

One day, Liebling, we'll be old

Von Indy

The only chapter

"No!" Caleb suddenly turned his head away when Essek moved in for the kiss.

White eyebrows shot upwards in surprise, but before the Drow's brilliant mind could start the race to figure out where he had misinterpreted the signals that Caleb so clearly had been giving him for the last three years, the latter forced himself to acknowledge the truth out loud: "One day, I will have grown old, and you will still be you." Essek couldn't want him. Not when it entailed that. Not with all the hurt and inevitable heartbreak.

But maybe they had succeeded in Aeor, after all; because the future-heartbroken Drow looked at him as if time meant nothing and this was the moment, right now, that something in his chest was shattering apart.

"Caleb Widogast," he said gravely, as he did so often to catch his eye, Caleb supposed, but the human gave in anyway and looked up into the face that was both younger and older than him. "I have watched you die already. The catastrophe you are trying to avoid has already played out. It might have only lasted for a couple of seconds, but it felt like hours to me. And not one second, not a single one second of that small eternity, have I wished I had not known you, or hadn't grown fond of you, or hadn't fallen in love with you."

Caleb stared a bit at that, so Essek continued: "The only thing I regretted, was that I hadn't told you. Because then, had you felt the same, we could have had at least a little while together."

After being dragged up from the floor to the face of the man floating before him, Caleb's eyes now darted upwards to the blinding sun that must be burning Essek's skin, and blinked rapidly a few times. Gods. Essek deserved a more composed collocutor for a conversation this important.

"So, do you?" Essek asked after a pause in which Caleb still hadn't managed to say anything to the confession he'd been given as if Essek didn't know he had just handed over his heart to a man on the opposite side of a war and trusted him not to kill him with it. "Will you grant me a little while?"

His human eyes had to blink a couple of times more, before he could lower them safely towards violet and silver. "I'll give you as much time as I have."

Essek's face split into a smile so bright, Caleb wasn't sure he wasn't still staring at the sun. "Good," the smaller man said. "After all, time is my specialty."

The starting deadline had been his first gray hair. As a ginger person, it took him quite

a lot longer than Fjord, who had started going all 'silver fox' by the sweet age of 20, and even Veth, who had just begun showing off a silver fringe around last year. He was, as far as he knew, the very last one. (Yasha and Essek didn't count in this comparison, for obvious reasons, and Caduceus disqualified based on dietary reasons...)

But no matter how long it lasted, they had destroyed his last chance to save his parents in Aeor, and with it the only possibility to stop times' ever advancing gravitational pull on his very own sword of Damocles. There was the Time Stop spell though, and sometimes, Caleb had walked in on Essek, late at night, or early in the morning, when humans can be reasonably expected to be fast asleep, buried in Dunamancy books that specialized on time. It could have been nothing. Time was Essek's specialty, as he kept reminding Caleb. But maybe Essek, too, was trying to look for a way to stop time, in a very particular, partial way. And somehow, that thought hurt even more than pretending the Drow didn't care.

Essek was making plans of torturing his lover by inviting Jester to arrive a week early for Caleb's fifty-fifth birthday – “You know she would love to help with preparations, and you will do everything in your spell book's power to finagle your way out of having to celebrate, which I won't allow this year.” – when it was there: In the mirror, in between red and orange and ginger. Caleb stared at it.

“Do you think we should move Jester's and Fjord's room next to Veth's and Yeza's until everyone else arrives?” Essek's voice from the room next doors shook him out of his stupor. He sounded so lost in thought about something so mundane... Caleb twisted the thin, white strand around his palm.

“Yes, we should,” he said, as he ripped as hard as he could. Only his birthday. They had still time until after his birthday. He wasn't gonna drop dead in front of his ever-young boyfriend because of a gray hair. He didn't need to leave Essek right now. Plus, when the Nein were there, on his birthday, and staying over until at least a couple of days after, Essek wouldn't be alone. Yeah. He shouldn't be alone. That was the whole point. “I think they will appreciate not being alone on the third floor.” Essek poked his head in, and Caleb saw his fanged smile in the mirror as he tried to hide the tiny sliver of gray in his hand like Essek would see it as the proof of betrayal that it was.

He forced a smile on his own face, but it made his cheeks hurt. “As will you, I'm sure.” Essek let out a huff that was almost a laugh. “I could never alone,” he said. “Not when I am with you.”

His cheeks still hurt. But now his eyes stung, too.

