have — since I’ve done anything more than kiss someone. But I want you, Eivor, I know how sudden this is but it’s so much — ” He was babbling, he knew, and he closed his eyes, clenching his teeth together and lowering his head. It was her *voice*, that husky rasp, the way she was teasing him relentlessly with her words, her lips, and her teeth, it was all driving him to madness. He breathed and tried to calm down.

“Hytham…” She stroked his hair and took a deep, measured breath and pressed her forehead into his shoulder. He took a few strained breaths, slowly relaxing into her comforting arms. Then after a moment, he took the opportunity to be bold. He touched her chin and tilted her face up enough to lightly kiss her cheek, then the other, smiling, and then she was smiling too when he kissed her lips. But then she repeated his name, looked into his face, and pressed her hand flat in the center of his chest, and he suddenly became aware of how labored and aching his breathing felt already. Surely, she had heard it as well, and he covered her hand with his own and tried to breathe slower.

It was her turn to kiss his cheek. “Your enthusiasm is deeply gratifying, Hytham,” she said, “and I would like nothing more than to follow that desire that is in both of us. But, I would never endanger your health for a moment of pleasure, sweet though I know it would be. I could not forgive myself if you strained yourself further trying to please me.”

Hytham closed his eyes and leaned closer to her, sighing in frustration. “This wound has taken months to heal. I know I will never be a great warrior now, but I had hoped I was at least well enough to do basic activities, like walking and — and *kissing* and sex — ”

He broke off and pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, turning his head away, blinking away the sudden mist of tears in his eyes. “I am sorry, Eivor, you don’t deserve my frustration.”

“Hytham,” she said gently and squeezed his arm. “I understand the frustration you must be feeling, especially with the lingering nature of a wound like this. But you are recovering. You just need time to heal and rest, and soon enough you will feel like yourself again.”

He laughed a little wetly. She was so, so good to him. “I felt more myself the past few days than I have in a long time.”

Eivor smiled. “I’m glad. I have enjoyed this version of you, so confident and strong and optimistic.”

All these compliments of hers were going to make him truly weep. It was true he had felt more confident than he had in months, even since leaving Constantinople, but the way she said it so openly, no flattery just speaking the truth as she saw it, made him feel seen and oddly vulnerable. But, it was a good vulnerability. He wanted her to see him.

“For now, we can spend time together, get to know each. Do more of this,” she leaned in and kissed him lightly to demonstrate, then again, and Hytham smiled and tightened his arms around her. “And, I will not make you wait for too long. Only long enough that you will not overexert yourself, so we can both enjoy ourselves and each other. I am only human myself after all.”

Hytham shivered and held her in his arms. He didn’t think he had ever felt this cared for in his life; she’d refused him now to protect his health, though she clearly wanted this as badly as he did. Again, she showed him the sweet, generous, honorable side of her that he never would have expected from her at their first meeting.

And he never *ever* would have expected to end up *here*, kissing the beautiful, fearsome warrior who was the right hand of the prince of the Raven Clan.

He cupped her sharp jaw and stroked her cheek with his thumb, and he leaned in to kiss her again. “We needn’t hurry. I will enjoy your company no matter what we do, and I will be glad to get to know you well before we go further.”

“Yes,” Eivor answered, giving him a sudden blinding smile, “so will I, Hytham. I will enjoy all of it.” She lowered her head to press her forehead against Hytham’s, and they stayed like that for a long moment, enjoying the closeness.

After a moment, someone outside called for her help for another, rather urgent, task. Hytham sighed quietly, and of course Eivor noticed. She touched his cheek lightly.

“I am sorry, my dearest,” she murmured, and Hytham’s heart fluttered at being called *dearest*, “it seems that duty calls. But I will find you later, yes?”

She was looking questioningly into his eyes, and Hytham smiled. “Yes, of course. Do what you must for your people. Go in peace, *habibti*.”

“Go in peace, dearest Hytham.”

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