Out of Tune

by Calescent

Summary

“I like her.”

“Daisy, what did we say about strays?”

“I remember. But she’s not at all like that cat… I’m pretty sure she doesn’t have fleas.”

Julia’s life was just about perfect. Breaths away from becoming a professional musician, she finds herself washed ashore in the most disgusting city she could imagine. Kirkwall. There she is dragged (literally) into the chaos that is Marian Hawke and her gang of misfits.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“Once I rose above the noise and confusion
Just to get a glimpse beyond this illusion
I was soaring ever higher,
But I flew too high.”

The pause between notes felt like a moment removed from time, both the orchestra behind her and the darkened audience in front of her holding their breaths before the plunge. Julia’s heart kept up a steady pulse that resonated through her skull even as she closed her eyes.

Tipping off the edge of a cliff, the song began again. It flooded the large room with color and feeling, chasing back the shadowed silence. Her bow flicked across the strings, plucking one note while drawing out another. Julia didn’t think, barely breathed as she tried to convey the music to the audience as more than black marks on a page.

Music was life, music was the air they breathed… It was…

The song flourished and her fingers fluttered through its paces, pausing just long enough for a vibrato.

…over.

Like the grey aftermath of a storm, the lingering remains of the piece held out for persistent heartbeats as the audience blinked. Their consciousnesses had been pulled higher with the notes, transcending a single existence. One by one, they plopped back into red cushioned seats to stare at the dimmer world in awe. Then they started to applaud.

Julia eye’s refused to open even as she heard the rest of the musicians stand to receive their accolades. Her right hand hesitated, bow pressing against taut strings as if it could once more summon the feeling of a minute before.

She was a fool.

Julia blinked once, twice into the lights that sought to idolize them. At the wave of the conductor’s arm, she dipped at the waist. She couldn’t see anything past the stage and with the song so recently finished, she still struggled to bring her mind back from the blissful numb of the music.

She need to focus, who knew who was out there? Only the best.

The epilogue of the concert was a wash of faces and voices. Someone handed her flowers which she promptly set to the side in lieu of her violin. She smiled at people she recognized and one after another, confident managers pressed sharp-edged cards into her palm. Eventually the waves of people slackened and ignoring that one particular person had yet to reveal themselves, Julia made her
way back to recital room.

Her case lay on a chair near the front, exactly where she left it. Quickly twirling the the numbers on the combination lock, Julia opened the velvet lined case and gently set her violin in its fitted place. Only then did she allow herself to breathe normally and take stock of her situation.

Hair: safely contained in an elegant twist. Solo: performed perfectly. Probably the most important, the cards of over half a dozen managers of major orchestras: contained in a pocket of her violin case.

Her mother would be especially pleased with the last one.

Julia pressed her fingers against the velvet inner edge of the case, tracing the shape of the paper rectangles. Her hand, steady throughout the entire concert, trembled slightly and she immediately stilled it, irritated. Today was her day.

She double checked that her violin was safely buckled in its container and clicked the lid shut. She didn’t really want to leave the black and white rehearsal room with its garish red plastic chairs arranged in increasing semi-circles around the conductor stand. It was simpler here. A few other people were still taking care of their instruments and getting ready for the post-concert celebration but no one she cared to talk to.

Checking her hair for the thousandth time, Julia slipped her violin case over her shoulder and left the backstage area, heading towards the lobby through the twisting hallways. More people to smile at and pretend to care what they said. How many first years would she have to deal with today? It was nice two years ago but at this point it was past an annoyance. Unfortunately the conductor disliked drama and so she would play nice. For now.

She turned a corner, the murmur of voices playing as a harmony in the background to her thoughts. Automatically, she plastered on a smile. That’s what Mother expected. Her smile tightened then relaxed as she thought about the cards in her case. A professional musician. Performing for audiences all over the world and never have to settle for anything ever again. She could live with that.

“She is such a snob,” a female voice said from around the corner in front of her. Julia slowed, smile losing its forceful energy. “She thinks that just because she is a talented musician, she should be the center of everything. I mean, geez, she even had the date of the concert changed so it worked better for her schedule.”

Julia’s feet ceased to move against the invisible molasses and she glared at the picture-covered wall protecting the girl from her gaze, the high of a successful performance vanishing. In front of her, one of the school's famous students looked out above the camera with their cello tilted against them.

That was going to be her on these walls one day.

“If you have something to say, I recommend not chattering about it like a pair of monkeys over a banana.” The two froze, caught. A viola and bass she noted. They reminded her of rabbits in a trap, eyes wide and hoping that the predator just ignored them. It was pathetic. Julia frowned at the pair and then walked past, heels clicking against the floor.

She didn’t have time to deal with their jealous nonsense.
As expected, her mother was ecstatic about the performance, blue eyes and white teeth sparkling as she came to squeeze her only offspring. The fact eyes of at least half the male population of the room and a large number of the female followed her movements didn't bother her mother, in fact it seemed to encourage her antics. Julia breathed in the fashionable perfume clouding the air around her mother and kept her face smooth despite the overwhelming odor. Before she clogged her lungs, she took a step back, barely listening to the stream of drivel.

John, a tall brown-haired specimen in a stiff suit, smiled at her over her mother’s shoulders and Julia just managed to keep her smile pasted on her face. This John had been around for two weeks, not even close to the six month mark needed to upgrade from ‘John’ status. Why should she even bother being friendly to a man who would be gone before she needed to retune her strings?

“…and Mrs. Rebenborn had the most lovely things to say about your solo. Ah, and your conductor already told me the good news. I can't wait to tell all my friends that my daughter is a professional musician. They are going to be green…”

Snatches of conversation flickered by from the crush of well-wishers. “I’m so proud of you…” “…dinner at Grape Vine sound okay?” Julia stared down at her hands, clear manicured nails gleaming as they pressed into her palms. The smell of her mother's perfume and the cacophony of voices pressed in around her, trapping her in her own skin. Air caught in her lungs and tickled at her throat. She would give up half the cards in her case just to be back up on stage again, in a world of darkness and music.

“Julia! Are you listening to me?” Julia glanced up, hands instantly loosening and back straightening.

“Yes, mother?”

“David has invited us to the Safone for a celebration dinner. Do you need to freshen up a bit?” Blue eyes blinked at her even as John beamed as if he had accomplished something to be proud of.

She couldn't do this anymore.

“Yes,” Julia said, tongue clipping the ‘s’. “It may take a few minutes.”

Long fingers, fingers much like her own, waved Julia off. “Take your time, my dear. You know what I say about proper make-up care.”

*Beauty brings excellence.* Julia’s smile melted slightly, tipping the expression, but she managed to turn away before it completely dissolved.

Fingers white from gripping the case strap, Julia strode out of the crowded lobby. It felt like the air in the room had gone stale, tainted by too many people breathing it in. A quick stop to the restroom to make sure her skin appeared clear and her mascara remained cleanly applied, then she was down the hallway towards the practice rooms.

Just a bit of quiet before the restaurant was all she needed; some time to breathe before being shown off like a new piece of jewelry to all her mother’s friends. And if by doing so forced John and her mother to have to wait for her, it was merely a bonus.

So soon after the concert, the group of sound-proof white padded rooms were quiet and dark. Julia flicked on a light switch and entered one of the larger rooms, one with a piano in it. Not a grand, but it still worked in a pinch.

Settling down on the black cushioned bench, Julia placed her case near her feet where she could be sure no harm would come to it. She pushed back the cover and without thinking, traced her hand
across the ivory keys, cool on her skin.

Unbidden, she smiled and as was her tradition, began with chopsticks.

Notes floated around her as she started at a simple duple time, ascending the scale. The tune repeated itself and she maneuvered her hands so her right played the melody and her left added a contrasting harmony. Working the familiar rhythms, she relaxed. The music swam through her system, making her feel light-headed as if all her stresses were floating away. Eventually though, she would have to return to her mother and the John. Her fingers slowed so that only two were needed to continue the song.

Everything must come to an end.

She stopped playing.

Her violin case was lighter when she stood back up. She could do this. It wasn’t hard. Just remember to smile, make polite small talk with John, and feign modesty when anyone asked about the evening’s performance or her plans for the future. Simple really.

Something wet tapped the back of her hand, a spot that she might have ignored if it wasn’t so cold. She looked down at the appendage curiously. A speck of clear water sparkled against her skin. What? Her eyes followed an invisible path to the ceiling, just in time to see another tear drop fall.

Of course the school that spent thousands of dollars to make creative murals on the walls wouldn’t take the time to fix a leaky ceiling.

Julia put her case on top of the piano and stepped onto the bench, balancing precariously in her strappy shoes. The water was falling faster now, almost a steady drizzle. Julia reached up, letting it trail down the length of her arm and soak the pit of her dress, almost impossible to notice on the black fabric. The tiles of the ceiling didn’t look any different though, in fact the drops seemed to be coming from the center of one of them. Someone was going to hear about this, she promised herself. The water could damage the piano or worse, her violin.

She carefully stepped down off the bench and yelped as her foot met cold liquid, engulfing her toes. There was over an inch of water covering of the practice room floor. How was that even possible? She doubted even an ounce had fallen from the ceiling.

Either way, as the cool feeling began to creep higher, Julia decided it was time to call for someone who would know what they were doing. Definitely not her. She leaned forward and snatched her case off the piano, nearly scratching the reflective surface. As she turned, her heel snagged on something and she lost her balance, crashing backwards. Her rear absorbed most of the impact but it still sent pain shooting through her back. The water was getting higher, submerging her hips.

She was going to need a change of clothes.

Struggling to get to her feet with high heels, Julia rolled onto her knees, water already halfway to her elbows. With some effort, she pushed herself to a standing position, getting a mini-shower from the drizzling ceiling. She glared at the spitting liquid. The water had to be coming from somewhere besides the ceiling. There was no way that the water lapping at her knees could rise this fast from that small sprinkle. It just didn’t make sense. To prove her point, her knees grew cold.

Tripping slightly on the edge of her dress, Julia pushed on the practice room door. It didn’t budge.

This had to be someone’s idea of a joke.
Julia hit the glass that taunted her with a barren dry space just beyond it.

“Hey, this isn’t very funny! Let me out!” Surely someone had to be nearby… or not since she had come here to be alone.

“Help!” Her voice came out in a croak and she swallowed. "I'm in here!" The water kissed her inner thighs, making her shiver. It couldn't be rising this fast! It's not like the practice room was sealed air-tight. There had to be leaks into the main practice area. She tried the slot of a door handle, throwing her weight against the side that was supposed to swing open. Nothing.

“Dammit,” she swore. Her mother would have disapproved. Julia slammed her palm against the door again, yanking on the handle. “Open, God dammit!”

Panic surged through her, distorting reason. Her legs bumped into a hard surface and trying to stay calm, she climbed up onto the bench. The damp surface threatened to make her slip but she managed to stay standing, hand firmly braced on the top of the piano. Her case was still on her back, not helping with her balance but she would sooner join the military than think of abandoning it.

The water lapped higher.

Julia glared up at the leak, wondering if she could stop it up with something. But what? It’s not like she was wearing much clothing. That was if she could even reach it.

Ever so carefully, she stepped first on the cover and then the top of the piano, ascending away from the liquid. It felt like sacrilege to put her feet on the instrument but Julia swore that she would have her mother buy the school a much better one when she got out of this.

Wobbling unsteadily, she reached out, tracing the tile for the invisible hole with the tips of her fingers. There really wasn’t that much water coming off of it, not enough to explain the water level that had almost reaching her toes again. She could see the waves rising higher on the white walls, making the cloth dark. She needed more options.

Julia smacked the ceiling tiles but they refused to move, designed for sound-quality rather than accessibility.

“This is ridiculous,” she hissed, trying to figure out the hole in the ceiling again. Her shoes shifted underneath her and before she could think, she was falling.

Cold water and then pain ricocheted across her skull as her the back of her head struck something. The pain ricocheted down her spine and sent sparks of black across her vision. She could barely concentrate, trying to stand, arms treading water. It was up to her shoulders.

Where was the damn bench?

Fumbling until her leg banged into it, she managed to get some more distance between her and the rising waves. Her dress clung to her skin, making her shiver and her case felt like a lead weight on her back. Van Swieten help the school if her violin had been damaged.

A plan. She needed a plan.

Crawling back up onto the piano, Julia fought against the water to get her body into a straight-standing position. After bracing her feet to keep herself from falling again, she unslung her case and raised it above her head. Help would arrive soon and she wasn’t going to lose her instrument.

If anything the water seemed to be rising faster, going from ankles to knees in a matter of seconds.
For the first time, Julia wondered what she would do if someone didn't come before the room filled up. Almost immediately, she rejected the idea. There was no way she would die here in water and silence. She was too close to her goals to give up now.

Desperation almost had her opening her case to get her phone but she kept it firmly shut and above her head even as the water rose up her stomach. She could survive a little water. Her violin couldn't.

Seconds swept by as the water inched its way up her body. Julia eyed her case, debating the pros and cons. She didn't have time to think! Swearing, Julia set her case on top of the water, knowing it would float for at least a second and jumped off the piano.

The coldness of the water slapped her face and she lost several bubbles of air before she even began. Peeking through the clear water, Julia swan over to the door and gripped the edge. As hard as she could, she kicked the frame. There was no way that the door could stay shut with this much pressure pushing against it. There wasn't even a latch!

She slammed the palm of her hand against the glass, barely hearing the low thump it made. Insides screaming, Julia pulled herself back to the ceiling, head popping out over the waterline and almost hitting the top. Nearby her violin case floated innocently.

That was something at least.

Arms beginning to burn, Julia struggled to keep herself up as her legs tangled in her dress. With a kick, she sank, choking on water. Her head spun but she got back to the shrinking air space, bumping her head on the ceiling. Barely able to see, she swore, using what little oxygen the room had left for a second of satisfaction.

Unbidden, her fingers wrapped themselves around the handle of her violin case. God better have an orchestra up there if he planned on taking her. If he didn’t, the devil better be a fucking good conductor. Julia tilted her head back for one final breath and then the water went over her head.

Liquid pressed in from all sides and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to think. Any second now someone would open the door and she didn't want to be coughing up water.

Her heartbeats grew louder in her ears, the slow crescendo of a timpani. It was almost beautifully peaceful as all other sounds faded leaving nothing but thoughts and the drum of her heart.

Then the lights flickered and went out, leaving her in darkness. For the first time, Julia didn’t know if she was going to get out of this. Her heartbeat began to pick up, moving from a moderato to a presto even as the lack of oxygen tickled her lung with needles. She couldn't go out like this! She refused.

Her foot struck something, sending pain lancing through her ankle and Julia lost some precious air as she yelped. There was no light, no sound... if not for her forte heart, she could have been dead.

There had to be some air somewhere…but it was getting harder to tell which way was up. Julia pointed herself in what she hoped was the right direction and kicked again, hands clawing her way forward. The top of her head thudded against what was probably the ceiling, scrambling her sense of orientation further. Familiar rough fabric brushed her fingertips and she latched back onto the strap of her case.

Lungs burning, she barely felt the dim hope that her violin would survive this.

Julia kicked uselessly into her skirts and like a solo emerging from the orchestra, her head burst out of the water.
Eyes shooting open, she dragged the weight of her case to her, submerging her head in the process for a terrifying second and filled her lungs with fresh air. Who knew that oxygen could be so wonderful? She blinked at the white strips of fabric across a blue canvas above her and as she faltered at what could not possibly be the sun, breathed in some water.

*What had happened?*

Coughing against the bitter taste of salt, she swam lopsidedly forward. Already the strain to stay afloat heated her limbs. Her knees struck something hard and the force had her crumpling forward, palms striking a gritty surface. For a brief moment, she didn't even care. She wasn't surrounded by water. Her violin was safe.

Almost as quickly as relief, the cold hit, sending shivers from her bare shoulders to the legs still nestled in the dark liquid. In front of her, wooden crates blocked her view of washed-out white stone buildings. A post-trauma hallucination? There was no way this was the pearly gates. Something... stank. Horribly.

Julia crawled up some steps, getting away from the dark water before sitting back on cold stone. Her case rested next to her even as her palms and knees burned from the short climb. None of this made any sense. Head swimming, she stared up at the structures. Several smaller figures crossed her line of sight, ignoring her. What she was seeing couldn’t be right. *There were no buildings in the practice room.*

With that rational thought, the world blurred and went dark.

Chapter End Notes

“Carry on my wayward son

There’ll be peace when you are done

Lay your weary head to rest

Don’t you cry no more.”
“Hey, Satan, payin’ my dues
Playin’ in a rockin’ band
Hey, mamma, look at me
I’m on the way to the promised land.”

*Author’s Note: If you haven’t already, read the tags. Unsympathetic POV Character... and more Swearing. Just wanted to make sure I don’t offend any young ears.

Something was touching her. It was light, barely noticeable, brushing up her legs and sides before trailing across her neckline. Julia flipped over, wanting it to leave her alone, but after a brief pause, it continued on down her back, which tingled in response to the slight pressure.

A tug on the strap still in her hand shot her from her sleep as if she had just heard someone play the clarinet for the first time.

“Don’t you fucking touch that!” Julia hissed, blinking furiously into the sunlight. A figure crouched over her, frozen with their hand still resting on her violin case. It was a man. Features solidified as her eyes adjusted to the bright light. Unkempt beard. Skin that would send dermatologists fleeing... A hobo was trying to rob her. Of all the--

With a half-hearted tug, the man tried to take her case again. Julia pulled back, jerking it from his hands and into her lap.

“What are you? Never mind, I don’t care. Get out of here or else I’ll call the cops. My mother has a great lawyer and you’ll end up behind bars faster than you can say Vivaldi.”

Alarmed, the little man scurried off but the crawling sensation on her skin remained. At least he was gone but... where to? Where was she? And why the hell did it feel like she had a hangover?

In front of her a short series of steps lead towards... water. A massive blocky structure that sent chills down her spine sat amidst the blue-grey liquid. She was in a bay of some sort, sun-speckled cliffs surrounding them. Behind her were the grey buildings, ill-repaired it seemed. Several men in odd brown clothing walked around, some carrying boxes and others angry voices.

It was nowhere she would willingly be.

Julia sniffed and regretted it. *The smell! It somewhere between rotten fish, body odor, and beer. If she had eaten anything recently she might have gagged. As it was she simply smothered the bottom half of her face with her hand.*

Perhaps it was a dream. With vomit-worthy scents. The stone was coarse beneath her free hand, small rocks biting into her palm and her face hurt from when she had been laying on it. The wind
brushed past her, chilling her damp dress and creating goosebumps. Too many details for a dream.

So she was nowhere that she recognized. That was definitely a problem.

The fog in her memories was burning away with the sunlight but there didn't seem to be more than bar or two difficult to pick out. No passages long enough to explain what she was doing here. Or how she got here. The practice room filled with water and… What? She floated through an invisible pipe to Flintstoneville?

Keeping her eye on the men around her, most of whom only glanced her way, Julia pulled herself farther from the water and moved to rest her weight on her knees. It stung, but the position gave her a better view of her surroundings. Setting her violin case on the ground, she entered the combination and with a twist, opened the lid. The interior seemed enough dry, taking a huge weight she hadn’t even realized was there off her chest. Her eyes swam as she traced the wooden frame of her violin. Not a hint of moisture. Her baby was safe.

She opened one of the pouches on the side of the case, pulling out her phone. It was difficult to focus on the screen, her headache was playing a cascara with the back of her skull. But she could still make out the symbol at the top of the screen. No signal.

What was the point of paying for service if it wasn’t there when you needed it? Julia swore that when she got back she would get her mother to change companies. It didn’t matter if they got good 4G by the pool if they couldn’t make a phone call when they were lost.

Putting her phone back in its section and shutting her case with a click, Julia stood. Her back ached with the straightening even as she swayed dangerously. There was nothing to it; she would just have to find a pay phone. Did those even exist anymore? If nothing else, almost everyone had a cell phone. Surely someone would let her borrow it.

She took in what she could of her appearance. Her dress seemed largely undamaged although it was still damp and limp. The black color hide that fact well even if it was a bit straighter than usual. She ran a hand through her hair and felt the ridges and loose strands already falling out of her updo. She might look like something out of a horror movie, but at least she wouldn't seem to be a threat. More like a deranged wet rat. Her makeup must be atrocious after the dip in water. She hadn't thought she'd need the water-resistant product for a short and simple concert.

What would her mother say?

With nothing else to distract her, Julia set off down the street, away from the set of boats to her left. The smell of fish wafted from that direction. The strange men ignored her for the most part, common blue-collared workers as dull as they were dirty. In the distance more white buildings rose into the sky high above the cliffs. An obvious illusion but it was well-done at least.

Her heel went down farther than expected and she stumbled, shoe tugging loose with the movement. Cracks and outright holes split the stone street. What was with this medieval decor? Hadn’t they heard of asphalt?

Something moved in the shadow of a building to her left and she kept walking at her normal pace, fingers tightening slightly around her case strap looped over her shoulder. It was probably nothing, but it didn’t hurt to be careful.

Figures emerged.

“Are you lost, serah?”
The box carrying men ignored these new people, changing their routes to give them a wide berth. Julia straightened her back, trying to stare the group of men down. More seemed to appear from the woodwork as she watched. She wasn’t some weak hapless prey for them to easily intimidate. She had no money with her and by God, there was no way they were going to touch her violin.

“You must be mistaken. I don't know you nor do I have any wish to.”

“My apologies. You are a long way from home, whore.”

*Whore? How dare he!* Julia felt her face heat and tried to calm down. With her makeup disintegrated, the extra color would not help her appearance.

“I suggest you change your tune. One word from me and your days breathing free air would be over. I am no common street trash like yourselves.”

“You certainly dress like one. My mother always said to dress for who you want to be. That’s why I got armor for myself. Always wanted to be a soldier. Wouldn’t you say, Aidan?”

Someone grunted. Julia frowned, the headache she woke up with making itself known. They weren’t seriously thinking about harming her, were they? That was ridiculous in this day and age, especially against someone newsworthy the police actually cared about.

“You should leave before you never see sunlight again,” she said. They must be idiots, that was the only explanation.

The men just laughed. “Listen to this arrogant bitch. Just hand over the case and your valuables and we won’t damage you. Much.”

*This is ridiculous.* Julia took a deep breath from her diaphragm, straightened her back, and then screamed. The note rang out clear, if perhaps a bit flat. Acceptable in this case since she had yet to warm up. She'd like to see any of the graduating sopranos do better.

The would-be muggers took a step back then came at her. Bells went off in her head and her scream cut off.

“Ouch, that’s better,” Someone muttered. “Didn’t know we had a screecher on our hands.”

Scrabbling at the hand that held her throat, Julia tried to take in air and failed miserably. *Fucking cowbell!* She twisted her body and slammed the heel of her shoe into the man’s foot. He bellowed, and mentally registering herself for both a doctor’s appointment and a dentist's, Julia bit him.

He tasted like dirt, sweat, and other revolting substances that had her gag reflex checking in.

“You bitch!” The man hissed as pain exploded in her gut. She bent forward, once again unable to take in oxygen.

Dazed, she barely heard someone catcall from a distance. Suddenly the bandits were charging away from her, heading towards the sound that must have been real.

Whatever was happening ceased to matter as her knees hit the ground. Gross stenches were stronger here and Julia’s head began to get fuzzy as she tried to breath but the combination of stomach pain and desire to vomit were making difficult. *Was that screaming?*

Her back ached dully. *How long since the fall from the piano?*
“That’s two! How many did you get, Hawke?”

“Four! I win again!”

“I think we need another round. You definitely cheated.”

“Only if it's cheating by having a head start. Now what do we got here? Hey, you alright? Please don’t be a darkspawn… Or another blood mage…”

Something poked her and Julia looked up, edges of her vision going grey with the effort. A person stood over her, features barely discernible against the sun. Mud splattered boots. Buckles on the clothing. Too short black hair. And was that… blood smeared across an overly long nose? Julia opened her mouth then closed it as the nausea crescendoed. Mists had reformed over her vision and she forgot what she was going to say.

Chapter End Notes

“And I’m goin’ down

All the way

I’m on the highway to hell.”
“Comin’ out your mouth
With your blah blah blah.”

“I still think Daisy’s would’ve been better.”

“I wouldn’t have minded having a guest, honest.”

“I know that, Merrill but what if she is a bad person? We don’t want her to learn where you live, do we?”

“No, I suppose you’re right.”

Low laughter. “So we bring her to my room. I’m glad I hold a big place in your heart, Hawke.”

“Oh, you know I only have eyes for you, Varric.”

Julia never had voices in her head before, but she was pretty sure that if she did, they would be less annoying.

“Could everyone shut up for five seconds? I can’t hear myself think.”

Caesura.

Exactly five healing beats later, a male voice asked, “You awake then?”

Head still pounding at a mezzo-forte, Julia raised her hand and pressed it to her brow. At least it didn’t feel like her stomach was trying to crawl up her throat. “Do I really need to answer that?”

A feminine giggle. “I like her.”

“Daisy, what did we say about strays?”

“I remember. But she’s not at all like that cat… I’m pretty sure she doesn’t have fleas.”

Knowing that she would regret it, Julia slowly opened her eyes. She was on her back… looking at a wooden ceiling. Her legs dangled, a hard edge pressing into the back of her thigh, so she was off the ground at least. That didn’t help her much. She could be anywhere.

With a heave, she sat up and her vision spun. “Ouch,” she hissed, bracing her head again. “Someone better explain exactly what the fuck is going on around here.”

“That’s what we were hoping you could tell us, Freckles.”

Julia’s eyes shot open and she twisted towards the offending voice. The sudden movement threw her already weak equilibrium off balance and before she could pick apart what happened, she was falling. Her feet hit the flat surface and without warning, her knees gave out. A sticky-looking
surface rushed up towards her.

Before she could dread the contamination of her dress, her waist hit a thick fleshy surface. Loose hairs floated away from her head as she hung there, nearly brushing the floor. Julia tried to focus on muting her headache, squeezing her eyes shut hard enough to hurt. *This day had to get better at some point.*

Large hands helped her back to the… table she had been laying. She blinked as her savior came into view. *Short… man. A dwarf. No… that wasn’t politically correct… what was the right term?* Either way, he was showing far too much chest hair. Modest v-necks were fine on women but the depth his shirt dipped would embarrass a Vegas stripper. She did not need to see that.

As she stopped wanting to pass out again—how many times had it been recently?—Julia’s vision settled on the rest of the room. She was surrounded. They were all in armor of sorts, spread across the dimly-lit wooden room in front of her like some crappy Renaissance painting. *Great… Nerds.* A dark haired female with sharp features was doing something with a short knife in her mouth a few feet away. The short blond chest-haired man stood too close, watching her intently with amber eyes. A striking white-haired man with… pointed ears lounged in a chair far enough away to almost look like part of the background while a dainty girl with tattoos covering her face hovered near the door. Finally, leaning back in a chair at the opposite end of the table, smirk plastered across her face, was a dark-skinned… slut. There was no other way to describe her. She was definitely at a nerd convention.

Something more important occurred to her. “Where is my violin?”

“Your what?” The woman wearing only a white shirt that went barely past her hips asked. Julia straightened, all traces of remaining dizziness and discomfort pushed to the back of her consciousness.

“My violin. I was carrying it in a black case before I passed out. Where is it?”

“Ohhh, that thing. Kitten, would you go grab that?”

The tattooed girl darted to the side and Julia’s head went fuzzy as she tried to track her. A familiar shape came into view and her hands instantly went out to take it. With a twirl and a reassuring click, she opened the case. It seemed fine.

She set the case aside and picked up the violin, tracing the lines. Still no damage as far she could tell. Just to reassure herself, she plucked the strings. E, a, d, g. Yes. *Everything was fine.* In fact, it was still in tune.

Of course the nerds were still there when she tucked the violin back into safety. The delicate one’s large green eyes were even wider while everyone besides the white haired man in the ratty ill-upholstered chair seemed amused. The blond haired man crossed his arms, which only served to emphasize the deep cut of skin and the ridiculously wide breadth of his shoulders. She barely resisted a shudder.

“If you are not my kidnappers, are you going to introduce yourselves?” Julia asked.

The woman closest to her took the knife out of her mouth long enough to laugh. “You are awfully demanding for someone we rescued. Varric, take all damsels in distress off my calendar.”

The chest hair *moved.* “Of course, Hawke.”

Julia tapped her nails against the table and waited.
“I’m Hawke,” the woman said. “The grumpy one is Fenris, the one who looks like she is going to jump you is Merrill, the one who has yet to keep her pants on is Isabela, and the delight of a dwarf is Varric. Now, do we get to hear your name or shall we just guess? I’m going to go with… Helen.”

“I call Melody,” Varric said, grinning at Julia. She frowned, pulling the edges of her headache tight against her skin.

“Julia Nielsen. How do you do. Now, I really must be going. My mother will be having an aneurysm at this point. She may even need to touch up her make-up. Thank you for your… help.” She slipped off the table and blinked several times as she steadied on high heels. The weight of her case reminded her that she had places she needed to be. Not here, she had a career to build. But for now, there had to be a door around here somewhere… There.

As she started walking, several of people who probably still lived with their parents trailed after her, the woman who called herself Hawke chattering away. “I’m not going to have to save you again, am I? Kirkwall is a good place for rats, bandits, and people with nothing to lose.”

Kirkwall? Was that the name of their geek-contest? “What does that make you then?” Julia asked, glaring down the flight of stairs. They really had gone all out for this one. The people below on what she could only guess was the main level were all dressed up like you might see in a medieval movie and the smell… she was glad she was leaving shortly.

A low chuckle from Isabela, but Hawke- the name must be from that beak of a nose- just grinned. “Probably all three. I do love a gamble.”

“Good luck with that then,” Julia said, making it down the stairs with no major disaster. No handrail on the stairs had to be some kind of safety code violation. The patrons of the establishment stared at her and she ignored them, raising her head high. They were far too old for this kind of thing anyways. Then she was out the door.

If she had thought the bar was elaborate, it was nothing compared to what she saw when she stepped out the door. For being obvious fakes, the backdrop of sky and cliffs stretched beyond the usual plastic scenery common with those who wanted to ignore reality. Red fabric was everywhere, fluttering from the buildings and ruffling the tables of people shouting their wares. Children laughed, chasing each other as the adults browsed the stalls that were barely more tables. Everyone dressed as if the last thousand years of fashion had been nothing but a horrible dream, yet if she closed her eyes, it would have almost sounded like New York.

“These geeks don’t do anything half-way, do they? Julia pointedly ignored the clogging stench of a public restroom and started walking. She didn’t know where she was going but surely soon she would have cell reception or come to a point where these people’s fantasy merged with reality. The realistic stone buildings and walls couldn’t go on forever, no matter what the occupants wished.

The feeling of eyes on her continued as she put the initial street behind her. As the only person dressed in anything remotely normal, she stuck out more than a sharp note in a duet. Gritting her teeth, Julia focused on not tripping on the uneven ground. Such low quality material. Just because they were pretending to be medieval didn’t mean they had to forget what good construction was. Or bathing for that matter. Why the hell was everyone so dirty?

Colorful banners flapped and she got a whiff of salty air. That couldn’t be right. The concert had been nowhere near the sea.

Perhaps all the convention’s budget went to the effects. They certainly could have spent some on a cleaning service.
Striding past the grubby shops, Julia turned right. Someone called out to her and she refused to give them the satisfaction of a blush. After the last several hours, she probably looked like walking disaster but that didn't mean she had to act low-classed.

“Five coppers for a ride, honey.”

*Oh, he better be talking to someone else.* Julia whirled around, sick of this entire situation. Someone was definitely going to hear exactly what she thought of this Nerdcon.

A dirty man in tattered clothes grinned at her, showing off discolored uneven teeth. “You’re going to enjoy this, sweet thing.”

“I doubt it,” Julia responded, glaring. “Where do you get off, talking to me like that? You should be arrested. Just be grateful I don’t carry my pepper spray in my case else you would be crying spices for a week.”

The teeth were slowly covered by chapped lips. “Uh… what?”

“Are you deaf as well as piggish? I shouldn’t be surprised. You dorks think anything female in these conventions is fair game. I’m surprised you managed to crawl from your mother’s basement. Perhaps next time she will put a bib on you so your drool doesn't ruin your shirt.”

Not giving him a chance to respond, she stomped off, not caring where she went as long as she got out of here. Several turns later had her walking down some stairs. In front of her an expanse of water rippled, punctured with a blocky structure that seemed oddly familiar.

A painting of some sort? One that… moved?

She should have service down here. All she needed to do was find a safe sanitary place to set down her case and---

That man had horns.

Julia froze, the hand holding firmly onto her case’s strap moving to the intersection between her collarbones as her heart tried to leap out of her chest.

The man was huge, over six feet tall and seemed to dislike shirts, instead coloring his almost grey pecs with red paint. And his eyes…. They didn’t seem to have any whites.

Julia took a few steps back. *Dorks weren’t supposed to look like this. They weren’t supposed to have abs or be intimidating. It was…* Her thoughts stuttered, trying to think of a good solution and drawing a blank.

Luckily, her feet knew what to do and pulled her away from the figure that she couldn't explain. She had gone only a several paces before a group of ratty-looking men approached her, surrounding her. **If they asked her if she wanted to go for a drink, by God she was going to bash someone’s face in.** Her nerves felt like she had just gone through her first solo performance while riding a unicycle, adding increasing cracks to her composure.

“Lost, Kitten?” One of them smiled at her. *Had none of these people heard of dental care?*

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I don’t have time for this,” Julia tapped an irate rhythm onto her strap as she tried to walk forward only to be blocked by two burly individuals.

“No time for us? That is a shame---"

"Hey Stixs, should I congratulate you on winning that bid for the Antivan wine or punch you in the face?” A nearly identical group to the one that rounded her stomped over from the water's edge. "I'm
leaning towards the punch."

"Awww, don't be like that, Trest. Everyone knows that my guys are the best." Julia took a step to the side and almost touched one of apes in human clothing. Not that way.

"Is that why you broke three crates in your last job?"

"You take that back!"

Knuckles too close to Julia's face cracked and she took two half steps and one whole step to the side so she was as far from the barbarians as possible.

"How about you make me?"

"With pleasure."

A body slammed into Julia, forcing her back. The ground gave beneath her and as she shoved the man away, her ankle twisted. What? A glance down revealed the problem. Her heel had jammed itself into a crack in the stone. Worthless shoes.

"I think your ugly mug could survive a beating!" One of the savages darted forward, stepping on her foot in the process. Julia yelped and twisted her ankle sharply. It didn't budge. Could this stupid convention leave any part of her body unharmed?

"What do you think you're doing?" A low, bored voice asked. Julia's head jerked towards the flat sound. It was the white-haired man from the Nerd Herd. The one with the compensating sword and tattoos. He watched her a trombone's length away from the jostling group.

He couldn't be serious… "Are you stalking me? Get lost."

A strangely dark eyebrow rose. "You want me to leave you there?"

"Shit." Julia bent her knee, just in time to avoid a fist. Did someone spike the convention's water fountains with testosterone? These beefy men didn't seem like the typical nerds but she didn't know what mental disease made these immature dorks wear such elaborate costumes.

One of the oafs finally noticed the person in close proximity to their conflict. "Stay out of this, knife-ears. This is no business of yours."

"I've been asked to find this woman. I do not think that means broken," the man intoned, not even giving the group a second glance.

"We'll see about that," the would-be ruffian said, drawing a blade. Somehow a single enemy unified the group and the people on the other side joined in. They couldn't be serious.

But they were.

Faster than Julia could blink, something wet hit her face and two of the bodies in front of her crumpled. The man with the tattoos had drawn his sword and already something red was covering it. A scream bubbled in Julia’s throat but it got stuck as she stared at the still forms. That…they…

There were more raised voices as the remaining men charged the would-be elf. Metal clashed and Julia yanked on her foot, gripping the area underneath her knee with both hands. One and two and.. Three! Her shoe popped free and she stumbled back, nearly tripping over a dark shape.

What was going on? They couldn’t be dead! People just didn’t get murdered in public. That was a
thing for third-world countries, not her home. Not in the twenty-first century. It had to be an elaborate trick; they were just spraying stage blood. The white-haired man smashed his elbow into one of the buffoon’s face and Julia started running.

Her feet hit the ground hard, heels turning the sound syncopated. A cracked tripped her, case heavier than expected. So much blood. It was just... Stage effects.. It had to be... But their open eyes hadn't blinked... What kind of creepy could master that?

The buildings on either side of her stayed the same, dirty and squarish. There were no signs telling her where she should go or what she should do... Did they think people could just know where to go without prompts?

Her heart thumped in her ears and she gasped for air, slowing. Her legs trembled, but she forced herself to keep going at a slower pace. There had to be an Information Booth around here somewhere. She needed to report this... needed to--

“Stop.” It was the man from before. She didn’t slow or turn around to see how close he had gotten. In her shoes, there was no way she would be able to outrun him. Keep people around, don't let it show that he got to you. Surely someone will intervene if he came at you.

Just like they intervened for those men a minute ago? What about earlier before Hawke came?

No one cared.

“I am not going anywhere with a murderer.”

“Do you know what those men were going to do to you?” He still sounded uninterested.

Julia paused, coming to the end of the street. Unless she felt like jumping into the suspiciously-colored water, she would need to look elsewhere. Blast it all. She turned and then wished she hadn’t. The man was covered in blood, some of it turning his hair pink and worse, he didn’t seem bothered by it. Unconsciously, she took a step back.

“I don’t really care. Have the tight pants cut off circulation to your brain? You can’t just kill people!”

“They deserved it.”

“Then I am definitely not going with you. I can find my own way home.”

The man-elf stared at her for a short moment with those unnatural green eyes and then sighed. Julia’s world shifted and she found herself looking down at ground, stomach pressed against pointy metal shoulder pads. She lashed out with her legs, but strong arms pinned them down before she could inflict real damage with her heels. Instead, she screamed, the high noise piercing the general murmur.

A jostle disrupted her. “If you don’t quit that, I really will hurt you. Now be quiet and let me bring you back to Hawke.”

Julia watched the stone ground start to move as they went back the way she had come. She was probably getting blood on her dress. Frustration and the sick feeling in her gut threatened to bring tears to her eyes but she forced them away before they could even get watery. There was no way she was breaking for this joke of a Renaissance Festival.

These idiots were going to get a piece of her mind. That was a guarantee.
"How dare you say that my behavior is unacceptable
So condescending unnecessarily critical"

The elf threw Julia ungracefully back on her feet before they made it to the stairs of the so-called tavern. She stumbled forward and spun to glare at him. The trip through the streets had been bad enough, but carrying her like a sack of potatoes through a crowded building like there wasn’t a felony going on? Barbaric. The elf settled against a wall, dark features daring her to make a run for it. She hadn’t reached the level of desperation to attempt that without a plan. The rest of the motley group of weirdos looked up from the table they had settled at. Are they drinking? At this hour?

Shifting her case to fit more comfortably on her shoulder, Julia tried once again to appear unfazed despite the fact that she was pretty sure that some... person...had gotten on her dress. It would need to be burned now.

The woman whose face resembled a bird smiled. “Sorry about that, I figured annoyed was better than dead. You don’t look like you could survive Kirkwall on your own. Maybe you’ll even thank me eventually.”

She thought this was funny, didn’t she…

Merlin-No, that’s not quite right... Merrill- waved shyly, small fingers fluttering and Julia forced herself to calm down. They are just geeks. They weren’t worth the effort.

The fact no one commented or even seemed surprised at her kidnapper's appearance disturbed her more than she cared to let on.

“Let’s try this again. You save me, bring me to a rat hole, kill several people only to kidnap me back to said rat hole, but if you could just stop whatever game you are playing to direct me to where I could find a phone, I won’t bring the authorities into this. My phone doesn’t appear to get any signal here. Do that one simple thing and we can just go our separate ways like it was always meant to be.”

The group stared at her till the dwarf-Frederick?- glanced at the elf. “How hard did you hit her, Broody?”

“I barely touched her.”

The pantless woman huffed, crossing her arms under her ample chest. Julia bit back a few choice words about that outfit; she had enough problems without making enemies out of losers. “Men. Let me try.” She stepped forward and spoke slowly, drawing out the words as if Julia was an idiot. “Hello. My name is Isabela. Where are you from?”

“Cedar Grove Falls.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard of that. Is it in the Free Marches?” Merrill asked, hands clasping in front of
The dwarf wrapped an arm around the dainty girl's waist, still looking at Julia curiously. “No, it’s not.”

*By all the…* Julia set her case on the table, ignoring the off-colored stains in the wood. She didn’t want to know. *The owner of this sick-joke of a festival better offer reimbursement if my case gets so much as a smudge on it.* She flipped the combination into the lock and opened her case, pulling her phone out of the small pocket. Still no reception. And the time was off. It wasn’t 1 A.M., if anything it was 1 P.M. Stupid expensive phone. She sighed, more than ready for this experience to be done.

“This is a cell phone, if you dorks have forgotten what they look like. I need to borrow another one. I promise, any assistance will be compensated.” She waved the device in front of them. Five pairs of eyes watched it blandly. She pressed a key, brightening the screen and the male elf scowled.

“Magic. I should have known.”

Merrill scooted closer and for the first time Julia noticed the girl wasn't wearing any shoes. “That is impressive. What kind of magic is it?”

“It’s not magic,” Julia groaned. Perhaps the bare feet had picked up some kind of fungus from the floor and it affected the girl’s brains. “Will you please stop with the dungeons and dragons for a split second and take this seriously?”

“I always take dragons seriously,” Hawke deadpanned. “A winged furnace is nothing to scoff at, right Varric?”

“That’s right, Hawke,” the dwarf said. The two grinned at each other like children who had gotten away with a particularly good joke. She just needed to hand them some lollypops and they would fit right in at any playground.

She wasn’t going to get anywhere with these idiots. They were lucky they weren’t as fat and pimpled as the usual people who dressed up for these things.

Varric got control of himself first, smirking at Julia’s stony stare. “You’re in Kirkwall, Freckles. The best cesspool this side of the Waking Sea.”

The headache that had disappeared with the relatively fresh air outside was returning, an ice pick chipping behind her frontal lobe. “So where exactly are we in New York?”

“Where?”

Julia glared at Merrill, even though out of all them she seemed the least likely to actually be useful. “This really isn’t funny. New York, America, on planet Earth. Live in reality for just a second.”

The slutty pirate leaned into Hawke and stage whispered, “I need to find whatever she’s had.”

Hawke smiled but her posture said ‘crazy’. “I haven’t heard of any of those places. You sound like you are from Kirkwall though. Some kind of trauma perhaps?”

“Sounds like a good as a reason as any,” Varric agreed. “But what should we do with her? We can’t just leave her on the streets to fend for herself. She’d be mugged within minutes and probably dead in a week.”

“I can take—“
“No, Merrill,” Hawke sighed. “I can take her. It’s not like I don’t have the space. Besides, perhaps Mother would like the company.”

Julia tapped her toe against the wood and instantly regretted the action as it took more effort to pry it off the floor. “I am right here. I can hear everything you are saying.”

“Good, I don’t like to hear myself talk *that* much. Let’s go. Unless, of course, you want to find a way home yourself.”

The unspoken ‘cause last time went so well’ might as well have been trumpeted into her face.

“Fine,” Julia spat, putting her phone back in her case and locking it up tight. “But if you try anything the least bit suspicious, I’m screaming.”

“She is quite good at that,” her kidnapper said. She glared at him to no avail. Nerdville was getting old fast.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter was so short! I was going to combine it with the next one, but that chapter needs some serious love and attention... Something short sooner is better than longer later, right?
Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, or Some Nights

Chapter Notes

“I was never one to believe the hype
Save that for the black and white
I try twice as hard and I’m half as liked
But here they come again to jack my style.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Julia had seen the 1939 Wizard of Oz once a year for as long as she could remember, but this was the first time she could actually understand exactly what Dorothy felt when she first arrived in Oz. Strange people, strange sights, strange smells. This place even had munchkins and people without brains.

Although she refused to let the tenor of emotion reflect on her face, Julia could feel her gut sinking lower and lower as they walked away from the tavern. It was becoming increasingly impossible for this to be a convention center. Perhaps one or two gatherings of the socially inept got this large but the farther they went with new structures appearing deep within the side streets, the less likely it seemed that this was some temporary thing. How could this all be faked?

The facts she ignored when trying to find a way out resurfaced with a vengeance. She was in a massive medieval city in a sort of natural harbor.

“What did you say this place was called?” Julia asked, immediately hating how small her voice sounded.

“Kirkwall,” Hawke said, strolling casually past a man in patched clothing throwing up in a corner. The only other member of their diminished group, the elf who went by Fenris, looked equally in place with his red-speckled armor. The rest had gone their separate ways, wishing Hawke luck with the crazy person.

“And the continent?”

“Thedas.”

Julia forced herself to breathe normally. It's all just an elaborate convention. Like some kind of large cult community... that doesn't sound the least bit familiar. The air smelt noticeably better as they ascended through the city, not good by any means, but certainly an improvement from the tavern and streets. While the stones beneath her feet remained grey, they were lighter and looked merely old rather than a remnant of the Black Plague.

“So you really not know any of this?” Fenris asked, strangely dark eyebrows coming together in sharp angles.

"No, I know very little about your stupid fantasy world. I had better things to do with my life than attempt to hit strangers with swords."

"The only things I attempt to do is please my mother and fly," Hawke commented airily. "Everything
else I succeed at."

Fenris made some noise between a snort and a grunt and Julia's calm act cracked.

"You're all idiots! I can't believe you made it past crawling because it's obvious you should still be wearing diapers rather than pretending to be legal adults. Get a job like a normal person!"

Hawke cracked up, shoulders shaking hard even from behind. Fenris turned his head to stare at her, unblinking like a cat. "You appear to be some kind of musician. That can hardly be considered normal."

Julia's hackles rose even as her case pressed hard against her back from tripping over a crack. "I'll have you know," she hissed. "I just received multiple offers to be a soloist for some of the top orchestras in the world. I am one of the best."

Hawke spun to face her, proceeding to walk backwards. "So, you are unemployed too then."

Julia lost her words for a second. Of all the people--

"You two can say nothing! Did you drop out of school to follow your obsession for the occult? You are practically slaves, unable to see the sky for the sun."

The wannabe elf froze, stopping short and Julia copied him. "Did I strike a nerve, loser? Perhaps you should throw away those ears and hope your tattoo artist offers refunds. Honestly, just put on one of the glasses with the giant nose and be done with it. This is your wake up call."

"Shit," Hawke muttered and grabbed Julia sharply by the arm, yanking her forward. The force set Julia off balance and she crashed into the woman's unyielding leather armor.

"Let go of me!"

"Trust me, you're better off this way."

"Hell if--"

"I am no slave!" Fenris shouted. Ignoring the hand still gripping her upper arm, Julia blinked. Had his tattoos changed color? She swore that they were pale and skin-toned but now they seemed almost white. She must not have been paying attention. Tattoos were a clear mark of an idiot. Especially face tattoos. It said a lot about these people if two of their number had them.

"She's clearly been hit in the head too many times, Fenris. While I don't disagree she deserves to be smacked again, it wouldn't end there." Hawke tried to soothe the madman in the way that made sense to her.

Scarecrow.

"Violence?" Pulling her focus on her current problem, Julia jerked her arm away from the woman's hold. "Is that your answer to someone calling out your delusion? Pre-Gregorian barbarians!"

"You are just like the magistrate, you think you wants are more important than anything else."

What the hell is he-- "More important than your group's wants? Certainly," Julia shot back.

The elf's eyes narrowed, tattoos definitely a glowing white. How is he doing that?

"Hold it, Fenris." Hawke literally stepped between them. "I did kind of agree to keep her safe and I'm pretty sure whole is part of that definition. I don't know why I always get stuck with the crazy
ones; I'm perfectly sane. Now….” She turned her back on the still glowing elf to wag a finger in Julia's face. "Gemla Nebih, was that your name? I don’t know what you think is going on, but you’re in Kirkwall now. Some may let you say things like that but this city has enough problems without another fanatic. They are running out of places to put them. Now, you are going to apologize to Fenris or I will drag you to Darktown and leave you there.”

During the extemporized speech, Julia’s hands clenched her strap tighter and tighter. The knuckles glared white. A significant part of her just wanted to stomp away, leaving behind these weirdos. But… that hadn’t gone well last before. Her jaw, stomach, and ankle still ached from the fights she already been a part of, not to mention the pains she suffered from the practice room. She was in no condition to spend hours roaming the cultist capital. If the people here continued to be as crazy as they had been so far, she wouldn’t do well on her own.

She forced herself to take a deep breath, immediately regretting it as the putrid air contaminated her lungs. “I’m sorry Fenris. I will try to be more… considerate… in the future.”

The elf-man glared at her but his tattoos stopped glowing.

“There,” Hawke declared, spinning around to start walking again with a sway to her step. “That wasn’t so hard. Now we are one big happy disorderly family.”

**Disorderly doesn't even cover it,** Julia thought as they followed after her. Fenris’s gaze remained pinned to the distance ahead of them.

The surroundings continued to change as they moved through the town, which showed the quality and wealthiness of the creeps at least. Julia eyed the massive tower that got larger as they climbed up a series of stairs. It wasn’t as high as a skyscraper but compared to the buildings around it, the top floors might as well have been above the clouds. For the most part, she was able to ignore the unresolved anger emanating from the man walking behind her.

They reached the top of the steps and came onto a large open square that seemed to be some sort of marketplace. Bright-colored tents stood stiff against the wandering breeze and the merchants competed to see who could out-shout the other. The people seemed cleaner up here and the wares were no longer trash with price tags. Hawke waved at a short bearded man and grinned at several others.

At least the smell here didn’t wake up her gag relax. Though that was like comparing a tuba to a baritone.

Julia glanced back the way they had came and frowned. The city extended out into the bay, the cliffs forming a rough circle around them. It was the same but different from other angles, which only confirmed it wasn't some sort of elaborate hologram. She should have heard of this community. It was hard to believe they could get away with all this unnoticed.

Google Earth would have at least picked them up.

Hawke hadn’t stopped moving so Julia pushed herself to catch up, glaring down the shop keepers who thrust goods in her face. They were worse then pop-up ads.

With a mumbled farewell, the elf parted from them, splitting down a side street as Hawke turned away from the tower, heading instead towards another tall, grand structure. The buildings around them parted, opening up into a clearing.

Whoever designed this part of the city had a bird fetish. Statues of birds lined the walls, perched on
stone pillars, and guarded the entrance to an especially large and impossible edifice in front of them. Some sort of city hub, except with less shops from what she could see.

Hawke barely paid attention to that though, instead turning left towards another side street. Of all the grey stone structures, she angled them at a building covered in vines. It was actually quite pretty despite some obvious neglect. A bit rustic perhaps, but in pleasant way. Julia preferred modern lines but there was something to be said of character features.

It didn't look like a house where people were cut apart and used as furniture but most of them didn't.

"Gema," Hawke said, once again butchering her name. "This estate belonged to my mother's family. I would appreciate it if you didn't break anything. Or at least nothing that my mother would miss." With that comment, she pushed open the door tucked between the stone and greenery and disappeared into the dim.

*This is it. Last chance.* Julia paused a few feet from the door frame. Chances were if Hawke was some kind of serial killer or human trafficker, she wouldn't be able to leave after going in. If she ran now…

One of the birds on a pillar glared at her, beady eyes down a black beak. *Not in Kansas anymore.*

The rough fabric of her strap wore at her massaging thumb. Her choice. No one would make it for her.

"Forgot how to walk, Gema? In awe of the grandeur of my home? Understandable. I am a very grand person." Hawke's voice floated from the interior, settling Julia's worry.

*A complete idiot.*

Julia entered the doorway.

A swash of warm colors welcomed her as she stepped onto the interior rug. Staring at the vaulted stone ceilings and obviously rich if outdated wall-hangings, she felt the already fragile idea of a cult center receive another crack, right near the top. It *had* to be though; any other explanation would be impossible but… An entire city with this much detail? And those cliffs? There were definitely neither of those in New York.

At least she wasn’t dreaming, that was clear from the pain in her feet. Her heels had started to rub the wrong way during the last leg of their trip. She definitely had blisters by now.

“Welcome back, messere. It is good to see you,” A small man dressed in red with a thick beard popped out from the room beyond the antechamber. Julia unconsciously stepped back, but Hawke just grinned. “And I see you brought a guest. Should I bring set another place for supper?”

Hawke ran a hand through her short dark hair. “Yes. Bodahn, this is…”

"Julia."

"Right... Julia. I found her wandering helpless on the docks so she may be staying with us for a while. Please make up one of the guest bedrooms for her. It's a good thing we have so many extra rooms with all my over-night guests. But hey, they usually turn out well in the end.” A wink followed her last sentence and Julia’s face hardened.

“Very good. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Messere Julia. Excuse me.”

The circus-styled man waddled off, leaving only the two women in the expansive space. A fire
burned in a large stone fireplace to the side with several desks lined up near it, ink and feathered quills resting on top. Determined to see the man behind the curtain, Julia stepped closer to the fire. Heat warmed her front as flames licked the bundle of logs.

“Please tell me they aren’t solely using this for heating,” Julia muttered, half to Hawke and half to herself.

Hawke just laughed, pulling two forearm-length blades from the straps on her back and setting them on a table. Without even a pause, she started yanking off bits of armor and putting them down as well. “What do you think we are? Lowtown Fereldens? We have a fireplace in each room.”

*Right.* Julia clenched her violin case strap. This was just some obese guy's make-believe reality. It had to be.

No matter what she kept telling herself, it was getting harder to breathe.

“My mother is out somewhere today but I’m sure she’d love to meet you. You’re not a noble are you? You have that kind of attitude.”

“No.”

“Well that’s good. My mother is all the noble I can take. Now, let’s see about that food.”

Julia’s dismay about the heating system changed to horror about the food and then, later, serious revulsion about the restroom situation. These people covered all their bases, diving straight into their fantasy existence. It was almost like it was a real medieval city. But, again, that was impossible.

Hawke disappeared after showing her the guest room and handing over several coarse dresses, but Julia still slid a chair underneath her room’s door handle just in case.

Her cell was small, barely bigger than her closet back home with bare walls and lit only by the fireplace and a series of four scones spread out over the walls. The twin-sized mattress crunched when she settled down it. *Might as well sleep on the floor.* She set her case to the side of the bed and tugged off her shoes, feet weeping as they felt every thread of the dark rug below. She couldn't even bring herself to care about the diseases that might linger within the material.

After a moment’s hesitation, she changed into the nightgown laid out for her as well. It fell to her ankles with a series of white bows bunched at the top. She would look sexier in a potato sack.

But at least it wasn't covered in the remains of another person.

Her dress she hung up near the fireplace and she set her shoes underneath. They would be ready when she needed them.

As for her hair… finding an awkward-looking wooden brush, she managed to get it out of the knot on her head, clumps falling around her face. Part of her wished she had taken Hawke up on the bath but it was more than likely a perverted trap.

The nightgown was repellent enough for that even if the door wasn’t blocked no one would bother to touch her. It didn't help that a check in a foggy hand mirror confirmed her makeup had melted, smearing across her face. *Still...* Some scrubbing with a handkerchief and a bowl of water that had been waiting on the end of the mantel fixed that. Her face burned but was now clean. All in all, she felt slightly more human than she had since… whenever the concert had ended.

She tapped her phone screen, the resulting glow familiar and comforting. According to the screen,
the concert had ended six hours ago. It felt like an eternity. She entered her code and checked for any type of reception.

Nothing.

Her heart leaked, but Julia pulled herself together, turning her phone on airplane mood and tucking it back into the case’s pocket. Instead, she withdrew the violin. The smooth wood brushed her fingertips and immediately she felt more in control. This was something she knew. Something, not matter what happened, wouldn’t change.

She began with scales, starting with C major, going through the majors and then the minors. Bach and Vivaldi floated around her, protecting the room from the freakishness of the situation. She rocked through the second-violin part of Verdi’s Requiem Mass and then slowed down with a rendition of Blvd of Broken Dreams.

Time ceased to exist. Julia played until her muscles had relaxed and the fog that had layered over her mind since she almost drowned cleared. Then, making sure her violin was firmly locked in its case, she covered herself with blankets. Uneasily, she closed her eyes. Her body pressed into the barbaric probably flee-ridden mattress even as her mind fought with her new temporary reality.

Maybe when she woke up, she would be home again, ready to start her life as a professional musician. She would have access to the Internet and the food wouldn’t taste like wet bread. Indoor plumbing would once again be commonplace. That wasn't too much to ask for.

The crackles of a dying fire filled her ears for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Story time! (aka random behind-the-scenes note that you can totally skip)
This chapter was kind of interesting to write. I was typing away when I paused for a second to reread what I had so far. I realized Fenris was being way too sexy for both this scene and for where I wanted the story to go. In my head "Okay Fenris. Enough with this nonsense. Just talk and act normally. Okay?" I proceeded and as I typed the character disobeyed me and continued to glare/yell sexily like any moment he would pick someone up and angrily make out with them. Two scene rewrites later, I think I corrected that rebellion...
Someone was knocking on her door. Worse, they didn't seem to get the hint that she had no intention of leaving bed this early. Lucia knew better than to bother her unless it was urgent and Mother didn’t care what she did with her free time as long as it did not reflect poorly on her. *So who the hell is...*

The knocking continued.

“Go away!” Julia yelled in the direction of the sound, burying her head further into the pillows. They smelled funny. What had Lucia done? She should know better than to switch brands on them. It wouldn’t be hard to find a housekeeper who knew how to do their job.

“Messere? Your breakfast is getting cold.”

*Messere? That isn’t right. Did they hire someone new? A... man?*

“Hey Julia, did you find an alcohol stash? I swore we got them all but Isabela could have added more troves last time she visited. If so, open the door. As your host, I demand that you share any ill-gotten drinks. And regular drinks. I’m generous like that.” That woman she knew. They had a bird name. *Raven? No... Falcon? Not quite... Hawke.*

She was still in a fanboy’s paradise. Right. Now she really didn’t want to get up.

The door jiggled but stayed shut.

“Helllllooooo. Calling strange female interloper. I’m not very fond of getting locked out of my own house. I would just break the door open, but Mother will have a heart attack if I start turning her family home into kindling. So please come out.”

Julia’s bare feet somehow missed the rug and hit the cold floor. She hissed, dancing over to the door. Bleary eyed, she dragged the chair out from under the handle and swung the door open.

The dark-haired woman took one look at her and burst into laughter. “You are not a morning person. That’s fantastic. Neither am I. Now come on, we have a day of fun ahead of us. I want to see if Aveline or one of the self-righteous robes knows anything about where you say you’re from. Or perhaps they have room in their hearts for a cranky unemployed musician.”

Kirkstone, or whatever the perverts called it, was determined to get under her skin. Hawke had her in a blue dress wearing some strangely soft but thick shoes before she could even think about it. Obviously made for someone else, the dress hung loose on her, particularly around the chest and hips. A thick brown belt helped limit the impression of poverty. If there had been literally any of her clothing that hadn’t met the insides of a criminal, she would have worn it instead. The only reason she allowed Hawke to drag her out of the house was because she had no one she cared to impress here. Mother and her friends could deal with it.

Her hair binder decided to get lost in the night, so her only resort was a tie the armored woman handed her. Strands mutinied, rioting away from her fingers to fall across her neck and shoulders. *Barbarians... they all are.* They refused to give up on their illusion to enough for modern essentials. She needed her straightener.
She refused to think about the earlier process of using their version bathroom, instead grabbing her case. Hawke raised an eyebrow at her.

“You don’t need to bring your instrument. I don’t think Sandel will be bothering it very much. We almost have him housebroken.”

Julia shifted her case on her back. What was a sandel? A dog? “I would rather it stay with me.”

Hawke just rolled her eyes. “Suit yourself. Just don’t ask me to carry you if you get tired. Despite what people think, I can’t do everything.”

They left the estate, going back on the rocky streets. It was just as strange as the day before, buildings definitely not modern even though it was obvious they were much nicer than the first ones she saw. These at least had non-weed landscaping and the semblance of cleanliness. Alarmingly, the smell was already less noticeable.

“If you are going to be our new stray, you’ll need to know your way around Kirkwall at least. This is Hightown when the high-class thieves live,” Hawke explained as they across the square towards a self-important building.

“You do realize that you live here,” Julia commented. It was petty of her to take the obvious opportunity for insult, but the woman seemed only amused by the derogatory remarks in the past. Plus, it gave her the pittance feeling of control over what was going on.

As predicted, Hawke laughed, tilting her head back as the rich genuine sound shook her shoulders. “I never said I wasn’t a thief. Just not a high-class one.” She grinned broadly as they started up the steps and despite the fact the woman was a crazy nerd, Julia almost gave an incredulous eye roll. She stopped herself just in time. Responsible for her situation or not, Hawke still refused to give up her illusion enough to hand her a working phone.

That made all the difference.

They reached the top of the stairs and Julia froze, something inside of her twisting. The building that she had noticed the day before was impressive, bird motif and all, but the entrance looked like something out of a movie, tall stone walls looming over what was almost large enough to be a plaza in its own right. Genderless individuals in armored uniforms, staff, lined up next to the rows of pillars on either side of the dramatic entrance.

This had to be real.

Julia took a steady breath, thumb unconsciously rubbing small circles into the case strap. The time and effort needed to construct this building, not to mention the rest of the city, would have taken years if not decades and enough people to put it together to populate a town at the very least. How could all of this escape the notice of the government? Not to mention the media who loved a click-bait story.

‘Cultists Build Medieval City on New York Coastline.’

"A bit grandiose for my taste, but if it wasn't larger than necessary it wouldn't be Kirkwall," Hawke commented, waving at one of the identical individuals and then winking when they shuffled slightly. "Maybe once we are done here I'll take you to the Blooming Rose so I can show you what I mean."

Blooming Rose? Is that a greenhouse? It seemed unlikely. "Maybe some other time."

"Pity," Hawke said, pushing through the overly larger doors as if she owned the place. The people
inside certainly dressed better than a majority of the fanatics Julia had seen yesterday, brightly
colored silks instead of brown-toned cloths. They all seemed to be shooting disgusted glares at her,
or perhaps more precisely, Hawke.

Are these the VIP nerds? Julia glanced at a woman who had to be in her sixties, wearing an outdated
yet fine green and gold dress that made her own second-hand blue dress seem to be one step above a
brown bag. Julia forced her eyes forward, keeping her stride confident. She had nothing to be
embarrassed about. She didn't choose to be here.

"And to our right we have the city guard, protectors of the rich and wonderful distractions," Hawke
waved dramatically to where more uniformed people were walking in and out, only some wearing
the clone-like helmets. "Well, I suppose they are getting better since Aveline took over, but some of
them are still no more than walking yellow targets. Speaking of... Hey Donnie!"

Julia winced as Hawke yelled at a longer haired guard with strong features who shook his head
before greeting her in return. "Hello Hawke. It's good to see you. Here to see Av.. I mean the
Captain?"

"Unless you're busy." Hawke leaned forward, lips turned in a closed smile and Donnic backed up a
step, hands waving in front of him before he settled for putting them behind his back.

"Ah... no, thank you. I... have things that need my attention. Good day, Hawke." With that, the man
turned and marched off towards a side room.

Hawke snickered, smirking at Julia. "He is just too much fun. Did you see his... ahh... if only Varric
was here. What do you think of Slick for a nickname for him?"

Julia stared at the woman. She was nuts. There were very particular places for people like her, and
none of them were running around Geek City with sharp weapons. As Hawke continued down into
the guard headquarters, Julia wondered for the hundredth time who she had signed up with. Not that
there had been a lot of options but she really should have thought about it more before she walked
off to stay with a complete stranger.

They continued into the smaller room, leaving behind the rich trappings for authoritarian blanks.
Uniformed people of both genders braced themselves at various stages of relaxation, some lounging
on stone benches while others were all business, chatting. A few practice dummies stood against the
wall but no one seemed to be using them.

How elaborate was this? Julia adjusted her idea that the guards were staff. They seemed to be taking
this gathering as seriously as anyone else and there were no modern touches. Perhaps they were
volunteers who helped set the mood. The idea didn't quite fix into the picture as a whole but Julia
mentally tossed it into her 'don't think about' pile. She didn't know what would happen if she started
sorting through the growing stack of items.

"Oh, hello Hawke. I was just talking about you," a female voice said and a redhead emerged from a
side room, honest smile pulling on a scattering of freckles. Even though the long hair and higher
register of voice indicated femininity, the creature in front of her would have shattered mirrors if she
wore a dress. Broad shoulders, hands large enough to crush a grapefruit, and a long powerful stride
all indicated tomboy. She dressed almost exactly like the rest of the so called guard-a yellow scarf
attempting a slightly more fashion conscious approach to the ensemble- yet the woman radiated a
confidence and authority that made Julia think that, if anyone could help her find her way out of this
madness, this person could.

"...we got that group who were raiding the lower dock shops. They were just romping around as if
they didn't need to hide," Hawke shook her head, bemused. "And that's when we found the newest addition to our ragtag group. We think she is some kind of Blight refugee who had her brains scrambled."

"If this is how you talk to someone's face, I'd hate to see what you say behind someone's back," Julia said shortly with a smile that cracked the side of her cheek.

"About the same, actually," Hawke told her. "Anyways, I let Julia spend the night at the manor and today we are trying to figure out where she came from.'"

The Guard Captain nodded slowly before turning towards Julia. "Where do you believe you are from, Julia?"

Why do they persist in acting like I'm the crazy one? Julia held her initial response back behind her teeth. "I am from a suburb of New York City. Even if you pretend not to be on Earth, surely you have heard of it. Frankly I'm okay if you point me in the direction of New Jersey at this point."

"Are those places in the Free Marches?"

"Depends how far your fairy tale kingdom’s borders go."

The guardswoman glanced at Hawke who rolled her eyes. Julia frowned, nails digging into the case strap. This person wasn't going to help her either.

Fine.

"Thank you for taking up my time. Clearly I had nothing better to do than be insulted," Julia snapped. It was a simple enough request. She didn't have to deal with this. As the rest of the guard turned to look at the person making all the noise, she stalked from the room.

The antechamber was just as impressive as before, soaring ceilings and large spaces making everything else seem small. But Julia barely paid attention to it, clipping down the stairs. She would find her own way home. Somehow.

Doubt nagged at the corner of her mind, reminding her of Kirkwall's impossible details. Cliffs and sea air, no cell reception, aged population. What if...

No, she wouldn't think that. There were no what ifs. Only obstacles that she needed to bypass. She would get home. It was only a matter of how.

"Julia! Hey!"

Julia didn't slow, navigating around the finely dressed geeks. Hawke thumped down the steps behind her and a few outraged voices alerted her to where the woman was. She almost made it to the doors when a hand grabbed her shoulder, whipping her around.

"Are you deaf as well as stupid? Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from here. You obviously don't have any intentions of actually helping me so I'm better off on my own."

Hawke ran a hand through her short hair. "Look, I know it may not come out right, but I do feel some responsibility for you. I might even lose some sleep if I just let you walk off. But you have to admit, it does sound crazy."
"Crazy?" Julia crossed her arms over her chest. "You guys are living like people over five hundred years ago and you are calling me crazy? No indoor plumbing, no electricity, what were you thinking?"

Hawke gave her a weird look. "I don't know what that means, but you're serious, aren't you?"

"As serious as Bach," Julia promised.

The woman sighed. "Fine. How's this... I will agree not to act like you have lost your senses and you will agree not to just go off by yourself. No matter what you seem to think, Kirkwall is dangerous a place for those who can't defend themselves. Even in Hightown."

Julia met Hawke's bright blue eyes, guileless and felt her anger falter. As much as she hated to admit it, the woman probably had a point. If nothing else, these cultists took their myths seriously. The elf yesterday had proven that. Was killing, or at least extremely well done pretend killing, common at these kind of things? Another thing to add to the pile.

"Fine," Julia said finally, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. "We will do it your way, for now. But if I discover that you are misleading me in any way, I'm out of here."

"Great. Now that I know you won't steal my undergarments while I'm not looking, what do you say we try the Chantry next? If there is someone to convert, they will be there so if anyone knows where your New York is, it would be them."

"The Chantry?" Julia tried the word out. It sounded important, a melody tucked beneath contrasting harmonies.

Hawke laughed, startling a pair of richly dressed women who they passed. "Don't tell me you've never heard of the Chantry? Anders is going to have a field day with you."

They made it to the bottom of the stairs and turned left, away from Hawke's home if Julia's memory was correct. The streets looked the same as they passed fine stalls and even a child or two screeching off-key. Julia held her case close, hoping none of them bumped into her. Several turns later, Julia had a feeling she knew where they were going. It was the tower that she had been able to see even from that tavern where she had first met Hawke, a large, holier-than-thou building, more ornate than intimidating.

"Is the Chantry a religious place?" Julia tried. She had no idea if fantasy addicts made up their own religions though if they were imagining everything else it only made sense.

"Is Varrie's chest hairy?"

A shorter set of stairs and smaller door led them into a space that Julia could only describe as golden. A staccato hallway opened into a room with a giant woman poised over them. Red carpets and fire gave the air an ambiance of grandeur. Ode to Joy rose in the back of Julia's head as she craned her neck to look at the ceiling.

What she'd give to play her violin here. The acoustics must be amazing.

"Sebastian, I can not condone your persistence on this issue. You had your ill-pursued revenge, now find peace."

"How can I when the true murderer hides? Why should I find peace while my family lies dead?"

The voices bounced around the room, making it hard to pick out where they were coming from but
as they continued forward, Julia spotted an older woman and a man standing on the center dais. The woman, grey-haired, seemed to be pleading with the man who had his arms crossed over a white armored chest. *Distinctive if nothing else.*

"Would they want you to spend your life this way? Let them and yourself rest."

"I... cannot. I need answers." The man looked away, dropping his arms to his side. He spotted Hawke and Julia as they walked up the side ramp to join them. "And here she is now. Hawke, it's... been a while."

"Shoot any defenseless boards lately, Sebastian?" Hawke smiled broadly at the man who blushed.

The older woman spoke up before the man could. "Serah Hawke, I heard you reclaimed your family's estate. Congratulations. I am glad to see the Amells take their right place among Kirkwall's noble families. I remember your mother..."

Julia stopped paying attention to what the woman was saying, instead watching the blush fade from the man's, *Sebastian's*, face. He was handsome to be sure but not enough to pick out of a crowd, with blue eyes and brown hair.

Her attention drew his gaze and she looked away, feeling traces of heat start to creep across her face. Instantly, she was annoyed. Why was she embarrassed? He was the one being overly loud in a church.

Cheeks still burning without permission, Julia raised her head, jutting her chin out slightly. Sebastian considered her for a long second before turning back to where Hawke and the older woman were talking enthusiastically.

"...Your sister is a mage. No matter what we might wish, she belongs in a Circle."

"But she went years outside the Circle and I would have noticed if she developed horns. She can resist demons."

The woman sighed. "Hawke, we've had this conversation before and I don't doubt we'll have it again. There is nothing I can do to get your sister out."

Hawke snorted, hands closing into fists and then loosening. "It's not 'can't'. It's 'won't'. You'd rather lock up a percentage of the population than allow them to be happy and possibly turn into abominations." She turned, nearly ran into Julia, and spun back around.

"Your pigheadedness almost made me forget. Have you ever heard of a place called New York?"

The woman blinked, unable to switch topics as swiftly. "No, I have not. What country is it in?"

Hawke raised an eyebrow at Julia. "The United States of America," she provided, already sensing that this was going to get her nowhere.

"I know no such place. Is it a large country?"

"One of the biggest in the world."

Unlike the other person they talked to, the Chantry woman considered it for another long moment. "I'm sorry. I don't have any idea where that could be. As far as I am aware, there is no country named that in Thedas. Why do you ask?"
Hawke supplied the answer before Julia could figure out how to say it without blowing this apparent resource as well. "Julia says she's from there but doesn't know how to get back."

The woman tilted her head, considering. "Well, how did you get here? Perhaps we can work it out from there."

Julia almost opened her mouth but instead pressed her lips together. 'My practice room filled with water and when I came out I was here.' It sounded crazy, even by these people's standards. No one had kidnapped her, nor had she lost consciousness from one moment to the next. Teleportation did not exist, but what else could explain what had happened? It made her feel sick just thinking about it.

"Child, how about I take you to a map and we can find your home together?" the woman offered, smile adding more wrinkles to her face.

A map. Unless they only included their convention in the map, it could prove helpful. Perhaps she would recognize a section of the coastline and be able to tell at least in what direction she had gone. "I would appreciate that."

"Good. Serah Hawke, we will only be a minute." Without a backwards glance, the woman started walking down the ramp. After a second, Julia followed. Hawke stayed behind.

They rounded the dais, went a few paces, then began climbing another set of stairs, passing a woman dressed similarly to the older woman on the way.

"I don't think we've been introduced. I am Grand Cleric Elthina."


"I noticed you seemed a bit tense back there when I asked how you got here. I thought perhaps it would be easier to say it to just me than to a crowd."

Julia bristled slightly at the idea bowing before the pressures of an audience. "The amount of people listening had nothing to do with it."

The Grand Cleric hummed as they reached the top, turning towards a table surrounded by bookcases. Yet another woman wearing the same outfit was working with some papers on the table. Kindly, Elthina asked for a map of Thedas and the woman rushed off.

"Perhaps when you say it out loud, all will become clear."

Julia doubted it but nothing about the woman set off any alarms. She was clearly someone important, yet she didn't feel that way. Elthina felt like how Julia had always imagined a grandmother should be, soft and full of sugar.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Julia muttered and after a breath told Elthina everything, starting with the concert and ending with meeting Hawke and her friends. The woman stayed quiet throughout, transitioning her gaze from Julia to the map that was delivered part way through, straightening edges and placing weights. When Julia finished, Elthina traced a line on the map with her finger and met the younger woman's eyes.

Nodding to the case on Julia's back, she asked, "Is that your instrument? The violin?"

"My violin, yes."

"May I see it?"
Julia's first instinct was to say no. Her violin was precious, not for general consumption. She would choose when she would share it with the world, not the other way around. But... she had trusted the so-called Grand Cleric this far.

Carefully, she unslung the case from her back and set it on the table. A few flicks opened the lock and she flipped open the lid. With more care than she showed anything else in her life, she slid back the velvet covering, revealing her pride and joy.

Her violin gleamed in the golden light of the Chantry, almost as if it knew it was on display and wanted to show off. The straight strings contrasted with the swelling curves of the body, light against dark. As always, Julia's heart warmed at the sight, wooden texture as familiar as the freckles on her arm.

"It's a beautiful instrument," Elthina said, voice soft. Julia nodded and after checking to make sure it was still secure, covered her violin back up. They were silent as Julia clicked the lid shut, noise too loud in the space.

"Julia, I am going to be honest. Your story is strange, stranger than most. But I believe you." Julia glanced up, surprised. She didn't entirely trust her own memory. There had to be something between the practice room and passing out on the steps that she was forgetting. The only solution was impossible. But... to hear someone else say that her memory was not flawed was... reassuring.

"The Maker works in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine. He tests our belief when they are at their weakest and never answers why. But through his will, all things are possible. Don't doubt yourself. You seem like a bright, determined woman. Stay true to yourself and the Maker and all else will follow."

Whatever Julia had been thinking or wanting to say floated away, drifting off the staff to octaves unknown. This kind of woman was a religious nut? They were at a church of sorts so it wasn't too unlikely. She swallowed. "Thank you, Grand Cleric."

"It is my pleasure, Julia. Now let's try to see if there is any hint of your home here."

Sometime later, Julia carefully stepped down the stairs to the main level. The young man was nowhere to be seen, but Hawke was easy to spot. The women who Elthina called sisters were glaring at her as the dark haired woman flipped a dagger in the air in front of her, deftly catching it by the handle before tossing it up again. She grinned at Julia.

"Did the old bat start reciting the Chant at you? She did that at me once, I barely escaped with my sense of humor. Although you don't seem to have one so you're probably fine."

Julia took a breath to silence her initial retort. "Hawke?"

"Yeeessssss?"

"This isn't a convention or some weird cult village, is it?"

"A what?"

Julia closed her eyes, pile of 'things not to think about else they might break you' looming in front of her. "I thought so."

Chapter End Notes
“Gotta make a move to a town that’s right for me

Town to keep me movin’,

Keep me grovin’ with some energy.”
Notes surrounded her, their presence as familiar as the air in her lungs. Julia's arms were beginning to ache, muscles reaching their limit but she continue to play, ripping through Vivaldi as if her life depended on it. In a way, it did.

Vivaldi's muse wasn't enough to smother her creeping thoughts so instead she tore into Enescu, then Paganini, and then the ever magnanimous Bach. Heart beating its own rhythms, Julia stopped, emotions raw and worn out. Her stomach lay tight in her abdomen, a reminder that her body had needs too.

