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**Clean Burn**

by *whatsherface*

Summary

Twenty years in the Circle taught Owain Trevelyan to survive, to bury his hopes and dreams and take nothing--and no one--at face value. When the mage rebellion lands him in the Inquisition, he’s called upon to confront his past and help shape the future. The skeptic is asked to hope, as Thedas hangs in the balance.

A DAI remix through the eyes of a male mage Trevelyan. Explores his inner world and relationships, especially with the Lady Seeker--a slow burn, friends-to-lovers, low-key romance situation. Just two people trying to find room for love as they navigate war, duty, and the expectations we place on ourselves and others.

A note on form: chapters average around 4-5k words, relatively self-contained “episodes” with serialized elements. Now contains 100% more Trespasser. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

First impressions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Senior Enchanter Owain Trevelyan leaned against the wall and pinched the bridge of his nose, absently running his thumb along the scar on his right cheek. It had been a long day, and, somehow, it wasn’t over yet.

He squinted at the others from across the table spread with maps of Ferelden and Orlais and littered with tokens and loose bits of parchment. The room was a small, dimly lit chamber in the Haven Chantry, and their voices threatened to overfill it. The bickering was giving him a headache. He stopped listening to the words and let the sound wash around him like a wave.

He ticked them off: the Spy, the Soldier, the Diplomat. So true to type. In a different context, he might have laughed at that. He knew their kind, from life at the Ostwick Circle and from memories of his highborn childhood. All of which felt like a lifetime ago.

His eyes lingered on the Seeker, Cassandra, who was punching the table to emphasize a point. A sword swayed at her hip, and the fiery eye of Andraste adorned the front of her heavy armor. The map markers jumped in place, as if that would save them from her wrath. One of them skipped off the table and rolled out of sight.

He had never met a Seeker of Truth before. From what he gathered, they were a special kind of Templar, and he had known a lot of Templars. Still, she was not what he expected.

He first met Cassandra Pentaghast in that dungeon, where they had taken him after the Conclave. After the mark had appeared on his left hand. The mark that still pulsed and glowed faintly green, even now. She had raged at him with her voice full of anger and grief. She had shaken him and threatened him, and she would have done far worse, probably, if not for spymaster Leliana's intervention.

And yet, she had also freed him and gone with him to the rift in the veil. She had defended him and, more importantly, let him defend himself.

“We both know I don’t need a weapon to be dangerous,” he’d warned through gritted teeth, gripping the staff he’d found and bracing for a stand-off, flames gathering in his empty hand.

“You’re right,” she’d said, to his surprise, looking in his eyes and lowering her blade. “I should remember you did not try to run.”

They fought side-by-side after that, falling into an easy rhythm in the heat of battle. They closed one rift and then another. And then the largest, at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, which had been reduced to a charred crater--ashes, indeed. His own voice had emanated from the breach, and that of the Divine. But try as he might, he could remember nothing about those events or even saying those
words. He had scoured his memory and come up empty...

His thoughts were broken by a sudden silence and the awareness of four pairs of eyes looking in his direction. Clearly, they expected a response.

“I’m sorry- what was that?”

Cassandra made an impatient noise but repeated herself. “Are you with us?” she asked, fixing him with her gaze. “Will you join the Inquisition?”

He answered her question with another. “Do I really have a choice?”

“You are free to go, if you like.” Leliana was the one who answered, her face hooded and her smile dangerously casual as she folded her hands behind her back. “But you should know that while some believe you chosen, many still think you guilty, and we cannot protect you if you leave us.”

He blinked slowly, considering the veiled threat in her words. “So, no.” No choice, not for a former Circle mage during a mage rebellion. Not for the sole survivor of the Conclave, and not for the one with the mark. The Chantry had plenty of reasons to hunt him down. He might doubt the existence of Andraste herself, but the swords of her faithful were real enough.

He sighed. “Alright. I'll stay, for now. I assume you have some kind of plan?” He gestured at the maps on the table. “You must have something to show for all this arguing.”

“Closing the breach must be our first priority,” Cassandra said, eager to plan their next move. “Solas says it is stable for now, but we will need more power to close it for good. That mark on your hand is the key.”

Leliana again. “A group of rebel mages has taken refuge in Redcliffe. Perhaps we could persuade them to help.”

“I disagree. More magic poured into a mark we barely understand?” Cullen gripped the pommel of his sword as he spoke. “Far too risky. The Templars could serve just as well. They could suppress the breach, weaken it so you could close it properly. I was a Templar. I know what they’re capable of.” The last was obvious to Owain already. Cullen may not have been wearing the plate, but his stance alone identified him to a practiced eye.

Leliana opened her mouth to respond, but Josephine beat her to it, punctuating each sentence with a flourish of her quill. “Either way, neither the mages nor the templars will even speak to us right now. The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition—and you, specifically.” She nodded at Owain.

“Well that certainly didn’t take long,” he said, folding his arms across his chest.

“Some are calling you, a mage, the Herald of Andraste,” Josephine explained in her smooth Antivan accent. “As you can imagine, that upsets the Chantry. They have declared it blasphemy, and we are heretics for harboring you. Approaching either the mages or the templars for help is out of the question until we can prove ourselves.”

“That reminds me,” said Leliana. “There is a cleric named Mother Giselle in the Hinterlands who has asked to speak with you, Herald. Perhaps this could be an opportunity to gain support among what remains of the Chantry.”

*Herald of fucking Andraste.* The title made him cringe. “I’m not a Herald of anything, let alone Andraste. Do you really think she’ll listen to a mage? We tend to be unpopular with clerics.”
“She knows who you are, and she’s the one who requested a meeting,” Leliana answered, matter-of-factly. “There are those in the Chantry who are more reasonable than you might think. And her assistance could be invaluable.”

“Fine,” Owain sighed again, resigned. Having pledged his cooperation to these people and their Inquisition, exhaustion settled like a weight on his shoulders. The headache throbbed against his skull. “I’ll leave in the morning. If that’s all, I think I’m done for the day.” He moved for the door.

“I’ll go with you,” said Cassandra, meeting his eyes again. He nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

--

The air outside the Chantry was cold. The wind ruffled his hair and flapped at his cloak as he walked. It was a revelation after the closeness of the war room. Dusk had fallen while he was inside, and fires were being kindled all over camp.

Music and laughter drifted from the tavern as he passed. He could hear the minstrel picking out a melody and the dull thud of glasses on wood tables. Maker, he could use a drink, but he couldn't face a crowd right now, especially not one that addressed him as “Your Worship.” Half fear, half adoration. He wasn’t sure which he preferred.

His feet carried him past his own cabin, past the main gates and the blacksmith and the tents. He found a small dock at the edge of the lake and sat down on the end of it, his legs dangling over the frozen surface.

It started to snow, lightly, a few flakes here and there. Darkness and silence gathered around him like a wool blanket, welcome. He snapped his fingers and conjured a small flame that danced on his fingertips and turned snowflakes into vapor.

He thought of home, such as it was, the Circle at Ostwick, where he had spent the last two decades of his life. It wasn’t bad, as Circles went. Nothing like the atrocities they heard about in Kirkwall, but there was a quiet, constant oppression that took its own kind of toll. They had voted for rebellion, himself included, and dreamed of freedom from walls and Templars and rules they had no say in. They had voted, too, to send him to the Conclave as their representative, thinking the Trevelyan name might buy them some influence in the talks. So it might have, if the Conclave had not gone up in flames, and he, alone, survived. He searched his mind again for memories of that day, and again he found nothing. Maybe it wasn’t even the Circle itself he missed, but the familiarity, the certainty, knowing a place and his role in it, no matter how limited--and limiting--that might be...