“Caaaay-leeeeeb!” Jester, as usual, was very versed in using her outside voice, right next to his ear. “Oh my gosh, you're sooo old now!”

He winced a bit. Weird, he was used to her voice, wasn't he? And his ears weren't bad, but they also were not what they used to be. “I am exactly one day older than 55,” he answered her warily.

“Yupp, birthday's over now, birthday boy,” Veth nodded. “I'm sorry if we're in the way of you two love-birds celebrating it in a more private way.” She grinned at Essek who was standing next to him, their shoulders not even touching, but for some reason, Veth acted as if they were digging for each other's tonsils with their tongues. (As she does.) When nobody else dignified her remark with a reaction, Jester squealed: “Like making tiny ginger Drow babies that float and have really good hair and a weird accent!”

“Or, you know, just fucking,” Veth shrugged.

"Yeah, I don't think making babies works that way, Jester," Fjord hummed, imperturbable by now to Veth's crass language or his wife's antics.

Caduceus smiled down at the Half-Orc, a tiny glint of mischief in his eyes: "How can you be so sure?"

And of course, Kingsley was right there with him: "Exactly! With two wizards, you never know. Might make tiny cat babies trying to figure out how to explode a house."

"Or explode a library trying to make soup," Beau added flatly.

"That was one time, Beauregard," Caleb cut in at the same time as Essek said: "I still am very sorry about that. I hope you told the Soul as much."

The monk shrugged. "'s fine. Was more fun than I had there in a week."

"Also since you always come in disguise, they don't really know who you are and you can still come back and visit us and go look at books," Yasha tried to cheer him up.

"Very nice," Veth said and gave them a thumbs up. "But back to fucking."

In the corner of his eye, Caleb could see Fjord facepalm. The blue Tiefling on his arm wasn't as merciful however: "Yes, tell us if you can make tiny floatie Eslebs! ...Cayseks?"

"Through fucking," Veth added with a nod. She was clearly trying to get a rise out of either of them. Yeza might have been looking apologetic, but he was very clearly relieved that for once, he wasn't the victim of his wife's brutal teasing.

Caleb wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of blushing, but he assumed that he wasn't her prime target anyway, since he was pretty shameless when it came to these things. "I think it might be time for bed for me," he simply said and was already turning around when he felt someone grip his wrist. When he turned to look, Essek leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek, but only to disguise the whisper in his ear: "Do not dare leave me alone with them while they are in this mood!"

He couldn't help but laugh, throwing Essek's clever ruse of faking a kiss to be subtle about his plea to the wind. "You could come with me," he suggested.

"Always," Essek promised.

Leaving tonight would be cruel, Caleb decided. Maybe he shouldn't leave Essek here with them, when they would needle him day and night about what might have transpired between them that had made Caleb leave. And Essek would be sitting up while they slept, mulling over their questions, thinking that he must have missed the clues, and that it was ultimately his fault. When in reality, it was just the inevitability of Essek finding him dead in bed one day, if he stayed for too long.

But even though he tried to leave early so that Essek would remember him as the man he fell in love with, rather than a geriatric, he still had years if he wanted to. He could wait a few months.

"Have fun fucking!", Jester yelled after them and while Essek refused to turn around, Caleb just gave her a wary: "Ja, sure".

"Bye-bye, Cow-man," Kingsley said just as Caduceus vanished home with his Word of Recall. He had taken Yasha and Beauregard with him, who had some kind of Cobalt Soul business in Shadycreek Run.

Veth clucked her tongue. "So I guess we're next." Fjord nodded.

Jester, however, was definitely not on board with all that was happening and was pulling a face. "Uuuuugh, I always hate it when everyone leaves." Even with 42, she had lost none of the youth, she had brandished like a sword the first time she told Caleb how much he smelled. Somehow, she had gotten older and wiser, but still stayed the same old Jester. As so often, he found that he envied her.

"That reminds me," Yeza's voice shook him out of his quiet contemplation. "Honey, don't forget to invite them."

"Oh yes!" Veth's face lit up with realization about a teeny-tiny matter which had almost slipped her mind: "We're hosting this baby shower for the couple next-door, in about six months, and we could really use some help—"

"Additional guests," her husband corrected.

"Yeah, well, the whole neighborhood is gonna come and sure, Luc is gonna be able to make small fireworks with a couple of spells – which is impressive and I'm very proud –, but, you know, a little more... magic 'oomph' would really show Grouching Gilda from two houses over who's the coolest mom with the best parties on the block."