When was the last time she had eaten? Or slept?

It felt like a while, though without her phone constantly reminding her, time was fluid at best. Julia cradled her violin in her lap, staring at the slim black device lying in front of her. The piece of modern technology, of civilization, was useless here. All the calls, texts, and emails she tried lasted less then a second before it alerted her that she wasn't getting any reception. She had an excellent network so as long as the satellites were up, she should be getting something.

But she didn't even have a bar.

Julia reached for something to throw and paused on empty air. Her pillows were already across the room and besides her case and the chunk of expensive plastic, there was little else for her to express her frustration on.

Two raps on the door and it cracked open.

"Julia, I this may be a bit forward since we just met, but are you doing alright?"

Leandra. Julia instantly straightened and patted down her hair, once again wishing for her straightener. Or at least for something that would make her hair listen. She really wasn't fit for company at the moment.

"Hello, Mrs. Hawke. I hope I wasn't disturbing you."

The door opened wider, allowing Julia to see her hostess. Leandra was older, with grey hair and blue eyes, but without the stiff smoothness of those truly aged. The woman smiled. Her daughter might have inherited some of her features but their smiles were completely different. Hawke's spoke of mischief and unspoken laughter while Leandra's was simply an expression of kindness.

"Of course not, my dear. This old house has been too quiet of late. Your music is a wonderful change." Leandra paused. "My daughter told me of your situation. If you don't have anywhere to stay, I want you to know that you are more than welcome to stay here as long as you need to. I know what it's like to have no home and I wouldn't wish that on someone my daughter's age."

Julia forced on a smile, tugging on the wrinkles of her borrowed dress. Beauty is excellence. "I appreciate the offer. I'll try to find someway to repay you. Once I have my situation sorted, I will see about finding somewhere else to live."

The older version of Hawke just shook her head. "You will have no pressure from us. Bodahn may
not be the best cook in Kirkwall, but he has prepared something for supper when you're hungry. I'll ask my daughter and Sandel not to eat it all."

"That's alright," Julia said automatically. "I am not very hungry." Leandra frowned, creating more wrinkles across her matured elegance but after a second she slid the door shut, giving Julia her space. Her smile dropped into the bass cleft and her hands twitched, back to needing to throw something. Instead, Julia forced herself to take a breath and grabbed the small container of resin from her case. Just because she was in a fantasy world did not excuse neglecting her instrument.

Some things were still important.

And at the same time they weren't. Julia continued her task, careful to keep her movements smooth. Her violin didn't deserve her anger. It, at least, had never failed her.

But it also didn't solve any of her problems. The fact of the matter remained that she knew next to nothing about the place where she had found herself. All the details she had picked up in the last two days fit together to form a single chord. She was nowhere near Ceder Grove Falls. Her gut told her she was no longer on Earth either but she wasn't ready to deal with the reverberations of that idea yet.

Moving as if underwater, Julia set her violin next to her on the bed and loosened the hairs of her bow. The idea felt monstrous, unseemly, but the facts remained. Even if she blacked out, which despite her foggy memory of arriving here didn't seem likely, there was no good explanation for why she would emerge from the water if someone had transported her.

Then there was the lack of cell reception. Her network was good enough that unless she was in some sort of deserted wasteland, she should be getting something. Not this absence of everything, forgetting 4G, 3G, and what else, she didn't have anything! What kind of convention would that be?

She also couldn't deal with the existence of nonhuman lifeforms as the moment.

So she had no idea where she was, how she got here, or how to get back. Fine. She wasn't some kind of weak-minded fool. She'd figure it out. It was not like the managers who had given her their cards after the concert could easily find a soloist or even a concertmaster of her caliber. They would wait and still be grateful when she showed back up.

Of course, her mother would wail, flirt endless with the reporters who came to hear her remarkable story, and somehow end up making it all about her. The publicity would make her first professional concert sell out and that would set her career off in the right direction when the critics praised her performance. Everything would be how it was supposed to be before all this mess started.

Julia looked down at her hands, which were just plucking the strings at this point. Pulling away, she stared at the crafted wood. Her violin really was a work of art.

Gently, she picked the instrument up, cradling it in her arms and after taking off the shoulder rest, slid the violin back into the case. That taken care of, her eyes flitted back to her cell phone. No reception and only 8% battery life left. After a second's pause, she turned it off and tucked the device in the side pocket of the case. If this was indeed a different world, the hundreds of dollars worth of electronics and plastic would be next to useless. And when she got home, she would need the last bit of power to call a taxi.

She made it all the way to the door before she realized she was still carrying her violin case. Her hand clutched at the handle reflexively. She didn't even remember grabbing it.
Julia emptied her lungs of air and set the black frame behind the door, double checking to make sure it was tightly locked. She was not a child with a stuffed animal. She would be fine on her own.

Striding out of her room, Julia headed towards the kitchen. Her back felt empty without the familiar weight. It was almost like she lost a limb. But there was no way in hell she was going to let emotions dictate how she acted. She would be herself no matter the cost. With a turn, she entered the dining room.

The large dark table was mostly bare, but Leandra stood at one end speaking to Bodahn. Both of them paused when she walked in, Leandra with a smile and Bodahn with a harried expression.

"Messere Julia, I didn't know you'd be joining us today. Did you come for supper? I will have to heat something up." The small man ran off, padding across the floor.

"I hope you don't mind that I took you up on your invitation," Julia said, picking a place close but not too close to her hostess's end of the table.

Leandra's smile grew as she pulled out a chair and sat down. "Of course not. I'm glad you got out of that small room. Are you feeling better?"

"Much, I'm sorry for any inconvenience I might have given you."

"None at all, my dear."

Pleasantries followed until Bodahn returned with a plate and despite herself, Julia felt her stomach grumble. It had been a while since she had last eaten.

It wasn't a fancy meal, but she could at least identify the ingredients as bread and what looked like a form of cheese spread over the top. Covering her lap with a cloth napkin, Julia poked the cheese with a finger before lifting the bread up to her nose. It smelt odd, strong but not spoiled.

Carefully, she took a bite. The bread was thick and rich, like that one time her nanny gave her some homemade bread. In contrast, the cheese was soft and smooth, coating the roof of her mouth with supple favors. At the dwarf's waiting expression, Julia chewed and swallowed. "Thank you."

He beamed at her and then went back the way he had come, leaving the two women alone.

Leandra pulled a cloth out from somewhere and started to picked at some embroidery. *A fitting use of time for a fantasy world.* "Have you sorted through what kept you in your room?"

"Somewhat," Julia said after a moment. "I just had some things that I needed to work out. I should be better now."

"There is no rush. When Hawke and Carver returned from the army just in time to lead us away from the Blight, we had almost nothing except the clothes on our backs and some food I managed to pack. It was close." Blue eyes rested on her work. "There is no feeling like losing your home in an instant. I had been lucky previously since in our moves, although sometimes rushed, I never lost anything truly important. This time I returned home but… I'm sorry, you don't want to hear me complain when you have enough of your own troubles."

Julia kept her face smooth as she tried to finish the bite she had just taken. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"As am I. But the Maker has blessed me with a good life. It can only be expected that I have my fair share of sorrow too. I am glad that you are here though. Marian hasn't talked to me that much in over a week when she told me that you were going to be staying with us for a while."
Finishing her small meal, Julia listened to the quieting grumble of her stomach. "Where is Marian today?" It figures that her name isn't actually Hawke.

"I'm sorry for my daughter's absence. Today at least, she has a good excuse. The viscount personally asked for her to visit."

The woman smiled, pride in her offspring apparent in every wrinkle. Something bit at Julia but her practiced polite expression slipped on without hindrance. Leandra stood and she followed suit.

"The viscount?"

Leading the way to the library, Leandra continued to beam. "The ruler of Kirkwall. He has a single son who is around Marian's age. If the viscount continues to favor her, perhaps there is a possible match there. The Amell name may have been tarnished over the years, but we are still an old family."

Julia nodded slowly. Perhaps Leandra isn't too different after all. Then the mother smiled. "Though I suppose I am not one to judge who she chooses. I hope it is someone nice and respectable but if they make her happy, my blessing, no matter how much she says she doesn't want it, is hers."

The food she had just eaten coiled sharply in her gut. Or perhaps not. Julia pressed her hands against her skirt. "Tell me more about Amell family." Leandra took the bait and began to talk about her ancestors and Julia forced her muscles to individually relax.

*This is fine. Everything will be fine.*

Some things never changed after all.

Chapter End Notes

“And now my life’s another city,

Another picture,

Another stage.”

*Author's Note: I'm not sure I like how this chapter turned out especially because at some point I was like "When was cheese invented?" "When did Western Society start using utensils besides knives for eating?" "How the heck does Dragon Age technology line up with our history?" Basically, I just ran with it so sorry if anything seems off.*
"After all the wars,
After settling the scores
At the break of dawn
We will be deaf to the answers."

"I'm just saying," Hawke said, half on top of Isabela by this point. The other woman seemed to be enjoying it, a Cheshire smirk pasted on her face. "You have to be a special, I mean ssspecial, kind of crazy to try to blow people up to prove a point."

"In their defense, they didn't actually blow anyone up," Varric pointed out, practically sober. "Poisoned gas is a different subsection of crazy entirely."

Julia tried to take shallow breaths; her memory of this place - the Hanged Man - hadn't done it justice. Or perhaps an evening of spilled drinks and she didn't want to know what else had marinated it to a new level of sickening. She was ready to leave the moment they stepped in the building, before then actually. But after Hawke threatened to throw her over her shoulder - the woman was just crazy enough to do it - she had come without resisting.

A decision she was regretting now.

Probably the only redeemable feature, and it was a drunk percussionist at best, was that she was familiar with most of the people in the group that joined them at the place she could barely call a tavern. The dark-haired, dark-skinned pantless pirate and the broad short man who apparently needed a turtleneck were already at the table when they arrived. The supposed elves showed up separately later, the petite and wide-eyed one with rambling apologies and the aggressive white-haired male in angry silence, sitting down in the chair hard enough to make it groan with his weight.

The large redhead female guard showed up later and by the time the pirate was into her third drink, a blond scruffy man in a feathered robe joined them. Merrill called him Anders.

To her growing dismay, Julia was almost getting used to these people's strange outfits. It didn't help that her appearance matched theirs now, if on a softer decibel. Leandra had produced a series of dresses for her to chose from and had even helped tailor them so they were less like a bag. While she still felt like one of those dorks who went to renaissance festivals, the pale purple dress wasn't crazy. Not like the armor Hawke supported.

But beyond that, with the long hot bath she had taken after some tempered exercise today, her skin actually felt like her own again. Her main wardrobe problem was figuring out how to get her hands on some new underwear. Both Leandra and Hawke had only produced blank looks at her questions, enough so that Julia had been seriously tempted to flash them to show what she was talking about.

"The Qunari have been here for years. The viscount has every reason to worry," Aveline said. She
hadn't even touched her drink. The guard captain seemed like the person who never fully relaxed, always ready to spring into action. Frankly, after watching Isabela throw back mug after crusty mug, Julia appreciated the restraint.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but the Qunari are not exactly the most peaceful bunch," Varric said, stealing Merrill's drink to pour most of it into his mug before sliding the container back. "They will leave when they want to and not a moment before."

The blond man hit the table with his palm. "Viscount Dumar is too weak, he doesn't even see the anguish right before his eyes. The templars--"

"You know what you need, Anders? A good lay."

Anders cut off what he had been saying, derailed enough to almost smile. Maybe there was a human underneath that unkempt façade. "And you are offering?"

"I never said that, there other options. Take Hawke for instance..."

The woman in question had her face plastered against the table. At the mention of her name, Hawke turned to the side, her hand rising to swim drunkenly through the air. "I told you, s'pirate, my bed is big enou' to seat everyone. It's s'all or nothing wiff me. Bianca can haf da place of honor."

"Leave Bianca out of whatever perverted fantasy you're having there, Hawke."

"What are you tawking about? She and I haff... an awangment."

"Now that's an interesting image," Isabela's grin made Julia want another bath. With a thick bar of soap and water hot enough to burn off at least a layer of skin.

All in all, it wasn't the worst evening she had ever had, but it was the strangest. Their bows had to have several strings loose. She already missed the few peaceful meals she had shared with Leandra. At least during those she didn't need to worry about getting diseases simply from breathing the air. Why did Hawke even want her to come? She had spent the last day hunting down a... dwarf... and now apparently just took down a crazy elf.

Julia had yet to figure out exactly what was going on in Kirkwall-a large percent of the time she didn't even want to know- but at some point she would have to find out. All she got so far was that some group called the Qunari were in Kirkwall and them not leaving caused problems. Hawke made it sound like they were doing it to personally spite her even though from the comments the others gave, Julia got the impression people had already died as the tension brewed.

*Sounds like an alto sax trying to find a place in the orchestra. Nothing but a headache.*

"In other news, Hawke tells me that you are from a different world."

Just like that, Varric managed to shift the key of the conversation, dragging it into a minor arrangement.

"Demon." "Really, what is it like?" "Impossible." "And you believe her?"

The words blurred together into a chorus and Hawke hefted her head up, bracing it with a hand. She grinned blearily. "If yewr going to tell that story, ya better say it korect. I saied she *might* be frum a different world."

Varric laughed even as Julia shifted. Merrill inched closer, green eyes trying to suck all the
information they could out of Julia's appearance. "Might doesn't make a good story. But tell me Freckles, where do you hail from?"

"Why don't you just ask Hawke if she knows so much?" Julia's voice came out angrier than she intended but it barely phased the dwarf.

"It is more interesting to get it directly from the source."

Julia tapped her fingers against the table then pulled them back sharply as they encountered something smooth against the grain of wood. "Fine. I am from Earth."

"That's a silly name for a world," Merrill commented. "Why not call it Dirt or Ground?"

"Why do you call your world whatever you call it?" Julia retorted then took a breath. She knew she shouldn't be snapping at these people, one of them was giving her a place to stay-even if she hadn't mentioned the payment yet- but that didn't stop her from doing it. They were stopping her from getting home.

Or at the very least, they hadn't offered to help.

"How are the mages treated where you come from?" Anders asked.

"Mages?"

"Magic-users."

"Magic doesn't exist," Julia said without thought. Or, at least, that's what she had thought before all this happened. Teleportation did lie in the realm of magic and dragons, and these people seemed to be follow all the nerd rules. The group stared at her, silence weighing down on her shoulders.

"A world without mages sounds better," Fenris grumbled to the table.

Anders's head snapped towards the elf. "You would like that, wouldn't you? The extinction of mages."

"They don't need to die. They can live normal lives inside a Circle, keeping everyone else safe in the process."

"How can you call imprisonment normal? The mages are slaves to the system. I would think that you of all people would sympathize."

"Slaves do not consort with demons."

"But they can still kill without resorting to magic."

"Will you twew nock it off?" Hawke slammed a small blade into the table. The cheap wood shook and for a second, Julia thought it was going to break beneath them. "Were all friends hear."

Fenris opened his mouth but Hawke shushed him. He frowned and Hawke frowned back, a mockery of his serious expression. The elf glared at Hawke and then Anders for a moment longer before rising to his feet and stomping towards the door.

The rest of the group scarcely seemed bothered by the exchange. Aveline massaged her forehead, Merrill played with her glass, gaze flitting from Fenis’s retreating figure to the table then to Hawke and back to the table, Isabela had gone to flirt with the bartender, and Varric was just resigned, staring into his mug like he could make more appear in it. What kept them together?
The answer to that question bothered her as Varric dragged whoever he could into a discussion of the best kinds of drinks. They were going to erupt at any moment and she didn't want to be around when they collapsed.

But they all appeared to take the existence of magic as fact rather than fantasy. Even Aveline had followed the conversation without telling them that they were fools, an opinion she freely shared particularly about Varric and Isabela.

Julia glanced into her questionable mug, dark liquid smooth like ice. She might be getting drunk of the air here to even be thinking it, and yet... if there was some form of magic that existed here, perhaps that would offer her some clue on how to get home.

All she needed to do was to find one of these mages.

Chapter End Notes

“Going through this life
Looking for angels
People passing by
Looking for angels.”

*Author's Note: Honestly, these type of chapters are my favorite, where the characters just get to be the characters and interact with each other. I try to make there be at least a point or two for the conversations so hopefully it isn't too boring!
“Uptown, another endless night
Hearts break in early morning light
Yeah, I take my time.”

"Messere Julia, you have a guest." Bodahn's voice grated on her nerves as his knock had just a
second before. She was in no mood to leave her room today; she had to practice Kreisler.

Who the hell is it anyways? Hawke would just barge in and Leandra was away for the day visiting
old friends.

"Are you there? I swore I heard music…."

Julia set her violin down on the bed and after several short steps, swung the door open to glare
pointedly at the dwarf.

He smiled, grateful that she answered. "Ah, yes. There you are. I've seen your guest with Serah
Hawke before so I knew she was no robber. But she refused to wait in the library and is currently in
the main hall."

Julia clicked her tongue softly. "Who is it?" she asked more out of bored curiosity than any real
interest. They would be sent away regardless.

"A Serah Merrill. She's seem like a nice girl though a bit odd if you don't mind me saying."

Merrill? Julia frowned, the image of the dainty elf-girl appearing in her mind. Not who she would
have guessed. She glanced back her violin, waiting patiently for her and then to the bearded dwarf.
"Tell her I will be there shortly."

Not waiting for his reply, she went back into her room, shutting the door behind her. A large part of
her wanted to continue to practice and force the elf to wait but if she was honest, she was sick of
practicing. Notes, exercise, a brief argument about finding mages with Hawke, and sleep
summarized her activities for the last day and a half. Even perfection got tiring at some point.

No matter what the elf wanted, it was a change in routine. Besides, she assured herself, a temporary
diversion will help renew my interest in going through the classics. At least she would know that
there was nothing else that she would rather be doing.

Julia put her violin away, making sure it was safe from any dwarven interference. Sandal seemed to
understand that she did not want him in her room after the third scolding, but he still might try.

She tugged on her bun. All her hair was contained. She had yet to find a good alternative to a
straightener so her style remained updos. The lack of attention turned even the most reasonable parts
of her hair into a riot. Maybe Leandra can help think of a better solution.

Leaving her room, Julia only had to go a couple feet before spotting her guest at the bottom of the
stairs. Merrill smiled broadly at her, slim hand raising in a greeting before she blushed and dropped it.
"Julia! I'd hoped that you'd be here. Not that you would be anywhere else since you lost your home but... I'm sorry, I should start again... Hello."

She didn't know what she was doing, did she? Julia took a breath and then released it.

Half rest.

"What can I help you with, Merrill?"

The elf blinked and then a smile relit her delicate features. "Oh I'm fine, thank you. Hawke asked me to show you around Kirkwall. She would have herself but she and the others were busy today so she asked me."

That woman is going to be the death of me. "And why does Hawke think I need to been shown Kirkwall?" Julia said, biting down on her hostess's name. She is the one who should learn to stay in more. Perhaps she can learn how to eat and talk without being mistaken for an infant.

"She says that since you'll be staying here for a while, she wants you to be as comfortable as possible," Merrill said, innocence radiating off her like it was her prime purpose in life. The worse bit was that it was completely genuine. She was a cygnet, completely pure without a hint of deceit in those overly large eyes. Julia rubbed her own eyes with the back of her hand, irritation descending to a piano.

"Is that how she said it?"

Merrill blinked and her hands fluttered like birds tethered to her wrists. "Well, not exactly, but I am sure that is how she meant it. She worries about you."

Chucking the rest of the day as gone, Julia sighed. Might as well get this over with. If Hawke is involved... She shuddered.

"Let's get moving then." Merrill smiled shyly and Bodahn wished them a good trip, apparently having eavesdropped their entire conversation.

Creep.

In a matter of seconds they were in the plaza of Hightown, bird motif as oppressive as ever. Merrill seemed to ignore it, instead turning away from the larger buildings towards Lowtown. Julia gave her the benefit of the doubt and remained silent. At least for now. If Hawke or this elf thought she was going back to that shithole of a tavern again, they had another thing coming.

They walked by buildings and shopkeepers, drawing attention. Julia kept her strides long and pace purposeful, lips turning into a scowl. What are they looking at? A stall owner stepped in front of his goods as they passed and Julia glared at him. He swallowed but didn't back down.

"You don't need to do that," Merrill said softly. "They just aren't used to the Dalish here."

Dalish? It sounded like a pastry.

That didn't excuse their rudeness so Julia gave the next person who made an initial movement a death stare as well. It wasn't like the elf looked more disreputable than any other Renaissance freak here. "I have no idea what that means but they are business people. It's not like these are particularly good stores, they should be grateful to have any customers, as long as they have money to pay for it."
"It is nice that you think that way. If only everyone did." Merrill plucked at a loose thread on her long shirt-dress. She seemed so morose; Julia just grew more irritable.

"I hope they burn in hell."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant."

"It's not."

Merrill glanced from Julia to one of the shopkeepers then she laughed. "I think we are going to be friends. Oh, I probably shouldn't just assume that should I... Do I just ask? I still don't know how to go about this..."

"Friends," Julia tested the idea on her tongue as Merrill's words became more and more desultory. A large part of her wanted to tell the elf to shove off, blather to someone else but... A usually quiet section of her mind urged to her take up the offer. She had never had many friends, to find one here would be... Odd to say the least.

"... I wish Hawke was here. She always seems to know what to do," Merrill continued, cheeks flaming. *She is rather pathetic...*

"Sure. Why not? Let's be... Friends." Even saying it was strange, an abrupt change of keys without anything to ease the audience into the new passage. What was she getting herself into?

The elf fumbled through something like a thank you that made Julia regret her spurt of kindness. She was still regretting it when they turned a corner and descended into Lowtown.

It was like agreeing to walk into a sewer pit.

Julia debated the image she would present breathing through her mouth and after several steps, gave up on the argument, cracking the corner of her lips. She could practically *taste* the reek of uncleanliness and incompetence. A long soak was definitely going to be in order before bed. With the good soap.

In an attempt to at least distract herself from slowly and surely getting covered in the obvious pestilence of the place, Julia turned her attention to the elf who was still smiling. "Where are we going exactly?"

"Well, I thought we could explore Lowtown for a while, maybe stop by Anders' clinic... Oh, and the Qunari live at the Docks, they are very scary-looking but also very polite in their own way."

"How about we stay away from the Qunari?" Julia suggested, the word feeling less strange than friend. It had a slight musicality to it, a gentle roll of the tongue that ended at the back of the throat. However, even Aveline had been wary of them which told her that they were a group to be avoided.

"Okay."

The market of Lowtown differed from the one in Hightown in all the ways that mattered. While Hightown stalls maintained their respectability and their distance, both the Lowtown wares and patrons seemed grubbier, enough grease in their hair to satisfy a trucker.

Merrill pointed out the shops she knew and made guesses at the ones she did not, the numbers of both indicating that she did not come up here very much. Not that Julia blamed her-*is any food sold here not rotten?* - yet if this was the "better market", where did Merrill go? There were probably no grocery stores in medieval-town.
The garnish colors of the marketplace faded as they continued on, Merrill waving at the Hanged Man as they passed, luckily not stopping. They passed more grey-washed buildings and the corners between structures got blacker. People of every color, size, and race gathered together in small bundles, shoulders curved inwards to ward off the world. Some, the ones that sent primitive prickles of warning down her spine, watched them, bright eyes tracing down clothing and lingering on the staff that Merrill had strapped to her back.

If she had been in her own world, Julia would have never set foot here. As it was, a large part of her wanted to turn around and go back to the section of the city that at least pretended to known what personal hygiene was.

She wasn't entirely sure why she didn't.

"This area is called Old Town. Not that it seems older than the rest, or at least I don't think it seems older. Do all the buildings look the same to you, or is that just me?"

Julia wrinkled her nose. Maybe the buildings could be considered older, if only because the grime of the city had been etched into the very makeup of the walls, as much a part of them as the plaster at this point.

"They are indistinguishable," Julia said finally. How much longer is this so-called tour going to last? She was going through with it to keep her host happy and because Merrill seemed like one of the few people whose presence might be redeemable, even if she was a bit of a mental klutz. "Did Hawke say where she would be today?"

Merrill jerked away from the direction of something that was either a large rat or a mangled cat. "I am not sure exactly. She said something about framing a templar and didn't want any mages with her. I think Varric and Isabela are helping."

Did she say….? That lying bitch!

"What mages are you talking about?" Julia's voice stayed remarkably smooth for the anger rolling in her chest.

"Well, Anders and myself. It's kind of her to worry but I've been to the Gallows before and no one said anything. My Keeper always worried about templars but they don't seem that scary if they can't find a mage right under their noses."

Merrill's a... Logic still made her want to scoff at the whole notion of magic but these were desperate times.

"You… can do magic?" It was a line from a bad play, not something that should be coming out of her mouth.

"Yep! Well, not all kinds. I can't heal very much and my fire flickers more than it should, but I think I have the basics For most disciplines. Why do you ask?"

Julia's lips parted but nothing came. She didn't have the words. Templars, mages, elves... it was beyond sense, beyond the world she knew.

Merrill paused at a corner, looking back her. She frowned softly. "I'm sorry, but I don't know how to get you home. The ancient elven might had the knowledge based on our stories, but we lost that long ago."

"If you don't have any answers, who would?"
Merrill thought about it yet her feet started back up again. Julia did a few jazz-run steps to stay at pace.

"Keeper Marethari could know more, but I'm not sure if anyone is capable of that kind of magic. I wonder how something like that would even work. Perhaps some kind of force magic? But we aren't trying to move you a pace away…"

_Basically she is useless,_ Julia translated for herself. The burst of hope that had flared in her chest amidst the anger faded and she went back to struggling with her dark new reality.

They reached a dead end, only a crack between buildings offering a way forward. Merrill didn't slow, heading strack for the small opening.

_Nope. No way._ Julia halted. "You don't plan on us going through there, do you?"

"This is the best way," Merrill said. "At least, I think it is. It's familiar…"

The dark space offered little encouragement that there even was a end to it, a sliver of light farther away than she would have liked. "No thank you. You'll have to find another way."

"That shouldn't be too--"

A series of deep barks covered up whatever Merrill was going to say. Julia turned slowly. Something a cross between a pig and a dog stared back at her. The top of its head reached her chest, fur-skin wrinkling around its face and neck.

"What the hell is that?" Julia managed, taking a few steps away from the monster.

"Oh, that's just a dog. I haven't seen one of those since Ferelden, they love dogs there. What are those noises?"

The mutant-dog took a single ponderous step forward, growl deepening. Teeth appeared beneath a raised upper lip, at least as long as her thumb and dirty enough to contain any number of diseases. Worse, by standing where it did, the creature successfully blocked an easy chance to go back the way that they had come. They were at a dead-end, possibly literally.

Or… _Shit._

"Run!" Julia shouted at the elf as the dog started to crouch. _What large teeth you have, Grandma._ Without looking back, she bolted towards the asscrack of an opening. A low bark was her only indication that the creature followed.

_This is going to stain._ Julia threw herself into the alley, shoulder smacking the wall even as she turned sideways. A second later, Merrill made a small noise as she entered behind her. Back brushing the stone, Julia closed her eyes to keep from focusing on the wall a hand's length from her nose. Her boots squished into _something_ but she ignored that in favor of getting away from the torrent of growls and barks from the monster at the other end.

A dozen steps later, she emerged from the other side, suddenly able to breath again. _I hate Kirkwall._

"That was close!" Merrill laughed, stepping out from between the buildings. "He was not happy to see us, I guess."

Julia touched her hair before whirling to face the elf. "Why didn't you use magic on that beast? Surely you could have turned it into a toad or something."
Merrill peeked back through the opening, as if looking for the dog in question. "That's not how magic works. You can a rock to a different kind of rock but it's almost impossible to change a living creature like that without harming them."

"So harm it!"

"I'm not supposed to use magic unless my life is in danger."

"Our lives were in danger! We were about to be used as chew-toys."

"That would be an interesting end, wouldn't it? Is that what dogs do? I wonder why Hawke wants one so much."

Julia stared at her for a long moment, trying to make sense of the woman. *How could she...*

*This is ludicrous.*

"Well, thank you for the tour," Julia said crisply. "If you could just point me in the direction of Hightown..." Criminals be damned, she wasn't going to spend any more time following this oblivious elf. She was going back to the manor until she could figure out another way home.

Merrill's expression dropped. "No, wait! We are almost there. Just a few more minutes. It'll be worth it, I swear."

Julia gritted her teeth. "How much farther?"

"Just around these next few turns... Please." *Is she begging now?* Julia rolled her eyes and dusted off a spot of grey on her shoulder. Instead of helping, the attempt turned the spot into a stain. *Another dress to burn.*

"Fine. Then we head back."

"Okay!" Like that, Merrill was an excited puppy again, practically skipping ahead of her. Julia straightened her back, ignored the looks of the people around them, and continued walking. Lowtown lived up to its name yet again. Everyone here was too dirty and too thin. Probably so they could slip through tight alleyways without noticing the extra grime in their hair.

As the banners above them changed colors, so did the loitering populace. A majority of the people in these streets were elves. They came in different colors, dark and light, but were all slender with the distinctive ears poking from their hair. Some tried to hide it was scarves while others shaved the sides of their heads in a deliberate attempt to show who they were.

If nothing else, that told Julia that they were not in a good part of town.

They descended some steps and turned-- and the town parted. Julia's feet stopped at their own accord as her attention halted on the massive tree in front of her.

It was like nothing she had ever seen. The base alone had to as large as a Jeep and the top spread out over the clearing, cresting the roofs easily. Ribbons were tied from the lower branches, fluttering in the slight wind and small colorful candles glowed at the base. It was old and rich like a cello, changing the genre of the music around it.

"...planted it here. What do you think?" Merrill's chatter crippled the melody floating around the tree, ruining Julia's focus. She blinked and some of the inspiration was gone. It was still a beautiful piece of nature amidst the drudgery of Lowtown but it was as if the string had snapped, ruining the chance...
"It is nice," Julia said before taking a breath— even the air tasted better over here somehow, everything was still dirty— and snapping around to head back to the manor. She was done with this nonsense. Time for some semblance of civilization.

She had barely gone more than half a dozen steps before Merrill caught up to her, hands clasped behind her back. "You've got to be careful around here. Kirkwall is a dangerous place, especially for a newcomer. When I first got here the buildings were so large and there were so many people... I hadn't spent much time around humans before... I still haven't figured out some of the customs, but I think I got most of them."

Dropping back to allow the elf to take the lead again, Julia kept an eye on the people around them. As they got farther away from the tree, the density of elves diminished so that it was once again a mixture of dirty humans with the occasional other species. "Where were you before?" She asked, more to keep the elf chatting than any real interest.

"I lived with my clan before. We traveled around, but my Keeper did not like us interacting too much with humans," Merrill said, pausing to look at a stand of clothes. They were obnoxiously bright and the dresses had weird stitching around the chest. The shopkeeper watched them but not any particular suspicion like the ones in Hightown had.

A clan... Mental images of tipis and feathered headdresses flickered through Julia's head. Merrill didn't seem like a Native American. She was wearing cloth-based clothing and... still no shoes.

"You should get something to cover your feet," Julia said after a moment of near gagging at what they had been just walking through. More than once she had to avoid a pile of unmentionable organic slop. Her own boots were crusted with brown and purple gunk yet somehow she could still see the color of Merrill's skin on her feet.

The elf shrugged. "Shoes bite hurt my toes. I'm okay without them." Julia scowled down at the pale appendages, their only protection some dark cloth wrapped around the arch of the foot.

They were definitely barbarians. Friendly and debatably kind barbarians but still closer to cave men than proper people.

Why was she even here?

"I need to go back to Hawke's house." The words came out weak but she didn't bother to look how Merrill responded to them. She didn't like the idea of getting back by herself but she would do it if needed. Hawke had money. She could always bribe someone to take her to Hightown and then have Bodahn pay them.

It was all Hawke's fault she was out amongst this filth anyways.

"Sure! I know a shortcut," Merrill said without any hesitation. "Just down this ally." Leading the way, the elf turned sharply through another space that was too small for easy walking.

Julia almost went out on her own at that point but Merrill was the only person she could reasonably trust in larger radius than she would like to think. She, at least, had good intentions. Fingers around her throat, rancid breath warming her face. Swallowing her pride and dignity, Julia slipped between the dappled grey walls.

The stone brushed her shoulders so she turned slightly to make herself a smaller target. The action made her feel absurdly large as Merrill's slim form easily managed to go straight through the same
A small skip saw her out of the crack of an alleyway and stretching out in the open air. Merrill smiled at her and waved them forward, setting off at a rambling pace through a series of alleys and plazas, an occasional proper street making its appearance in the twists. The only thing that surprised Julia through it all—she had already delegated Lowtown and its inhabitants to the depths of depravity—was how similar it all was. Besides the square with the tree, this part of the city had the same gloomy and dirty aesthetics.

But then again she hadn’t spent much time in suburban neighborhoods back home either so she had no basis for how the middle class lived. Maybe that group always lived in cookie-cutter type developments.

Ahead of her, Merrill had begun to go down some rough stone stairs and Julia hurried up to grab her guide’s attention. "We are supposed to be going up."

Green eyes blinked at her. "I know. This is a shortcut. It should save us at least ten minutes."

The smells arising from the dark pit beyond the stairs were worse than the wide assortment she had encountered in Lowtown, which was in turn worse than anything she had ever encountered at home. They were going down into a hole. "You can't be serious."

Merrill had the nerve to tilt her head slightly, braids dangling. "I didn't tell any jokes."

*Pack up the score and the batons. There is no working with this one.*

She didn't have the willpower or energy to argue with the elf further. Instead she took one last deep breath of what could only be described as clean-in-comparison air and started down the steps.

It was worse than she thought.

Julia had been in caves before and this... This was a tunnel. A dark, dank, barely holding itself up tunnel. Wooden beams braced the ceiling at various intervals, but it was clearly rotten, with chunks missing and crumbling slivers of moldy wood onto the dirt. She caught herself walking closer to the elf, who didn’t seem bothered by it.

At least she hadn't brought her violin with her today. Then she really would have been worried.

They exited the initial tunnel and came into a larger, if not especially brighter, area. Torches glowed in spheres of light and the still air made odors seem much more present than they might have otherwise. Skeletal images of people begging or in chains appeared at random on the walls like some goth's doodles.

*Cheerful.*

"And this is Darktown," Merrill said as if there were not pale shapes huddled against the walls amongst the more dangerous looking individuals. "Varric says that they are the remains of old mining quarries from when Tevintar ruled but I think some of it is natural."

Julia open her mouth to tell the elf when something wet hit her cheek. Yelping she hopped closer to the only person she knew in the area, wiping at the dampness with the end of her sleeve.

"Oh, don't worry about that! It's probably just water," Merrill tried to reassure her.

"Probably?" Julia scoffed. The brown substance clung to her fingers and she wiped it against her hip. *This dress has already been condemned.*
That was it. She definitely wasn't leaving the manor until she found a way back to where people bathed daily, wore clothing without spikes or feathers, and remembered that they were supposed to be better than animals.

"You can never be too sure down here. Or on the surface really... You never know when a bird is going to fly by and---"

"It's our lucky day, boys. Look what we have here. Two fine specimens ready to be shipped." A man pushed himself off the wall towards them, followed by several other shapes she couldn't really see. Unlike a majority of the people around them, they didn't look like they were trying to push their bones through their skin. They reminded her of football players with padded upper torsos. "All we need to do is grab them. But they will come along nicely if they don't want to be hurt, won't they?"

Merrill's steps slowed and Julia hesitated behind her. This is why she hadn't wanted to go by herself. Threats and common sense didn't work on these people. Plus now she didn't know how to get back to the surface. The chances of these tunnel dwellers having a greater sense of morality than those on the surface were smaller than her respect for hip hop as a genre.

What the hell was Merrill thinking?

"Oh, were you talking to us?" Julia's guide said. Her friendly demeanor hadn't changed, in fact, she seemed almost confused.

Even in the dim light, the man's scowl was apparent. "By Andraste's knickers... Somebody just get them."

"Well, that's not very nice." Merrill yanked the dark wooden walking stick from the strap on her back and with a flourish, slammed it to the ground.

Julia's vision whited out as sparks flew from the stick, striking the man closest to them and sending him flying to a nearby wall. Someone screamed and the remaining men paused their assault even as the huddled blots of flesh sprinted away. The one who had talked before grinned as a white spot blurred out the rest of his features.

"A mage. Forget the slavers, the templars will pay to hear about this one. Everyone! Focus in on the elf!"

Merrill spun the staff around, pointing it at their attackers. "Defend yourselves."

The ground erupted, dark tendrils emerging to wrap around the closest body part. Things snapped and people screamed as their bodies lifted into the air. It was like something out of a horror movie... And Julia had never been a fan of that particular genre. They had always seemed so cheap with unrealistic characters and situations. But this was anything but unrealistic.

A hand grabbed her upper arm, squeezing hard and a line of cool pricked the warmth of her throat. Julia froze as a foul form pressed into her back, hot air panting past her ear.

"Stop or your friend tastes my blade!"

Taste? Really? The knife is nowhere near my mouth. Julia's thoughts spun as her brain tried to come to the understanding that she was in danger. She shifted slightly and a blade pressed down harder. Something warm trickled down to the base of her throat, probably staining her borrowed dress. This had been exactly what she was trying to avoid.

Next time she was just going out on her own.
Merrill stared at them, heading tilting a fraction to the side. "That seems a bit excessive."

"You bitch! How can you--" Something sharp pressed into Julia's shoulder blade and the man's words cut off. His hand spazzed on her arm and she took the opportunity to shove the knife away, taking several steps to get closer to Merrill before turning around to face her attacker. He lay face down in the dirt, a familiar curvy figure standing above him with a smirk.

"What are you doing in Darktown, Kitten? Don't you know not to play in tunnels by yourself?"
Isabela plucked her dagger out of the corpse, wiping it against the man's back to clean it. Julia's shoulder burned. A man's lifeblood had cut into her.

Yet more deaths she had witnessed in this hellhole of a city.

"It's alright, Isabela. I am just showing Julia a shortcut to Hightown," Merrill smiled at her companion. Her staff slipped back into its straps on the elf's back. Not a walking stick then.

Isabela rolled her eyes, taking a few steps forward to pick something out of the elf's hair. "Varric's going to burn through all his money from the Deep Roads at this rate."

"What are you talking about? Why would he burn it?"

"Don't worry about it, Kitten. Let's get you two out of here. Our friend looks like she might faint."

The exchange didn't make sense, but not much of this world did. Julia followed the would-be pirate's lead as she started walking, the woman's hips rolling suggestively. It was disgusting.

This whole place was disgusting. Who the hell just attacked people and then who the hell thought the solution to that was to kill others? The man who had threatened her deserved to die, or at least be castrated, but it wasn't something she needed to see. Add that to the way Merrill had stopped the people from attacking them and you got a whole new level of depravity.

Julia glared at the backs of the two women leading her through the turns of tunnels. In comparison to the beings surrounding them, they were vibrant, tuned, and ready for whatever came their way. She didn't like it but the fact remained that she was a stranger here. These people, along with Hawke, were all the resources she had.

A whore and an idiot. Her mother would cry at the company she was keeping.

Julia's steps faltered. Since when did she care about that?

"Merrill, Isabela." The two in question turned, Isabela with a sultry smile and a hand on her hip.

"Yeeessssss?"

Julia took a breath. She would not be like mother. She might be a strange world but she would continue to do things her own way.

"Thank you for saving my life."

Isabela grinned and Merrill's entire face lit up. "Of course. We are friends, aren't we?"

Her smile might not have been wholly natural but it was still there. "Of course. Friends."
"Climbed a mountain and I turned around
And I saw my reflection in the snow covered hills
'Til the landslide brought it down."

Julia's head hurt. It was the kind of pain no amount of Tylenol would be able to solve even if she had some available. Her mother had often complained of a similar condition, frustrating any doctor she visited. Nothing physically was wrong with her, yet the pain remained.

*Magic exists. Violence. Two moons floating in a star-speckled sky.* Her head pounded like a bass drum in a marching band. The image of vines breaking from the dirt like some kind of monster's tentacles had mixed with her dreams, waking her in the middle of the night. The glow of the embers in the fireplace did little to slow her racing heart.

Breakfast had been the typical ordeal. Hawke was still sleeping so it had been only Leandra and the dwarves joining Julia as they ate some kind of porridge. After breakfast Leandra had a meeting with someone whose name had dropped from Julia's mind the moment the older woman had said it. Sandal was working on something for Hawke-the smell of burning was strongest in the entryway-and Bodahn was doing who-knew what.

Julia found herself in her normal rut, playing the same songs as she had for the last week, familiar tunes itching her skin. The music from the recent concert reached perfection months ago and the rest of her repertoire was equally flawless. She had nothing to work on, no new notes to trickle through her fingers in increasingly difficult cascades. It was beautiful and complex, but the rush of energy from picking apart the marks on the page and turning it into feeling and song was gone... and she had no idea how to replace it.

More time was spent cleaning her violin, wiping down the wood, putting more resin on the strings, and making sure everything was good enough to go on display. Then she deposited herself on what supposedly was a high quality mattress and rested her aching head.

This was getting old fast.

Someone knocked on her door, out of sync with her headache and Julia heaved herself to a sitting position, noting the tension in her abdominal muscles. It had been at least two days since she had last worked out. Perhaps that was something else she could do besides music to pass the time.

She refused to think about what she was counting down for.

“Julia?” Leandra cracked open the door, just enough to reveal the color her dress. Her hair was up with a flower pin that decreased years off her face. She smiled and Julia stretched her legs out to the floor. “I hope I am not interrupting anything.”

*What exactly is there to interrupt?* “Of course not. What can I do for you?”
Hawke’s mother paused then smiled. “How would you feel about joining me shopping this afternoon?”

_Shopping? That… was not what she was expecting. “Why?” Julia asked. “Or rather, why would you want to bring me along?” _

Leandra laughed, creating distinct wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. “Do you think Marian would go with me?”

It took a moment for the names to meld in her mind. Hawke was a sharp grin and blood on the nose. To call her Marian seemed so… Formal… feminine. Marian was a stranger.

Though if she was honest with herself, she didn't know the woman called Hawke very well either, despite the fact that she trusted her to a degree. Which was insane itself.

"I would love to join you," Julia said, mask of docile content slipping on with familiar ease.

It turned out that what Leandra considered shopping was more like going to fancy farmer's market. Shades of cloth were spread out over tables, open to the elements like they were trying to contaminate them. It made the skin beneath her own clothes crawl. Apparently they were supposed to pick the cloth they liked then order a dress, pants, or whatever the heck that they wanted. Then the tailors would sew it by hand.

_At least it's not buying off the rack._

Leandra walked by the stalls slowly, fingers occasionally brushing a particular cloth. Of course this would prompt the owner to start extolling the virtues of his product to which Leandra would respond kindly and sometimes inquisitively. After a bout with a particularly aggressive man, Leandra shook her head, still eyeing the soft red fabric.

"It still is hard to readjust myself to the idea that we can afford this. That I can get some fine Orlesian silks simply because I want to."

"They were not that good," Julia commented, distracted as a woman walked by, a hideous blue and orange necklace draped around her neck. Obviously trying to prove something. Leandra laughed. "They save their best stock for those that they are trying to impress. Here, I have been meaning to stop at this store for a while."

The building was the same off-white stone as the rest of the city with an elaborate red and yellow sign over the entrance. Leandra stepped through the open doorframe first, Julia remaining a step behind. The smell of perfume slammed through her nose into her head, increasing the headache that had dimmed due to the relatively fresh air. She didn't stop her frown as her eyes adjusted. Despite multiple lanterns that cast the shadows into the edges of the shop, the dimness of the wares created a question of their quality.

Ribbons hung limply from some wiring in the central space of the room and a makeshift mannequin wore a dress with a ridiculous amount of ruffles, like some high schooler's prom dress. Some thin pale-skinned women in simple green dresses showed larger women strips of cloth and designs of outfits. In the corner, a tall, pepper and salt female watched over it all. Her own green dress was more extravagant, with gold stitching at the edges. For someone who catered to a crowd with no fashion sense, she clearly had a better idea of style. She knew what she was doing to them then.

Julia could almost respect that.
"Oh, Leandra. What a surprise to see you here!" A nasally female voice said and Julia turned to see who was talking. The powdered woman smiled, extra chins wobbling beneath her too red mouth. Leandra smiled back broadly.

"Helen! It has been ages. It is good to see you again. How are you doing?"

"Better than some, worse than others. I am purchasing a new dress for Lady Staven's tea party, is that what you are here for as well?"

Leandra's smile faltered. "I am afraid not. I was just here checking out the wares."

The large woman hummed. "I see. I really must be going but it was good to see you again, Leandra. The Amell name had fallen so far, most of us didn't think it would ever come back."

If Julia had closed her eyes, it could have been her mother talking, not this overweight squash. Her lips automatically curled at the corners and she bared her teeth at the woman. "It is gracious of you to show such concern, especially for one in your condition."

The woman's satisfaction stuttered. "What are you talking about?"

Julia pressed her fingertips against the skin just underneath her nose, eyes widening. "Oh, I assumed based on your appearance that you were terminally ill. Or perhaps that is just your taste in clothes."

"How… How dare you! Do you know who I am?"

"No. Do you know who I am?"

"Of course not, you---"

"Your loss then."

The woman gaped at her like a fish pulled from the water. Then she turned and stormed off to talk with the matron of the store, leaving her supposed old friend alone.

Julia released the breath that she had been holding. She should have expected the cattiness, but the time away from Earth had lessened her immunity to it.

Leandra, when she turned, was less composed, face smooth but wrinkles of feeling creeping in on the edges. "Julia, I hope you don't mind, but I am not really feeling like shopping anymore. Would it be alright if we just headed back?"

"I couldn't care less. There is nothing worthwhile in this store anyways," Julia said, just loud enough to make the woman who had just spoken to them stiffen. The shop was silent behind them as they entered the sunlight.

Their footsteps across the stone plaza were brisk but quiet. Leandra stared ahead, mouth tightening slightly every few moments. Her blue eyes were clear though, no hint of emotion clouding them. So unlike Hawke. The woman must resemble her father in her personality because sometimes Julia could barely convince herself that this lady and the reckless hurricane shared DNA.

"Lady Helen did not mean anything by that," Leandra's words broke through Julia's comparison, drawing her gaze as well. She didn't speak loudly of course, but with the authority only one with a proper upbringing whose pride received a significant blow could muster.

"She meant everything by it," Julia countered, not diminishing her hostess with a continuing stare.
Instead she traced the red banners rippling in the wind, a slight vibrato. "She intends to tear you down to make herself feel better. That's just the way some people are. It is not your responsibility to make up excuses for them." There was no reason really for her to try to make Leandra feel better. She was a grown woman after all, she should take care of herself. But that didn't stop her from speaking up.

Voices rose around them, offering their wares as if they were infinitely precious rather than common goods.

"You are right of course," the older Hawke admitted finally. "It is just hard to realize the people I knew are no longer the ones I’m meeting. Helen and I grew up together, we played as children. We attended our first soirees at the same time and to see her opinion of me now... Did my daughter tell you what happened to the Amell name?"

Julia shrugged. "I picked up bits and pieces."

Leandra smiled sadly. "Basically I ran away with the man I loved, who happened to be a mage, turning down a noble in the process. My brother gambled away our inheritance and we only recently got back the family manor by petitioning the viscount."

She made it sound as if her life was some kind of tragic love story, something Shakespearean. "You are just making this up as you go along, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

Leandra stared then smiled, a startling a movement as if a ray of sun came down during a thunderstorm. "Yes. I suppose I am. But I can't give up now. I still have my children, even if I can't see two of them. What kind of mother would I be if I just let face the world on their own?"

A normal one.

Julia barely kept herself from saying the words that floated across her mind as slowly as leaves in a swamp. They lay there, distracting her from all else, a contrast in a simple existence.

Bodahn greeted them in the antechamber and as they stepped into the large hall, a dark shape appeared on the upper floor, jumping to slide down the rail to greet them.

"You two took long enough! I thought I was going to develop wrinkles," Hawke grinned at them, cheerfulness blinding in face of the darker conversation they just had.

"That could be avoided with regular baths and skin care," Leandra informed her daughter with a deep familiar sigh.

"So you say, but I like to think of my dirt layer as extra protection. Frankly I'd think that you'd be happy with anything that kept me alive and money flowing into your coffers. Buy anything nice today?"

"The most expensive things we could find," Julia said with a wide white smile. "I honestly have no idea what we will do with half of them but they look nice and that is all that counts, right?"

Hawke stared at her for a long moment, lips spreading slowly as her eyes glittered. Then she started laughing, bending over to rest her hands on her knees so that they couldn't even see her face. By the time she straightened, some of the color had returned to Leandra's face.

"Of course. I love having useless things in my house. Might as well start piling it in. Speaking of... Julia, were you planning on entertaining the wall tonight?"
What is this woman talking about?

"No, of course not."

"Right. Then I would request your presence this evening for card games at the Hanged Man."

Julia blinked then frowned even as Leandra sighed. "I wish you would spend a little less time at that tavern. It does not have... Good company."

"Like you can find up here?" Hawke laughed. "Besides, I'm there so the company is exceptional. Put your purchases down and let's get a move on."

"And if I say no?"

Hawke flashed her teeth and rested her hands on her hips. "Then I will put my threat of throwing you over my shoulder into action. You can't stay in here forever. Besides, Merrill wants to apologize, and how could you ever turn down someone that cute?"

This woman would do it too. She had no sense of propriety. Julia exchanged a look with Leandra who just seemed resigned to the fact she would never be able to control her daughter.

"Fine," Julia said. "I will go to your gambling den. But this is the last time."

Hawke's eyes practically glowed. "So you say."

Chapter End Notes

"Well, I've been afraid of changin'  
'Cause I've built my life around you...  
But time makes you bolder  
Even children get older  
And I'm getting older, too."
They left after Julia changed her shoes to a more worn pair of boots. She refused to step into that bar with footwear she actually cared about. The heels she wore at the concert were still sticky even after Bodahn had scrubbed them several times.

The sun had not yet set as they started through the streets of Hightown, the sites almost familiar. Julia tracked their path even though as the sun disappeared the markers she picked out turned into shadows. But at least she would have a rough idea on how to get back to the manor.

Despite the lack of electricity to provide real light, people still milled about under the lanterns and strange blue glowing lights. They shifted like dim ghosts between buildings, forms stretching out to mix with the eternal dark grim of this place.

"Are you going to ask or do I just get to tell you?" Hawke's voice broke through Julia's judgement. Smartass. "You want to know why I keep dragging you to do things you clearly hate. But chances are that you are too much of a prude just to say it straight out."

"That's not the right use of that word but yes, the question has crossed my mind. I just assumed you were a sadistic," Julia said, keeping an eye on the rippling shapes just beyond the lights' grasp. She didn't doubt that Hawke could hold her own in a fight, however, that said nothing on how well Hawke could protect her. This world offered danger at every corner and Hawke seemed like the type of person to poke a bear to see if it roared.

"The answer is simple," the other woman continued, grinning cheekily at a pair of child-shaped clumps of dirt. She tossed a coin at them. "I like you."

Sounds like a curse. "You are a horrible person."

Hawke shrugged. "I prefer great and honorable ally of justice, Anders' and that thing Aveline is always going on about, but it's all the same really. Either way, I don't want you moping around my house, sawing at your lute."

"It's a violin. A lute has a--"

"Your stringed piece of shiny wood. I have no idea how to help you get home and little interest in parading you in front of the templars to find out. So, we adjust you to life here. Besides," Hawke grinned at her, every yellowed tooth confident. "I doubt you'll find more resources than around my card table."

That sounded like calling a oboe sonorous but considering Hawke's motley assortment of associates,
they must have some advantage.

A catcall floated behind them and Hawke responded with an unfamiliar hand gesture. Male laughter, honest and passive, followed.

"Are you sure you are Leandra's daughter?" Julia asked before politeness kicked in. Hawke didn't care either way.

"Well, I can't be sure and the topic is up to debate, but I probably am. I wasn't really paying attention that day. Not my best moment, now that I think about it. Being kicked out of your first home will do that to a person."

Julia's sigh used up her remaining air as the Hanged Man came into view, the gaudy sign of the groggy dark against the wood. She had put aside the notion that she wouldn't leave the mansion but to come here again... By the time she got home her lungs would probably be green.

At least she didn't play a wind instrument.

Hawke opened the door for them after Julia refused to touch the handle and they stepped into the gloom.

Once again, her memories of the Hanged Man left some things out. There were many more health code violations than she had noticed the previous three times. As she watched, one of the barmaidspit into a mug then wiped it with a rag. Bile rose in the back of her throat and she swallowed as Hawke nudged her forward.

"Why do you come here? Surely there has to be somewhere-anywhere really- that is better than this."

Hawke grabbed a cup off a stranger's table and laughed at their drunken outrage. "Why would we want to leave? Where else can we find beer that tastes like it was poured from someone's boot?"

Was Hawke like this before she started drinking here or had it given her brain damage? At this point, Julia wouldn't put anything past the grime of this place. It could be a living, parasitic entity by now, full of malicious intent.

"Hawke, Freckles! You made it!" A large hand waved at them and stepping around a singing man whose words burned at her ears, Julia spotted the blond dwarf.

"I don't want to be called that," she told him as she carefully sat on the bench. It looked the most like normal wood. Hawke slid in across from her and stuck her feet up on a chair.

"Well, I have to call you something and you already said your name wasn't Melody."

"My real name would do just fine."

"Nah," Varric waved off the suggestion like an annoying fly. "Too common. This way you know who I am talking to. Wouldn't want to waste my poetry on someone who wasn't even paying attention."

Julia grit her teeth. Who does he think he is?

"Down you two. Fenris isn't even here yet so a fight is pointless," Hawke winked at the waitress then closed her eyes with a yawn. "That's why we come here, Gemia. No one cares who you are. Everyone drinks the same scum and gets the same service. Even arrogant would-be nobles such as yourself."
A low harumph from Varric was the only noise from their table for a long second. Julia's blood warmed and she scowled at the woman who continued to ignore her. *That sorry excuse for a--*

"I'm not late, am I?" Merrill's strangely European accent distracted Julia from forming an exact plan on how to trip Hawke into a barrel of the paint remover she thought was so great. The thin female slid in the spot open next to her, smiling shyly. "I tried to leave a little earlier this time in case I got lost. It took a little longer than expected..." Her face froze. "Has everyone already left?"

Varric reached off to pat her hand, eyes strangely gentle as he looked at the poor attempt at adulthood. "You are actually early, Daisy. No one bothered you on the way?"

"Not that I noticed. Did you know that the baker has a new batch of kittens? They are just getting old enough to wander around on their own. I'm thinking about bringing one home, but I'm honestly not quite sure what I would feed it. Catching mice is a lot of work."

Whole rest.

Varric managed to get his facial expressions under control before Julia. "Daisy... Why do you want a cat?"

Merrill shrugged, swinging her legs underneath the table. "I've never really had a pet before, there was never enough room in the aravels. Plus my house is kind of quiet with just me. It would be nice to have some company. Besides the rats I mean. Not that they are bad company... but they leave their dropping everywhere no matter how many times I ask them not to."

The half rest after that note was held longer than it should have been. "Cats usually like milk," Julia tried, not sure why she was bothering, though anything had to be better than the silence covering over their table like a desperate assistant manager. "And they could probably catch mice themselves."

"Really?" Merrill's face lit up. "That wouldn't be too hard at all. I could get more than one."

"Let's start with one," Varric said, grinning. "We already have a cat-obsessed mage. I'm not sure we really need another one. We would have to recruit another Ferelden just to even things out."

Hawke jerked to a standing position and robotically made her way to the bar.

The urge to massage the ache building in her skull was already getting to be too much. Frankly the only that kept her sitting was the threat by the Hawke, having to climb over Merrill in order to get out, and the fact that she was already dreading the sound and feel of having to get up off the bench. The last reason would probably haunt her all the way back to the manor.

"Aren't you looking particularly delicious tonight, Kitten? What's the occasion?" Julia didn't resist the sigh that crept up on her as Isabela sat down, rocking on the chair.

*She's already drunk.*

Julia's lip curled, which turned into an outright glare as the pantless woman winked at her.

"What's wrong, sweet thing? Do you have something stuck somewhere? Or is it more like what isn't stuck somewhere? Hey, I know, why don't you and Fenris hook up? Both of you could use some release from all the crankiness."

"Go screw a fork. If you think—"

"Are we thinking now? I thought this was supposed to be a fun night." Hawke dropped a tray of
drinks down, splashing a portion of contents over the table. Unflustered, Varric pulled a rag from somewhere and began to mop up the liquid before it spilled into his lap. "Easy there, Hawke," he muttered.

"I don't get it," Merrill said, daintily plucking a cup from the mess. "Hooking up. Is that like doing laundry?"

Isabela reached over the table, dying her shirt with amber liquid, to ruffle short dark hair. "I'll draw you a picture later, Kitten."

Hawke snatched one of the mugs and began sliding the liquid off of the table into the container. She isn't going to... The woman proceeded to throw back the drink, throat rippling.

"How are you still alive?" Julia asked.

"You know, Freckles, sometimes I wonder that myself."

Hawke wiped her mouth off. "What do you mean? It's not like I'm stealing mages in front of templars or jumping off cliffs."

"You're missing a key word there, Hawke. You are not doing any of that stuff yet. Tomorrow or next week, maybe next month, I don't doubt you'll find a reason to leap off somewhere very high or tell a templar that their skirt is too short."

Hawke pretended to be outraged while Isabela giggled like a toddler who had their nose taken away. "I would never do something like that. I am the epitome of decorum and respectability."

A shock of white hair meandered its way to their table and as if to prove her point, Hawke graciously stood and swept her arm forward to offer Fenris easy access to the bench. He looked at her sceptically, strange dark eyebrow raising slightly. After a second, he slid on to the bench so that he was an arm's length from Julia and turned his gaze towards Varric who simply smiled and shrugged.

Fenris's lips shifted and for a moment it looked as if he was going to say something. Then he too took a mug from the mess on the table and without flinching, drank.

Was everyone immune from Hawke's craziness or were they just good at ignoring her? Julia straightened slightly and set her hands deliberately into her lap. The liquid was no longer spreading so she was safe from staining her clothes with that questionable substance at least.

Her mind on the other hand was not as safe. Every minute spent with this crowd only served to remind her more and more of the differences between them.

Anders, face rough with stubble and dark bags underneath his eyes, came soon after and then Aveline, confident steps scattering the more skittish individuals in her way. "I'm not Guard Captain here," she said to one of them whose face had turned even more beet red with her presence. "Though if you make a ruckus, I will arrest you."

The server returned with more drinks and a dirty rag which Merrill used to enthusiastically clean the table, spreading the mess more than cleaning it up. With everyone present, the conversation roared back to life, Isabela making suggestive comments, Aveline sensible ones, and poor Merrill trying to keep up with it all. Varric, it seemed, liked egging the various personalities on, making them more of themselves. Worse, the others let him.

"What do you think, Julia?" Merrill blinked at her and Julia just shook her head, leaning back ever so carefully against the wall. The conversation continued on unhindered and besides Aveline's solo cup,
the drinks flowed.

Who were these people anyways? They acted as if their little section of the world was the most important thing around and that nothing else mattered. It was narrow-minded, chattering on and laughing over dreadful jokes.

Sometimes the worst place to be was the one in the center of the crowd.

Varric pulled out a deck of cards, strange foreign images flashing at her. "Who's up for a game of Wicked Grace? Rivani, don't think I missed that card in your shirt."

Isabela smirked. "The real question was why you were looking there."

Varric began to shuffle, only having to strip a card off the table once or twice. "You just pulled a coin purse out of there as slowly as you could manage. I’d have to be blind to miss it."

The pirate licked her lips and replied, "You should know I never do anything slowly, dwarf."

"Try as you might, I'm not going to loan you Bianca."

"It would only be for this one…” Isabela glanced at Aveline who frowned at her. "Venture. She would be returned without a scratch"

Varric's response was to look at Aveline who answered for him, "If you need work, Isabela, there are plenty of honest jobs you could do. I would recommend--"

A dark hand waved off her suggestion. "I could never be tied down by something so normal as a job. That would mean having getting up before the sun, taking boring orders, and probably having to wear something as horrible as what you've got on. None of which I have any interest in."

Aveline’s lips drew back into a minorly terrifying expression for a woman so large but Hawke jumped into the conversation. "Are we going to play or aren't we? I'm getting to be as old as Anders over here."

Anders frowned slowly, as if it took a while for the insult to reach his brain. Varric shook his head and began shuffling out the cards. A single dull blue card landed in front of Julia. It was followed a moment later by a twin.

"I'm not playing your game," she said, pushing her cards back towards the dwarf. The group glanced at her, most had already picked up their beginnings of a hand. Varric raised an eyebrow.

"Why not? If you don't have any money, Hawke can give you some to start out with. Do you think Anders or Isabela have any coin to spend?"

The feathered man flipped through the cards in his hand. "Hawke is very generous. All the money I make goes into the clinic."

Merrill's voice trickled into her ear, "Anders runs a free health clinic in Darktown. I tried to help out there once... But I am not the best at healing magic."

Isabela stretched and glanced at Aveline's cards. The guard captain didn't notice, focusing on her hand. "It's not that you're bad at it, Kitten. You just specialize in other things. Like, I'm not bad at cooking, it is just not something I normally do."

"That doesn't make any sense," Aveline told the pirate, glower deepening slightly as Varric leaned
forward to tilt her cards away from peeking Jane. The dark haired woman pouted slightly then turned
to trying to get a good glimpse of what Hawke held.

They were... Julia found herself repeating the same sentiment as she had countless times already...
Crazy. Easily distracted and prone to ridiculous conversations. If they hadn't been putting on the
same act for the last few days, she would have thought that they were doing it deliberately to annoy
her. Like some slap-stick comedy.

And she was literally stuck in the middle of it.

Fenris and Aveline blocked one side of the bench and Merrill the other. It wasn't difficult to choose
which way she would go.

"I would like to get out," Julia told the small elf. A second passed and then green eyes blinked and
Merrill looked at her. Another longer than necessary moment went by in which Julia's frustration
rose. *Does she even understand English?*

"Oh! You want me to get up?" At Julia's nod the girl jumped to her feet, cards fluttering like a fan. Julia half-stood and slipped by her even as Varric said, "Daisy, remember about not letting people
see your cards?"

"Opps, sorry!" Paper rustled and out of the corner of her eye, blue rectangles obeyed the laws of
gravity.

Julia didn't stop her trek across the tavern, even as shouts and a familiar laugh shot over the other
voices. "Isabela!" "Showtime!" "Oh, I didn't know you didn't wear--" "Pants, Rivani. I'll even chip
in for a pair."

Swerving around a pair of blond men singing an off-kilter song, Julia slowed for a brief step. She
hadn't thought about where she was going. Leaving the Hanged Man led only to disaster and the
bottom floor's noise crashed about, losing any distinction in the process. Which only left the upper
level.

Her feet knew where they were going before her brain had even decided and just missing a splash of
unmentionable liquid, she made it to the steps unharmed.

Shoddy construction creaked as she strode up them. They were lucky it hadn't cracked already. The
floor upstairs was the same, moaning with the added weight. *How could anyone sleep here knowing
that any moment might send them falling through the probably rotten wood?*

The muffled voices from the bottom level overwhelmed any chance of eavesdropping through the
thin walls. Which meant that they couldn't hear her either. A variation of silence.

There wasn't much to see up here, an 'L' shaped hallway and several doors leading to what were
probably rooms. The end of the hallway was as grotesque as the rest of the place. Some sorry sap
had attempted to improve the appearance by putting some limp flowers on a table. *If you are going to
do something, don't do it half-assed.*

Julia walked up to the flowers, rubbing the delicate leaves between her fingers. The plant was almost
dead. *Did they even water it?*

*This place must suck any sensibility out of any who entered.* Just one more reason for her to get out
of here.

Floorboards squeaked behind her and she turned, only to almost run into a male figure. He grinned
and at his exhale, she gagged. She would put good money on the fact that a toothbrush had never entered his mouth.

"Well, hello there," the man slurred. "You look like you could use some company, beautiful." He reached for her face but Julia leaned back. The man frowned, confused at the denial of his touch.

"Believe it or not, I came up here to get away from people like you. Now go find a corner and leave me alone." Julia stepped around him and started her way back to the main room. Surely Hawke had her fill by now. If nothing else, Aveline wouldn't let someone go into danger alone.

A surprisingly strong hand wrapped around her upper arm. "Wait now…"

Julia spun, yanking her limb from the man's grasp who stared at her stupidly. The drinks from this place must have ruined his cognition. "How dare you touch me!"

"I just want to get to know you better," the drunkard reached for her again and Julia cursed silently. He was too much of an idiot to understand simple facts. Chances were he would continue to bother her until she broke the idea that it was never going to happen into that thick skull. Julia frowned and then followed her first impulse.

She jerked her knee into his groin.

The hands that threatened her went immediately to cover his precious goods and he crouched over, groaning. He looked even more wretched than before.

**Good.**

"That is one way to do it!" Someone said behind her, voice tinged with laughter. Julia turned to see Hawke leaning against a wall, shoulders shaking. "I thought I would have to save you again but it appears you can take care of yourself."

Several steps forward and Julia stiffened as Hawke slung an arm around her. "I'm so proud of you, bringing a grown man to his knees. It felt like it was just last week that you were fainting after a fight."

"It was last week."

"No… I swear it was at least 5 days ago."

"Do you even hear yourself?"

"I hope so. No one else ever seems to listen to my words of wisdom. I always thought that would be their final and deepest regret. They would be on their deathbed and--"

Groaning, the man straightened, staring up at them with narrowed eyes. "I don't understand…"

Hawke leaned into the man before Julia even felt her move, something slim and silver pressing against the hollow of his throat. Almost gently she brought her mouth to his ear and whispered something into the opening. The man's knees trembled.

"Do you understand now?"

A bobble head, the man nodded rapidly then, abruptly, began to cry. Thin clear tears streamed down the sides of his cheeks, pooling on his chin. "I'm so sorry serah. I didn't mean nothing by it. I just gets carried away with the drink you see…"
Hawke gave him a small shove which sent him sprawling onto the floor. "That's enough. You are ruining the cheery atmosphere. Let's go, Gemu." Without a glance back, the woman started towards the bottom level.

"What did you say to him?" Julia asked, pausing her hostess at the top of the stairs. The mass of people below writhed in tasteless enjoyment.

"I just told him the different ways one arranges flowers," Hawke said smoothly. "That can bore the most hardened criminal to tears and that man was hardly hard, despite what his pants might say. Now if we don't get back soon, I don't think Aveline will be able to keep Isabela and Varric from glancing at my cards."

The woman with too short hair and ridiculous clothing trotted down the steps, waving enthusiastically at the people at their table. Whatever had passed over her less than a minute ago was gone like so many sixteenth notes.

*Maybe there is more to Hawke than bad decisions and beer.* Julia frowned, the thought itching at her like a spot she couldn't quite reach. She didn't want to like the woman, she was obnoxious with no sense of what was proper, everything that Julia was taught to despise and ridicule.

And yet…

"Julia!" Merrill stood on the bench, waving vigorously. "Over here!"

They were still idiots.

Internal crisis averted, Julia went to join up with the familiar faces in the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

“I would rather be at home all by myself

Not in this room with people who don’t even care about my well-being

I don’t dance, don’t ask, I don’t need a boyfriend

So you can go back, please enjoy your party”
"I dare you to move
I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor…
Between who you are and who you could be
Between how it is and how it should be…"

*Author's Note: Sorry for the delay! My excuse is that I spent a week and a half glaring at the chapter before I realized that I just needed to rewrite the entire thing. Hopefully the next chapter behaves itself. Thank you for sticking with me!

"Are you going to explain why you assaulted me only to drag me to this patch of dirt?" Julia asked, every decibel of irritation and anger echoing in her voice. The sun was too hot, her "new" clothes were already sticking to her, and dirt kept sneaking into her nose. Some guard training yard was not where she wanted to spend her day. Not that I'm getting much of a choice these days...

"It's much more entertaining to leave you guessing," Hawke replied, grinning mercilessly. "Besides, it's not like you were doing anything interesting."

"Yoga is hardly dull, but that doesn't change the facts. You can't just grab someone and start forcing their clothes off. It's inhumane and---"

Hawke groaned. "This is why I did it in the first place. You talk too much."

"Says the babbling moron."

"I may be moronic but at least I'm not morose."

"What language do you--"

"Exactly."

Julia snapped her jaw shut. Useless. She'd be better off convincing a tambourine not to jangle.

"You made it," Aveline said, coming in from the side. The Guard Captain looked particularly clone-like today, hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. It had always been a goal of Julia's life to avoid wearing uniforms and after middle school, she had succeeded. Yet some people still sought out jobs that required them to toss away their individuality. The only people who did that were those who wished they were someone else. Aveline didn't obviously fit into that picture but it was a probable description none the less.

Hawke made some sort of response and Julia took the moment to stretch her legs out. The pants she had been forced into really were strange. Loose around the thighs, it tightened around the knees to cling the rest of the way down. Hawke's "sister" must look like a circus mirrored image if this was how she was shaped.
Muscles tugged gently against each other, relaxing. Julia twisted to raise her leg in the beginnings of a scorpion. The eyes of an audience forced her into completing the move, holding the position for a burning second before lowering herself back to a pedestrian pose. She might not be in the visual arts but she still had standards.

"You must be great in bed," Hawke commented offhand, watching her.

"The hell, Hawke!"

"Are you saying you are terrible?"

"I'm saying that you need to learn to keep your mouth shut, harmonica-player."

"Will you both be quiet?" Aveline asked. The tone straightened Julia's back like she was back in high school orchestra and their ex-military conductor just entered the rehearsal room. The woman had the voice down at least. "I didn't reorganize my schedule for this so you could mess around in the keep."

"It would help if I knew why I was here," Julia bit out. The captain stared at her, hard face turning stony. She switched her gaze to the maniac in question who shrugged.

"I just haven't had the time."

A short sigh-the most common expression when Hawke was involved- and Aveline turned back to Julia. "Hawke thinks, and I agree, that if you are going to be staying here, you need to learn to defend yourself. Especially if you are going to continue spending time with Hawke."

"I don't think there is an option where she lets me not."

"You got that right."

Julia's eye roll met little sympathy. "What exactly are we talking about here? Handing me a blade and telling me to watch the pointy end?"

Aveline and Hawke exchanged a glance and Julia's blood cooled a little. "I'm not learning how to kill someone. I might be many things, but I'm not a murderer."

The guard captain looked like a parent about to tell their child that Santa Claus didn't exist or that Beethoven was dead. "It's a hard choice. But even with all the improvements the guard has gone through, Kirkwall is still dangerous. The time may come where you have to choose your life or your attacker's. I want you to be able to choose you."

It's your job to make sure I don't have to. Julia stopped her tongue from forming the accusation. As satisfying as it would be to say, the result wasn't worth it. She still hadn't given up on going back to her real life but that didn't mean she could burn all her spare strings.

Taking her silence as a form of consent, Aveline nodded and marched past them. She went less than a dozen paces forward before she turned back. "Come on now. We need to see what kind of weapon you are suited for."

"How about one that keeps me from having to fight?"

"Well, that's no fun," Hawke muttered, shoving her at the guard captain.

Julia stumbled, toe snagging in the dirt. She caught her balance, shot Hawke a glare, then headed to
where Aveline waited. The whole thing was stupid but perhaps if she just played along, it would be over with shortly.

At least they weren't in the Hanged Man.

Posing herself in front of Aveline, Julia crossed her arms over her chest. "Now what?"

The guard captain had her teacher face on again. "Stand like you are about to fight."

After a second, Julia moved to how she would stand for a concert: feet, shoulder-length apart; weight, centered; shoulders, relaxed. She breathed normally and waited.

"Good. You know how to stand. If you were a guard I would tell you need to be able to stay still for hours at a time. Now, step towards me."

One foot moved in front of the other.


They did the stupid exercise once more before Aveline changed gears. "Pretend you are holding a sword."

Hawke groaned. "We're trying to keep her alive, not making her the laughing stock of the village dance. You are doing it all wrong. Let me try."

"You're not qual--"

Julia jumped back as Hawke tossed a dagger at her. It hit the dirt and lay there like some kind of lizard.

"Fail. Dead. Try again."

"By the ears of I'm not touching that."

"Then you are dead. Merrill will cry but no one else will. Besides, it's clean. If you don't wipe off the blood, it will rust and it's no fun to stab someone with a rusty blade."

"You're a psychopath. I am not learning how to kill someone."

Some dark bangs fell in front of Marian's eyes and she shook her head to clear them. "Then I officially kick you out of the manor."

"Fine."

Blue eyes narrowed. "And before you leave, I will use your lute as kindling."

_She wouldn't_-- Julia smothered the thought before it was even complete. _That's the thing. Hawke would gleefully smash a work of art if she thought she would get a beer out of it. Her sense of value is the same as her sense of everything else. Completely warped._

She frowned. "If I do this, you will never touch or threaten to touch my violin again."

Hawke pretended to consider it, finger tapping against her chin. "Agreed."

_The sacrifices I make..._ Julia bent down, gingerly touching the handle. Smooth leather wrappings rubbed against her skin. They looked clean enough, no dark spots to mark where human life touched
them.

She circled her fingers around the edges of the handle and straightened. The dagger weighed down her arm, surprisingly heavy for something less than the length of her arm. This is a weapon. While she had held knives before and once or twice even contemplated their violent potential, she had never held something she considered an actual weapon.

"I know it's a thing of beauty, but are you done admiring my blade yet?"

"Weapons aren't beautiful," Julia said, angling the sharp end of the dagger decidedly away from her body. "Yet I am as ready as I will ever be."

Hawke grinned, smile sharp. "Perfect."

Then she launched herself forward.

Julia threw herself to the side in an attempt to get as far away from the woman as possible. Hawke shifted and dropped, Julia's foot suddenly hitting something hard. Her speed forced her sideways momentum down and only a jerk of her free hand kept her from tasting dirt.

A point pricked the back of her neck.

"Dead."

"Screw you."

"I'm not really into hopping into bed with dead people but if that's what you are into Gemia, I'll only marginally judge."

The slight pressure on her neck dropped and Julia pushed herself up, palm smarting with the impact. Both women looked at her, faces saying nothing. Logic has left the composition. "I thought you were going to try to teach me something, not stab me."

"I don't see why I can't do both," Hawke said with a single slow blink.

"Is there a point to this besides your amusement?"

"Did you forget already? We are trying to keep you alive. An impossible task I can see."

"It wouldn't be an issue if you didn't spend so much time in the shady places."

"There are plenty of shadows in Hightown. They just cover it up with flower terms and outright lies. Now, try to live."

Julia didn't have time to swear as a blade flashed towards her chest. Raw instinct raised her own dagger even as she leaned back. A smirk and metal scrapped. Hawke spun and her dagger's handle whipped out to smash into Julia's side. Pain burst behind Julia's eyes as she stumbled. Her fingers reached out to press against the injured area, which screamed in response.

Her ribs better not be broken.

"I think you proved your point," Julia hissed. "I don't belong here. I should stay indoors until I can figure out a way to get home."

"Andraste's tits, that isn't what I was going for at all. You're awfully slow."
"What can I say, you're an awful teacher." Julia tossed the blade at the woman who swooped down to catch it. *Only a fool catches sharp things in midair.*

"Hey, if I taught Carver to fetch, I can teach you the value of fighting skills."

"Go have your pissing contest somewhere else, I am not interested."

Hawke cocked her head and then starting sprinting at her. Julia swore, hand still pressed to her side. She refused to run. *This game is over.*

A blade sped towards her face, a flash in the sunlight and Julia blinked. A muffled phrase and Hawke jerked back. A breeze brushed Julia's nose.

"Dead. But you aren't a coward, I'll give you that. Still dead though," Hawke said with a laugh. "Aveline, what do you think? Can we salvage her?"

"Anyone can learn the basics on how to defend themselves," Aveline said automatically like it was some kind of guard recruitment slogan. "Julia, how would you feel about learning the bow?"

*I already know how to use a…* Julia didn't flush as she realized her mistake. "I don't think that--"

Aveline called one of her guardsmen over and took a bow from their hands. Clunking over in her man-boots, she passed the weapon off to Julia whose fingers curled around it automatically.

"Just because the killing isn't close and personal doesn't make…" Julia lost the point of her thought as a finger absently plucked the string. A low vibration filled the air. Nowhere as crisp as her violin but close enough to confuse her. This was a weapon, not an instrument. Just because it was less barbaric didn't mean---

A sharper tug made the note ring out louder with a slightly cleaner sound. Something wavered in the back of Julia's mind and went still. Hawke wouldn't stop until she had some sort of weapon in her hands and if she needed to learn something, it might as well be deadly with an edge of musicality.