“Ah, it’s you,” a voice drawled from behind him, followed by the sound of a sword scraping against its scabbard. Owain leapt to his feet, hand scrabbling at his back for the staff that was not there and cursing himself for leaving camp unarmed. A moment later, his brain registered the voice as Cassandra’s, and she appeared at the end of the dock holding a torch in one hand and sheathing her sword with the other.

He sat back down. The planks creaked under her boots as she made her way down the dock to join him. “What are you doing here?” he asked, forcing calm into his voice.

“I suppose I could ask you the same,” she responded archly, turning to look at him. He said nothing, so she continued. “I volunteered for the first watch. I sensed magic and came to investigate.”

“And all you found was a sad, homesick mage. Disappointed?”
“Not just a mage. The Herald of Andraste.”

His shoulders stiffened at the title, again.

They were silent for a moment, watching the snow fall. Then she sighed. “Did I do the right thing? What I have set into motion here could destroy everything I have revered my whole life. One day, they might write about me as a traitor, a madwoman, a fool. And they may be right.”

He looked at her in the torchlight, her dark hair shining and eyes flashing, shadows sketching the angles of her cheeks, her jaw, her mouth… Her face was striking, to be sure, but it was her candor that disarmed him now. “What do you think?” He reflected it back at her, at a loss for better words. Another question-as-answer.

“I think you are innocent,” she said evenly. “And I think there is more going on here than we can see. But is this the Maker’s will? I can only guess.”

“You mean you don’t believe I’m chosen? You did just call me the Herald of Andraste.”

“I think you were sent to help us.” She studied his face as she spoke. “I hope you were. But the Maker’s help takes many forms. Sometimes it’s difficult to know who it truly benefits, or how.”

“Isn’t it a little late to worry about that now? You’ve declared the Inquisition, and I’ve agreed to help you.”

“We have only just begun,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “You might think this is brash, or that I should think more before I act, but it is how I am. I see what must be done, and I do it. I see no point running around in circles like a dog chasing its tail. But I misjudged you in the beginning, did I not? I cannot afford to be so careless again.”

“Glad to hear it.” Was that an apology? His tone cooled as the dungeon flashed in his memory.

She looked down at her hands and then up at him. “Forgive me. I can be harsh, I know. But tell me, Trevelyan. Do you believe you were chosen? Are you the Herald of Andraste?”

Her eyes searched his, warm hazel piercing his steel grey, and he couldn’t stand the intimacy of it. He knew what she wanted to hear. But he looked away, and instead, he told her what he felt to be true. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m not chosen. I… I don’t even believe in Andraste. Or the Maker. I believe in this world, that it is what we make it.”

“It must be comforting to be so certain,” she said, eyes never leaving his face. “I have to believe we were put on this path for a reason, even if you do not. Now we must see where it leads us.” She stood to leave. “Good night, Herald.”

“Seeker.”

He waited until the sound of her footsteps faded into the night. Then he squeezed his hand into a fist, and when he opened it, the flames filled his palm.

She was not what he expected at all.
Apologies in advance for rehashing some game dialogue, particularly in early chapters. Sometimes it just works the best! It should get rarer as we go along. This is my first foray into fic, so thanks again for reading!
Chapter Summary

Into the fire.

The Hinterlands were a nightmare.

Not nightmare like a demon, but nightmare like never-ending, mind-numbing boredom. Being the Herald of Andraste seemed to make him everyone’s errand boy. The breach still hung in the sky, but you would never know it from all the trinket-fetching, sheep-herding, and herb-picking he had done over the last fortnight.

He recalled it bitterly as his horse churned the mud on the road to Val Royeaux. No sooner had they returned to Haven then Josephine had sent them on a new mission to address the grand clerics in the Orlesian capital on behalf of the Inquisition. Errand boy, indeed. One positive: the rain that had dogged them the past twenty-four hours had dissipated into a thick, grey mist. He thought he might be marginally drier than yesterday, though he couldn’t be sure.

Despite his complaints, the trip wasn’t a complete waste. He had succeeded in meeting with Mother Giselle, and they had brought much-needed supplies for the refugees at the Crossroads. He had even treated some of the wounded with healing magic. Never his specialty, but better than nothing, he thought. Let them see that mages were not all monsters to be feared.

This was his first look at the mage-Templar conflict up close, and after just a few days, he could see it was utterly pointless. At its lowest level, the war amounted to small groups of rogue Templars fighting bands of rebel mages. No strategy, no plan, just unnecessary bloodshed and destruction that served no one. The Conclave had been sorely needed then, and it was even more overdue now.

They had also picked up a few recruits in the Hinterlands, including a Grey Warden named Blackwall. And when they returned to Haven, a crew of mercenaries and their Qunari leader were waiting on their doorstep to offer their services. Not in the business of turning away help, the Inquisition had taken them on, though Leliana kept a sharp eye on Iron Bull, who made no secret of his Ben-Hassrath ties.

Owain had to admit he was feeling more comfortable with his role in the Inquisition, though he still bristled at the title. They had camped out nearly every night away from Haven. He would spend evenings by the fire debating Solas on the finer points of fade manipulation and drinking whiskey with Varric. The dwarf hadn’t decided on a nickname for him yet but assured him he was “working on it.”

As for Cassandra, they had spoken a few times on their journey, but nothing like that evening in Haven. She slept early and rose early and rarely joined them by the campfire. Was she disappointed in him, in his unbelief? Had he been too honest that night? He had worn those questions threadbare with nothing to show for it. Today, she had ridden ahead of their group, as usual. He looked up and could just make out her shadow in the fog ahead.

“You sit a horse well, my lord,” said Blackwall, pulling up next to him and breaking into his thoughts. The Warden had taken off his helmet, and drops of water augmented the silver streaks in
his otherwise dark hair and beard. He smiled. “Do they have many at the Circle?”

“Hah,” Owain snorted, pushing his hood back and slowing to a walk. “I’m afraid leaving the tower is a rare enough occasion for mages. We don’t have to think much about transportation. No. I grew up around horses. My family used to raise them back in Ostwick.” He patted his mare on the neck, and she gave a soft whinny in response.

“Ah. You ride more like a soldier than a scholar. That’s all I meant.”

“Well, you can thank my parents for that, too. My father had me training to be a knight since I was old enough to hold a sword. They had high hopes for me.” That never came true. At least he could think about it with distance now. Most of his anger over the direction of his life had burned out of him long ago.

Blackwall changed the subject—unexpected tact from a man they found wandering the Hinterlands alone. “Have you ever been to Orlais, milord? It’s a bit of a ways from the Marches.”

“I have not.” Owain shook his head. “You?”

“Aye. My first time in Orlais was a tourney many years ago, when I was a young man. I met a chevalier who took me under his wing and helped me win the grand melee. Even offered to take me on as a squire afterwards.”

“And did you? Squire for him, that is.”

“No,” Blackwall replied, nostalgia in his voice. “I was 18, young and foolish. Thought I was invincible, as we all do at that age. But sometimes I think how life might have been different if I had…” He paused and looked up. “Something ahead.”

Cassandra had halted in front of them. They were approaching a rise in the land that afforded a clearer view of the road. Owain quickened his pace to catch up with her.

“Templars,” she said, nodding down at the route they were following. The fog was thinner here, and he could make out two columns of soldiers in robed armor, the sword emblem of the Order emblazoned clearly on their shields and plate and banners.

“Why march away from Val Royeaux?” Owain asked, noting the direction of their travel. “Shouldn’t they be protecting the grand clerics during their meeting?” He looked sideways at Cassandra. “Isn’t this… unusual?”