"It's so unfair that we can't come." Jester stomped a foot on the ground in frustration. Kingsley on the other hand, seemed quite happy with whatever else they had planned: "Yeah, well. Waiting for the first blue moon in the last 10 years to bring an eldritch orb to an underwater planar-gate in the Lucidian Ocean to seal an ancient Leviathan-wanna-be-god away from the Material Plane once and for all, does sound a bit more fun in my ears, but go off." Fjord's expression had transformed into something a bit pained, but he just kept nodding along to placate Jester.

"Well, fine," the Tiefling groaned. "But only because the next blue moon will not be for another decade and I'm really sick of your stupid ex-girlfriend scattering her stinky Zombie limbs all over our ship every time I hit her with a lollipop! She really needs to realize that there's a point after which you shouldn't keep coming back from the dead! No offense Kingsley."

"None taken."

"I'll be sure to let the Dynasty know," Essek said drily.

"I don't think consecution counts," Fjord countered with a sigh. "The Bright Queen looked tiptop last time I saw her, whereas Avantika... uh... let's just say even though I fancy myself not too superficial or focused on looks, I wouldn't have hooked up with her if she had always looked like that."

"Last month she lost an ear," Jester added matter-of-factly. "Which is impressive because there's not much of a face for it to hold onto anyway."

"Well, she does have a lot of teeth in there, though," Kingsley said.

"Oh yeah, the shark choppers were new!"

"A-ny-way," Veth raised her voice over everyone's chattering about long-dead but not-quite-dead foes. "Baby shower. Are you two old grandpas coming to show Gilda who's boss? Trick question. You're coming. Glad we cleared that up. Okay, now we can go."

"Sorry," Yeza said needlessly. "But I'm glad you'll be helping out. There will be quite a lot of Nicodranas attending."

"Yeah, but literally nobody we like, so it's cool if you wanna end it with a bang or something," the feral thing that is Veth Brenatto added. "But I'll make a Fluffernutter anyway, just in case."

Her husband made a noise that was partly born of fear and partly from pure resignation.

"Can we please get going?", Fjord asked as he reached out for Jester's hand with his right and Veth's with his left. He winced when she purposefully clutched it a bit too hard with a disgusted: "Your weak handshake feels like a wet rag". And after Kingsley had grabbed onto Jester by casually leaning his elbow on her shoulder, they vanished from view, wrapped up in a bright green cloak that came out of nowhere.

Essek deflated with a long sigh. "I do love them, but I always find myself rather relieved when they finally make their departure."

Caleb had to smirk at that. "I know what you mean."

"I'm just glad I will be attending this baby shower with you," the Drow moaned. "I am no good with new people, and I am not going to know anyone there except the Brenattos, who will be too busy hosting to socialize with me. Promise me you will not leave me alone there for long enough so that this Gilda-person can rope me into a conversation."

Caleb's smirk turned into a sudden laugh. "Du bist mir wirklich einer! You've stared down the Nonagon in a living city of flesh in the midst of the Astral Sea, committed high treason to the Kryn Dynasty and defied the Cerberus Assembly, but you quake in terror at the thought of a couple of gossiping mothers in Nicodranas."

Indignation wrinkled Essek's nose and Caleb felt a slight pang in his chest as he realized how adorable this man still was to him. "Have you forgotten that Gnome woman from the last time we went to visit Veth? The one who started yelling at me until the whole street was looking just because I dared to accidentally look at her behind when she abruptly stopped in front of me and bent down to tie her boot?"

"I remember. Karen, I think it was. One of Luc's favourite prank victims. If I hadn't come and get you out of there, she would have actually made you drop your disguise. The fugitive Shadowhand in the midst of Nicodranas! That would have made for some interesting news. Good thing I was there with a Counterspell to her Dispel Magic."

"You see?" Essek pretended for a second he wouldn't have been able to Counterspell her himself; but only to prove his point, Caleb knew. The floating man drew him in, with an arm around his waist and a hand at the small of his back, all the while hovering above ground so his face was several inches above Caleb's. "Whatever would I do without you, Caleb Widogast," he grinned so wide that his canines were peeking through purple lips, before his gaze wandered from blue eyes to a pink mouth.

Six months, Caleb thought. What was six more months?

It was after six more years, then, when he couldn't justify procrastination after delay after postponement anymore. He had been selfish for so long. Now he had to do right by the man he had loved so dearly for almost half of his short human life.

It was time to leave.