"Ohhh, that might make Bianca jealous. I love it. Now. Who is going to teach her how to avoid hitting anyone I might like?"

"Several of my guards--"

"Stop right there. I trust your guards to distract criminals but not to teach anything worth learning. Julia will get training from someone who actually knows which way to point the thing."

The guard captain responded as well as one might expect to that level of insult. Her face reddened but Hawke didn't stop to notice the situation she had worked herself into. "I know just the person. Someone who is as crusty as Julia and is recently back in Kirkwall."

Julia translated Hawke's words to the common tongue as the pain in her side faded to a dull ache. The woman was going to drag some sucker into this messy excuse for a life.

She felt bad for them already.
Hawke didn't even make it back to the manor before she ran off, saying something about finding Prince Charming. Julia honestly couldn't say that she minded, she had enough of Hawke's antics the last few days. Instead of avoiding fists and crude jokes, she allowed herself to enjoy a peaceful day in the quiet warm tones of medieval normalcy. She practiced her violin for several hours and after making sure her instrument was spotless, had some strange tea with Leandra. They discussed the different forms etiquette could take.

The madwoman hadn't returned when Julia went to bed.

Sunlight from her crack of a window woke her the next day. She squeezed her eyes shut against the bright invasion. A dull ache made its way from her back to her head, reminding her about the quality of the mattress and pillow. Unless she got home soon, she would end up a cripple.

Discomfort eventually forced her from the sanctuary of blankets.

The day moved by steadily, time with Leandra and violin practice covering the hours. After supper, built up energy encouraged Julia to put her body through its paces. A stretch of yoga followed and when she had built a healthy level of sweat, she asked Bodahn to get a bath ready.

No matter what else he is, Julia decided some time later, the dwarf knows how to prepare a bath. The tub was nearly full, a hand's span of bubbles frosting the top. She dipped her hand into the water. It was hot, verging on skin searing. In a word, perfect.

Setting the wannabe-towel on the railing near the tub, Julia stepped into the container, first one leg and then the other. As she lowered herself down, the liquid level lapped higher against the whitish-grey material until it reached the edge of the tub and crested over. It dripped down the sides and splashed on the stone floor.

Breathe in… Breathe out.

The water felt amazing, suspending her in warmth and weightlessness. Julia leaned her head back, some of her hair escaping the makeshift bun to float next to her. Muscles relaxed, strain easing with the heat.

So Hawke wanted her to learn how to fight. A week ago she would have laughed in the woman's face if she even mentioned the notion. Now she still laughed but a dissonant note affected the chord. This was not her world and based on the few times she had left the manor, fighting here was like knowing how to use the Internet at home. Essential for life.

What would she lose by at least going to one lesson? Some pride. Julia dipped further down, bubbles brushing her chin. She wasn't missing out on anything, the city celebrated its lack of entertainment. It
grated on her that Hawke didn't at least ask her opinion before doing something but at this point she knew that Hawke didn't ask anyone about anything.

Decision made, she pushed all other thoughts about the future annoyance out of her head before she ruined her bath.

Of course, that was the moment the source of her irritation burst into the small room.

“Get out,” Julia said without preamble even as her elbows jerked slightly. She kept her body still. Everything worth covering was already concealed.

“You’re in the bath? After I’ve been slaving away all day trying to get you a decent tutor? I should steal all your bubbles and make you suffer through a bubbleless bath.” Hawke leaned over the tub and poked at the white froth.

Julia resisted the urge to slide down further and instead took the compromise of crossing her arms over her chest. Hawke smirked at her. A flick of soapy water and she was off to play with Julia's towel.

Maybe her name should be Cat instead. Julia sighed, breath fluttering against the bubbles.

“Fine, you don’t have to come. Why have a handsome prince teach you when you can have a snarky dwarf?” Hawke commented, giving the cloth a final tug.

Had she gotten water in her ears?

“A prince?” Julia asked. Surely that was one of Hawke’s jokes, something only the woman herself thought was funny.

"Well, he's not much of a prince, doesn't even have a shiny crown or jewels. But he's prideful enough to be royalty. That's how I know you two will get along."

It was amazing how much of an effect Hawke had on her. The magic of the water was gone, tension returning to her muscles. That ends my bath. Julia sighed. "It is more of a miracle anyone is willing to spend anytime with you. When was the last time you cleaned yourself?"

Hawke shut the door she had opened, giving them some semblance of privacy and snatched the dangling towel. She tossed it to Julia who stood and wrapped it around herself. "Why would I ever want to ruin this perfection? Besides, anyone who judges me on what I look like isn't worth my time."

"That's most of the world."

"Exactly. I want the people who look beyond 'facts'. That way I know I can count on them when it all goes to shit."

Julia stepped over the rim of the tub and pressed a curving symbol near the base, draining the water. She grabbed another piece of fabric and pressed it to her head Hawke slowed her ramblings to stare at her.

"Your hair's a mess."

"Oh really? I hadn't noticed," Julia muttered.

"Why don't you wear it down? I bet we could get all our drinks paid for if we just dressed you up a
Hawke blinked, hands pausing in midair. "No? What's wrong with free drinks? That's about as good as it gets in Kirkwall... And I've been to the Blooming Rose so I know exactly what the city has to offer."

Julia wrapped the cloth around her head and with the edge of the towel, began to dry herself off. Her mind buzzed slightly as she pictured her mother for a half second in the Hanged Man. She would be horrified. Skin inexplicably itching, Julia rubbed harder than necessary on her shoulders, needing to leach every last bit of water from the surface.

"I am not acting like some tramp so you can drink piss for free."

Hawke didn't respond, instead watching her carefully. Then she sighed. "Fine, I guess I will burn my fortune in drinks and pretty men. There are worse things to spend money on. Like books. If I want to learn something, I go to the source, not to some cut up trees."

Julia grabbed her underclothes - small clothes here - and slipped them on quickly. The breastband was tight against her skin and she used that for the reason why it felt hard to breathe.

She really needed to get her straightener back.

She slipped her dress on easily, practice over the last few days making it a quick process. Strings were tightened and bodice adjusted so it fit to her curves rather than forcing her to fit to it. Hawke waited almost patiently for her to finish but Julia ignored her.

Although still poorly made, this dress already was one of her favorites. A soft blue, the cloth didn't irritate her skin, instead wrapping in a cool warmth. But the part that raised this one above the rest was the subtle brown stitching weaving through the fabric. Not in any discernible pattern, the lines twisted through space and thickness. Sometimes uneven, someone had sewed these accents by hand.

It was amazing how little of time it had taken her to appreciate the work that went into the things of this city. They didn't have sewing machines or factories to churn out identical articles. Each item was unique in its own way. A frightening aspect of individuality.

As Hawke tapped her foot, Julia grabbed a bush that was more of a bristle than a grooming product and tugged the tangles from her hairs. Every sweep made the clumps grow exponentially so soon she had a nest of hair surrounding her head. Trying not to pay too much attention to the figure in the mirror- her stomach twisted as her eyes accidentally met the near-stranger reflected back- Julia used a piece of twine to tie her hair in a bun.

"Are you ready yet? I think you missed a few spots. Maybe you need to take another bath, just to be sure."

"Do you talk so much because you think we like to hear what you have to say or is your head too porous to contain your thoughts?" Julia shot back as the woman followed her out of the bathing room.

She could hear Hawke's grin even if she couldn't see it. "Both."

Bodahn was already in the antechamber, holding a pair of long dark fabrics. "Some cloaks, serahs? It seems like rain this evening."
Hawke laughed. "The day I am scared of a little water is the day you can put me in a dress and call me a noble."

"Very well. Messere Julia?" The dwarf said, bowing slightly before turning his attention to his mistress's enduring guest who just sighed. Renaissance Festival nerds would wet themselves at this.

"I will take one." Bodahn handed her one of the strips of thick cloth and after finding that one side had a hood on it, Julia wrapped the article around her shoulders.

"Let us be off then! Bandits to kill, drinks to drink, pretty people to woo… All that good stuff and more await."

The sky was tinged with pink on the horizon, yellow light already fading when they left the manor. The loss of color made the whole city seem just a bit sketchier and Julia's skin crawled as she realized that even though the growing shadows were suspicious, she wasn't worried. Not walking next to Hawke. It had to be the woman's ego. She spent enough time with the madwoman that the infallible confidence had started to sink it.

Either way, they made it out of Hightown without trouble. With only the light of a single moon and the scattered torches to guide them, a surprising number of people milled around the cramped streets of Lowtown.

Julia sighed as the familiar gag-inducing smells assaulted them. *How many more times are we going to come here?*

Hawke stretched and waved at a cluster of darkly dressed men. "This is better. Hightown is just too… clean."

Someone vomited, sounding like they were gargling water. Julia stepped away from the noise and tried to quell the sick feeling as her stomach sympathized. "Versus this pigsty? Were you dropped as a child?"

"Probably. But what is the difference between dropped and jumping anyways?" Hawke said as she bent to pick a coin off the ground. "Looks like the first drink is half-off."

"Down, Hawke. You don't know where that's been."

"I know where it's going though and that's twice as fun."

Julia gave up. She should have known better than to try to make her hostess see sense. "Is everyone coming again tonight?"

"Aveline is busy and Anders is dealing with a recent outbreak of something in Darktown so you couldn't drag him out of there even though I tried. Which is a pity since they are bad card players but you and the chaste prince are here so hopefully that will make up for it."

"You do realize that you are just winning back your own money, right?"

"Are you sure? I'm pretty sure victory adds interest."

Julia's laugh came out in a single soft puff of air before she could stop herself. A single shake of the shoulders but it was enough. Hawke grinned and Julia shoved down her mirth, returning her features back to their normal placidness. If she was falling victim to the crazy woman's sorry excuse for jokes, she was sinking further than she had thought. She needed to find a way home.
But how? Her knowledge of fantasy limited her to asking a mage- check- and that was it. She wasn't quite desperate enough to go swimming in the bay yet though if she continued to lose control of reactions, she might not have a choice.

They came upon the annoyingly familiar building and Hawke shouted, "Hey!" Numerous people turned towards the noise but Hawke headed straight towards a couple near the entrance to the Hanged Man. Julia followed at a slower pace, not feeling the need to get involved with whatever Hawke was sticking her head into.

Yet… One of the people seemed familiar, thin and dark-haired. They turned slightly and Julia blinked.

*Merrill?*

"So you have five sick children at home along with an elderly grandmother and a lazy uncle. I have a lazy uncle too, they can be rather draining. Can't say I know anything about children or grandparents though. Oh, only five gold coins to help? That's almost a bargain if it wasn't such a steal."

The man backed up a few paces, clearly unsure of what to do with someone who didn't immediately cough up the money he wanted. Hawke took out a dagger from her belt, twirling it in between her fingers. It glinted in the torchlight like the sharp smile of a predator.

"Now," Hawke continued as the man bumped into a barrel and fell onto his back. *Drunk as well as stupid.* "I am feeling kind today so the Hawke-doesn't-want-to-pay-for-her-own-drinks-fund is open for donations. Since you are such a giving man, I bet you wouldn't mind to part with a few silvers for such a worthy cause. Maybe even a gold coin."

"But.. I...I.." The man patted the ground around him as if it would offer up a solution for him to get out of this. He stared at Julia who just shook her head. *Idiot. He deserved everything he was getting.* "Please serah… There has been a misunderstanding…"

Hawke's blade twisted in the air and landed flat on her opposite palm. "Why is it criminals are so offended when they are the victims? The only problem here is that my coin purse is feeling a bit light."

"Are we really robbing him?" Merrill asked. She knelt to be eye-level with the would-be scam artist.

"Yes, Merrill. He was going to do the same to you."

"Oh. That's very logical. But what about his five children? One of them is adopted you know."

"He made that up. I doubt any woman would let someone like him close enough to produce a child."

The man almost replied at that comment, but the flash of metal kept a spine from growing. Julia lips turned slightly as he once again looked to her for help. If anything, he paled further.

A small bag landed at Hawke's feet, jingling cheerfully. "Look, good things to happen to those who help others." Hawke put away her weapon with a smile. "Thank you for your generosity. The Maker surely smiles upon you."

The toe of Hawke's foot crept underneath the bag and kicked it upwards so that she snatched it out of the air. "Alright!" She rejoiced, turning to face them with a smile large enough eat a banana sideways. "Drinks are on me tonight."

"Please tell me that wasn't your entire goal," Julia muttered as Merrill led the way into the Hanged
Man.

Hawke attempted to smile knowingly but it turned out more like a constipated rabbit. "Of course not. That would ruin my reputation of an upstanding citizen."

"The night is still young, you might be not standing up for long."

The woman grinned as the chorus of slurred voices rose around them. "Oh my dear Gema, was that a joke? Perhaps you should check for brain damage."

Before Julia could offer some more choice words for her, Hawke danced off between waitresses and patrons towards another familiar figure that leaned against the bar, shirt barely covering the curve of her ass. Julia rolled her eyes and instead made her way to their table. While she didn't in any way like the tavern, she could appreciate the routine. It seemed like even when the world went crazy, these people would still be here, cheating at cards.

She slowed as she neared their corner. The backs of a not-small number of people surrounded the spot where they usually sat. Varric's voice rose above the heads, distinct despite the noise.

"Hawke faced down the demon, not even blinking at the creature which could tear her apart. 'We are not dealing with a glowing bag of bones.' Then, drawing her worn blades, she attacked."

He was… telling a story about Hawke? Why would anyone want to hear a story about the local lunatic?

"And that's it for tonight folks! Come back tomorrow to hear how Hawke and her brave companions took on a rock wraith." Varric's audience groaned at his words, several raising complaints that he was done so soon. He waved them off with diplomatically arranged phrases that also encouraged them to buy him drinks.

Hawke wasn't the only one who didn't like to support themselves. Once a path was clear Julia made her way over to Varric who was looking unduly smug.

"What's wrong, Freckles? Hawke got your tongue?"

"Are you trying to get free drinks by telling stories about Hawke?"

"I wouldn't say trying… My audience is very appreciative of the entertainment I offer them so they provide beverages to help my voice stay smooth," Varric said and took a long drink from one of the mugs in front of him. "It's a business arrangement."

"Varric, I liked the part where Hawke helped her friends to stay brave despite the fact that they were trapped. It was very motivating." Merrill sat on the bench, chin resting on her knees.

Where the hell did she come from?

The dwarf grinned and patted her head. "That's the idea, Daisy. We can't have the side characters being mopey. It drags down the dialogue."

Julia sighed and nudged Merrill over. "What does Hawke think about you profiting off of her?"

Varric shrugged. "As long as I share in the spoils, she doesn't seem to mind."

Somehow, Julia knew that he was right.

"That shiny man looks lost, do you think he is in the right place?" Merrill asked suddenly, perking up
to peer across the room towards the door. Both Julia and Varric turned.

The man was taller than most the patrons and looked like he saw a bath sometime in the last month but the most distinctive thing about him was his armor. Pure white it stood out in the Hanged Man like a loose hair on a bow. That's when Julia realized she had seen him before. He had been at the Ode to Joy church, talking to the Grand Cleric. His name was Samuel or something.

*What is a priest doing in a bar?*

"Did he lose a bet or did the owner hire him for entertainment?" Varric wondered out loud. "Either way he is in for a rough time."

Merrill hopped to her feet, balancing precariously in the space between bench and table. "I'll check!"

Julia almost grabbed the thin elf as she dropped to crawl beneath the table but Varric stopped her. "He is probably harmless. Besides, Bianca can see him just fine from right here."

*Who was he talking about?* She had heard that name before though…

Merrill skipped through the room, almost crashing into several people. She made it to the man before one of the waitresses did which meant that she missed the glare the woman shot at her.

At this distance it was impossible to hear what they were saying but the priest's surprise was clear. Merrill's hands rose and fell as she talked, head bobbing.

"I bet two silvers that she's inviting him to join us," Varric said.

"I don't bet," Julia replied. "But from what I know of Merrill, it seems unlikely anything else would happen. Hopefully he doesn't give us a sermon."

Varric raised an eyebrow at her. Julia sighed, leaning back against the wall. "He was at the church Hawke and I went to."

"Church?"

"The tall building with the statue of a golden woman."

"Oh, you are talking about the Chantry. That would explain the belt buckle." Varric's satisfied expression returned. "And there she comes."

Merrill had turned around and was leading the man back to their corner. He smiled at them, bright blue eyes pausing on Julia for a lingering second.

*Sebastian. That had been his name.*

"This is the table we sit at. You can go wherever you want, we don't have assigned spots. Though I like to sit next to Julia, who usually sits next to Fenris. Hawke and Anders sit together. So maybe we do have spots..."

"Greetings," the man said, accent both familiar and not, much like Merrill's. "It is a pleasure to meet more of Hawke's acquaintances. I am Sebastian Vael."

"Vael," Varric mused. "Isn't that the name of the ruling family of Starkhaven?" Julia paused her idle arranging of the collection of mugs.

Sebastian's face darkened. "Yes, it was. But I am the last of my family. My cousin currently rules."
Royalty…. this must be the prince Hawke was babbling about.

She had expected him to be older.

"How do you get your armor to be so shiny?" Merrill asked, moving in her seat to get different angles of it.

"I haven't been able to wear it very much yet," Sebastian said, twisting the single arm that almost glowed in the torchlight. "My father commissioned it for me when I entered the Chantry."

Varric choked and covered his mouth as he tried not to cough up his drink. "Your father gave you armor when you were about to enter a life of talking and praying to the great invisible man?"

The prince looked uncomfortable. "He probably wasn't sure of what else to give. I regret that I now have reason to wear it."

Julia studied the man, not quite sure of what to make of him. He seemed honest, perhaps not as crazy as was par for their particular group. Handsome enough but again, their group did not have any hideous people. Of all the people in Kirkwall, why did Hawke pick him? Surely there were other options.

"..ric and this is Daisy. You can ignore Freckles over here, she tends to be moody," Varric said as he waved his hand at their assembled party.

Sebastian bowed slightly at the pair of them and said, "It is good to meet you." Merrill giggled and Julia felt her face turn downwards.

"My name is Julia as you tend to forget, Varric. I believe we have met already, Sebastian, although not perhaps introduced. You were at the Chantry discussing something with Grand Cleric Elthina."

The prince's smiled turned from somewhat forced to genuine. "I thought I recognized you. I had not expected to meet you again in a place so… colorful."

"It is under duress," Julia told him even as the back of her neck warmed. Annoyed, she looked away. Why was she embarrassed? She didn't agree to be here. She had simply… stopped fighting it.

"Hey you made it! Though I hate to disappoint, if you were trying to blend in, you failed completely." Hawke's voice cut through her thoughts, jarring like the person themselves. She and Isabela settled down on the other two chairs, lounging while sitting. "Do you have anything less bright?"

"I have no need to hide," Sebastian said. After a pause, Hawke gave Isabela a shove, who practically toppled onto the bench. Sebastian thanked them, sitting down between Varric and Hawke and looking more than a little uncomfortable.

*How had Hawke convinced a prince into the Hanged Man?*

Isabela leaned forward, elbows resting against the table as she stared at Sebastian. "Hawke tells me you are both a man of cloth and royalty. That's not a combination you see much of. Usually in role-playing it is one or the other but you pull them off nicely."

"I..uh.. Thank you," Sebastian managed, face coloring.
"And of course, this is Rivani, also known as Isabela. You might want to keep an eye on her."

Isabela winked at the man who was rapidly matching Varric's shirt. "I prefer both eyes open. How else are you to appreciate all the delicious details?"

_She knows no shame_. "Quit it, Isabela. Just because you find validation in sex doesn't mean anyone else wants to lower themselves to your level."

The group starred but Julia refused to back down. There was no way she'd stay silent just to try to make these losers like her. Isabela, however, just laughed. "Ooo, the pet shows her claws. If you're jealous little one, I'd be more than happy to leave the lowering of the prince to you."

Julia tensed, refusing to look at the man in question. The whore was baiting her and she wouldn't fall for such an easy ploy.

A chuckle broke the energy that had been building across the table. Julia shot a glance at Varric who grinned. "And here I thought our dynamics would be off without Aveline. Thank you for picking up the slack, Freckles. Now, Choir Boy, did the Chant teach you anything about the game of Diamondback?"

The priest frowned, eyes flickering between the group as he tried to figure out exactly what just happened. "The Chantry does not condone--"

"Yeah, yeah we know. Why do you think we are playing here rather than in the Chantry? You can give any money you win to charity; Hawke provides the base sum."

Sebastian spluttered excuses but Hawke just glared at the dwarf over her mug. "Why do I need to always give out the money, _partner_?"

"Because unlike you, I have actual uses for money besides as paperweights. Now dish out what you have and let me deal."

It took three games and two trays of drinks for the group to melt into a sort of routine. Fenris showed up near the end of the third round and apparently had been involved in whatever scheme Hawke used to get a prince into the Hanged Man.

Hawke told the story, waving down Sebastian by saying he would only tell the truth and none of the good bits.

Julia listened, fiddling with the hand-painted cards, the images smeared from being soaked by something she didn't want to know about. Part way through she got distracted, instead watching the prince's reactions to the story.

It was amazing really, how open he was, like a sheet of music crisp and clean. He reminded her of Merrill whose joy over her hand of cards shone out over the table, lighting them all up. Sebastian did not have a good spread in front of him, face turned in concentration. For a man proclaimed to be of a church-like organization, he hadn't asked many questions about how to play the game.

Julia on the other hand had no idea what she was doing. She refused to ask questions in the beginning and it was taking her awhile to piece together the rules. From his smirks in her direction when she placed a particular card down, Varric knew about her lack of knowledge and was just enjoying the show.

Lucky for him, he said nothing.
Hawke set down a woman with a sword. "But the drunk man wasn't the best part. Our gentle brother knocked out an elf who was going to help cover someone in molten gold. Then there was the nobleman with the feather…"

Sebastian’s face turned red even as he pretends not to listen.

Isabela cackled, rocking her chair back in her mirth. "At least he didn't ask for the whole chicken."

"Sebastian of course wanted to stop and watch--" "I did not!" "--but I insisted we move on."

"You're a saint, Hawke."

"Why thank you, I know."

Julia laid a card with five blue diamonds on the growing pile, drawing another one. Fenris raised a dark eyebrow and took the card. Maybe that wasn't the best move then. How was she supposed to know what cards were good?

"--Fenris's large sword was invaluable as he stabbed them into submission--"

"Mmm, I bet."

"Hawke…"

"Did I miss something?"

The white haired elf had less tells than Merrill or Sebastian, at Hawke's comment he shifted, somehow frowning harder. Isabela traced his body with her eyes, tongue darting across her bottom lip. Fenris didn't even flinch, although he did raise that eyebrow again. A person of few words.

"As much as I enjoy making Broody feel awkward, will you continue?" Varric said, thumping his thick fingers against the table. "I am curious what would make a prude fetish and someone think covering themselves in gold was a good idea."

"It was a demon," Fenris told him. Hawke gasped and dipping her finger in her mug, flicked some clear liquid at him.

"Shh you. This is my story. As I was saying, we fought past dozen of creatures to find ourselves in ancient ruins..."

Julia leaned over to the elf who was staring into his mug as if it offered all the answers in the world.

"You were there?"

He nodded once. "Hawke asked if I would come along. From what I gather, it was on the way."

So the woman knew what backup was. That was something at least. Somehow Julia had the impression Hawke just threw herself into fights without thinking and hoped it turned out for the best.

"... And there, standing next to the desire demon was Lady… Sebastian, who were those people again?"

"The Harimanns? They are a distinguished family in both Starkhaven and Kirkwall and--"

"Yeah yeah, the Hairymen. So there she was, consort with a demon…"

One day Hawke would need to learn the value of silence. It could be a beautiful thing, a lingering
feeling as the audience held its breath for the next note. Hawke acted like it was horrible for her friends to hear their own thoughts.

Julia stared at her hand until it was her turn. At this point they were all looking the same to her despite the detailed pictures on them. Were they going by color or suit or some random characteristic? She still couldn't tell. Selecting one that had more reds than the rest of her hand, she tossed it to the discard pile. Once again, Fenris picked it up.

Wrong move. Julia wondered if she should care. Her goal was to leave this place, should she take time trying to memorize the rules to a game she might never play again?

Fenris discarded and Varric drew a card, a smile growing across his face. He spread out his full hand.

"Drowned Man's Eight. Pay up."

Isabela and Hawke protested and threw down their hands with the supposedly better cards. Julia stretched and set her assortment in the pile to be sorted. It wasn't that she cared or even wanted to care about this silly game. It was the idea that she was so unknowledgeable about something that it rendered her incompetent. Useless.

And that was the last thing she desired.

"So Choir Boy," Varric began as he gathered the scattered cards into a manageable bundle. "What I still don't get is what you are doing here? Hawke helped you with your assassination issue and you… followed her here? Not that I don't mind taking your money but it still leaves some questions unanswered."

A blank moment passed. Varric sighed and pointed a card at Sebastian. "I mean you. If you are in our group you are going to need a nickname."

"I don't have a nickname. Have all these years of friendship been a lie?"

"You don't need a nickname, Hawke. If I gave you any more personality you'd need to let out your armor."

"Varric, what's your nickname?" Merrill asked, face concerned.

Varric scratched at his cheek. "I am the one giving the names so I haven't really thought of one myself. I am rather fond of The Lovable Dwarf, but it doesn't roll off the tongue as much as I would like. Now, Choir Boy… about my question."

Sebastian face twisted slightly like he wasn't quite sure how to respond. "Hawke invited me. She said that she wanted help teaching someone the bow and after everything she has done for me, I gladly accepted."

"Hawke… are you trying to make Bianca jealous?"

The woman leaned her chair back so it was only on two legs. Julia hoped she'd lose her balance… she couldn't get any more ludicrous. "I would never do such a horrible thing; I just thought our newest recruit should be able to defend herself."

Varric laughed, turning it into a half-hearted cough when Julia glared at him. "Ah, sorry, you're right. Freckles should learn to carry her own weight."
Bright blue eyes turned their attention to her and Julia kept herself still. "Are you interested in learning how to use the bow, Messere Julia?"

Voice casual, Julia said, "It seemed like the best weapon available."

Sebastian smiled. "My grandfather called it the wise man's weapon. The bow defends rather than hurts."

"People still die in the end," Isabela interjected, raising her hand for another mug.

"That they do. But they will fall before they get too close," Sebastian reasoned, pushing the drink that had somehow ended up in front of him to the pirate. She accepted with a low half smile. Slut. "When would you like to start the lessons, Julia?"

His accent curled her name and made it sound foreign to her own ears, somehow more dynamic. Julia once again found herself struggling to keep her face smooth and her blood running equally through her veins. "Whenever. I have no plans that I am aware of."

Now he probably thought she was a loner. Why did she care?

"How about tomorrow then? Hawke tells me you live near the viscount's keep so perhaps by the courtyard pillar?"

"Tomorrow could work," Julia said cautiously. No matter how nice this man seemed, he was a stranger. Given it would be in broad daylight in public in Hightown and she once entered the Undercity with Merrill… there was really no comparison. "Midday?"

"I will be there," Sebastian said, flashing surprisingly straight and white teeth considering she had yet to find a suitable replacement for a toothbrush. Julia hesitantly smiled closed-lipped back and was rewarded by his smile somehow stretching wider. Her heart beat crescendo slightly.

"Ahhh, I like the bow," Isabella sighed as she set the drink she had gotten from Sebastian down just as the one she ordered arrived. "There is something about the moment before release, an arching drawn out ecstasy before you just let it go. Perhaps it reminds me of something."

"Like what?"

Varric started chuckling and Hawke was quick to follow, almost collapsing over the table in her drunken mirth. Julia sighed. At least we're done playing cards.
She was being ridiculous. Nothing was going to happen. In the last week and a half, she had only been attacked… Nevermind…

Julia focused on the main points of the situation. Back straight, steps sure, and breaths normal. For all appearances, nothing bothered her. She could leave the manor by herself like an adult without going into a panic attack like a preteen losing their phone.

Familiar stone structures rose around her and the bird statues laughed at her internal hesitation. Her nerves seemed to think it was her first audition all over again. But this was Hightown at midday and she was no longer six. She had nothing to worry about.

Frankly, Julia decided, she should be more concerned that Leandra hadn't been the least bit alarmed to learn that Julia would be attempting to hit dummies with arrows. Apparently she knew her daughter and was willing to sacrifice Julia to this city's desire for bloodshed.

"You never know what will happen. Perhaps if I had learned some sort of combat, I would have been more help that poor boy during our escape from Lothering."

Hawke had scoffed at that as she stuffed something that looked like a bagel into her mouth.

"That guy had been determined to kill himself. Even if he did bring down those darkspawn with just that metal wand, only someone suicidal takes on an ogre head on."

Leandra winced as crumbs shot out with the words. She tugged a white handkerchief from her belt and handed it to her daughter who took it as if she had never seen its like. After a second, she wiped her face on her sleeve.

Julia took a bite of porridge to cover her reaction even while Leandra sighed, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Please don't speak ill of the dead, my dear. He did save my life, even if he was rather strange."

"It's not wrong if it's fact. Who looks at an ogre and think, 'yum, I want me some of that'? Carol Rose-in-my-Bush would have been better off asking the darkspawn to dance."

"Colonel Rosenbush," Leandra corrected, reaching for her tea. "He was a brave man."

Hawke shrugged even as Julia forgot how to swallow. The lump felt overly large as she forced it down, nearly choking. "Colonel James Rosenbush?"

Both women stared at her. Why had she even thought of that name? It was just so similar…

Leandra spoke first, poking at the tension with hesitant words. "Yes… Yes, I believe that's how he
introduced himself."

"Did you know him? He doesn't really seem like your type but if you are into serious and silent, I suppose…" Hawke trailed off.

Julia stared down at her food, spinning the spoon in the thick mush. "No, I didn't know him." That… no. It isn't possible.

Taking another spoonful of porridge so that she could think without having to speak, Julia set her silverware back into the bowl carefully. But… The situation itched at her in a place she couldn't quite reach.

The thought was shoved to the back of her mind as Hawke told them her plan for the day, something about helping a smuggler, which set Leandra off.

"We have enough money now, I will not have you engaging in criminal actions," Hawke's mother said, coming to a standing position. Hawke rolled her eyes and settled back onto her heels.

"Yet you were okay with it when your children had to sell themselves into servitude to keep you safe?"

"We didn't have any other choice!" Leandra blinked rapidly. "We didn't have anywhere else to go, but that didn't stop me from wishing there was another way."

Hawke laughed, the sound pitched lower than her usual carefree one so often heard at the Hanged Man. "No, you just didn't want Bethany and Carver to sell themselves. My indentured servitude was fine. Don't lie to yourself, Mother. Or to me." With that final statement, she spun around and left the room. A breath later, a door, presumably the front one, slammed shut.

Leandra watched the space her daughter had stood for several heartbeats, almost as if she thought hard enough she could summon her back. Then, upon the realization that Hawke wasn't going to return, her shoulders slumped and she slid back into her chair.

"Am I a bad mother, Julia?"

Julia almost choked. It took a moment for her to catch her breath. "What?"

"I love my children and would give up anything for their happiness. Yet it feels like everything I do just sets Marian off. If I try to take an interest in her life, I'm suffocating and if I give her some space, I don't care. Maybe I am trying too hard but it feels like I failed Bethany and Carver so Marian is the only one I have left…" The final words came out in a whisper and years grew across Leandra's face as she stared at the wooden tablet.

Julia couldn’t wrap her head around the idea. Leandra, a bad mother? It was like saying the piano was a bad instrument, utterly incomprehensible. What could bring that notion into her head? If anything, Hawke was a bad daughter.

“You are a wonderful mother,” Julia told her, voice lowering slightly with emphasis. “Hawke is an idiot for not realizing it. You care about her and are not afraid to show it. The details of that are not important.”

Leandra’s watery smile still remained in her mind even as she strolled into the main square, keeping her eyes open for the pure white amidst the washed colors. The priest-Prince was nowhere to be seen. He probably had better things to do than to wait for her, as if she didn’t.
It raked at her that she actually didn’t.

Her thoughts had distracted her enough to make it to the planned meeting spot without faltering. Yet the appearance of the destination was enough to send skittering worries through her core. What if this is a trap?

Julia pressed her teeth against her tongue to force herself to focus. She had nothing. No money and certainly no items of value. Sebastian didn’t look like a fool to try to kidnap her away from a public place.

The statement made her pause. What was she thinking? Her nerves were corrupting her reason.

Ignoring the ever-present stall owners and their glittering wares, Julia found a pillar facing the Chantry and settled in to wait. A few nobles walked by and sent her analyzing glances. She frowned at them and their steps went a little bit faster.

Julia sighed. Just because every time she had been by herself in Kirkwall she had been attacked didn’t mean it would happen this time. She had been assaulted with others as well so leaving the manor in general should be considered a bad idea.

No matter what she did she wasn’t going to win at whatever games these Kirkwallers were playing.

“Serah Julia?”

At the mention of her name, Julia glanced up and met bright blue eyes. In an instant, her irrational worries lessened.

“Sebastian, you're late.”

“I’m sorry. One of the sisters asked if I could help her move some books that had been gathering in one of the closets. I just didn’t realize how many books she had,” the priest said as he rubbed the back of his neck with a laugh. He had the decency to apologize at least.

“You are forgiven,” Julia said after a beat. “I wasn’t waiting that long anyways.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He smiled and Julia smoothed out her face to hide her reaction. She was being ridiculous. A growing trend today...

Instead, she nodded. “We should get a move on.”

“Of course, my lady. My time is yours.”

It must be the accent.

Reminding herself that she had better things to do, Julia strode towards the keep. Aveline had offered the guard practice area for them to use so at least the location was somewhat familiar. She repressed a shudder at the memory of Hawke trying to get her to fight. Sebastian was stable enough that she wouldn’t have to worry about that incident repeating itself.

The brother caught up to her and matched her pace without comment. Julia kept her vision focused ahead but that didn’t stop her from sneaking glances.

She had already acknowledged that he had an attractive appearance. But that didn’t explain why he kept tripping her up. She had talked to handsome men before. Had done more than that with good-looking men. Well educated, rich, and musically talented men at that.
Maybe that was it. Sebastian had a different personality than most of the people she had interacted with. Nor was he a peer, conductor, or person to impress. Simply a decently good-looking male to whom she had no relation. Her unease stemmed from the fact that she didn't know how to act with him.

_The same could be said of Varric, Fenris, or even Anders…_ Julia hushed the thought. The whole thing was irritating. like a string that refused to be tuned.

“Does the Chantry condone violence?” Practice. That's how she solved difficult passages and it was how she would push through this troublesome bar as well.

Sebastian seemed to almost relax into the question, hands open at his sides and features loose. “As a general rule, no, we prefer peaceful solutions. That is the only way for us to convince the Maker that we are worthy of his return. But yet Andraste herself was a warrior and helped to bring down one of the greatest empires the world has known. So, at the same time, yes. If there is no other way and the cause is just, we do what we can to make the world a better place.”

“Do brothers usually fight?”

At this, the man winced. “I am no longer a brother of the faith although Grand Cleric Elthina allows me to remain in the Chantry. I turned against my vows when my family was murdered though sometimes I wonder if sorrow made me act too rashly.”

Julia tried to remember the story that Hawke told the other night. The only thing that stuck out was the obnoxious teasing. The woman really didn’t know when to call it quits.

“I’m sorry for you loss,” she managed, not quite sure what you said to a basic stranger when they talked of the assassination of their entire family.

Sebastian smiled at her effort. “Thank you. It was three years ago now but… I don’t think the pain ever fades entirely.”

Julia frowned. This was not how this conversation was supposed to go, she needed to be angry at his naivety not appreciating the honesty. Sebastian was too open, baring his emotions to her after only two short encounters. Was it because Hawke helped him and she was apart of Hawke’s group or was this how he always was?

Either way, her absurd reactions didn't seem like they were going to cease anytime soon.

Maybe it was a prince thing.

They had entered the keep by this point, turning into one of the numerous outlets from the grand hall. At her slowing, Sebastian took the lead. He didn’t seem bothered by the restriction of vision and dark stone walls that surrounded them. _A tomb._

She hadn't liked it the first time and she certainly did not appreciate the aesthetics now.

Sebastian led the way around several corners till he opened a door and they stepped out into the sunlight. Julia took a deep breath as her eyes adjusted to the influx of visibility and for once didn’t immediately choke the bathroom odors that filled Kirkwall. It was still sweatsy and dirty but the lack of shit was a definite improvement.

Several fully armored guards already took up some of the space, thud of wood against wood grating on her nerves.
Ignoring the fighters, Sebastian took them to the other end where stiff manakin targets lined one wall. Only one guard was over here, confidently hitting the straw man from a dozen paces away. Not very impressive. Hopefully that wasn’t the extent of the skills she was supposed to learn.

“Have you ever used a bow before?” Sebastian asked as he turned to face her.

“Only on my violin,” Julia said. “I never had any interest in the other one.”

The prince’s blank expression made her sigh. “No, I have never used a bow to try to shoot someone.”

“Then we shall start from the beginning,” Sebastian decided, face settling into a gentle placidity.

Julia didn’t waste energy in replying, there was nothing polite she had to say to that. Instead she pulled the concave wood Aveline had given her off her shoulders and held it in front of her. As she had noticed before, it seemed decent enough quality. A single piece of a dark wood, oiled smooth with a coarse, natural string dangling from it. It seemed silly for the weapon to remain loose but Aveline had insisted that when not in use, she unstring the bow.

“Before we even begin to use arrows, we need to start with posture. That is the beginning between a good archer and a great archer. First, your feet.”

It went about as much as Julia would have expected, not so different from learning how to play the violin. It was about how you held yourself. Feet spaced just so, comfortable but not lax. Arms raised and loose but not being supported. Sebastian had her hold the bow unstrung exactly how he wanted for almost a minute so she could get used to the position. He seemed surprised when she didn’t start to shake but years of yoga had given her that much.

There was also a brief discussion of equipment and proper protection gear. Somehow Hawke had neglected to give her the arm guard—Sebastian called it a bracer—needed to avoid potential string damage.

It was at least an hour before he even allowed her to touch an arrow, instead making her practice the motion of shooting and explaining the mechanics of it. Finally he helped her string the bow, plucking it to make sure it was tight.

Carefully, Julia pulled a single arrow out of the quiver they had placed on the ground and settled into the position she had been taught, legs spaced but steady. Sebastian edged closer so he was standing behind her.

“Now you know what you are to do. Look to where you want to hit and aim there. Since this is your first try, I don’t want you to be disappointed if you don’t get to the target this time.” Julia focused on the manikin in front of her, crude arms and legs sticking out from its uneven torso. Someone had smeared eyes and a mouth on the would-be head in an attempt to make it somehow more realistic.

Julia didn’t feel the least bit bad for trying to put an arrow in it.

With the prince in shining white armor hovering behind her, Julia raised her bow and pulled back the string. The motion went in the wrong direction and took significantly more energy, but she could pretend it was familiar. The arrow wobbled and Julia tried to brace it better. Her fingers felt contorted but that would come with time.

All she needed to do was let go.

Her chest rose and fell, slow and steady. It was simple. These Dark Age people could do it so it
stood to reason that she could too. Aim at the target and let go. Ignoring the strain in her arms from keeping the string from snapping back into place, Julia inhaled and held.

Then she released.

It ended before she could even blink, arrow buried in the dirt. Julia’s forearm felt jarred but no pain. Sebastian was saying congratulatory words yet the dark tuft of feathers was at least a body length from the intended target.

“… All you needed was some more distance and you would have hit it. That was really very good for a first time.”

“May I try again?”

Sebastian paused, eyebrows wrinkling. “Of course.”

Julia pulled another arrow out of the quiver next to her and lined it up on her bow. This time she raised the point for distance and took the string as far back as she could to line up with her mouth. Before her arms started to shake, she focused in on the straw figure and let go.

This time the arrow just missed the practice dummy, nailing the ground behind the figure. Julia released her air and lowered the bow.

Better. Not by much but still better.

“You’re a natural,” the brogue voice told her, smile in his words. Julia clasped her hands around the bow and pulled them forward, stretching. “All you need now is practice.”

For the first time, Julia noticed how close the man was standing to her. Much too close really, he could hit her with his elbow if he wanted to but… it didn’t bother her as much as it should have.

“Would you show me how you do it?” She asked before she could think about it. Once the question was out she regretted it. She sounded like a child.

Sebastian took the bow from her. “Of course. Though I should warn you, I don’t practice as much as I should so I’m not guaranteeing anything.”

Julia handed him an arrow which he thanked her for. He stared at the target for several moments, still with concentration. The bow rose and the string was pulled back in a single motion to be held as Sebastian adjusted his aim ever so slightly. Then he fired.

The end of the arrow stuck out the space where the target’s paint eye had been. Some of the guards shouted from across the arena. “Well done, pretty boy!” “Nice shot!”

Sebastian smiled, the pure joy of success radiating. Julia locked her jaw. Guess he did know what he was doing then. The ease in which he achieved a bull's eye meant that he must be very good.

“Don’t feel too bad, Julia. I have been training with a bow since I could barely pull back the string. It will take time before you can do that. But with time and practice, you will be able to.”

Julia straightened and took the offered bow back. She fitted another arrow against the frame. While this was not something she was willing to dedicate excesses amount of time to, since she would be staying here for the indeterminate future she would learn it.

One arrow at a time.
Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition, or My First Kiss

Chapter Notes

“In the back of the car
On the way to the bar….
She won’t ever get enough.”

A/N: Don't get excited with the title. I was more just amused with the lyrics and how they relate to the chapter. On a side note, the non-musical title for this chapter is 'Bonding with Hawke'

Julia’s days fell into a steady routine despite Hawke’s efforts to the contrary. Wake up, yoga, bath, breakfast with Leandra, violin practice, lunch, walk to the keep to practice the bow, then back to manor for more violin, a nap, dinner, and the Hanged Man. If she wasn't whoring or fighting or some grotesque combination of both, Hawke would never let her get out of the last one.

Tonight the bartender had their order ready for them before she even reached the bar. He smiled at her and Julia barely kept back a wince at the teeth discoloration. A muttered thanks and she carefully lifted the tray off the counter. The drinks splashed against the edges of the mugs, threatening to attack her if she so much as faltered.

God forbid any of this piss actually touch her. She had smelled it enough to know that there was no way she was ever putting anything from this place into her system.

“Now, Merrill, do you remember anything from our lessons the other day? I expect a better performance tonight,” Varric coached the small elf as Julia approached their table. She slowly lowered the tray and almost immediately several of the mugs were taken off of it.

“I remember, Varric. I think I’ve got the rules now,” Merrill said with a smile. Julia scooted next to her, making sure the seat was relatively clean first. Isabela had gotten stuck a few nights ago and decided the only solution was to slip out of her dress-shirt. Julia left at that point and didn't look back.

Hawke laughed and stretched her arms above her head. “Our little girl is growing up, Varric. I think I’m going to cry.”

“We knew it would happen eventually.”

The rogue sighed loudly and tumbled over so her head rested in the dwarf’s lap, nose just poking above the table. “But soon she will want to go out on her own and meet boys.”

“She won’t meet anyone if we smother her,” Varric reasoned, all but ignoring the woman. Over dramatized crying followed, causing Julia’s eyes to roll. Every night they went through different skits of the same tune. It was old the first night.

Merrill plucked the cards from large fingers and shuffled them smoothly. “You two joke all you want. I know what I’m doing. Oh, and Hawke, I have a message for you from Arianni.”

“Who?” Hawke barely moved from her makeshift pillow.
“You remember her. Feynriel’s mother? The boy that the templars were looking for who—–”

“Ah, yes,” Varric interrupted, voice louder than usual. “The one who died. It was very sad.” He shot Merrill a look and the elf blushed.

Hawke finally sat up, her hair pressed on one side. Julia winced but didn’t say anything. The woman wouldn’t listen to her anyways. “She sounds vaguely familiar. What did she want?”

Wordlessly, Merrill handed her a small slip of paper. Hawke glanced at it for a moment then handed the note to Varric who sighed and unfolded it. “If you want me to be your secretary, Hawke, you have to pay me better.”

The woman snorted, snatching another mug to match the empty one already in front of her. “It’s not that bad. Look at all your benefits!”

A semi-questioning grunt as Varric scanned the letter. Merrill fumbled her shuffling and Julia helped her gather the cards before they fell into something unfortunate.

“You get to spend time with me? What else could anyone want?”

“A new feather pen would be nice,” Varric muttered, only half paying attention. “You should probably read this, Hawke. It sounds rather urgent.”

Hawke groaned but took the paper back. Free from the note, Varric held his hand out for the cards. Merrill rushed to pick up the remaining slips of paper but Julia pointedly studied the ones she had gathered for any defining marks. She then switched her cards for Merrill’s.

A shadow darkened the colorful pictures and a white-haired elf settled down next to her. If she had any way to accurately tell time, she had a feeling she could set her clock to when Fenris arrived. He took a mug, staring at the contents dubiously. Julia flipped one of the cards over and frowned. She pushed it and another one over in front of Fenris.

“I am not familiar enough with the… Etiquette of this world to know but do these marks count as cheating?”

For a moment she thought he was just going to ignore her, lips pressed against the ridge of mug. A dark eyebrow rose. Julia’s own face hardened. The mug tapped against the table and Fenris touched the cards.

“What is the meaning of this, dwarf?”

Varric shrugged and snatched at the cards Julia had collected. “Hey, I still owe you three silvers after the last series of games so it’s not like it’s been helping me much.”

“Get some new cards,” Fenris tossed the two watermarked cards at him.

Hawke slammed her hand down. “I knew you were cheating! There is no way you could have beaten me otherwise.”

“Hawke, I hate to tell you this but as your friend… Every time you bluff you try to distract us with a joke.”

“I do not!”

“Hawke… You tell jokes when you bluff.”
The woman paused. “Fine. But they are great jokes so you should feel honored that I share them with you.”

Aveline dropped into the chair next to Hawke without a word. Her scarf was rumpled but the rest of her uniform remained presentable. Had she run into trouble?

“If I’m not the last one, that means I’m fine right?” Anders commented as he appeared behind her. He set his staff against the chair and studied the array of drinks carefully.

Hawke handed him a mug with a larger than normal smile. “You are fine. And I mean that in all the ways possible.”

“How is it that Isabela isn’t even here yet and the conversation is deteriorating?”

Merrill’s head rose from the mug that she was holding with both hands. “Where is Isabela?”

Varric glanced at the group assembled and then began to deal out the cards, sending a set towards one of the two empty spots. “Isabela is helping Athenril with a job.”

Aveline sighed. “I don’t know whether I should pretend I didn’t hear that or be surprised that the pirate is actually working.”

“Speaking of work, are you going to help Arianni with her son, Hawke?” Varric sent out the last card. With a glance at Aveline, he added. “Who has left some effects she doesn’t know what to do with.”

The guard captain frowned at them both and letting out another sigh of years of patience, deliberately focused on her cards.

“Two silver. And I don’t know… It’s not like I need the money.”

“Arianni… Isn’t that the mother of the mage you sent to the Dalish?” Anders slid several copper coins next to Hawke’s.

“I suppose… Apparently he is not doing well. His nap has last over a day now. Sounds like a fine time to me but you know mages…”

Fenris’s hand crinkled the cards. “Hawke, if he is consorting with demons, he needs to be killed before he becomes an abomination.”

“Mages are not animals! You can’t just put them down when you think they might go feral,” Anders hissed. “Else Danarius should have killed you long ago.”

Was the elf’s tattoos lighter? “He probably should have. But that doesn’t change the danger the boy is to everyone around him.”

“Give someone a knife and they are dangerous.”

“Knives can’t possess people.”

“Gentlemen, as much as I enjoy you asserting your distinct opinions, can you save the argument to when it isn’t your turn?” Varric interjected. Julia let out a breath. For a minute there it felt like they were going to attack each other with her in between. Fenris’s tattoos faded slowly, becoming skin-toned. At some point she needed an explanation on why he was part glow worm but now probably wasn’t prudent.
Coins were moved and cards flipped for a turn before Hawke tried again. “What do you call a rabbit without any fur?”

“Hawke…” Julia warned. The woman had been testing jokes on her the entire walk to Lowtown and if she heard another one, her ears might start to bleed.

“Hareless!” Hawke snickered as everyone but Merrill groaned. Julia massaged her forehead.

“That’s really clever! How do you think of things like that?” Merrill asked.

“The same place my beauty, wit, and other jokes come from. Naturally.”


“Let me know,” Julia muttered, waving at Fenris to move. He slid from the bench and she followed him out. “Varric, is your room open?”

“Depends what are you going to do?”

“Anything involving less clothing or puppies better involve me. If it’s both, I’ll beat you there.”

“I don’t want to know what you are imagining, Hawke, but if you want to do any of it in my room, I’m going to call the guard.”

“And I’ll gladly arrest you,” Aveline added to Varric’s increasing amusement. The dwarf really needed a new hobby. Julia tried to care and failed before the first bar. She threw a thanks behind her as she made her way up the stairs.

They were just as sticky as the last few times.

She would complain to the owner, the Health board, or the other customers but no one appeared to give a damn. Sometimes she was the only sane one in this city.

Varric’s door was shut but his room was lit and warm. Despite him seeming to be permanently implanted in their corner, somehow a fire was blazing against the wall and… was that a full course meal? It actually looked like food too… Wasn’t that against some Hanged Man policy?

Shelves of books surrounded a cushioned chair, dozens upon dozens stacked upon each other. At least two more lay interspersed between the still warm trays of food. Who would have thought the dwarf was a reader? Stepping closer, Julia pushed a bowl of bread to the side to reveal a thin tome. It was made of leather on the exterior and off-colored paper in the interior. She flipped through several pages. The text swirled in odd increments. Definitely not English.

Definitely not Earth.

Massaging her forehead against the ache that had started the moment she left the manor tonight, Julia slumped onto the bench. No matter that she had been here over two weeks—closing in on three—, the new world still felt like a cheap violin. Familiar in some ways but still hard to wrap her fingers around just right.

Prone to splinters.

Two knocks on the door and a dark head peeked around the wooden panel. “Hellooo… I got nominated to get you to let you know that you lost miserably at cards and now must grovel at the feet
of Varric’s greatness. Though personally if you want to just knock him down when you’re there, I would greatly appreciate it.”

“What are you doing, Hawke?”

The woman strolled into the room like it was her summer home, cocky grin plastered across her face. She was definitely drunk. “Improving the ambiance of this room. It’s a difficult task but someone needs to do it.”

For a significant moment, Julia seriously considered throwing some bread at her. But chances were that it would just fall on the floor and then Hawke would eat it. “One day Hawke, someone is going to shoot you. And we are just going to laugh.”

“If I am slow enough to get shot, I will laugh with you,” Hawke agreed. She plopped down in the chair across from Julia then leaned back to set her feet on the table. Her smile dimmed a few watts and she closed her eyes. “I never get to do this when Varric is here. ‘I eat off that, Hawke. I don’t want whatever slop you’ve been marching through mixed with my food.’ A little dirt is good for you.”

“Go take a nap in an alley, Hawke. You’re drunk.”

“Drunk… Or practically perfect?… It is a fine line you know.”

Julia did throw some bread at her then. It bounced off her chest and settled in the valley before her legs. Blue eyes blinked at the brown chunk and then raised up to her. “You’re in a fine mood tonight. What stick has joined the usual dozen in your behind?”

“Maybe I will shoot you.”

Hawke waved off the idea. “You can’t hit the sea when standing in it. I’m more worried about growing two heads and having one of them snore.”

“Give it time. Your head is full of enough hot air.”

"Are you calling me hot?"

Leandra didn’t seem the type to drop a baby but it could happen to the best of them. “Hawke, either state the reason you are intruding or find someone else to pester.”

“Agh, fine!” Hawke’s feet slammed down. “World’s greatest friend here to help. What’s wrong?”

Julia stood, to go where she hadn’t decided yet but she wasn’t staying here. “Since when did you become my friend?”

“Since I dragged you off the street, saved you from ruffians, offered you a home, and got insulted by you repeatedly.”

“Do you have some kind of fetish?”

“I don’t know what that is but I think like it.”

“Of course you do,” Julia muttered. But her initial flash of anger had dissipated and after a second she lowered herself back down to an equilibrium with Hawke. “Now what do I need to say to make you leave?”

“Varric informs me that something is bothering you. I don’t like to see you upset so please let me
help,” Hawke said, for once sounding sincere. She still looked like she was going to run a race in her birthday suit at any moment but she was somewhat motionless.

“There isn’t really anything you can do. Merrill can’t either so there’s that.”

Hawke’s eyes lit up and she leaned forward. Julia leaned away. “This is about that world you say you come from. The one with the horseless carriages and flying machines.”

“Don’t forget the indoor plumbing,” Julia added, crossing her arms into a pillow and then using them at such. By God she missed indoor plumbing. She had previously dismissed toilets as something unimportant in her life… She had been so naïve.

“That sounds gross,” Hawke commented. “Anyways, what I mean to say is, I want to make sure you know that no matter what you lost, and if you never manage to find a way to get back, you will always have a place in my house and in our group. You provide a certain element that Varric said is essential to round out the character of our friends and I like having you around.”

Julia’s eye flickered opened and she peeked out over her arm. Something in her chest twisted. It sank down to her stomach where it warmed. Her dinner probably had something living in it.

Hawke tilted her head so it was at a similar angle. “Do you feel better now that I’ve reassured you? Can we return to our game?”

Her sigh came low and just when she started to run out of air it came out in huffs. She gasped and laid her head back down as the laughter rolled in. The parasite in her stomach twisted once more than faded. Finally, Julia sat up and checked her bun. It seemed neat enough from just feeling it. “You’re a twit.”

The rogue grinned. “That’s my Gema. Let’s go make sure Varric doesn’t take Merrill for all she’s worth. I told her not to bet everything when she has a pair but she thinks that is good.”

“Fine. Let’s go protect Merrill.” Julia stood and Hawke jumped up to open the door.

No one seemed surprised at her return though Varric gave Hawke a large thumbs up. “Not very subtle,” Julia pointed out. The dwarf shrugged and began dealing out the cards.

The games progressed as normal, with everyone doing their normal solos and melodies. Julia inserted her own tune at moments but mostly watched the group work. It was lento, staccato at points, but steady and repeating.

An age later, Hawke unsteadily decided it was time for them to go. Merrill lay across the table, snoring softly. Varric ran his hand through her hair, the gentleness that seemed reserved only for Merrill returning in full force. “I think Daisy will be spending the night. Fenris, would you mind helping me to carry her up?”

The elf sighed. “Sure. Let’s carry the blood mage to bed. Maybe tuck her in before she continues consorting with demons?”

“Stop grousing and help me with her, Broody.”

Hawke tripped and Julia watched her spill cheap beer over a man much too old to be here and then start talking to him. “…bin twu da Bluding Rose? Lovely place…”

_How far had she fallen that this was the type of person who called her a friend?_
“Hawke! Don’t touch that, it probably has enough diseases to turn you green!”

“Hey!”

“Get over yourself, you’ll forget it in about five seconds. Are you sure you can afford to lose more brain cells on that beer?”

Hawke laughed even though Julia was pretty sure she didn’t understand anything over two syllable at this point. The drunkard only looked confused and angry, no doubt a common occurrence for him.

“We are going, Hawke.”

“I didn’t order another mother… not that drunk,” Hawke told the patron.

Julia rolled her eyes. Walking over to the woman who provided her with food and shelter, she pulled the daggers out from the sheaths on Hawke’s back. “No sharp things for you. Now give me that arm… ufh… Have you ever heard of working out? You should consider it.”

With Hawke wrapped around her neck like the worst accessory ever, Julia pulled the other female upright and half-led, half-dragged her to the entrance. “You are just lucky I am beginning to know my way around this rat’s nest of a city.”

Hawke mumbled something but Julia didn’t really listen, concentrating instead staying standing and compensating Hawke’s weight. How was someone so thin so heavy?

The door was opened by them throwing themselves against it more than actually using the handle. They stumbled out into the dark night, fog of clouds covering up all sources of celestial light. Of course there were still torches scattered across various buildings but they did little to illuminate the cracks on the street.

This is going to be a long walk.

Holding the blades loose in one hand, Julia helped Hawke limp out of the Hanged Man. “You really need to learn how to control yourself, Hawke. Just because a drink is there doesn’t mean you have to have it.”

“hmm… soooooo taassteee…”

“Only after you burn off your taste buds.”

“mmmmm..” The woman murmured into Julia’s shoulder.

“Are you drooling? Please tell me you are not…” She was going to ruin this dress. This was the third one in so many weeks that she would need to burn.

“Looky here. Two women, ripe for the picking.”

Kirkwall strikes again. She had almost forgotten the sheer amount of aggressive idiots there were in this city. Julia tilted Hawke to the side so she could look up. Shadows shifted into people-shapes. They were large and she spotted the tell-tale shapes of sword handles on their backs. Of course.

“Wake up, Hawke…” The dark head groaned but didn’t move. All that talk of fighting prowess and this is what it got them. A dead weight. Practically literally due to the amount of alcohol the woman had consumed.

Guess it was up to her then.
“Do you guys really have nothing better to do then wait outside low-end bars for drunks who probably spent all their money inside? Not the best plan but I suppose I should give you some credit since you did have a plan… Neandertals that you are.”

Her words succeeded in making the men stop. *The people in this city were as dumb as rocks*… She hefted Hawke up and slid several feet back towards the Hanged Man. The rest of the friendly band of idiots were there… Not that they could hear her through the general racket of the drunks.

She had only gotten a few steps before one of them broke through the web of words. “You bitch!”

Now he gets it.

“I understand that you want to try to make some easy coins, but I’m just letting you know, we don’t have any. This one,” she shook the woman for emphasis. “lost all her money in a stupid bet with a liar of a dwarf. I’m sure you can understand. Better luck with some other sap.”

One more shuffle back. However, any progress she had was ruined by one man’s quick steps forward, the ease of only carrying himself. “I don’t know who you think you are…but you don’t know as much as you think you do. Money wasn’t the only thing we were after.”

Kirkwall was truly ridiculous. “Hawke, wake up. Hawke!” The woman didn’t even make a sound.

Her would-be attackers formed up around her, cutting off the escape routes, even to the relative safety of Hanged Man. Julia glanced at the snoring woman on her and then at the men. She should have just run when she had the chance and let Hawke deal with her own mess. That would have made more sense. That would have been more *logical*. Why couldn’t she be logical?

So Julia did the only thing she could.

She dropped Hawke.
The woman hit the ground with a low thunk, crumpled up like a child. Julia shifted the daggers into both hands, leather grips unfamiliar in her palms. *How the hell am I supposed to hold these things?* Hawke and Isabela made it seem effortless so it couldn’t be that hard. She raised the blades, pointing one at the men surrounding her in a slow arc. *How did the guards hold their practice swords?*

“I’m only going to tell you once. Leave now.”

For half a glorious moment, she thought it worked. That was until they started laughing. One leaned over and slapped another’s back, both practically rolling in their mirth. Julia’s hands clenched over the handles. It had been worth a shot.

The man in front lunged at her and Julia went sideways. Someone pulled on her arm and she nearly tripped… But she wasn’t in high heels tonight. Spinning around she lashed out with the daggers, something tugging at them as they passed.

“Ouch! That hurt, bitch!”

Pain burst across her face and then flared at the back of her head. Julia blinked and tried to push herself off the ground when something hard connected with her stomach.

She couldn’t even gasp. The world of black and grey spun.

Cool stone pricked pricked her face. Julia closed her eyes hard before opening them again to steady the swaying of Kirkwall's night. Arms shaking, she pressed her hand against the ground and shoved herself up.

Through the dark, she saw man-shapes approach a pile on the ground. *Useless Hawke*… Shadows cut off the moon and as something latched onto her neck, her view changed to higher than normal. Feet dangling, she kicked out but hit nothing. Rank odors pressed against her nose. *Of all the times to notice smells...*

The pain in her neck pulled her attention away from lesser manners.

Her attacker's face blurred as the grip tightened. *Is he going to kill me? What's the point… of practicing with a bow?* Her fingers fluttered and tightened on a leather handle she somehow hadn't let go of. A shout and a glow drew the man's attention away for a split second. It was enough. She thrust her hand forward, pushing metal through the resistance and jarring her arm. Something slick tickled her fingertips before spreading and the grip on her throat fell away.

Julia staggered as her feet hit the stone ground. The man shuddered below her and screams filled the air. *Don’t think about it.*

*Hawke.*

Julia whirled and stumbled several steps before stopping. Figures were either fleeing or slumped on the ground. One of her attackers stood next to a humanoid shape whose limbs were covered in glowing lines, white hair reflecting moonlight. Fenris pulled his sword out of the man’s chest and he collapsed with only a muffled thump.
“You really should be more careful. Kirkwall is dangerous enough in the daytime.”

Watching the tattoos slowly fade into the shadows of skin, Julia remembered she needed to breathe. “I see that. Why did you come out?”

“Varric had begun his storytelling for free beer and I wanted no part of that. You are lucky I left when I did.”

Julia’s skin cooled and she kept her back to the figure on the stone behind her. Her fingers felt sticky. Don’t think about. “Is that what you call it? Now, are you going to carry Hawke? Merrill tells me you live somewhere in Hightown.”

“Most people would say thank you before demanding aid.”

Is he trying to get her mad?

“Fine. Thank you for not letting us be killed. Shall we go?”

“Have it your way.” Fenris bent over and hoisted the still-unconscious woman over his shoulders. Her head rested against his back and bounced slightly as he walked. It was no less than she deserved after what she put Julia through.

Trying to smother short term memories before they could become long term, Julia did the only thing she could do.

She followed the elf.

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Red fingers reached out of the dark to stroke her face, trailing down her neck and leaving a cool wet sensation on her throat. Julia choked and tried to draw away but her back was pressed against a barrier. Fingers turned into claws and tightened around her. She wanted to scream, to call for help but she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even see the person attacking. It was just crimson-soaked hands stretching out from an unknown source.

She woke up with a start and reached for the nearest weapon at hand, a pillow.

Beware... Julia set the soon to be banned weapon of mass destruction back in its spot at the head of the bed and slid back down.

So she had killed someone. For Hawke and the others, that would be a pre-meal exercise. This city thrived on dirt, blood, and low morals. Death was common here, like fleas on the homeless. Murder and crime scattered across the stained city like pepper. Her actions were not a big deal.

Rolling out of bed, Julia stripped out of her overly-ribboned nightgown and grabbed her hair tie. By God she missed elastic. Her skin prickled as she wrapped another cloth strap around her chest. At first the corset like tightness bothered her but at least it kept everything from moving about. A loose fitting dress ended her assemble. She left her room.

Everyone but Hawke was up already. “Morning exercise, Julia?” Leandra asked, sipping something very similar to tea. Julia stretched her arms above her head and felt her muscles tug.

“There is no point in wasting the morning.”

The woman laughed. “If you could teach Marian, I would appreciate seeing her sometime before
noon.”

“I’ve seen livelier stones than Hawke when she sleeps. If she were more responsive, Varric wouldn’t have to get his face clawed off every time she forgets that she agreed to do to something,” Julia commented.

A few more pleasantries passed before Julia stepped away from the conversation to go through a short exercise routine involving the stairs and then a series of push-ups and crunches. Body warm and worn, she melted like wax into the tub until her skin wrinkled and she was forced to remove herself from a weightless existence.

Julia had her hair mostly tucked away in a bun when she walked out of the bathing room, nearly crashing into Varric. The dwarf leaned against the wall near Hawke’s bedroom, head in a book.

“Good morning, Freckles. Eventful evening last night?”

Julia twisted the final strand of hair into the band, tugging so that the end would stay underneath the tie, before glaring at the dwarf. “Why do you even bother to ask if you already know?”

Varric pulled his eyes from the swirling text to grin at her. “A story always has more than one side, my blunt friend. For example, those men might have worked for a slaver that Hawke may have angered some weeks ago, or they could have been random thugs.”

“So Hawke was to blame,” Julia concluded. Of course. One day she would find out that she dropped into Kirkwall because of something that woman did.

“I didn’t say that. It is just a thought to consider before you leap to conclusions. The tale is in the details. Readers come for the explosions and twists, but they stay for the color of her eyes and the feeling of the cloth beneath his fingers.”

Hawke must do a raffle from the insane asylum to get her friends. That had to be the only explanation why all of them were missing a few screws.

“What are you doing here, Varric?”

“The usual, marshaling Hawke into action before the sun sets. We are meeting Merrill’s old keeper about an elf today and the sooner we get moving, the less time the templars have to get involved.”

Julia glanced from the dwarf to the closed door. “How’s that going?”

He shrugged, drawing attention to his chest and the ample chest hair present there. Gag me with a piccolo. “I’m waiting for the opportune moment.”

“You want me to do it.”

Varric laughed, “I didn’t say that. Though if you were to try… Blondie is going to meet us there so any scars wouldn't be permanent.”

He was a coward. Julia rolled her eyes and with a shake of her head, went to knock on Hawke’s door. “Hey Hawke, time to get up!” Nothing. She pushed open the medium sized wood panel. The light in the hall barely managed to get past the first few feet of room before succumbing into darkness.

“Hawke!” The bed shifted then went still. Why the heck was she even bothering? It’s not like she cared about what Hawke failed to do.
Her internal complaints didn’t stop her from striding over to the bed and shoving the lump of blankets. “Hawke, Varric is waiting for you. If you want to be a lazy mushroom, I couldn’t care less, but don’t get me involved.”

Something swept by her face, air brushing her nose. Julia took a step back. From the mass in front of her, a low, barely human voice spoke, “Go away.”

“Not until you get up.”

“No,” the voice came out a bit clearer. “Tell Varric to go find someone else to drag around. I just want to sleep.”

“Who is dragging who, Hawke?” Varric asked, chuckling from the safe distance of the hall.

“Shudup.” The bed shifted again as its occupant rolled over. The dwarf’s soft laughter followed the movement and Julia groaned. Reaching out to feel the quilt on top of the bed, she gave it a good yank. Her success was noted with a squawk of irritation. Julia took another step back as the woman on the bed fumbled for the cover. “To the street with you!”

The words were getting progressively more understandable at least. Julia tossed the quilt behind her and waited. The bed creaked and moaned as a shadow tumbled off the block of a bed and swayed towards her. Another horror movie scene if she had ever imagined one.

Hands clasped around her shoulders and the pale face of one Marian Hawke peered at her. “It can’t be noon yet. Why are you bothering me?”

Not caring in the least that she was in a way betraying him, Julia waved at Varric still waiting near the door. “Ask him. I got sick of seeing him lurk around.”

Hawke said something that would have given Julia’s mother a heartache and then stumbled over into the light, blinking like the nocturnal creature she was. “Varric, what kind of a mess are you trying to get me involved with today?”

“You haven’t forgotten already, have you Hawke? Merrill mentioned it last night.”

Hawke grumbled something, messing up her short hair with one hand as she yawned widely. Her work done, Julia slid past the two, heading back to her room. Classical composers were calling her name.

Minutes later, her violin rested against her shoulder and her bow dangled from her hands. What to start with?

Scales would be appropriate.

Lifting the thin slip of wood, she pressed it to the strings and waited.

A thin layer of red covering her fingers as she scrubbed at them with the closest bar of soap. Her breath harsh against her ears.

Her right hand shook.

Julia grit the back of her teeth and pressed the bow down harder as if the movement could still her thoughts.

The brightness of the color was now gone… or was it? Her fingers had turned pink and… the sticky
sensation remained.

Her jaw ached as Julia closed her eyes against the memories and drew her arm back. Her violin yowled at her, as if it was the first time she ever put bow to string.

*He was a bad guy. I had every right to do what I did.* Julia repeated the words in her head as if they could convince her body that all was well. It refused to listen.

Keeping her movements slow, Julia tucked her instrument back into the safety of its case before snatching the pillow off the bed and throwing it across the room. It thumped against the wall before slumping to the floor.

*Hawke.*

*It is all her fault.*

Julia stormed out of her bedroom, dress pressing against her legs. *Where…?* No sign of the dwarf or Hawke despite the fact it couldn't have been more than five minutes.

They had left already.

Heat rose beneath her skin, making her muscles need to move. There was no way she was going to let a little queasiness stop her from playing her violin. She just needed to get it out of her system and she would be free to bring meaning back into the world again.

Acting on instinct, Julia spun back into her room, grabbing the essentials. Without so much as a goodbye to Bodahn, she left the manor.

It took longer than it should have to reach the training yard even though she didn't remember any of the trip. Just the underlying frustration of songs unplayed.

How could she create beauty, *life,* if she was a murderer? Sure, any court would have let her get away with it as self defense but that didn’t change the fact that *she had killed someone.*

It was hard to think about but she forced herself to dig at it. Only a few figures crowded the practice area. Aveline stood to the side as two of her guard beat at each other with sticks. She called out compliments and criticism with equal measure, never hesitating to jump in and show her people how it was done. She nodded when she saw Julia but didn’t stop the practice session. Just as well.

Julia found a target to the side and stood fifteen paces away. She could hit the target even from this far away at this point if never exactly where she was aiming. It was something only practice could fix. So she would practice.

Grabbing an arrow from the quiver, she raised the bow, holding it still for a beat, then released. Target hit, at least a foot from the center. Undeterred, she reached for another arrow.

The process repeated itself till she ran out of arrows and had to go to the straw pin cushion to take them back. A few of her last ones had been close to the bullseye. She resumed her spot and started again. The repeated thump of the arrows landing was a soothing bass drum to her treble thoughts but it didn’t stop them from coiling around and clashing with her consciousness.

A quiver empty, a quiver refilled. Several arrows managed to hit the center of the target but she barely noticed to celebrate this small accomplishment.

She had killed a man. Someone who was breathing yesterday was dead today because of her. No
one would miss the lout but that didn’t change the fact a life had been extinguished. Her hands flexed against the smooth wood but she was a professional and knew how to control herself no matter the emotions.

“Varric sent word that you might be out of sorts today,” the low voice of the guard captain commented. Julia sent another arrow into the second ring of the target and stilled her reaction to reach for another one.

“Varric needs to learn to keep his mouth shut.”

Aveline laughed. “I won’t disagree with you.... How are you doing?”

Julia sighed and twisted in her spot to look up at the armored woman. Some sweat beaded at her forehead but she looked as authoritarian as ever. “It’s fine. No need to bother yourself.”

“It’s no bother,” Aveline said. “Even if I don’t know you well, I still consider you one of the people I need to watch out for. I’ll offer whatever support I can.”

Heat turned to lightning and Julia snapped. "Perhaps if your people were competent at their jobs, none of this would have happened."

"The guard can only do so much to prevent crime. A good economy can do more than a hundred guardsmen," the captain of the guard informed her, voice level. Annoyance and a hint of disappoint flickered and Julia was just aware of her emotions to know she wanted the woman to take the bait. To engage in a verbal fight where she could walk away the winner. "But that doesn't change the fact that it happened. I'm sorry you had to go through that, yet having someone to talk to makes it easier. I had some good mentors to help me with my first kill."

If she still had a lawyer, that dwarf would be drawn into a slander case. “He told you that too?”

“He was just worried and doesn’t show it well.”

Julia grit her teeth again. It would be easier if they all just left her alone. "I'm fine, Aveline. You can go back to training your people how to not die.”

Aveline watched her face, seeming to ignore the words coming out of her mouth. "I'll let you handle it then. But let me say one thing. Sometimes you do what you need to in order to survive."

Finally, common sense. "How are you friends with Hawke?"

The captain’s face lightened and she laughed softly. “I sometimes wonder that myself. But we came to this city together. She’s like family at this point. Besides, no matter what outrageous stunts she pulls, I know she means well. That is more than I can say for a lot of people.”

“Did you know she brought home rat meat the other day? She tried to convince Bodahn to put it into a stew so Leandra and I would try it as well.”

Aveline did not seemed surprised. “Do even I want to know why?”

“She thought it was a good substitute for beef. Somehow she was going to set up a stand in Darktown and make a fortune.”

One of the guards sparing fell on their back with a shout. Aveline glanced at them without comment though her lips pursed. “I doubt she would have gotten further than the stew. She isn’t known for her patience in business schemes. That is why Varric manages her investments for her. Else who knows
what she would end up spending it on.”

“Beer and pretty men I believe is what she said,” Julia commented. A pair of guard walked out of the keep and at the sight of them, trotted over. She recognized both of them. It was disconcerting to be able to pick out features on the otherwise practically identical cops.

“Guard Captain,” a brown haired man saluted when the pair reached them.

Aveline smiled and for the first time, Julia realized that the woman was not unattractive despite her mannish figure. She glanced at the man-Donald?- but he seemed average enough, features straight.

“Guardsman Donnic. What can I help you with?”

The man straightened further as he gave his statement. “There are reports of templars causing a disturbance in the alienage. They say that powerful magic was worked, but they are breaking down doors and destroying shops.”

What light had been brought by Donnic’s presence snuffed out. “Templars,” Aveline practically groaned. “When will they learn that they are not above the law? Guardsman, I want you to take several of the guard and try to contain the damage. Don’t stop their mission but please keep them from breaking anything else. The last thing we need is some child getting injured because they didn’t move away fast enough.”

“Understood, ser.” Donnic saluted and strode out of the office, already shouting for several people.

Aveline massaged her forehead. “I’m sorry, Julia. I need to go take care of this. That being said…”

She turned to face her and laid large medaled hands on Julia’s shoulders, mirroring Hawke earlier that day. “It is alright that you feel guilty for killing someone. The moment you lose that is the moment you stop being human. There are other ways to serve justice.” Aveline leaned close, fingers squeezing painfully. “But if it falls down to your life or theirs, don’t hesitate.”

With that mixed speech, Aveline led her guardsman out of the practice area. Her voice raised for information and the sounds of stomping feet followed shortly. Julia took up the quiver that had been resting on the dirt and walked to the door only to watch the redhead disappear up the stairs.

She closed her eyes and focused on her breathe. The image of the man slumping almost on top of her pressed in and her fingers itched.

The guard captain hadn’t really said anything that she hadn’t thought herself but somehow, having someone else say it made her own thoughts seem more realistic. This world was a strange place, far removed from the one she had grown up in. The food stunk, as did the music, lack of technology, and frankly people in general. Literally in the last case.

But she was no quitter. She refused to sit in the manor and repeat old songs. Julia opened her eyes and threw the quiver case over her still aching shoulder, ghosts of Aveline’s fingers still digging in. She would overcome this nonsensical surge of emotion.

She always did.

Chapter End Notes

“And after all that’s been said and done
You're just the part of me I can't let go.”
“Shouldn't you be raising an army or giving speeches, princeling? What are you doing on a glorified shopping trip?” Varric didn’t attempt to cover up his amused disdain as they ignored the shopkeepers practically swooning in front of them.

“I have not yet decided if I should attempt to take back Starkhaven.” Sebastian replied easily. “Until I know the Maker’s will, I cannot ask hundreds of people to risk their lives just to put me into power.”

The sunlight glinted off his pristine armor, making it seem even whiter. Compared to the grime and shades of brown around them, he could have stepped off some Romantic’s painting. Whenever Julia glanced in his direction, her eyes would catch on the shine of plated armor.

“So you expect any would-be supporters to wait around while you try to make up your mind?” Varric asked, grabbing Hawke by her belt and hauling her away from a table of daggers.

Hawke muttered about being a shabby killer and wandered off to look at hats instead. Julia almost groaned as she picked the worst one of the lot, a purple velvet monstrosity with blue and green feathers, and tried it on. Seriously? The only place that thing belonged was in a fireplace.

“If they truly believe I am the best candidate, they would be doing themselves and Starkhaven a disservice if I came to them less than confident.”

Varric snorted. “You are more naïve than I thought. Perhaps it is best if you stick to telling people how much they sin instead of managing nobles.”

Sebastian opened his mouth and then shut it, jaw settling into a hard line. His nostrils quivered slightly as he breathed in deeply before returning his face back to a placid state. Although Julia couldn’t understand the laborious time the prince had making the decision, she didn’t comprehend Varric’s motives here. For being the person who spent at least an hour explaining to Merrill the distinctions between playing cards, the juxtaposition of his actions was extreme to say the least.

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“Do you have much experience with nobles to have such a decided opinion of them?” Julia asked.

The dwarf laughed, demeanor almost incidentally changing. Not softening precisely but it was if the edges had been sanded off. Less likely to stab her with a smile. “I’m in the Merchant’s Guild and I lived with my brother. Nobles are the same everywhere. Well, I suppose there are some exceptions. Like Hawke. She doesn’t have a conniving bone in her body.”