“Highly.” She made up her mind about something and shot him a determined glance before urging her horse down the hill.

“Wait-” It was too late to stop her, so he spurred his horse after her instead.

She was riding straight for the head of the line, which had halted on her approach. She slowed as she neared and paced her horse in a small circle as she addressed them. “I am Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, Right Hand of the Divine. Who is in command here? Where is Lord Seeker Lucius? Why do you ride away from Val Royeaux?” she demanded, firing her questions one after another.

“Knight-Captain Denam,” a cruel-looking man in high-ranking armor stepped forward and identified himself. “The Divine is dead, Seeker Cassandra, and they say you ride with the man who murdered her.” He spat at the ground and scowled at Owain, who had come to a stop beside her. Owain glared back and tightened his grip on his reins, trying to suppress his desire to set fire to Knight-Captain Denam.
“Lies.” Cassandra was completely unfazed. “Where is the Lord Seeker? I must speak with him. There is a breach in the sky. Templars should be defending Val Royeaux, not abandoning it.”

“You’ll find him in the city, Seeker,” Denam answered, his eyes raking over her with scorn. “Though I doubt he’ll listen to a heretic. We march under his orders, for Therinfall Redoubt.” With that, he shouted an order to his men, and they resumed their march, leaving Cassandra and Owain puzzling and fuming in their wake.

--

Lucius proved easy to find. When they arrived in Val Royeaux, they found Chantry leaders set up in the central square, a small crowd gathered around them. Upon spotting Owain and Cassandra, they launched into a speech denouncing the Inquisition and accusing him of false prophecy and murder. So much for Josephine’s mission to win hearts and minds. They had walked into an ambush.

“I am not your enemy,” Owain said, pitching his voice to reach both the clerics and the crowd. “Our true enemy is the breach. We must unite to stop it and end this chaos before it’s too late!”

While the Revered Mother readied her response, the Lord Seeker and a small group of Templars appeared in the square and approached the dais. Her speech was cut short as one of the Templars struck her in the head. She crumpled to the floor, and the crowd hushed in shock.

“Is that really necessary?” Owain shouted as Lucius descended from the platform. “Is this what the Templars have come to? Abusing old women they’re supposed to be defending?”

Lucius turned his glare on him. “You will not address me, mage.” Owain clenched his jaw and reminded himself, repeatedly, that engaging a whole unit of Templars on his own was a bad idea.

“Lord Seeker,” Cassandra cut in, determined. “We must speak about the breach. The Templars must work with the Inquisition to-”

“You should be ashamed, Seeker Pentaghast,” Lucius interrupted. “Starting a heretical movement, raising up a mage as a prophet of Andraste. Blasphemy! The breach is indeed a threat, but your Inquisition has no power to do anything about it.”

“You should all be ashamed!” he continued, addressing the whole crowd now. “The Chantry has failed! They sit here pointing fingers and squabbling amongst themselves while my Templars purge the mage threat. No more will we bow to your control, no more will you leash our righteous swords! From this point forward, the Templars will be a power in their own right. We alone stand against the void!”

He turned to his men. “Templars! Val Royeaux is no longer worthy of our protection. We march!” They saluted and followed him from the square.

“That went well,” Owain said to Cassandra. The crowd slowly dispersed, giving them a wide berth and shooting nervous glances as they left.

“That… was not like him,” she said, a deep crease in her brow.

“How well do you know Lucius?”

“By reputation, mainly. He took over as the Lord Seeker two years ago following the death of Lord Seeker Lambert. But he seemed to be a good man. Steady, not one for grandstanding or public gestures. This is very concerning.”
“In more ways than one. Now we have the Templars going off on their own, and the Chantry seems more divided than ever. No one will even speak with us.”

She sighed. “We should return to Haven and inform the others.”

She was right, but their departure would have to wait. They had been in Val Royeaux for little more than an hour. Their horses needed rest and their supplies replenishing, so they headed for a nearby tavern to stay the night. He was looking forward to a real bed and a roof over his head.

As they left the square, a tall elven woman in mage robes approached them. “Enchanter Trevelyan,” she called. He paused at the use of his Circle title.

Cassandra recognized her. “Grand Enchanter Fiona,” she said. “Is it wise for you to be here?”

“I heard about this gathering and wanted to see the fabled Herald of Andraste for myself.” Fiona gave him an appraising look. “They said he was one of our own, the mage delegate from Ostwick.”

“You weren’t at the Conclave,” Owain said, automatically suspicious of her scrutiny.

“You were supposed to be, yet somehow you avoided death,” Cassandra added, with her own hint of accusation.

“As did the Lord Seeker,” Fiona pointed out. “Both of us sent negotiators in our stead, in case it was a trap. I won’t pretend I’m not glad to be alive. I lost many dear friends that day. It disgusts me to think that the Templars will get away with it. I hope you won’t let them.”

“What makes you so sure they’re to blame?” Owain asked.

“You saw him. He would gladly kill the Divine to turn people against us. So yes, I think he did it. More than I think you did it, at least. If it’s help with the breach you are looking for, perhaps we could be of service.”

“And how much does this help cost us?” Fiona didn’t seem the type to offer assistance for free.

“Ah, we should talk about that, but not here,” Fiona said. “Consider this an invitation. We would welcome the Inquisition at Redcliffe to discuss terms. You would be among friends there, Lord Herald. Remember that our cause was once your cause. Au revoir.”

Friends? That, he doubted. Our cause? Perhaps. Her words rang in his head long after she had walked away.
Cassandra hates parties.

Owain and Cassandra met the rest of their party at the tavern and recounted their conversations with Lucius and Fiona over a late lunch and a well-deserved tankard of ale. The spectacle in the square had announced to the whole city that the Herald of Andraste was in town, and before they had finished their meal, he had received no fewer than two more invitations to meet. Apparently there were people willing to talk to him after all.

The first note came on a damp, folded scrap of parchment plastered to the bottom of his mug. By the time he noticed it, the woman who had served them was long gone. The message was scrawled in wobbly handwriting and bordered with crude doodles. It warned him that he was being watched, gave a time and place, and was signed “Friends of Red Jenny.” He set it aside, unsure what to make of it.

In stark contrast, the second invitation was hand-delivered by a courier, written on crisp white paper, and sealed with red wax stamped with the symbol of the Circle of Magi. This one came from Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Royal Enchanter to the Orlesian Imperial Court. It was an invitation to a salon, tonight, at the estate of Duke Bastien de Ghislain.

“Vivienne. I’ve heard of her,” he muttered, almost to himself.

“Do all of you mages know each other?” Varric asked, before taking a pull of ale.

“No...” he said, choosing to ignore the snark. “But she was trained at Ostwick. The youngest full-fledged mage we ever had, in fact. She transferred to Montsimmard just before I got there.”

“I’d be careful if I were you. She must be pretty good at The Game, to be a Royal Enchanter.”

“The Game?” Owain felt like he should know what that meant.

“You know, all the political bullshit they play here in Orlais,” Varric explained. “Nobles and backstabbing and all that.”

“Sounds like Josephine’s territory. But I think I’ll go. I’d like to hear what this Vivienne has to say. Can’t hurt, can it?”

Varric grunted into his ale.

“Anyone care to join me?”

“Sorry, Trevelyan,” said Varric. “I made plans with my Orlesian publisher. She wants to talk business over dinner tonight.”
“Blackwall?”

“Me?” Blackwall chuckled. “I’m more suited to this tavern than a fancy salon. I haven’t the rank for it, my lord.”

“Cassandra, then.” Owain looked pointedly at the Seeker, who had been studiously avoiding eye contact.