It felt nothing like standing in front of a burning house; like the ringing in his ears tuning out the screams of the people he loved most. But those feelings at least hadn't sunk in until years and years after, when the fog of his muddled thoughts had been wiped away by a stranger. And at that point he had already known, deep down, for a long time, what had happened. So it came gradually, in some way.

This, however, this came all at once. No matter how much he had planned for it. And it came again and again, every time he had tried to command enough courage to finally step through that door. How often had Essek found him silently shaking with tears on the threshold of the tower. How often had Essek led him back by his hand, put him to bed, and wrapped him up in a tight embrace until sleep conquered the despair and Caleb went still in his arms. How often had Essek not asked what he was doing at the entrance of their little demi-plane.

And how pathetic must it have been for this bright, young, handsome Drow to be the keeper of an ever-frailer, aging man who couldn't even keep his emotions in check. This wasn't the lover Caleb wanted him to remember. Essek had fallen in love with the man who had faced Trent Ikithon and (co-)spearheaded the dismantlement of the Cerberus Assembly. Not with a gray human in his 60s whose back hurt when he read for too long in the same position, and who randomly started crying just because he

remembered his own mortality in relation to Essek's.

This was not their story anymore.

And that hurt even more than leaving.

And so, this time, he took the final step over the threshold. The Teleportation spell finished.

That Caleb Widogast, the one that didn't hurt, whose chest was filled to the brim with friends and love, was over.

He was alone again. Back where it all began: Blumenthal.

It had taken him some long hours of walking around the vaguely familiar village, to calm down enough for his old, sore feet to lead him to his final destination.

The small cottage before him, that he had paid to have build a long time ago, was standing on the long-gone ashes of an equally small house that once had been in a different lifetime. He didn't know why he had chosen this exact place despite the memories it brought, but it felt fitting. He had begun here until he became a completely different person, and now that he had to change who he was one last time, he came back. And he was going to end here, too.

His hand connected with the hard wood of the front door but his fingers didn't pass through.

This was real.

The time had really come.

With a shaky breath that did nothing to steady him, he pushed the door open to what was to become his exile. The place of his solitude.

And when the creaking door gave way, it opened up to a view of a sober, lone wooden chair in front of a sturdy oak table, a sole door that led off to a narrow bedroom with a single bed, and a plain armchair that... had an elegantly clad, short-haired Drow half sitting in it, half floating above it, idly turning over a page in the book he was reading. "Liebling, was-... wie?!" Caleb was distantly aware that his mouth was agape, but he couldn't quite muster up enough brain-power to close it, as it was direly needed to figure out how on Exandria Essek had gotten here.

"Oh, you finally opened the door," the intruder said without looking up from the Xhorhassian romance novel in his manicured hands. "I was just about to recast Locate Creature."

"But... how did you even know I was going to be in the vicinity?" The radius of that spell wasn't as generous as you'd like if you had no idea where to begin looking for someone.

"I did not," Essek admitted nonchalantly. "I used 7 Teleportations to places you seemed likely to have retreated to, before I found you on the edge of this town." He had the tone of someone who didn't care, but Caleb could hear an undercurrent that until now was reserved for people who had wronged either him or Jester or on rare occasions Caduceus. "You were suddenly gone from the tower in the middle of the night, while I was still in trance. It did not take a genius to assess the situation and you know I am not a fool." Essek's already clipped voice had an edge to it that Caleb also knew to be at the end of the Magician's Judge.

But the wizard, always more inquisitive than was good for him, had to keep digging: "Even if you found me in the village, how did you know I was gonna come to this house? I never took you to Blumenthal."

"Oh no, you never did," Essek conceded acidly as he finally put the book down and lifted his chin that was jutting out a lot more than was usual. "But you insult my intelligence if you think I did not know what you were planning. And even though you

are quite an annoyance to her and her new position, as she assured me – what with your persistent supervision and your unwavering teachings of things that are easily construed as treason which she has to discuss away – Lady Beck was a tad more cooperative in preventing you from shutting yourself off from me, than you would believe a former lover to be.”

Caleb began: “You brought Astrid into-” but cut himself off when Essek levitated into something akin to a standing position and was looking down at him over the bridge of his own nose. Gods, this man was pissed. The small cottage suddenly felt colder than the history it had been built onto had any right to be.

“Do you want to be rid of me, Caleb Widogast?” Essek asked pointedly.

For just a moment, Caleb contemplated lying. No, that wasn't true – he contemplated contemplating the option to lie to Essek about this.