Their attention moved to the woman in question who was in a brisk argument with the stall owner over the hat she had picked. Julia went to intercede. For the sake of eyes everywhere.

“... from sheep who were fed only the richest grain.”

“And my butt craps gold. Try again.”

“Hawke, you aren’t going to spend actual money that, are you?”

The woman blinked at her then her lips split into a grin. “Well, I don't think they accept fake money here. Besides, he is trying to convince me that the feathers were from the Empress’s own peacocks.”
Julia massaged her temples. “Why are you getting it then?”

“Bethany always liked fancy things, and I can’t imagine anything fancier than this.”

Julia didn’t quite understand where Bethany was- a school for mages? - but if she wore that, bullies would descend like carrion birds over a corpse. That wasn’t quite what Hawke was going for but then again, who knew how siblings thought?

“Don’t buy that one. It is…. terrifying. I’ve seen fifth grade bands that scared me less. Why don’t you find something else?” The sister had enough bad luck to be related to Hawke, she didn’t need any more.

“Listen to her, Hawke,” Varric added, coming up from behind. “The templars would call her an abomination if she ever set it on her head.”

Hawke sighed and threw the hat behind her. The stall owner barely managed to catch it, fumbling with feathers and outrage. “Fine. But I thought it was a great hat.”

“Sticking to drinking and getting into fights, Hawke. It’s what you are good at.” The woman grumbled but Sebastian distracted her with a question about her uncle. Varric smirked and threw a coin at the man with a hat in his hands. “You did a good thing there, Freckles. There might be hope for you yet.”

Julia almost smiled at the backhanded compliment. Typical. “That implies there was doubt.”

A hand pressed against the mixture of strawberry curls and skin. “Never. Though you still give off that superiority air.”

“You voluntarily spend your time in a tavern that smells like an outhouse.”

“It gives character.”

“Nothing says depth like yellow stains.”

Varric winked. “Now you are getting it.”

A bundle of grey bumped into Julia from behind, knocking her into the dwarf who might as well have been a rock. She swore even as Varric automatically steadied her. “What the hell!”

The grey blob was vaguely humanoid, more dirt than person with what might be hair matted around their ears. They wore a sack that couldn’t even be called clothing besides the fact that it was material wrapped around a person. They could be human but frankly it was hard to tell.

“Are you Sherah Hawke?” A high voice didn’t tell her anything about their gender and a large gap of a missing tooth created a lisp. The picture of a typical child.

“Maybe,” Hawke squinted at them. “But it feels too early to be receiving messages. Come back at a reasonable hour.”

Varric took over. “Did you have something you needed to tell Serah Hawke?” The sarcasm on the title was thick enough to coat a cake. The dwarf didn’t believe it anymore than Julia did but clearly he didn’t want to confuse the small minded child.

The creature sniffled, wiping the back of their hand against their nose. Mud smeared and Julia took one careful step back. It might be contagious. “The healer wants to talk to her.”
Hawke sighed. “What happened to ‘Hello, Hawke’ ‘Good to see you, Hawke’ ‘How is your family, Hawke?’ No, no. Now it’s ‘I need this, Hawke’. Did he say what he wanted?”

Eyes as wide as coins the urchin shook their head, hair scarcely moving. Julia put Sebastian between herself and the swamp thing. It definitely had fleas and who knew what else colonizing that patch of hair shaped dirt. “Nothing, Sherah. I shwear it.”

“Fine, fine, don’t piss yourself. Varric?” The dwarf chuckled and flipped a coin at the creature who caught it and scurried away. Did he always tip people Hawke interacts with? If so, she was missing a pile of coins. “What do you think? Trap or sincere attempt for assistance by Anders?”

Varric considered it, tracking the child’s movements as it disappeared. “Blondie has been off lately, so he could be dealing with something and not mentioning it. Though I doubt he would keep any true trouble from you for too long, Hawke. It’s a toss up. I suggest that we proceed carefully and armed.”

“There’s a significant chance that it is a trap and you are still going to go?” Julia interjected, not quite believing their stupidity.

Hawke and Varric turned to her. “Anders could be in danger.” “We don’t just leave friends behind, unless there is money involved.” “How many times have I pulled you from getting stabbed?”

Julia bristled at the last comment. “And I protected you last week when you were intoxicated. State your point.” Hawke’s face narrowed but Varric stepped in before she could blow propane on the budding fire.

“Look at it this way, Freckles. You might get some more experience with that bow of yours or you might just get a nice walk. You don’t really lose.”

“Unless I get stabbed.” Or stab someone. Julia kept her face neutral as the thought flickered by.

“Well, there is always that. But you already survived Kirkwall for several weeks, that’s more than most newcomers.”

“So I should just walk into a dark, mold infested hole in the ground, the occupants of which would not hesitate to shank me over my boots?”

Varric grinned. “That’s the spirit. Besides, Anders is the best healer outside the Circle and if someone ever gets seriously injured, you need to know where to find him.”

Julia glared at him, which only made his smile grow larger. He was ridiculous, they all were, but the dwarf especially. Maybe he had an immortality complex. There was no real reason that she should join them. Not even the prospect of spending more time with Sebastian should convince her to go back to Darktown. Her throat had been almost slashed open last time.

She had enough of fighting.

“How about that if you come with us you don’t need to go to the Hanged Man for the next two days?”

“You expect me to risk my life to avoid going drinking with you for two days?”

“Three days?”

The sigh started at her lower sternum and rose up to rest against her lips. “I get at least a week and
you have to knock before coming into the bathing room.”

Hawke snorted. “Done. Let’s go!” She set off like she was leading a charge, Varric’s shoulders shaking behind her. Julia ended up falling into step with Sebastian.

“It is good of you to be willing to help,” the brother commented. "I believe that mages belong inside the Circle, for both their and our safety, but Anders is at least using his ill gotten freedom to help the poor and abused. If he is to be caught, I would prefer it to be by templars rather than some thug… what do you think?” Sebastian smiled at her expectantly, blue eyes warm.

Heat threatened to flood her cheeks and Julia internally cursed herself. She was a grown woman, for Elise’s sake. She could, and would, act with decorum and dignity.

“I would prefer not to get involved in more violence;” she said when she was sure she wouldn’t say anything foolish. “But as you heard, Hawke doesn’t really understand the concept of ‘no’.”

Sebastian hummed in agreement. “She can be stubborn. One of her best traits at times but anything can be turned into a sin when there is too much. Though, I apologize if this is too forward, why do you carry a bow if you don’t wish to fight?”

Julia twisted her back so the pressure of the quiver was more apparent. “Aveline recommended it. She thought that I should get used to moving with it so if a fight comes, the weight won’t distract me. If I can at least look like I know what I am doing, perhaps my would-be attackers will think twice before coming after me.” It was like a performance in front of an amateur audience. If you played a wrong note, you had to keep going without showing the mistake. They would never know the difference.

They left the Lowtown market without comment and soon were deep into the residential area. Children, barely cleaner than the urchin from earlier, played in the streets and more than one woman threw out chamber pots. Hawke and Varric barely noticed the mess but Sebastian at least traced the scene with sad eyes.

“These are the people the Chantry should be reaching out to. Not just the rich and those who come up to Hightown. We need to be out here, giving hope and encouragement that they are not alone in their struggles.”

Varric made some comment about a nice sermon and Julia snapped, "Don't you have anything better to do, dwarf?"

"Not at the moment. Do you?"

"Of course."

"Then how did Hawke convince you to join us again?"

Julia frowned but instead of honoring the dwarf with further debate, directed her next comment to Sebastian. "That's what religions are for, aren't they? To give hope to those who don't have anything else."

He stared at her for a long moment before a small smile crept onto his lips. "I suppose you are right."

They skirted a series of docks, heading down stairs towards what amounted to a large hole in the wall. Julia winced as Hawke walked into it without even slowing down. Of course. They couldn’t take a nice, clean way down. They needed to make sure to breathe in plenty of fungal spores before they got there.
Shadows covered everything and in the moment it took for her eyes to adjust, monsters and magical roots twisted in the darkness beyond. Weeks later and still not enough time had passed for her to walk down here comfortably.

As before, Darktown represented the depths of Kirkwall society. If nothing else, it reminded her that Lowtown was not in fact the worse a place could get. At least there rain and sunlight could freshen up the smells and clean the streets. Here... Everything stayed. People, their refuse, and the rats.

They passed one of the grotesque images of slaves and Julia loosened the bow on her shoulder further.

"Are you a follower of Andraste?" Sebastian asked softly. He acted if he raised his voice over a piano, it would disrupt the sanctity of the odious tunnels.

Julia touched each word, dolce but succinct. "No. I am agnostic though some might call me a twice-a-year Christian." The people in Darktown were the same as in her memories, covered in shadows and what was hopefully dirt. Short specimens, either dwarves or children, shifted against the wall, masking their movements. Hopefully with four of them clearly armed, fools would kept from acting. That didn’t stop Julia from shifting her bow to an easier reach though.

Why was she down here again?

"Being agnostic means I don't disbelieve in the idea of a higher power but I don't subscribe to any particular faith," Julia replied to the unasked question. "Those I suppose with the culture I grew up in, you could argue that I follow the sensibilities of Christianity."

"That's right," Sebastian said, astonishment coloring his voice even if she couldn't clearly see his face in the spaced torches. "Varric mentioned you were from another world. Was it... very different?"

"Your world is a dirty mess," Julia stated. Is that lump a heap of dirt or a person? "There are people in third world countries who have more technology than you. That is besides the fact that I have probably been attacked more in the last week than the people of Cedar Grove Falls have...ever."

The diminuendo that followed was expected, her companions considering the imperfections of their world. Julia moved her hand to run a finger over the smooth wood of her bow. Still there.

Now that she thought about it, she really should consider getting a dagger as well just in case they got too close. But...liquid on her fingers...moonlight turning the body shapeless... perhaps that would only give any assailant another means of which to hurt her. She wanted to stay as far away from any drooling, filth-covered mongrel that was rabid enough to attack.

"Those are some strong opinions, Freckles," Varric commented lightly. Julia raised an eyebrow and even in the gloom she could see his smirk.

Meanwhile, Sebastian struggled on. "It must have been a difficult change for you. If you ever need a place to be able to contemplate what has happened, the Chantry is always open. Even if you're not religious, sometimes talking to someone helps make the world’s burdens lighter."

"Will talking to someone help me to go back to Earth?" Julia questioned without pause. Darkness pressed in around her as the priest frowned, words hesitating before they came into the open air.

"No, but sometimes the Maker reveals his will in unusual ways. Perhaps the solution will become known to you."

"..." Julia said.
The rogues ahead of them laughed and Julia could practically hear Sebastian’s stubborn resolve. He was naïve but meant well.

“Thank you, Sebastian,” Julia said. “I am comfortable dealing with this myself but the offer is appreciated.”

Sebastian smiled as they passed beneath a torch and her steps faltered. A catcall from one of the lumps about the priest’s armor kept him from noticing till she found the uneven dirt ground again. Just a pretty face. Nothing to get flustered over.

Once he starts acting normal, this insanity will fade anyways.

Their path took them past some kind of Darktown marketplace, rotten stalls selling even shabbier goods like food that didn’t even pretend to be edible and rusted knives. One shopkeeper was trying to sell a ragged scrap of cloth that he was calling a tunic to a thin grayish elf. If she cared more, Julia would have called him out on that.

An almost breeze brushed away the miasma polluting the air around them and Julia allowed herself a single cleansing breath through the nose. It smelt like the ocean.

Hawke and Varric led them down some steps and Julia blinked as the caves opened up into the world. Darktown was no longer so dark.

Most of the wall in front of them stretched like a gaping mouth, jagged edges and clear spaces framing a view of water and cliffs. Julia didn’t recognize any of the rock formations but that didn’t mean she never saw them before. They looked like any other cliff face she had seen, no distinguishable colors or shapes to pull the attention. That explains the salty smell.

Her group didn’t slow to enjoy the small current of air that the opening brought, instead turning to walk beside it. The hole took up almost a football field’s length of wall but very few people huddled near it. Perhaps they felt safer in the dim depths of Darktown.

A single lantern hung near the top of some steps at the end of the window to the world. More people were gathered here and Julia’s hand went automatically to her bow, the other preparing to grab an arrow. Like the other people she had seen, these were dirty, ill-clothed, and underfed. Unlike the lumps, the men and women seemed hard, determined, and almost… Angry.

At their approach several of them pulled themselves away from their spots to form a clump in front of the door. There was no armor amongst the lot of them but several had blades or thick sticks. Offense was more important than defense apparently.

“You don’t belong here,” a man near the front said at a near growl. “Go back and you won’t get hurt.”

Hawke sighed dramatically but Varric spoke for her. “We are just here to see Anders, he’s a friend of ours. No one needs to harm anyone.”

The man squinted at them but several of the group relaxed and lowered their weapons. “How do we know you aren’t templars?”

Varric laughed. “Have you ever seen a dwarf templar?”

“Well, no…”

“Because we may be many things but we aren’t that kind of stupid. Are you going to let us pass or
are you going to tell Anders you scared the guests he invited away?"

Several worry-filled glances later, the would-be guards parted, giving them space to enter. Hawke laughed and Julia released her grip on her bow. They may be idiots but thanks to Varric, at least they were subdued idiots. As long as Anders didn’t ask too aggressively, and from what she knew of him that was about as likely as a first year squeaking, they should stay calm. If not, perhaps the insects that were definitely a part of their wardrobe would slow them down.

After the momentary bliss of a fresh breeze, the clinic was like a slap in the face. Julia choked then covered her nose with a hand, carefully siphoning air through her mouth. Sebastian frowned but the other two didn’t even react to the stench of sick organisms. Eyes threatened to tear up, Julia took a step back, only to run into the now shut door.

The clinic was full, rigid shapes of living creatures spread over tables and leaning against the walls. In a space smaller than Hawke’s grand hall, there were at least Julia tried to decipher the breaks that made two different people-twenty patients. One or two standing individuals moved about, stepping over bodies to offer water and scraps of bread.

Anders, at least, was easy to spot. The blond man hunched over a brown figure, hands glowing blue as a dirt covered female elf held the patient down. A hoarse groan and Anders stumbled back to brace himself against the nearby wall. He said something and the woman smiled before beginning to cry. Her mouth moved with returned words and Anders shook his head, lips lighting in an almost smile.

Pulling his body off the wall, the mage glanced around his clinic only to pause as he spotted them. They couldn’t have stuck out more from barely-clothed masses if they grew purple fur.

Hawke went forward, dancing around feet that stuck into the makeshift walkway. Julia peered ahead at the haphazard terrain then back at the door. There were no good choices here. Glad she decided to wear the thick-soled boots today, she followed after Hawke.

Anders waved them into a back room, half the size of Julia’s current child-like bedroom. This room was lit by a hole near the ceiling, lending light onto a long table. The smell of the sea was back.

“Thank you for coming Hawke. I need your help,” Anders said without ado, settling against a wall even as the minimum light played against his pale skin.

Hawke smirked. “What kind of service may I provide for you?”

Anders’s lips twitched but didn’t evolve into a full-faced smile. “I am… Involved with people in the mage resistance. We help mages who want to escape and provide support for those still trapped inside the Circle.”

Sebastian’s face drew Julia’s attention as it turned downwards. He looked like he was just able to refrain himself from saying something. The mage continued unfettered.

“Have you noticed lately that there have been more Tranquil in the Gallows? More and more every week, and some are mages that I know passed their Harrowings.”

Now it was Hawke’s turn to frown. “That’s impossible, once a mages passes their Harrowing they are safe.”

“That’s just it. The templars are making Harrowed mages Tranquil and for the slightest offense. My sources tell me that this is a systematic plan by the templars to turn every single mage in the Circle Tranquil in the next few years.”
“The Chantry would never—!” “Do you have any proof of that, Blondie?”

Julia left outrage to the others since she only barely understood what any of those words meant. She knew what a Circle was and why mages went there—so they wouldn't harm others. But no one had ever told her about tranquility or harrowing. It was important enough that Sebastian was arguing passionately that it wasn’t possible and Hawke was… Hawke was angry, limbs stiff with emotion.

In a flash, Hawke spun around, nearly hitting Julia with a swing of an arm. She slammed the back door open and stomped out into the clinic. All other conversation stopped and then the group was after her.

“Hawke!”

“What are you doing, Hawke?”

“What do you think I’m doing? Bethany is in trouble and I’m not going to sit by chitchatting while they turn my baby sister Tranquil.”

Varric somehow caught her first, grabbing her wrist as she reached for the clinic’s door. “So you are going to what? Storm the Gallows by yourself? That’s brave but it won’t save Bethany.”

“Varric is right, Hawke,” Sebastian chimed in. “This is obviously mage propaganda but if there is any truth to it, Elthina would know. We can just talk to her and you can rest easy knowing your sister is safe in the Circle.”

“No mage is safe in the Circle. Not when their rights as sentient beings are taken away.” For someone who looked on the verge of passing out, Anders was still more than capable of raising his voice.

What the hell were they all getting worked up about?”

“If you are so worried, why don’t you just go see her?” Julia half muttered. Hawke spun on her, setting Varric off balance.

“Why thank you Julia! That’s it! I’ll just stroll up to the Gallows and ask the woman with her sword glued up her ass if I can make sure she hasn’t all but killed my sister the former apostate.”

Varric straightened. “It wasn’t a horrible idea. I’m sure there is some back way into the Gallows and I would bet a prize-winning nug our resident freedom fighter knows where it is.”

All eyes, even some swollen eyes of patients turned to Anders. His lips tightened. “Come with me.”

Hawke had to help Anders stumble out of the clinic which in turn almost set his guard dogs on them. Varric and a reassuring nod from the mage calmed them back to their spots. Only when they were some distance from any listening ears did Anders motion for them to stop.

“I do know a way into the Gallows,” he said carefully. “It is a path the lyrium smugglers use.”

“Are we waiting till we have enough grey in our hair to match Aveline? Let’s go!”

Anders just shook his head. “I am going with you. I know the way but I am too weak from that last healing to be much use for at least several hours without some lyrium. It would be better to go in the evening anyways, that’s when the templars let down their guard.”

Hawke fumed for a second. “Fine. But the moment you can walk in a straight line without looking
like a drunk, we go."

*Hell, who is we?* “I am not going on your crazy rescue mission.”

“Like you have anything better to do.”

“Shut the—’

“I’ll go,” Sebastian interjected. “If Julia does not wish to involved herself in this, I will. I want to make sure there is no proof to this madness and at the very least, I can stop Anders from endangering the lives of innocents by releasing another mage.”

“Mages are the innocent ones you pompous—“

Hawke physically stepped in between them before the claws could come out. “You know I don’t care if you fight each other but not now. We’ll pack Julia off to bed and then come back for you Anders. Varric, you in?”

The dwarf chuckled. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Chapter End Notes

"We didn't start the fire
It was always burning since the world's been turning
We didn't start the fire
But when we are gone
It will still burn on, and on, and on, and on…”

*A/N-* In case you were worried, Julia won't be able to sideline herself for too much longer. We will get into some 'canon' events eventually... after some more non-canon shenanigans :D
IV. Andante Moderato. Allegro Con Spirito, or Hello, Goodbye

Chapter Notes

“You say yes, I say no
You say stop and I say go go go, oh no
You say goodbye and I say hello
I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Per usual, Hawke destroyed any sense of peace Julia managed to gather, much like a phone going off during a concert. Rude, loud, and generally for no good reason.

“Well, shit.”

Which is inexplicably how she ended up walking across town with Hawke and Varric to the Chantry, only to grab Sebastian and head through Lowtown towards the docks.

She was both and annoyed that she was familiar enough with Kirkwall to know that.

Besides making some jokes about getting something from a Madame Lusine, the two rogues thought it was funny to not explain what the hell was going on. Worse, Sebastian just smiled and once he heard they were going to make sure Bethany was okay, went along without question.

“I’ve seen undead move faster than you,” Hawke threw behind her as they went down the steps towards the main docks. “In fact, I have seen legless undead move faster than you. They would have eaten up to your knees by the time you decided what color cloak would go with your outfit.”

“And I’ve seen monkeys come up with more well-thought out plans than you. Since you refuse to tell me what we are doing, I’m going to be as prepared as I can be,” Julia shot back. There was no way she was putting up with Hawke’s crap today. She was doing the woman a favor and this was the thanks she got. If it hadn’t been for Leandra she wouldn’t even be here.

Hawke threw up her hands. “My genius plans are wasted on you.”

Birds squawked as they came to the end of the road, the path turning to stairs that walked into the water. For all the mermaids apparently. Next to the stairs, a man waited next to what could barely be called a raft. Julia wouldn’t have noticed it except for the way Hawke focused in on it like some kind of pointer.

She glanced at the strips of wood glued together then back at the woman.
“Are you trying to drown us?”

Varric grinned and Julia almost offered him a few choice words. Sebastian interrupted her. “So do we get to hear the plan now? I don’t believe anyone here would be interested.”

Hawke glanced around at the drab dock workers and then snatched the bag Varric had been carrying. She pulled out some cloth in primary colors. The outline of the sun appeared.

Sebastian blinked. “Where did you get those?”

“The Blooming Rose,” Varric supplied, closing the bag before anyone else could see. “Usually they go for a Sexy Sister version but they do have some more realistic outfits for those true fetishists.”

"And you...what? Want us to write a dissertation on why perverts are aroused by nuns?"

Hawke smiled at her and Julia's blood went a little cool. "No, you are going to wear them."

"What?"

Varric waved off her concerns. "Don't worry. It cost a bit more, but these have been washed since their last use."

Julia really didn't have the words for this. They thought she would... _wear a prostitute's clothes?_ No amount of pity for Leandra was worth that.

"Screw this. I'm not involving myself in anything with STDS. Find someone else... Isabela comes to mind."

"What are you angry about? Varric said they were clean. Andraste’s knickers, is this what your lovers feel like?"

"My what?" Julia just held herself back from raising her voice. It would only encourage the madwoman.

Varric gave Hawke a shove. “Ignore her, Freckles. When she is nervous, she insults people. She also tends to forget that she occasionally needs help from said people.” The last bit was clearly aimed at Hawke who grumbled something about Varric’s sexual prowess. He just shook his head, smiling fondly.

_I need to stop drinking the water around here._ Julia spun on her heel, intending to go back to the manor. She would tell Leandra her eldest had finally lost it and that would be the end of it. _Everybody wins._

Sebastian held an arm out in front of her before she could take more than a step and she stopped to avoid hitting him. Blue eyes met hers as he asked, “What exactly do you want us to do?"

Varric, fortunately, spoke instead of Hawke.

"The Gallows has tightened security until they figure out what happened to their psychopathic templar... which will be never if I have anything to do about it. Until then, we need to make sure Sunshine is okay without making it obvious that she is connected to this in anyway. Choir Boy, you are a recent addition to our band and an actual brother. You can get in by offering guidance to worried mages. Freckles, you can handle the lying, plus the templars don’t know you yet. Together you have the best chance to get in and out without causing a fuss.”
How had I thought Varric was more persuasive? Julia shifted to glare pointedly at the dwarf and Sebastian lowered the arm blocking her path.

“There are a few holes in your plan, Varric. There are several brothers and sisters already placed in the Circle. Why would they need more?” Sebastian asked, less concerned about the fact they were breaking into somewhere than she was.

The dwarf shrugged. “Maybe the mages need more support in this stressful time? Do I need to make up all the details?”

“Fair enough. Once we are in, how are we going to find Bethany? Correct me if I’m wrong, but neither Julia or I had the pleasure of meeting her and I doubt the templars will be willing to give directions.” Hawke groaned dramatically and strolled away to argue with some boxes.

“We do have some contacts in Circle. Thrask is an obvious choice, or Keran. Or if templars aren’t working with you, you can try Alain or Ella.”

Hawke kicked at a nearby crate, swore when it didn't move, and nearly toppled over into the water as she tried again. She probably lost the verbal debate. Julia rolled her eyes. “You do realize that we have no idea who those people are?”

Varric went to drag Hawke away from the edge before she made a mess. “Want me to paint you a picture? Thrask usually hangs out in the entrance to the Gallows. Keran or Ella might be weak resources depending on the situation. I don’t know, you guys can figure it out.”

Julia glanced at Sebastian. Every inch of reason urged her to turn this down. She didn’t know Hawke’s sister and didn’t owe her anything. From what she had gathered in the last day, the Circle had many similarities to a prison and for all purposes, they weren't supposed to be in there. Which undoubtedly had consequences.

And yet…

No 'and yet'. This is stupid. Crazy even. There is no way I am involving myself in this.

There was the right decision and the smart decision, Julia realized a heartbeat later.

Sebastian took a deep breath next to her. “I want to make sure your sister is safe. But I need your assurance that no one will get hurt. I don’t want you stabbing a templar out of some sense of revenge.”

Hawke laughed, but it was a dark sound that made Julia’s skin crawl. “Fine. No making templars bleed today. As long as Bethany is alright. Else I am not promising anything.”

Once again the brother's eyes met her own, both a question and a statement, and Julia’s reasoning faltered slightly. He isn't seriously considering... She raised an eyebrow and his lips twitched. A silent duet of a conversation. His decision was clear enough. Finally Sebastian turned his gaze back towards the rogues.

“I can not speak for Serah Julia, but despite this plan’s faults, I will try to help make sure Hawke’s sister is unharmed.”

Three pairs of eyes then turned to her. Peer pressure at it's finest. Julia wanted to swear, to stamp her feet like a petulant child, to yell at them… but instead stayed silent. This is idiotic, they are idiots, this whole city… Her nails dug into her palms, pain helping to keep her thoughts from spiraling.
"I am not changing out here." A voice much like her own spoke, surprising all of them but her most of all.

"So find a corner and---" "We don't expect you to switch out here in the open. That is too suspicious. I have rented some space in a nearby warehouse away from any prying eyes." Varric interrupted Hawke with a look. The woman muttered something and went off in the direction of some men who looked exactly like the disreputable type of people Hawke would know. "Just follow me."

The so-called warehouse was less than a block away, a nondescript building that practically screamed nefarious purposes. A short empty hall lead to a small bare office.

"Here you go. Not the cleanest, but at least no one is watching you. Who wants to go first?"

"I can," Sebastian volunteered after a quick glance at Julia's face. She wondered what he saw there. "I will be quick." Varric handed him one of the outfits and the door shut behind him.

The minutes that followed could have been awkward. Julia mentally went through the Vivaldi's Concerto for Two Violins in A Minor, fingers twitched occasionally as she remembered the notes. She had only made it partway when the door opened and Sebastian stepped out.

Against all better thought, Julia's breath caught in her throat. The strong primary colors… suited him. The dark blue contrasted against his warm toned skin and the flash of red brought out similar notes in his hair. Even the shape of it… She shut her thoughts down there.

Grabbing the sack from Varric's hands, Julia glided past Sebastian and closed the door.

She allowed herself a moment of silence before looking down at the bag in her hands. Carefully she set it on the desk and opened it up. Even in the dim light of the room, the sunburst reflected back at her. Working up her courage, Julia reached down and grabbed the fabric. She raised the robe in front of her with the bare minimum amount of skin contact. It seemed to be the right size. Her sigh escaped and since her fingers hadn’t instantly broke out into a rash, slung the fabric over her arm.

If she got herpes from this, she would never forgive Hawke. Or Varric.

Then, in the time honored tradition of females everywhere, Julia shimmied out of her dress and then into the costume while remaining concealed under her cloak. There could easily be a peephole hidden on a wall. With no better place to put it, she folded her dress into the bag and marched out of the room.

The two males glanced up at her approach and Varric smirked. "Are you sure you changed? I can't tell."

Her answer was to show him a new kind of bird, Chantry robe clearly on her arm. Varric laughed and even Sebastian's face lightened a bit. Then they were off again.

As they walked back to the dock, Julia tested the feel of the robe. After weeks of loose gowns, this was different, but not unwelcome. The sleeves were tight, fairly fitted for something a clergy person wore. Close around the wrists, it expanded slightly past the elbows, allowing movement. As a whole, the outfit made her feel feminine and proper, like she was finally dressed normal. Too bad the look didn’t match the feel.

Hawke seemed to be sharing something edible with a hobo when they came back out. Varric did the sensible thing and ignored her in favor of leading them back to the cardboard raft. Julia didn't bother hiding her disdain and the man guarding the boat glared at her. She stared right back, almost hoping that he would say something. He didn't.
Varric turned to face the pair of them. “Well, you know what you need to do. Find Sunshine, make sure she is still in one piece, then get out. Simple as cheating a blind man.”

Sebastian didn't look too pleased at that last idea but went to the boat regardless with only a short nod. Julia gave Varric and Hawke equal shares of a glare then followed after him. The man who was going to ferry them across the expanse of dark water settled in the back without even acknowledging their presence.

Sebastian stepped down first, bracing himself against the dock. He sat in the middle and then offered a hand to Julia. She eyed the contaminated water and after a second of wiping away the idea of what was probably in there, crouched onto the dock and stepped down.

Her balance was immediately off, rocking first forward and then almost smacking the back of her head against the rock. Sebastian’s hand curled tight around hers and the ferryman swore. Julia hissed as she slipped onto the front seat, facing the two men. Her backside hurt—her pride was a bit sore as well—but she straightened automatically. “These logs better get us to the Circle and back without making us swim.”

“I ought to push you overboard right now then,” the plebeian said. Who does he think he is? Julia almost told him exactly what she thought of his manners but common sense pressed her lips shut. She had no interest in rowing them across herself. Might as well put up with it for now and then give him a proper understanding of where he was placed in society when they got back.

This plan was ill-conceived from the beginning anyways.

Instead of thinking about sewage that undoubtedly clouded the water a finger's width of wood away, she turned to focus on the approaching Gallows.

The buildings were bigger than she thought.

Of course she wasn’t an idiot, she knew they were big. From the bits she had picked up from conversations, primarily when Anders went on one of his Mage-freedom rants, there were several hundred people who spent most of their lives in the Gallows. But the discussions hadn’t given enough emphasis on how the trifecta of a building loomed. It was like a security guard with people trying to sneak into a concert, uncaring of excuses. Brass to the core.

Silently cursing Hawke and Varric for getting her into this mess, Julia glancing around the scene in front of her for something else to distract her. A dark shape near the opening of the bay caught her attention. “Sebastian,” she began. “What is that?”

She heard his questioning tone over the splash of the waves against the thin wood and raised a single blue arm to point towards the half concealed figure of a human that was rapidly hiding behind the angle of the cliff face.

“Oh, those are the Twins. They guard the entrance to Kirkwall back from the time the city was part of the Tevintar Imperium.”

“Why are they there?” Julia heard herself ask, a low French horn melody playing amidst her scattered thoughts. The shape hadn’t been strong like the Statue of Liberty or grand like Mount Rushmore. The glimpse she had seen was hunched, curled emotion and dark thoughts.

“Kirkwall was once the center of the Imperium slave trade. The Twins were there to remind slaves of their place so they wouldn’t think of revolting,” Sebastian said, voice taking on a sad tone. “It was a
dark time in the city and in Thedas. Now slave trade is only legal in Tevintar."

Slavery… of course. Moronic medieval worlds.

“I hope this isn’t too forward, Julia, but those Chantry robes suit you.”

Julia startled, staring at him, even the ferryman cursed at the sudden jerk. A single thought crossed her mind. *Finally a fault... he’s blind.*

“I don’t think these colors can work well with anyone,” Julia commented, tugging a sleeve back into place. “Though I appreciate the effort to distract me from the fact that I on a thin boat floating over a city's worth of sewage.”

Sebastian frowned. “I wasn’t---“

“If you two are down ogling each other, we are here,” the coarse tones of the man ferrying them overrode whatever Sebastian was going to say and for once, Julia was grateful to the small rat-like man. She shifted and watched as the small boat brushed up against the docks of the Gallows. “Get a move on, I was only paid for two hours and that time starts now. If you take longer than that, you better be prepared to swim back to Kirkwall.”

“You are a viscous, incompetent excuse of a human,” Julia commented without thinking. The man didn’t even blink.

“Keep them coming, nothing you can say that I haven’t heard from my wife. But I’m not the one wasting time.”

Sebastian carefully stood, steadying himself against the slightly raised dock. He offered Julia a hand. “Let’s go find Hawke’s sister.”

After a second of glaring at the man behind him, Julia placed her hand into his. It was large and warm, slightly rough fingers circling her own.

“Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

*A/N- Sorry for the wait! This chapter needed some therapy... Just a heads up though, I am doing Nano Wrimo (National Novel Writing Month) this November, so I might not get another chapter up until December. But I haven't abandoned this fic! The next chapter is written, it just needs some more love and attention. Thank you for your patience!*
Chapter Notes

“So what’s your evil attitude
When you got me spendin’ my time pleasing you
Why must you keep me underground,
Tell me tell me, whyyawannabringmedown.”

A/N* I'm so sorry for the delay! I won't bother you with excuses, so instead enjoy a longer-than-normal chapter!

"What are you doing here?"

Sometimes Julia hated being right.

A pair of templars, helmets turning features into shadowed lines, approached them. Uncomfortable-looking boots clinked against the stone, a distant triangle. By their step and tone, they almost seemed to want to be here less than she did.

The coward of a ferryman dunked his head like he didn't exist and Sebastian stepped forward with a generous smile.

"Hello, I am Brother Sebastian. We came to offer spiritual guidance to souls that might be troubled."

Black slits moved from Sebastian to Julia and then passed over the rower. Julia kept her back straight and tried to look content. Pleased. Like she wasn't about to walk into a building full of temperamental magic-wielding lunatics who could probably burn her from the inside out.

Really, she was happy that she'd come.

"We already have clerics here to offer guidance," the templar said, voice echoing slightly from inside his elaborate can. "We don't need two more. Go back to the city and administer your services to those who need it."

Stay away from the Gallows.

The templars were going to send them off before they even saw a mage. Well, she tried and now Hawke couldn't complain or drag her to anymore drinking competitions by attempting to guilt her. Easy. Bethany is probably fine anyways.

She didn't even know the woman so why should it matter?

"Her Worship, the Grand Cleric Elthina, requested that we serve the people residing here. Would you have us say that you refused her kind gesture?" Julia asked, face smooth. "I wonder what Knight-Commander Meredith would say if she found out you turned away clergy sent by the Chantry to support her work."
She hoped to Yo-Yo Ma that she pulled the right name out of the barely-listened-to conversations from the Hanged Man. It could be Mary or maybe even Gertrude for all she knew.

Two masks turned her way, identical expressions above and beneath the metal surface.

The one on the right cracked first. "Fine, you may come in," they said. "But know that we will be watching you. The least sign of trouble and you will be tossed out."

"That is very gracious of you," Julia told them. "Now, if you'd excuse us…"

The templars stepped out of the way and Julia and Sebastian passed them, heading to the edge of stairs near the docks.

When they had gotten at least two dozen feet away from the fancy guards, Sebastian let out a breath of air. "That was closer than I would care to admit. I am impressed that you didn't falter though. Varric chose well sending you along."

She raised an eyebrow. "Hardly. They were just soldiers, they are used to be told what to do. You just need more willpower than them and they will follow directions."

"Still…" Sebastian's voice faded as he looked up at the staircase ahead. Julia copied the gaze and then swore silently.

The same sadist who designed the Twins she had glimpsed on the ride over must have screwed the people who designed the Gallows since statues of depressed people were everywhere. Crouching, begging, hoping to survive.

A tremor rose on the back of her neck, tickling her hairline. Bronze eyes stared at her, desperate and pressing. An invisible weight settled on her shoulders, trying to shorten her by inches. She pressed the tips of her nails into her palm, hard.

They are just statues. No worse than those damn birds in Hightown.

Irrationally, Julia wanted her violin.

“While most of Anders’ views are extreme,” Sebastian said slowly as they continued walking along the only path available to them. “I do wish they would take down the statues of slavery. Mages must be sequestered from society for their protection and ours, but that doesn’t mean that they are any less of the Maker’s children.”

Julia’s glance spurned him on. “You might think me naïve, but I know that the Circle system is not perfect. Although there may be some infractions, the Circles do more good than harm. They teach mages how to avoid demons and to use their gifts to help others. If the tales are true, one of the Wardens who stopped the Blight in Ferelden was a Circle mage. But… what happened with Ser Alrik concerns me. He turned female mages Tranquil only to…”

Sebastian palmed his eyes as if it could somehow erase the thoughts. “I informed Grand Cleric Elthina about the acts we saw and heard. She will work out a plan to make sure the templars are not abusing their power. But when I think of all the women that man must have hurt already… I wonder if some of Anders’ arguments are correct. Maybe the mages do need more say.”

They reached the top of the series of stairs and landings without hindrance and Sebastian straightened, previous anguish disappearing to the corners of his eyes and lips. Julia faced in the same direction and took a sharp breath. Before them lay the Gallows.
By all the is holy… those damn birds had followed her. Nothing in this city can escape from them.

Bronze statues of the predatory birds formed rows towards the central of the three towers. Coupled with three-dimensional figures of slaves bowing in terror, they lowered the Gallows ratings as a tourist attraction. If she could go back into time and meet whoever thought birds and slaves made a great accent points, she would force them to watch tacky HGTV for several days straight. Even those washed up styles would be better than this.

The walls surrounding the courtyard that they found themselves in were… Pointed, obviously unfriendly. As Sebastian had put before, these were for keeping people in, not out. The sheer amount of closed gates gave the impression of being in a cage even as they moved freely forward.

Of the population that moved about the courtyard, it was simple to deduce the factions they belonged to. Robes were mages—how very ComicCon—, armor meant templars, and the few that remained were obvious outsiders, wearing what passed as normal attire in this blind city. As far as Julia could see, there were no other members of the Chantry to blow their cover.

Or her cover at least.

“Do we have some kind of plan for finding Bethany?” Julia asked quietly. No one was bothering them yet but already dozens of eyes followed them, picking their appearance. If they stayed out in the open too long or didn't do something to validate themselves, someone would come for them.

Sebastian’s gaze swept over the gathering of individuals. “One of the names Varric mentioned sounded familiar. A Ser Thrask often spends time praying in the Chantry. If he can get us into the mage quarters, finding Bethany will be a much simpler task.”

“What does he look like?”

“He is tall, with red hair and a—there he is,” Sebastian turned sharply, giving Julia no choice but to follow, almost tripping over her slightly-too-long robes. She caught herself a step later and proceeded without pause, giving no one time to comment. I belong here. The Chantry and the templars are connected. That gives me every right to talk to the mages. By the blessing of the Maker.

That is still a silly name for a god.

Her internal recital of persona halted as they stopped in front of a templar, red hair groomed carefully over his head and face.

Other templars and mages watched them, the new element. Julia breathed and it was like she could taste the tension in the air.

Maybe Hawke was right to be concerned. The Gallows was like a pot set to hot. Sooner or later, the lid would shake and water would boil over.

As long as she wasn't swept up in it.

“Ser Thrask? My name is Brother Sebastian. We’ve come to pray with the templars or mages. Would you be willing to let us into the mage tower or shall we start out here with the templars?”

The templar seemed startled to have them talk to him. He frowned slightly at Julia but upon seeing Sebastian all traces of worry vanished. “Ah, Brother Sebastian. I have seen you at the Chantry. It is very gracious of you to come to offer solace although now may not be the best time. Would you be able to come back in a few days, perhaps after everything has calmed down?”
Sebastian smiled, every inch the kind clergyman. “Dark days are when people need the Maker the most. I would not abandon any of his children to despair when there is something I can do to help.”

Thrask didn’t move for a second and Julia wondered if Sebastian had pushed him too far. Then the templar broke into a smile. “You are right of course. We need every bit of hope we can muster in these dark days. Here, I will show you to where the mages are. You can start with them.”

Julia measured her breath as the templar started one of the towers. *We've done it.*

Thrask cut through the people, hardly slowing. *He didn't need to.* Robes rustled as mages stepped to the side, heads bowed like something pressed against their necks. Even those not as close to them were aware without looking, faces straight and steps quick.

*They expect something to happen,* Julia thought as a pair of mages ducked slightly as they passed. *The just don't know where or when.*

*Why am I here?*

Sebastian could have handled this on his own. Picking up the edge of her robe, she stepped over a break in the stone floor. In front of her, several robed individuals bartered with the normal folks over a stall. The Gallows had a gift shop.

The image of cheap Gallows t-shirts and bobble-heads flickered through her mind and then she turned after the redheaded Templar as he went for yet another series of stairs. *Elevators can't be invented fast enough.* Immediately the crowds, if they could be called that, lessened as they walked under an arch to their new location. The templars here made the ones below look relaxed, at rigid attention with helmets covering their eyes.

Patchwork of greenery attempted to soften the fact they were in an ostentatious prison. Well tended, exotic flowers bloomed from the squares of dirt. No trees, just plants. Nothing that blocked the templars' view of their charges. A few benches lined the walls but very sat in them. Too obvious a target.

Even more than the Gallows courtyard, this place made her uncomfortable, an itch beneath her skin-*someone is watching, always watching*- but she straightened. A Chantry sister wouldn’t notice any of this. She would have been in places this secure before.

“Here we are,” Thrask announced. “Would you like me to remain or shall I let you go about your work in peace?”

Heads raised at his voice, not looking but turning their ears slightly in order to hear better.

Sebastian smiled, if not broadly at least honestly. “No, we will be fine on our own, thank you. Your assistance is much appreciated.”

Thrask nodded once and then, obviously trying not to pay attention to the amount of eyes on him, left the courtyard. His figure had barely passed beneath the arch when the noise level in the immediate area rose incrementally. Children without a teacher even though at least three templars still marked the area. As if the profile of a screaming slave visible down the path they had come wasn’t enough of a reminder.

“We made it passed one barrier at least.”

“I don't like lying to Ser Thrask,” Sebastian mused. “He seems like a good man. Perhaps if we explained why we were here...”
"He would probably order the others to throw us into the bay if not arrest us," Julia interjected into those daydreams. "Sometimes good means following the letter of the law rather than doing what is right. There are rules for visitors I assume and he would want us to follow them."

Sebastian crossed his arms, looking out over the huddled groups of mages. They were… Interestingly positioned. They opened themselves up enough as if to say that they weren't hiding anything but still dipped their shoulder blades inward like they were trying to hide.

"You are correct, of course. We would wish that the laws of man and the laws of the Maker followed the same path but when man deviates, we must stay true."

Julia just kept her eyes from rolling. The robes were affecting his brain, thinking that he needed to preach.

He should find someone who cared while she looked for Hawke's sister. Which meant finding a single mage amidst a building of them. Hopefully she at least slightly resembled Hawke or Leandra else the woman could be standing in front of them and they would never know.

"Hey, mage!" Pitching her voice low, Julia called out at a younger-looking robe as they walked passed with a similar companion. "Do you know a Bethany Hawke?"

Sebastian winced slightly as the elf snorted, lips curling in an impressionist’s version of a smile. "Even if I did, why would I tell you?"

"We don’t mean her any harm. We just want to make sure she is alright. These are hard times for all of us,” Sebastian cut in.

"The fact you say that with a straight face shows how little you know, shem. I bet you came here to look at those poor mages and to tell your fellows how charitable you were to spend time here," the mage said with a scoff and continued walking even as Sebastian stared back in bafflement. Julia sighed. “Well, that's one down.”

The brother frowned. “He must have lived a harsh life to be so bitter.” Julia glanced at him, not quiet sure if he was serious.

He was.

*Clergy people…*

A few more attempts at talking with other mages produced similar if not quite as rough results. A headache beat mezzopiano at the back of Julia’s skull as she watched a silent ripple of space grow around them. They were purposely not wanting to talk to them, glancing at the intruders with only the corners of their eyes to give no excuses for conversation.

“We should split up,” Julia decided. The idea was horrible, the last thing she wanted to do was face these potential bombs by herself but perhaps sequestered away from the rest of the city kept them from the corrupting influence of Kirkwall that made a walk down the street in daylight dangerous.

“Are you sure? I have been here before but it is easy to get lost. We have only about a hour before our boatman leaves and finding a replacement might be difficult.”

Julia met his blue gaze, teetering on the edge of it but not falling. “I can barely stand living with Hawke now. If we don’t find her sister, she will never shut up about it.”
Sebastian smiled slowly. “I suppose you are right again. Serah Hawke does have a way of the kink in our armor. Let’s see what we can find and then be back here in forty minutes. That should allow us enough time to find Bethany and not miss our way back.”

*How the hell were they supposed to keep track of time without a watch? Go through a 40 minute song.* Julie nodded quickly. “Fine…. Who was that female who got put to the stake? Anterina?”

"Andraste."

"That's it. Thank you."

They parted ways, Julie heading towards a door that should lead into the mage tower and Sebastian trying with yet another group, these all female. *If he smiles at them, it might just work,* Julia decided before going back into the strangely lit hallways.

In contrast with just about every other interior she had been in Kirkwall, the Circle tower was not a dim, torch-lit space that seem determined to ruin eyesight. Instead, glowing spheres lit the way, casting an almost white aura over her steps.

Stone walls with bright orbs of light weren’t exactly traditional horror movie material but Julia still made sure not to pause at any corners for more than a second. A boy once took her to a special showing of the Grunge for a date. Even excusing the fact that the theater had gum stuck to the chairs and the popcorn was saturated with butter that clung to her fingers, it was clear that the only reason he brought her to a horror movie was so she was feel the need to take shelter in his arms.

Ten minutes into the film, she told him that she didn’t think that they would need to see each other again and found her own way back home.

Nostalgia for electricity pressing in from the sides, Julie took a breath and forced herself to focus. She didn’t have time to hope for things that might never come to pass. It was a waste of energy, especially when she had other things that she should probably be paying attention to. Namely the mages that twitched when she passed.

Logic and instinct warred within as she wished for the comfort of her bow. Even though she would more than likely miss whatever she was aiming at, the knowledge that she had a chance to defend herself was worth more than she could have understood back home. Not that an arrow would be much use against an attacking mage- she remembered Merrill’s assault in the Undercity far too well- but it was still something.

It was a good thing that most magic users were kept in Circles, they would probably end up ruling if were out in the world.

Chopin’s Concerto Number 2 playing in the back of her mind, Julia turned down another identical corner that shifted into stairs instead of level stone floors.

*At least it seems like progress…*

She made it to the top of the steps, training keeping her from being winded, and paused. If she hadn’t just climbed a flight of stairs, she would have sworn she was on the same floor that she had just left. Nothing had changed. Not the bland stone walls or the position of spheres.

All exactly the same.

*Maybe the templars are a redundancy plan in case a mage gets out of the maze. How the hell is someone supposed to find their way around here?* Picking a direction at random, Julia set out, boots
muffled against the stone. Were there even people around here or was it just her alone in this entire tower?

She paused at the next interchange. Three rows of closed doors looked back at her. That was something at least. All identical spacing with no distinguishing marks but it was something different than the floor below.

Why weren't there any doors for the first floor? What was the point of it then?

A chill creeping beneath her peacock robe, Julia channeled the emotion into a sigh before it could become something more destructive.

"Pardon me," Julia's voice rose sharply, not loud but designed to carry. Her stage voice. "I need help finding someone. Is there someone available to assist?"

She felt a little silly asking empty hallways for help but there were people behind the doors. She knew it like how she knew when she had an audience when she practiced even if she couldn't see them.

The dead silence told her enough about the civility of these mages, not even an echo of her voice to remind her she wasn't in some hallway to hell.

She needed to stop thinking about things in terms of horror movies.

*Sebastian better be having better luck. Perhaps he got one of the harlots to talk to him.*

Metal creaked in a familiar swinging sound from behind her and Julia turned to face it. A pale feminine face peeked out from around a thick door she had just passed, eyes momentarily reflecting the light back like an animal. Julia took a half step away, hand shifting before she remember that she didn’t have her bow or any sort of weapon.

When had her responses turned to violence as a solution?

“Are you really a Chantry sister?”

The young voice broke through Julia's disturbances, focusing her on the matter at hand. Wisps of black hair fell over a large forehead which only accented the elfin features. She seemed barely big enough to hold a full-sized violin, more slight than Merrill if that was somehow possible. “I might be. Do you know your way around here?”

A small head bob was her reply. She was like a wild, potentially explosive animal. Julia raised her hands carefully so the mage wouldn’t get frightened but didn’t move closer. “I am looking for a female mage named Bethany Hawke. Her sister sent me to check on her. Do you know her?”

Another nod.

“Would you be willing to show me where she is?”

For a second, the girl ducked back as if she was going to hide again but then the door opened further, revealing a creature just as young as Julia had suspected. Her robes were a dark blue with yellow embroidery around the edges. They draped about her like someone had thrown a bolt of fabric around her, tied with with a belt, and it called it a day.

And she had thought the rest of Kirkwall had no fashion sense.
"Which way?"

A pale and slim hand emerged from gaping sleeves, pointing back to where Julia thought she came from. Of course. Feeling like she had to move through molasses to not scare the child, Julia smiled and took a careful step in that direction. The girl didn’t flinch although she tensed as if she would have to flee a predator at any moment.

God, I don’t have time to pamper to children’s emotions. Why are they so sensitive? Julia pulled on a smile. She had no idea what to with children; she had successfully avoided having more than a temporary interaction all these years and she had no intention on starting now.

Perhaps an introduction would set this situation to right.

“My name is Julia. What is yours?”

“I’m… Revas,” the mage几乎 whispered, ducking her head again. She’s like a turtle, Julia mused. But at least she had a name now. That was something. Civility always eased a conversation, like a score of music. Everyone knew what was expected of them.

“Will you lead the way, Revas?” For half a second, the wafer of a female seemed about to run back into the sanctity of her room screaming in terror but then she set out in obviously agreement.

Finally.

For someone who took so long to get started, Revas moved surprisingly fast. Julia almost had to jog to catch up with her as the blue figure flicked through the hallway, only pausing at the intersections to make sure she hadn’t lost her follower yet.

They didn’t pass as many people as Julia had when she first entered the tower. A piano softly trilled in the back of her mind as the violins hummed. She still had time.

Julia lost her way more than once before the elf stopped in front of some stairs. These, at least, had a hole of a window at the landing and she could see that time hadn’t been so sucked away that night snuck in upon them.

Up the cool stone stairs, around a corner and into a wider opening that diverted into yet another series of doored hallways.

The labyrinth never ends. Maybe next she’d meet the Minotaur.

They went through a few more twists, Revas slowing so she was less and less ahead, knuckles alternatingly white against her robe. The music in Julia's mind paused dramatically and she itched to finally find the mage sister and get out of here. The last thing she wanted was to be around a nervous child-mage.

A swish of a door with well-oiled hinges and a metal figure stepped into the light in front of them. Revas skidded to a halt, freezing as if that would stop the templar from seeing her in the middle of the hallway. Julia didn’t bother slowing.

Blue-grey eyes solidified on the small mage, hardening into a familiar expression. "What are you doing up on this floor, Apprentice?"

"She is with me," Julia said, stepping beside the mage whose head barely reached her shoulder.

Hatred mixed with disgust flashed back at her. "Who are you?"
A well-worn smile broadened Julia's face. "My name is Sister Julia, directed by her Worship, Grand Cleric Elthina, to offer comfort the residents of the Gallows during these trying times. Apprentice Revas here graciously offered to escort me through the tower since I am yet unfamiliar with its paths."

Despite giving off a tone that could barely warm tea, internally Julia cursed up a storm as a flute took over the song in her head. She didn't have time for this and unless Chantry's doctrine matched up with the words that had been placed into her head the number of times she had payed attention in church, she would be screwed if any pointed questions were asked.

The woman’s eyes narrowed, color becoming obscured by light shadows. “So you come to the mage quarters.”

“I go wherever it makes believers feel at peace. For example, the person you just left in that room could probably use my services. I wonder what kind of things they would tell in confessional.”

The woman's face flushed, though she tried to hide it, hand flying to her hip. "You know nothing!"

Ah, yes. Now she remembered. When had she turned to violence? Since she had come to a place where it was so normal, deaths could be overlooked.

Julia's smiled turned soft even her stomach tried to turn itself into bagpipe. "You may be right about that. But I do know the look of someone who has recently committed a sin. I suggest you find a brush before someone sees and gets the wrong impression. I would hate to hear that you got in trouble over this misunderstanding."

The woman's face turned redder, hands shifting into fists. Revas broke her paralysis enough to start to inch behind Julia.

"I better not see you in the Gallows again," the woman snapped.

"You won't. But if you do, you will continue on with you day."

A sharp hiss but the woman didn't strike. She glared at Julia and Julia met her gaze face on.

Spinning on her heels, the templar strode away.

Only when she turned the corner did Julia break her pose, back losing some its board-like stiffness and rolling her shoulders.

"You…” A whisper-soft voice stuttered from behind her. The small mage crept around to stare at her with something shining in her eyes. She still trembled like the child that she was, hands clenched together in front of her. "She…. but you…”

"Get it out already," Julia told her. She had less than fifteen minutes now to find Bethany and return to the courtyard.

Revas's throat bobbed and then she shook her head, slim arms encircling herself like they were all that kept her from falling apart.

Such a child. She should know better than to let that kind of weakness show.

A spark of curiosity had her walking forward to leave Revas behind to glance into the still open room the templar had left. A not-unattractive man, probably around her age, raise his head from his hands to stare at her. He only wore his underclothes.
She stared back for a second then turned to Revas who almost had pulled herself back together. "Let's go. We are running out of time."

They left the hallway, luckily turning in a different direction than the woman had gone. Less than a minute later, Revas pressed against a door which opened up into a library.

This being a nerd's paradise, it probably had some ridiculous name, but for all intents and purposes, it was a library. Large and small books stacked on the shelves and Julia even caught a square shaped box with rolls of thick paper in it. Scrolls.

Ugh.

After the low hallways and darkness, the library was a burst of light and space, ceiling easily going up a couple stories. Lights similar to the ones in the hall were increased and dangled from ceiling to cast an even glow over the place.

Revas didn’t hesitate at the foreground to the new type of maze. Julia quickened her steps as the elf temporarily vanished behind one shelf only to turn a corner as Julia rounded the previous one. Tripping on a book, Julia swore louder than she meant to and then nearly swore again in frustration. A swearing nun? Hopefully no one was paying attention.

The shelves opened up onto a small cleaning with a table. Two girls with dark hair sat at it with a brown-haired male. One of the girls had long wavy hair while the other had short and straight. Revas had paused just at the edge of the paper forest as if at a high cliff, unwilling to proceed. She met Julia’s gaze then flicked her eyes to the two girls. One of them was Bethany.

If I threw out the name of another mage, would Revas know where they are as well?

A question for a different time.

Julia entered the open space and approached the table. Only then did the mages acknowledge her presence, conversation silenced and heads turned. She almost laughed at their faces. A younger version of Leandra looked back to her with golden brown eyes and aristocratic nose.

“Bethany Hawke, I presume?” Julia asked the woman who face tightened and then went still with a blank emotion of those trying to hide something.

“I am. What can I help you with, Sister?”

“I need to speak with you alone for a minute.”

Short glances between the mages and then Bethany said, “There isn’t anything you need to tell me that can’t be said in front of my friends.”

“It concerns your sister.” Bethany’s eyes narrowed at this and then she slowly stood. The other female mage’s hand darted out as if to grab her back down but stopped just short of touching her sleeve. Julia turned and started back into the shelves.

Revas had already disappeared.

Hawke’s sister walked almost silently behind her as Julia strode quickly enough that she could pretend that she knew what she was doing. Finally, far enough away from the last person she saw, Julia paused so Bethany could catch up.

“So,” the mage mused, golden eyes suspicious and watchful. “What does the Chantry know of my
sister?"

“I have no idea,” Julia told her. “But I live with her. She threatened to throw me out if I didn’t agree to check on you.”

The transformation on Bethany took place instantly, all traces of tension dropping away like an old coat. She even laughed, closing her eyes behind her palm. “Marian never did know a bad plan when she saw one. But you are living with her and Mother? Who are you?”

Julia shrugged. “Would you mind leading me back to the front of the Gallows? I’m on a bit of a deadline.”

Bethany just shook her head, dark waves rippling—Julia could have cheerfully stabbed her with a tuning fork for that hair and complexion— and began to lead the way. Like Revas, she was confident on their path but unlike the younger mage, she didn’t seem to hide every time they reached a crossing. It took only a minute before they were out of the overshadowing books.

“So, Marian made you break into the Gallows just to check on me?” Bethany asked as they swept into the monochromatic hallways.

“You do know your sister, right?”

“I’m sorry, silly question. Why did she think I would be in more danger now?”

Julia sighed and shrugged. “Apparently some templars died last night, but your sister is also crazy who knows how she comes up with these ideas.”

Bethany slowed at the crest of somewhat familiar stairs. They could be the same ones or a completely different staircase on the other side of the tower, it was impossible to tell. The interior decorator needed to be strung up for what they did here. Right next to the architect and sculptor. “I heard about Ser Alrick… But the templars have been quiet about it. Ella mentioned that someone saved her and told her to come back to the Circle… It must have been Marian.”

The last bit had all the bitterness of a lifetime of worry as Bethany continued. “Do you know one time she convinced the village kids to help her build a catapult? They were going to launch Marian into this one apple tree that didn’t have any low branches.”

*Why is none of this surprising?* “Let me guess, she missed and hit the trunk.”

Bethany laughed. “No, she made it up into the branches but then she realized that she couldn’t get back down. By the sunset, she was sick of us trying to think of a plan so she just jumped from the tree and broke her leg.”

“Thinking isn’t really Hawke’s strong point,” Julia agreed. Hawke’s head would make an excellent drum.

“She has her moments,” Bethany admitted. “But for the most part, no. She has a gut feeling and then goes with it. It gets her into trouble but it also is what drives her to help people. Even if it is stupid plans like sending someone into the Gallows to check on me. How did you get involved with my sister?”

It was a good thing Bethany seemed to be more like Leandra than whatever gene made Hawke the way she was. The last thing the world needed was another Hawke. “She killed my would-be muggers.”
Bethany rolled her eyes. “Of course and then invited you home. If you haven't noticed, she has a tendency to pick people up and then make them part of the family.”

They walked for a few measures without comment. Echoes of metal boots tightened Bethany’s expression slightly, but she controlled herself enough not to react.

“What's your name? You know mine but I don't know yours.”

Julia glanced at the other Hawke daughter. She seemed earnest at least.

“I am Julia, Julia Nielsen. A pleasure to meet you.”

“A pleasure. How is everyone, Julia? I hear so little from the outside, the Templars read all our letters so I don't know if I get everything they send.”

“You sister is still crazy and drinks too much, but I suppose is otherwise well. Leandra is working to build up her old relations, with mixed results. Both are busy and relatively happy.”

A push of a door broke them out into sunlight and Julia glared into the harsh brightness as her eyes struggled with the differences. They were back at the entrance to the Gallows, skipping the courtyard all together.

*Where is Sebastian?*

“And… How is Fenris doing?” Bethany watched the ground ahead of her carefully for any threat.

*Fenris? Of all the people to ask questions about, why the angry elf?*

“He seems normal for himself,” Julia said after a few beats of consideration. She scanned the populace on the stone slabs for the primary colors. No one was ostentatious enough to be a Chantry brother.

Bethany hesitated and Julia tracked her eyes to one of the templar groups. She was worried then, despite her attitude to the contrary. Julia kept her face placid but her lips curled slightly. If the Circles were to protect the world from magic-users, what kept the guards from abusing the mages? A memory from her one psychology class ran around her thoughts, a false prison experiment that had to be ended early to protect all involved.

*Is that happening here?*

She didn’t know Bethany, had no desire to get to know the slim mage with better hair, but against all evidence to the contrary, she did owe Hawke. That debt had to be canceled.

“Bethany, are you safe here?” Julia lowered her voice to a decibel above a whisper, almost lost against the general noise of the Gallows.

The woman jerked slightly but then forced herself to continue in a calm manner. “I am not safe anywhere. Here at least, I don’t have to worry about being killed walking down the street. The Knight-Captain knows Marian and so checks up on me every now again. I am better off than most here.”

Shouts rang out as a group of templars approached a pair of mages. Bethany's hand snatched Julia's arm and began to pull her away.

“You need to get out of here."
Templars yelled and tugged at the male, his friend screaming something about leaving him alone. A snap of metal and the friend fell to the ground. Julia allowed Bethany to turn her, dragging her away.

That didn't stop the too-soft laughter from creeping into her ears.

"Oh, no. Please no," Bethany pleaded softly to no one as they both paused to look behind them. Even from behind the Templars, they could see the friend who had been knocked down shaking. He was the one laughing.

*What the hell...*

The laughter cut off and the mage screamed. Something like a charging bull struck Julia in the side and threw her to the stone, Bethany landing in a heap beside her.

Ribs creaked but as Julia forced herself back to a sitting position, nothing hurt enough to be broken.

The Gallows had descended into chaos. The group of templars were spread out on the ground, not moving, a bright robe still between them. Metal soldiers yelled and ran forward, swords being drawn and shields catching the light from the sun. Pedestrians screamed and robes fled or huddled where they had stood.

A monster stood in the place of the laughing mage.

Purple bulbous features twisted on a head too small for the body that torn the robe to tatters. Sharp horns protruded from the non-human skull and its mouth opened to laugh once more.

Magic.

Templars swarmed like shiny wasps and lightning cracked, bouncing off a templar to take a chunk the size of a cello out of the wall.

*He transformed... Magic... Monster...* Julia tried to draw her thoughts into a logical sequence but the mixture of screams and laughter jostled the attempts. Like playing Jenga on an airplane with turbulence.

"Julia, we need to get you out of here," the young Leandra shouted at her, grabbing her arm again.

*Escape. Yes, that... is logical.*

A pull and she was on her feet. Then they were running, away from screams and the sounds of bodies being damaged.

They approached the gates and Julia saw red shortly before arms grabbed her.

"Julia!" A brogue voice yelled, alarmed.

"She's just a little beaten up," Bethany explained.

The tone broke throw the confusion and with a blink, Julia was herself again. "I'm fine, thank you. We just need to get out of here. I'd hate to see how the templars react to this."

"You're not wrong," the redhead templar said stiffly from next to Sebastian, as he directed non-templars to safety. "This way! Back to the tower! I hope no innocents get hurt by this. Enchanter Hawke, thank you for escorting the sister back to the gate. I will make sure you get to your room safely."
Bethany didn't relax at this, her eyes flickering to the templars rounding up the mages who had been waking about, swords already drawn, but she nodded. The she met Julia's eyes and said without falter, "Thank you for your time, sister. Your words will give me much comfort in the days ahead."

Julia slammed down on the too giddy laughter tickling the back of her throat. Maybe this woman was related to Hawke after all. She nodded back.

Their two groups broke apart, Julia and Sebastian speed-walking back to where the raft waited for them. If the cretin had left sooner than the agreed time just because of a little wailing…. Julia kept down her thoughts protesting that it wasn't quite a little wailing.

Swords appeared in front of their chests as they made it down the final set of stairs. The points wavered slightly, shimmering like the waves just beyond them. A drab raft floated at the dock's edge.

"State your business!" One of the templars shouted despite being a few feet away.

"Did you forget us already? Something happened and we thought it was best to make our exit," Julia snapped. Seriously, after all that...

The blades lowered and after an awkward pause where they all looked backed at the Circle, they were waved on.

The ferryman hadn't left yet.

"What did you do?" The man asked with a whistle as smoke trailed above the walls.

"A mage turned into an abomination," Sebastian told him and Julia closed her eyes for a beat as they push off away from the Gallows. The song that had been playing in the back of her mind was quiet. Had it finished or simply died off when the mage turned?

If the raft hadn't been there, she might have considered swimming.

"Oy, yikes! The templars will take care of it. That's their job."

The prince-turned-priest said something else but Julia just focused on the waves lapping high on their little boat.

She would need to be the one who did the talking when they got back. Sebastian was too honest. If he spoke, Hawke would try to break into the Gallows to rescue her sister, daggers blazing.

Against her better senses, Julia glanced back at the building. The smoke was gone now and it looked like nothing had changed, tall opaque structures forcing the eye upwards.

Hawke wouldn't have gotten far.
Happy New Year everyone!

“For the last time, no! I’m not going to watch you get drunk, flirt with anyone with a pulse, and then pass out. I paid my rent in full for the next few months with all the craziness you put me through the last few days.”

Hawke just grinned, leaning against the wall. Too lazy to even stand properly. “What craziness?”

"Oh, I don't know… breaking into the Circle while impersonating a nun? Running from those merchants whose boxes you knocked into the bay? Or how about you staining my dress this morning?"

"Hm… I'm pretty sure one of those didn't happen. Don't ask me which one though. When you live a life as fantastic as I do, small things just fall to the wayside."

"Small things! You---" How the hell am I supposed to argue with an idiot? Julia’s jaw ached from clenching it; she worked the muscles for a moment before responding.

“Hawke, I’ve been at the Hanged Man more than once and every time I have come back stickier and with a headache that is probably due to the toxic fumes. I refuse to be dragged back there again like some mindless groupie."

The woman dug a small palm-sized dagger from her belt and began to clean out the grit from underneath her fingernails. Julia winced as something small and red flicked from one. Did she always have to resort to weapons when she didn't think she was going to get her way? “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re not completely mindless. You used mostly logical words in that last sentence.”

“Why can’t you at least pretend to be normal?”

“So I can be stuck in a skirt and twitter about every eligible or potentially eligible man my mother sees? Thank you for offering such a boring existence to me.”

Be the better person. Julia smoothed out the top of her skirt, imagining the first violin line of Vivaldi’s Winter. “Well, your normal evening plans are boring for me. Leandra and I already have a quiet evening set up and if you think I’m giving that up so you can have another audience member ---“

Blue eyes flashed. “Who said I wanted you to come? Perhaps I just thought you should leave the house every now and again. Your soap stinks.”

Julia couldn’t help smirking. “You don’t even know what soap smells like.”

“Like inbred boot-lickers?”

Julia uncrossed her arms, straightening to glare at Hawke at her full height. “What kind of a point are
you trying to make? I don’t want to go and you clearly don’t want me there.”

Hawke threw her hands up into the air in some mock-surrender. “I don’t even know anymore!” Spinning on her heel, the rogue jabbed the dagger back into her belt and stomped out of Julia’s room, disappearing around the corner. A pause and then a door slammed shut. Julia sat back down on the bed, forcing down heated tremblings.

_Fucking cowbell. That’s what Hawke is. Nothing but a fucking cowbell._

Even the insult didn’t make her feel better though. Neither did glaring at the wall. Julia jerked to her feet and grabbed her case from the corner where it was out of the way of any rampaging Sandal. In matter of seconds, she was setting her violin on her shoulder, sans shoulder rest. She just wasn’t in the mood.

Ignoring the scales and any sense of a warm-up, Julia tore into Paganini’s Caprice No 24. Notes hissed under her bow as she tried to turn her emotions into some something more manageable, something worthwhile.

Her fingers stumbled over a passage and just as quickly as the music began, it scratched to a halt. Julia starred at the lines of strings pressed beneath the tips of her digits. They didn't even quiver.

With forced care, she slipped the instrument back into its case.

Then she grabbed her other bow.

Sandal made some sort of comment as she swished by but she didn’t stop to listen or care, already out the front door in her head. Soon the vine-covered manor was behind her and the viscount’s keep began its overrepresentation of the bird theme.

Clones of guards formed their rows at the entrance, pretending that they were doing something. Julia ignored them as their blank continences stared back at her.

Not so different than the clones who had been tossed aside like toys in the face of a child’s rage. If that child was purple and had horns.

She just needed to stop thinking. As in now.

It took longer than she wanted to reach the practice area, having to backtrack at least once when all the doors started looking the same. _Hadn’t these people ever heard of signs?_ So many things of home that she never really appreciated until she had to deal with identical hallways with virtually nothing to distinguish them from another. They were one of the many bane of her medieval existence.

The sun resumed its beat against her head the moment she stepped out into the small secluded courtyard. A plain-clothed guard was already at one of the targets with two other pairs in uniform hitting each other with practice swords. Aveline was nowhere in sight.

One thing that went right for her at least.

Julia took up her position about a dozen paces from her chosen straw target, the one a few down from the guard.

Practice. That's what she needed. The repetition of doing the same thing over and over again in the pursuit of improving. Mind-numbing at times, it tested the limits of mental patience and physical dexterity. Only when one pushed passed all the limits could they create perfection. Julia raised her
bow.

The first arrow missed the target entirely.

No one seemed to notice but Julia’s cheeks still tinged in response. Teeth firmly gritted together, Julia grabbed another arrow from the quiver on her back. Hold it tight against the wood but not too tight. String pulled back, keep arms from trembling. Breathe in.

The next arrow hit the outer ring and Julia allowed herself a small curl of the lips.

“Oh! That’s a nice expression. You should smile more,” an accented female voice commented. Any trace of Julia’s success vanished.

“What are you doing here, Merrill?”

The elf smiled, about as out of place in the training yard as a rock guitar was in an orchestra. The guard practicing noticed her as well, eyes watching carefully. “I was playing with the kittens in the market when Hawke came by looking all fierce. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Meddling elf.

“There is nothing to check on.” Julia drew another arrow and barely pausing to line the shot, released. It went wide.

Merrill blinked at the arrow. Her entire frame tilted to the side, bare feet digging into the dirt. Why couldn't she wear shoes? Was it an elf thing? Fenris didn't either.

Bug-eyed freaks.

“Were you trying to shoot over there? I don’t see any marks for a target.”

Julia didn't bother looking at the elf. She was here to get back control of her emotions. Merrill didn't help, if anything, she made it worse by giving her a sentient outlet. As it was, Julia plucked her bow string and checked its tone to avoid reacting. It’s just Merrill…. don’t reduce yourself to Hawke’s level.

The next arrow snagged the edge of the straw man. She wasn’t completely wasting her effort then. It still grated that the hits were lucky flukes rather than the average.

But practice would make perfect. Eventually. She grabbed another arrow.

“Hawke usually means well. She just doesn’t know how to say it,” Merrill said. Julia glanced over, only to find the elf sitting cross-legged on the ground behind her.

Mage.

Dangerous.

Julia blinked deliberately, forcing her thoughts straight. Does Merrill know how much sweat and spit coated those grains? Julia wanted another bath just thinking about it.

“That woman doesn’t even know what she is talking about most of the time,” Julia said, sending her arrow flying. “And I doubt it bothers her.”

She didn’t see Merrill’s frown but she heard it at the edge of her voice. “You don’t mean that. Hawke is always helping people. She gave you a home and brought you to meet her friends, just like
she did for me. She opened her life up so that you could have a piece of it.”

_Hawke, kind?_ What kind of warped world did Merrill live in? There was no possibility that the word kind or any other word that could wring a semblance of sympathy being applied to Hawke. She was an idiot, and that was end of it.

Instead of replying, she buried another arrow into the target’s side. If it had been a human, that would have slowed them down.

This new thought nagged at her. She was practicing in order to hurt someone. Could she aim at a living person and try to kill them?

_It doesn’t matter._ One life already stained her hands. Even if they deserved it for trying to take her own. Innocent was a subjective term now.

_I'm not practicing attacks, merely defense,_ Julia reminded herself. Kirkwall had proven that the weak or unskilled would be picked off. If she became competent enough to protect herself, no one would ever make her frightened again.

Even if that person wasn’t a person anymore.

Merrill was still there when her thoughts came back to the present, looking perfectly comfortable amidst the dirt and the sun. A drop of sweat tickled the edge of Julia’s hairline and she glanced away from the elf who might as well have been lounging in an air-conditioned unit. Her apparent relaxation didn’t help Julia's own.

“You passed along the message. You can go now,” Julia said, short and soft. She didn't dare say more.

The elf made a noise in response and Julia’s arrow bite the ground near the target’s post.

_Seriously?_ She had it. This stupid city, the stupid things she was supposed to know, it all existed for the sole reason of getting under her skin. There could be no other explanation for why else she was having so much trouble with it all.

“Just get out of here, Merrill. Go back to dance under the tree or whatever it is you elves do. You’ve done your good deed for the day; please pat yourself on the back somewhere I can’t see.”

This next arrow smacked into the target’s heart, though at this point, it was undoubtedly still luck. Julia took another sliver of wood and metal to test its strength against the straw man but her sightline was blocked was a slip of an elf.

“Does the world look different from where you stand? You must be lonely up on that axil you put yourself on.” Merrill placed her hands on her hips like a two-fold harp. Julia’s back went rigid.

“What do you think you are doing?”

Merrill leaned forward, tattoos cast into shadow. “You said we were friends, didn’t you? I haven’t had a lot of friends before, but even I know that’s not how you treat them.”

Julia’s breath hitched and she pressed her tongue hard against her teeth as she gathered her thoughts back up from where the elf had scattered them. _The arrogance of her…_

“You don’t know any—“
“Yes, I do. I know it’s not polite to walk into someone’s home without asking, that you can’t dip bread into beer without it dissolving, and that insulting friends is a good way to end the friendship.” For the first time since Julia had met her, Merrill actually seemed serious. It was about the same as her normal self except the vapid film no longer lingered in front of her eyes.

Julia twisted the thin shaft in her hand, spinning dully like a note on hold, then plopped it back into the quiver. The desire to practice was gone. What is the point?

Kirkwall wouldn’t turn into some off-brand NYC with a little work.

Merrill waited for her to collect her things and then joined her as they walked towards the doors. Hands tucked together behind her back, she looked straight ahead, watching the guards at work.

Not wanting to say anything but not quite comfortable with the silence, Julia glared at the monochromatic walls. It’s not like she did anything wrong. Maybe she lashed out at Merrill for simply trying to help, helping poorly perhaps, but that didn’t mean she needed to apologize.

No reason at all…

“The dark-haired elf smiled shyly at her and Julia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Why do I still like her? There has been managers I wanted to like me less. There was no reason that she could think of for it but she still had the urge to make things right. Get yourself in gear.

“I’m sorry for the comment. I wasn’t thinking before I said it.” That was easy enough. Merrill perked up.

“Apology accepted. What are we doing now?”

“We? Julia regretted attempting to mend this fence. She had been intending on taking a bath with those lotions Leandra and her had found at the market the other day. One of them smelled somewhat like lavender which was as close as she had gotten to a recognizable scent.

“I am going to scrub the sweat off and then practice Bach’s Minuets. I have no idea what you would be doing.”

Merrill skipped a bit to avoid a guard running by. “I don’t know. I could wait for you to be done washing and then listen to you play? If you don’t mind that is. I know some people get upset when you intrude on them.” Really, she thinks of that now? The female’s interest in listening to her play still stalled Julia’s rejection of the plan. It had been a while since she had an actual audience, no matter how small. Leandra mentioned curiosity about the activity that consumed so much time but nothing had come of it yet.

“Fine,” Julia said finally. “You can come. But I am not going to change any habits for you so be prepared for a long wait.”

“I don’t need anything to do, promise!” Merrill assured her. Julia caught her groan when it reached the throat and instead directed it through her nose as puff of air. We will see about that.

The manor echoed with emptiness when they strode through the door, not terribly unusual since Bodahn often took his son with him when he went grocery shopping. He must be making something good for supper if he needs the extra hands, Julia reasoned. One more reason not to go to the Hanged Man tonight.
As if she needed more than one.

“I’m going to go take a bath. You can… Sit out here and try not to cause too much damage.” Julia waved vaguely at the opening hall and without pausing to see what Merrill decided to do, went to her bedroom to grab a change of clothes.

The bathing chamber, by the time she got there, was as dark and spare as always. Activating the medieval-magic that counted as plumbing, Julia straightened out the clothes she had picked out. The dress was a bit finer than the one she currently wore but not by much.

Embroidery, it turned out, was scratchy when done poorly.

The water didn't take long to get to a suitable level and she stopped the flow. Grabbing Kirkwall's equivalent to a bath bomb, she dropped the small gritty rune into the tub and watched the steam begin to rise.

Moments later, the water began to bubble with white foam.

Julia stretched and after checking to make sure that the lock on the door was firmly shut- not that it ever stopped Hawke- began stripping off her clothing. Dancing in the cold, she delicately splashed into the tub, hot water surrounding her like a second skin.

This is exactly what I needed. Something normal. Something clean.

For a few minutes, she could just close her eyes, lean her head back, and pretend that in a few minutes the housekeeper would knock on the door to wake her up for tea with one of her mother’s friends or a rehearsal with the director. She would slowly get out, blow dry hair that was pure brown and straighten out the unruly strands.

How long have I been stuck here? Julia rolled her neck to prevent stiffness from forming. It felt like she should know the exact amount of days- the exact amount of hours- that she had been in this wasteland but the longer she was here, the more her sense of time went away.

It had been too long.

But she needed to get back to New York. She had things that she needed to do. Here she had… nothing. Nothing to pursue, nothing to hope for, no goals to drive her to find new limits.