“No. I detest parties.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“You can’t expect me to go alone,” he persisted. “You heard Varric. What if it’s a trap? Would you have my blood on your hands? They’ll talk about it tomorrow: ‘The Herald of Andraste, murdered at fancy salon, abandoned by the Inquisition…”’

Cassandra made a disgusted noise. “Ugh! Fine. I’ll go!” She folded her arms over her chest and glowered at him.

“Perfect.” He couldn’t help grinning as he finished his lunch.

--

He was in a playful mood that evening as he climbed the steps to the chateau. Maybe it was because after three weeks with the Inquisition, going to a party seemed refreshingly normal. Maybe it was because even if The Game proved harder than closing rifts, at least he thought he understood the rules. Or maybe it was just the prospect of an evening with Cassandra without the threat of demons or rogue Templars hidden in every shadow.

“Representing the Inquisition: Senior Enchanter Owain Alexander Trevelyan of the Ostwick Circle of Magi, son of Bann Trevelyan of Ostwick, Herald of Andraste,” the doorman announced as Owain entered the hall. He waited as Cassandra was introduced. “Seeker Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena Pentaghast, cousin to King Marcus of Nevarra, Right Hand of the Divine.”

The room had high ceilings lit with glittering chandeliers and a grand staircase that scrolled down its center. String music was playing from somewhere, and a couple dozen people were gathered in small groups around the perimeter.

“Are all those names yours, Cassandra?” he said as she entered the ballroom behind him. “And are you really Nevarran royalty? Should I have been calling you “Your Highness” this entire time?”

She rolled her eyes and made that disgusted noise that only encouraged him. “Hardly. I’m a member of the royal family, yes, but the Pentaghasts are a large clan. Half of Cumberland could say the same.”

“Really?”

“No, but it feels that way,” she sighed. “There are so many of us that they need charts to show how we are all related, and they have them, oh yes. Pentaghasts value their precious blood more than anything.”

“Not so different from some Trevelyans,” he said, flagging down a passing servant with a tray of wine. “But if we’re going to talk about our families, I may need a drink first.”
“That I can agree with.” She accepted the glass he offered.

He still wanted to know about her background. “Do you ever see your family? Do you miss Nevarra?”

“I had a very sheltered life as a child,” she explained, sounding weary. “My brother and I were raised by my uncle, who treated me like a porcelain doll to be protected and kept safe. When I grew older, I realized that I had never really seen much of Nevarra— the real Nevarra, that is. So I can’t say I miss it at all.” She paused to sip at her wine. “And you? Do you consider Ostwick home? Would you wish to go back if you could?”

Owain stared into his glass before he answered. “In a way, yes. But I lived in the Circle for most of my life, and I’m not sure I would really call that Ostwick. There’s no going back to my life before the Circle, so now I suppose home is wherever I am.” He drained half his wine. Cassandra had a curious way of drawing complete honesty from him, even things he didn’t readily admit to himself.

He looked up and was comforted by the understanding in her eyes. “That’s how I feel as well,” she said. “My brother Anthony was the only thing keeping me in Nevarra, and when he was gone, so was I.”

“What happened to Anthony?”

“I’d rather not talk about him now, not here,” she replied, her voice going soft. “Another time, perhaps.”

He opened his mouth to ask another question, but they were interrupted by a pair of other guests wearing gilded masks and Orlesian formalwear trimmed in ruffles and silk. His standard-issue Inquisition coat and Cassandra’s worn armor must have looked rather dingy in comparison.

“The Inquisition!” the woman exclaimed. “How fascinating! It is not often we get new people at these parties. Are you here to see Madame de Fer? Or perhaps Duke Bastien?”

He made a guess. “Madame de Fer?”

“Yes, that is our name for Vivienne,” the masked man replied. “She is a force of nature in the Imperial Court.”

“We have heard the most intriguing stories. They say that when the veil opened, Andraste herself delivered you from the Fade! Is it true?”

“Absolutely!” Owain smiled his biggest, fakest smile. “I was trapped in the Fade and set upon by demons until Andraste saved me and tossed me back out. Surprisingly strong for a woman who was burned to death a thousand years ago.” He tossed back the rest of his drink. The Orlesian woman looked enraptured. He could see Cassandra frowning at him from the corner of his eye.

“And is it true that you have the power to close the tear in the sky? That the Inquisition is building an army to save the world?” The woman was nearly breathless with excitement.

Before he could manage another glib response, another masked man came down the grand staircase and interrupted them. “The Inquisition? What a load of pig shit! Everyone knows it’s just an excuse for a bunch of political misfits to seize power. Washed up sisters, crazed Seekers, rebel mages. What can you hope to accomplish?”

He was so tired of making the same damn speech. How many times did they need to explain themselves? “Exactly what we’ve said,” he replied, "closing the breach and restoring order to the
world. Exactly what needs to be done but what only we seem willing to do.”

The man stepped up to him as the first couple backed away. Cassandra moved closer, but Owain gave her a slight shake of his head, and she stopped. He didn’t want her to intervene just yet.

“Impossible,” the man said, looking him up and down. “And you, the one they call the Herald of Andraste, claiming to speak the Maker’s will while foul magic flows from your hands? Magic that killed the Most Holy Divine? How dare you!” He reached for the sword on his back and brought his face within inches of Owain’s. “If you were a man of honor, you would step outside and answer the charges!”

Owain flexed his fingers into a fist. He’d had just about enough of everyone in this city calling him a liar and a murderer. They had left their weapons at the door, but he could easily burn this man to a crisp, even without a staff.

Before he could act, he heard a loud whoosh and the man was frozen in place where he stood, one hand still on his sword. Cold air blew off of him. Owain stepped back, extinguishing the flames he had readied in his right hand.

A tall, imperious woman descended the stairs, cutting a regal figure in a horned crown and snow white robes that set off the rich umber of her complexion. The remains of an ice spell swirled around her fingers. “My dear Marquis,” she addressed the frozen Orlesian. “How unkind, to use such language in my home, to my guests. You know such rudeness is intolerable.” She brought her hand up to cup his chin. “Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?”

“I beg your pardon, Madame Vivienne,” the Marquis croaked.

“You are the wounded party here,” she said, turning to Owain. “What would you have me do with our friend?”

“You saved me the trouble. But I couldn’t care less what you do with him.”

“Very well,” she said, and snapped her fingers, releasing him from her spell. “Go home, Marquis, and be sure to give my regards to your aunt.” He scuttled away, coughing and clutching at his chest.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” she said. “I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Orlesian Imperial Court.”

“A pleasure, Madame de Fer.” He bent into a stiff formal bow.

She nodded. “I’m so glad you could join us this evening, Enchanter Trevelyan, Lady Cassandra. I’ve so wanted to meet you.” She looked pointedly at him. “Perhaps we could have a word in private?”

He shot Cassandra a wordless apology, while she crossed her arms and inclined her head with a sigh, resigned to fend for herself among the curious, fawning Orlesians. He followed Vivienne to a hallway near the back of the ballroom. It was quiet there, and dark except for the faint light from the mullioned windows that ran its length.

“You are from the Circle at Ostwick, aren’t you, my dear?” Vivienne asked as they walked. “Enchanter Lydia is a dear friend of mine. Did you know her?”

“We are acquainted,” Owain said and left it at that. He had nothing positive to add. Lydia was a gossip, manipulative and overly concerned with Circle politics. If her opinions on mage rights were any indication of her friend’s, this conversation might not go as smoothly as expected. Like everything else lately...
Vivienne stopped at the far end of the hall and turned to him. “You may have guessed, but I didn’t invite you here for pleasantries. With Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is in shambles. Only the Inquisition might have the power to restore sanity and order, and as the leader of the remaining loyal mages of Thedas, I thought I could lend my assistance to your cause.”