But he knew he wouldn't. “I did not want to be rid of you, even when you lied to my face and told me your name was Dezran Thain, when you admitted that you only ever bothered speaking to me because I brought proof of your treason before the people looking to execute someone. Even when you told me to choose between the most powerful wizard I knew, and you, to go into battle with, when the fate of the whole world was at stake, I chose you. What do you think?”

“Then why are you doing this to us?” A bit of the razor-like ice shards had melted from Essek's voice, though he was still a far cry from the man who hid the quirk of the corner of his mouth in a book so Caleb could not take his grin as an encouragement to keep poking fun at his love for pretentious Undercommon titles.

“I'm doing this, because we are not who we were anymore. I am not the young and naive wizard who could run through a dungeon full of deadly monsters, with assassins on my heels and no way of escape but flying by the seat of my pants,” Caleb answered him desperately, trying to make him understand that this was what had to be done if they wanted this thing, this cozy, blooming, writhing, wonderful little thing between them, to stay alive. “No matter what we do now, our relationship will change. You are still you and I am becoming more and more of... this.”

Essek caught a freckled hand in his, as it was gesturing to the whole of what was once Caleb Widogast, protégé of the Shadowhand of the Kryn Dynasty. “You are the most intelligent man I know,” the former Shadowhand said. “And you are right in all of what you just said. I am still me. And you are not the reckless naive boy anymore, that I considered getting rid of because he knew too much. Because I am in love with this man who is not as old as he is making himself out to be; and I will still be in love with him when he is. And because I am still me, you do not get to make the choice of whether or not this is true.”

Essek held up their hands and laced their fingers together. Caleb stared at them as if he had never allowed himself to see them before. Maybe he hadn't – at least not really, not in a long time.

“Were you afraid that the Dusk Captain would show up on our doorstep any day, to take me away to the executioner's block?” the Drow asked. “Or that the agents of the Lens would find me and you would come home to a bloody puddle on the floor?”

Caleb swallowed hard and needed to blink a couple of times before he found his voice to answer, because he knew where this was going. He was a genius. Of course he knew. “Every day for years and years, and some days still.”

“And did you want me to leave you so you would not have to see this happen?”

The blinking stopped. All Caleb could do was stare his lover in the face as if he'd just told him that time was flowing backwards and the world just. Because how had he

never considered this before? How were his own and Essek's feelings still so incomparable in his head? It took what might have been a minute – Caleb could not tell, and Caleb could always tell – before he realized that Essek was honestly waiting for an answer.

"No," he breathed.

"So then, let me ask you this," Essek continued his interrogation, his tone having softened to conversations across cocked book spines and purring tabby cats.

"Because I acknowledge you were right in everything you said before, and our relationship will have to change as the years progress –" He dropped his levitation at that, and suddenly Caleb had to look down a couple of inches instead of up. Their hands were still interlinked at their side. "You can take my feet actually meeting the ground as an equivalent of me being down on one knee, I hope."

Caleb's brow furrowed violently as the words registered. "Ich- was-?"

"My final question for you is whether you will marry me, Caleb Widogast."

"I am 61 years old, Essek!" He protested. "That's 61 Human years, not Elven!"

But Essek was having none of it. "I do not see a problem with this," he said in the same tone of patience and self-evidence he used to explain concepts of Dunamancy to Caleb. "I would still pose that same question if you were 81 or 91, but I ask myself, why wait if you clearly need our relationship to change in a direction that shows you that I want all of these years from you. I wanted to ask you this for quite a number years now, but I never got the impression you thought much of the institution of marriage. However, if you would humor me, I would be much obliged. You once told me that you would grant me as much time as you have, and, whether by agreeing to my proposal or not, I would like a reassurance of that promise."

Foolish old man that he was, Caleb had to look up to the ceiling and blink a couple of times before his voice, suddenly hoarse, was obeying him once more. "Jester will want to be a groomsmaid, if there is such a thing," he said in lieu of an answer. "And Veth and Beau the best men."

"I was thinking something a bit more private, with just the two of us," Essek admitted solemnly. "But if that was a 'yes', then I will gladly let us have any kind of celebration you would like. So, Caleb Widogast, will you give me as much time as we have?"

The blinking did not help, and damn his dignity, he wanted to look into Essek's eyes for this: "Yes," he said, and their foreheads touched for a couple of seconds or minutes – time completely lost to Caleb's keen mind – before their lips did the same.