Just skills to master before the lack of them caused her death.

She needed to leave Thedas. It seemed like a distant possibility at this point, set back by both logic and distance. She couldn’t even look at the stars and hazard a guess if they were in the same system. She had no way of determining where in the universe she exactly was, if this wasn’t some kind of Twilight Zone Parallel universe.

No matter how many times she thought about it, it was still hard to give up the possibility of return. She occasionally thought she was fine, managing, but then would sit down to a bland meal or catch a glimpse of herself in the foggy mirror and the desire for something better would crescendo back to life.

She did not want to stay here.

With a breath, Julia pulled herself under the water. Bubbles tickled her nose as they ascended back to the surface. She hummed softly and the sound deepened through the liquid even as loose strand brushed her cheek. Her lungs ached slightly but nothing severe. Even without steady practice, they
could still retain air for longer than normal.

She held on till the pain was a gentle burn in her chest than hoisted herself up to cool her lungs on fresh air. Her throat shivered with it till she slid back against the heated surface of the tub, head against the lip. Somethings hadn't changed at least.

Between the whoosh of air, the slosh of water against the tub, and soft crackle of the heating rune, the world outside her miniature lake was quiet. At the edge of her hearing, a bird called out its presence from beyond the window but nothing replied that she could hear.

Stretching over the darkness beyond the tub, Julia snatched some soap from the cool floor and brought it back into her space. One thing she hated about life here was that they didn’t have shampoo. They just used the same soap for their body as their hair. That had to be unhealthy. But there was also no way that she was going to leave her hair dirty so that just meant she had to soap up her hands before threading fingers through her hair and scratching at her scalp.

Even though the water was still warm enough to reduce bone to jello, Julia climbed out before she turned into a pink prune.

Ignoring the fact someone was waiting for her, Julia dried her hair and used the almost-lavender lotion to massage her skin.

I should take proper care of myself more often. Next, an alternative to floss. From the specimens available, it was clear dentists here merely pulled teeth.

A soft beat on the door and Julia glanced up. Rest and three quarter notes.

“Julia?” The accented tones of both her most and least favorite female elf came through the wood. “Are you alright?”

Biting back a groan at the intrusion, Julia popped the cork back into the bottle of lotion. She wouldn’t be able to relax now anyways. “I’m fine, Merrill.”

“Oh, okay… Are you almost done?”

She is like a damn puppy. “Just getting dressed.”

Several beats of silence gave her the chance to get dressed, a fitted grey a-line with fine blue embroidery. A few hops and undignified hip wiggle, and the smooth cloth slid around her skin. She could breathe, but unlike a number of her dresses, she wasn’t swimming in it.

Hair whipping around like live wires, Julia stalked over to the door, swinging it open to reveal a bright eyed Merrill. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

“Not really… What did you do to your hair? It's all curly”

By God, grant me patience. “That happens when it gets wet,” Julia explained slowly.

"Why don't you wear it down?"

"Because my hair doesn't listen to me without threatening it with a straightener."

In a blink, Merrill was in her face, small hand reaching out to stroke the wet mass. Julia jerked back and the elf merely blinked at her.

“Can I do your hair?”
Julia grabbed offending feature and tossed it over her shoulder, sending a small storm of water down her back. “What?”

“I’ve done it before! Well once… And we didn’t need too much fat to get it back to normal.”

Julia opened her mouth to tell her no, no way was she going to let anyone not professionally trained work with her hair but then the words paused on her tongue and their lingering soured them. It wasn’t like she had anyone to impress anymore and since she wasn’t going anywhere tonight, perhaps getting her hair put in something other than a bun would be relaxing…

Bach knew her last few attempts hadn’t gone well.

“What… What kind of style were you thinking?”

“Hmm… maybe braids, wrapped around your head…”

Julia snatched her small pile of dirty clothes from the rack before abandoning the thin light of the bathing room. Merrill followed, muttering about different hairstyles.

Tossing the old clothes into a basket in the corner, Julia turned to find the elf smiling. Small pangs of fear trickled down her spine, like when a percussionist said that they had an idea. “Don’t worry! Just sit down and I can take care of everything.”

After a too short moment to consider her sanity, Julia complied, lowering herself to a perch at the edge of her bed. Merrill found the brush on the ledge and hopped onto the mattress. The bed groaned as weight settled behind Julia, humming a foreign tune. If she ties my hair into knots, she will never be allowed in this house again, Julia promised herself as she felt the first tug of a brush.

Bristles met wet tangles and stuck. Pull, relax. Pull, relax.

The tension in her back lessened as nothing burst into flames and her hair stayed mostly in her head. This was Merrill after all, not some crazy transforming mage. Nothing immediately alarming. The sound and feel of the brush was reassuring. It was like she was child again, back when her mother helped her get dressed.

Eyes closed, Julia sighed.

“Why do you and Hawke fight so much?”

“I already told you why.”

“Not really. You just called her names.”

Julia’s eyes shot open, automatically focusing on the barren fireplace. Someone should be coming to start that up again. Without a central heating system, it was all they had to work with to keep the manor a reasonable temperature. Pathetic really. Who would want to live in this dump?

Not her.

“And?” The word flopped as if from a saxophone, harsh and utterly flat.

"You are friends. How will you remember that if you yell at each other all the time?"

"We are not friends. She is an idiot."

A tug burst through a tangle, pressure on Julia's skull immediately disappearing without the brush
trying to pull out her hair.

"I think you are just upset because you miss your home."

Julia's fingers twitched and she set her jaw. The elf was just so… Mid-staff D. High and clear without getting shrill. It was hard to get annoyed at the mid-staff D.

“I’m sure,” she decided finally. Merrill’s fingers tightened around several locks of hair and then the pressure returned as she began to braid. She reached the base of the skull, threading the previously created braids. The elf hummed softly to herself with the occasional fluid foreign words thrown in.

The weight of the water helped to keep her hair still, staying in the braids when normally when they would have wiggled free. Julia closed her eyes again and listened to the strange music. Not quite a traditional Western European, it felt older, with none of the complex characteristics of the tunes she knew and loved.

"Any luck on finding a way back?" At a request, Julia bent her head forward and Merrill moved in front of her to begin work on the crown. Her vision was restricted to her lap and hands, the latter of which flexed. It still felt off though. She definitely hated this. The feeling of. Insecurity. Over an elf of all things. A month ago and a half ago she would have never believed that she'd take the time to exchange words with someone like Merrill.

"No. My efforts started and ended with you. I don't know enough about these King of the Rings type worlds to even guess at what other strategies I should take and the fact no one else has any bright ideas means that there isn't an obvious solution anyways."

"Me? But there aren't other mages you could talk to? You could go to the Circle… Well maybe not, it is kind of intimidating…” Julia kept her eyes closed. She couldn't know. Sebastian promised to keep it quiet unless it became critical information. "Keeper Marethari knows so much more than me. If anyone knew a way to get you home, it would be her."

"Keeper Marthanali? She is your…"

"Oh! She is...was… The leader of my clan. That's not exactly what she is but it is easiest way to explain it to humans. No offense."

Hair tightened an inch behind Julia's scalp line. She sighed. "Where is this keeper of yours?"

Merrill didn’t answer right away but instead tugged tightly on the new strands she was pulling into the mix. At her angle, Julia could just make out the curve of the elf’s pain hands. They moved rapidly yet even without seeing it, she could feel the skill and practice. Was it with her own hair or others? She said she hadn't done this much… With her ability to make things awkward instantly, Merrill didn’t seem like someone who had a lot of friends.

Maybe they had more in common than she thought.

The idea stung a bit, a prick of a sewing needle. She had been raised in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in lower New York while Merrill spent her life traveling in a wooden wagon. Given they were both female of similar ages but that’s where the similarities stopped.

"The Keeper is with my clan. They are currently living out on the Wounded Coast."

Not a lie perse, but there were omissions there. Enough for Merrill to fidget as she braided. No wonder she always lost at cards.
"You will have to take me there then. If there is a chance that your keeper knows something, I won't risk not going after it."

Merrill nearly dropped the braid she was working on. "Oh, that works great! I've been meaning to go back there to get a tool. We can go together. Maybe bring Hawke, she likes to go places. Even if they aren't always the nicest places. Not that they're bad places, some people say the alienage isn't nice but I saw someone get jumped on my way. It is how they..."

Julia stopped listening to the nuances of what Merrill was saying, sweet but excited tone washing over her.

She had a lead. It wasn't large, a wisp of possible than an actual chance-don't get your hopes up-but even that was more than she had in weeks.

She might go home, might stop running her hamster wheel of a life here. Stop worrying about horned monsters tearing her apart. Things would go forward, wrongs would be made right. She would be able to take a shower. Her career would start off with a rush.

Merrill tucked in some final loose strands and settled back on her heels to admire her work. "There. I think I'm done. Do you like it? I suppose you can't see it... I hope you like it. I think you look very pretty."

Reaching up to trace the curves of hair, Julia eyed the small wavy mirror on the wall, angled away from her. A relatively thick braid circled her head, leaving the rest of it to be pulled back into a multi-strand creation that brushed between her shoulder blades. A different style to be sure. She wasn’t sure how it looked, and she didn’t want to glance in a mirror to check, but it felt put together enough.

Anything was better than another bun at this point. She thought her hair was going to stay permanently up there even after she removed the tie a few times. Although this style still pulled at her roots, at least everything was contained.

"Thank you, Merrill." The words slipped out without her even having to think about it, no internal discussion about whether or not she should express gratitude hindering its progress.

The elf beamed back at her. "I am glad to help. It was kind of fun, doing someone's hair. It's like we are good friends. Well, I know we are friends but... Maybe I'll just stop talking now."

The remainders of Julia's sourness from her fight with Hawke disintegrated and she rolled her shoulders. "You did a good job."

*She really is an innocent and pathetic creature.*

"... But I suppose it is almost time to head to the Hanged Man."

The retort that she wasn't going to enter that petri-dish of germs and disease got caught in her throat, exactly where the words of gratitude were supposed to go. Merrill's lips were spread wide and her eyes glittered with hope. "Please, Julia? It won’t be the same without you."

"No. No, it wouldn't." Julia sighed and stood as the elf gave her some space. She didn't have to go. She really shouldn't go. For her health and sanity. She looked at the mirrored image of her wall, finger tracing the curves of her braid. "Fine, let's go watch Hawke and Isabela get wasted."

Merrill clapped and in a swift movement, had interlocked their arms together at the elbows. "Don't worry, it will be so much fun!"
Julia just rolled her eyes but the weights that seemed to attach themselves to her ankles every time she was forced to go to the Hanged Man missed the memo to Velcro back on. With little hindrance, Julia took the lead, and they made their way out of the manor and into the city of Kirkwall.
Chapter Notes

A/N* Random note, but look! The violinist Lindsey Stirling did a Dragon Age Inquisition video! (Yes, it's been out for years, but I just found it so... shh)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuJnvC8voJY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stifling humidity pressed down on her like a blanket, trying to smother any chance of life or energy emerging. Julia dragged her eyes up from the dirt path in front of her to glare at Hawke's back.

“I hate the outdoors, you do know that right?” She said as if the repetition would slowly drill the fact through the woman's thick skull.

“Oh, no! I wish you would have told me at least once before we set out… Too late now, unless you want to walk back by yourself,” Hawke said from over her shoulder, tossing the words back like so many stones.

Julia swore which made the psycho laugh. They had been attacked no less than three times since they had left the relative safety of Kirkwall's walls. Three times where she had to run for her life while the others finished the opponents off. Twice the attacks had been by mangy bandits and once by skeletal structures that she could only call zombies.

Because of course they had zombies here.

“It’s really not that bad,” Merrill spoke up from where she had been walking beside her. “Grass makes a wonderful cushion for a nap, and most of the wild animals are actually quite nice.”

*Barbaric.* Julia stubbed the toe of her boot on a rock and tripped forward up the slight rise. She cursed again. *What the hell is Hawke thinking?* When she had expressed interest in meeting the Keeper, she imagined it would be over tea in a structure with four walls and a barrier from the sun.

She had no interest in wandering through this wasteland to meet the Dalish, the image of dozens of Merrills was enough to make her want to lock the door to her room and never leave.

The elf was nice enough, especially in comparison with the rest of Hawke’s gang, but that didn't mean she needed to walk miles uphill to find the people who raised her. She honestly didn’t give a crap. So what if their wagons were ships on wheels? That didn’t help her get another bar of resin nor add new songs for her to play.

Apparently the Keeper only came into the city for important things. Specifically, things that involved elves. Helping someone cross the barrier between worlds didn't interest her enough.

*Arrogant witch.*

How had she been convinced to come out here? The possibility of clothes that didn't itch and modern
The smell of something recently dead and already rotting blew past them and Julia resorted to her Lowtown breathing techniques.

“Isn’t this nice?” Hawke rambled on, obviously to everything including the pile of brown muck that she just stepped into. “Besides, the city runs out of idiots after a while but there are enough caves out here that there are always some bandits to play with.”

“Zip it, Hawke. Haven’t you had enough?” The woman is still looking for a fight…

Fenris made a noise that could almost be interpreted as a laugh from where he trudged at the back of their small group. Hawke meanwhile wondered what ‘zip’ meant. Everyone ignored her.

“You would think that, but no. How do you think she afforded the manor you live in?” Fenris commented evenly.

*Something more efficient than killing people and looting their pockets?* “Something about a treasure hunt in a cave with Varric and his brother?” *Who, according to Varric, is an irredeemable bastard who left them for dead.*

*What kind of person would someone have to be for these delinquents to think they’re immoral?*

Hawke swiveled around to face them while walking backwards up the small mountain she decided was a shortcut. “You’d think the dragon-sized pile of gold I brought back would be enough… But you’ve met my mother. She insists on updating every single room in that freakishly large house. I might as well have melted the gold and painted it on the walls for how much she is burning through. Or at least, that’s what Varric is telling me.”

Julia raised an eyebrow, hoping the woman would trip. “You expect your mother to show off a rundown old home that used to hold slavers to her friends? She is trying to prove that your family is strong again, not get smothered with their laughter.”

To her amusement, Hawke did stumble but caught herself before she could fall. *Pity.* “Why does that matter? It’s not like her so-called friends cared or lifted their delicate little fingers to help when we came here penniless fleeing the Blight. Friends like that might as well get treated like enemies and be stabbed.”

"You can't resolve everything by…"

"They deserve it."

The venom in her voice was enough to make Julia pause. Hawke was actually angry about this, and not just the shallow just-for-show anger she usually pulled out. That emotion only seemed to appear in discussions about Bethany being stuck in the Circle.

“Hawke,” Julia began. "You live in a different world than your mother and I. Those people you scoff at still have power and influence to make important decisions and that has to be acknowledged in order to succeed. Our world isn't so black and white."

A grumbled response about being colorless drifted back and Julia let it go. Why did she even try to argue? Hadn’t she learned her lesson by now?

Hawke didn’t follow the laws of logic.
They crested the ridge, bare bushes on either side marking their path and Hawke paused so they could all catch their breath. Julia felt less annoyed about being winded when she heard Merrill’s breathing pattern slow slightly and even Fenris in his armor took the moment to stretch.

It wasn’t her fault she didn’t have a proper gym to exercise in, there was only so much that yoga and jogging in place could do. She needed a good treadmill and stairstepper. Not that she was gaining weight as far as she could tell with their low fat diet. *Less preservatives at least.*

The Scarred Shore, or some equally absurd name, spread out in front of them with the one mountain peaking above the rest in the distance. To their right, sharp rocks and the jagged edges of the shoreline intermixed with the lapping waves. From what Julia had gathered, the sea was a bit like the Mediterranean, large enough to divide the land into separate countries without being an impossible barrier to cross with medieval technology.

On the horizon it was a ribbon of blue dividing land and sky.

The world she found herself was raw and wild. Battered remains of ships jutted from invisible rocks like tombstones. Some notes from the tenor sax in *Purgatorio* floated through her head as her breathing became as regular as a bass drum.

“It’s good to be out of the city,” Merrill said softly, tilting back her head and closing her eyes to enjoy the breeze that ruffled her loose hair. “I forget how different it smells out here.”

Julia couldn’t catch the short laugh that escaped her. “It’s a sewer in the streets sometimes. Same amount of rot here though.”

Fenris’s grunt was as much of an agreement as they were likely to get and then they set out down the hill. Julia’s boots skid on loose dirt and she slide down a few feet before pretending she was skiing and twisted sideways, knees bent to absorb the impact. *Useless Swiss Alps vacations, right Father?*

Hawke made a smartass comment that she ignored and she made it to the bottom of the hill with only some new dust to line the edge of her skirt. A tan lizard skittered away from their party and Julia glared at the retreating reptile.

“Have I mentioned I hate hiking?”

“Is there anything you don’t hate?”

“Baroque period music.”

“If something isn’t broke…”

“Shut up, Hawke.”

The ground was level now, which she was extremely grateful for. Yoga had nothing on *fucking hiking.* She could spend the next several days relaxing and still probably be sore. If Kirkwall wasn’t so far away, she would go on strike.

No more Hanged Man, no more archery practice, no more helping Merrill find her way out the manor when she somehow got lost in the kitchen. Done. She needed a break.

Cousins of the hill they just climbed rose around them, straight backed cliffs making a sort of short gully for them to walk through. Layers of rock wore the ages and weaved back and forth with their own foothills. *The path of an old river?* Kirkwall was not a land of plenty, runts of bushes peeking out of corners and jutting out their roots just to trip her.
“You know…” Hawke said, stretching her arms behind her head. “This would be an excellent spot for an ambush.”

What?

“Why would we come this way then?” Julia asked, suddenly very interested in the top of the short cliffs. It seemed the same as before, an occasional bird still sang and they were completely alone. There was no trace of civilization out here… But then again, she could say the same about Kirkwall.

“Short cut.”

Julia glanced at Merrill and then at Hawke, just double checking that they hadn’t merged when she hadn’t been looking. How did they get around without a survival instinct? Most people would see an ambush site and decide to go around it. Not stroll through it like it was a Sunday park.

A breeze twisted through their path and almost immediately Fenris stilled behind her. Without pause, the other two drew their weapons, Merrill spinning her staff out of its carrier.

An itch grew up Julia’s back as the large sword that Fenris carried swung out behind her. Not that she thought he’d used it on her, at least not with Hawke here, but it was big enough to spit her without trouble.

Her bow came into position easily, practice helping with something at least. But she had nothing to aim at, which left her with… Hawke’s face.

With that summoning thought, more than enough targets appeared for her to shoot.

Figures lined the edges of the cliffs, shapes against the blue. More stepped around the bend of the path in front of them and a muttered curse from Fenris alerted her that there were armored people behind them as well.

No escape then. Julia counted the number of sharp sticks of metals and then realized the problem. She was surrounded by people who undoubtedly intended harm and while her heart had picked up tempo, she was more angry at Hawke than anything else. She looked for another fight and now dragged them into one.

Of all the irresponsible foolhardy maneuvers that woman has led me into… At the least the other fights they wandered into today she could run back and wait for the others to finish it off. Only once had she actually had to fire an arrow, which had missed but Fenris took the opponent out with the distraction.

It wouldn’t go that way this time.

“Stop right there! You are in possession of stolen property. Back away from the elf!”

Hawke lowered her blades, becoming a bobble head as she looked back and forth between Merrill and Fenris before calling back at the figure on the hill. “You are going to have to be more specific; we are kind of an elf-friendly group.”

“I won’t repeat myself. Return the slave and you will live another day!” The original man yelled again, the staff in his hand waving wildly. Does he have a complex? And were they just waiting for us to wander by? Really not the best plan by any measure.

Maybe their idiocy extended far enough to let her by without a fuss.
Fenris’s tattoos changed colors like the hairs of dog would raise up when they felt threatened. Hawke grinnned at him before saying, “I don’t understand. There is no slave here.”

Those words were like lighter fluid, setting Fenris up like a Christmas Tree. “I am no one’s slave!”

His charge at the huddle nearest to them was followed by Hawke’s whoop of excitement. They weren’t going to the sensible thing and find a way to retreat then. Well, shit… Julia drew back an arrow, picking a target at random and fired. She misjudged the distance, arrow flying over an attacker’s head. They ducked which gave Hawke the opportunity to stab them through the neck.

Julia looked away from the flash of red in time to see Merrill topple a ledge of mercenaries with roots. She was out of her league here, that much was obvious. Everyone here had spent more than her dozen or so hours practicing with their weapons.

She needed to find some place to hide.

Another arrow managed to glance off a torso. “Behind you!” Julia whirled around at the ring of Merrill’s voice to see a figure in black charging at her. She stumbled back a few steps before remembering the bow in her hands.

Moving target… Straight ahead…. Just like I practiced.

A short cut of air and she lined up the shot. The mercenary yelled, sword swinging. A release and a crack. The figure shuddered but lunged forward. Julia dove to the side. A weight grabbed her legs and she tumbled to the dirt.

Dust coated her tongue but she barely had time to cough as she kicked out at the thing pinning her legs. They could barely move.

"Get… off!" She turned and froze. Brown eyes stared at her unfocused as hands clawed at the dirt. Lips turned red as her would-be attacker coughed and started to seize. Julia kicked again and scrambled away on her hands and knees like some awkward crab.

The man’s seizures stopped and her eyes narrowed on the short staff of her arrow protruded from the leather armor. Somehow she had actually hit him. The lack of distance probably helped.

Air whistled through the man’s lungs as thickening liquid rose onto his lips. “You... Bitch...” The man choked, body shuddering with the movement, then went silent.

Julia’s heart thumped a few times before the realization cooled it’s way through her bloodstream and into her head. She had killed another person.

More blood on my hands.

Trying to refocus on her situation, Julia ignored the churning mass in her gut and looked around to see that the fight was nearing its conclusion. Fenris was stabbing a corpse, cursing in a foreign language as he splattered what was once human. Hawke cackled as she danced around an obviously wounded soldier, like a cat with a mouse. And Merrill… The elf was using her magic to pile bodies into a pyre. Splendid….

“Don’t you be melting my coins, Merrill!” Hawke shouted as she finally finished playing with her opponent, stabbing him through the chest. Julia blinked and then bent to pick up the quiver she had dropped from the collision.

She couldn’t have become a top level violinist without being able to hold down the strings for mass
amounts of time and she couldn’t survive here without developing some more calluses. Death was common in Kirkwall and the world beyond and it appeared she would be the distributor of it as well. She would just need to shake these useless emotions off and move on.

_Danse Macabre indeed._

The trick was to breathe, always remember to breathe. Even without a wind instrument, the posture from the diaphragm was critical. Strength needed to be delegated in order to be effective.

Blackness flickered in the corner of her vision, drawing her attention. Something— _a plant?_— waved from one of the taller hills. Julia blinked at Fenris who was interrogating someone who somehow hadn’t been killed right away. She averted her eyes from that. Knowing the elf, it wouldn’t end cleanly.

_But what is that?

It was too stiff to be moving in the breeze and too fluid to be a rock. Which left… _what exactly?_ It was dark brown, a rounded square. She squinted and an oval rose above it. A thin curve like a crescent moon appeared to the side, long sticks connecting it to the main shape.

Precious heartbeats thudded in her ears as her mind put together what she was seeing. A slim rod slipped into the shadow of the larger sticks, aiming down at the growing flames and the elf spreading them.

_Merrill._

“Get down!” Someone shouted and Julia’s arms trembled as she pulled her own bow into position. Her arrow wavered and went wide. The archer didn’t falter and then a high voice cried out. Merrill fell and lower voices joined in disjointed harmony.

Julia tried the passage again. Arm forced steady, tip focused on the point she wanted, raised for distance and height difference. No wind… The thrums of pain from her left arm crescendoed as she held too long and she let go, string snapping the skin of her forearm as it trembled.

A grunt and the archer fell back. Two beats later a familiar figure rose behind him, twin daggers flashing as they bite down. Julia kept her eyes on the man as he toppled off the edge of the hill below her view, rough edges of the scene wearing her thin.

But she had to watch. _This is how calluses are formed._

When Hawke straightened, Julia found her feet tugging her towards the orange flames. Fenris was already there, blood splattered face stormy.

“Do I need to put my sword through you to keep you from summoning demons, blood mage?”

Merrill coughed softly, hand pressed against her side. The area on her left side, right above the hip was dyed red, impossible to see how deep the actual wound was. “All spirits aren’t the same. The one I have worked with knows little of healing magic.”

Fenris growled, tattoos flashing dangerously. He handed her a bottle of transparent red liquid which Merrill struggled with for a second before he popped the cork for her. She gulped it down. “I’m not going to wait around for you to become an abomination.”

“Don’t you have a corpse to stab?” Julia asked him point blank. He glared at her then stomped silently off to talk to the returning Hawke. “Merrill… I…” The proper thing to do was to ask if she
“I’ll be fine,” Merrill chirped, eyes bright with pain. “Anders can heal anything and I’ve seen people with worse.”

“Can’t you… Magic it away?” Julia hazarded a guess. Merrill laughed and winced.

“I can barely heal a bruise. My speciality is blood magic.” Her fingers clenched against her side and the blood in question leaked out around the edges of pale digits. The now empty bottle fell against the dirt with a clink. Julia couldn’t concentrate on the logic of magic as her thoughts spun.

My fault… No, not my fault. I didn’t shoot her and neither did I bring Merrill out on this ridiculous venture. Not my fault.

But Merrill wouldn’t be injured if I could make my shot.

Hawke strolled over. “So Fenris has this revenge thing with a would-be Tevintar magister, which I can’t let him go alone to and you are injured. What does that leave me with? How about you relax here for an hour or two and then we come back to get you once we’ve killed some slavers?”

“Did you get your damned eyes plucked out? She needs medical attention now,” Julia hissed. “You aren’t leaving her anywhere!”

The woman glanced from her to Merrill then groaned. “I don’t have time for this. Fenris is about to race off to get recaptured by a sadistic bitch. How about we give you a few health potions, bandage it up, and we all walk to the cave entrance together? It isn’t too far.”

“No, no way!” Julia yelled before Merrill could even open her mouth. “We are going back to Kirkwall.”

“I’m not going to let Hadriana get away,” Fenris said, stalking up to their small group. “Today is the day when I wrap my fist around her heart.”

Bloodthirsty animal… The elf didn’t bother to hear there answer, walking back to stab the attacker with the staff again.

“Merrill and I are going back, no matter what you say. I’m not letting her die out here over your selfishness.”

Hawke rubbed at her face. “Fine, fine. Here are some more potions. Go back to Kirkwall, find Varric, and get him to send help. I’ll see if I can stop Fenris from getting himself killed.”

“You are telling us to go back by ourselves?”

“I’m telling you to shut up or start paying rent. My house, my rules.”

“We are not in your house right now.”

Hawke threw her hands into the air. “Still applies.”

“You’re an imbecile.”

“That’s the kindest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I can tell you more if you want.”
“No need. I’ll let my imagination do the work. I must release the Fenris before he chews through his leash again.” Without so much as a backwards glance, Hawke jogged over to where the white-haired elf was pacing. They took off at a run.

Julia bit her lip hard to keep from screaming at the woman. She didn’t know where they were going, how was she going to send help?

She didn’t even know how to get back to Kirkwall.

"Julia, it's still a ways to go, but my clan isn't too far away. I know the way and it's probably safer."

Julia swore and bent down to throw one of Merrill’s arms over her shoulders. The elf was light but her weight was still enough to throw her off balance. They stumbled forward a few steps before Julia managed to get them into a simple enough standing position. She can't find the way out of her own bedroom. But what choice do we have?

“I hope you're right. I hate camping.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up, I'm less than halfway done writing the next chapter and I am a fairly slow writer so... I'm sorry in advance for any delay.
"On the first part of the journey
I was looking at all the life
There were plants and birds and rocks and things...
But the air was full of sound"

The path gave way, ceasing its upward trend to dip suddenly downwards. Julia paused to steady herself, side stiff with trying to hold up a not-yet-literal deadweight. Merrill shifted, eyes only half open in an almost grey face.

"Almost there… I'm pretty sure." The last few words came out in a whisper. If speaking took that much energy, they were running out of time.

Julia held back a comment and carefully put one foot in front of the other. The ground, or perhaps her connection to it, seemed to shake with every movement. It didn't help that by heading towards the mountain, the slope was decidedly against them.

The lowering sun cast shadows over the dirt trail as the sun inched closer to the horizon. Julia grunted as Merrill lost her balance and she had to brace them from slipping. Her knee twitched painfully but they didn't topple.

We are thoroughly lost.

If I were a band of elves hiding in the mountains, where would I--

A sharp metal tip of a spear dropped down to point at her chest where before there had only been open air. Julia jerked to a halt and slowly looked up. … I would be in front of me.

“What are you doing here, shem?” A low voice asked. A blond male elf glared at her through his facial tattoos. He didn't lower his weapon.

“Hello Junar... Is that a new spear?” Merrill raised her head weakly to smile at him.

The elf recoiled as if she was a snake rather than someone practically-unconscious.

“Merrill… what are you doing here?”

“She’s injured,” Julia snapped. No, we obviously came for a through spa treatment. Hop to it, pool boy. “Do you have someone who can help her not bleed out or are you just wasting our time?”

The two elven guards glared at them before saying something softly in a smooth unknown language. Julia grit her teeth, feeling herself sway dangerously. Merrill was a lot heavier than she had been an hour ago.

“Fine, you are allowed,” the other elf said, frown making the lines on his face seem angry. “But we
will be keeping an eye on you, shem."

"Why don't you..." Julia caught herself, swallowing back the insults. Just get Merrill to a healer. "Thank you."

Her vision narrowed slightly as she passed the guards towards red sails that appeared over rocky pillars. The path opened into a clearing, almost bowl-like with the higher rock faces around them. Julia half-dragged Merrill around them only to find a small armada of wheeled boats in front of her.

*What the...*

"The Keeper will..." Merrill struggled to catch her breath and Julia put her wonder at the absurdity aside.

The closer they got to the wooden structures, the more elves that appeared. They all stared at her, some with hostility and others merely curious. None of them moved to help her with the clearly injured woman.

Merrill's foot snagged on something in the center of the clearing between wheeled boats and they went down, Julia managing to turn enough to catch the woman. The hard ground still hurt though when she hit it with the weight of two bodies and Julia's head swam.

"Where is your Keeper? We need her... now!" The elves moved then, eyes flicking to the structure at the apex of the oval space. A word from a nearby elf called out, foreign.

The shaking began in her arms and for a moment, Julia thought it was only her limbs tired from overwork. Then the tremors traveled down to her legs and she knew that she was not responsible for this.

Merrill was seizing.

Whites of eyes flickered beneath roving lids, lips parting and then closing. Julia gripped her. "Merrill! Quit this... you can't... Merrill!"

"What happened here?" A silver-haired female elf dropped into the edge of her vision, pale hands reaching to touch the younger elf's forehead and wrist.

"Arrow... wound on the abdomen," Julia pulled her legs out from underneath, holding Merrill down as if that could make her seizures stop and green eyes to appear again.

Wrinkles tightened around the woman's face and she rose to her feet. "Pol, Ahna, help me get Merrill into my araval."

Limbs came from everywhere, hesitating before grabbing Merrill. They carried her by her armpits and feet to the apex wagon as the seizures slowed. The elves that had gathered at the commotion didn't disperse as the pale figure disappeared from view, merely shifting their gaze to the sole human.

Julia swore softly and pressing her hand against the dirt, got to her feet to follow after the one person she knew here. Her legs might as well have been half-cooked noodles for how steady they were.

The interior of wagon was small and rustic. Strange things hung from the walls, bits of animals, plants, and objects that looked like if you touched them, they would turn to dust. A mixture of a hunter's wood cabin and an antique store, bare minimum light from the doorway showing her what was beyond.
The so-called Keeper led them to a mat where they carefully lowered down Merrill till she was lying, if not comfortably, at least on a solid surface. Merrill breathed out slowly, seizures gone but with little energy for anything else.

After a second with no further commands, the two helper elves slipped past Julia, that passing taking up much of the width of the structure. The Keeper had dropped to her knees, hand on Merrill's forehead.

"What attacked her?"

"Slavers," Julia said without hesitation. "They ambushed us on our way here."

A frown but the woman continued her gentle examination, pushing the damp strands back from Merrill's face.

The silence of the dying filled the wagon, and Julia shifted, quiver and bow a weighty reminder on her back.

"We gave her couple potions, I think that’s what helped her make it this far but she’s still lost a lot of blood."

Not even looking at her, the Keeper nodded, “Thank you for your help, I have it from here if you want to get some food and drink. I'm sure you are tired from your long journey. Merrill will be well taken care of.”

A dismissal? Facial muscles stiffened as anger sparked to life in her chest. Climbing up all those hills, breathing in dirt and the smell of dead bodies, sweat staining her clothes… all to be kicked out when it became important. She wasn’t some kind of pack-mule.

Julia pasted a medium smile on her face, crouching down so she and the Keeper were at eye-level.

“Your thoughtfulness is appreciated, but Merrill needs to be healed before I will leave her for a snack.”

The older female’s lips twitched, this time up rather than down. “Very well, I am Keeper Marethari.”

“Julia Nielsen. Pleasure.”

Introductions complete, they turned their attention back to the pale elf on the ground. The Keeper tucked her fingers beneath a pointed chin, checking Merrill' pulse. Julia pulled off her bow and quiver, setting them to the side as smooth words fell from Marethari's lips, elvish or elven or whatever, as she looked at the younger female.

What is she waiting for?

“Can’t you just heal it shut?”

The Keeper’s face didn’t respond to the question, attention focused on her patient. “I know a moderate amount of healing. I can make sure the wound is less serious but her body will still need to do the work.”

Fingers worked their way to the ties keeping Merrill’s tunic-dress together. After a second, Julia added hers as well, pulling apart the cloth so they were able to get the first layer of fabric off. A knife appeared at some point to make the ripping easier so they could see the wound.
The potions had done their work and slowed if not completely stopped the bleeding. Julia remembered to breathe as the her nails came back red. *Still bleeding then.* Merrill’s chest continued to rise shallowly, air coming out in a rasp. Where was Anders when they actually needed him?

Probably ranting in some corner about mage’s rights without actually doing anything to improve the situation.

“Keep pressure on the injury. I’m going to put together a paste to cover it with,” the Keeper rose to her feet in a single smooth movement.

It took a full second for Julia to comprehend that the woman wanted her to put her hands back into the mess of flesh and liquid. That had to be unsanitary, maybe if she had rubber gloves... but Merrill was already not doing well. What would denying her help do? *If Merrill doesn’t make it…*

Julia cut the thought off before it could finish and instead pressed her hands against the red rose of color on Merrill’s side. It squished between her fingers. Julia’s breath shuddered as fingers slide further down than skin level. *How hard am I supposed to push? Too much could hurt the elf further but weren’t chest compressions for CPR supposed to break ribs?*

Tiredness pressed against the sides of her head. Hiking around the Wounded Coast, fleeing zombies, and half-carrying a wounded elf had taken its toll that her normal exercise routine hadn’t prepared her for.

A shadow fell over Merrill and the Keeper dropped back down to her knees beside her, a small black bowl in her hands. A rotting earthy smell fogged the air and Julia forced her senses to focus on the body. *Not matter how revolting that concoction looks.* At least her gag reflex wasn’t checking in, a reminder that she hadn’t had anything to eat since that bread Hawke threw at her on their way out of the city.

The extra carbs proved useful after all.

At the direction of the Keeper, Julia removed her hands and breathed through her mouth as the woman began to spread careful layers of the wound. The pungent stench spread its way to the back of her throat, bitter flavor unavoidable. *What did she put in that?*

Once a thick, frosting like layer of paste covered the worst of the wound, the older woman put the bowl aside and grabbed a long stick from behind them. *Not a stick…. A staff.*

Fear, familiar and strange, tightened her legs. *Run or stay?* Face the terrors that magic could bring or make the smart decision and get out of there before a demon took control? A look at Merrill’s face made the decision for her.

*I am an idiot.* She didn’t know this Keeper and Merrill indicated that they weren’t on the best of terms. While it didn’t sound so bad that Marethari would attempt harm, perhaps having someone watch her would kept her honest.

The Keeper rested her right hand onto the clump of green, staff held loosely in her left. For a moment, nothing changed. Then the tip of the staff began to glow. Air shifted, tugging on the loose strands of Julia’s braid, and the drying blood on her hands warmed instead of cooled. The sound of her heart rose until it was a thrum in her ears, low and insistent.

*Don’t panic. Don’t panic. Don’t--*

Silence.
Words caught in the bitter taste still lingering at the back of her tongue and Julia swallowed drily. “Did... it work?”

Soft syllables answered, almost like a prayer, flowing into each other. Before Julia could even get irritated at the purposeful language barrier, it was over. Only then did the woman look at her.

“Yes, child. It did. Merrill will be fine, though she will need several days to recover.”

Several days? "And how long will it take before she is fit to travel?"

The Keeper shot her a hard look. "She needs rest, not movement. Merrill will remain here until I am satisfied that she can make it without reopening her wound."

"And if she doesn't want to be here?"

"Then she can tell me that herself. My tolerance for such remarks is less for who calls themselves Merrill's friend."

Julia jerked to a standing position, looking down at the two elves. Only one looked back.

I don't belong here.

Spinning on her heel, Julia walked out of the wagon.

Fresh air cleaned her senses out for a moment before smells of the outdoors clogged them up again. No longer in that large wheeled casket, Julia stretched her arms up. It had been like stepping into a hippie's van. You didn't know what diseases lurked.

Her palms crinkled and she brought them down to stare at the dried blood coating her hands. They had still be wet only minutes before.

Magic.

Although she was fully aware it was only in her imagination, Julia felt a chill pass through her bones. She shivered slightly but pushed forward, stepping out around the ramp towards the camp she had passed through earlier.

She need some water and soap.

Now that Merrill was not trying to actively die on her shoulders, her mind allowed the features of the scenery to be absorbed.

The camp was both larger and smaller than she expected. Land boats were scattered around in a loose arching formation. Red sails wrapped the masts, keeping the possibility of movement void.

The landscape around the camp clearly was picked due to its defensive properties. The mountain on one side and tall hill on the other lead the camp to almost feel like a spoon position. A pair of elves patrolled the top of a nearby hill, watching out for anyone who dared approach.

Not the friendliest bunch.

She was aware of, if ignoring, the looks she was getting. Elves wandered between campfires, wove fabric, and huddled smaller elves together. All seemed to be staring at her, the children especially. She met the gazes of a group of little ones, their infancy and large elf eyes combining to give them an alien appearance, sharp ears jutting out from rounded heads. A single step forward and they hide behind their caregiver, high squeals making their way across the distance.
It has been apparent before but the Dalish made it obvious enough that even those obtuse enough to think Mozart and Bach were contemporaries would realize it. Elves were a different species, not just humans with points on their ears.

Only a few of the ones watching seemed to lean towards violence, already garbed in some sort of leaf-shaped armor. Hands rested on hilts and her gaze was met with glares.

She was clearly not wanted then. *What else is new?* But by Chopin, she wasn't going back into that wooden cave until she washed her hands.

Julia tucked some hairs behind her ear with her knuckles, highlighting differences and then set forward again. A subtle ripple of movement washed out around her, elves purposely moving so their paths would not intersect with her and turning so they were both not looking at her yet able to make sure she didn't do anything sudden.

A brief wish for her bow snuffed out as Julia kept her hands loose. She didn't need a weapon to turn a bad situation worse. Despite the fact she was unarmed and surrounded by fighters, apparently she was the threat.

*Kirkwall's love of violence was everywhere it seemed, with every type of people.*

A woman yanked back a laughing child who got too close and Julia angled herself around a huddle of figures. *Where would a… Do hippies even wash?* Dipping under the edge off a ship-wagon, she paused, *more wagons,* and then kept walking till she was past the second arch of structures.

*Thedas spread out before her, the mountain cresting on her right. At this angle, she could only see a path, if it could be called that, leading up the side of the mountain, disappearing behind a swell of land. Besides that, it was just rough terrain with no evidence of sentient life.*

*Her frown was unbidden. *How do people stand to live out here?* Kirkwall was bad enough but at least there were permanent structures and a steady source of water. Camping out in the wilderness was a ridiculous waste of effort and time. If people wanted to experience nature, they should go to a park or watch a National Geographic documentary.*

*Easier and cleaner.*

*Thinking of cleanliness made the skin beyond her palms itch as well, sweat and dirt crusting over her pores. However much she would want one, there was no way she was going to take a bath out here. But they had to have *something* for clothes and bloodstained hands, right?*

*At least they don't have mirrors here.* Her mother would have a fit if she saw her now. If beauty was excellence, she could only be called decrepit.

*Knowledge of that reality forced Julia to turn back on her heel. There was nothing she could use over here to clean up with. She only took a few steps back towards the center before she paused once again.*

*A pair of elves, armored in green leaf-colored plate, stood in the opening between wagons in front of her. By the way their unnatural eyes focused on her, they weren't just on some patrol.*

*Despite the distance, Kirkwall managed to strike again.*

*Julia started walking.*

*She made it a few more feet before one of the elves, a male with thin brown hair that elongated his*
already stretched face, raised an arm to block further progress. "Hold it right there, shem."

Crossing her arms, Julia met their gazes one by one. "Are you addressing me? I can't tell for sure as I only respond to titles such as ma'am or madam rather than what can only be a derogatory term."

The lack of cowering startled them, but not enough to make them move. With features only slightly more feminine than the male's, the apparent woman of the pair narrowed her eyes.

"You are only our guest temporarily, shem. We have every right to turn you away, so I would recommend being very polite."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "One would think that as a temporary guest, you would try harder to make a good impression. Besides, I helped save a member of your clan. That should entitle to me to more than whatever this is supposed to be."

"That witch is no longer a member of our clan," the male spat.

Julia's frown grew. "You're right. Merrill is much better off where she is now. Away from you, in case I didn't make that clear."

Unfriendly expressions shifted into something harder and more personal. "You know nothing."

"I know more than you. For example, that the sky isn't really blue and cutting a string in half raises it up an octave. I didn't appreciate people in Kirkwall pretending thinking they are so clever and I definitely don't appreciate it from you. Good day," Julia said, stepping to the side and starting past them.

She didn't have anywhere she needed to be and yet she still didn't have time for this kind of nonsense.

A hand wrapped around her wrist, yanking her to a halt. The female, blue eyes glaring at her, tightened the grip. "You shem never change, thinking you own everything. That we exist to serve you"

Julia tugged her arm back but the hand held. "Don't play the victim card. If you want your situation to change, stop complaining and do something about it."

Her living bracelet hurt as it clamped down even harder, cutting off circulation. Julia glared right back at the armored elves, refusing to show the pain. "Just like Kirkwall."

"Hadan, Sesil, let her go," an older male voice spoke up and Julia turned back towards the camp to see a grey-haired elf walking slowly in their direction. In the dimming light of the sun, his facial tattoos looked like odd wrinkles.

Another pinch of pain and the hand dropped away. Julia brought the wrist to her side and refused the urge to rub feeling back into it. She would do that later. Not while these two bone-heads could get some satisfaction from it.

"Master Ilen, we were merely trying to figure out why this shem was wandering around the camp," the female assailant said smoothly.

"Is that what you asked?" Julia commented. "I must have missed that question amidst the assault."

Three pairs of annoyed gazes glanced at her and Julia stared back. At least Kirkwall was impersonally rude, like New York City at rush hour. This greeting was more like doing a
performance for a single person and being laughed at. Harder to brush off. No wonder Merrill left.

A few unintelligible words and the older elf waved her with him back towards the camp. The other two elves didn't seem to move so after a second, Julia acquiesced.

They made it past the first wagon line before this Master Ilen spoke. "You should stay in the aravel with Merrill. Most are unused to having a shem around while they sleep and it will make them uncomfortable."

"That's hardly my problem," Julia said, feeling the weight of gazes fall on her again. She rolled her shoulders but the pressure remained. "I'm not here to make people feel relaxed. I merely wish to see Merrill recovered and to wash my hands."

Lien glanced at her hands. "That may be so, but unless you want the Keeper to bow to majority opinion and kick you out for the night, you should at least attempt to be civil."

Julia's lip started to curl but then the full meaning of the words hit her. "Stay the night? I am not…" Her head jerked up. The sun had begun to fade behind the hills, turning all into shadow. She… thought they had a few more hours before dark.

*Hell, they are going to make me camp here.*

Master Ilen led her to the side of a wagon, unrecognizable compared to the rest. "You may clean up here."

A series of small wooden buckets, each filled with varying levels of water sat in rows at the base of this land-ship. *Finally.* Wasting no time, Julia crouched down and dipping her hands into the water of one of the emptier ones, scrubbed her hands. The barbarians didn't have any soap around so she more than likely still had contaminants on her skin, but at least the layer of red was gone. With no better alternative, she wiped her hands off on her skirt. *I am going to run out of dresses if this keeps up.*

When she stood, Master Ilen bore a scrunched expression. Disgust. Julia kept her own face placid, she really didn't care, and asked, "Which wagon is Merrill in?"

Master Ilen indicated one of the shapes around the center of the camp. "She is in that aravel."

Julia ignored his tone and marched around the elves that had started to gather around the campfires. The smell of cooked food wafted by her and her stomach grumbled irritable. *I can't stay here, who knows what they put in their meals?* Merrill seemed to eat much of the same food at the Hanged Man with little difficulty but that didn't mean the reverse was true.

She was not going to survive Kirkwall only to be poisoned out in some elvish gypsy camp.

No one stopped her from climbing into the shell of a house, ducking through the door. Almost immediately the smells of dirt and weeds assaulted her nose and her eyes blinked rapidly to avoid tearing up. It was darker than she remembered, the handful of candles dropped to a single one. It was next to useless, only showing the shapes of things.

Red eyes reflected back in the dark.

Julia stepped back, hand reaching back for the bow that wasn't there. Soft laughter followed from the black and an orb of white light blossomed from beyond her range of sight. Keeper Marethari held out her lit staff, Merrill lying still in front of her.
A breath and Julia walked carefully forward to kneel next to the woman who called her friend. "I'm sorry, child. I sometimes forget humans have trouble in the dark."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Julia snapped, air still missing from her lungs. It made her throat dry just thinking about it.

"It is what I said. We see better in the dark than humans do. I sometimes wonder how you get by, only being to see clearly when the sun is out."

Dryness extended to her mouth and Julia bit down on her first reaction. Instead she smiled.

"We manage. Where I come from, darkness isn't really an issue. We mute out the stars with our light."

Keeper Martha made a curious noise at that. "I remember the note you sent. You say you are from a different world, yet you don't look like any creature of the Fade that I have encountered."

"I am from a different world, a different planet or perhaps dimension. My practice room filled with water and then I found myself in Kirkwall's bay. Merrill seems to think that you might have knowledge on how to get me back."

At the mention of the younger elf, the Keeper and then Julia's eyes flickered down to the resting form. Her chest rose and fell evenly with each breath and her face wasn't no longer plaster-white. She didn't look good but she was better.

"In the times of Arlathan, the ancient elves used mirrors to travel great distances in moments but I never heard of travel to other worlds. I hope you haven't gotten your hopes up, for I doubt I have any new information to offer you."

Julia focused on Merrill's face and the life-indicating movements she made. They came a long way for a few sentences. However, she was too tired to get truly mad at this point. Maybe she'd have to explain to the Keeper when your answer was that short, just to send it with the note. But not tonight. Tonight… she would swallow back her emotions until they didn't sting so much.

It's not like it was something she hadn't heard before. She was stuck here. No matter who she spoke to, there was no changing that. The bell of hope which had been reverberating in the back of her mind, damped against her chest. Silence reigned .

"Thank you for your honesty," Julia said. "It appears I may have to impeach on your hospitality for the night. When Merrill has recovered tomorrow, we will head out."

The Keeper didn't bother with disagreeing with her even though Julia could practically hear the argument for Merrill staying. Instead she stood, orb of light at the end of her staff shifting the layers of dark. "You are welcome to stay till tomorrow. I will see about getting you something to eat as well as an escort back to Kirkwall."

She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I ask that you stay in the aravel tonight. We have not been treated well by humans in the past and I fear your presence might make the clan uneasy."

A puff of air escaped Julia's nose in a bitter half-laugh. "No worries there. I have no intention on venturing back out there."

The older woman nodded and as she made her way past Julia to the door, relit a few candles.

Then it was just Julia and Merrill.
Noise from outside their wooden walls trickled in but inside it was quiet, Merrill's breathing practically silent. Julia pressed her hands against her legs, air burning her lungs.

*Alone. Here. For the rest of my life.* Her eyes pressed shut, closing everything away.

*What is the point? No one can hear me anyways.*

All of Julia's oxygen came out in a rush, her throat making an undignified noise as she bent forward. Fingers dug into her covered skin then curled into fists to control the shaking. Small chokes of air rubbed against her vocal cords and Julia curled in on herself a bit further.

Something thumped against the wood outside her makeshift shelter.

Julia straightened instantly, breathing turning normal as elegant lines of hands brushed any traces of moisture from her face. Two beats later when the Keeper stepped into wagon, a perfect smile greeted her.

"Thank you. I trust none of this is dangerous to humans?" She accepted the bowl of strange solid items. Vegetables probably and a lump of… meat? She could smell basic spices, some of which she recognized from Bodahn and others unfamiliar.

*Well, at least it's not a stew, then there could literally be anything in it.*

"Not that I am aware of. Our systems are not too different in that regard."

Julia nodded with a smile and resigned herself to not eating properly till they were back in Kirkwall. "Now, I assume this is where I will be sleeping tonight?" A quick study of the room had only revealed a hammock in the back.

"Yes. I have a blanket for you, it gets cold at nights here. I will be here as well to make sure Merrill doesn't need anything," the Keeper said as if sleeping near a stranger was nothing. She tugged a blanket out of a chest and passed it over.

Julia took it carefully, the elves seemed relatively clean-*cleaner than many in Kirkwall*- but that didn't mean they didn't have bugs. The fabric was soft and thick, well made. "I appreciate your assistance." A large part of her wanted to complain about the conditions they expected her to endure but reality was strong enough to keep her mouth closed.

Elves didn't seem to believe in comfort.

The Keeper left to join the clan in their nightly activities and Julia was alone with an unconscious person again. She poked at her food, taking a few bites of the vegetable shape before giving up at the strange flavors. She may have only had one meal today but that didn't mean she would put that in her system.

No matter that her stomach disagreed with her assessment.

Time passed at a lentando tempo, moments stretching exponentially. Julia shifted off her knees at one point, putting her back against the slightly curving wall. Her thoughts moved at a sluggish pace as she forced the main part of her brain through several Classical and Romantic era pieces, fingers playing soundless notes.

It was a desperate attempt at distraction, but without her violin, she didn't have much of a choice.

Eventually her eyes closed as the candles burned low and the music stopped.
A creak of wood shot Julia to a sitting position. She hissed as her body groaned with sheer stiffness. *Was I run over by a bulldozer?* Every muscle hurt and even some bones from laying on a hard surface.

*I need a hot tub and a hot masseuse.*

At the other side of the wagon, Keeper Mary-something pressed her hand against Merrill's skin and the younger elf stirred, blurred words slipping out. Julia gripped the blanket that somehow had crept up over her entire form as eyes opened, blinking slowly.

"Oh, hello Keeper. You look tired, have you been getting enough sleep recently?"

It was remarkable how two sentences could drain her. She sighed as the Keeper said that she had been watching over her the last night.

"Oh! I remember getting hurt, Julia brought me here and… I don’t know what happened after that. I think I’m much better now. Oh, Julia! You are here too."

Julia leaned back against the side of the wagon as Merrill's cheerful voice washed over her. *She almost died and still acts like all is sunny in Thedas.* Irrepressible idiot.

"You will not leave until I am satisfied you are well," the Keeper practically snapped. Julia's eyes opened- *they had been shut?* - to look at the pair. Merrill had gotten paler than she had been mere minutes ago and the last remnants of sleep left Julia's mind.

"She is an adult, if you haven't conveniently forgotten. Merrill can make her own decisions about her health and wellbeing. You may advise but you can't order. Not anymore."

The older woman straightened to give Julia a death-stare, distant politeness gone. "Merrill is my responsibility. Even if she's left the clan, it is my job to make sure she is taken care of."

"No, Keeper. Julia is right," Merrill's soft voice cut between them like sharp note. "I make my own decisions, no matter how hard they are." She struggled to push herself up and both the Keeper and Julia leaned forward to help her sit.

"Child, you are still hurt," the Keeper said quietly, large eyes glued to Merrill's face.

"It's not too bad," Merrill disagreed, smiling at Julia. "I'm sorry for making you worry."

*She's sorry? For what? Not dodging an arrow she didn't see?* Julia held the words back and instead simply nodded. There would be time to digest that later.

The older elf stood suddenly. She looked down at the pair of them, as if she was going to say something, but instead she just shook her head and walked out of the wagon without a word. They stared at the opening for a long moment without speaking.

"You have a Keeper there," Julia commented.

"What?"

"Nevermind," Julia waved off green-eyed confusion. "Do you think you'd be able to travel back to Kirkwall today? Apparently Anders is good at healing so maybe he could get you to rights again."

Merrill hummed, stretching fractionally to the side. She winced. "I can make it back, as long as I don't have to fight anything. Does that happen very much out here? It seems like everytime I go..."
walking, something wants to fight."

Now it as Julia's turn to wince. For once, the elf was right. They would never make it back on their own, even if somehow they knew the way.

"Your Keeper mentioned giving me an escort. Perhaps it would be for the best if we took her up on that."

"That sounds like a good idea," Merrill agreed, smiling. "Like breakfast, that is also a good idea."

Julia glanced down to where a blanket covered the worst of the damage. She knew too little about medicine to guess if it was smart to eat so recently after being injured in the abdomen. And if magic was involved… Surely if Merrill's organs had been hit, they would have found out before now?

Unless that's what the seizures were indicating.

If she hadn't missed her shot, she wouldn't even need to ask that question.

"Are you alright, Julia? You seem a bit pale," Merrill said, her own skin still fairer than normal.

"I'm fine," Julia said without falter, pushing herself to a standing position. The movement reminded her body that it was unhappy with her, aches rising to the surface. It took more effort than it should have to keep any of it from her face. "I will return with something for you to eat."

A few careful steps took Julia out off the dark of the wagon into the light of a new day. Sunshine burst over her head like a bat and she shadowed her eyes with her hand. It… was later than she thought. She couldn't tell how long she slept but with the sun a good distance over the horizon, it had to be at least mid-morning.

Had there been something in the food to keep her asleep?

Cool fear slowed her movements even as her stomach reminded her that it needed more substance and soon. It didn't seem likely. She didn't know these people, but as things went, she wasn't going to trust them to restring her violin. Even if they hadn't drugged her.

The daytime camp had a sparser population than the evening, only the old and younger lingering. Everyone of a workable age seemed to be doing something, spinning, cooking, or carving long thing sticks.

All seemed devoted in pretending that she wasn't there. Which didn't bother her, New Yorkers could ignore just about anything up to and including a flute in the ear.

"Julia, may I speak with you for a few moments?"

Marethari.

"I am not going to talk Merrill out of leaving," Julia said, eyes traveling over the camp. Where did they keep the food?

"It is not that. I haven't been completely honest with you and I fear that has put your opinion against me."

Now Julia did turn towards the older woman. Her hair was neat and her robes unwrinkled, like she had slept well. Acutely aware of her own disheveled state and general dirtiness, Julia tried to take charge of the conversation.
"What are you talking about?"

Marethari met her eyes and then jerked her head back. They left the common area, exiting the camp to stand in the clear. The only elf visible was at least 10 yards away, patrolling the road.

"There is some magic I can try. It won't help you get home but it might offer us hints on how you got here."

"Why didn't you offer this last night?" Julia asked. Why should I trust you now?

The Keeper's gaze was unfocused. "Because Merrill was in critical condition and I couldn't afford to waste mana. You were a self-centered human and I didn't owe you anything…. But this morning I realized that despite everything, you do care for my old First, in your own way. You deserve honesty at least."

That… wasn't what she expected. The sincerity in the words were clear. Julia took the time to consider what she said before she spoke.

"What exactly is this thing you can try?"

Lips pinched together. "A seeking spell of sorts. It is used on artifacts from our past to try to determine what magic was used on them. I could cast this on you and see if there are any traces of spellcast still present."

It sounded simple enough, but magic rarely was. "What would this spell do to me?"

"Nothing. You would barely notice it being cast. Only I would be able to see any differences."

A small risk then but a risk nonetheless. It didn't sound like something that could summon demons but her knowledge of the arcane was limited to waving a wand and shouting 'Abracadabra'. Conductors' batons had created more magic in her experience.

"Fine. Do it."

The staff was already pulled off the Keepers back, finding its place in wrinkled but strong hands. That slab of wood is more dangerous than all the arrows and swords in Aveline's arsenal. Julia kept her airflow normal as the branch-like end of Marethari's staff lightened.

A blink and the world changed, like she now wore green-tinted glasses. The sky, the dirt, her skin itself, all now a pale green. The Keeper had faded to a nearly ghost-like appearance. Julia opened her mouth but no words came out. She pushed air through her vocal cords but it was if someone had muted her. Simple as a button on a remote.

Barely notice it, my chinrest. What happened?

Marethari raised her arms in slow motion but a different movement caught Julia's eyes. A figure, shapeless in a hooded robe, faced her direction. They were not tinted green like the diminished surroundings, instead, their robes were a stark black.

"Who…" Julia tried to shape the words but still nothing. ..are you?

An arm rose, gloved hand pointing directly at her and Julia's back ached. The pain spread out across her back, base of her neck to her tailbone and the all plains in between.

What is Marethari doing? The woman's hands lowered, light of the staff fading.
The figure stood several meters away now, jumping the span of a dozen lengths in a second. A pillar of black. Yet Julia's back still hurt, crescendoing to a dull burn.

This person was responsible for her coming to Kirkwall.

Julia couldn't explain how she knew it, but the fact came from deep, the place that told her what note was being played or when someone lied when they said that they loved you.

Hot fury flashed through her core, pushing the sensation of pain away from her mind. This was the cause of her all troubles. How dare they pulled her from her life? Her career?

How. Dare. They.

Foot pushing through a swamp of invisible mud, Julia stepped forward, teeth pulled back in a scowl. The figure faced her direction without falter. Of all the tone-deaf--

"Are you alright, Julia?" Marethari looked at her curiously, mouth moving at normal speed in realist landscape.

The green tint was gone and her kidnapper left with it. Like they had never existed at all.

"I am fine. What did you discover?"

Unperturbed Marethari explained that she had found very little. Traces of previous magic but nothing substantial.

"... I thought I found something at the very end, but then it disappeared. It was a long shot."

Julia's gaze lingered on the spot the figure had stood. Her back tingled slightly, a testament that she hadn't made up the entire thing.

"Thank you, Keeper Marethari. I appreciate the effort. I really should go back to Merrill."

"As you wish, child. May Fen'harel not haunt your steps."

Julia nodded and putting one foot in front of the other, strode back off to the camp.

Minutes later, a warm loaf of bread in her hands, Julia approached the lead araval. She almost made it when a rukas rose from the far side of the camp.

"I'm just looking for this woman who could irritate the Maker himself and this elf who could get lost in her shirt. You definitely know the second one, you kicked her out to fend for herself after all. Not that I'm angry on her behalf or anything, but I might not do anything if a horde of slobbering mabari came after you."

Julia almost dropped the bread, swerving around an araval and another one to stare at madness personified. Varric motioned with his hands as he tried to calm down the elves with the spears and behind him, Anders looked around curiously. The dwarf's efforts went to waste as Hawke grinned and pushed past the guards to stride up to Julia.

"Gema! There you are! Decided to visit the Dalish without me? How rude. I am going to add more to your rent for the inconvenience of having to come back for you. Oh, is that for me?"
Before the woman could act, Julia yanked the hand with the bread back. "You left me with an injured woman in the middle of nowhere surrounded by things that wanted us dead. Now you walk in here like it's a fucking catwalk?"

Varric laughed as the guards let him by as well. "In her defense, she wanted to go out last night, but I convinced her that the Wounded Coast was not the place to be after dark."

"Oh really?" Julia's burst of anger was still hot but smaller. She was just too tired to properly chew Hawke out for all the life-threatening activities. The image of a black figure haunted the space behind her eyelids, making all other problems fade in comparison. "At least you were somewhat useful. Anders, can you heal Merrill enough for her to walk out of here on her own?"

"More than likely," the healer replied and Julia took that for what it was, turning her back on Hawke. "Great, then let's get started."

Against all logic, she actually wanted to be back in Kirkwall. At least there everything pretended to make sense.

Chapter End Notes

"Under the cities lies a heart made of ground
But the humans will give no love."

A/N* I don't think I've said it enough, thank you all for your support! Commenters, kudos-ers, and lurkers, you're all amazing for taking the time to read this fic.
Kirkwall appeared before them like a cancer, growing larger rapidly. Even at this distance, it was not a pretty city, it wouldn't end up on any postcards. What might have once been a white had turned grey. Smoke from hundreds of home fires rose above the manmade structures, increasing the impression of grime.

"There it is," Varric declared louder than he needed for such a small company. "Our own City of Chains."

The pain in her fingers brought the strawman in front of her into attention, stray bits of hay turning crystal clear. The edge of the string dug into her flesh as she steadied the point of the arrow.

Release and hit.

"Camping with the Dalish? Lucky, they never let me spend the night."

"If they did, you'd either end up accidentally burning the camp down or getting drunk and breaking something sacred."

Merrill perked up slightly, "That would be impressive. The artifacts that survived this long are very durable." When four pairs of eyes stared at her, she clarified. "Not that I'm saying you should break them, I'm just impressed that you could."

"Well, don't get too excited, she hasn’t done anything yet, Daisy."

Julia lowered the bow, muscles muttering at her. She hadn’t practiced this much since she got second place in that violin contest in the sixth grade. Different bow and more strings, but the still the same emotion to be channeled into something productive. Failure was not acceptable.

"I'm thiiirrsssstyyyy," Hawke moaned, sitting down next to one of the bodies.

Varric didn't look up from where where he was padding down his own fallen assailant. "What happened to the canteen I told you to bring?"

"It got stabbed and then I threw it at dog."

"You can share mine, Hawke," Anders spoke up from checking Merrill over again.

Hawke stopped her squirming to flutter her eyelashes at the mage. "No need for that indirect stuff, you are more than welcome to just kiss me."

Julia groaned and tugged her arrow from where it had tried to bury itself in the ground.

The next arrow struck the other side of the target. If that had been a mercenary, they would no longer pose much of a threat. But only if they were holding still at a dozen paces.

Something dark moved in the corner of her vision and she jerked before she could help herself. A crow flew into the sky, a few stray feathers drifting down.

"You alright, Freckles?" Varric asked, offering her his skin of water.
How many bacteria does that have? Julia didn't want to know the answer though she had a feeling she already did. Her tongue stuck to the roof her mouth and her throat ached. She would just need to wait till she got back to the manor and water that she knew had been properly boiled.

"Everything is fine, Varric."

Lining up another shot, Julia concentrated on her breathing. According to Sebastian, the release of air should be in line with the release of the arrow. It was one of the slight tricks which turned a good archer into a great archer. With practice of course.

Metal bit into the black ring of the outer bullseye. Julia relaxed her muscles and cupping the curve of the bow, flexed her aching fingers. Another thousand times like that and perhaps she would be able to hit an opponent in a fight.

Coaxing her arm back into position, Julia pulled another arrow from the quiver on the ground next to her. Look where you want the arrow to go, place it against the string, then when you are ready, draw.

Julia pulled in a breath, string stretching away from its wooden frame at the same time.

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard over guilt."

The arrow hit below the target, right where the legs would have met the torso. A fight ending shot if nothing else. Am I so focused that even Aveline can sneak up on me?

"Thank you for the advice, but I am not one of your guards. I don't feel guilty about things beyond my control."

The guard captain looked down at the quiver and the straw man who had been turned into a balding porcupine. "I don't think you do. Hawke should have known better than to travel the Wounded Coast with so small a party and she will hear about it tonight at the Hanged Man."

"Great, I'm sure that will put her on the straight and narrow," Julia said. A thump and the thousand times she needed to hit the target went down to 999. "Don't worry on my behalf, I won't be going out with Hawke again.

Raise, pull, hold, and steady… Fire. The arrow struck the dummy’s armpit and the 9s in her head glared at her.

“Don’t blame yourself for what happened to Merrill.”

“I don’t,” Julia said before Aveline could offer any useless platitudes. “I blame Hawke.”

Another arrow went wide as she lost control of the tranquility in her arm. She glared at the offending limb as the muscles threatened to strike. Instead of settling negotiations, Julia stretched her arms over her head. The change stopped the worst of the shaking and she reached for another arrow.

“Give me the bow,” the guard captain demanded suddenly, hand jutting at her.

Julia deliberately set the arrow against the string. "Why do you want it?" After a second's rest, she raised and released.

A hit if not a well-placed one.

"This is the guard's practice yard. I don't have to let you use it."
Julia considered it for just long enough to not seem like she was bowing to pressure then she handed Aveline the bow. If she were honest, her practice was done for the day anyways.

"Now, come with me to my office. I have some cream for your hands."

Candy cane-colored fingers wiggled back at her as Julia glanced down. Her right hand just didn't have the same type of calluses that her left did. It would have to adjust.

"There is no need, it is better if I let the calluses develop on their own."

The guard captain stared at her pointedly and Julia sighed, grabbing her quiver with her left hand. The woman was too used to giving orders. Or perhaps Julia didn't care enough to argue over moot points. She had much better things to occupy her time with. She had only played her violin for an hour or so today.

Bow jerking back and forth with the motion of her arm, Aveline marched towards the Keep, Julia trailing behind. Her eyes inevitably fell on the figure in front of her. *Aveline's shoulders really are broad. She walks like a man too. That explains a lot.*

They made it inside before the captain began her lecture.

"Julia, you aren't a soldier and before you came to Kirkwall, you probably had never been in a fight in your life. There is no shame in not following Hawke around. You don't need to get killed to prove something."

"I have nothing to prove."

Aveline didn't even hesitate. "Then why are you practicing so hard?"

"Why would I stop at simply being rudimentary?" Julia said with a flip in her voice that usually ended a conversation with silence. The touch of arrogance helped. "That's what separates the player from the soloist, the guard from the knight, the child smacking their hands against the keys from the pianist. It is how much you care about yourself."

The medieval version of a police chief paused for a split second to stare at her. Then she continued walking as if she never stopped. "You and Hawke are more alike than either of you will admit."

Julia’s back tightened into position.

"Who the hell—"

"Guard Captain!" A clone in guard armor clanked up to them, breath hissing through their face mask. "The Seneschal was looking for you about the increase in spending for the guard."

Aveline made a face. "Is he still here?"

"No, Guard Captain. He said he would be back later for a full report."

They had barely gotten rid of that pest when they turned the corner to go down into the guard headquarters and another demand greeted them. This time the guard didn't have a mask on.

"Guard Captain, we have some several new recruits waiting for your approval and Lynette requested backup for a small riot that broke out in the Lowtown Market."

A glance and a sweep of her arm indicated that Aveline wanted her to continue into her office so she could deal with this.
Aveline’s office was a mixture of clean and efficient. A decorative set of armor stood on the side of one wall and a bookshelf on another. A large wooden desk with an uncomfortable-looking chair took up perhaps a quarter of the floor space. Most intimidating of all was a weapons rack opposite the desk. Large swords, short swords, curved sticks with a metal point, and things that looked right out of a nerd’s medieval fair costume. All of the weapons shone with care and use.

"I'm sorry about that, let me grab you the cream." Aveline strode into her office like a storm, marching over to her desk and jerking open a drawer. She pulled out a small clay jar about the size of a tea cup. "Here. This should help your hands; I keep it around for the new guards."

Like I'd trust any medicine here. Julia still hadn’t decided if it would be worth it to attempt to dye her hair here. Her roots were beginning to show which was a disaster in itself but who knew what sort of damaging products they had in medieval dye? She really couldn't afford to harm her hair.

"Thank you," she said after a long second. Aveline nodded and dropped down into her chair, picking up a feather and parchment.

Julia waited another moment before asking, " Aren't you going to give me my bow back?"

"You can have it tomorrow."

"I'll have it now."

Eyes shot up to meet hers and Julia raised an eyebrow. It was her bow and Aveline had no right to take it. She had played this game for long enough. The guard captain frowned and opened her mouth.

"Guard Captain, Lady Ceritis is here about her flowers again."

Aveline’s mouth shut hard and the bow came up to rest in the desk. Julia took it back. "Thank you. Please show her in."

Julia dipped out of the office just as an older woman in faded blue started chattering from even beyond the doorway.

"Guard Captain! You assure me that my flowers would be safe from bandits with your people around--"

The door shut and she was alone amongst the clones again. One or two faces were vaguely familiar, in an image in a crowd kind of way. Nothing that would keep her here any longer. Julia slipped her bow into its place at her back and spun towards the steps.

She had places to be anyways.

The walk back to the manor was uneventful, stone birds watching her from their perches. If it would do any good, she would shoot the smug beaks off their faces.

I wish I had a face to go with at least. Julia tried to scrub the thought out before it caused any trouble but it was too late. Over 24 hours had passed since her encounter in the Emerald City of a world and she still couldn't fully pull her mind from it. Who are they and what do they want?

Questions that she couldn't even begin to find the answers to.
"Anders, I understand you have a proper magical education?"

"If you mean being imprisoned in the Circle most of my life, than yes. I suppose you can say I am educated. What did you want to know?"

"Does…. a green world mean anything in particular to you? I heard one of the Dalish talking about it."

Anders tapped his staff against the ground as they began their way up yet another hill. "That sounds a bit like the Fade, it has green sky at least."

The Fade. Julia had heard that proper noun thrown around before but she had never been interested enough to pin down what it meant. "Tell me about the Fade."

Julia sighed and tilted her head up to look at the perfectly normal blue sky overhead. A few wisps of clouds stretched in the spaces between buildings. Anders' explanation had done next to nothing to helping her understand what she had seen. Dreams, demons, and the destroying of a city. Little to explain how her waking mind went there and saw a person.

Or maybe it wasn't a person. How would she know the difference? Maybe the next time I go to the Hanged Man--

Julia cut herself off there. Why did she have to go back to that outhouse of a tavern? Anders could just come up to Hightown to visit. Safer and cleaner.

Overreaching vines greeted her back to her temporary home. The door handle was cool against her palm and the stale air she released rushed out into the expanse of sky. A soak in the tub followed by several hours of practicing awaited her. Normal, peaceful practicing.

"It's a pretty stick," a stilted voice said from beyond her vision of the entryway. Julia tried to blink away the gloom of the interior as she continued forward. What the heck? Was Hawke trying to teach Sandal to fetch? Wait… is that in his hands…?

The dwarf tugged at the hairs attached to the long smooth wood, greasy large fingers rubbing off the resin. Julia stilled further.

"Sandal, you put that down right now." Her voice came out low and loud. Unmuted.

"The stick has hair? Is the stick alive?" He twisted the screw and plucked the tightened hairs. \textit{The idiot is going to ruin my bow!}

"Give me my bow, Sandal."

He ignored her. Julia started forward but the dwarf saw her coming and sprinted away, going up the stairs far quicker than someone with his build should be able to. She had barely stepped into the main hall when Sandal reached the top of the stairs. He now had several feet of height and a railing to protect him from her.

Not that she would be able to hit him from here anyways. No matter how much she was tempted, she wasn’t going to be like Hawke and respond with violence simply because it was an option available to her.

"Bodahn!” Julia called. “Bodahn, come out here! Your son needs to learn a lesson.”
Nothing but silence answered her. The one time when the nosy man wasn’t underfoot it was when she actually needed him. *Of all the...* She would need to talk to Leandra about getting different servants. These two were definitely not cutting it.

Which left her with the matter of getting her equipment back. *How to entice Sandal to just hand it over?* Some papers were spread on the table near the door, weighed down by a rock. Julia snatched the small stone and held it up to the dwarf.

“Hey Sandal! Look at this rock! Isn’t it pretty?” The blond mop of hair didn’t even turn to the sound of her voice. He fumbled with her bow. Julia’s fingers clenched around the smooth stone. *Ignore me will he....* Pulling her arm back, Julia aimed and snapped it forward. The wall behind the dwarf cracked with the impact.

Sandal’s head rose for a second and then he went back to plucking the hairs.

*If he removed a single thread from that bow I am going to kill him.* Julia gathered her skirt in her hand and marched towards the stairs.

Knock, knock.

“Who the hell is coming now?” Julia hissed, twisting back to the entrance. A few steps and she swung the door open. “What do you want?”

Green eyes blinked and then began to fill with salty tears. “I’m sorry! I was looking for Serah Hawke’s house but I must have gotten the wrong one. Please forgive me!” The elven woman bent, crouching over her knees with arms raised over her head.

Of course it was a crybaby, not someone who could be reasoned with.

“This is Hawke’s place. What are you trying to sell?” Julia asked, turning to see if she could catch a glance of Sandal out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't but if he was smart, he would hold very still.

“I don’t understand, mistress.”


“Serah Hawke said I could work for her. I am a good worker, I’ll try my best to please you.”

Julia stared at the unmarked elf. Hadn't Hawke mentioned something like this? Inviting a stranger she met in a cave into her house... The retort the woman gave became suddenly clear. "Like you?"

She hadn't been interested in the differences between the two cases.

Julia groaned, rubbing at the space between her eyes. Perhaps this slip of a woman could replace Bodahn. A coat rake could replace Sandal.

“Hawke’s not home. But if you want to work here, you need to do something for me.”

“Anything, mistress.” The words were like a prayer from elf’s lips. What kind of a pit had Hawke drug this one up from? Would it be that hard to hire a servant who actually knew what they were doing? Leandra was never going be able to raise her head in dignified company if their servants were as useful as a clarinet in a jazz band.
Julia stepped back so the woman could see into the manor. “The dwarf at the top of the stairs has something of mine. I need you to help me get it back.”

“And then I won’t get kicked out?”

_This is getting old._ “How would I know? But if you are going to come in, I’m not going to wait.”

The elf stepped past the door frame. “I will help, mistress.”

“Great. Now, I think we just need to corner him. The problem is, he is fast for someone so thick. Our best bet would be to approach him from both sides to trap him in the doorway to Hawke’s room. That’s the large indent straight ahead from here on the second floor.”

Although her mouth pressed itself white, the female nodded and Julia lead the way up the stairs. Sandal stood from his crouched position as they approached. The hairs on her bow were loosened to an amount she hadn’t seen since elementary school orchestra. She was lucky that they hadn’t just fallen out yet.

That would be a pain to put back, but at least nothing was broken. Yet.

“We just need to move slowly. Last thing my bow needs is for him to get scared and snap it,” Julia whispered to the woman, who just looked confused. If they treated the dwarf like a feral animal, perhaps this would all work out.

Holding her arm out like a conductor about to begin after an especially long caesura, she stopped the elf as they reached the landing level with Sandal. This would need to be careful and well-thought out. Practically gentle.

Unless the abecedarian developed wings in the next few minutes, he only had a few options of where he could go. The stairs, which they currently blocked, or one of bedrooms. If he went down the main hallway that could get messy but at least he would be trapped. The windows were too high off the ground for her to reach, not to mention someone who barely reached her shoulders.

This was simple then.

“You stay here, make sure he doesn’t get down the stairs,” Julia said as Sandal contaminated the hairs. Someone lit up inside of her as he plucked one, spreading uncomfortable warmth throughout her body. “I will corner him and retrieve my bow.”

The elf didn’t move, which for her purposes worked well enough. It was up to her now. She just needed to outsmart a half-wit. If she couldn’t do this, she might as well give up her job as a profession musician and do something completely pedestrian, like work in a office.

Her steps were slow, even as Sandal lost interest in the hair he plucked. It dangled off the end of the bow, waving at her. The muscles of her face hurt as she kept everything smooth and petrous. It would all be for nothing if she scared the dwarf into doing something drastic. She just needed to stay tranquil…

Fat fingers plucked another hair and Julia lost whatever sense of calm she had.

“You’re going to regret that,” she said, darting forward. But the dwarf was too fast and as she reached out to grab him, he ran past her.

Julia spun around. If that elf didn’t do her one job… Her thoughts sputtered out as Sandal ran straight towards the railing, not even turning towards the stairs.
“Shit!” He was going to jump! Julia sprinted forward, needing to get there before the dwarf… Jumped…

In the space of less than three seconds, the little man climbed up onto the banister, wobbled, and leapt straight onto chandelier. Something hit the ground near the railing as the chandelier swung forward, Sandal hanging limply from the edge like so much laundry.

Her hands slammed into the same railing Sandal had stood on a moment before, reducing the impact to the rest of her body. The chandelier came back towards her but it was still too far for her to attempt grab anything.