“Loyal mages?” he asked. “Loyal to whom exactly?”

“Why, the people of Thedas, of course. We have not forgotten, as some have, that magic exists to serve man, not the other way around.”

She was baiting him, but he bit anyway. “And are those with magic not men, too? Shouldn’t we be allowed to live our lives? To have families and futures? To be free from the oppression of the Chantry and the Templars?”

“Oppression? Hardly,” she sniffed, waving off his argument. “I’ve made a life here in Val Royeaux and serve as an adviser to the Empress. And you certainly seem free enough to come and go as you please.”

“That’s easy to say while you stand here in your chateau!” His blood was starting to heat. “You and I are exceptions to the rule- I would hardly call our experiences typical. And if it not for the rebellion and the Conclave, I would still be in that tower like the rest.”

“You and I have also been trained to control our gifts and use them safely.” Her expression was still all cool composure. “Mages are not like ordinary people, my dear. Magic is dangerous, just as fire is dangerous. Anyone who forgets that truth gets burned. Kirkwall gave the world a reason to remember its fear of magic. A mage killed hundreds of people with a snap of his fingers.”

“Not entirely without reason,” he argued. “I don’t condone what he did, but certainly the Chantry and the Templars have a share of blame in what happened in Kirkwall, too. Would you go back to the way things were? Restore the Circles, lock the doors, and give the keys back to the Templars? You would open us to the same kind of abuse that drove us to rise in the first place.”

“And you forget that the Circles protect both mages and the people outside. Young mages need a place to learn and study so they will not be a danger to themselves or others. We need an institution to protect and nurture magic. Maker knows, magic will find neither on its own.”

Perhaps on that we can agree,” he conceded. “But there must be a better way. Mages must have some say in their destinies, whether that be the Circle or something like it, or something else entirely. We must be able to govern ourselves, to have some amount of choice in our lives, just as other free people in Thedas.”

“How very idealistic of you,” she said, her eyes studying him as if for the first time. “In any case, I did not invite you here to discuss the mage rebellion either. The breach is a greater threat to all of us, and it must be dealt with, no matter what comes next. You will need the help I can offer before this is over.”

“Very well.” He sighed out his anger. She was right. He had to admit that despite their disagreements, Vivienne’s magical skill and political acumen would be assets to have on their side, at least for now. He couldn’t afford to turn her away. “Welcome to the Inquisition.”

“A wise choice, my dear. I’ll see you in Haven.”

Owain and Cassandra collected their weapons and made their way back to the city. As they reached
the outskirts, a voice called out: “Halt!”

A man stepped forward with a torch and a sword in his hands. The light reflected off his mask. “The famous Herald of Andraste,” he said in an Orlesian accent. “You never answered my offer to settle this with honor. So we will settle it another way.”

It was the Marquis from earlier. Owain cursed himself for not letting Vivienne kill him. The man wasn’t alone either. Four more figures emerged from the shadows. Owain reached for his staff.

“Ah, I’m afraid not,” the Marquis said, motioning to one of his goons. The man stepped forward with a bow, his arrow nocked and trained at Cassandra, who had frozen in a defensive stance with her sword half-drawn. “Hands off your weapon, mage, or your lady will pay the price.” The other three advanced on them, cutting off escape on all sides.

Owain snorted and exchanged a glance with the Seeker. “If I’m the one you’re worried about, you really don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

The archer shifted his eyes and his aim between Owain and Cassandra, like he wasn’t sure which of them was the bigger threat. In that moment of hesitation, Cassandra sprang into action. She slammed her shoulder into the nearest man, taking him by surprise and knocking him to the ground. A second man stepped forward as she drew her sword, just in time to parry his axe as it swung toward her. She leapt backwards and pulled her shield off her back before moving in again for a strike of her own.

Her movements were fluid and full of a deadly kind of grace, but Owain did not have time to watch. He grabbed his staff as the archer made up his mind and loosed an arrow at him. Owain fadestepped to flank him, dropped a fire mine, and then shoved him hard in the back with his staff. Caught off guard and off balance, the archer stumbled forward and fell screaming to the ground as the mine exploded into flames around him.

While Owain focused on the archer, the Marquis and his remaining man rushed him with their swords. The Marquis managed a glancing cut down his forearm before Owain fadestepped again to put some distance between them. Adrenaline suppressed the pain for now, but he could feel blood dripping down his wrist, and it was as if all the anger and humiliation and frustration of the day flowed out with it. He cast a wall of flames behind the men and boxed them in with more mines. He hurled fireballs and conjured flames from the ground, pushing his mana to its limit. Spells flew from his fingertips with a fury beyond what was strictly necessary for low-level thugs like these. It was overkill, and he knew it. But he didn’t care.

It was over quickly. Three bodies lay on the ground in front of him, the cobblestones scorched by his flames. Cassandra stepped over to him, sheathing her sword and leaving behind two bodies of her own. Her brow creased as she looked between him and the swath of destruction he’d made. He panted and clutched his left wrist, trying to staunch the bleeding from his wound. He sank to his knees, exhausted.

They heard a low groan, and one of the bodies twitched. The Marquis-- he lived still. Cassandra moved closer and pulled his mask off. He was younger than Owain imagined. “Please,” he whispered. Cassandra drew her sword, but before she could swing it, an arrow thunked into his neck, silencing him forever.

Owain and Cassandra looked in the direction of the shot, guards up again. An elven woman with choppy blonde hair and shabby but brightly colored armor stepped from the shadows with a bow. “Put him out of his misery, yeah?” she said, walking over to pull the arrow out and examine the tip. Her words seemed to trip over themselves as she talked to herself. “Rich tits, always wanting more than they deserve. But with no breeches! Hahahaha, no breeches!”
“Herald thingy? Early?” He was slightly dazed with pain and very confused by this turn of events. “Early for what? Who are you?”

“Didn’t you get the note? Ah well, I guess you followed it well enough. It’s all good, innit?”

He remembered the other invitation from this afternoon and slowly pieced it together. “So you’re the one who sent that note. Does this mean you’re Red Jenny?”

“What? No! The name’s Sera. And, the Friends of Red Jenny- that’s me. Well, I’m one. So’s a bunch of other people. But it’s just a name, yeah? It lets people be a part of something while they stick it to nobles they hate. I mean people people, not like your people, not like mask face here. Little people. Real people.”

“What do you and your friends want from us?” He still didn’t see where this was going.

“You’re the Herald of Andraste, yeah?” she said. “You’re a strange one. You do all kinds of creepy magic, and you’ve got that glowy green thing on your hand. But I want to get everything back to normal like you do. So I’d like to join.”

“Join the Inquisition?” He looked at Cassandra, whose silent expression radiated disapproval. Yet, for reasons he couldn’t explain, he liked this Sera.

“Here’s how it is,” Sera added. “You important people are up here, shoving your cods all around. ‘I’ll crush you!’ ‘No, I’ll crush you!’ Ahem. But if you don’t listen down here, too, you risk losing your breeches, like these ones. I’ll use my friends to help you. Plus arrows.” She snickered again. “Look, do you need people, or what?”

“Alright, alright. Join us then,” Owain said. He’d already made one questionable alliance this evening, why not another?

“Yes!” She threw her arms up. “Get in good before you’re too big to like! That should keep your breeches where they should be! Plus extras, because I’ve got all these… hah. You’ve got merchants that buy all that stuff, yeah? They gotta be worth something. Haven, right? I’ll be there. This is gonna be grand!”

Sera flitted into the dark, leaving the two of them to make sense of what just happened. Cassandra shook her head and frowned as she helped him to this feet. “Are you sure that was wise, Herald?”