How the hell was she supposed to get her bow down from there?

“How the hell was she supposed to get her bow down from there?” The elf woman called. Julia didn’t spare her a glance, it was obvious what she was trying to point out. Sandal wasn’t staying still any longer. Shifting slightly, he let go with one hand, hairs of her bow wrapped under his fingers. With the confidence of an idiot, he swung himself to the next section of metal, arms splayed like a V over his head.

He was going to fall and land on her bow.

If that imbecile breaks my bow… She couldn’t even think clearly enough to determine the exact cruelty of his punishment. She needed to get him down.

Sandal let go with an arm and then brought them together again, farther away from her this time. Where did he think he was going?

She needed a ladder or a long broom, something that could reach him.

Like an arrow.

Or a rubber band. Julia's eyes fell on a brown circle on the floor that Sandal dropped as he climbed onto the banister. Her hair band…. Which she hadn't seen in weeks.

Did Sandal steal that too?

Bodahn and I will have words.

Julia bent down and snatched the shape off the ground. It still had some elasticity to it, stretching with the pull of her fingers. Not great but it would work. It had to. She had two bows in her violin case, but if she lost this one, she was that much closer to not being able to produce music. Which was like death in a way.

She aimed and felt her already worn arm muscles protest at the continuing exertion. Sandal rocked back and forth before heaving himself up and around the bars. Feet planted firmly amongst the ever-lit candles, Sandal looked like some hideous creature, a short Phantom of the Opera.

“Last chance, Sandal!” Julia called. The dwarf didn’t respond, curling in on himself. Fine. She had tried hard enough at staying nice. Since when had this world been nice to her? If that was the way it was going to be, fine.

She could deal with that.

Aiming carefully, Julia held her breath and released. A second later, Sandal thumped to the ground, chandelier rocked slightly overhead. He lay there, wide chest barely moving and eyes closed.
Julia's arms lowered to the side and she walked down the steps to the lump of flesh. He groaned softly, pink eyelids fluttering. “Sandal… Hurts.”

“Of course you hurt,” Julia said, bending down to pry her bow out of his hands. It was still in one piece. Luck more than anything else helped with that. “You jumped from a chandelier at least twelve feet off the ground. What did you think was going to happen?”

“Fly?”

“Well, you didn't do that,” Julia muttered, glancing up at the swaying light source. She had hit her target of the dwarf's backside perfectly, which had in turn scared Sandal enough to make him jump. By the looks of him, nothing was broken- he landed with all the grace of a potato sack- he just had the wind knocked out of him.

What else would have happened from the oaf climbing onto a something that high off the ground with no easy way down? Such a child.

Speaking of…

“Stop looking like a scared rabbit and get down here.” The elf woman blinked and slowly made her way down the stairs where she had been frozen ever since Sandal jumped.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t stop him, Mistress.”

Julia almost told her that she should be sorry but the grown woman was practically shaking with terror, stealing away her anger. Instead she twisted the screw on her bow, fixing the hairs.

“What’s your name?”

“Orana, Mistress.”

“Where did you say you came from?”

“Tevintar. I was traveling with Papa and my old Mistress. Then Mistress looked scared and she… I don’t understand… She loved papa’s cooking and she…” Tears loomed in those big elfin eyes and the strange woman started to cry.

*Hawke really has no standards on the type of people she brought home.* She just sent a random elf to the doorstep and forced Julia to deal with them… *Idiot.*

Well, it was not like Leandra would be able to say no to this pathetic creature and with both Hawke and her mother on the same side, there was nothing Julia would be able to change the situation, even if she cared to.

That was it then. They had another person in the manor.

“Orana, do you know how to do laundry or do any type of cooking that doesn’t result in stew or overcooked meat?” The woman paused in her tears, red-rimmed eyes peering up at her.

“I know how to cook and I can clean. Not as good as Papa, but my old Mistress said my bread was almost as good.”

At this point, about anything sounded better than another one of Bodahn’s meals. “Then I have no problem with you staying. Wait till Hawke gets home before getting settled though. As long as you are who you say you are, we could use you.”
Water glittering at the corners of her eyes—how the hell did she manage to do that?—the elf smiled, “Thank you, Mistress. You are too kind.”

Julia wasn’t sure about that but she would leave whatever fanciful thoughts the elf had to herself. Instead she picked up her quiver and the two different bows and went to her room. She had some music to practice.

Chapter End Notes

"Don't you know I'm caught in a trap

I can't walk out."
Carnival of the Animals: Aquarius, or Reflections

Chapter Notes

"Look at me you may think you see
Who I really am but you'll never know me
Every day it's as if I play a part
Now I see if I wear a mask"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole mess played out that evening just about as she expected when Sandal abruptly said that he fell from the chandelier. Bodahn fluttered about alarmed for a minute or two before he settled into scolding his son for climbing that high. Leandra worried over the dwarf more than the chandelier, which was definitely the wrong priority.

Hawke just laughed and then declared Julia a hero, Sandal a hero, and swept Orana into an one-armed hug that turned elf red.

The only positive side to the whole thing was that their latest stray actually knew how to cook and in her determination to earn a place, made their food that evening. She whipped out a full course meal with the ingredients they had on hand, including a fruit cake, roasted meat with spiced vegetables, and something that vaguely resembled a Caesar salad.

In comparison to the barely adequate meals Bodahn had prepared, it was a feast. After several minutes of pretending to be a vacuum cleaner, Hawke informed the group that Orana would be doing the cooking from now on.

The days that followed were homogeneous and harmonious. Julia practiced her instrument and the bow, went shopping with Leandra, and exercised. Orana got slowly more comfortable in the kitchen resulting in dishes that pushed the boundaries of what Julia had considered typical medieval fare.

Without even trying, she barely saw Hawke. The woman slept past noon, stayed out late, and never was where she was supposed to be. Leandra held dinner off the one of the evenings since Hawke said that she'd be there but as the steam slowly faded and Julia finished her first glass of recently boiled water, the matriarch gave up and they ate.

"Gema, are you still alive?" Julia winced as the voice broke through her refrain. Think of the devil.... Ignore her and maybe she'll go away. Closing her eyes, she focused on the array of thirty-second notes that approached. Her fingers flew, bow itching at the strings.

"I know you can hear me. You can't complain about my lute-playing from across the manor and be deaf now."

Julia didn't respond but she was running out of song. Immediately hop into another one? Her performer instincts rebelled against it. You needed to let a piece linger after the final note to feel the full effect.

Hawke marched around to stand in Julia's view, leaning her face close. Feeling the last notes approaching, Julia closed her eyes to avoid Hawke's. Hold the whole…
Warm breath against her lips, sensation of presence. "How about now?" Julia jerked back, breaking her posture as she put some distance between the herself and the face that was centimeters away.

"The hell, Hawke!"

The woman in question burst into laughter, holding her stomach as if something might come out. "You should have seen your face!"

Julia tried to think of the right term for Hawke's behavior and got stuck on a single word. "That's sexual assault."

"I didn't touch your butt."

"It was still gross. Have you ever brushed your teeth? Your breath could kill an elephant."

"Whatever an elephant is, it probably deserved it. But now, to more important things---"

"There is no way I'm listening to anything you have to say after that." Julia turned stiffly and began to put her violin away.

"Fine, fine, I'm sorry I didn't actually kiss you---"

"Try again."

"I'm sorry I didn't give you flowers first?"

"Last try Hawke, else I'm telling Orana that you like peppers in all your food."

The woman was quiet for a moment, which was both reassuring and worrying. Julia zipped up her case and locked it shut. She had no idea how Sandal broke into it, but she wasn't going to let her instrument be in that kind of danger again.

"I shouldn't have gotten that close without your permission. "Wow, she almost sounds normal. Next thing you know the moon will be made of cheese."

"By Dutoit, she realizes that consent exists. For the record, you don't have permission to touch me. Ever."

"Prude."

"Lunatic."

Hawke laughed and Julia finally turned back to face her, arms crossed over her chest. "Now that I have your attention, you're coming to the Hanged Man tonight. Aveline's been so busy, she might not be there. As the replacement funless redhead, you're up."

"Assault and insults, you sure know how to negotiate," Julia commented. "I'm going to decline your gracious invitation. I prefer to keep my organs inside my body."

"Are you still moaning about that?" Hawke asked, flopping onto the bed and crickling the recently ironed bedspread. "Merrill is fine. Tonight we are celebrating Anders' declaration of her return to full health. Merrill asked why you weren't there the other night. I made up some grand tale for you about dragons and lost princesses, but I don't think she'll buy it a second time."

Julia internally sighed. *Oh Merrill...*
"I'll think about it," she finally said, motioning for Hawke to leave.

"Think what you want, but when it's time to go, I will drag you there if needed," Hawke assured her, rolling out of the bed to sprawl on the floor. She picked herself up as if nothing had happened and ambled out of the door into the manor.

Julia groaned and sat back on the edge of her bed. Life had been good without Hawke interrupting every other hour with some crazy idea that she needed an audience to. Peaceful and productive. Boring. The introduction of the word into her consciousness stalled her thought process.

No. She was happy to be left out of life-threatening trips in order to focus on improving herself. The number of hours she had spent practicing over the last few days were more than she had been able to get done consecutively for a long time. It was a good thing.

So why am I so restless?

A short cuss out later, Julia went to practice her archery.

By the time the sun had increased its downward trend, a majority of the arrows nestled inside the target, a proud two exactly on the bull's eye.

Julia stretched, muscles aching faintly but not even close to the pain of several days ago. Even though it hadn’t been that long since she was first handed the weapon, it was a comfortable presence on her back. At least now that she could hit something.

If she continued to practice, she would never miss a target when it was important again.

That, if nothing else, is why she spent hours a day sending wood into a strawman.

An uneventful walk through the keep later, she once again emerged into the sunlight, a fresh breeze cooling her face. As peaceful as the secluded corner of the keep was, the walls trapped all the heat within the area as well. The press of bodies and dirt clogged the senses faster than it should have.

Julia passed the rows of guards and paused at the top of the stairs. Hightown looked like a child's playset. The people up here at least tried to take care of their homes, which didn't say much unless put next to the zero effort in Lowtown.

Like comparing ticks to fleas. Julia sighed and started down the steps, avoiding the missing edges. Everything was becoming annoyingly familiar. The smirks on the birds' beaks, the random holes in the streets, and even the gaudy fashion sense.

A month. It was an impossible, horrible, breath-stealing notion. How could she still be trapped in this pit of a city after a month? She should have something more to go on by now. Instead she had what? A hooded figure. Basically nothing.

Just because she had accepted the possibility of not getting back to New York didn't mean she had accepted it as likely.

I will go back to hot showers, digital music, and coffee, Julia assured herself, not moving aside as a group of noble women waddled down the street. It just might take… more time. But what if it wasn't just more time? What if she never got back?

A ridiculous notion but one that she needed to seriously consider after a month. Julia ignored the calls of the shopkeepers, not too many due to the bow on her back, but still enough of them were desperate enough for a profit that they would try.
Even if it only took one more month to get back, would she continue to spend her days like this? Practicing and avoiding Hawke, just waiting to leave this horrible world? She go crazy before she could smell the exhaust of the city again.

*Which leaves me where?*

The Amell manor stood firmly in the place it had always been and Julia pushed open the door. One day she’d get through to Hawke why you needed to lock up even when someone was home. At least Hawke hadn’t lived in Lowtown. That would have made this whole situation intolerable.

Bodahn greeted her from the antechamber. “Serah Julia, I’m happy to see you made it home safe. May I take your weapons for you?”

After a beat, Julia slung the quiver and bow off her back. The dwarves could be trusted with the less delicate things at least. Bodahn kept the quiver’s leather exterior soft and supple beneath her fingers and shined the length of the bow.

*They both look better than when I first got them.*

With no one besides the servants in the main hall, Hawke had run off shortly after harassing her and Leandra was going through books in the library, Julia was free to continue her exercise routine. Next on the todo list, the best version of a stair-stepper she had: real stairs.

By the time her legs had been reduced to solid jelly, she was satisfied that she had enough cardio for the day. In this place it was needed more to run away than for any sense of being healthy. With slow, careful steps, she went back to her room to finish up with a short abdominal workout. She might as well take care of everything at once. Perhaps that could help her be ready for whatever Hawke managed to sent her way.

Her rug was nowhere even as close to as good as her yoga mat but it was better than lying on the stone floor. She managed only forty crunches before the combined ache of her legs, arms, and now stomach convinced her to be done for the day. She gave herself a moment to relax, head resting against the thick material—she had seen Bodahn take the rug out for a beating the other day so she was sure there was nothing living in it—and closed her eyes.

*Back to the Hanged Man.* It seemed that no matter what she did, she always ended back at that condemned grogerry. Like most things in her life in Kirkwall, it was probably Hawke’s fault.

As she lay there, waiting for her muscles to ease, Julia opened her eyes. She wasn’t dreading the Hanged Man visit. Without realizing it, she had already decided on going. That was… Alarming to say the least. It was a dreadful place with horrible people and yet… That sticky corner filled with laughter had seeped beneath her defenses without giving her a chance to push it back. In fact, she was almost looking forw---

No.

She wasn’t going to let herself fall that far yet. Perhaps time and their group’s bombardment had made the Hanged Man and the refuse that patronized it *tolerable* but she would rather eat soap than actually let herself *want* to go there. That emotion would indicate she had succumbed to a level of depravity that made laying on a plague-infested rug seem tame.

*Definitely not looking forward to going.*

Julia pushed herself off the floor and walked over to her closet. Since she was *not at all* interested in going tonight, it didn’t matter what she wore. She could pick anything off the shelving and be
content with her choice.

But that red dress made her look like a tomato and she had worn that grey dress amongst the group quite recently.

Riffling through the short stack of dresses, Julia withdrew a green dress that she wore before but that was tailored to properly fit her the previous week. In that regard, it was practically new. She traced the simple but elegant lines of the embroidery and then shut her closet. This would do for now. At least no one would mistake her for a vegetable in it.

Her bath when she slid in was hot, water searing her skin with a vengeance and melting her muscles like it never wanted her to leave her tub. She only managed to drag herself from its embrace when her fingers and toes shriveled to prunes and the temperature dropped to merely tempid.

In contrast to the heat, the air drew goosebumps. Julia grabbed a towel and quickly wiped herself down, collecting water droplets in the fabric. Her hair, as always, spun out of control into complex knots, even as single damp strands stuck to her cheeks. After a moment of twisting bathwater out, Julia wrapped the towel around her torso and walked over to the single fogged mirror.

A shadow of herself, blurred colors and lines, stared back. Julia closed her eyes, counted slowly to ten and then did it again. Using the side of her hand, she cleared the misted water from the glass surface.

She had forgotten, on purpose or due to the amount of time that had passed, how bad her freckles were. They dotted her face, dense over her cheeks and forehead, lightening by the time they were trailing her neck. Julia’s fingers itched for some concealer to level out the tones to a clear normal shade. Not these colored scars.

If she could ignore the mess, her hair was manageable. It was still brown although she could see discoloration, like rust, at the very roots. No wonder Hawke noticed. Luckily, she had gone to the salon shortly before the concert else she would probably have to start buying hats.

Trying to ignore the imperfection creeping into her hair, Julia settled down on the stool and picked up the brush she set on the shelf earlier in the day. The handle was coarse despite some obvious effort to make it smooth. Inferior technology. With a sigh, Julia began the battle with her hair.

Although the slim locks were not the most dangerous opponent, they were fairly stubborn. Every stroke of the brush would increase the mess in volume and create general disarray. Julia stared fixedly into the reflection of her own eyes as her hair grew worse and worse. A dozen or so strokes and her hair practically haloed around her head, something out of cheap horror movies.

The only good thing about the situation is that it go the worst of the water out, leaving only damp. Carefully, Julia brushed a front section of her hair, separating it evenly. With that done, she set down the brush and began to braid. She had no professional training on hair, but she knew enough to make a sensible style, especially after Merrill showed her the benefits of a good braid.

In a matter of minutes, she tucked the end of the braid behind her ear and reviewed her work. The hair crowned her head, drawing attention away from the roots. Julia quickly pulled the remainder of the hair up into her usual bun, end of the brain ending up in the midst of it for stability.

This will work. Julia twisted her head to either side. Her way of doing it was not as detailed as Merrill’s but the resemblance was enough that even the oblivious elf would be able to recognize it.

Now she just needed some proper makeup and the rest of her reflection would work as well.
Julia stood, walking over to the railing where she had set her clothes. Her skin was just getting cool enough that covering up became a very enticing idea.

Underclothes, slip, dress. The trick was that apparently Thedas hadn’t invented the zipper yet so they made due with buttons and ties which weren’t even close to as good. Unless there were dozens of them, they inevitably left some skin bare.

Didn’t they realize exactly how long dozens of buttons took to take on and off? She had much better things to do with her time, yet showing her back off to the patrons of the Hanged Man was not one of them.

By the time she finished, Hawke arrived home. Even though the thick bathroom door, the stomps and hollering sounded like the woman stood in this very room. That moron.

For the final time, Julia turned to face the mirror, standing far enough back that she could see herself from the knees up.

The person in the mirror was a stranger.

The freckles started it, making her skin different than what she was used to seeing. The bulk of hair on her head combined with the medieval-style dress made her seem simpler. Medieval pedestrian. If she had seen this person a month ago, she would have scoffed at them and then moved on.

How can this be me?

Something crashed against the door and Julia jumped. Hawke’s cackle followed. That woman…

Throwing the damp towel over the railing, Julia went to see what the fuss was about this time.

“Gemia! There you are! I was looking for--- do you have a date? Good for you!” Hawke grinned at her and inexplicably Julia’s face flushed.

“Stop imposing your fantasies on me, Hawke.”

“I may be beautiful but I’m not blind. Let me see… Are you trying to get under the brother's belt? A worthy challenge. Not that I blame you for trying, Sebastian has that pure vibe, but I bet once you trip him into bed he’d be all bad.”

For a second Hawke’s ramblings got to her. Bare skin beneath fingers, bright blue eyes lidded with pleasure. A large hand squeezing her own…

None of that. Maybe it had been too long since she had been… satisfied in that way. Of the males she had met in Kirkwall, Sebastian was the only one qualified enough to be considered for something more and he had apparently taken chastity vows. That was besides the fact that all the people here, including Sebastian, probably had diseases.

Since she still had every intention on returning home, however, the work it would take to set up a suitable arrangement…

“… Recommend the Blooming Rose. Once you become a frequent customer, you get a punchcard. At the end, one of their specials are free. I’m getting close but I don’t know if I want the ‘bad girl special’ or maybe something else… What do you think?” Hawke finally shut up to look at her.

Julia sighed. “Are you talking about that brothel again?”

“When something is that big—“
“I’m not talking to you,” Julia said, stepping around the mad woman. Orana probably had supper ready and then it would be time to go to the Hanged Man.

“Hey! It’s rude to ignore someone when they are talking to you?”

“You would know.”

Hawke snorted, skipping a few steps to join her. “It’s not my fault most people are boring. I have better things to do than listen to things that make want to strangle myself so that at least something interesting would happen.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“Blasphemy!”

Julia rolled her eyes as they entered the dining room. Leandra and Bodahn were already there. “Didn’t you almost get kicked out of the Chantry the other day?”

The woman snorted. “Misunderstanding.”

“Unlikely.” Julia nodded to Leandra and settled into her seat, spreading the napkin over her lap. Hawke rambled on for another minute, but then she settled down as well.

As meals with the three of them went, this one was practically peaceful. Leandra tried for stilted conversation with her daughter and Hawke’s remarks were sarcastic but not especially rude. She is in a good mood then.

The food that night was something like a sandwich as in it was ingredients between two slices of bread. Julia couldn’t quite place everything in it, but already she trusted Orana for quality and flavor.

Once they were done, they threw their compliments at the bowing elf who still seemed convinced that this was only some elaborate ploy to make her rise above her station and then to beat her back down. Hawke and Leandra still hadn't given up trying to persuade her otherwise.

As the mad woman went to change into something she considered more appropriate, Julia and Leandra left the dining room for the library.

"You should consider joining me for Lady Petrud’s gathering. Apparently she has a fine lute player for musical entertainment,” Leandra said as they settled into the chairs by the fire.

"I'm sure whatever antique style they are playing would be amusing,” Julia commented, leaning back into the cushions and resting her eyes. It had been a productive day and her trip to the Hanged Man wouldn't ruin that.

Julia’s thoughts spun lazily and snagged on what Leandra had said, combining it with questions from earlier in the day.

"Leandra, how do the nobles find a musician to play for them?”

"By reputation. You hear of musicians that are both talented and respectful, and if you have a gathering and they are in the area, you reach out to the one you wish to showcase."

"A word-of-mouth situation then,” Julia said slowly. That would make a bit more difficult without a single person or group to audition for. But not impossible. She was one of the best after all. "After some consideration, I have decided that I would like to continue performing. My skills aren’t
decreasing at present but practice is different than playing for an audience." She opened her eyes to meet Leandra's curious gaze. "You have contacts amongst the nobles. Would you help me secure an audition with some of them?"

Leandra's smile came out in a burst. "Of course. I would love to help. I can arrange a dinner party with some friends and you can play for them there. While your style of playing is unusual, I'm sure you can find someone willing to take a chance on you."

_Take a chance?_ That tasted of amateur aspirations. But she was in a different world. Perhaps the rules were different here.

"Gemmmmmaaaa, stop being old and let's get moving!" Hawke's voice ricocheted through the doorway into the library. Julia rolled her eyes and stood.

"Have a safe evening, Julia."

"Thank you. You have a good evening as well."

Then she went out to meet the lunatic.

No one bothered them in the Hightown streets. Unlike Lowtown, the upper crust was sensible enough to go to home when the sun set and to stay there. The pure level of darkness in this world layered over everything it touched, smothering torches into canopy of muffled light. Even the single moon overhead failed to provide detailed sight.

They made it to the steps that marked the border between city sections and clipped down the stairs just steep enough for a non-existent railing.

Lowtown was still awake. They had barely reached the landing when Hawke relaxed, smiling broadly. A group of young men, faces obscured, fought near a building in front of them. The skin above a woman's dress line flashed white as she walked slowly next to a clearly older man. Pungent smells wafted over them and although Julia didn't gag—unfortunately she was used to it enough to avoid that—she winced.

If anything, Hawke just revealed more teeth.

Two streets in, a pack of guards stomped by. Lowtown residents scurried out of their way, even as the clones ignored them. Hawke paused and Julia nearly swore. Anything that drew that woman's attention had to be bad.

"Let's keep moving, Hawke. Everyone is waiting for us."

Hawke could have been a pointer dog for how hard she stared at the huddle of guards that were almost out of their sight line. "Those aren't real guards."

"Yes, they are. Who else would want to wear that ridiculous costume? Let's Go."

The woman didn't move and Julia's gut began to sink. "Hawke, no. Leave it alone."

Dark hair, practically invisible in the dark, spun. "We need to take them out. No one dresses up like a guard for fun. I know, I've tried."

"Are you kidding?" Julia almost groaned. "They aren't doing anything, we have places to be. Just ignore them and let's move on"
They couldn’t even see the guards at this point. Julia deliberately turned in the direction of the Hanged Man. Please for the love of Gregorian composers, just leave it be.

“Okay, you are right. We shouldn’t go after the guards.” Julia relaxed. “Alone. You tail them and I’ll grab the others.”

“What? No!” Hawke grabbed her shoulders, shoving her in the direction the guards went. “That’s a terrible idea.” Her voice came back too loud in the layer of dark.

“No, what’s a terrible idea is having you get the others. You’d probably leave me to deal with them myself… Not that I couldn’t handle it of course.”

Julia swore at her and Hawke grinned in the bare moonlight. “Don’t let them see you,” the woman stage-whispered. Then she was gone, dark armor disappearing into the dim of a nearby building.

The world was quiet for a heartbeat.

This is why I don't let Hawke take me places.

Chapter End Notes

"Who is that girl I see staring straight back at me? Why is my reflection someone I don’t know? Must I pretend that I’m someone else for all time? When will my reflection show who I am inside?"

A/N* I hope you guys didn't mind a slower chapter. Julia needed some time to think through things without any near-death (near-bow destruction?) experiences. Also, consequentially for the content of this chapter, Out of Tune just hit its one year mark on Thursday! I appreciate all of you so much, thank you for your support this last year!
Chapter Notes

"And I don't want to run away anymore
Leave the lights on, leave the lights on, leave the lights on...
What would they say, what would they do?
Would it be trouble if they knew?"

“Shit,” Julia hissed again, listening for the sounds of any living creature around her. Some footsteps, wind rustling through the streets, and… Voices. Lowtown never sleeps. Part of her wanted to chase after Hawke but logic prevailed. While she had a general idea of where the Hanged Man was, finding it in the dark would probably result with her completely lost and as Kirkwall had it, bleeding out in an alley.

Then there was just the option of staying still and waiting for Hawke to return. But passiveness would more than likely result in the same loss of blood.

Steeling herself with a deep, repulsive breath, Julia started forward at a slow quiet jog. Her only-extremely poor-option was to follow the guard. If she stayed far enough away, maybe nothing would come of it.

_of course, that is if Hawke can find me._ That was the Mariana’s Trench size hole in the plan. The woman had no way to track her through the dark unless she was part bloodhound. _With that nose, not completely unlikely…_

If she could leave a mark or path for them to follow… But it was too dark and she had nothing with her but her weapons and there was no way she would leave them behind in a sort of pointy-bread trail. She would just need to find another way.

There was a chance that Hawke knew what she was doing. Even though it had been close, the woman hadn't gotten her killed yet. _Key word there is 'yet'. _No, it was better if Julia just tried to solve this riddle of staying alive and uninjured herself.

Julia reached the corner the guards disappeared behind and slowly peeked her head around. This street was still, not even the shadows flickered with the few torches attached to the walls. She lost them already. _Well then… Wait._ Just beyond the range of easy sight, something moved in the blackness of an alley several yards down the street.

She stopped breathing and waited.

A grunt and a hoarse voice called for help. Despite the grim she knew was there, Julia pressed herself closer against the rough texture of the stone wall. _What are they thinking? No one comes to help in Kirkwall._ Memories of her own situation a month ago made her clarify even in her own head. _No one but Hawke is crazy enough to help in Kirkwall._

The sound of flesh meeting flesh jolted her from her reflection. A crash followed. Julia squinted but it was still too dark to make anything out clearly. Laughter rebounded against metal.
The guards.

So these were either bad guards or... Damn it, Hawke is right. Aveline’s standards for guards narrowed down the potential protectors to a few dozen people in Kirkwall. Apparently her old boss looked the other way on certain behaviors. Aveline didn’t.

A couple of people walked down the street, arm in arm. They sped up past the alley way but otherwise didn’t react to the sounds of an assault.

The optimist called out again and received a grunt for their efforts. Julia held her breath as something jingled. Somehow she heard the next words from the guards. “Don’t forget to pay your taxes.”

She blinked. Petty theft? The methods were a bit coarse for twenty-first century conmen -the Internet helped with that-but in a world where names were known but not faces, pretending to be someone you were not took on a whole new level of ease.

*If Aveline actually made it to the Hanged Man tonight, these muscle heads won’t live to see morning.*

The thought made her smile even the would-be guards laughed and started to move again. Julia glanced around the corner, the level of darkness Kirkwall could develop pressing in on her. They were going away from her at least.

She gave them a few seconds before creeping forward again, more concerned about sound than speed. It felt like there was a countdown clicking through the city. Number of days since last fight. The higher it went up the less likely the city was to let her continue her peaceful existence. The chances of this ending badly after almost a week of no violence were high enough for her to consider the lottery.

But by hell if she’d let Hawke get away with saving her again.

Thin clouds covered the moon, giving just enough light to reflect off the metal armor. Leathers and even Julia's cloth dress were much more suited to sneaking around at night. *These fake guards want to be spotted.* The gleam of silver guided her forward and off onto another side street. Less and less people passed them as they continued forward, occasionally laughter spilling back. They had to be in more residential neighborhoods now.

Julia avoided the gaze of a torch in a nearby scone, keeping her shadow as nonexistent as possible. This place needed electricity and soon, but she would use the weakness when she could.

As if to spite her, the moon shook off its temporary cover, illuminating the previously darkened streets. Julia stalled her steps, eying the sky as if she didn't have a care in the world. The guards, less than 10 yards away, turned right.

*By Ravel… where are they going?* They could just be wandering around looking for likely victims but that seemed like a waste of time. Why come here?

Ignoring the mangled cat that strode out from under some steps to glare at her, Julia jazz-ran forward. Bent low, her weapons bounced against her back but were otherwise quiet.

The corner where they turned quickly approached. Voices twisted around, laughter and male timbres mixing together into a not-unpleasant sound. They didn’t sound like criminals but most true bastards didn’t.

“The Just heading back to the tavern or going out?” One of the guards yelled at someone, voice echoing slightly in their helmet.
Laughter unaffected by any barrier responded. “The wife don’t have that much control over me. We are to have a great time tonight!”

Julia squinted, not stepping fully out into street while the guards had stalled their progress. *Come on, Hawke. It's not polite to keep someone waiting.* The group of four guards were standing next to two people that were harder to see, even with the unfettered moonlight. But even at this distance and with her view partially blocked by the metal armor, she could tell that the newcomers were large.

“Liar! Your wife picks out your boots and we both know it.”

Both fake guard and pedestrian chuckled as the first man made excuses. Unless Hawke got distracted- *she would be in so much trouble if she decided to get a drink before they left*- backup sound be coming soon. *If they could even find her after so much weaving.*

Footsteps began again and Julia pressed her back against the building. Something hissed angrily behind her but she didn't give it any attention. Maybe that way it would leave her alone.

Voices grew louder and as Julia debated the pros and cons of heading towards the hissing, the two men came into view.

They were monstrous, thick arms, shoulders, and legs distorting the apparent size of their heads. These men could probably carry boulders around Kirkwall without breaking a sweat. Laborers, possibly dock workers based on the type of people she saw there. *No wonder the guards hadn’t tried to con money out of them.* There was no way that they would miss her so she leaned against the wall, studied her nails, and tried to look unsuspicious.

"I disagree, Norah of the Hanged Man is the cutest waitress in Lowtown. If I were ten years younger and unmarried---"

"She would still ignore you?"

"Ha! You think I got my wife with my looks? I know how to woo a woman."

"I'll believe you tricked her into marrying your ugly mug before I'll believe you wooed her."

A head turned in her direction and Julia focused on the dirt she couldn't see in her nails. If she hadn't been so religious on good skin care, maybe they wouldn't have noticed her at all. As it stood, her fair complexion must have been obvious.

“Hey, what are you doing over there?”

*Shit.* Julia glanced up. Both of the men were staring at her, their ages somewhere between late twenties to early forties. Kirkwall made ages hard to guess with bad diet and even poorer living conditions.

"I'm just waiting for a friend. She should be along shortly."

"The streets aren't safe for a girl to wait by herself," the one a bit taller but less wide said.

Julia pushed herself off the wall, turning slightly so they could clearly see the weapons on her back without putting her hands anywhere near them. She managed to keep the irritation out of her voice. "Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine. As said, my friend should be here any minute. I would go after her but all the streets look the same in the dark." *I am a woman, thank you.*

For a beat, the two men said nothing then one of them cocked their head. “Guards!” Julia’s hand
twitched as their voice ricocheted down the street. “I believe this young woman needs help getting home.”

The one who had called for the guard turned back to her and smiled. “My daughter can’t be too much younger than you. I wouldn’t want her alone at night. The city guard will help you get home safe and sound.”

Julia’s lips curled. Idiots. “I'm fine, thanks. The help is not wanted or required.”

But it was already too late. The four tin soldiers joined them, several of the buckets glancing her way, tracing over her form before resting on the bow.

She pressed her open-hands into her hips and smiled. "Hello sirs. I'm afraid there was a misunderstanding. Your efforts are appreciated but I don't need any help this evening. Thank you for your time." As naturally as possible, Julia turned and took a step away from tin cans.

The guards shouldn’t do anything with an audience but depending on how much the city had corrupted them, there was no telling what they would do once the two muscle heads left.

"Wait!" A low voice called out and a large hand closed around her arm, yanking her none too gently to a halt.

"This girl is alone and waiting for a friend. Would you make sure she stays out of trouble or maybe even help her find her friend?" One of the supposedly Good Samaritans said to the guards as Julia whirled on her captor, grip on her arm turning painful before she was released.

Ignore me will they?

“They are mistaken. I thought I was lost but I remembered where I am now. Thank you for your efforts. You all can head out on your ways." It was like she was saying the same thing over and over again but they weren't listening.

One of the clones bobbed their reflective head. "We can certainly make sure she get back safely. Don't worry about it." The two laborers gave their thanks for the guards taking care of such a weak girl and went on their way.

Julia grit her teeth. Her shoes were sensible enough that she could run but more than likely that would result in her getting lost. Which left trying to slow them down with words until help arrived.

"I appreciate your assistance. My friend and I were originally headed to the Hanged Man. Would you mind helping me get there? Lowtown can be dangerous for a female like myself," Julia said. It took more effort than it should have to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. If they wanted to play this game, so could she.

Even though she couldn't see their faces, especially as the clouds muted the light from the moon again, their smiles were apparent.

"Of course, that's what the guard is here for. We will escort you there."

With a move that was practiced enough to make her wonder, the four guard stepped so they surrounded her in a square-like formation and then they started walking.

The streets passed in steady procession, dull grey walls and darkened alleys repeating themselves to distort any sense of direction. It felt vaguely like the right way though. If they were going to rob her, they would have done it after the two laborers left, not trotted her around like some prize livestock.
Unless, of course, if they weren't going to merely rob her.

Julia pushed the thought away even as it trickled through her mind. She wasn't some defenseless newcomer anymore. They would regret coming after her.

Of course the guards wouldn't merely allow her to bring them closer to Hawke & Friends™ in silence. They asked her questions that she answered in a manner benefiting someone who was actually grateful to have them nearby. They were so brave to protect the streets at night. They must be handsome and kind. A farce if she ever heard one but the four fake guards lapped it up like so much Kool-Aid.

Idiots.

The street parted in front of them to reveal a plaza of sorts that felt like it should be familiar although she couldn't place it. Dark cloth rippled overhead, casting more shadows over the already diminished setting.

"Are we getting close?" Julia asked.

"Not too long now," the guard on her right said.

A few people mingled and walked around the open space, mostly men, but the near crowds of when Hawke and her first came down had trickled home. Everyone saw them though, even if they pretended that they didn't. The guard weren't a group you wanted to miss.

They turned left down what looked to a main street at least in the aspect that were more lit scones than on previous streets. The guards around her spread out slightly, giving her a break from the stench of compressed sweat.

Another block passed before they got distracted. The can on her front-left paused. "Hey, you! What do you think you are doing?"

It was going so well.

Julia turned to see what had caught the man's attention as the whole group slowed. Frozen still on the side of the street was a small figure, male if she had to guess. They had to be young, early teens at that size. He didn't seem to be that interesting so she had no idea why they stopped.

"Excuse us messere, we will continue escorting you shortly. We just need to take care of this," one of the other fake-guard said softly before all but one of them went to surround the boy.

"Why are we here? It's not like someone that dirty would have any money to steal…"

Even though they weren't facing her, bits of their interrogation made it to her ear. "...can't be here… getting in the way…"

The boy said something back and then bent over, gasping, as a guard punched him the gut.

Julia sighed. Seriously? This was a waste of time and energy. The boy let out a half sob and she pressed her fingers to her forehead. Could this day be any more annoying? "Do you imbeciles really have nothing better to do then try to scam money from children? There has to be better ways to make a quick buck, besides the obvious example of working an actual job."

Four helmeted heads turned to face her and with the distraction, the boy darted away, limping like he was worried his guts would come out.
As one guard cursed, the one who had waited beside her held up his hands like some kind of peaceful gesture. "What are you talking about? We are the guard, we help people."

Julia scoffed, crossing her arms. They were a bit too close for her to get her a shot in before they grabbed her. She shifted, sliding a foot back. "Is that how you sleep at nights? You only help yourselves. I can't believe anyone actually buys that you're Aveline's people."

That stalled them. No 'Guard Captain' but just Aveline's name by itself. Even children would get the implications of that. Julia used the distraction to put her hands on her hips and take another step back. This whole thing was so ridiculous.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” one of the clones said and Julia almost snorted. What else could he have said? ‘Yes I’m a poser, please don’t hurt me?’ Her luck wasn’t that good. “We are members of the guard and you will be coming with us for resisting arrest.”

“I’m not resisting arrest, I’m resisting you. But you probably get that a lot, so you really should know how to react to it better.” A sweep of the arms at them all and another foot of space.

Several of the buckets tilted inward, as if double checking that there were indeed four of them and only one of her. Bolstered by superior numbers, all faced her. “You can’t talk like that to us.”

“You have no respect for freedom of speech, do you? That’s horrifying. But I suppose your faces must be equally as bad else you wouldn’t feel the need to hide them.” Julia smiled softly.

The one who had been besides her took a step closer and Julia whipped the bow off her back, snatching an arrow while she was at it. Luckily, nothing snagged. They weren’t going to get close enough to touch her if she had anything to say about it.

“You don’t realize who you are messing with.” At the sight of her bow, the pseudo-guards pulled out their swords. No shields. Aveline would never let her people patrol without a shield.

"Incompetent soup cans? I guessed."

"Why you---" Julia didn't bother to figure out what they had come up with to say. She whirled around and ran.

_Fucking Kirkwall and fucking Hawke._ Neither of them could just mind their own business. Shades of grey and flickers of yellow flames caught the corner of her eye as she sprinted down the street. She had tried to be nice, tried to go along to their stupid ideas without complaint and this is where it got her.

She increased the lengths of her strides, watching the ground more than anything. Even if the moon hadn't been in hiding, it would have been difficult to see the dips in the stone. As it was…

Voices called out behind her and the briefest of glances told her what she already know. She was being chased.

The few people who had been out of the streets jerked to the side as Julia passed. Calling for help wasn't worth the air. No one came on good days and with her followed by those who resembled upstanding city guard, they were more likely to join in on the chase.

_Now, if I can just remember what direction the Hanged Man---_ Julia's boot went down further than expected, toe catching on something, and she was on the stone with just enough awareness to land on her elbows rather than her hands.
Still stung though.

Julia pushed herself up but it was already too late, she had lost her advantage.

Her bow was undamaged though her arm ached as she drew the arrow. "I would recommend not getting closer."

The four men slowed and spread out like a fan in front of her. "You can't hit all of us."

"You are right, but I can hit at least one of you and it's going to hurt. Any nominations?" Julia asked, adopting the sweet tone that she had been using with them earlier.

No one moved and Julia's arm began to shake from the strain of holding the string back. They couldn't see that in the dark but she wouldn't last for too long. She refused to think about what would happen then.

A guard to the right shifted and as Julia's arrow automatically pointed at them, the one of the far left lunged forward.

Shit!

Julia swung her aim around, releasing the arrow. Metal clanged and the world went white.

Tears sprung in her eyes even as she pressed them hard together. Light burned through her eyelids and she stumbled back. What the hell? It was like someone switched on a LED light directly in front of her… Or perhaps just used magic.

Merrill or Anders.

“I would like an explanation for why you think you can dress up like my guards without permission,” a low female voice asked. Aveline. So she had made it. Julia relaxed and took a few more steps away from where her attackers had been coming from. A second later, the sounds of a fight began.

“Your vision should clear in a minute.” A hand grabbed her by the elbow and tugged her to the side. Even though he wasn’t ranting about mage rights, she recognized the voice of their resident homeless man. Despite his scruffiness, Hawke trusted him so at least she could be sure that he wouldn’t stab her with a rusted switchblade.

“What the hell was that?” Julia asked as she tried to open her eyes. Bright colored spots appeared amidst the white blur of a world.

“A light spell. Not usually offensive but when it’s dark like this, certainly effective.” Anders chuckled even as the distressed shouts rose.

“Too easy!” Julia sighed. There was Varric. She squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again. The mage was a grey shape in above her. Features blurred into sight and then faded. Her head pounded with the effort of returning her vision to normal.

She blinked again and felt tears trickled out. Anders hummed softly. “Here, this should help.” Warm skin against her cheek and Julia jerked back. “Just me. Hold still.” His hand grew hotter, sparks fluttering just behind her eyes and her vision warped.

Then the contact was gone. “That should speed it up a bit.”
“Maybe you should think before sending up a flare at night,” Julia said as the mage came into view blurring into crystal clear. He was as scruffy as usual but the bags beneath his eyes were merely the size of handbags, not totes like usual. "Aren't you guys supposed to keep your magic a secret or something?"

Anders shook his head, loose hair whipping around his thin face. “You don’t need to tell me that. It was Hawke’s idea.”

Of course it was. More white entered her sightline, reflecting the glob of light overhead. The mini-sun had faded slightly from the initial burst, now casting a softer illumination on the scene. “I can wait with Julia if you want to tend to the others, Anders.”

A frown flicked across the mage’s face but he agreed shortly and Sebastian took up the place at her elbow. “How’s your eyesight?” the priest asked quietly.

Yards away, Aveline looked to be in mid-lecture to the now-helmetless clones. They were all normal looking enough, which meant scared and angry in Kirkwall terms. Hawke and Fenris stood behind them, the contrast between light and dark, anger and amusement apparent even without perfect vision.

“Better,” Julia said finally. “I’m surprised Hawke convinced all of you into this mess.”

Sebastian smiled and Julia was forced to turn her gaze back to their group. Not just light that blinds...

“Not at all. It was a ill-thought out plan, but I suppose Hawke specializes in those. When I heard she left you alone to defend yourself, I had to come make sure you were alright.”

Julia wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or to swear at him. He didn’t mean anything by it, just a kind of impersonal worry. Knowing him, he would have done the same for anyone.

Shutting down those thoughts, Julia straightened and smiled. “I am fine. Hawke’s just an idiot.”

She barely kept herself from flipping that smile as Sebastian laughed. “It’s amazing that she noticed the guards as she walked by. What do you think gave it away?”

Before Julia could answer, Varric appeared. “I’d say it was simple but nothing with Hawke ever is.” Julia quirked an eyebrow at the dwarf and he winked at her. “From what I can guess, she noticed that the number of them- Aveline has been unable to get the funds more than two guards per patrol-, the unusual patrol route, and then the fact that their weapons were shoddy.”

“She couldn’t have been able to notice all that in the dark at the distance we were at.”

“Don’t think about it too much, sometimes I swear that woman is part elf.”

Julia rolled her eyes. Unlikely. Her vision caught on Aveline continuing to lecture the fake guards and adjusting her quiver, she walked over.

“…means respect and honor. You never understood that, which is why I let you go from the guard. But I won’t let you destroy the image I’ve spent these last three years building amongst the people you were supposed to protect. Fenris, would you help me guild them to the keep?”

The white-haired elf nodded once and one of the men shuddered. The fight had been easy enough if there was no gore, but that didn't stop Fenris from being intimidating.

At Aveline’s command, the group stood and started walking. The captain called Sebastian over and he joined in on the parade. Hawke just grinned, arms crossed, and watched the proceeds from the
“Are you happy with yourself?” Julia asked, neutrally.

“In general, yes.” Hawke quirked her head. Julia tracked her gaze then groaned as she realized what the woman was staring at. Fenris’s pants were fitted.

“Get your head out of the gutter!”

“My head hasn’t been in the gutter for years. Not terribly comfortable.”

Julia’s headache that had quieted with Anders’ magic turned from a kitten to a lion tearing at the sections of her brain. “I could have died, you know. Or at the very least, been mugged and severely beaten.”

“But you weren’t.”

There was no way she would miss a shot this close.

“Julia!”

Julia paused her plans at the feminine lilt. Merrill. Carefully, she turned slightly. The slim elf grinned as she walked up from wherever she had been. It took a moment for Julia to properly clear her throat. “Seems you are feeling better.”

“I am great! Darktown wasn’t so nice so Anders let me stay at my home in the alienage. He says I’m fully recovered. Or at the very least, my side doesn’t hurt anymore. Ohh, I like your hair by the way.”

“That’s… I’m glad,” Julia said. Hawke snickered behind her back and Julia carefully slide her bow over her shoulder.

“Can’t you stay quiet for even two seconds, Hawke?”

“Why would I want to? Now, let’s get going back to the party. Gamlen lives near here and the thought of him makes me lose all sense of joy… Onwards!” With a graceless spin, Hawke scampered off in the opposite direction Aveline and her prisoners went. Varric called out at her and with a sigh, Julia joined their small group in following after her.

A single man sat in their corner when they arrived so Hawke and Varric cheerfully kicked him out of their seats. He lay on the floor longer than was decent before getting up to sit at another table.

“To Team Hawke!” Julia’s host yelled, hefting up mug to send showers of almost-acid across the wooden surface. Julia leaned back with a sigh. She was going to have to drag the woman home again.

The dwarf joined the cheers with a solid gulp of whatever the liquid was in his cup. “May they always live in fear of Aveline's wrath.” Merrill giggled and Anders’ lips twitched but both of them drank as well.

Did they have any idea what could be in those mugs?

“Are you seriously rejoicing that you guys got into a fight?”

Hawke wiped at her mouth with her sleeve and burped. “Well, I might be, but I’m pretty sure everyone is happy we won without a scratch.”
“I’m still seeing spots.”

“Spots aren’t scratchy.”

Merrill frowned. “I’m sorry my spell hurt you… It just seemed the best way to stun them.”

Julia took a deep breath and then let it out. “Don’t worry about it, Merrill.” The elf smiled shyly and Julia schooled her face against responding.

“Aww, look at us. I think we are really bonding as a team.” Anders choked on his drink and Julia shot a glare at the dwarf who just grinned further. Besides the coloring, size difference, and just about every other physical trait, he and Hawke could have been twins.

_Bach have mercy, the world couldn’t survive that._

“Speaking of, I was talking to the owner of the Hanged Man and they mentioned about trying to get some music in here. The question is, Freckles, are you good enough to guarantee me free drinks?”

She must have missed something. “What?”

“You have an instrument and say you can play it. But can you perform?”

Her back straightened to match a ruler. “Of course, I can. I once joined the Chicago Philharmonic at the World Orchestra Festival.”

“So that sounds impressive, however I bet you entertained a different sort of people than I am going for here.”

Some of Varric’s premise caught up with her and Julia traced the Hanged Man’s patrons. Her lips curled. “Theses ingrates couldn’t appreciate the music I play.”

Varric sighed, draining his mug so that it clattered against the table. “That’s what I thought. I’ll tell the owner to find someone who has the skill to perform here.”

Julia’s pride itched even as the dwarf paused his less-than-subtle manipulations. She knew what he was trying to do—the greedy fool—yet her shoulder blades still felt compressed beneath the thin layer of skin. _Not skilled enough?_ By its own volition, her hand rose to trace the braid crowning her head. Despite everything, it was still in place, loose hairs tucked neatly away. This was a bad idea.

“Fine. We will call it charity work, introducing the masses to the greats.”

Thick teeth beamed at her. “Then you’ll do it?”

Julia smiled back at him, making sure to flash as many teeth as possible.

“I will.”
This was quite possibly one of the worst decisions Julia had ever made. It placed right next to following Hawke home that first day and dying her hair blonde back in middle school.

She still regretted both.

Varric’s apartment, no matter how much bigger it was than her own room at the manor, felt like a matchbox. The pieces designed for him were just a bit too small for her without being child-like, enough to set her sense of normal off. She paced next to the table, dirty dishes piled high like some hipster's attempt at sculpture.

She should never brought her violin back here. Spores for mold and fungi were undoubtably present, ready to latch on to the first available surface. It was bad enough she breathed it in every few days but to expose her violin… At least for the moment it was protected by the case but when it was time to perform, that last shield would fall away.

*Damn pride.*

A large part of her insisted that she leave, agreements be damned. But… she was not some common artist to flimsily say yes and then at the last minute to say no. She was better than that. Her performances deserved a grand stage as well as an audience that sacrificed to come, but if she said she would be there, only loss of consciousness would stop her.

Back to chastising herself, Julia sat down on the bench by the table and massaged the sides of her face. This was the last time she ever listened to Varric. He could just sew his mouth shut for all his words would be worth. Frankly, a silent Varric would be better for everyone involved. Perhaps they could hear themselves think for once.

She stood and walked back to where her case waited, set on a chair moved away from the possible contaminations of the table. Double checking that there was nothing around that could damage it, Julia flicked through the combination and opened the top. After a second, she tugged the protective cloth layer off her violin.

Wood gleamed even in the candlelight of the room, strings cutting across the surface like thin razors. Julia crouched down and lightly stroked the scroll, trailing the line down the neck and to the body. Just seeing her instrument calmed her down, like she had returned from a long journey and stepped through the front door to the familiar sights and sounds of home.

This is what she was supposed to be doing.

Gently, she removed the violin from the case and placed it against her shoulder. With her free hand, she plucked each metal wire. The strings sang out sonorously, completely in tune. Julia smiled and picked up her bow. A quick tightening and she started through the scales.

Her eyes closed, not needing any visual cues to keep her fingers in their proper places. The motions of weaving music brought back years of practice. Her right arm turned the scales into something more, cantabile and piano, catching at the end of notes. She shifted the scales again and tore through them forte, staccato, and allegro.
Julia paused for a breath, bow a hair's breadth above the strings as if it wanted to dive back in. She held it back. Too much practicing could influence her during the actual performance. More than likely, this would be a difficult one and she would need all the mental fortitude she could muster.

In the several days since she had agreed to this, she had planned her strategy. The closest she had ever come to a performance like this where she picked all her own songs and played them by herself was in middle school for a project where they ended up only having to play one song and then had to tell the class what else they would have played.

*Still a waste of time.*

It hadn't helped that the majority of her classmates cared more about who was dating who and the fate of some boy band she never cared to listen to than actually practicing their instruments.

In some ways, nothing had changed even at a university devoted solely to the arts.

The door to the apartment swung open and Varric strolled into the room like he owned the place. "Did I hear someone skinning a cat? If that's what qualifies as music where you come from, we may have a riot of drunkards on our hands."

"Keep your shirt closed. I have never disappointed a crowd, and I don't plan on starting with a group of illiterates."

The dwarf laughed and came over to get a closer look at her instrument. "Just don't get involved in any fights. Your lute is way out of its weight class."

"Violin," Julia enunciated slowly for the sake of the slow-minded archer. "They are both stringed instruments but that's where the similarities end."

"Looks like a curvy lute to me."

"And you look one step from a cradle to me. But you don't hear me constantly mentioning it."

Masochist that he was, Varric smirked. "Fair enough, Freckles. Now, we don't want to keep your adoring audience waiting. I managed to prepare some space so you have room to breathe without accidently playing someone's beard instead."

"Your generosity knows no bounds," Julia told him straight-faced. He winked at her.

"That's what they tell me."

Varric leading the way, Julia left the relatively quiet space to face the main area of the Hanged Man. It hadn't changed in the last few days, but tonight she got to look at it with the eyes of someone who had to draw the attention of the room.

The crowd was rowdy, per usual. Voices frequently rose above an acceptable talking volume and at times someone would scream across the room in order to converse with another they could have just walked up to. Half the time, one of the participants in the loud dialogue was Hawke.

Primarily a male audience, with a few women scattered throughout. Norah sashayed between tables, doling out the so-called drinks and the shy blond kid was behind the counter. The best evenness of the genders was at the familiar corner table. They were the only ones who looked her way as well.

If anything it was a normal night, loud and obnoxious.
This was such a bad idea. *I can still turn around and call it off.* Varric dealt with Hawke’s decisions all the time, hers would be exponentially simpler to settle. It was an insult for her to play here. These people had no class and wouldn’t appreciate the finer sounds even when they heard them. It was just the futile matter of keeping her pride from dictating her actions.

Julia’s teeth grit down and she paused at the bottom of the stairs, eye on the opening against the wall that Varric had clearly claimed for her. There was no time limit for her set tonight, so if it went badly or the patrons were unable to appreciate true music, she would leave after a few songs.

The idea of people not applauding crept behind her shoulder blades, pushing them together. She should get a standing ovation for just showing up to this nightmare stage. If they weren’t inclined to listen to her, she would make them.

Varric’s place for her was in between their normal corner and the bar, slightly hidden from those at the entrance but in a position to project to the entire tavern. A single bench sat against the wall, tables pushed away to give her space. To keep anyone from stealing the spot, the dwarf had stationed Fenris to guard it. He sat with his back against the wall and glared at anyone who got too close.

The elf reluctantly stood as they approached. "I am surprised that the dwarf managed to convince you into this. You seem like you would know better than to listen to him."

"I could say the same for you yet here we both are," Julia commented, taking in the audience again. Besides a few drunkards who were all but passed out, the conscious crowd had yet to even look her way. The contrast between the quiet and then sudden applause for her at a normal Earth concert and this explained all the issues she had with Kirkwall. "I assume this is his one creative idea and then we will return to peace for several more weeks."

"No promises, Freckles." Varric waved at the bartender and then with a final smirk, went to sit in his corner. An expressionless look from Fenris and the elf followed after.

Julia breathed. All of their typical crew was already at the table. Aveline was noticeably absent, but everyone else was there. Including the shining white prince.

One more thing for her to think about.

*Not that it mattered who watches.* She was years past when that would influence her performance. One of her major concerts had featured an ex who only hours before she had both slept with and then broken up with. He had been right behind her during the solo, angry eyes glued to her back.

She hadn’t fumbled a single note.

No, the priest-prince’s attendance didn’t matter even if he was one of the few people still watching her. She knew her music and would play accordingly.

Julia picked a place to stand in the space provided and raised her violin into position, shoulder-rest balancing precariously. She breathed out… and the tavern continued its noise. So no expectant silence then. Her prelude would suffer slightly from the lack of comparison but it still would be like comparing a diamond amongst pebbles.

Ignoring the roars of laughter and the bright blue stare from her left, Julia touched the ferrule to the strings and began.

The first few notes of Ysaye’s Sonata No 3 drew the attention of the tavern, despite their relative softness. She had picked the song due to its shorter length. It was complex enough to be interesting, yet did not require too much of a burden on the audience. She doubted these slobs would be able to
handle something that required more emotion intelligence.

Other sounds diminished as the music drew her in, swirling patterns and emotions. Her fingers danced over the strings to their own accord, shimmering through vibrados and whole notes alike.

All the stresses of performing in this setting floated away, like a fish re-entering water after dangling from a hook. Submerged beneath the tumultuous surface, her existence revolved around the music pouring from her violin and the steady rhythm of her heart.

Julia closed her eyes.

Time continued without seconds or minutes- so she supposed as the music progressed- and the movement of her arm crescendoed into crashing waves of colored sound.

She breathed and it was over.

It took a moment to convince her eyes to open, to pull herself out of the comfortable soak of beautiful music. The world outside the violin was never quite as good as the one inside it.

Finally, she lowered her right arm and raised her eyes for the audience's reaction.

' I told you' so is not good enough for Varric. Whatever attention she had gotten from adding a new sound to the mixture had long gone. The audience continued the motions from before she started playing as if the last six minutes hadn't happened. She might as well have been juggling bright red balls for how much these idiots cared. They probably would have appreciated that more since it gave them something to drool at while their minds marinated into slop.

One of the men in front of her had his head laid on his arms. A small snore rose from his lips and Julia almost called it quits right there.

The only people who were actually looking at her were the bartender in the corner and the gang of people she could put names to. Merrill smiled widely at her and tried to get up to come towards her but Varric stopped her with a hand and a few words. The dwarf looked like a cat who had gotten into the cream, smug and content. Isabela and Hawke whispered between themselves, occasionally shooting her a look.

Julia really didn't want to know.

Fenris, Sebastian, and Anders, despite all their differences, were at varying levels of relaxed. Fenris, rigid but slumping on the edges, Anders' eyes were almost closed with his head braced against his hand, and Sebastian… the priest smiled at her as he caught her gaze. The smile was kind, with no ulterior motives other than than sharing the pleasure of what he had just heard.

Julia pulled her eyes away from his face, embarrassed by the display of emotions. At least someone appreciated her Herculean task.

With that acknowledgment, she began her next piece. She hadn't planned on doing Paganini's twenty-fourth caprice tonight, it was a bit longer than this crowd could enjoy but since they didn't seem to care either way, she would play what she wanted.

The rapid fire notes of the opening raised heads but within seconds they bowed over cups again. Julia glared at them, hoodlums, and then focused in on the music, reminding herself that just because they were her first audience in a while didn't mean she needed to care what they thought.

Once again the sound drew her in, twisting above her head like a storm. She didn't have to lose...
anything by playing here, not if she refused to give in. If anything, this performance helped her to ignore her surroundings even more than normal.

Despite her attention riveted on the friction between strings, the clank of mugs and murmur of voices and laughter still trickled past her barriers.

The song ended as quickly as it had begun. Julia tilted back her head and flashed a smile at the oblivious audience. Better to not see an adoring crowd than to have to bear witness to this indifference.

"Play something faster!" A voice called out from behind her sightline of people and Julia's smile sharpened a few degrees. *They don't think Caprice 24 is fast?*

She would show them fast then.

Bowing her head in the direction of the person who had called her, Julia dramatically set the bow back on the violin.

*Let's see how they like the Flight of the Bumblebee then.*

If she hadn't warmed up by this point, the song might have been more of a challenge but as it was, her fingers flew through the notes with as much ease as Isabela had draining mugs of alcohol.

Although she didn't have a timer to prove it, she finished the piece in less than 75 seconds. Lowering her violin, Julia curtsied to the drunks with a smile, then went over to her group's corner.

"I am not a fan of I told you so, Varric, but I was undeniably right."

The dwarf grinned but Merrill spoke before he could.

"You were amazing, Julia! I have never heard anyone play like that! Your fingers were a blur!" The elf sat back down, eyes sparkling. "How did you learn to do that?"

"Practice," Julia said. "Years of practice and not a little bit of skill."

Merrill made appreciative noises and Varric took control of the conversation again. "All that bluster wasn't for nothing, you really do know how to play."

She glared at him waiting for the stick to the carrot and the dwarf continued. "The problem is that, no matter your talent, you aren't picking the right songs. Don't you know anything that we can dance to?"

Oh, ignorant fool. "People do dance to the songs I play." Varric waved her off.

"Not those high-class dances where nobles pretend to have a good time. I mean dancing for fun. Lively music. That's what we need here."

Her lips curled. "I am a classical violinist, not some street corner fiddler."

His teeth winked at her. "Than I guess you will leave your audience unsatisfied."

"That's what they deserve," Julia said, but she glanced towards the tavern regardless. *A song to satisfy these simpletons.* She was not a fiddler and had no interest in playing some square dance tune, but she did know a few more modern pieces that commoners might approve of. If for no other reason than to shut Varric up, "I'll play one more, and then I am done. I don't care if it wins whatever bet you have with the owner or not. Understand?"
A nod and Julia went back the several feet to her spot against the wall. Someone called at her but she ignored them, trying to draw up the memory of a song she hadn't played in years. *What key is it in?* The tune and a memory of honey-scented perfume floated by in her head, and she began.

D, D an octave up, C….

The song was simple but much of the world's population knew of it or at least could hum along. Long drawn out notes with careful vibratos spaced within.

Heads swayed, turning their ears to hear her better. *If they had the brains, they would be wondering about the abrupt shift in music style.*

Whole notes faded into hopeful eighth notes, picking up the tempo. A nice change from the drawn out lyricism.

Despite being shorter than almost every classical song in her repertoire, the tune went on long enough for several heads that had been paying attention to dip, heads bobbing forward. *They are worse than teenagers.*

Julia played the phrases of the piece, reciting the words in her head at the same time. She was a little amazed she still remembered them. *'If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow why oh why can't I?"*

The Hanged Man was quiet when she lowered her bow, or as silent as the tavern ever got. She successfully got their attention. Not with one of the great musical works or with astonishment over her skill, but with a common song that had been around for the greater part of a century.

If she was a coarser person, she might have considered giving them a one-finger salute, but instead she turned and strode past strangers and supposed-friends to return her instrument to its case.

Everything had returned to its normal rhythms when she clipped down the stairs, key to Varric's apartments heavy in her pocket. He had loaned it to her when she had to explain that there was no way she would leave her occupied case unattended.

"You finally played something good and then you stop? What kind of musician are you?" Hawke said. *Practically a glowing review.*

"One with standards," Julia told her, nudging Merrill to slide over. Sebastian sat in the chair on the other side of her but she purposely didn't look at him. For whatever reason, her skin felt irritated near him, like if she glanced his way, she would break out into a rash.

"Standards, smatters. Do you think I got an expensive manor in Hightown by having standards? If I did, I would have never ended up in the asscrack of the Deep Roads and sent my baby brother to join the suicide squad. Trust me, standards are for those who can afford to be picky. You cannot."

Julia raised an eyebrow at that background comparison. "Why would I care what these drunkards think if they don't care about quality playing? I'm not changing myself to suit their whims."

The dwarf across the table laughed. "Unless you can get into playing for the big league, you need to learn how to pick your songs. Your audience matters. It's like telling a story..."

She let him ramble off, since he wasn't the type to say much of use once he got going. As she said, none of it mattered. She was one of the best, the winner of almost every violin contest she bothered to enter and the guest soloist for some of the top orchestras in the world. Her career had barely begun and already she was above the level of many violinists who had been in the scene for decades.
A hand fell on her shoulder and Julia jerked at the sudden contact. Sebastian, oblivious to her ignoring, wanted her attention and at her jerk, he withdrew his hand.

"I apologize for startling you. I only desired to let you know that of the several violin players I have heard, none compare to your skill. You draw in the listener and entice them with emotions that they might otherwise reject. Several stoic men had tears in their eyes during the last song."

A smile flickered across her face before she realized it. "Thank you, Sebastian."

The brother smiled back. "Have you been playing long?"

"I started lessons when I was five years old. My grandmother had some connections to the music world and helped get me a good tutor."

"That is a long time to show such devotion to a single skill."

Julia shrugged and looked towards the center of the table. "Of course. The greats start young and never stop. My debut was at age twelve with an audience of over a thousand people."

"That must have been very hard."

*What a weird thing to think...* She shrugged. "Playing the violin was never difficult. Most of the time it is the only thing that makes sense." Her lips pressed shut. The lack of applause must be getting to her more than she thought.

Sebastian made a soft noise and the gentleness of his face made the prickling sensation underneath her skin increase. "I feel the same way about my time in the Chantry. I have spent the last few years trying to convince everyone else of my rightful place. But whenever I step back into the light of the Chantry, I feel that same sense of peace you just gave me, if only for a few moments."

The bare emotion forced her to look away before she could reveal herself with an ugly blush. "You found your place then."

A sigh. "If only it were that simple." But he didn't seem inclined to talk about it anymore and Julia was inclined to avoid emotional discussions where she could. The last thing she wanted was to bare souls with someone, especially if that someone was a kind and relatively handsome man. It would only lead to trouble that she couldn't afford.

The rest of the table continued on like their side conversation didn't exist. Merrill and Hawke were discussing another trip to visit the elf’s clan to get some kind of hammer. Varric had to remind Hawke that some templar named Eric sent her an urgent message.

Hawke groaned. "You're right. He is a rather dramatic sort but he did make it seem like life or death. Merrill, how about I check on what the skirt wants and then we can go out again."

Anders commented that 'Emeric' wasn't a bad sort for a templar but they should be careful before helping him. Fenris chipped in negatively and per usual, the group dissolved into fighting.

"Hey Julia, you should come too, you know your way around the Gallows now," Hawke said over Anders and Fenris' arguing.

Julia rewarded her with a blank stare. "I would hardly call one time as 'knowing my way around'. Besides, your mother has a tea party tomorrow."

"I wasn't invited to that!"
"Yes you were, you said you would rather swim in sewage."

"That doesn't sound like me at all. I am usually more colorful in my similes."

"Not a simile, Hawke."

"Eh, see if a metaphor or simile will help in a fight. It's not like I stuck around for Common lessons anyways. There was always something more interesting to do."

Julia rolled her eyes, catching Sebastian's smile out of the corner of her eye. Nothing changed. At least she now knew to say no to any shows Varric tried to provoke her into. Especially if they concerned the Hanged Man and free drinks.

Underneath it all, the glow of a performance flared like a cheap match. Julia leaned back. Despite the audience, someone had been moved by her playing which in turn helped to turn it into a failure into something that was closer to a success.

In the end, it hadn't been all bad.

Hawke knocked her mug over with a sweep of her arm and as Julia sighed, the liquid spread across the table. She was developing quite the resistance to the ways of Hawke. Before that would be annoying, now it was just reality.

The warm glow twitched but then remained steady as a pulse. Julia peeked at Sebastian out of the corner of her vision and allowed herself a small inner smile.

No, not bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

"If it were easy as fishin' you could be a musician
If you could make sounds loud or mellow
Get a second-hand guitar, chances are you'll go far
If you get in with the right bunch of fellows"
Chapter Notes

"Why wait to say
At least I did it my way."

Julia moved the spoon a fraction to the left and stepped back. Bodahn and Orana had set the table at least half an hour ago but Leandra’s buzz of energy made her want to do something, even if it was just straightening silverware.

She paced around the small table. The setting was closer to something in a Regency movie than modern day, but it was still familiar enough to make sense. Two plates, an increased set of silverware, and two drinking containers, one a shimmering glass and the other similar to china. No table cloth but a rather large decorative floral arrangement gave the gleaming table a sense of formality.

They were expecting a half dozen guests, all familiar to Leandra from before she ran away with Malcolm. Due to the barriers the older Hawke already encountered reentering high society, they decided to start small, with people who wouldn't likely refuse. They were carefully selected, no one too high up the social ladder or that had made some negative comment about the return of the Amells. Despite their careful choices, a few people didn't respond to their invitations or turned them down outright, but a majority agreed to show.

Leandra had at least verbally accepted the fact that some might be coming to see how far the Amells had fallen rather than the pleasure of the company. Kirkwall was like Earth in that regard. Reputation once lost was nearly impossible to retrieve, but people may still be there for the show.

Still, the idea of spending an afternoon with individuals who bathed regularly was appealing.

One of the napkins on the table dipped beneath its own weight, tarnishing the crisp lines. Julia snatched the crumpled mess, spread out the material, and refolded it back into something more respectable.

Taking one more frowning look at the clean table and dim candles, Julia walked off to join Leandra in the library.

Patiently sitting seemed beyond Leandra as Julia passed through the door frame of the usually peaceful room. The elder Hawke strode in a wide circle around two chairs and a small table. Her hands alternately roved between checking her hair, adjusting her jewelry, and straightening her dress as she stared off into space. Julia held back a sigh.

“Everything is ready.”

Leandra slowed at the sound of another's voice. She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Thank you, Julia. I appreciate your help.”

Julia considered sitting but the idea of watching Leandra go in circles deterred her. Instead she positioned herself next to the path. “It is nothing.”
The woman began her pacing again, hand going through her silver hair. “I know we went over all the details but still I worry. It has been so long since I could even conceive of doing something like this. Malcolm and I never had much money for hosting and then with the children… Did we spend too much, or not enough? Are our decorations out of style? Will our guests work well together?”

Julia hesitated then reached out to lay a hand on the matron’s arm as she passed by. The pacing stopped. “It will be fine. Orana is almost done preparing the snacks, Bodahn and Sandal spent most of the day cleaning, and you look lovely.”

The answering smile made her effort worthwhile. “You are beautiful as well, Julia.”

She didn’t bother answering that. Her hair was gathered into a fishtail-type braid down the back of her head which turned into loose hair at the base of her skull that Orana had somehow gotten into graceful waves. She had turned down the glue-like paste that Leandra called make-up, instead simply borrowing a small stick of eyeliner and a dab of perfume.

It wasn’t something she could call good but just about anything was better than going natural.

The carousel ended with Leandra resting her hand on one of the chairs and slipping down to sit. She closed her eyes. "I wish Bethany and Marian could have been here for this."

Julia’s gut ached dully but she pushed the feeling off. "Hawke would undoubtedly make a mess of it, so it is probably for the best she has other things to do."

Leandra laughed shortly. "You are right of course. Bethany would sometimes play noble lady as a child, but Marian never would. She wanted to be a knight. Malcolm was worth everything I gave up and we were happy, however, I always wished my children would still have all the opportunities their heritage should have given them."

Unbidden, the image of Hawke stuffed into a fine dress, drinking champagne while making small talk popped into Julia's head. As unlikely as a kazu being cultured. Malcolm must have been a male version of Hawke, since the younger woman clearly inherited nothing from Leandra.

A sharp knock and Bodahn stepped into the library. “A Lady DuMois and Suma have arrived.”

Leandra stood, sorrow dropping off her face like so much sludge. Whatever concerns she might have had about the party, she was capable enough to push them aside in order to do her job as a hostess.

“Thank you, Bodahn. You may see them to the parlor.” The dwarf disappeared from view and she smiled at Julia. “Are you ready to see to our guests?”

Julia felt her own public mask slip on and she smiled back. "Of course."

A short while later all but one of the guests had arrived. Leandra entertained the guests for a while longer, giving them a bit of extra time but when it was clear that they had been stood up, Julia slipped out to help Bodahn rearrange the settings.

It wouldn't help the evening if it became clear that others turned them down. Once the spacing at the table looked like they had only intended to have five guests, Julia came back to the parlor. A dip of the head at the hostess and it was time for tea.

“Leandra, I don’t think you’ve properly introduced us to your young friend here. How did you meet dear Julia?”

Without falter, Leandra set down her tea cup. She knew the whole story of course, but after a brief
discuss, they had decided it would be better to give a mixed version of fact and fiction.

“My daughter encountered Julia down by the docks a bit over a month ago. She was soaked to the bone with no memory on how she had got there. After our own unfortunate circumstances, Marian can’t abandon someone who needs help and brought her here. After some searching we found out that she had no family or friends in Kirkwall and after getting to know her, I decided to let her stay.”

Eyes turned to Julia, both horrified and delighted. "You really have no memory?" A powdered lady whose name Julia had forgotten as soon as it was spoken asked.

"Very little. I can speak and know the basic social norms. It is lucky that I remember my own name since I had to relearn the names of countries and cities. The only hint we have as towards my origin is my violin."

"The violin… I think I've heard of that, isn't it a type of weapon?"

Julia almost said yes. "An instrument actually. My fingers remember how to play it along with a number of songs but no one seems to recognize the music."

“Oh, you must give us a small show! I have a great appreciation for the arts! I never learned, but I’m sure if I had, I would’ve been quite proficient.” One of the ladies cooed and Julia ducked her head as if embarrassed, hiding her face so they couldn’t see the temptation to roll her eyes.

“I couldn't possibly…”

“Please dear,” the another woman asked and Julia slowly nodded to a succession of pleased sounds.

From the corner of her vision, she spotted Leandra smile. A secondary reason for this gathering was to introduce Julia to potential patrons. She could only hope the people of Hightown had better taste than those living below.

Pushing back her chair, Julia fetched her already-tuned violin from her bedroom. Her entrance back into the parlor silenced the soft chatter. Julia stepped to the side to face them all and set the bow into position.

She started with Bach’s Chaconne from Sonata no. 2 in D minor.

The notes weaved around her, unhampered like they had been at the Hanged Man. Her audience this time was silent; they could have been comatose for how much noise they made. Julia glanced up. *Nope. All their eyes are still open.* She hadn’t shocked anyone into a heart-attack yet.

Bach ended too soon and she lowered her violin, bowing towards the small group.

They stared at her for several beats and then their hands rose to clap.

“That was marvelous, dear!”

“You sound almost like a professional!” Julia’s smiled waned sharply. *Almost?*

Lady DuMois, a plump woman with thin straight blond hair, spoke up, a French accent spread thick over her vowels. “You, my darling, are better than most musicians I have heard in this city. I don’t mean to impose, but the person I had hired to play for my nephew’s birthday party has shown themselves to be a dishonest character. It is just a small gathering of family and close friends, so I understand if you are not interested, but if you can play more than just that song, I would love to have you entertain us.”
Face wiped smooth, Julia glanced at Leandra whose head moved forward a bit. *Not a bad offer than.*

She bowed. “That is very generous, Lady DuMois, to offer such a thing to someone lacking in reputation like myself. I would be interested in playing my music for a large group of people. Perhaps one of them have heard something similar and can offer some more information about where I came from.”

The ladies tittered and Julia smiled at her would-be patron. Then she went to put away her violin. She had gotten what she needed out of this tea party, yet the day was still young. Now she just had to make nice with the rest of the women and force a more solid agreement out of DuMois.

Although she didn't need the validation to known her own worth, the recognition of her skill was appreciated as well. Despite everything, her confidence had dipped slightly after the Hanged Man. She couldn't help but think that perhaps music was done differently here. Perhaps what would get a standing ovation on Earth could be easily dismissed in Thedas. But the fact remained, even in this backwater, she was superior.

By the time she made it back, the women had settled into small gossip. Julia sat back down in her spot and used her knife to butter the fresh bread Orana had made. Although their cheeks were not as stiff with age as she was used to, the ladies gave each other false smiles and tinkling practiced laughter.

That was familiar at least.

"My cousin just returned from a trip to Starkhaven. The new Prince's court is full of opportunity for those willing to make a few investments."

"The Ferrings' son was found at a tavern in Lowtown, with an elven servant of all things!"

"Lady Putough's sister is in favor in Nevarra right now, she has been getting the most interesting clothes as presents. She seems determined to convince the rest of us that Nevarra is the way fashion is turning."

Julia didn't know what they were talking about most of the time, but she knew how to gasp at the appropriate moments and make derogatory remarks at the different people mentioned. Sometimes one of the women would remember her so called amnesia and let her knows the particulars of the rumor they were spreading.

They did their best of keep their tone pleasant, but emotions flickered with the corners of their eyes and how they held themselves. While not it wasn't always blindingly obvious, Julia started to pick up when they were purposely lying. It had been a while since she had to exercise that particular mental muscle.

Her face stayed smooth but the thought paused her absorption of petty information. She didn't spend time with Hawke's friends looking for lies. Which was odd, since they certainly did lie and often in the cases of Varric and Isabela. What was the difference?

“Leandra, what is this I hear about your daughter breaking into a mansion in Hightown and killing someone?”

Leandra froze mid-bite before she got control of herself. *Well that is a direct confrontation.*

"Yes, Leandra. I'm been meaning to ask. They say that your eldest spends her time running around with criminals in Lowtown. How can you let her do that? My children know better than to do anything that would tarnish the family."
Attacking while she is disoriented? Some things never change. Julia swallowed her bite of bread and accidentally tapped her silverware against her glass.

“As I understand it, a templar requested Haw… Marian’s assistance in hunting down a murderer who has repeatedly kidnapped women from both Hightown and Lowtown. This is what led her to that mansion,” Julia said, pulling out details from the talk at the Hanged Man the day before.

The women tittered. Lady Suma hide her mouth with a dark hand. “Getting involved with the templars? I respect the Order for keeping us safe from malificars but it is so violent.”

Leandra gathered herself together. “Marian has always been brave. She and her brother served in King Cailan’s army at Ostagar till Loghain's betrayal, which is when she and Carver came back to protect us from the darkspawn horde. I don’t doubt whatever she did, it was for the best.”

“You give her a lot of credit.”

“I trust her decisions.”

After a long pause, Lady DuMois offered some consolatory remark and then switched topics. The rest of the table followed.

Julia glanced at her hostess whose face had tempered into placidity. Just there, for a moment, she had seen where Hawke got some of her determination. Despite the fact Leandra had expressed similar opinions as their guests in the past, when it came down to it, her loyalties were clear.

Maybe Hawke had inherited something from Leandra after all.
The parchment tucked into her sleeve crackled as she walked, giving away the melody before the piece even began. Julia frowned and straightened her arm. The hidden letter made more noise. *Subtle.*

“Have you lost it yet?”

“No, and even though you keep asking, I won’t,” Julia said without breaking a beat as they approached the final flight of stairs.

Hawke shrugged. “All you’ve been doing the last few days is torturing your lute, who knows what skills you lost in the meantime.”

Julia massaged her forehead as bronze slaves wailed silently on the walls above them. "There are too many things wrong with that statement to bother correcting you. Now, aren’t you supposed to be jogging ahead? We don’t know each other here."

"We could have become friends on the ride over," Hawke said with a grin.

"You are more likely to lose a friend on the ride over," Julia retorted, purposely slowing since Hawke refused to change pace.

"Oh, are you talking to me, Sister? We are strangers after all."

Julia grit her teeth and swallowed back her remark as Hawke crested the final few steps to the main level of the Gallows.

Taking her time to give the other woman distance, Julia let the view of the tortured courtyard slowly seep into her sightline. They had been lucky the first time they tried this, but the templars had to be blind and deaf for this to work again. Though, with those buckets on their heads, perhaps they were. Julia pushed down her doubts and tried to look like a nun. *The templars care more about mages leaving then clerics entering.* She was supposedly on their side after all.

"Oh, yes. Emeric is quite dead. I might even say very dead," Hawke's voice was clear despite the 40 feet and several bodies between them. "I don't know what your buddy Moira told, but the man we think was responsible for his death is also quite dead."

Apparently Hawke had a thing about people doing things that she considered part of her job. Even
though the blond Templar she was talking to more than likely already knew what she was telling him, she just couldn't let it go. 'Who knows what kind of crazy facts that female templar will try to make them believe?'

Julia shifted her path towards the mage tower, glancing at the clones in skirts. If what Varric said was true, these people were more than just guards for the mages. Apparently they were the power behind the viscount, controlling the city in the ways that mattered. Yet here she was, doing something that at the very least would annoy them.

*If the templars are anything like Earth's fanatical military groups, Kirkwall is going to burn.*

Julia shook her head to clear out the thought. She just needed to make sure not be here when that happened and it wouldn’t really matter.

*And one and two and three.* Julia took a breath and walked up the stairs to the tower. She made it into the courtyard and into the tower itself before she was forced to pause. She had purposely forgotten how much of a labyrinth this place was.

White globes of light burned holes into her eyes and made the hallways indistinguishable. Not that she knew where she was going anyways. All she needed was to bump into that young elf mage or some other easily persuaded sort and the letter would be delivered.

To keep herself distracted, Julia started going through Concerto no 2 in G Minor in her head to keep track of time and to stop herself from staring too hard at identical hallways.

Corner, hall, corner, stairs. Straight, right, straight, avoid a crack in the floor. Julia passed a few people as she walked, mages and templars, but no one commented on her so she ignored them as well.

Everyone but her seemed to be in groups, pairs at the bare minimum. What did it say when no one walked alone?

A door barred her path but opened easily a slight push, revealing yet another set of stairs. It only took several twists and turns before she found herself in something resembling a cafeteria. At least in the aspect that groups of mages were gathered at tables eating.

Figures glanced her way and then returned to their activities as the large doors shut behind her. *Indifferent as ever.* Julia ran her eyes over the assembled crowd for someone likely not to reject her outright. *This would be easier with Sebastian here.*

Short brown hair, long brown hair, curly blond hair, braided black hair, strawberry blond… Julia's gaze jerked back to the black hair. Sharp points of ears poked out, visible even from behind. That one she knew. *What did she call herself?… Rebecca? No, it is shorter and more unusual…Reba?*

“Revas!” Julia called out, settling on the name that played right in her head. Pointed ears turned and the young female looked up. As familiar dark eyes met her own, Julia smoothed her expression into a soft smile and walked forward around the nearest tables. Shoulders hunched as she passed and more than one mage watched her from the corner of their eye.

The young female sat at a table with an eclectic band of fellow robed people. Any conversation she might have been a part of seemed to have ground to a halt at the call of her name. Despite the fact she looked like a rabbit watching a predator approach, the elf didn't bolt, although she did give herself a smaller outline.

Julia sighed internally and began her pitch. “Good afternoon, Revas. It is good to see you again. You
are looking…” pale “…well. Would you once again be able to direct me to where Bethany Hawke is?”

Although she tried to make it subtle, Julia spoke a bit softer than the volume of the room dictated, with the chance that it would hinder eavesdroppers. No one needed to know Bethany had a messenger to the Kirkwall. She wasn’t a damned mailman.

Revas stared at her for a long moment then nodded at her tablemates before standing. Even quieter than Julia had gone, she said, "Of course I can help you, Sister." Then she was on the move, weaving around tables towards one of the doors.

Mindful of the templars and mages watching her, Julia barely held back swearing. The borrowed robe wasn't fitted for fast movement. Pulling up the fabric with her left hand, she started after the small mage.

They made it back to the bright hallways and Revas picked up the pace, scurrying around long passages and barely slowing at corners to allow Julia to see what direction she was going. At one point she did stop and take a few quick paces back to join Julia. It took less than a minute for Julia to figure out the reason. A pair of templars marched passed in the hallway crossing that Revas had paused at. Their eyes ran down both of them, making Julia's skin itch. Not quite a leer but something similar. Hateful but currently passive.

She glanced at the young mage but the girl didn't give a hint to her thoughts.

They moved on.

Several hallways and sets of steps later the decor changed. Subtle but after so much walking through mirrored images, any differences might as well as had a neon sign point to them. The orbs on the walls were a different style, no longer a burning white but a softer brightness and the hallways themselves seemed larger.

"The Enchanters live on this floor," Revas said, waiting for Julia at an intersection.

More to see if keeping her talking slowed her down, Julia asked, "What is the difference?"

Unfortunately, the mage started walking without hesitation. "Enchanters are mages that passed their Harrowing. I am just an apprentice, a mage that hasn't going through their Harrowing."

_The Harrowing..._ Anders had ranted enough about that event for her to have a general understanding of it.

"So Bethany is an Enchanter?"

That one got the elf to react, a quick hard press of the lips together. "Yes, as an apostate, she needed to take the Harrowing almost as soon as she got here. She only spent a few nights in the apprentice quarters."

"Which is how you know her?"

"Yes."

She seemed to want to leave it there but Julia hadn't been in high society for years without developing the ability to make conversation with reluctant participants.

"How is it decided to move one from apprenticeship to Enchanter? Is it based on skill or simply
Revas stiffened slightly and her eyes checked for eavesdroppers before she said at a near whisper, "Skill… And temperament."

"Ah." There was more to it than that but Julia decided to let that topic be. She didn't care enough to get trivia from her guide. "So where is Bethany?"

Her companion made a face and looked at the rows of doors. She doesn't know. "I… think the mages she spends time with use this time to practice their magic."

"If nothing else, if we find one of them, then we at least have another person to ask," Julia concluded the thought.

It took around six minutes of walking through a series of passages that Julia didn't bother to commit to memory till they reached a pair of doors the size of two grand piano stacked on their sides. Revas hesitated at the sight of them but followed as Julia gave the wood a sharp push.

Sounds rebounded off each other in a space that seemed too large to physically be able to exist with the level of technology in Thedas. It was a massive blocky room, several football fields length across. Bright lights hung near the ceiling, casting sun-like rays down on the below several stories below. So this is where the mages practice.

Wind from nowhere blew by Julia's face as fire and ice alternately blossomed in front of her. Several mages took turns firing streaks of purple light at a mage with a glowing bubble encasing them. Meanwhile a group of smaller robes seemed intent on pushing a bolder larger than them across the room without touching it.

Julia focused on her breathing. On every wall, spaced deliberately, faceless templars stared out at the mages practicing. They could have been statues with how little movement they made. But they were watching. Those black eye-slots wouldn't be hiding someone dozing off. They were waiting for a mistake, for something to happen. They didn't rest their hands actively on their weapons, but it was clear that in a matter of seconds, they could have a point of metal shoved through a mage's heart.

She hadn't forgotten how skin rippled as it parted to make way for horns or the tenor of the screams that it produced.

Another scan, focusing on the faces rather than the feats of fantasy, revealed the Hawke sister, dark hair twisted up behind her head. Sweat beaded her forehead as she focused on holding what could only be described as a lightning ball in the air. Her arm wavered and the ball cracked out of existence. Bethany dropped her hands and wiped at her forehead.

"Revas, would you please wait a minute while I check on the spiritual well-being of a mage? It shouldn't take long and I might need assistance returning back to the main floor."

With a failure of a poker face, Revas frowned and then nodded. She had to know something was odd about this situation but did nothing. People like that needed to be rewarded before they started to ask inappropriate questions. Julia slipped her hand into the pocket on the side of her robe. Good thing she was prepared.

"Revas. I found this sash in the Chantry donation bin. It matches the robes you were wearing last time we met. If you don't like it, that is fine. But I thought it would tie the outfit together well."

The elf froze before raising her hand slowly to touch the silk-cool cloth of the sash. It was a
bright-obnoxious really- yellow color with some blue embroidery on the edges. A shopkeeper had tried to convince Leandra to pay actual money for it but though some choice words, Julia got it as a complimentary gift instead.

"Thank you." The sash fell from her hands and disappeared into the fabric of the robe. "Why would… thank you."

Julia nodded shortly with a smile that wasn't completely forced and mindful of the helmets that angled her way, she started forward. Like most things, it was all about the tempo. She had time but still a purpose that shouldn't be bothered.

Spells didn't stop for her but they angled away, mistrustful eyes following her movements. This was probably not somewhere someone in her colors came very often.

Bethany saw her way before they was close enough to talk without the templars hearing. Her eyes widened for a second before settling quickly into a disinterested expression. Not so naive then.

"It has been some time since you last lifted your troubles to the Maker, child," Julia said when she had reached the correct distance. The corner of Bethany's lip twitched but otherwise she didn't make a reaction.

"I would take some comfort in prayer, Sister, if you were willing to guide me."

“Of course. Let us find a peaceful spot to meditate on our places in the world.” Julia hoped no one heard her who both knew how this religion was supposed to work and cared enough to question her on it. There was only so much BS she could weave before she tripped herself up on it.

They weren't stopped on the way out but Julia spotted a single dark head near the door. She gave the elf a quick nod and the younger woman disappeared down the hall. Julia gave herself to the count of ten, long enough for Bethany to lead them beyond the view of the practice room, before digging into folds of fabric for the letter. Parchment passed between hands without comment and Bethany slipped into her robe.

A matter of seconds and her whole mission here was almost complete.

"Will you let my mother know that it will still be a while before I am allowed visitors? Apparently it takes more than passing my Harrowing to overcome almost two decades of being an apostate," Bethany said with a sigh.

"Of course," Julia said. She hesitated before adding, "She misses you."

Emotion wrinkled the woman's face for several steps before she fought to get control herself again. "Thank you for coming, Julia. It is good to be reminded that there is more to the world than these walls."

Julia wasn't quite sure what to say to that. If Bethany was anything like her sister she wouldn't appreciate platitudes but she was Leandra's daughter and the older woman at least was grateful for the effort. In the end she just nodded and looked away as Bethany rubbed at her eyes.

“What other news is there from the outside?” The mage asked as they approached a corner. It seemed like they were heading back towards the entrance but really, she had no way of knowing for sure.

"Depends what you want to know. Your mother hosted a moderately successful tea party a few days ago. She also wrote another letter to your brother who apparently still hasn't gotten a message back in
a few months. Hawke is determinedly trying to get herself killed, but I assume you are aware of that fatal flaw."

Bethany frowned and snorted. "Yes I am. But how are you doing? Any progress with getting home?"

Julia almost raised an eyebrow. They met twice for only a handful of minutes and the woman was trying to get personal?

"I have my first proper performance coming up in a few days so everything is proceeding at a good pace. Has the Circle calmed down since my last visit?"

Bethany considered it for the several seconds it took for them to reach the stairs. “In some ways. Meredith still has more guards patrolling outside our rooms after curfew and we aren’t allowed to be in unsupervised groups but the fervor is down now that it is clear that Ser Alrik’s death wasn’t part of a mage uprising.”

Nodding like she completely understood what the woman was talking about, Julia smiled. "I will let your sister know. Are there any other messages you would like me to pass on?"

"Tell them not to worry about me."

Julia plastered over any expression as a pair of templars rounded the corner, marching towards them. Following Bethany's example, she stepped to the side.

"Thank you for explaining that text to me, Sister," Bethany said just loud enough for the templars to hear as they marched past. "I always wondered what that passage meant. 'Blessed are they who stand before/ The corrupt and the wicked and do not falter./Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just.'"

Once the two skirts were behind them, Julia asked. "Why shouldn't they worry?"

Bethany took one more look behind her, eyes lingering on the corner the skirts had dispersed around. “Life here isn’t great but for the last three years I haven’t had to hide who I was. I’m not just Hawke’s sister or the new girl. I am me, Bethany, a mage. I teach apprentices the basics on how to control their power and pass down my father’s words to them. There are things to be improved on, but I can handle myself." The woman paused to breathe then looked directly at Julia. "Will you make sure Marian doesn’t do anything to try to save me?"

Tell Hawke what? She already knew that wouldn't go over well, there was a good chance Hawke thought that this whole Sister masquerade would lead to some kind of escape attempt. Not that the madwoman had expressed the idea in so many words but it was more of her comments on the ride over to the Gallows. Like how surprised she was that Julia got by so easily last time and what a blindspot Chantry clothes offered.

"You should tell her yourself," Julia said after a moment of figuring out how to least colorfully phrase that there was no way Hawke would listen to her. "She came with me to talk with some templar about a murder. She should be causing trouble in the courtyard right now."

Metal steps echoed sharply from close by and both women straightened to look natural.

Julia cleared her throat as another pair of templars came into view. "As I was saying my child, the Maker welcomes all into his embrace. You only need to turn to him in your troubles. It is really as easy as---"
“Sister, can you please come with us?” The templars paused a few feet away, close enough to grab if needed.

Lip curling just a hair, Julia smiled. “I am discussing salvation with this young woman. Surely whatever is the matter can wait.”

The masks hide their occupants’ thoughts well, but they didn’t seem impressed.

“The Knight-Commander wishes to have a word with you about why she wasn’t notified about the Chantry sending extra clerics. Now come along.” A metal hand reached out but Julia jerked away.

“I am capable of walking myself. Bethany, I’m sorry our time was cut short but please reflect on what I said.” With that final reminder, Julia straightened her skirt, raised her chin, and faced the templars.

“Now I am ready.”

Chapter End Notes

"From my arms you maybe out of reach
But my heart says you're here to keep."
The templars' boots beat a hard rhythm that turned the echoes into something syncopated. Julia focused a portion of her mind on that, figuring out when she had heard a similar percussional tune, while the rest of her thoughts trailed down different melodies of reason. She had a semblance of a strategy, the notes just an octave away.

As swiftly as it began, the hoax of a drumline halted at a door that in many ways looked almost exactly like the ones around it. Dark wood with metal inlays, swung in rather than out. Instead of a Circle, they should consider calling it a Labyrinth. Julia kept her face smooth as one of her escorts reached out and pushed open the large panel.

The interior was dim, a single thin barred window with a scattering of sconces providing the limited light. Stone walls did little to help improve the ambiance. In the center of the room, a desk dominated the space in more ways than one. Its occupant, a red-hooded figure, leaned over the wood frame, feather fluttering in her hand as she wrote. That would be the Knight-Commander then.

It's just like any other audition. Julia rolled her shoulders back. They have misconceptions about me, I know little of them, and they are hoping that I fail.

She hadn't lost at an audition in years.

As the scratching against the parchment slowed, Julia took a breath and strode into the room.

"Knight-Commander, I am Sister Julia, it is an honor to meet you. My only wish is that it had been without this misunderstanding." The smile she had on was small, to be interpreted as slightly embarrassed but she kept the few steps needed to approach the desk confident. She had every right to be here.

Sharp blue eyes rose to meet hers and the edges of Julia's vision turned white. A shock of ice traveled down her spine, causing her to almost stumble into the desk. Ghosts of a skyscraper-filled horizon came into view on the wall to her right. A car flashed through the office mere feet in front of her. Julia dug her nails into her palm but didn't flinch.

Then there was just the templar in front of her again.

The hell… Julia smiled back the demands for answers and forced the last few seconds from her
thoughts. She… would figure out what just happened later. She couldn't afford to be distracted now. Experience wrinkled the skin around the Knight-Commander's eyes but they didn't diminish the piercing gaze.

"I am glad to see you are not a mage, Sister. Which merely leaves the options of sympathizer, criminal, or idiot. Why don't we start with your explanation of why I was not informed of your impending visits?"

The woman would not tolerate fools. Julia respected that even though that meant the story she had pieced together on the walk over wouldn't work with the Knight-Commander. Then I'll just have to try a different genre of music.

Julia dropped her smile. "Clerical error. I won't give excuses or worthless explanations. I apologize and take full responsibility for the mistake. My only hope is that somehow I can rectify this situation so I may continue spreading the Chant to the mages."

"So you are sticking to the story that you are a Sister of the Chantry?"

"It is the only truth I have to offer, so I am."

Once again the Knight-Commander stared at her, barely blinking. Julia held herself relaxed, the moment after a particularly difficult section and she had yet to see the judges' reactions.

"You lie well, but it is false none the less."

Julia's fingers twitched.

"Tell me, Sister, do you think mages should be put in Circles?"

A 'no, but'? She met the woman's gaze, the color reminding her of a different pair of eyes, sometimes brown sometimes blue. Roots in the dark, snapping of bones, a thing taking on human form. Without thinking about the implications of her word choice, Julia answered the question.

"Mages are a threat to everyone, including themselves. Freedom is a pleasant concept and perhaps some mages could even manage it without bringing harm upon those around them, but more would fall into temptation. So, yes Circles are the best place for them."

Her mouth closed as her mind traced over what she had just said. Is that what I… The Knight-Commander leaned back into her chair, face relaxing. "Your story may have its holes but your conviction is true at least."

Julia pasted on a smile. "I assure you, the rest is true as well. Sebastian Vael is serving as one of my spiritual mentors; he can vouch for my attempts to do this the correct way."

Any progress she had winning over the woman ended. "The Vaels were a good family, but from what I hear, the youngest son spent many years in taverns and brothels. Perhaps he has improved with the death of his family but throwing his name around will not win you any favors."

Her smile didn't fade but it took more work to keep up.

"Most would say he is a respectable man now, I would say kind to a fault. However, I have interacted with the Guard Captain a number of times. Would her vouching for my character have any weight?"

This was a risk, an unpopular piece. But she was running out of skills to show off. Amati help her if
the Knight-Commander asked her to recite verses to prove her affiliation.

Luckily, the woman didn't dismiss the reference outright. "Guard Captain Aveline is a good leader, much better than her predecessor. She has improved the quality of the guard and her work with my people has been productive. Of all the individuals you could have referred to, she is a wise choice."

Although the rhythm of Julia's breathing didn't change, the ease of the action did. The final notes had hit true. Perhaps not perfect in pitch, but succeeding in what mattered most. She nodded shortly and allowed her face to slip into a more natural expression. The audition didn't end with the song but as long as she avoided most of the landmines of the final wrap up, this would end in a victory.

But the Knight-Commander was still talking. "... send a templar to the keep to ask about you. If you are who you say you are, then you will be released."

"Thank you, I appreciate the use of resources on my behalf. Which brings us back to my initial question. What must I do in order to help bring the mages closer to the Maker?"

An indifferent expression that could have been chiseled into stone stared at her. "If my man come back with a positive report, we will discuss it."

Julia smiled. "I beg your pardon, but it is not a short trip to the keep from here. When your man returns with a positive report, I would like to have a plan in place and be able to head on my way. I came here by myself and would rather avoid walking through Lowtown after dark."

The leader of a small army gave her a look that was somewhere between amused and annoyed and scratched a few lines on a new piece of parchment. "You may speak with my Knight-Captain about the issue. My people will take you to his office and you will give this to him." The parchment crinkled as it was folded. Julia accepted the item, her brief glimpse of swirls and lines giving her little clue to what the message said.

At some point, I will need to learn how to read this mess.

Julia bent at the knees. "It has been a honor and a pleasure, Knight-Commander. I look forward to our next meeting."

A hand waved her off, the person it belonged to already moving on to other matters. Another time Julia might have bristled at the dismissal but under the circumstances, she didn't waste the emotional effort.

Her two escorts opened the door and lead her down another series of hallways and stairs. As they walked, the ratio of templars to mages steadily shifted, favoring the armored-skirts. Julia kept a song going in the back of her head for a reference on exactly how far they were going, the different areas didn't change the design.

Overall, the trip to the Knight-Captain's took less time than the trip to the Knight-Commander's, though it felt longer. The first trip she wanted as much time as possible to think through her options but then they were at the door. Here her thoughts were less urgent.

What kind of person would that woman pick to be her second in command? A guess would be someone similar to herself. Good thing Hawke isn't the one playing dress up.

This time when her escort knocked and opened the door for her at the low 'Come in', they didn't stick around. Ignoring her completely, they marched away down the hall. Julia watched them go for a second before stepping into her second templar's office.
As uncreative in design as the first, the main distinguishing feature between the two rooms was the size. The Knight-Captain's was roughly half as large, big enough for a desk, a bookshelf and a chair. The man himself was broad-shouldered, looking compressed in the small space. His blond hair was cut short, but not enough to hide the beginning of curls.

She sympathized with his efforts.

Julia bowed as he glanced up. "Good afternoon, Knight-Captain."

To her surprise the man smiled. "Hello Sister, what can I do for you today?" He had a slight accent, one similar to something she had barely noticed with Hawke and Aveline. This man's was a touch thicker though.

"The Knight-Commander requested that I bring this to you," Julia said after a brief second. She almost wanted to pretend to be here for something else, but that would catch up to her quickly. The folded parchment exchanged hands. \textit{Truth is sometimes best.}

Eyes scanned the page, eyebrows drawing down for a second. His resting frown tightened. Then his eyes rose up to rest on her. "Sister Julia, is it?"

She gave him a smile. "That is correct. What do you prefer I call you?"

He blinked and then his lips twitched. "My given name is Cullen but just Knight-Captain is fine as well. Now that I've read Knight-Commander Meredith's message, would you like to tell me in your own words why you are here?"

What did that woman write?

"I wish to bring mages closer to the Maker. I thought I had gone through the proper channels for that goal but only today found out that no one was informed of my coming. A templar is reaching out to Guard Captain Aveline to verify my story and I was sent to you to work out the logistics of my next visit."

The parchment fluttered down to the desk and the Knight-Captain clasped his hands together in front of him. "The Knight-Commander wrote something similar. Why don't you take a seat and we'll figure out how this will work? I confess, my main interest is how you got here not just once but twice without being immediately stopped."

Julia glanced in the tight space. A small wooden stool pressed into the corner, a spider web dangling between the legs. "I will stand, thank you."

The following conversation took longer than she expected, enough time to have several interruptions come and go. The Knight-Captain wanted all the details she could give, which was a challenge in itself since she couldn't simply state that she saw the same two mages.

Finally another knock on the door revealed a plain templar, she was beginning to see the hints of rank in their uniforms at this point. He saluted even as he glanced at Julia. "The Guard-Captain has confirmed the Sister's story and has sent a guard to make sure she gets safely back to the Chantry."

"Thank you, Ferith. If you would wait outside for a moment, I have one last thing to discuss with Sister Julia and then she will need an escort to the courtyard."

"Of course, Knight-Captain." Another salute and the door shut again.

Julia kept her face smooth and expressionless. \textit{Is that how a Sister would react?} She lightened her
"Is there something you needed?"

The man nodded slowly, thinking before he spoke. "We have talked over the how you got here and the possible logistics of your return, but we haven't gone over the why."

"I beg your pardon?" It took a bit of effort not to reveal her annoyance. What did he mean the 'why'? Aren't religious people supposed to be all about converting?

"Yes. While you individually do not seem like a threat, this opens the door to more clerics coming in the future. More unfamiliar faces means my people will have to be extra careful that the clerics that enter the Circle are the same ones that leave. Besides that, if you do return, resources will need to be expended to keep you safe. Mages can take comfort from Chantry readings if need be and I have a few older templars who like to offer advice to troubled youth. Why should I allow you to return?"

Julia stared at the blond templar for several beats. He didn't flinch at the silence. Finally, Julia ran a hand over her hair, checking for look strands. She hadn't wanted it to come to this.

"Because I can offer you something you don't currently have."

"What is that?"

"Perspective."

Brown eyes narrowed but he didn't speak. Julia took that for what it was worth and continued.

"Your people are here everyday, more than likely in firm routines. I see things that you might not. If anything concerns me, I will bring it to your attention."

"You are offering to be a spy?"

Julia straighten her back with a raised eyebrow. "Not exactly. My primary reason for coming here has not changed. I want to spread the Chant to all people. But peace in the Gallows helps all. If I see flaws in your procedures, I will point it out. If during our sessions, a mage shares a concern to me, I will bring it to you anonymously. I won't pass along the secrets of the mages if I don't deem them harmful, that would ruin any trust I might develop with the mage population, but if there is discontent brewing, I will let you know. If I hear that a certain templar has been abusing a mage, I will bring the accused's name forward."

Beats of thought-filled silence followed and Julia let him go through the possibilities without hindrance. There was no reason that he should say no. She really didn't want to get involved in templar-mage politics, their group at the Hanged Man had enough of them. But like hell would she be kicked out of the Gallows like a second-class citizen.

"You give an interesting offer. I am willing to consider it on a trial basis. If the mages appreciate you being here and you can offer some useful perspective as you say, then perhaps we can work on something more permanent. When do you intend on returning?"

Julia tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Unfortunately, my other Chantry duties take precedence, so it won't be for another two weeks. Would you like notice a few days beforehand?"

"That would be prefered. Check in with the templars near the docks when you arrive, I will let them know to expect you."
Julia bowed her head slightly. Then, since that seemed to be the end of it, she gave her farewell and joined the templar in the hall.

Her escort managed to get her to top steps leading down to the courtyard before they were stopped, this time by a mage. He was older, grey hairs streaking through the black near his pointed ears. His robes were dark and elegant, and he was the only mage she had seen outside the practice area who carried a staff.

"First Enchanter," the templar next to her said as way of greeting. *What kind of a title is that? Similar to first chair perhaps?*

"Thank you for your assistance, I would like a word with the Sister, if I may."

A quick glance from Julia to the two dozen feet remaining between them and actually being in the courtyard decided it for the templar. "That is fine. Good day, Sister."

Julia practiced her noble nod and then she was alone with the strange mage. He gave her a small smile and turned slightly. Following his lead, she continued to walk down the flight of stairs.

"Bethany told me of you," The man started with. "My name is First Enchanter Orsino."

"What does that make you?" Julia asked. She was tired of this nice nun facade.

"The leader of the mages in Kirkwall," Orsino said without faltering. "But first, this was a risky plan. The fact it worked at all makes me wonder if there were greater powers at work."

She didn't need to comment on that. They had only a few steps left and then she needed to make it to the docks before she willing to start calling it a success. *I also need to make it back to Kirkwall proper without Hawke splashing me with contaminated water. Perhaps having a guard escort as a shield would help. I wasn't the one who came up with it."

The elf nodded. "So Bethany said. But the fact remains that you still went along with the plan and that says something about you."

Julia's cheeks hurt as she tried to keep her face expressionless. "Which is what precisely? I've drunk the Kool-Aide? Any sense I had has filtered away from too much time with danger-loving morons?" Her voice stayed low, a little harsh, but it didn't attract the attention of the templars.

*Where is Hawke?* At that least then it would be familiar nonsense rather than this hand-on-the-hilt tension.

Sharp angles tilted to the side and large elf eyes narrowed as he seemed to consider her. "Regardless of that, I have a proposition for you."

Julia scanned the heads of the courtyard searching for dark hair. "I'm not interested in any of your political games and maneuvers. I will only be here two or three more times to dissuade any remaining suspicions." Blondes and brunettes but very few midnight-black heads like Hawke. None with the trademark bird-nest of a haircut.

*If she left me here…*

"I hate to bring it up, but I know your secret. I can inform a templar that you aren't who you say you are."

Julia sighed and paused their stroll to turn to face him. "If you do that, I can pass along that you were
soliciting a fake Sister with some type of proposal. I bet I can offer some interesting suggestions on why you'd want to do that. Who do you think they'd care more about, a mage trying to incite rebellion or a woman who merely brings a mage a letter from their noble mother?"

The elf's frown grew with her words. If she had a guess, he wasn't very experienced in dealings of this nature but he had seen an opportunity too good to pass up. Poor fool, diving into the deep end while barely knowing how to swim.

"If you leave me alone, I will leave you alone. I'd hate to get the templars even more anxious and twitchy then they already are," Julia said the final point coolly, smiling as a single armored individual marched by, eye slot peeking at them.

Now it was the First Enchanter's turn to sigh, all previous attempts at cleverness gone. "Very well. You would be helping a good number of people though."

A figure sauntered out of one of the side plazas, a hat that resembled a half-melted basket on their head. Julia didn't need to see their face to know who it was. For a brief moment she wondered how Hawke did it. People were always coming to her, friends, random figures on the street, and even a letter with unfamiliar names. How did Hawke always care about these people, strangers even, who wanted her assistance? Didn’t she ever get tired of it?

Julia sighed and shoved the thoughts out of her mind. "That is the problem, First Enchanter. Someone always needs help."

With that, she went to figure out the best way to burn a basket.
Julia managed to get a week of relative peace and productivity -as much peace that could be expected living in the same building as Hawke- before it was interrupted by a dwarf. Or two to be precise.

“Messere Varric is here to see you, Miss Julia,” Bodahn announced from the doorway to the library. At least he remembered the correct title.

Leandra glanced up from where she was going through the finances, then went back to calculating how much Hawke's random purchases had damaged their budget. How rude of a message could she tell Bodahn to pass along before the matron got shocked? Whatever the dwarf wanted, it wouldn't be enjoyable. Julia opened her mouth to more politely phrase it when the person in question strode in.

"No need for that, Bodahn, I hired you first," Varric said without preamble, broad smile across his face. Julia allowed herself a quick glare before going back to her book. Perhaps if I just ignore him he will go away. It worked with Hawke sometimes.

Unfortunately, Leandra didn't let an intruder keep her from being polite. Finishing a line, she carefully set her quill to the side and stood. "Master Varric. It is good to see you again."

"Mother Hawke, I hear you are conquering high society."

Leandra laughed, cheeks turning a little pink. It made her look younger. "I don't know about that, but I think I'm making progress securing our place here."

"Well, if your way doesn't work, I could help make the nobles more cooperative."

"That is very kind, Master Varric. But I would prefer to start with conversation rather than blackmail in my relationships."

This time it was Varric who started to chuckle. "Fair enough. Would it be alright if I borrowed Julia for a few hours?"

"Not, it would not be alright," Julia said, raising her head. It was pointless to pretend he wasn't there anymore. "Every time someone comes to retrieve me for some sort of errand, it always ends in trouble. My life expectancy has gone down enough since living here, I don’t need to shave off more years. The Hanged Man alone is capable of that."

The dwarf chuckled. "What can I say? Kirkwall is an interesting place."

"Interesting—"

“But that shouldn’t stop you from enjoying what it has to offer. Come on, Daisy needs some help."

Merrill? Julia internally shook her head, pulling back the sudden and dangerous urge to hear the dwarf out. Just because that elf is involved doesn't mean… She sighed. “Wouldn't Hawke or Aveline be a better choice?”

Varric’s amusement didn’t help her mood as Bodahn returned with a cup of something for their
uninvited and unwanted guest. “I don’t know if you have noticed, Freckles, but our group isn’t what you’d call emotional competent. I need someone who can help cheer up Merrill without subtly pushing for her to end up in a Circle.”

"Mages are a threat to everyone... Circles are the best place for them." Julia shut the book in her lap harder than she meant to.

"So you came here?"

Taking a big gulp from his cup, Varric shrugged. "Did you have a better suggestion?"

Julia ran through their group quickly. Aveline wasn’t the comforting type and Anders, Isabela, and Fenris were just a hard no. Sebastian and Merrill's relationship wasn’t horrible but she couldn't see that going well. As for Hawke...

"No, but I don’t think I am the one that can help her," she said finally.

Varric finished whatever it was and waved over Bodahn to return the cup. "Well, I need a wingman, or woman as it has it, for this and Merrill likes you. Which means whatever you think of it, you’re up."

Tracing a finger over the dimensions pressed into the leather cover, Julia glanced at Leandra. Just maybe she will...

"If you are worried about me, Julia, I'll be fine on my own." Leandra said with smile. "Go help your friend."

She’s not my--- But she had agreed to be friends with the dark-haired elf what felt like a lifetime ago. If she had known it would come with obligations, she would have been less likely to say yes. Julia sighed and setting the book on a side table, stood.

“Alright, I’ll go. But don’t expect me to come running the next time Isabela stubs a toe.”

Varric grinned. "Fine. Isabela will suffer alone."

It didn't take long for Julia to get ready. A quick change into a Lowtown dress and boots and a grab of weapons later, she followed the still smug dwarf out the door.

They made it about ten feet before Varric cleared his throat. We haven’t even turned onto the main street yet.

"You haven’t made it to the Hanged Man recently. How are you doing, Freckles?"

Julia swore internally. She might as well get this over with, Varric with information was like a clarinet player with a new reed. It was almost impossible to pull from one from the other. Maybe an evasive answer would make him drop it.

“Fine. Just continuing to practice my violin and archery."

“And reading.”

She kept her head still instead of following her instinct to look at him. What is he bringing that up for?

A chuckle told her he saw through her non-reaction. “That device you showed us, your sellfone, the characters on it were not ones I know and being in business, I’ve seen a few. Despite you speaking
Common, I assumed you wrote differently. But if you are reading…"

Damn. How could he have noticed that?

“I was not reading, I was simply looking for anything recognizable.”

Varric's brow furrowed for a long moment and they managed to get another block before he said, "I heard a rumor about a Sister at the Gallows."

Julia blinked at the abrupt change but didn’t feel the need to bring up her failings. Even if they were as ridiculous of failings as not being able to read a fantasy world's writings. "You know religion cannot be blocked by walls or water."

"Hawke also says you are playing for a noble's party soon."

"She talks too much. But yes, I have a performance in two days." Where is he going with these topics?

Varric waved at a merchant as they walked past the door to their shop. The woman glared at him in response and made a gesture that Hawke had done a few times. “You turn down the Hanged Man for a group of people who wouldn't know a good time if it bite them in the nose. Makes a person wonder why you would prefer them to us."

“How do you even have friends? Do you pay them?"

“Sometimes.”

“You are as bad as Hawke.”

“That's not as insulting as you think it is”

“See if I care.”

Varric gave her a break that carried them to the edge of Hightown, a rise where Lowtown spread out before them like a maze. They paused on the edge, taking a moment to gage the view.

Twisting streets flowed like meandering streams through stone buildings. Red banners were the main contrasting color, dotted throughout the open gaps. She glimpsed something and frowned. Those damn birds.

“Who designed this city anyways? They had a horrible sense of taste.”

The dwarf snorted. “The Tevintars. But I agree, they could have toned it down on the birds.”

Julia blinked, a short laugh slipping out before she could stop it. Of all the things she would end up agreeing with Varric about.

Somehow, the conversation progressed much easier from there, both of them playing nice. Despite his relaxed attitude, Varric really did notice everything, even if his viewpoint twisted those details into something else.

“I'm serious, Freckles. Hawke likes Anders in a more-than-friends way. She just won’t admit it because she is too terrified about being hurt to do anything about it.”

“Are we talking about the same Hawke? Marian Hawke, the one who frequents the Blooming Rose
at least twice a week and the one we had to practically physically restrain from making out with strangers?” Julia shook her head. The image was too ridiculous. And of all the people to pair her with, why the homeless-looking mage?

Varric must have rotted part of his brain with Hanged Man beer. But he didn’t give up his absurd notion.

“She does that because it’s easy. If she pays for it or doesn’t know them, their rejection won’t sting. Trust me, I’ve seen mooning in Hawkes before.”

“Hawkes… Plural?”

“Ah, that’s right. I sometimes forget how long you’ve been here. Hawke’s baby brother, Carver, joined the Wardens after being Blighted in the Deep Roads.”

“I know of Carver,” Julia said sharply. She wasn’t that ignorant. If Leandra had any fault, it was that she spent too much time talking about her children. She would have had to be deaf these last weeks not to have heard of him.

“Well, he had a serious crush on our own resident pirate.”

“Isabela?” A male version of Hawke and Isabela… Julia’s eyes hurt just thinking about it.

“Yes. Now, give me a few minutes. I have to take care of something.” Varric dug into his belt, pulling out a handful of copper coins while giving a sharp whistle. Since they were well into Lowtown by this point, it took only seconds for the small shapes to swarm. Julia took a step back but the dwarf just grinned at her. “Don’t worry, these ones aren’t dangerous.”

Julia glared at him. “They are children. I am more concerned what kind of diseases these walking Petri dishes carry.”

Ignoring her hygienic reasoning, Varric smiled warmly and started speaking to the small individuals. As more children came, they formed a wavering line in front of him. At one point, shouts erupted as two boys thought they were both there first. One glance from Varric and they sobered up.

“What are you doing?” Julia asked, crossing her arms as Varric handed out coins.

“Gathering information.”

“From children?”

The dwarf didn’t answer as a possibly blond child spoke quietly to him. Varric ruffled their hair and gave them some coins. “Of course. They are small and easy to ignore. People think they don’t understand and so say stuff they otherwise wouldn’t. Plus, by having them work for me, I can try to keep them out of serious trouble.”

“A copper or two from you can’t make that much of a difference.”

Varric smirked. “You’ve never been poor, Freckles. While you’re right, it isn’t much, a few coins can turn a miserable night into a tolerable one.”

She rolled her eyes but let him continue his child labor practices.

It took a number of minutes to get through the line, unhelped by the fact more children joined in as soon as they saw what was going on.
Surely they can’t all have useful information. They were children after all. Her lips twitched as she realized her error. Varric was right about one thing. They were easy to dismiss.

Finally the dwarf finished his information gathering, shooing away a few dirty adults in the process. He dusted his hands off, out of coins apparently. “Well, some of it was unimportant, but when you have them bring you everything they think might be important, you do get a few good things.”

“Such as what? An increase of candy prices?”

Varric chuckled. “That and other tidbits. Children see things but don’t always realize what they mean. I can interpret what they see and then get knowledge of value. For example, today I learned a rival on the Merchant's Guild is smuggling and that for no solid justifiable reason, fears about the Qunari are sharply rising.”

Only one of those seems interesting. “And we care about the resident fear factor because…”

They went past the swinging monstrosity that was the Hanged Man’s sign. If the building was a person, she would have been tempted to give them the finger. At least it wasn’t their destination today.

“I’ll make it simple for you. Have you ever fought a Qunari?” She raised an eyebrow, he knew that answer. Varric continued. “Basically they are large, strong, and usually well trained. We have a whole compound full of them sitting by the Docks for reasons no one really knows. It sets everyone, myself included, on edge. The unknown can do that.”

A child ran up to them, crying that they missed the initial craziness. Varric smiled and spoke to them softly. Julia ignored them and mulled over the fear of the strange. The dwarf wasn’t incorrect in his conclusions, people did tend to strike out at things they didn’t understand. It happened during the great eras of change for music and throughout the rest of history as well. As survival instincts it was a solid impulse but since humans had moved beyond animal status, it was beyond excuse.

The child ran off, a coin richer, and Varric hummed off-key to himself as they continued forward. Around them, the buildings were growing progressively grimmer, a good indication that they were close to the alienage. Julia checked the population. Yep. Pointed ears.

“Varric, you never did explain why we are especially concerned about Merrill today. She’s been a hair away from disaster most days, the way she gets lost and appears in random places.”

Nodding at some of the elves they passed, Varric took a breath before responding. “A few days ago, we went to get something from Daisy’s clan. Turns out they haven’t exactly remembered her fondly these last years.”

Julia straightened her shoulders as some gaunt elves looked at her with little friendliness, bow and quiver a comfortable weight on her back. “What happened?”

“A so-called friend ran towards a monster rather than her and then was killed by that monster.”

Seriously? She glanced at Varric’s face but he was unusually somber. Merrill could use magic, but she was as creepy as a tired puppy. What the hell are they scared of? “So Merrill’s clan has issues. What are we supposed to do about it?”

They rounded the corner and the giant tree rose before them, as magnificent as the first time Julia had seen it.

“It’s simple,” Varric said as they walked down the final set of stairs. “We remind her that she still has
friends here and make sure she takes breaks from working on her mirror.”

*Her mirror?* Eventually she would need someone to elaborate on that.

Ignoring the stares of the elves, they bypassed some playing children and came to a home at the side of the main plaza. Varric knocked twice and then tried the door. It was unlocked. They entered without preamble.

The air inside Merrill’s home tasted like static, an almost burnt smell in the air. Julia breathed it in and felt it at the back of her throat. As she breathed out, she focused on the appearance of the home. The furniture was sparse and barely standing, the table noticeably leaning to the side. A small dark shape skittered in the corner and Julia covered her nose. While not necessarily dirty, the main room they had stepped into was messy with papers strewn across the furniture and floor. Some had small lines of text while others looked like a drunk kindergartner had gotten hold of some ink.

“Merrill! You alive?”

“Varric? I didn’t know you would be visiting,” the soft melodic voice came out from a doorway at the end of the room. Varric nodded at Julia and they stepped forward.

*An interior decorator would have a field day here.*

As she turned the corner, her spine started to itch and then she froze. Merrill was on her knees, something in her hand. In front of her was the mirror.

Large, the mirror stood several feet higher than her, at least seven feet if not eight. But at the same time, even though the shape of the mirror was similar to the one in her bedroom back home in New York, the rest of it remained eerily distinct. Vines about as thick as her leg curled around the base, twisting around the mirror. Indistinct shapes rose from the frame, almost familiar. The glass in the middle was in shards, cracks cutting from edge to edge.

But thing that added to the skin-crawling sensation spreading from her back was the reflection in those pieces. Or perhaps, to be more clear, the lack of one.

She must have made some sort of noise since Merrill looked up from her work and beamed at them. "Oh Julia! You’re here too! If I had known that so much company was coming, I would have cleaned up a bit more. I promise my home isn’t always this messy."

Julia pursed her lips, dragging her eyes from the grey dullness of the mirror to look at the elf. She was pale, much more than normal, short hair spiking from her head. She could have almost been a panda for how dark the bags were under her eyes.

With her silence, Varric slipped back into the forefront. "Yes, Julia is here too. She was worried about you since we haven't seen you around for the last few days. We just want to make sure you are doing alright."

“YOU didn’t need to do that, I’m fine!” Merrill said, still smiling. “Now that I have the arulin’holm, I can focus on fixing the eluvian.”

“How is that going?” Varric asked. Julia held in a sigh. If he was just going to exchange pleasantries, she really didn’t need to be here.

"Merrill, when was the last time you slept? Or ate something decent?" Julia purposefully stared at a plate of half eaten moldy bread.
“Not that long ago.” Merrill paused. She slowly stood with a stretch. “Or… I’m pretty sure I have… I went to get… No, that was before. Um… I guess I haven’t eaten or slept recently. But that’s alright. I’m getting a lot of work done.”

*Work done?* Julia glanced from the strange ‘tool’ in Merrill's flexing hands to the mirror. Then rubbing her forehead, she met Varric's eyes. *Your turn.*

Of course when it actually counted the dwarf's poker face was horrible. He struggled not to smile. "Daisy, why don't you come with us to the Hanged Man? I'll buy you a meal and a mug of that wine you like so much."

Julia sighed. *This is why I have to do everything myself.* What was he doing offering a person who was probably almost delirious due to lack of sleep alcohol?

Somehow ignoring the dubious suggestion, Merrill turned halfway back towards the mirror. “Thank you for the offer, but I couldn’t possibly leave just yet. I’ve got so much to do here.”

"No, Merrill." Julia surprised herself when she spoke, stepping forward to tug the tool out of Merrill's hands and set it carefully on a nearby bench. The elf's eyes followed her but she didn't stop her actions. "While I understand and respect the urge to finish what you’ve started, sometimes the best way to make progress is to take a break. Give your mind a chance to relax and everything becomes easier when you return to the task."

The elf frowned slightly, reminding Julia again of a puppy, one who just lost their favorite toy. "But I'm so close… I've waited years…"

"Then it won't hurt to wait a few more hours."

"I don't think---"

Julia took a breath to tell the mage off when her eyes caught back on the mirror. A hooded head stared back at her through one of the shards. Her breath got stuck in her throat and she started to cough.

*Not again.* Her skin burned and felt too tight against her muscles and bone. She coughed again as her lungs attempted to get the oxygen back into her body.

"Julia?" Both of them were looking at her and she realized she had taken a few steps away.

She coughed once more and then forced her body straight. "I apologize, this room is very dusty. I need to get some fresh air."

No one commented as she fled at walking speed from the room.

There wasn't anyone immediately nearby when she opened the door. She breathed out and leaned against the wall near the door, bow and quiver making the position uncomfortable. She didn't trust her knowledge of the surroundings enough to go further than that. Vaguely aware of the dirt, she pressed her palms against the stone behind her, needing the reassurance of something solid.

*What is happening?* Not that many days had passed since the incident at the Circle but she was still avoided thinking about it as a reflex.

Julia closed her eyes and resisted the urge to rest the back of her head against the wall as well.

"*You saw your old world again?*"
Julia forced herself to sit still on the chair though a restlessness wanted her to move, to do something. She curled the tips of her fingers around the edge of the seat and breathed normally.

"The Knight-Commander... she did something to me when I entered the room."

Aveline stared at her, hard. "Did you feel anything?"

Julia stared back. Feel anything? "Besides dizzy as I had double vision? No."

A few beats passed as Aveline considered something then she sighed and settled back behind her desk. "It is called Silencing. Templars use it to temporarily take away a mage's magic."

"Convenient," Julia commented. "But what does that have to do with me? I'm not a mage."

The Guard-Captain snorted. "Don't ask me."

Julia opened her eyes to watch the clouds overhead. They were wisps of white against a pale blue, stretching thinner as they moved. She had yet to discuss the situation with a mage, but the only thing she could think of was that there was a spell keeping her here, and the Silencing had disrupted it.

*Can it be that simple?* She hesitated to even dare hope. Physics and the rules of logic didn't seem to apply here. If it had been a few weeks ago she would have rushed into it but now, she had to savor this possibility a little longer before it was crushed.

Besides, there was still the matter of the figure she kept seeing.

Julia pursed her lips and pushed herself off the wall. A few elves were staring at her but since they didn't move towards her, she ignored them and went back to the door leading to Merrill's house. She had barely reached for the knob when the door swung open. Two non-humans stared at her then smiled.

"Are you feeling better, Julia?" Merrill asked, large eyes a little watery.

"Yes, the fresh air cleared it up."

Without any verbal indicators, they left Merrill's house and headed out of the alienage. Varric kept up a steady stream of chatter but Merrill kept abnormally quiet. Despite herself, Julia glanced over every few blocks. At one point, she swore she saw something glistening at the corner of her eyes.

*Liszt's Rhapsodies...*

"Were you happy there?"

"What?" Merrill asked, nearly stumbling as Varric quieted down.

"It's simple. Were you happy with your clan?"

"Of course! Well, not all the time, no one really understood what I was doing there and I never really had many friends..."

"Are you happy here in Kirkwall?"

"I love Kirkwall! There is always so much to see and then there are you guys... I don't enjoy getting lost all the time but no one is too mean when they take me out of the cupboards." That last bit almost distracted Julia enough for her to question it but she managed to make herself focus in time.
“Would you say you are happier here than you were with the Dalish?”

“I…” Merrill froze, staring at Julia and then to her feet. “I… am. Is that bad of me?”

An eyebrow raise. "Your clan thought you of all people were threatening. They didn't appreciate you when you were with them. So screw them. You are better off here.

The elf sniffed. “Do… do you really think so?”

“If I didn’t, why would I say it?”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Merrill smiled then. It wasn’t her usual bright flash of happiness but it was at least genuine. “Thank you, Julia. You are a good friend.”

Julia shrugged, still uncomfortable with the liberal use of that word and they started walking again. She made it a few minutes before considering the fact that they were probably headed to the Hanged Man. *Shit.* Wasn’t she supposed to be done with that place for a while?

Weaving around a puddle of organic matter, Julia pushed aside the feeling that she was ignoring something important, something she had told Merrill, and instead focused on the conversation between the other two. Merrill was trying to explain how she was fixing the mirror but most of it was jargon that she had trouble defining. Julia’s shoulders slowly relaxed as she sighed and looked ahead. *I suppose I can put up with this for a little longer.*

Chapter End Notes

"Standing at the end of the road, boys,
Waiting for my new friends to come.
I don't care if I'm hungry or poor,
I'm gonna get me some of them."
Julia stared at the array of a dozen dresses in a variety of colors and decided that she had nothing to wear.

Dressed only in her slip and a pair of hard-soled slippers, she tossed a robe over her shoulders and strode out of her room. “Leandra!”

The distant sounds of people moving met her ears but no one responded. Julia started down the stairs, just avoiding a bundle of folded laundry with legs coming out of the door to the small courtyard.

“Orana, have you seen Leandra recently?”

A blond head popped out from behind the cloth. “Oh, good morning, Mistress Julia. I haven’t seen Mistress Leandra for quite some time but I was outside with the dirty clothes. Would you like me to look for her?”

The pile swayed dangerously and Julia gave herself more distance to avoid the inevitable crash. “No, that is fine. Continue what you are doing.”

“Alright, thank you, Mistress.” With that cheerful departure, the elf continued on her way, graceful despite her load. Julia frowned. It hasn’t been that long ago she would have been cowering in the corner by now. Pushing the distracting thought aside, Julia turned towards the library.

It was only early evening, so the elder Hawke should still be at the manor. Bodahn would be out running errands and since the main hall was quiet, he took Sandal with him. Which left… Leandra’s version of an office. Or so she hoped. She didn’t have time to search the house today.

In less than two hours, she had to be at Lady DuMois’ manor for her first performance in Kirkwall. The Hanged Man, for obvious reasons, didn’t count. If the audience doesn’t know you are there… Julia sighed. A birthday celebration was humble beginning but it served its purpose as a stepping stone.

Lady DuMuis had sent a letter, which Leandra had read out loud for her, with more details and the first half of Julia’s payment a few days ago. Julia would be joining two other musicians to be positioned throughout the manor offering background noise to the party. They were to pick tunes that were enjoyable but not distracting. As simple as possible.

Basically they were to prove the elevator music.

Julia had seriously considered throwing the letter in the fireplace and sending her regrets, but Leandra had talked her off that particular ledge. How was she supposed to build her reputation if she couldn’t prove she was worth hiring?

That was besides the fact that the payment offered was not even enough to cover a new dress.

Books and dust motes greeted her from the library’s first floor. “Leandra?”

“Up here.” A quick flight of stairs later and a silver head appeared over the desk near the second
floor’s fireplace.

“You must be excited. It is almost time for… Oh, what wrong?” Leandra smiled turned as she took in Julia’s half done wet bun and the robe.

“None of the dresses in my wardrobe are right. I need a secondary opinion.”

“Of course. Let me just set this to dry.” She sprinkled some sand over the page and stood. Together they made the trip back to Julia’s room. Once exposed to her closet, Julia waved at the assembled articles.

“I need an outfit that says I’m every bit a noble’s equal but I’m not going to flaunt it. That I’m not just another musician.”

Leandra ruffled through colors, speaking as she looked. “Purple is ill advised, the yellow dress is a bit plain, you wore this at the tea party… why not this one?”

Light pink cloth practically cream, it was a blush of fabric curving slightly with gold and white colored thread weaving patterns around the middle. It was something Leandra had originally bought for Hawke years ago but had never convinced her to wear. Feminine and underwhelming. Julia tried to picture herself in it and winced.

“That color doesn’t suit me.”

“Have you tried it on?”

“I know what I can and can’t wear.”

The older woman made a face. “You should at least give it a chance.”

Part of her wanted to give the woman a blunt no but if it would prove her point and let them move on… The dress fell over her slip smoothly and Leandra helped with the nearly hidden buttons extending from her right armpit to her hip. Julia smoothed the skirt. “There. Happy?”

Silence.

“Oh, Julia…. You are beautiful.”

Muscles froze and she slowly raised her head to stare at the woman. Leandra’s hand covered her mouth and her eyes shone wet. How can she… without makeup…

“I’m sorry,” Leandra murmured, taking her hand away. “It’s just… I know I have no real reason to claim this, but I am proud of you, Julia. You’ve worked so hard and come so far already. Seeing you like this… it’s like you are already performing for the Orlesian court.”

She had played for royalty before; they had less security than some elected officials but the prestige was higher. From where she was now, that would be far off. “Thank you. Now, if you excuse me, I need to find a mirror.”

The largest mirror was in the bathing room. Julia stood in front of it and tried not to frown more. Leandra’s right. The color didn’t blend in with her skin as much as she had feared, instead it contrasted, making her seem less like a ghost. It even paired well with her brown hair, lessening the impact of the invading red.

The cut of the dress showed off her figure but not to an extent that seemed crass. She looked
sophisticated without being arrogant, strong but still female. Even her freckles didn’t appear quite as
bad since they weren’t being compared to a deep color. It was perfect.

All she needed to figure out now was how to best present her hair.

A little less than an hour and a half later, she left the Hawke manor, as physically ready as she
could be in this barbaric world. Several smudges of makeup and a twist of hair to reduce the color change
were apparently enough to make her presentable. What I would give for some proper tools... Not that
it changed anything in the end. She would still give a spectacular performance no matter how
medieval she looked.

Lady DuMois’ manor was on the other side of Hightown, closer to the Chantry than the Viscount’s
keep. She had tried the route more than once earlier in the week with Merrill. The elf had offered to
wander around with her, but Julia made sure she never let the smaller female take the lead no matter
how much of a shortcut she said she knew.

Her bow and violin case shifted on her back as she walked, throwing her sense of equilibrium off.
She had debated whether or not to bring a weapon but even Aveline admitted that Hightown wasn't
as safe as she would like.

Ahead of her, the stiletto peak of the Chantry poked above the flat-roofed homes. Even if she didn’t
have the path memorized, that would have been a sufficient beacon to get her there. Julia sighed. The
pillar was no skyscraper and all the buildings around it were too short. She could see armfuls of sky
where there should only be handfuls. Even over a month later, she couldn't stop herself from missing
New York.

Another turn down a side street led her almost straight to the DuMois manor. Tastefully manicured
with just enough flowers and vines to meet whatever quota Hightown had. Servants already stood on
either side of the door, dressed in matching green.

A thin human woman came out the main door before she even had a chance to announce her arrival.
She glared at Julia, stress and ill-temperament wrinkling her face. "What brings you here?"

Julia raised an eyebrow. "I am one of the musicians for the party." She was tempted to just say 'for
the party' but she would rather start getting set up than help servants develop some common sense.

“Very well, Messere. Follow me and I will see where the Mistress wants you.” Keeping her face
emotionless, Julia followed after the woman.

The first step inside the manor nearly stalled her. Leandra is right to worry about the manor's
decorations.

Gold didn’t quite cover the ceiling of the anteroom but it detailed almost everything else. Birds
perched on ledges and a silver-rimmed mirror reflected light back at the entrance. Tapestries and
paintings filled much of the open wall space. It was elaborate and overdone, but it was hard to deny
the DuMois's wealth.

Hawke would have a heart-attack if we tried to match this.

“May I clean your shoes, serah?” A servant in a plain light green tunic asked. The first woman held
up a hand for her to wait and then disappeared around a doorway. Julia stepped to the side and
brought out a fresh pair of shoes that she had brought solely for the purpose of having something
clean after Hightown's streets. The servant took her shoes without a word and then the first woman
reappeared.
“This way, Messere.”

The next room was equally obnoxious. More birds adorned the otherwise bare walls with specks of shimmering gold dotted the beaks. *What is the point of that? Do the birds supposedly eat gold?*

Julia had arrived before the party was due to start but some of the guests were already sipping on thin glasses of something transparent while chatting. They ignored both the servant and Julia, tinkling aristocratic laughter familiar in a way that both irritated and comforted.

A small but glittering hallway led them to a ballroom, massive walls covered in repeating patterns that didn’t look like wallpaper… *It had been painted to look like that.* It took two chandeliers and more scones than she cared to count to light the room, leaving crisis-crossing shadows on the floor.

Julia almost slowed to find a proper corner but the servant kept moving. *Strange…* It made more sense to have the musician with the guests… But when she paid attention, music already floated above the disinterested heads. A stringed instrument, plucked… It didn’t have the crisp sound of anything she instantly recognized, but it was played with at least some skill.

She spotted the source as one of the early arrivals stepped away. A man in overdone blue outfit with orange accents sat on a stool near a fireplace, a lute resting in his lap. After a second, his mouth opened and a tenor voice joined his gentle playing.

Old fashioned, but not a terrible instrument.

They left the main room into a wider hallway. A short walk led to a buffet-styled dining room. Stacks of food sent wafts of delicious smells over crisp white tablecloths. Yet another musician, this one holding a recorder type instrument, occurred a corner in this room.

What did they have left to go then? Some private party of elite that would truly appreciate her music?

They turned down a dark, narrow hall with a series of closed doors on one side. The serving woman paused. “Here you are, serah. This is where you will be playing tonight.”

Julia glanced at the doors, there couldn’t be more than five. Compared to the rest of the manor she had seen so far, this area was plain and unadorned. “Where are we?”

“These rooms hold the chamber pots for the guests. You are to provide a musical distraction for them while they are going or if a line forms.”

Wildfire rushed underneath her skin. *This is a joke.* “I am not performing for a bathroom.”

“There are no baths here, serah. Just pots.”

“I need to talk to Lady DuMois.”

“She is in the middle---“

"I don't care."

The servant sighed. "This way then."

They returned to the ballroom, taking a sharp left to go further into the space. Servants bustled about, taking care of last minute details. The hostess was easy to spot, a familiar face in a deep red dress surrounded by several guests.

“Oh, and this is the stray my dear old friend, Leandra Amell, picked up. I’m sorry sweetie, I forgot
your name. Aren’t you supposed to be playing already?”

Gathering her pride into a tight ball, Julia smiled. “I believe there has been a misunderstanding. Your woman led me to play outside some chamber pots. My music is best enjoyed in an open space and I do not think your guests will enjoy it while they are otherwise occupied.”

“You don’t believe the people who came out to help me celebrate my nephew’s birthday deserve the best?” Lady DuMois’ teeth looked yellow when she displayed them. “I personally have found a party much more enjoyable if there is music at all stages of the night.”

*Just keep smiling.* “If you prefer that, switch me with one of the others. Perhaps one whose instrument is better suited for a small space.” *This is not what they meant by chamber music.*

Hawke’s blades couldn’t match the sharpness of her hostess’s smile. “Why would I do that? These are musicians of good reputation, I couldn’t do them the disservice of placing them there. Besides, what can someone of unknown origin whose only reference is an apostate’s wife expect?”

Julia took a breath. "Then I am sorry to report that something came up this evening so I will be unable to play for you. My deepest regrets.”

At her turn towards the door, the lady of the house spoke once more, “It’s a pity that it’s so hard to find patrons in Kirkwall.”

Keeping her turn smooth, Julia faced DuMois again. "I apologize. With all the chatter, I didn't hear what you said."

“No worries, darling. I was just commenting on the fact that Kirkwall’s relatively small noble pool makes it difficult for new musicians to find jobs once they’ve earned a black mark.”

“And how does one earn a black mark?”

“By not doing what they are told, talking back to an employer, playing inappropriate songs… You know, horrible things that I’m sure you won’t have any problems with.”

*This damned woman.* It was a game, one she knew well even if she had never been on this side of it. No one had ever dared play it with her before.

*They dare now.*

She had two choices, do what the woman wanted or give her the finger and go back to the manor. But new musicians lived and died based on their reputation and Julia had no doubt Lady DuMois knew how to spread a bad review.

Muscles tight to keep from letting any sense of expression out, Julia curtsied. "It looks like my schedule works after all. Thank you for the honor of performing for you today, Lady DuMois.”

Chuckles of the listening guests followed her as she stalked back to the chamber pot hallway. Reaching the spot, Julia set her bow and quiver in the corner, beyond caring about propriety at this point. After several seconds of slow breathing, she put her case down and set to work preparing her violin.

This at least was familiar. The open disdain, less so. *Restroom music, really?* Leandra would hear about the actions of this so-called friend.

In the end, what was the difference between this and the Hanged Man? Still awful smells and
unappreciative people.

She had tuned before she left but still she played a few notes to double check. Perfect. With that thought, she launched into Bartok’s Second Violin Concerto. It was not a piece that DuMois would have approved of for a light-hearted gathering, but that just made it all the better. Swooping into the low notes, she drew out her anger and stuffed it into the music till the bars were stiff with it.

Distantly, the guests at the end of the short hall looked up and took an automatic step back.

Bartok enjoyed dramatic flair in his music, fast one measure, quivering a whole note the next. The whole concerto, despite taking a minor tone, enjoyed a uneasy feeling throughout the piece, like it was some eighties science fiction film. Julia closed her eyes and focused on the music.

When Julia finally gave some of her attention outwards, a line had formed, no one moving towards the open doors. A single lone male walked carefully past the assembled group, watching for any sign of objection. He glanced at Julia and then went into one of the chamberpot rooms.

Whatever spell that held the people cracked and they started to shift. The woman at the front of the line turned, took a step back towards the ball room before remembering why they came here in the first place. They went to complete their business.

Julia breathed out through her nose, reminding herself that it was about the music, not how many people wanted to listen. But by the time the song finished, she was ready to resort to drastic measures with Lady DuMoose. Rolling her shoulders at the lack of applause, Julia readjusted the placement of her shoulder rest and began again, this time with something lighter and shorter.

Bach’s Violin Concerto in A minor. It had less obvious emotion than the other piece but since she was playing for the bathrooms she would just do whatever the hell she wanted. Perhaps she would just do concertos all night. No one in this damned city knew the songs anyways.

The music ended before she could fully immerse herself into it, just a shallow puddle of comfort instead of the pool she wanted. She sighed and lowered her arms to stretch her muscles, staring purposefully at the wall to avoid seeing the nonexistent crowd. What concerto to be ignored next?

"Julia? I didn’t expect you to be here tonight," The voice startled her enough to glance down the hallway. Sebastian smiled and she blinked.

"Why are you here?" Her irritation made it come out harder than she intended. Luckily, the priest didn't seem phased.

"To listen to you, it appears. You have gathered quite the audience." Julia raised an eyebrow at the empty hall next to them and Sebastian added, "They hover right outside the hall so that they can enjoy without being so close to the… Of all the places to play, why did you choose this one?"

Julia put her violin back into position, bracing it between head and shoulder. “The lady of the house wished her guests to have music the entire time they were here.”

Sebastian frowned. "That seems a bit illogical. Why have a musician of your talent entertaining during such a small portion of a guest's night? Perhaps I could suggest a different place for the lady to put you."

"It is fine," Julia said quickly. Whatever good intentions he thought he had, he would only make it worse. Not that he would understand that. How to say it so he would not push? “I appreciate the sentiment, but I agreed to play here. Your position is not so secure that you can afford to give away power on such a small matter.”
“My… position?”

Julia ran through the concertos she knew best. “You need more support from various nobles in order to go after your throne. Don’t spend that favor on things that you don’t need to fix when you have a larger goal, else you will never succeed.”

Several beats passed as blue eyes stared at her, confusion finally breaking apart into something warmer. “You are too kind, Julia.”

*Kind?* No one had ever accused her of that before. The notion pressed against her forehead, edge of a headache forming.

“Hardly,” she said after a moment. “I just know what works and what doesn’t.”

His answering smile was soft somehow. She looked away, picking one of the concertos at random.

“You give yourself too little credit. If I can’t talk to the lady for you, is there anything else I can get for you? Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“Thank you, but no. I shouldn’t eat or drink on a job.”

He chuckled. “Very well then. I’d wish you luck but I don’t think you won’t need it.”

Julia almost smiled back. “Luck is for amateurs.”

The brother bowed out and Julia finally set her bow against the strings. Without pause she tore into the next piece.

It didn’t take long for her to realize that Sebastian was correct. At the end of the hall, the figures of several people waited, sometimes moving beyond her sight line only to return less than a minute later. The repeating color schemes grew as she continued.

Half way through Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto E Minor, op 64, Lady DuMois made an appearance. Keeping her eyes on the scroll, Julia ignored the hostess. This piece was busy enough that stopping in the middle would probably give the listeners an aneurysm. Too soon though, it was over.

Keeping her violin in place, Julia asked, “Do you need to use the facilities?”

The woman’s lip curled. “No. You are to come with me.”

It took only a few seconds for Julia to safely store her violin in its case. She had a feeling she knew what this was about, but wanted to hear it from the woman herself.

Lady DuMois led her out of the chamberpot hallway and across the ballroom. "Your playing has been too distracting for this area. For the comfort of my guests, I have decided that it is better to move you.”

“That is very gracious of you.”

“It is,” Lady DuMois agreed.

They crossed the ballroom to a set of stairs. To Julia's amusement, her hostess simply pointed at the top. "You will be up there now. Stay out of the way and don't play too loudly."

"Thank you," Julia dipped the best she could with the double bows on her back and quickly
ascended the staircase. The lighting was different up here, with a few windows bringing in the rays of the setting sun. Several small groups of guests mingled, sipping on shining glasses.

This time, Julia did allow herself a smile. Much better.

Finding herself a new corner, Julia set up again. At the very least, here she didn't have to be quite so careful with how deeply she breathed.

Several concertos and a lessening of bodies in the ballroom later, a male elf in the now familiar green attire approached her. He waited the several minutes it took for her to finish then spoke.

“That is all we need of you tonight, serah. I have the second half of your payment and will show you the back way out.”

Julia took the small bag and tucked it into the small side pocket in her case. I wouldn't be surprised if this was smaller than the first half. With greater care, she stored her violin and put the entire cache over her shoulders.

"Thank you for your help, but I know the way out,” she told the servant who visibly blanched.

“But I was told to…”

She walked away before he could think of some reason to try to make her follow after him. She had barely stepped onto the floor of the main ballroom when an older gentleman approached her.

“So you are the treasure DuMois has been hiding from us this entire evening! Some of us wondered if it was due to your appearance but look at you! Lovely. What is your name, dear?”

“Julia Nielsen. A pleasure to make your acquaintance…”

“Lord Gaston of Villa Devieres. I am here from Orlais visiting family. I attended this gathering as a favor to my cousin, not expecting to find an example of true culture. Kirkwall has been separated from the empire too long, you know. Your music, no matter how unfamiliar, reminded me of my younger days at court… But you must come play for me and my family.”

French? Despite the curiosity at this new accent to add to the number like Sebastian's and Merrill's, she smiled at the man. “The honor would be all mine.”

“I will look forward to it. Someone mentioned you were staying at the old Amell manor? I will send word with when we would like you.” Clearly thinking that was the end of it, the man spun on his heeled boots and walked off, a manservant peeling off the wall to follow him.

The damn cracked after that, several more nobles approaching her to request a performance. One outright demanded she come to play for their gathering the following day which she turned bluntly down. Her pride would only put up with some much abuse in a single day.

Part way through a discussion with a noblewoman who was unsuccessfully trying to describe a piece she had heard, Julia glimpsed a streak of dark red. Lady DuMois stood across the room, glaring at her. What is her issue besides apparently constipation? She was not bothering the guests, if anything… Julia successfully kept her face smooth as the realization hit her. The hostess put her on the second floor to keep people from seeing her and then tried to send her out the back way. Her manipulations were basic, almost childish. Out of sight out of mind as it were.

If she wants to destroy my career, she shouldn’t have hired me in the first place.
Finally, a handful of names and guarantees later, Julia was left alone with a single parting comment. "Many do not want to approach you yet so not to anger Lady DuMois. That snake and I never saw eye to eye so even if you had no talent, I'd hire you just to spite her." Is this really how I must earn my career back? Pandering to the whims of the so-called elite?

Despite the differences in technology and hygiene, the people she spoke to could have easily been placed at one of the parties she attended back on Earth. Their attitudes were the same. But at least back there she didn't really have to care what they thought. The performances continued without them. Straightening her back, Julia started forward again.

"I believe that went well," a low brogue cut across her thoughts of dates and obligations. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sebastian come to walk next to her. In her embarrassment earlier, she was unable to appreciate the fact he was not in his usual armor nor brother assembly. Instead he wore a white outfit, almost like a uniform with loose pants and a series of detailed buttons. It stood out amidst the kaleidoscope of colors, separating him from the rest of the crowd.

"The acoustics were better in the second spot," she agreed.

His lips twitched. "You had quite the appreciative crowd."

"That as well."

He paused, face turning suddenly serious. "I don't know if I need to warn you about trusting all the people who spoke to you. Some lords and ladies think that by paying for your services, they will get more than a song to listen to."

She hadn't given it much consideration, but reflecting on some of the looks she had received...

"Thank you for your concern, but I will be fine. I know how to handle myself."

"I do not doubt that." They weaved through the manor in silence for a few minutes, avoiding the several drunks who were grabbing at anyone within range, before Sebastian asked, "May I walk you home, Julia? I would sleep easier knowing that you were safe rather than met with misfortune on the way."

Julia waited near the entrance while a servant fetched her outdoor shoes. "The Chantry is quite a bit closer than the Amell manor. You would need to backtrack more than two times the length."

"Even Hightown is dangerous at night. As a man of faith and as a friend, I would appreciate your company for a while longer."

An eye roll would have been appropriate. "Do as you wish."

They made it out the door and onto the street beyond, sky now a darkening pink. "Was your night successful?"

Sebastian jerked his head to look at her. "My night?"

"Did you make any useful contacts?"

The smile that followed was resigned. "No one that I haven't talked with before. But your night seemed to go better."

Julia shrugged. "More or less. I have least two new events to play at which should only help to spread my name."
“You don’t sound too happy about it.”

She tilted her head back to stare at the purple streaks of cloud. "I'm not."

“Might I ask why?”

A single cloud seemed to stretch from rooftop horizon to rooftop horizon, a stripe in a sea of spots. "Back in New York, I had invitations to join several different world-renowned orchestras for a season as a soloist. To drop back to where no one knows my name… I might as well be seven years old again. So no, I am not happy to lose a decade and a half of work.”

“I’m sorry that you lost your world.”

*Why would he apologize? *"You weren't the one who dragged me here."

Sebastian followed her gaze as he spoke. “I know, but regardless, I wish you hadn’t had to go through the suffering of having been pulled away from the life you knew.”

She gave herself another second then brought her vision back to the world of gravity and stone. "Thank you for the sentiment then."

They continued their stroll through Hightown, passing a pair of guards. This time of day, the nobility were either at parties or home unlike Lowtown which continued all night. Sebastian made small talk and she responded in kind, falling back into familiar routines. The brother was like Leandra in that sense. They both had the high class knowledge which made a conversation easy but were kind and intelligent enough to make the task pleasant.

“So your pieces tonight was supposed to be played with more instruments? That is why they were called concertos?”

Julia nodded, pleased it hadn’t taken him too much work to grasp the concept. “I primarily played the soloist part of the pieces although occasionally I had to adapt in order to keep the composition true to its original flavor.”

Sebastian’s smile came easily, it was apparent that he used the expression often. “That sounds difficult.”

“Perhaps to some. I have the experience and skill needed to arrange in the seconds before playing. With practice, everything becomes easier.” The problem lay in the fact that many people gave up before they were skilled enough to even make their effort worthwhile.

*What a waste.*

The sun had completely disappeared and the sky had lost much of its color by the time they made it back to the Amell manor. In contrast with the DuMois manor, it struck her as simple yet tasteful. “Thank you for accompanying me, Sebastian. It may not have been needed but your conversation made the trip more enjoyable.”

For some reason that made him laugh, low and soft. “It was my pleasure. I’m glad that my only service needed was words.”

“Yes.” A beat passed and for some reason Julia’s mind flicked to those ridiculous romantic movies her mother sometimes forced her to watch when she had been drinking heavily. A man and woman standing awkwardly outside the woman’s house. Heat flashed through her. “Good night, Sebastian.”
Clenching the handle, she yanked the door open, the burst of light scorching. She stepped into the warm interior before she could dwell on any other irrational thoughts.

Words crept past the door right before it closed.

“Good night, Julia.”

Chapter End Notes

"They call you Lady Luck...
You might forget your manners
You might refuse to stay
And so the best that I can do is pray."
Hello again! I'm so sorry for delay right after I promised consistent updates. Short version, mid-November 8 coworkers and a supervisor quit so I've been working instead of writing.

Anyways... Enjoy!

"Hey! I'm not giving up today
There's nothing getting in my way
And if you knock knock me over
I will get back up again."

She hadn't really thought that finally getting professional engagements in her career of choice would change anything, but she barely got one use out of 'I have a job tonight' before Hawke refused to take no for an answer.

"What makes you think this is a good idea?" Julia asked, questioning herself at the same time as she avoided the green undefinable mass on the ground.

"All my ideas are excellent."

"That is… just no, Hawke. How many times have you almost gotten me killed?"

Hawke laughed. The sparse light of the torches created odd shadows across her face that could have been daunting if it was someone other than Hawke. The only scary parts about the woman were her fashion sense and life choices. "What are you talking about? I've practically ignored you. I didn't even ask if you want to help us clear out giant spiders on the Wounded Coast for Aveline yet."

"Which you keep saying you'll do but whenever I ask, you always find some other task more important." Aveline cut in, a half amused glare at the back of Hawke's head.

"I'm in high demand. Like my many lovers, you will just have to wait."

Of course there were giant spiders. Julia rolled her eyes. Overhead, beyond the light of the scones, things fluttered between stalactites. She knew better than to wonder what they were by this point. Curiosity died as a survival instinct in the Undercity.

"Can you please focus? I have a performance tonight that I need to prepare for. Thanks to you, those preparations now include another bath."

Hawke snorted. "You think you are so talented for having your third job already. Frankly, I'm not sure how they can stand listening to that cat strangling, but I was never one to shame a kink."

"That's because you have no shame."

Hawke glanced back, putting all her brain cells to work thinking of a retort only to have the other rogue cut in. "Don't worry, Freckles, we'll get you to your noble fans in time."
Teeth gritting hard enough to make her jaw ache, Julia flashed a bright smile at Varric and took a step to the side to wait for the back of their party. Aveline shortly took over her spot to quiz Hawke on something she had gotten involved in these last few days. Probably another mess that the Guard-Captain had to clean up. Julia had to give the woman credit for continuing to try. She would have locked Hawke up as a public nuisance ages ago.

"Who are you playing for tonight?" Sebastian asked from where he walked next to Fenris at the rear. The elf had been placed strategically so the large sword on his back could remind the people of the Undercity why attacking them was a bad idea and Sebastian had kept back to keep him company. What would those two ever talk about?

"A Comte from Orlais who is visiting his friends, the Algreste family," Julia threw back the words as she dipped to the side to tug Merrill back on path. The two men's secondary unsaid job was to keep Merrill from becoming lost, no matter the fact that she always seemed to turn up again. Julia didn't quite believe there could be anything of interest in the Undercity but since Merrill could actually see more of it, maybe she had found something to peak her curiosity.

"Oh, yes. I know the Algrestes. Good family. Their late matriarch managed to marry off her children to almost every major country in Thedas so their fabric business has been going well from what I hear."

Julia raised an eyebrow, unsure if the trivia was useful. Unfortunately, even as she tried not to gag as Merrill's bare feet plodded through a wet patch, all information was useful when establishing one's place in society. Dutifully she memorized the words 'fabric' and 'wide-spread' in connection to Algreste. Then she turned her attention back to the elf.

"Merrill, I know you don't have a thing for shoes, but please pay attention to your surroundings. There are undoubtedly parasites down here and I'm not entirely sure magic can help with those."

Merrill tore her gaze away from whatever her eyes were tracking on the ceiling and smiled at her. "You're kind to worry, but it's fine. I think magic can handle many of them and the skin on my feet is pretty thick. Besides these pictures are so interesting. One of my neighbors had stories about them and I don't know if they are true."

Julia nodded slowly, barely listening as Merrill explained the fairy tale. Something about directions through the Undercity based on picture designs. She glanced at one of the images in question as they passed, strained faces not so different from The Scream.

Unfortunately for the chattering elf, after several not completely illogical arguments from Varric, she had agreed to learn how to read and write in Common. Varric had gotten it in his head that having her and Fenris do it together would be a better experience, but she had suspicions it was actually because she and the moody male didn't get along and Varric found that amusing.

Over an hour of tracing unfamiliar characters and reciting the sound that it represented was not only tedious, but it made her unwilling to learn anything new. But hopefully with a bit of work she wouldn't have to rely on Leandra to read performance invitations. Beethoven's ear drum, I'm sick of being functionally illiterate.

"Stop! You are in our tunnell and must pay a toll." A thin female's voice called out from the darkness ahead. Julia squinted, focusing on the shadows and picked out three figures. To double check, she glanced at Merrill, who was starting at a skeletal image on the wall, and then Fenris, who looked unconcerned. She couldn't be missing that many then.

Then the real question was what kind of idiots thought it was a good idea to try to intimidate a group
as large and cleared armed as they were. Wouldn't it be more practical to let them pass and more on to easier targets?

Perhaps the mold down here prevented logical thought. It would make sense since her heart hadn’t even picked up its pace at the sight of sharp objects in the hands of people delusional enough to use them.

“..and then the very nice prostitute said, ’I’m not putting that there!’ and ran off. Which is why saying you own an opening doesn't always work well,” Hawke finished with a grin.

Varric shook his head with a smirk, Merrill looked confused, and the rest of their party just stared at Hawke as if the force of their gaze could keep her mouth shut.