“Not at all,” he said, wincing at the pain in his arm. “What was all that about breeches? Anyway, that’s two new recruits for the Inquisition tonight. Josephine can’t be too displeased with us, right?”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise and wrapped her arm around his waist, supporting him as they walked slowly back to their lodgings for the night.

He paused a few steps later, struck by a thought. “Breeches. Too many breeches…” And what had he been saying all day? “More like, too many breaches!” He snorted and then laughed uncontrollably all the way back to the tavern.

Chapter End Notes
Dialogue is hard. o_O
Among Friends

Chapter Summary

Owain and Cassandra get acquainted the best way they know how. Plus, a familiar face in Redcliffe.

Chapter Notes

A longer chapter this time. Thanks for reading!

“Lord Trevelyan, a word, if you please?” Josephine waved him down as they were leaving the war room. Owain had just finished giving his report on Val Royeaux.

“Lord Trevelyan,” he mused as he followed her into her office. “I keep thinking that's my father. You know no one's ever called me that? It’s been a long time since I’ve even had any right to that name.”

“It is a courtesy to your birth, my lord, even if you are a mage. Would you prefer ‘Herald of Andraste’?”

“Ah,” he said. “Anything but that.”

They sat down on opposite sides of the desk. Josephine gestured at the pitcher in front of her. Owain nodded, and she poured wine for each of them.

He picked up his cup and took a sip. “Where did you manage to find wine like this in Haven?”

“I brought it with me all the way from Antiva,” she said, sniffing her cup and closing her eyes. She opened them again and sighed. “One must have some reminders of home to take one’s mind off the surroundings. And the cold. And the wildlife. And the lack of civilization for miles around.” She sighed again. “Why anyone would choose here to live here, I cannot imagine. I hope you don’t find our accommodations too… rustic for one of your station.”

“Me?” He laughed. “The Circle is hardly the lap of luxury, I assure you. Haven suits me just fine.”

“What was it like to live in the Circle, if I might ask? Ostwick’s Circle had a reputation for being rather sedate.”

“That’s… one way to put it, I suppose,” he said, watching the wine swirl in his cup. “It wasn’t a bad place to grow up. You study, they teach you how to use your magic. Assuming you pass your Harrowing, of course. And get over the trauma of being ripped from your family and everything you’ve ever known to live in a glorified prison for the rest of your life.”

“I see. But your parents, surely they could have made arrangements to see you or for you to visit home?”
“Oh, I’m sure they could have. There are Trevelyans in every branch of the Chantry, and there were any number of connections they might have used, if they wanted to. But they didn’t.”

“Well,” she said, eyeing the documents on her desk. “Perhaps that answers my questions, then.”

He looked at her quizzically, and she handed him a sheaf of parchment. He read the top page. It was a letter, from some Trevelyan he didn’t recognize, claiming family ties and offering support in exchange for lightly veiled favors. He flipped through the rest of the stack—they were all like this. He threw them back on the desk in disgust.

“How do they even know who I am? The Conclave was only a few weeks ago.”

“Word travels quickly, my lord. And your... display in Val Royeaux has certainly raised our profile. The nobility have taken note of your ancestry. It gives the Inquisition some legitimacy, though not as much as we’d hoped.”

“What were you hoping for?”

She folded her hands and smiled at him. “You must understand, among the Orlesian nobility, family and rank can mean everything. And we must win support among them for the Inquisition to succeed. However, you are from Ostwick. Orlesian nobles consider the Free Marches somewhat… quaint.”

“That’s the problem? It doesn’t bother them that I’m a mage?”

“Even that is forgivable, under the right circumstances.”

He leaned back in his chair and turned his eyes toward the ceiling. Maker. Was there no escaping these games?

She continued. “I was going to ask about your parents, whether we should approach them for their formal support of the Inquisition. But, given our earlier conversation...”

“No,” he said, sitting back up. “Absolutely not. Nothing good will come of it. I can only imagine how my father will react to the news that his failure mage son is the ‘Herald of Andraste.’ I can’t decide whether he'll relish the opportunity or if his head will explode in anger. Possibly both.”

Josephine sighed and tidied the papers he'd dropped, clearly a little disappointed. “Very well. I will find another way to grow our support. And what about these letters? Would you like me to respond?”

“Do whatever you like. Burn them, for all I care.” He finished the last of his wine and stood up. “Thanks for the drink.”

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He walked down to the outer gates of Haven, where he knew she would be. He found her practicing on a straw dummy, and he stood back to watch, folding his arms across his chest. Cassandra grunted and brought her sword down on the neck, nearly taking its head off.

“I hope that wasn’t meant to be me.”

She looked up and lowered her sword. “If it was, you would know it,” she said, coming over to him. “How is your arm?”

“This? Practically good as new, hardly even a scar.” He pulled up his sleeve to show her. The mark
on his hand crackled faintly, and he flinched.

She noticed. “And your mark? Does it bother you?”

“If you mean physically, not as much as you’d think. As for everything else, well, I’m here, aren’t I?”

She said nothing for a moment, looking at him with that penetrating gaze of hers. “So. Are you just going to watch me practice, or would you like to join me?” She gestured toward a spare sword and shield leaning against a nearby tent. “Blackwall told me you know how to use these.”

He hesitated. He used to know, but that was a very long time ago. On the other hand, did he really want to turn down a chance to spar with Cassandra? “Sure, why not?” he shrugged. He removed his staff and stuck it in a snowbank. He picked up the sword and shield and hefted them, taking a few tentative swings at the air and trying to dredge up 20-year-old muscle memories.

He held up his shield and took a fighting stance. Cassandra squared up in front of him. They paced in a slow circle. He struck first, attempting a quick blow at her left side, which she parried effortlessly. She retaliated with a swing to his right, which he was forced to block with his shield. The impact reverberated up his arm.

He rushed forward for a heavier strike, which she parried again, and in the opening, she bashed him with her shield, knocking him backwards. He stumbled and sat, hard, on the ground.

She stood back, waiting for him, weapons up and eyes focused. He looked down at the weapons in his hands and was struck by how wrong this felt. He was clumsy. He was dull. He was slow. These movements belonged to a different version of him. A different body, a different life. He looked over at his staff and decided. He stood and walked to it, tossing the sword and shield to the ground. He pulled out the staff, spun it around his hand, and caught it. Much better.

He went back to Cassandra and took up his position. Her brows raised, and what might have been amusement flickered in her eyes before she brought her attention back to their match.

They danced around each other again, Owain more sure of his steps this time. It was she who attacked first, moving quickly to slash at him with her sword. He saw her coming and fadestepped to the side, hurling a series of fireballs in his wake, which she easily dodged. He contemplated his next move. Unlike practice swords that could be blunted, his magic tended to be all or nothing, and the last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

He looked around and realized they had drawn a crowd. Inquisition soldiers and scouts formed a loose ring around them. Some still held weapons, distracted from their own practice, no doubt. Even Cullen stood at the fringes, looking slightly guilty but as interested as the rest.

Time to put on a show. He cloaked himself in ice armor and fadestepped toward Cassandra, wielding his staff blade first, like a spear. He swiped at her feet, and she jumped aside, stepping around his flank with sword raised. He whirled to block her, holding the staff with both hands and catching the edge of her blade with the metal grip. He pushed her back, and they separated, circling again.

He lunged with his staff, darting forwards and back, once by her right shoulder, once by her left, then at her right hip. She matched each of his thrusts, parrying the first and the second, and blocking the third with her shield. She knocked his blade aside with her sword and stepped in with her shield, slamming it into his block. He stumbled back a few steps, the strength of her blows again sending shockwaves up his arms.
They were both breathing heavily now. Sweat dripped down his temple, despite the cold Haven air. He needed a new strategy. There was no way he could beat her in straight combat like this.