"What the… Agh, just give me your money if you want to leave in single pieces."

Hawke tapped her chin, face turning into the rarely seen serious expression. "Well, you seem like nice enough folks…. but no can do. Julia just lectured me about not buying anymore frivolous things. And paying you to walk in a tunnel definitely is that. So, I’m sorry, but it’s her fault.” She helpfully pointed back at Julia and Julia massaged the space around her eyes to try to keep her headache from spreading.

_Seriously, Hawke?

“You won’t be laughing soon,” a low voice rumbled behind them.

Julia spun around, blurring the darkness and torch flames together before her vision settled on the figures behind Sebastian and Fenris. _Shit._ Rapid counting and the tension filtering into Fenris’s back told her all she needed to know.

They were now outnumbered.

Perhaps the toll-men weren’t as brain-dead after all.

“You underestimate what I can laugh at!” Hawks shouted and with a hoot, launched herself at the closest opponent.

_Of all the..._ Around her weapons were being drawn so in a move she had done dozens of times, Julia whipped her bow off her back and plucked an arrow to match it.

As Merrill's glowing staff whirled in the air next to her, Julia kept her breathing even and tried to pay attention to the broad picture of the fight rather than the details. Metal clanged and figures darted in and out of clarity.

They were stuck in a tunnel perhaps three meters wide with enemies blocking both exits. The smart thing would be to push in one direction so they could get some open space were they would be less surrounded. Their group had too many archers to be successful in a closed tight space like this.

"Prepare yourselves!” Julia raised her arm over her eyes as Merrill cast a light spell. Even with the barrier, the burst of light crept underneath her lashes. She squinted and swore. Their attackers slowed but didn't stop, Helmets with holes and greasy heads charging blindly. They might not be able to see straight, but their weapons were still sharp.

_Where to shoot?_ Her eyes darted from figure to figure, friend and foe mingling every other second. She needed time to aim! Perhaps the other side would have...
“Julia, behind you!”

What instinct she had dropped her to her knees, turn allowing her to see a small knife enter the space her chest had been before. Her heart thumped and almost in slow motion she raised the arrow still against her bow string and fired.

Her attacker almost managed to dodge but the close range shot struck them side with enough force to collapse them backwards.

They didn’t get back up, but their scream implanted itself in her memory. Her eyes trained themselves on the writhing form for a second before she pushed herself to her feet. *This is nothing. Self-defense is a perfectly valid excuse. Besides, haven’t you already—* she cut herself off there. It wasn’t helpful.

The fight, for all its build up, was almost over. Fenris dispatched the last standing member and Hawke started explaining her amazing feats to Varric who almost seemed to be taking mental notes.

White armor turned her way but Merrill got to her first. “Are you alright, Julia? I hope my light spell didn’t put you too out of balance. Maybe I should give a better warning next time?”

Tattoos twisted in worry and Julia rolled her shoulders back before shifting off her quiver. Failure and a darker emotion burned at her tongue but her tone stayed smooth. “You did very well, Merrill. Your spell was helpful. I just have more practicing to do.”

Giving the elf a smile that was bright enough to soothe her, Julia turned towards Hawke, weapons loose in her hands. The woman had finished offering her boasts to Varric and instead had turned to looting corpses.

*Did she ever have a sense of dignity?* Crossing her arms, weapons dangling from her fingers, Julia marched over to Hawke. “Next time you decide to get us involved in a useless fight, how about you don’t? Varric has a way with criminal types, just let him do the taking.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment, Freckles?”

Hawke wiggled her fingers in the dead woman’s pocket before moving to the next body. “But that would take all the fun out of it.”

"It's not supposed--" Julia cut off, saving her breath as she remembered who was she talking to. "Can you at least least try to pretend to take staying alive seriously? If you are going to jump off a cliff, don't drag the rest of us with you."

"I thought friends were supposed to do things together." The woman spotted another looting possibility outside the tunnel, sent back by the force of Bianca if she could judge by the quiver in their chest. Julia followed after.

"Not things like this."

Hawke just laughed and bent down to start with searching for any wearable jewelry. *Does she really have no sense of preservation?* Julia bent her head back staring at the cave ceiling like that could offer up some answers. She really just needed to get back to the surface and start preparing for… *is that a person up there?*

It was hard to tell since they were out of the direct path of Merrill’s light but the shape she saw was vaguely humanoid. Bits of metal reflected back at her as they clung to the wall just a length above the lip of the tunnel. Suddenly the figure shifted forward and Julia's spatial reasoning kicked in.
"Hawke, move!"

Her push was more of a heavy slap than an actual shove but it sent Hawke rolling over the body she had been patting. Julia had barely taken another step when the weight of a drum set hit her in the back and she went down.

All the air shot from her lungs as her head played the drumstick. Coughs clogged her throat with dirt and she wheezed with the world spinning.

Ouch. Even as the weight rolled off of her, Julia's entire being ached. Her head throbbed from where she hit and when she opened her eyes, black spots and fuzzed out sections dominated her vision. She closed them again in order to get her thoughts in order. This ground... hell... the Undercity...I need to get off the ground before...

Limbs shaking tratoriously, she pushed herself away from the floor and almost immediately, hands grabbed her, helping her move to something between sitting and laying down. Cool and unyielding material pressed against her shoulder-armor- while an arm braced her up against her sore back.

"Slowly, Julia. Slow."

The brogue voice relaxed her heaving lungs, but didn't stop her frown as vertigo reminded her not to move. Someone had jumped on her... and Sebastian had witnessed it.

Snapped strings!

Her head pounded and she let her breath out in a hiss as she opened her eyes into narrow slits. What few colors were available in this dim setting swirled like a lame kaleidoscope and ratcheted her headache higher on the pain scale. The voices of the people around her echoed and made it difficult to concentrate on a single sound.

"Julia, I need you to follow my finger with your eyes," Sebastian said softly, a single digit rising to rest in front of her vision.

She blinked once, twice, wetness forming at the corners of her eyes and focused on the finger as it slowly moved. Left. Pause. More left. Pause. Now right. "What is your name?"

My name? Her thoughts came slower than she would have liked and she squeezed her eyes shut momentarily as her tongue traced out the sounds. "Julia... Farrah Nielsen-Roberts."

Distantly someone said something with a laugh and her lips turned. Surely they couldn't make smart comments about her mother's atrocious naming sense. They didn't know the references.

"Do you know where you are?"

Hell? It would actually explain a lot if that was the answer. "Kirkwall. Specifically below the city."

The finger stopped moving, dropping out of view, and a soft sigh brushed against her ear. "I'm not a healer, but I don't think you are concussed. Does anything else hurt?"

Just about everything, but there was no real point in sharing that. "Nothing is broken." Her fingers traveled to the pain radiating from the center of her forehead only to find damp and parted skin. She hissed through gritted teeth.

"Do I have a facial laceration?"
"Only a small one," Merrill assured her from somewhere beyond her area of sight.

Julia swore, words startling Sebastian who nevertheless gave her a hand as she struggled to climb to her feet. Her vision spun again then steadied. Several pairs of eyes watched her and she almost said a few more choice words at the sight of her now dappled-brown dress.

Facial injury and covered in the filth from below Kirkwall, she would need to play behind a curtain tonight if she wanted to keep her engagement. That or some magic and boiling water.

"I assume Anders is almost always at his clinic?"

Hawke snorted. "He eats there, sleeps there, and manifests there." Manifests? "Unless he's off doing magey things, he'll be there."

Well, that was something. She couldn't imagine Anders keeping regular office hours. She glanced down for the equipment she had dropped only for Merrill to hand her a full quiver with a smile. Damn elf eyes. "Thank you, Merrill. That is very helpful." Sebastian passed her the bow and Julia swung the two pieces into their proper places, back protesting the weight.

"Aveline, would you be willing to show me to the clinic? I can't have a recital looking like this."

The Guard-Captain's expression barely changed as she nodded. "Of course. I've been meaning to check on Anders myself anyways."

"Are you finally going to tell the templars about him?" Fenris asked just soft enough to pretend that everyone couldn't hear him.

Aveline glanced at Varric and then Hawke, the latter's face growing cloudy. "More than likely not. Depends how he is doing."

"Just because Anders is a mage doesn't mean--"

"I don't worry because Anders is a mage. Bethany never gave me reason to be concerned. It's because Anders is an abomination who more than once has lost control is why I need to check up on him."

Hawke muttered something but didn't respond to that. Julia's eyebrow rose in a painful gesture and then they were on the move.

After all places that she traveled, on Earth and in Thedas, the Undercity was by far the worst. There had been other bad places, New York's subways for level of contamination and the keep and Gallows for lack of directions, but the Undercity had the joy of being both disgusting and confusing. There was no change in ceiling for the different type of guests, no helpful signs pointing the right way. Just mold and images of screaming slaves.

Merrill quietly checked in on her before resuming her perusal of the darkness. As they passed through a sort of garbage heap-market, Julia carefully guided the elf away from a woman trying to convince her that the strings on her mat were worth something.

Ahead, Fenris and Aveline had moved beyond turning mages in and instead were discussing the condition of Darktown.

“I'm surprised you would be down here with us, Aveline. It doesn't seem like an activity a Guard-Captain would condone,” Fenris commented.
Aveline laughed lightly. “No, it wouldn’t. But my people can’t patrol Darktown, there are too many risks and not enough people and resources to try to make it safer. The old patrol schedule had most of the routes around Hightown and only a few in Lowtown and the surrounding area. Despite what they might think, nobles don’t need as many guards so I’ve been slowly pulling routes out of Hightown and into the areas that need it more. Eventually, I want to even bring the Guard down to the Undercity, but that is still years off.”

A beat passed and then Fenris said, "I have no objections to less patrols by my manor."

“Should I be concerned?”

“Not at all.”

Aveline made a noise that could have been a grunt or a laugh but left it alone. Julia hadn't realized it for a while after she arrived, but Aveline let their group get away with a lot. She offered a sort of legitimacy to their often lawless cohort and no doubt interceded whenever the Keep took notice of Hawke's actions.

With that in mind, she turned to Sebastian, whose was only a few steps behind. His face distracted her for a moment as he stared at their surroundings with a creased brow. "How did Hawke convince you to join this particularly misguided expedition?"

The brother laughed, wrinkles smoothing out. "She didn't have to try very hard. The usual reason of protecting people is enough for me although she did come up with an interesting secondary one."

Julia raised an eyebrow—ouch, I really need to stop doing that until I’m healed—and waited. It took a moment but Sebastian complied with her unasked question. "She mentioned wanting to give you more realistic practice for your archery."

"What? Julia's head jerked back to stare at Hawke trailing behind with Varric, woman in question giggling over something the dwarf said. She looked up and winked at her.

"You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am. Hawke didn't think your practice at the Keep was helping you get ready for an actual fight so she wanted to get together a large enough party that you wouldn't worry about being killed instantly if you failed a shot."

Julia directed her gaze ahead, barely paying attention enough to pull Merrill away from a glob on the ground. "I don't think we are talking about the same Hawke. There is no way that the woman I live with thinks that deeply."

Sebastian chuckled, the noise tickling at Julia's senses. "It may not always appear so, but there is more to Hawke than she likes people to think."

_Hawke, proactive?_ That was like calling an oboe a soothing instrument. Theoretically possible but practically improbable. _But could I have been wrong?_ Unlikely but still...

The conversation moved on although Julia didn't pay it much attention. He asked about her last two performances, she said that they were fine. She was getting more inquiries about playing and a few concrete dates.

They passed by another destitute marketplace and Hawke demanded a detour to buy something from her friend Tomwise. Julia got through the first two movements of Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D Major before Hawke called it a success.
There is no way this woman is anything other than what she is. Notion finally settled in her mind, Julia nodded to herself and let her thoughts move back to her setting.

Although she wasn't sure, she almost thought she recognized the path they walked after the Darktown market. The smell of the sea brushed by her nose and as the spectrum of light changed, she knew that they were getting close.

"Stop! Don't got any further!"

"Here we go again," Varric muttered from behind. Julia managed not to swear as she peered around the hulking shapes of Aveline and Fenris to see what fool was in front of them. She really needed to keep those types of words silent, for Merrill's sake at least.

There were a multitude of idiots in the Undercity today apparently. Unlike the ones earlier, these were wearing something that could actually be called armor, even if it was poor quality.

Aveline spoke first. "We are headed to the healer's. He is a… an acquaintance of ours."

The largest of the three crossed their arms over their chest. "The healer is busy."

Hawke made a noise that was surprisingly animalistic and Fenris pointed out, "Anders is often busy. He'll want to see us."

"Go somewhere else."

"Why don't you go somewhere else?" Hawke shot back and despite the tension, Julia resisted the urge to massage her forehead. Sometimes Hawke could actually think of base-level clever lines. This was not one of those times. "We will see Anders and I dare you to try to stop us!"

Seriously? What did we just discuss? "Hawke…"

Their opponents didn't even bother to speak, drawing weapons and once again they were in a fight.

Hawke took off, passing Julia in a grinning blur and moving together, Julia and Sebastian grabbed their bows. They were supposed to be done fighting today. While she didn't think she had a concussion, she was dizzy enough to call it a day. But no, Hawke didn't know when to call it quits.

More evidence that even listening to her was a bad idea.

Screams erupted from the bystanders as they tried to flee the scene. Julia jerked her attention away, fitting an arrow against her bow. She wouldn't let this fight be as a disaster as the last.

They had more space this time at least and a quick glance behind showed that no one seemed to be attacking them from that side. But Hawke, Aveline, and Fenris were making it difficult to get a good look at the people they were fighting. She needed the high ground, else she was equally likely to hit an ally than an enemy.

The other two archers in their group seemed to be managing as more enemies crowded into what she could see but she wasn't ready to test her new skills to that extent.

A swivel of her head gave her what she needed. Slightly behind and to the right, not adding too much extra distance was a raised level with stairs. A pillar blocked part of her view but it looked like a stall of some sort had been operating there with table braced against the stone. Not great, but it would work.
Two deep breaths to take back control from the distracting throb of her head and the flash of Fenris's
tattoos. Aveline bashed an opponent with her shield, loud enough to make her start. *Fine. Let's do
this.*

"Merrill, I need your help."

The elf spun her staff one-handed and smiled. "I'm a little busy, but what do you need?"

Julia nodded at the level. "If we get up there, can you make a barrier to prevent anyone from easily
sneaking up on us?"

Merrill stared for a moment then struck the top of her staff against the ground. The stone and dirt
shook as earth shifted. Julia braced herself but the elf was already darting towards the rise.
Something whistled over Julia's head and she broke into a sprint as well. She barely felt the magic as
Merrill cast a barrier around them.

The enemy archers had arrived.

Ignoring the slime layer that threatened to slow her down enough to hit, Julia leapt up the stairs two
at a time, nearly slipping at the top. To her right, the ground had been cracked open, vines rising
from the open maws like something from Sleeping Beauty. *Holy Amati...* Sometimes she forgot that
underneath the distracted female who nearly crashed into walls was a powerful mage and a
researcher who was putting together ancient artifacts with little help from anyone.

And she had just created this destruction at Julia's request.

Something cool and alien slipped across her chest with that thought and Julia tried to remember to
breathe.

Sparks flew as another arrow struck Merrill's barrier. Julia broke out of her reserve, raising her bow
and arrow into position. The distance had increased but the perception of the fight had improved
enough that she was still in a better place than she had started.

Less than fifty yards away the walls split away into a view of the outside and if her memory served
her right, they weren't far from the clinic. The Undercity's residents had dispersed so the armored
individuals running in their direction from the clinic could only be more opponents.

Julia drew, aimed briefly, and fired.

She missed her target but they were close enough together she hit the one behind them. The light
pouring in from the crack made this place brighter than the previous location but details were still
hard to catch. She couldn't see her arrows very well but she could see their results.

Her head throbbed and she grabbed another arrow.

More sparks rained down, this time closer to her face and Julia barely managed not to jump as
Sebastian appeared on the other side of her. Their eyes met for a moment, then they were back at it,
aiming down the targets before they could enter the fray. Julia missed more than she hit but Sebastian
and Merrill managed to take out the enemy archers whenever they spotted them so all their front line
people and Varric needed to worry about were the melee fighters.

More bodies than she cared to count later, the fight was over. No one stopped Aveline from
marching up to the opponent in the nicest armor and hosting them off their feet.

“Guard scum.” The man made a spitting noise but Julia was too far to see the result. He grunted as
his back hit the wall.

"Why were you so desperate to stop us from getting to the healer's?" The Guard-Captain asked, voice firm but not loud. That… was not something Julia wanted directed at her. She walked over to the stairs only to stare at them. She had somehow made it up but would she get down without making a fool of herself more than she already had today?

What the hell happened to railings?

"Allow me," Sebastian said, approaching her as he finished wrapping his bow back over his shoulder. Crouching down, he jumped off the side of the raised level near the stairs and then held out his hand. Julia didn't let herself roll her eyes but she placed her hand in his and using that as a brace, made it safely to the main level. A moment later, Merrill giggled as Sebastian helped her down as well.

They joined the rest of their group, stepping around the bodies. Merrill dipped down to run hands over the closest corpse till she grinned and found a pocket. So she was a looter too… Sebastian didn't pause over the apparent money pits and instead they went to stand next to Varric as Fenris joined in on talking to the apparent leader.

"Learn anything?" Julia asked.

Varric shrugged. "Nothing yet. Give it another minute and Fenris will scare it out of them."

A dim flash of white light and the attacker leader started whimpering. "Please no… I'll… I'll tell you anything."

Fenris stepped back as the man gasped for air, Aveline giving the elf a barely concealed frown.

"We were trying to recruit the healer to join the Coterie but his people put up a resistance."

"What?" Hawke yelped, jerking up from where she too was performing her TSA routine. Yanking a blade from her belt, she started running.

Shit, not again. Julia looked to the rest of their group and as Fenris gave a crisp knock to the head of the apparent leader, Varric took off after their madwoman.

Stabilizing her quiver, Julia allowed herself one more curse and then started to run.

No one stopped them as they crossed at least two stages worth of uneven ground to the clinic. Julia was not at the front of the group but that didn't mean she missed the bodies of Anders's so-called guards sprawled on the ground near the stairs leading up to the clinic.

They had been arrogant and not even a little hygienic for a medical setting but it was still unfortunate.

"Anders!" Hawke yelled from somewhere in front of them. Wood cracked as something slammed into it and then the barrier broke.

Light flashed and Varric shouted, "It's us, Blondie!"

The group paused and Julia halted with them, air coming a bit faster than normal. This wouldn't be a problem if I had a treadmill. Beyond the door hanging off its hinges, a slightly blue Anders gripped his staff in front of a crowd of pale and sweating people. Hawke punched him in the shoulder and he said something to her too quiet to overhear.
"What happened?" Sebastian asked, hand still half reaching for his bow.

Julia eyed the bodies and drew her own conclusions.

"The Coterie wanted him to be their exclusive healer," Varric answered in her stead. "I didn't have all the details but based on the rumors I gave him a warning. He must have not given them the answer that they wanted."

Undercity thugs. Julia rolled her eyes and walked around the loitering group to enter the clinic. The scents of the sick assaulted her nose and she raised the back of her fingers to her face to muffle it. Hawke cracked a joke, almost causing the mage smile.

"Anders, do you have enough magic for a quick patch job?" Brown eyes looked up at her question and she just stopped herself from raising an eyebrow.

"How did you manage to injure yourself?" Anders asked, straightening so that he was now taller than her, if not by that much.

"Do you even need to ask?" Julia glanced at Hawke who managed to preen. Several feet away, someone threw up and Julia took a single step in the direction opposite of them.

The mage sighed and went back to partially leaning on his staff. "I don't have enough magic for superficial wounds."

"Superficial? The person who hit me jumped from the ceiling."

"The ceiling?"

Hawke wandered over to one of the occupied table-beds, climbing up to sit between someone's legs. "Yep. She pushed me out of the way. Very brave."

Anders looked from Hawke to Julia and then back again. Shaking his head he walked up to Julia and bracing himself with the staff on one side, reached up to hold a hand over her head. As usual, Julia's back tensed at the use of magic as Anders's eyes closed.

"A little bruising but nothing serious. You will be fine." He ran a finger over the space above the wound and as Julia's forehead tingled, stepped back. Julia's hand automatically went up to the spot. Blood still crusted underneath her fingertip but there was no wound to go with it.

Back in working order.

"Thank you. I will give a donation next time you come up to the Hanged Man. And maybe some of Hawke's clothes you can use as rags."

"Hey!"

Both of them ignored her and Anders's grim face almost lightened. "Alright."

With a last glance at Hawke, Julia turned on her heel, leaving the center of more illness than wellness. Besides Aveline who seemed to have guard matters on the mind, the rest of the gang was still talking outside the door. Merrill stepped back to let her into their circle of sorts.

"Are we going stay in this sewer pipe until Schubert finishes his symphony or can we get out of here? I vote for the latter so as long as no one else wants to kill us…"

Merrill's smile wavered and then she giggled, Varric offering her a warm grin. "I suppose we can
find other things to do. How do you feel about nug races?"
Voices rose and fell, breaking the silence of sleep like a fifth grade trumpet player. Julia rolled onto her stomach, pressing her face into the pillow. Her nose itched as she breathed in the organic stuffing and she switched positions. A voice stabbed the air and Julia groaned. Her body was far too heavy for it to be past noon yet. *Shouldn't everyone who can get that loud be still sleeping?*

If the lady of the house last night hadn't insisted she stay until the last guest had either left or been carried to an open bedroom, she might have gotten enough sleep to be able to ignore the voices. But the extended performance left her muscles, both physical and social, worn and with every crack of sound, sleep drifted further from possibility.

*Why are they shouting?*

In a last-ditch effort, Julia put her pillow over her head to try to muffle the noise. Yet the angry voices still shoved themselves underneath the door into her room, worming their way through fabric to her ears.

With a groaning curse, Julia rolled out of bed. The floor was cool under her feet and she half danced over to her closet, quickly changing into something better suited for outside her room. Even without checking a mirror, she could feel her hair rising around her like a brown cloud. The tie was right where she left it on the mantle and she quickly pulled the loose ends into a bun. She would worry about style once she headed to the keep for practice.

Then she opened the door.

Instantly, the voices became recognizable without the thick wood to hinder them. Half a dozen steps out of her room revealed the people themselves.

Two women faced each other, features similar enough to dispute her continuing belief that they were not actually related. Somehow, Leandra had birthed Marian Hawke and she had been paying for that ever since.

Three weeks ago Julia would have let them continue, but even that parsal of time had lessened her resistance to bypassing the argument. This fight had been in the composing stages for a long time, despite what Leandra insisted.

“Do you two know what time it is?”

The older Hawke's mouth pressed into a thin line. “Good morning, Julia. I’m sorry our disagreement woke you.”

Hawke herself snorted. "I'm not. She is more interesting when she gets less sleep, like a grouchy bear."

“Marian!” Leandra snapped. “If you don’t have anything nice to say—“

“Keep talking anyways. Yes, I know,” Marian said. “No need to lecture, Mother. You don’t need to involve yourself in every detail of my life.”
Already fair skin turned paler but Leandra's features hardened. “If I don’t at least try, you don’t let me in. You are my daughter and I know almost nothing about what you do or who you spend your time with.”

“The only reason you want to find out is so you can find more things to scold me about.”

_Are they really doing this now?_ Julia sighed. If this ended like all the rest of their arguments, Leandra would be in near tears and Hawke would storm out, only to return with another crazy idea.

Just because she had the time didn't mean she wanted to deal with this. It really was too early.

"Hawke, what exactly is Leandra asking for that is so difficult?"

The woman crossed her arms, resting all her weight on one foot so her hip angled out. “My dear mother wants to subject my friends to a first course interrogation, followed by a scolding, and then dessert will be a guilt trip.”

_The hell?_ Julia stared at her. "Leandra wants to invite everyone to dinner? Why?"

"That's what I said!"

Leandra looked like her favorite composer had died. "I’ve barely met any of them. The only ones I actually know are Aveline and Varric. The only reason I know Varric is because he introduced himself before… the Deep Roads.”

The pause barely concealed the unspoken words and Hawke's hands tightened at her sides.

"Will you ever not blame me for that? Carver wanted to go and Bethany wanted to stay, yet you say both of their choices are my fault. Believe it or not, I can’t control the world, Mother."

“I know that, dear. I don’t blame you… I just wish there had been a way for all of us to stay together, even if it was still in Gamlen’s house.”

Hawke snorted. “Then you would be complaining about lost Amell glory. You know what? I’m done. You leave my friends alone.” Releasing her death grip on the edge of her overly-large shirt, the woman strode across the room and a moment later, a door slammed shut.

_That… could have been worse._ Julia was always vaguely concerned when the two fought that Hawke would react like she usually did with a problem and try to stab it. Unfortunately, Leandra did not look like she shared the same relief, instead looking at nothing at all with watery eyes.

Julia bit back her frustration. "Don't take Hawke personally, she is known for saying things that she shouldn't."

The older woman said nothing but went to grab her knitting. _Oh, not the…_ Taking a deep breath, Julia let it trickle out. It was far too early for this. Unfortunately, that also meant that she had the time.

"Why do you even want to meet Hawke's friends? I can save you the trouble and tell you what they are like."

Leandra took the nest of yarn from the nearby table and started tugging loose strands of it to find the end pieces. “These are the people my daughter trusts her life to and they are strangers to me, I barely know their names. I have been so focused on protecting us that I let my daughter drift away. Now Marian doesn’t want for me to get involved and…” Her face broke a little. “It’s like I barely know her. In some ways, she’s the only one I have left and she is so far away.”
Don’t get involved. Julia told herself quickly before sympathy could arise. Leandra was destined for failure with this particular motif. Hawke was never good at sharing. However, as the older woman struggled to keep her composure and the knots in the knitting grew more profound, Julia's resolve weakened.

She sighed and mentally reorganized her day.

"I can get everyone here. When did you want to do this... dinner party?"

"Julia... I can't ask you to--."

"Then don't," Julia interjected. Leandra's lips turned down for a moment before relaxing into a smile.

"Then let's do it tonight. I'll have Orana and Bodahn start getting ready. How many should I prepare for?"

Fingers flickering as she counted, Julia said, “There are seven of them, not including Hawke and myself.”

The woman’s smile was blinding. “Then I will prepare for an even ten.” She started to turn then paused to gently touch Julia's arm. "Thank you for this."

Julia waved the sentiment off and instead took the farewell for what it was worth and went back to her room. I should have stayed in bed.

In less than half an hour, she was bathed, clothed, and armed. Her mass of hair threatened to burst from the tie and her dress was plain enough to get her kicked out of any quality restaurant. At least she wouldn't have to be alarmed if it was dirty and since this trip would involve Lowtown, that was more of a guarantee than a possibility. But with any luck, she wouldn't have to go much farther than the Hanged Man.

This would be so much easier if we could just text.

She started with the worst visit, a nagging suspicion proving correct as a dark haired woman hollered from a table at the Hanged Man. Varric sat near her, sweeping hand gestures indicating he was trying to distract Hawke with one of his tall tales. He blinked at Julia as she approached. Hawke luckily ignored both of them.

"Freckles, I don't remember you being bribed or threatened to be here today."

Her glare did as little as usual. "It's a little of both actually. How do you keep in contact with your urchins?"

"My..." Varric laughed. "They're always around if you know where to look. But the reason why is one I've got to hear."

"I need to get invitations to Merrill, Anders, and Isabela for a dinner tonight at the Amell manor."

"A dinner, don't I get an--" "Maker's balls, there is a dinner!" Hawke shot to her feet, wobbling already despite the early hour. Julia leaned away from her breath. "If my mother thinks she can go behind my back and interfere with my life then she--"

"Oh shut up, Hawke." Julia rolled her eyes, dropping any attempt to keep her facial placid. "Leandra is interested and concerned about you, God knows why. You will let her have her misguided attempt of mothering and be grateful that she cares about you enough to even bother."
Hawke's alcohol soaked brain couldn't take the assault and she just stared at Julia. Varric had a similar expression but it slipped into something that she didn't like. But she would rather not know whatever thoughts were slipping through that mind of his.

"Varric, you are invited as well. Make sure your urchins tell the others to be there at..." She considered it and named a time. "Isabela isn't allowed any grand late entrances."

The dwarf smiled but it didn't make it to the calculations being processed behind his eyes. "I suppose that can be managed."

Julia looked at the pair of them for a long second and then spinning on the ball of her foot, headed out of the Hanged Man. The later it got, the more likely it was that the refuse of Kirkwall would wake up and slow her down.

Almost three hours later, the wind tugged on her dress as she opened the door to Hawke's house. Dirt seemed to crust her skin and dress, her muscles aching from the long session at the keep after she had passed the final invitation off to Aveline. After her last failure in the Undercity, she had upped her practice routine, leaving her twice as fatigued as before as she tried to perfect shooting from different positions and while on the move.

But at least she had done her part for this dinner. With any luck, Leandra's wouldn't be as tacky as the ones Julia had been hired to play for. Was it too much to go to a gathering that she could actually enjoy?

*Perhaps I should just check...*

Her fears were shortly unfounded and after a bath, Julia went to the library to review the alphabet she had learned so far. Varric liked to leave their lessons with a cliff hanger and apparently they were close to being able to put characters into actual words.

Eventually the dim lighting burned at her eyes, the edge of a headache building. Julia braced her face in her hands, massaging the skin around her eyes. One day all this practice would pay off. She would be able to travel the city without getting lost, read its words, and fight those who would harm her. The idea of Kirkwall being comfortable and familiar grated at her, but at the same time, she hated the alien feeling that permeated the air from the moment she woke up till she drifted off at night. Routine and time had numbed the unease, but it never completely disappeared.

"Taking a nap there, Freckles?"

Julia kept herself from freezing in her pose and instead slowly raised her eyes to the dwarf.

"Did you shave, Varric? I didn't know you had enough decorum for that."

He snorted and shambled over to peer at the book in front of her. "Call it a gesture of goodwill for Leandra. *Economics of the Free Marches?* Not one of my favorites, a little slow in the middle and the ending was anticlimactic."

Julia pushed herself to her feet, sliding the book back into its place on the shelf. "Don't you get insider trading tips from the Merchants' Guild? I'm surprised that you need to bother reading these basics."

Varric tilted his head away from her, eying the door to the library. "Never doubt the contents of a book, Freckles. You never know what useful information you might dig up."

She was about to point out the fallacy in that argument when a pink figure slipped through the door.
"Good evening, Julia. Oh, hello Varric! I wasn't sure if I beat you here."

"Daisy! Where did you get all those bows?"

Time picked up its tempo after that and slowly the rest of their guests trickled in. Julia was increasingly amazed to see that Varric and Merrill weren't the only ones would had cleaned up for this dinner. Aveline didn't wear a dress, but at least she wasn't in armor. Anders had large enough bags under his eyes to store a full sized harp but he had discovered what a comb was for the evening. Even Fenris had cleaned his usual attire and Isabela's shirt was replaced by a tunic that could have been considered the minimum acceptable length, rather than inches away.

Hawke when she strolled in was clean if not well-groomed. But she wasn't yelling, face lightening up at the sight of her friends, so Julia accepted the bare minimum attempt.

Sebastian slipped in with Aveline, a light blue tunic and form fitting pants stealing more of Julia's attention than she cared to admit. They suited him, bringing out the color of his eyes and contrasting against his darker skin.

Julia deliberately placed her eyes elsewhere and refocused her attention on Merrill's progress with her mirror. It was effort ill spent as she tried to listen without thinking about the object itself. She didn't understand the hooded figure that she had seen, but both times had been a result of elven magic. She had no interest in a third. Even if meeting them could possibly get her home, she wasn't desperate enough to force herself to stare into the shadows of that hood.

She'd save that for a different day.

"Dinner is ready," Bodahn announced from the doorway and the group started following after him into the dining room. A few of them hadn't been in the manor before tonight and made comments on the way.

"What kind of a mask is that?" "Are you sure you live here, Hawke? It doesn't seem like you."

"You've done a wonderful job restoring it, Leandra."

Since this was a casual dinner, Leandra hadn't arranged a seating chart. She sat down at the head of the table and after a few moments, Julia found herself between Sebastian and Merrill like she would have any other night at the Hanged Man. However, these chairs were less likely to collapse underneath her and she wasn't unduly suspicious of any consumable that would be brought out.

Why can't this be our place to meet up?

Leandra beamed at the full table. "Thank you all for joining me tonight. I appreciate you taking the time, especially with such short notice. I hope tonight is pleasant for all of you."

Julia kept her mouth firmly shut until Leandra raised her glass for a toast. She sipped from her goblet and let the smooth wine run over her tongue. Her eyes fluttered and without effort, her face smoothed out. If we held our gatherings here, I could almost enjoy them.

"What kind of wine is this?" Fenris asked, holding the edge of his glass to his lips and simply smelling it. "It almost tastes Nevarran."

The older Hawke beamed at him. "It is Nevarran, but from a new vineyard. They live close to the Orlais so they try to blend the two styles. I wasn't aware any of Marian's friends besides Julia appreciated wine."

Green eyes met hazel and a brief moment of mutual dislike later, they resumed normal activities.
"Don't tell him that, Mama Hawke. These two are hard enough to teach without our reading lessons dissolving into wine tastings." Julia forgot to swallow and started choking. Setting down her goblet, she covered her lips with her free hand as the rest of the table erupted with unnecessary comments and opinions.

"You can't teach!" "Why wasn't I invited?" "Sounds boring." "Julia, you don't know how to read?"

Julia caught her breath, earning only a sideways look from a few sitting around the table. "I never said I couldn't read. I can read English better than most Americans. I just can't read the squiggles you call a written language."

Varric smirked, something annoying sparkling in his eyes. "Your English is more squaggles than squiggles."

Luckily, Orana and Bodahn took this opportunity to bring out the food, smells washing over the assembled table. Julia's stomach growled in response as thin arms leaned past her and the steam filled her nose. After all the exercise, her lunch had been very light.

Normally at a formal dinner like this, the servants would bring out pre-arranged plates like at a restaurant, but Leandra opted for a more casual family dinner setting. Probably wise since who knew how the group's palates would handle quality cuisine. Medium cuts of seasoned and roasted beef, almond-crusted fowl, a spicy stew with large soft colored potatoes poking through, and hard-boiled eggs were a few of the dishes Orana had managed to prepare for the night.

Food shuffled across plates and Leandra's face twisted between alarmed and amused as the group went through their usual bickering. Hawke and Isabela tussled with a serving spoon for a few moments before resorting to other things. Wine flowed and people slowly settled into actual eating.

Only a few bites in, the anticipated interrogation began. Leandra smiled, eyes alight as she looked up from cutting her meat. "Now, I've heard a little bit about all of you, but I would enjoy hearing more. Varric, how have you been lately?"

Julia tried not to roll her eyes as Varric struggled on weaving somewhere credible but still polite lies for Leandra. Silverware starting its delicate dance, she let the conversation flow over her, picking out bits of interest.

"Improving the guard..." "...stabbed him in the..." "...repairing the clinic...kind people offering themselves as guards..." "...found myself in a pantry. The Coterie are not..." Hawke and Anders leaned close, arms almost touching but they didn't look at each other. Julia's eyes flicked back down. Good thing I didn't take that bet with Varric. Fenris gradually loosened his rigid posture while Isabela enjoyed the wine more than she should have. "...borrow from your library." "...tattoos are beautiful, Merrill. Do they have..." Sebastian cut off a small piece of meat and Julia was happy to find that he had excellent table manners. "...a lot of profit in textiles right now, particularly if they..." "...latest performance, Julia?"

The melody crashed into the forefront of the piece and Julia blinked. Her smile slide on without a hitch. "It went very well, thank you. The Lady was very generous and even had a few requested pieces."

"I'm sorry to spring this on you, but would you be willing to play a little for us after supper?"

She wants me to be a guest and to play for them? "Actually I-" The two people on either side of her smiled broadly and with a mental groan, Julia changed her words mid-sentence. "-would love to. Allow me to finish my dinner and I will get my violin."
Leandra lightened her questioning during the second half on the dinner and once they had finished, stood. "If you would all follow me to the library, we will serve a light desert." She glanced at Julia, who nodded in return. When the others headed to the library, she took a detour for her instrument.

It didn't require much tuning and only a little practice warmed her up enough for a performance of this level. Merrill beamed at her as she walked through the door to rejoin them.

"Julia! If it isn't too much of a bother, would you play that final song you did at the Hanged Man? It was so lovely I sometimes find myself humming it as I work."

_The song… oh._ Her face stayed smooth but she almost winced. Outside of her practice sessions, that was the only time she had played a song, which while could be called a classic, was not classical in the broad sense. Yet Merrill looked so hopeful, the words refused to come that she didn't perform that kind of music. _Of course that is what she wants to hear._

Julia smiled and make her way to the front of the group, taking care to remain several steps away from the fireplace. Without the answering applause at her entrance, she didn't grace them with a bow. Instead she placed her bow against the strings and began.

Despite herself, the music drew her in, wrapping her with the familiar melody. The world faded, external environment becoming a secondary concern.

It ended faster than she would have liked and this time the scattered group remembered to clap. Anders moved over to Leandra, leaving Hawke to snuggle with Isabela on the uncomfortable sofa. "Leandra, I hope this isn’t too forward, but Hawke once mentioned that her father was an apostate. You, a noble of all things, ran away with a mage?"

Leandra stared at him, looking but not looking at the staff he had with him. It wasn't obviously a mage's weapon, looking more like a fancy walking stick if anything. "Yes, he was an amazing man. Malcolm was like Marian in many ways, they both could charm as easily as they breathed. Even after everything we went through including losing him, I've never regretted agreeing to run away with him."

"That is what we need more of. People like you who see mages as something more than a robe and a staff and are willing to do something about it. I see where your daughters get their bravery."

The older Hawke looked surprised but smiled at him. "Thank you, Anders. That is kind of you to say." From across the room, Hawke kept an eye on two. As Julia began to play her next piece, Hawke slowly relaxed and diverted her attention back to tossing _something_ at the backs of Aveline and Fenris.

_Maybe some good will come out of this disaster after all and I will be able to sleep in the mornings._ The thought came smoothly and then Julia let reason drop away with the notes.

Chapter End Notes

="We got hippies, gypsies, freaks and geeks
High class women in daisy duke denim
Bangin' on gongs and singing our songs"

Chapter End Notes

Another late chapter, what else is new? I hope it wasn't too dull. I almost completely
deleted it but since the next chapter has a bit of action, we needed something calm first.
The feather snapped, scattering tufts of brown fuzz and strands of plumage over the table. Some of it settled on her still damp ink.

"Gentle, Freckles. It isn't a music critic. No need to snap their neck when they give you an average review."

Julia didn't bother glaring at the dwarf at this point. Her fingers and palm stung from the force of the split, a small white sliver of quill poking out of her skin. The elf across from her made a small noise, somewhere between a grunt and a cough and she gave him a sharp look. Green eyes didn't blink as he met her gaze, the only hint of humor at the crease at the edge of his lips.

He was getting as smug as the dwarf.

Choosing the path of betterment, she ignored him and carefully plucked the foreign object from her finger. A speck of red welled at the point of impact but then it faded, damage not even enough to offer a drop.

She looked up and a quick sweep of the room showed her that she might have broken the last spare feather. The room, more of a closet than a space for people, was apparently the best the Chantry had for non-nobles who needed neutral meeting space. Julia still couldn't believe they couldn't have done this at the Amell manor but Varric had disagreed and it had taken more words than it should have to explain that she was not going down to the Hanged Man for lessons.

The dwarf in question's face still hadn't shifted from its amused expression. "What do you say we are done with the writing portion of the lesson? I am running out of birds to pluck."

Julia smoothed over her face, prickles of irritation running under her skin. "Perhaps you should invest in better chickens." She wasn't a behemoth. There was no way she would be destroying medieval pens if they were normal. They seemed more like hole punchers than a writing instrument.

"Invest in a sense of humor and then we'll talk," Varric replied, grabbing the small pot of ink next to her splattered canvas. "Now, as promised, you two have enough characters memorized that we can begin with some simple words."

Julia straightened. Something beyond the rudimentary memorization? "This better not be a children's book about seeing Spot run."

"I agree," Fenris said, breaking whatever vow of silence he had given. "I have little need to read stories for children."

Varric groaned, massaging his chin. "So little gratitude. I really deserve a medal for putting up with you two." He waited for some kind of comment from them but was met only with silence. With a sigh, he grabbed a large sheet of parchment and a short brush. He waved the utensil at them, winking at Julia. "Maybe this is what I should have given you to practice with."

Smothering the proper insulting remark for that in the interest of getting what she finally wanted, Julia focused on the characters he drew on the paper.
There was no mistaking the shapes as Latin-based. She was in a fantasy world after all. But the characters seemed to be tied to syllables, a consonant and vowel into a single symbol. Kind of like the most basic of music lessons, do, re, mi to make up the notes that shaped the world.

Varric finished his painting and took a step back, giving a suitable Vanna White impression. It took a moment for Julia to place the syllables. The one at the bottom she recognized as it was the first one Varric had taught them. Apparently it was one of the most common symbols although Julia couldn't understand how that was possible. 'Ka' didn't appear in that may words. Unless they didn't have a 'Qu' character but even then saying it was common was a bit of a stretch.

She and Fenris both leaned forward to stare at the three characters stacked on top of each other. Da... Ti... Ka. Julia waited and then double checked what her memorization had told her. No, that was it. Datika. A… weird version of 'dad'? Or perhaps 'dated'?

"You bastard," Julia breathed. "This isn't a word at all, you are just trying to--"

"Bird," Fenris interrupted without raising his voice.

She twisted to stare at him. "What?"

"It says 'bird'," Fenris said. Is he in on the scheme? No... the elf didn't have the patience for that kind of thing.

But still...

"Bullshit," Julia said. "How does datika mean bird?"

"You're reading it backwards."

They read from bottom to top? That… explained a lot of things about why the city was the way it was. So going the other way made it ka-ti-da. Still not bird.

"Now I know your teaching skills are rubbish, Varric. Katida? How is that mean bird?"

"Bird?" Varric's smile widened into an almost-laugh and Fenris sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Did you seriously just ask how bird meant bird?"

Julia groaned and stood. Where did I leave my cloak? "I don't understand the joke, but it sure as hell isn't funny."

"Who said I'm joking?"

A few steps took her to the pile of boxes in the corner that had her folded blue cloak on top. "You have to be. Katida doesn't mean bird."

Varric's smile faded slightly, but his eyes glistened. This was only going to get worse, but if everything she had painstakingly drilled into her head was fake, he wasn't going to get out of it that easily.

"Now I know I've heard you complain about the statues all over the city using that exact word. What does it mean to you if not bird?"

"Nothing. It is a series of syllables that mean nothing together. Ka-ti-da is not the same as bir-d."

"What was that last thing you said?"
"You mean the word we've been arguing about this entire time? Read my lips. b i r d. Bird."

Both males were staring at her now, Varric's amusement finally gone. "Freckles… are you listening to yourself?"

_He…_ Julia grit her teeth, finishing the knot in her cloak. She should have known better than to trust Varric. She turned and reached for the door.

"Julia. Please, wait. Something odd is going on here."

It was the fact that Varric knew her name that made her pause from exiting the room.

"What you are saying doesn't match up. Ka-ti-da. Bird. They are the same. You are just saying the same word twice. Except a few times there, I don't know what you said."

Julia rested her shoulder against the door frame, thoughts following the same path over and over again.

_I missed something._ Some trick, or hint, that would explain this. Varric could be going through an elaborate joke or… or what?

"Humor me, Freckles. _Ka ti da. Bird._" She focused on the dwarf as he spoke slowly and deliberately.

His mouth moved wrong.

The thought didn't hit her so much as seep into her consciousness and even then, she didn't quite know where it came from.

"Varric, say something."

"Happy Hawkes are less dangerous than hungry Hawkes."

"Now slower."

Varric obliged, splitting each word with at least one pause. Julia focused on his mouth. His lips closed for a sixteenth rest as his voice said 'less' clearly in her ears. Ice formed in her stomach.

She had read enough lips in noisy orchestra rooms to have the basics… but she wouldn't have know what he was saying by his lips alone. They mouthed a different sentence than the one she heard although Varric clearly articulated each syllable.

_What does that mean?_

The dwarf wasn't speaking English. It was obvious and yet it wasn't. It couldn't be called English in this nerd's dream but instead it went by Common. But it had to be English. She didn't know another language, regardless of what her high school Spanish teacher might believe.

Besides, hadn't Hawke made some god-awful pun the other day?

"Some consider it odd that you play at a recital and recite at a play," she said slowly.

"What?" Varric and Fenris glanced at each other but Julia couldn't focus on their expressions. Her hand gripped her skirt before she forced it to relax. She let out a breath and tried again.

"This makes no sense. We are speaking English. I am speaking English. You are…" Julia froze as
her tongue clicked against her teeth.

She was wrong. She wasn't speaking English at all.

Her heart thundered in her ears, a cadence beating against her inner drum. *It's impossible... There is no way... but there is no other answer.* More weight pushed against the door frame as her legs struggled to maintain their upright position.

What had happened to her? What had happened? What had...

Julia closed her eyes and stopped breathing, searching for a calm to draw over herself like she would before a particularly important performance. For a moment she thought she had it only to lose the sense a moment later to the adrenaline of a rapid heart.

*No.* She was not some child being told that they couldn't go to the orchestra because it would end past her bedtime. She was an intelligent adult. People with brains didn't panic, they thought of solutions to the problems and then solved them. The problem was that she no longer spoke English.

What was the solution for that?

*Damn Kirkwall.* The lack of answers lingered like a disease.

"Julia..." Her eyes shot open to stare at the dwarf approaching her like she was kind of wild animal. A scowl automatically twisted her features and he relaxed slightly. "What just happened?"

She spat out her answer before it could catch in her throat. "It appears that I no longer speak the only language I've ever learned." Something, or more likely someone, had affected her brain, tuning her language receptors into a new key. A different language.

Flashes of a black-cloaked figure rippled through her mind and her arms tightened around her middle. *Oh God... someone was in my mind.*

"Who... what has the ability to affect how words are processed?"

Varric had that worried look again but she couldn't find it in herself to be annoyed. "As far as I know, it isn't possible. Else interpreters would be out of a job."

"It isn't completely impossible," Fenris muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Blood mages can control your mind. Perhaps they've found a way to change something permanently."

_Blood mages?*_ They were supposedly bad, though if Merrill was one of them that had to throw the average off. *Could she...* Julia cut the thought off before it could finish. No, Merrill wasn't capable of something this malicious. Her mind went back to the figure and inexplicable certainty flooded through her. Striding through a world of green, closer and closer. An unseen face staring through the glass.

The room spun and her shoulder against the wall lost its sense of friction.

A low oath and a large hand crushed her upper arm before she could hit the ground. Finally, preservation instincts kicked in and she blanked her mind, throwing her thought power into transposing the Battle Hymn of the Republic for an ensemble of reed instruments. Varric yanked her
back to a standing position and she straightened her cloak.

"So you can understand a language that you shouldn't. Isn't that a good thing?" Varric asked, voice clear but distant.

Her eyes saw if didn't absorb Fenris's bitter expression. "Someone forced their way into her mind, changing what they wanted. It's hard to rejoice at that."

Julia's transposition faltered and her gaze caught on Varric's large parchment, marred by ink. Bird but not bird. The chill that had been spreading across her skin solidified at once in her stomach.

It was true, even if by all logic it shouldn't be. She shouldn't know what they were saying yet the words were as familiar to her as the scales. They didn't sound like another language although her instinct screamed at her that they had to be.

She hadn't been speaking English for over two months.

Julia spun around, striding out of the room on the edge of a jog. Her mind… wasn't safe anymore. Sunlight washed over her through stained glass windows but its warmth didn't reach her skin. Has anything else changed? Not her ability to play the violin, thank all that was holy, but she hadn't been able to test anything else. Could she still play the piano? How about typing on the keyboard? What had been lost when someone messed with her mind? How would she even know?

"Julia!"

The door she had just exited burst open and she didn't need to look to know that Bert and Ernie were behind, yelling quietly since they were still within the Chantry's walls.

Damn it all. Why was I dragged here?

She ignored Varric talking and stopped by a pillar, bracing her hand against the stone to catch her breath. She was on the edge of something and it took effort to pull herself back from the precipice. She had no answers and no way to get them.

"Are you crying?"

"Hardly." Julia let out a breath. Her thoughts moved prestissimo, almost too fast to catch. A single idea stuck and she didn't give it time to disappear. "Varric, wh-a-t a-m I s-a-y-ing?"

"What?"

"What am I saying?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

The speed and the concentration determined what language she was speaking. A low ache rose at the front of her head and she gave up trying to figure out the logistics of it. It didn't prove anything but that she was too tired to work through this. She needed her violin. Music didn't need a single language to work.

"Thank you for this... informative lesson, Varric. I don't know if I care to do it again. Now, excuse me, I must be heading back to the manor." Julia gave a miniature curtsy in the direction the two males and rotated on her heel towards the exit.

A pair of sisters passed her, taking up most of the hallway. "The garden is quite beautiful this year,
don't you think?" Julia's eyes unconsciously fell on their lips, trying to make out the sounds. Now that she was looking for it, she could pick out the small differences. How were sound waves changing in her ear into something other than they were?

Her next step kept going instead of meeting carpeted stone and she went down, hands slamming into the ground.

"Shit!" Julia glanced back at her foot to see it resting normally against the flat surface. What had she...

"Fenris, do you think you could escort our friend home?"

"I don't need an-" "We are not friends."

She shot the elf a look just as his lips shaped an 'o' sound while her ears heard 'friend'. She swallowed and tried to focus.

Fenris took a step closer and Julia climbed back to her feet. "I. Can. Walk." Only when Fenris's face turned slightly did she realize that she must have spoken in English. Her mind was paying too much attention to how she spoke.

"What are you---"

Julia doubled over, hands covering her ears as they both popped simultaneously, the sound of a brass instrument fracking at the edge of her awareness. Her breath came in short gasps as the white pain faded, leaving her eyes wet.

She needed to get back to the manor.

Julia started walking, ignoring the gray fog at the edge of her vision. Her headache began to pulse, low and steady, echoing her heartbeat. Julia's grit her teeth but as she stepped out of the short hallway into the Main Hall of the Chantry, statues of Andraste looming overhead, her ears caught the never ending Chant being spoke to a few figures scattered among the benches.

"And in that baleful eye I saw/ The Lady of Sorrow, armored in Light,/Holding in her left hand the scepter/ Of Redemption. She descended..."

Chapped lips shaped unmatching syllables and the drumbeat increased. What were they actually saying?

Mouths around her opened and shut but she couldn't stop staring at the woman reciting the Chant.

"From on high, ulnetin a great voice/ Maplienat from the top poneamika/ Mountain and pinnacle tekadjohas."

More pain speared through Julia's frontal lobe as English and Common twisted together. She needed to stop exacerbating the situation but they just wouldn't stop talking.

"All everest saletem! All radits bend! Lonosa being kitterle Realm/ Of alkedfanli pay homage, yi ladier kanade of All hedika /soldena to you!"

Her lungs caught and a few steps took her past the rows of benches where she reached out to brace herself against the corner. Almost outside. Her hand reached for stone but missed, fingers disappearing into the wall.
Her shoulder took the brunt of impact this time as she hit the ground.

"Julia! Kiri et! Reflip dudeg wetman help." Her eyes watered as her left hand merged with solid material once more. She raised it and a moment later, the limb stopped phasing and lay on the ground like it belonged to someone else. Distantly Julia rubbed her wet cheek with her sleeve. The cloth came back red.

"Pnajduad uansdf."

Cradling the still-solid hand against her chest, Julia shoved herself to a sitting position. Blocking her view of golden Andraste, Fenris blinked and stretched a metal hand towards her.

“I can do it myself,” Julia hissed and the hand stopped. Using the arm that hadn't betrayed her, she pushed against the ground.

The world spun suddenly, shapes turning into blurs of color and she collapsed back against the wall. A low moan vibrated in her throat as a sharp burn burst in her abdomen only to fade a second later. Silence. There were too many people around for her to make a scene. She bite her lip hard enough to taste blood as her headache spiked to briefly blind her.

Someone doesn't like me messing with their spell. The thought flicked through her mind in the remaining bits of logic. Her heartbeats stretched off, marking time with each resounding thud. Havestaycalm.

Low voices spoke above her and a hand touched her shoulder, soft but it was enough to threaten her balance. Julia pushes the hand away as pressure built in her throat.

"Don'tthrowup."

"Julia."

She opened her eyes to squint at the too-bright swirling world. Colors settled enough to see a familiar shape and eyes the color of the sky.

She knew the word spoken, her name, and she knew the one who said it, his voice. Pain knocked the air out of her lungs and she didn't fight it as the person who had said her name squatted down, arms coming under her back and knees. Julia rested her head against the warm plain of his chest as gravity fled and her legs dangled. Her nausea came in waves now but she kept it back with all the energy she had left. She couldn't… not in front of him.

They moved but she had lost the ability to tell how long and the desire to care. Ithurtsithurtsithurts. Her world quaked with every step and her head seemed to ride scales up before pitching back down. Only the heat underneath her cheek gave her any sense of grounding.

Sunlight brightened her eyelids and a melodic low voice vibrated against her ear. The words blurred beyond her understanding, any sense of English long vanished. Every rumbling step deepened the mute muffling her senses.

Justbreathe.

Her heart thumped out the time, pain transforming the quarter notes into whole notes. A symphony passed as her body rioted against her, the peaks of agony growing closer as each part of her body seemed to get their turn.

Darkness replaced light and a range of higher voices joined the cacophony of noises. Julia curled in on herself as her head spun and she lost the ability to take in air. She choked and coldness replaced the heat beneath her. Fumbling, she turned on her side, struggling to breathe.
Her air returned and her shaking limbs abandoned her to collapse against smooth surface. "Julia!" Lean… Gravity grew too strong and the blood rushed to her head, her fingertips brushing against the ground. Someone screamed and the rest of Julia's body fell.

Pain.

Hands pulled her to the side and then lifted her back up to the solid surface. Something pressed down on her hand, interlocking between her fingers and Julia reflexively clutched at the warmth.

_Breathe. You need to breathe._ She coughed again, struggled in, before racking her body with another cough.

This time, she couldn't stop.

Air went out faster than she was able to draw it in, world greying even behind her eyelids. Sensation liquified and even the rapid sound of her heart grew distant. Nothingness beckoned.

_No… I can't…_

Fire scorched her skin, burning away the dissociation that had consumed her. She felt everything, pain in every fingertip, air rushing against the back of her throat, and the crust of dried liquid on her cheeks. Julia tried to move, tried to roll away from whatever was burning her but a weight dropped on top her, pinning her still.

_No nonono…_ She threw her weight into escaping, jerking her elbows into a hard surface.

Then the fire was gone.

She froze in the stillness, only the echoes of pain proving that the entire thing hadn't been made up. Julia breathed, the weight of... a body... making the movement more difficult than it should have been.

"Please get off."

The weight shifted away from her and Julia gathered her stream of consciousness back into some sense of rational order. Then she opened her eyes.

The ceiling above her was dull but a too-familiar chandelier hung from it. If she looked at it from the right angle, she would see the handprints Orana couldn't quite figure out how to clean.

Cool fingers brushed her forehead, moving hair away from the sticky surface. "Are you having any more symptoms, Julia?"

Amber eyes looked down at her and Julia couldn't summon the energy to think anything negative about the healer's homeless appearance. _I understand Common again._

"No. They have gone."

"Good," Anders nodded and then moved his finger to her throat to check her pulse. "As far as I can tell, the physical deterioration has stopped and if you can speak to me, I managed to reset the spell. But I would recommend not getting up for a few more minutes, just to be safe."

The Common grated like sandpaper on her ears but she ignored the language and instead focused on the message behind the syllables.

"What happened?"
"If you were a mage, I would have said you were becoming an abomination," Fenris said from beyond her immediate sightline.

Anders sighed. "More like rebound of a fracturing spell. My guess is that you have a spell that gives you the ability to speak Common as well as binds you here physically. When you started to break one part of it, the other part began collapsing as well."

Julia's eyes had drifted to a near-shut but they shot open. "I was going back to Earth?"

"Not exactly. The spell wasn't ending smoothly. It kept trying to repair itself but failing, which lead to your body getting pulled between two worlds. I was trying to analyse the spell more but your heart gave out from the stress. If Justice hadn't stepped in…"

She waited and Anders made a face before answering. "... I don't' think you wouldn't have survived. He seemed to have pulled knowledge that he doesn't posses and combined it with my knowledge as a healer. Together, we somehow managed to patch up the spell based on what remained enough to pull you back."

_I almost died._

Beats passed as Julia waited for some kind of emotional reaction but nothing came. The vast emptiness she had faced before Anders healed her still remained at the back of her mind. She had almost died, and there was nothing she could have done about it. There was no enemy to face or threat to fix. She could have reached the coda of her life without any applause or calls for an encore. She pushed herself to a sitting position.

Now her hands started to shake. She flexed her fingers, streaks of red crusting the digits.

"Leandra, do you have a wet cloth for Julia?"

_Sebastian._ Vague memories of warmth and blue eyes kept her face smooth as she met his gaze with a slow blink.

"How.. are you alright?"

Of all the questions she did not want to answer today… she was too tired to lie.

"I will manage. Don't waste your time thinking about it."

"It's not a waste, Jul--"

Leandra appeared, holding out a wet handkerchief. Julia accepted it, the cold a welcome respite. She began wiping away the evidence from her hands.

Satisfied that Julia’s immediate needs were being met, Leandra turned the rest of the group. "Now, I think Julia has been through enough for the day. Depending on how she is feeling, you can check in later but for the moment, what she needs is peace and quiet. Anders, you are welcome to stay as long as you need to."

Varric and Fenris gave their comments and went back to their day but Sebastian lingered like he wasn’t sure if he should really go. When she focused on cleaning her hand, he finally got the hint and left.

Cloth folded over on itself and using her fingers as a guide since she didn't have a mirror, Julia began washing the blood off her face. Nearby, Anders warmed his hands by the fireplace and her eyes
narrowed. *What do I owe him now?* This was no superficial laceration he helped to erase. With his description, there weren't many people in Thedas who could have stopped her from… She would need to dip into her savings.

"Leandra, do you know when Hawke will be back?"

"I'm sorry, Anders. Marian does not tell me very much. Hasn't since she was a child."

*Right.* Julia swung her legs off the table and felt her sense of balance sway. It was like her body was overcompensating for the symptoms it thought should be there but weren't.

In an instant, Anders was at her side, hand hovering in case she fell. "You shouldn't move so fast."

She raised an eyebrow and slid off, landing solidly on two feet. "You healed any damage the spell had done. Besides, a hot bath would do more to aid my recovery than laying on a table.

Wrinkles formed over the healer's brow but he didn't say anything about her assessment. Taking that for what it was, Julia headed towards the bathing room.

Luckily, the two didn't question her decision and she was able to start adding hot water to the tub and then retrieve her clothing from her bedroom. Unable to help herself, she glanced at the mirror while waiting for the water to reach a suitable level.

She looked horrific.

Her skin was deathly pale, the blood she had missed vibrant in contrast to faded freckles. The whites of her eyes were now pink with uneven spots of red intermixed. Sweat had dried her hair into a hard crown and the strands that escaped the tie stuck to her skin in clumps.

*Mother would have disowned me if she saw me like this. Or brought me to hospital in order to swoon in front of the staff.* The thought was idle, more to keep her mind from turning dark than having any real meaning behind it. She looked like she felt, that was all there was to it.

Julia stopped the water before it could overflow and quickly submerged herself in the near-scalding water. It stung but was exactly what she needed. Her skin still didn't feel like her own, the sensation of disintegrating too fresh in her mind. When she closed her eyes she could still see her hand passing through the wall like it wasn't even there.

She shivered and with a breath, pushed herself under the water.

The heat beat at her skin, clearing out her pores and washing the remaining blood away. *If only it could burn my memories away…* Julia emerged from the water before her lungs could even ache. But no, she couldn't wish that. She needed to evaluate. Not being able to read was an annoyance but could she learn to read in another language that she didn't know but could magically speak? More importantly, could she do it without threatening the spell again?

There was no point returning to Earth if she was dead by the time she arrived.

The thought stilted her stream of consciousness, another blow to escaping this latrine city. Julia closed her eyes and leaned her head against the small towel that served as a cushion against the hard rim of the tub. Her muscles slowly relaxed in the embrace of the water and she let out a breath of air.

Too much had happened for her to properly process it without her breaking down due to proximity. For her own well-being, she was done thinking tonight. She would figure out what to do tomorrow.
"The lightning strikes and the wind cuts cold
Through the sailor's bones, to the sailor's soul
Till there's nothing left that he can hold
Except the rolling ocean"

*Now for random thoughts
1) To pat over some of the plot holes I created and since it won't come up in the story itself, there is a third aspect to Julia's spell. Basically, to try to keep the spell from breaking (like how it did), the spell also manipulates the mind into not noticing things that could indicate that there is a different language, such as the disconnect between lips and audible words. If Julia hadn't been in a situation where she was analyzing the words themselves, this whole thing might never have come up.

2) How are there puns? Well... let's just call that magic and move on. I enjoy them too much.
Chopin Prelude in E Minor, or Unbreakable

Chapter Notes

"Sometimes it's hard to just keep going....
Forget the fear it's just a crutch
That tries to hold you back
And turn your dreams to dust."

In which Julia proceeds to deal with the events from the last chapter by not dealing with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Leandra came to check in on her, Julia had moved beyond moping and instead worked on removing the blood from beneath her nails.

"How are you feeling, Julia?"

"Fine." She shook her hands underwater then raised them. Finally clean.

"Have you washed your hair yet?"

Julia raised an eyebrow. With blood on my hands? "Not yet."

"May I help?"

The question was enough to make Julia stop moving, staring at the older woman. "Why would you want to do that?"

Years of living with Hawke protected Leandra from blunt remarks. A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she opened her mouth. “You had me worried. I know that magic can’t heal everything, but I care about you and didn’t want you to be alone if you didn’t want to be.”

Julia’s breath caught in her throat and for a hard moment, her chin quivered over the water, emotions wreaking havoc on her resolve. Finally she nodded and at the older Hawke’s request, dunked under the water as Leandra grabbed a stool and anything else that she thought she needed. The heat ironed out the wrinkles in her face and when Julia emerged to rest the back of her head on the lip of the tub, her features were her own again.

It was more than cumbersome that so many people in Kirkwall could crack through her shields when those of Earth left her in peace.

Water sloshed gently against the tub and Leandra’s nails scrapped against Julia’s scalp in the following silence. Her muscles relaxed like they never had at a hair salon and as the seconds passed, Julia’s eyes grew heavy.

“It may sound strange, but I don’t think I was prepared to worried about you.” Leandra's words were soft, almost conversational in their simplicity, but they woke Julia from her stupor. “Marian always makes rash decisions so as much I hope it does not happen, I know that sometimes she will come home injured. You join her occasionally but since you are careful I thought…”
She drifted off and only the rules of being polite kept Julia from telling her to be quiet. Leandra’s words tuned the muscles in her chest sharp and tight, making every low breath difficult.

“You were so pale when Sebastian brought you in… I thought you were already gone. Then when you went through the table—“

"What?" Julia hissed, nearly jerking out of Leandra's ministrations. The woman gently squeezed her bare shoulder.

"Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about?"

Palpitations forced Julia’s hands to press into her lower abdomen. "No. Please continue."

"Well, you hadn't been on the table long when suddenly your top half went through the wood like it wasn't there. You dangled for a few seconds, your waist somehow in the table until your hips and legs collapsed through. Sebastian picked you up and placed you back on the table…. He appears to care for you quite a bit." There was a question in that topic divergence, one Leandra was too polite to ask outright.

Julia’s mind dragged through repressed memories, pushing away the fear and burgeoning panic to gentler thoughts. Her name and looking up towards bright blue eyes. The skips in her heart slowed just like it had then and she hide a grimace. She trusted him, more than she should for someone she knew for such a short about of time. But it was hard to argue, even with herself, that her trust was misplaced. Sebastian was a good man, someone who saw the best in others and treated them accordingly.

"He is a friend." The words slipped out, uncomfortable but fitting.

She could almost hear Leandra's smile as she asked her to dip. The older woman waited till after Julia re-emerges before pressing on. "He seemed like a nice person when I met him. I'm glad you have someone you trust."

Mother-hen duties now complete, Leandra gave her space to finish her bath.

Once the door shut, Julia pushed herself out of the tub. Thinking of the brother had tempered the worst of her symptoms-just like Leandra probably intended- but the threat of losing control still loomed.

She needed her violin.

Julia busied herself with the mundane tasks of getting dressed and dried and then went back to her room.

Two concert’s worth of music flowed from her hands before she realized that it was going to take a less sophisticated approach to remove the sharp edge from her emotions. Tucking away her violin, Julia double checked her door was locked, blew out her candles, and climbed into bed.

Only then did she allow the events of the day to become a more visceral reaction.

The next morning woke her with the feeling of being trampled by a herd of tweens at a boy band concert. It was an odd ache that covered her body without any actual sensation of pain. Her mind knew she had been hurt, but her body didn't agree.

It was afternoon before Julia gave up the sanctuary of her room and violin, grabbing two slices of bread that Orana had gotten fresh that morning. Leandra caught her in the main hall as she threw her
A few careful phrases extracted her from that particular trap and Julia left the manor before Leandra could pin her down with anymore sympathizing words.

A scattering of clouds diluted the sunlight, preventing the temperature from getting too unbearable. The walk to and through the keep was uneventful, no one bothering her or even offering a distracting sight. Her thoughts danced from topic to topic, avoiding the large dark hole in the center. Occasionally she would nearly touch it as winged statues glared down it or conversations brushed by her ears, yet she managed yanked her mind away before it could fall.

"Good afternoon, Julia. What are you doing here?"

Oh, for the love of Bach. Julia forced a smile for only person in the keep she didn’t want to run into yet found in a random hall nonetheless. "Good afternoon, Aveline. I am here to practice, just like I do everyday."

As luck would have it, the Guard Captain already appeared to be in lecture mode, arms crossed and talking with a younger tin can. "By the way Hawke and Anders told it last night, you were near death yesterday. You shouldn't be pushing yourself so soon."

Her words echoed Leandra’s and Julia grit her teeth, continuing the benign smile. Why does everyone think I’m pushing myself? Clearly even though magic could heal dangerous wounds, people still took advantage of the situation to laze around. She had better things to do.

"I am perfectly well, thank you. I can fire a few arrows without going into cardiac arrest."

"Just one moment, we aren't finished with this," Aveline said to the guard before turning to fully stare down at Julia. "No, until Anders looks you over again, I won't have you hurting yourself further."

Apparently I don’t know the difference between a viola and a violin. "You may the Guard Captain, but don’t let that authority go to your head. I am no idiot guard to be ordered around."

"No, you're your own kind of idiotic. Go home, rest. Talk to me after you see Anders." Aveline shifted back as if that was the end of it then paused. "If you are wondering, I will tell my guard not to let you into the practice area for the next few days. So don't try to sneak in without my permission."

Then she was back to scolding the other guard.

Julia forcibly unclenched her hand from around the quiver strap. Who the hell do these people think they are? She was no child or imbecile to be told what to do. They had no right to tell her what was wrong with her body. She knew it better than any of them so when she said it was fine, she wasn't boasting or putting on some brave martyr front. She. Was. Fine.

Hand passing through the wall like it wasn’t even there.

Julia shook away the stray thought and spun on her heel away from the keep’s practice yard. She made it to the noble holding pen before common sense broke through simmering anger.

Where will I go now?

The Amell manor? Leandra’s questions and the looks the servants gave her made that destination a firm no. But where then? Unless it was for a job, she didn’t voluntarily go anywhere besides the manor and the keep.

Her list of places she knew well enough to walk to herself was small and unacceptable. The Hanged
Man-too dirty and Varric was likely to be there. Merrill’s home- a dangerous walk and the elf was unlikely to give her peace. The Chantry… Julia stared up at the sky as the memory of Sebastian’s eyes yesterday when he let the manor lingered in her conscious thought.

No, I can’t go to the Chantry either.

What she wanted was a glass of wine, a warm fire, and the Brandenburg Concertos playing in the background. She wanted a pedicure, back massage, and the knowledge that she wouldn’t going into seizures by paying attention too closely to the spoken word.

There is no place like New York, there is no place like New York. Wistful thoughts snagged on strange ideas and Julia closed her eyes in order to breathe. It seemed to come down to choices. She needed to have options. Good options were to be prefered but when it came down to it… she did have another place she could go where no one would care.

Julia rolled her shoulders back and set out, turning left in the plaza just outside the keep. These steps were less familiar but not completely unknown. Around the pillar with the constipated-looking bird, past the manor whose owner tried too hard with their landscaping, left at the large courtyard where the Chantry tower peered down over the rooftops… She recited the directions till she stood in front of a door.

Good option? No. But it was better than the alternatives. Julia raised her hand and knocked.

There was no answer immediately so she gave them several bars and knocked again, harder. This time the door opened mid-rap.

Large eyes reflected red for a split second from the dark interior, white hair shining. "What are you doing here?"

There was no point to pursue smiling or opening pleasantries, they would do little to aid her in this endeavor. Instead she kept her hands at her sides and spoke cooly. "Based on previous remarks, I am to understand you possess a large cache of quality wine. Although I don't know if I trust Varric’s assessment of the word quality, I am here to purchase a glass."

Fenris’s frown grew. "I am not a bar, go somewhere else." The door started to swing shut but Julia's foot blocked it from closing completely.

"Do you think I would be here if I could go anywhere else?" The soft words were enough to keep him from slamming the door shut, foot in the way or not. He stared at her through the gradually spreading crack in the door and she continued. "I am not carrying any money and you are the only place I can think of that might accept my credit."

Green eyes narrowed. "Go home and get your coin."

"Obviously it is less work to come all the way here and argue with you than grab some change and get my own bottle," Julia snapped. Then, when Fenris's features hardened, she sighed. "Aveline got full of herself and won't let me practice in the keep."

It felt like a weakness to admit it, like somehow she failed. But Fenris wouldn't be bulled over. She needed to give something true for him to bend.

As expected, the elf's expression didn't change, but the sense that he was only a few seconds from stabbing her faded. After another handful of beats, the door spread wide and Julia walked into Fenris's manor.
"Don't touch anything," Fenris said as the door shut behind them, only a few sparse candles offering shape to the space.

Julia covered her nose. *What died in here?* It was a nauseating combination of rotting flesh, mold, and dust. She vaguely knew how Fenris acquired such a large home, it wasn't peaceful, so it was quite possible he never had cleaned it.

Following his shape through the dim rooms, Julia only tripped a few times over objects she couldn't even see. *Damn elves.* Merrill kept her home light and bright but apparently Fenris had a different motif in mind.

Finally they made their way into a room where she could actually place colors and textures due to the fire raging in the large fireplace. It was still as dirty and ragged as she expected though. A rickety table leaned against the wall on one side and two upholstered chairs faced each other in front of the fire, a smaller table between them. The cloth on the chairs was ripped in places, stuffing popping out.

*Standing it is then.*

Fenris walked to one of the chairs and then turned to face her. "I'm not serving you."

*The arrogance…* "You expect me to wander your mansion looking for wine?"

He stared back at her without falter. "The wine is in the wine cellar."

"Why, thank you. That makes it so much clearer," Julia snapped, spinning on her heel in a random direction to set forth.

"I wouldn't recommend that way."

Her glare did nothing so instead she took a step towards the remaining exit that didn't require stairs. Silence persuaded her into a walk until she reached the black domain beyond the living space. Not a single light source cut through the dim, the manor seeming to even lack the windows present in the Amell manor.

*Night vision doesn't mean being able to see without light.*

She grit her teeth for a second before calling back to the lounging elf. "Do you have a portable candle or lantern or something?" *Electricity couldn't come soon enough.*

A low noise and Fenris stood, catching up to her in a few long steps and disappearing into the dark. Julia crossed her arms and waited. With his bare feet, he was virtually silent so it was near impossible to tell how close or far away he was. Unlike the Amell's manor, this one didn't creak with every step.

She hadn't realized that it was something to be appreciated.

An armored hand reached out from beyond the door, a single bottle of wine in its grasp. A moment later, the rest of Fenris's metal form appeared. *Did he ever remove the armor?*

Julia accepted the item, wine bottle cool against her skin. The glass was oddly shaped but it still held onto the characteristics needed to contain liquid. If no one besides Fenris saw her drinking from it, she had nothing to be concerned about.

"Thank you, but where are the glasses?"

Fenris's lips curled slightly at the plural. "You need two?"
Julia narrowed her eyes. "Wine loses flavor after being opened. Surely you didn't expect me to drink the whole bottle by myself?" The elf didn't say anything for a moment but then dipped back into the dark.

Julia left him to his treasure hunt and walked carefully over to the chairs in front of the fire. *It doesn't look like anything is living in them….* Setting the fragile glass carefully on the table between the chairs, she slid her weapons to the floor, nudging them to the side. Then she picked the bottle back up.

It looked a bit different than the diluted grape juice they called wine at the Hanged Man. This world's quality wine bottles were made of a dark glass, a symbol carved into the surface and marked white. A brand? A name? Either way, it wasn't English.

The thought jittered through Julia's brain and she set the bottle back down, just as Fenris came back, a clear glass in each hand. He passed one of them to her and after a second's consideration, she used her inner sleeve to wipe at the inside of the glass. It didn't look dirty, but this was Kirkwall.

"Do you have a corkscrew?" Julia asked. When he didn't respond, she added, "To open the bottle."

Fenris sighed and grabbed the wine, fingers turning claw-like as they grasped the cork and popped it out. The scent of fruit filled the air, overpowering the lingering smells of rot.

"Now, would you like to pour or should I?"

"I won't serve you," Fenris said again, putting the bottle down like it was nothing more than a decorative piece.

*Fine then.* Julia took up the offer, pouring dark red liquid into both glasses. Putting the bottle back into the center of the table, she wrapped her fingers around the stem of the glass and raised an eyebrow at the elf. His expression didn't change but he followed suit, the thin glass looking fragile in his claws.

Well, she had never been interested in having a chatty drinking partner.

"Salute," Julia said softly then put the cool edge to her mouth and let the liquid trickle into her mouth. Unable to help herself she closed her eyes as the flavors filled her senses. *Medium body, sweet, similar to a Malbec variety if perhaps more crisp.*

When was the last time she drank wine just for the pleasure of it? Drinking alone just left her irritable and Leandra had other things she wanted to do other than sample wines. Plus she didn't emphasize quality. It was wonderful to get a literal taste of civilization.

Fenris was watching her when she opened her eyes again. He didn't respond to her eyebrow raise and she let it go. A large reason she came here instead of going elsewhere is the comfort of indifference. Fenris didn't care what she did and she felt similar about him. They were bound by mutual acquaintances and little else. She didn't have to worry about being assaulted nor someone commenting on her emotional state.

In those regards, this was the best place in Kirkwall for her to be right now. Starting Vivaldi's *Sinfonia in E Major* in her mind, Julia let everything else drift off.

The wine level in the bottle slowly went lower and the fire continued to crackle, Fenris pausing to toss one log in and then another one. Julia swirled an ounce of liquid in her glass. It almost looked like blood.
"How long does it take to get over having someone influence your mind with magic?" Julia blinked as someone with her voice spoke. *I can't be drunk from half a bottle of wine, can I?*

"I wouldn't know," Fenris said after a second, meeting her eyes. A cool sensation trickled across Julia's chest and in a jerky movement, she swallowed what remained in her glass. Clicking the glass against wood as she set it down on the table, Julia rested her hands against the armrests. At some point, she had given up standing. The fabric was coarse against her fingertips, rubbing a residue on her skin.

*I'll probably have to burn this dress.*

"And how do you deal with the fact that the magic changed you from who you once were?" Julia swore internally as her mouth wouldn't stop. She really did drink the wine too fast. She pushed herself to her feet and tested her sense of balance. *Fine enough.* "Nevermind, ignore that. Good evening, Fenris."

She grabbed her weapons, but only made it a few steps before Fenris spoke up. "When you lose the person you once were, you keep going and get vengeance on those that caused it."

Julia glanced back over her shoulder but the elf wasn't looking at her anymore, simply staring into the fire. Her hand traced the edge of her quiver strap and she continued in the direction of the entrance, guided by the scattering of candles. With any luck, the Amell manor would be empty when she got back and she could take a bath.

*After drinking some water.*

Chapter End Notes

"Where are the people that accuse me?
The ones who beat me down and bruise me
They hide just out of sight
Can't face me in the light
They'll return but I'll be stronger."

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

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