Rolling his shoulders, he squared up to her again. More fireballs, one after another, which she dodged as deftly as before. He knew they wouldn’t hit her, but that wasn’t his point now. He aimed a few at the ground, melting the packed snow around her feet. Then he moved in with his staff and cast an ice spell, freezing the ground beneath her. He slashed again at her feet, and again she jumped, but this time the frozen ground betrayed her. She slipped and fell to her knees.

Owain brought his staff down for one more blow, expecting to end the match. To his surprise, Cassandra brought her shield up to block it, and with a scream of fury, she pushed herself back to her feet and rushed at him. This sudden onslaught was too much for him. He deflected her first few attacks and blocked the next, but one final shield bash sent him reeling to the dirt. He looked up to see the tip of her blade in his face, so he yielded.

He lay there catching his breath and mentally assessing the damage. There was sure to be a nasty bruise on his shoulder in a few hours and some holes in his coat that needed mending. Not so bad, all things considered.

Cullen barked at his men to return to their duties. “Back to work! All of you!” Did that man ever take breaks?

Cassandra offered her hand to help him off the ground. “You were holding back,” she said. He let her pull him up before hauling himself over to one of the practice dummies. He sat at its foot and leaned his head against the post, resting his staff across his knees.

“So were you,” he said, looking up at her.

She smiled at him, and it was instantly the best thing that had happened to him all day. The last several days, if he was honest with himself.

She sat down and leaned against the other dummy, looking as winded as he was. “Where did you learn to fight like that? I have never seen a Circle mage move that way.”

“Here and there,” he said, lightly. “I had some training at the Circle, but the rest I made up, mixed in with weapons training from my youth. I wasn’t quite as studious as the others, so I would practice on my own. There’s a lot of time to experiment, cooped up in a tower. It’s proven useful since the rebellion.”

“I expect it has.”

“What about you?” he asked, still a bit breathless. “You're quite impressive.”

“Are you complimenting me?”

“I'm trying to,” he said, as he returned her smile. “Did they teach you all of that at Seeker school?”

“Some, but not all.” She inspected the sword in her hands and swiped her thumb over the guard. "My brother Anthony started teaching me swordsman ship long before I joined the Seekers. He was a dragon hunter, brave and honorable. He was everything a Pentaghast was supposed to be, and I idolized him. We used to dream about hunting together, brother and sister, vanquishing the beasts of old.”

“You mentioned him in Orlais. What happened to him?”
“He died,” she said quietly, her eyes going distant. “A group of apostates wanted him to get dragon blood for them, and he refused. So they killed him for it, right in front of me. After that, I begged the Chantry to let me become a Templar, to fight mages and avenge him. They sent me to Seeker training instead.”

He immediately regretted the question. “I’m sorry, Cassandra. I had no idea it was a painful memory. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“It’s alright.” She met his gaze again. “I think sometimes about what my life would be like if he had lived. Would I really be hunting dragons? Or would I be married to some noble? A mother of three? I believe the Maker has a plan, but… the path is not always easy.”

“Do you hate mages, for what they did to your brother? Because I might, if that had happened to me.”

“No,” she sighed. “I was angry at first. And for a long time, I wanted revenge. But I know, now, that mages are simply human, flawed like the rest of us.”

“Indeed.” He had learned that truth, too.

They sat and watched Cullen's soldiers in the practice ring. Their shouts and the clash of their weapons were the only sounds in the air. He could feel his heart rate slowing and the breeze starting to feel cold on his skin. He turned to Cassandra again.

“So, what is a Seeker, exactly? Are you like some kind of super Templar?”

“The Seekers of Truth were formed from the first Inquisition and charged with watching over the Templars. We were supposed to be incorruptible and above reproach, though the reality falls considerably short of that ideal.”

“As it often does. Seems like you could have done a better job watching the Templars. Are your powers like theirs?”

“No, our abilities are different,” she said, shaking her head. “Theirs come from lyrium and are designed to hunt mages. Ours come from years of ritual and training. We cannot be possessed by demons and are immune to mind control. Some also gain other gifts, but that depends on the individual.”

“What gifts do you have?”

“I can set the lyrium in a person’s blood aflame.” She looked him in the eyes. “Both mages and Templars bend before my will. Some Seekers use it to interrogate or paralyze. Rarely, some can use it to kill.”

He stared at her for a beat and then blinked away. Well. That was perfectly terrifying. He ran his hand through his hair and smirked. “So could you do that to me? Could you bend me to your will?”

“Don't tempt me,” she said. Then she smiled again.

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Owain had lobbied hard for the Inquisition to let him meet with the free mages at Redcliffe. They should at least hear the offer, he argued, and given Lucius’s attitude in Val Royeaux, they had no reason to expect a better reception at Therinfall.
He was surprised, then, to walk into the Gull and Lantern with Cassandra, Blackwall, and Sera and find that they had been completely unexpected. Grand Enchanter Fiona had no recollection at all about meeting him in Val Royeaux or issuing an invitation to Redcliffe. It was baffling. More troubling still was the news that the mages had already formed an alliance with a Tevinter Magister.

“You can’t be serious!” Disappointment, disbelief, and anger boiled in his blood. “Wasn’t our purpose to convince the rest of Thedas that mages can be trusted to govern ourselves? That magic is not a threat? And you pledge yourselves to the enemy of us all. The one nation that proves the danger of a society led by mages!”

Something else was also unsettling him. There were a handful of other rebel mages gathered in the room. Lieutenants or other leaders, he guessed. Among them was a familiar face.

Althea. His first and oldest friend at the Circle, one of the few people he trusted in his life. They had grown up together, coming through their Harrowings and rising up the ranks as peers. They had been lovers, too—on and off—though that had ended for good a few years ago.

Her face lit when she saw him and settled into a smug half-smile while he tried to concentrate on his conversation with Fiona. Seeing her here was surreal, his life in the Circle colliding with his life in the Inquisition.

“Alexandr, what choice did we have, Enchanter Trevelyan?” Fiona said, trying to explain her decision. “We had nowhere else to turn. I have children and elderly under my care. We needed food, shelter, simple necessities. Redcliffe offered us refuge for a time, but the people’s patience with us has worn thin.”

“The Inquisition could have provided all of that.” He let his frustration show in his voice. “And we would have received you as equals. No need to enslave yourselves to us like the Magisters.”

“Then I sorely regret you did not come sooner.” Fiona seemed exhausted and deflated. This was not the woman he had met in Orlais.

“It’s not too late,” he said, refusing to give up. “We still need your assistance to close the breach. We could still offer you an alliance.”

Fiona bowed her head. “As one indentured to a Tevinter Magister, I’m afraid I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you.”

Owain stood there, speechless. Had they really come all this way for nothing? Had the mage rebellion truly sold itself to Tevinter?

He turned his head as the door opened behind him. A middle-aged man in hooded red and yellow robes entered the inn, followed by a younger man in similar dress. The older man walked authoritatively to the front of the room.

“Agents of the Inquisition. I am Magister Gereon Alexius. I command the mages of Southern Thedas. If you wish their assistance in closing the breach, then you must negotiate with me.”

Owain narrowed his eyes. “How did a Tevinter Magister come to command the Southern mages?”

“I heard about the tragedy at the Conclave—one I hear you had the good fortune to survive—and I came immediately to Redcliffe to see how I might be of assistance to my fellow mages at such a difficult time. It could only have been divine providence that we arrived when we did.”

“Yes, what perfect timing,” Owain said. “Well, if you want to negotiate, let's negotiate.”
“Of course,” the Magister smiled. “It’s always good to meet a reasonable man.” He turned to the younger man beside him. “Felix, would you send for a scribe? Apologies for my manners, Herald. This is my son, Felix.” The younger man bowed.

Owain nodded and turned back to Alexius. “I think you’re aware of what the Inquisition intends to do?”

“Yes, closing the breach is no small task. It will take a considerable amount of magical power, and there’s no telling how many mages you might require.”

The Magister held the upper hand in this negotiation, and it was clear that he knew it. Owain tried to think what he had to offer. He feared the price would be too dear.

Felix returned, but as he moved toward them, he appeared to faint. Owain caught him before he hit the floor, and Felix pressed a scrap of paper into his hand before struggling to his feet.

Alexius rushed to his son. “My apologies, Herald,” he said. “My son is not well. We will conclude these negotiations at another time. I will be in contact with the Inquisition.” And then he left, as abruptly as he had entered, supporting his son with one arm. He called to Fiona, and she followed them out the door.

Owain looked at the note in his hand. It was a warning and a request to meet in the Redcliffe Chantry. So many notes like this, lately. He tucked it discretely into his pocket.

“Owain.” Althea wrapped him in a tight embrace and kissed his cheek. He pulled back and darted his eyes to Cassandra, who looked quickly away. Althea followed his gaze and quirked an eyebrow before returning her focus to him. “Maker. I thought you were dead. And then you turn up here, with the Inquisition, of all things.” Her eyes roved over him, and she smirked. “I’ve seen you look worse.”

Likewise. She was dressed for travel, in riding breeches and a leather coat. Her long, wavy brown hair was tamed in a low ponytail that cascaded down her shoulder. Althea was a beautiful woman. And she knew it.

He remembered his manners and introduced Cassandra and the rest of his party. “This is Senior Enchanter Althea of the Ostwick Circle of Magi.”

“Former,” she corrected him. “There are no Circles anymore.”

“Thea, what are you doing here?” he asked. “How did it come to this? Tevinter? Really?”

She glanced quickly around the inn, and then back at him. “Let me buy you a drink, and we’ll talk.” They settled at a corner table on the second floor. She sat next to him, with Cassandra, Blackwall, and Sera opposite.

Owain reached for his mug of ale, and Althea caught hold of his hand. “What's this?” She held his palm open and prodded the mark, which glowed green in the dim tavern.

Ordinarily, he took her physical familiarity for granted, but with Cassandra sitting stone-faced across the table, he was hyper-aware of every touch. He withdrew his hand. “To be honest, we don’t really know, but it’s why I’m here. All I can remember is that I escaped the Fade and came out with this. And it’s the key to closing the breach.” He proceeded to update her on his life since the Conclave.

She listened with interest. “Do you really think you can do it? Close all the rifts?”

“We have to. But we’ll need the mages to do it.”
“Alexius will make sure you pay for it.”

“I know,” he said. “You never answered my question. How did you get here? And what happened that made an alliance with Tevinter sound like a good idea?”

Althea sighed. “I left Ostwick right after the Conclave. We all thought you were dead, and that for sure the Chantry would find a way to pin it all on the mages. We went into hiding, and they sent me here to find out what to do next. I was told Alexius arrived two days after the Conclave. It was all settled by the time I got here. And now I’m supposed to go back and bring the rest of our group.”

“Here's what I don't understand. We saw Fiona in Val Royeaux a week ago. She asked me to come here and meet with her, and she made no mention of any Tevinter alliance. It just doesn't make any sense. Something's not right here.”

She shook her head. “I believe you, but I need more to go on than your feeling. I can't even believe you've been alive this whole time. It's been bad for us since you left. The Templars have been making more raids. We've got children to take care of, the injured. I know this is a shit plan, but it’s the only one we’ve got.”

“Don't do it Thea, don't bring them here,” he pleaded with her. “Come to the Inquisition. We’ll take care of you. You don't even have to believe me. Just wait. Wait until we get to the bottom of this Tevinter thing. I'll send you word.”

She considered him for a long moment and then set her jaw. “Alright. We’ll wait.” She stood up. “I should go.” She kissed him again. “You’d better be right, Owain Trevelyan.” She turned to flash Cassandra a knowing smile. Then she nodded to Blackwall and Sera and left.

As soon as she was gone, Sera spoke, like the words were bursting out of her. “Hey Herald, did you and her used to, you know...” she said, while making rude gestures with her fingers.

“She blew a raspberry at Cassandra and looked at Owain, who was covering his eyes with his hand. She gasped. “You did!”

“That was a long time ago...” he mumbled, draining his ale and refusing to look up.

“What happened? Did she dump you? I bet she dumped you.”

He said nothing, just continued rubbing his eyes with his fingers.

“No? You dumped her? You kicked that out of your bed?” Her eyes went wide, then she started laughing hysterically, falling backwards off the bench. Blackwall smiled into his cup. Cassandra just furrowed her brows and looked at Owain, deep in thought.

He sighed and cleared his throat. “Anyway. You should all take a look at this.” He pulled Felix’s note from his coat and handed it to Cassandra. She scanned it quickly before passing it to Blackwall.

“This could be a trap,” she said. “But you will go anyway.”

“Am I already so predictable? Felix did take pains to hide it from his father. And I need to know what's going on here.”

Cassandra sighed and stood up, adjusting the shield on her back. “To the Chantry, then.”
Owain pushed open the heavy, iron-clad door to the Redcliffe Chantry and was immediately hit with
the smell of sulfur and burning flesh. A large, glowing rift took up the front of the sanctuary. A lone
mage was brandishing his staff, beating back the spawning demons. The room was a mess, broken
pews and debris everywhere.

They drew their weapons and joined the fray, but there was something odd about this rift. Several of
his spells missed their mark, moving either more slowly or more quickly than expected. He looked
around and could see the others struggling with the same thing. Sera’s arrows were flying wide.
Cassandra missed an easy hit, and Blackwall narrowly caught an unexpected blow with his shield.

Even with these anomalies, they managed to defeat the demons and close the rift. The unnamed
mage marveled as Owain lowered his hand. “How does that work?” he asked.

Owain struggled for a moment with how much to tell this stranger, while the man moved into the
silence.

“You don’t even know, do you?” he said, smiling. “You just wiggle your fingers and the rift closes!
Remarkable!”

Owain regained his composure. “Who are you? I was expecting Felix.”

“Of course you were. I'm getting ahead of myself. I am Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of
Minrathous. How do you do?” He bowed.


“Suspicious friends you have.”

“Excuse us if we’re a little wary,” Owain replied, crossing his arms. “We haven’t had an easy time
with your countrymen today.”

“Ah, you mean Alexius,” Dorian said. “Magister Alexius was once my mentor. And by ‘once’ I
mean that he’s not anymore. I’m uniquely qualified to help you, and you will need my help, I assure
you.”

“Help for what?”

“Haven’t you wondered how Alexius was able to claim the allegiance of the Southern mages out
from under you?” Dorian asked. “How he conveniently managed to arrive in Redcliffe just after the
Conclave? It seems he would have had to distort time itself, no? Well that's exactly what he's doing.”

“Mages have been attempting to manipulate time for centuries,” Owain said. “It’s impossible. No one
has ever succeeded.”

“I know what I’m talking about,” Dorian insisted. “I helped him develop this magic, though it was
just theory at the time. He must have gotten it to work. But what I still don’t get is why. It’s an awful
lot of trouble just to gain a few hundred lackeys.”

“He didn’t do it for them,” Felix said, joining them.

Dorian smiled. “Took you long enough. Is he getting suspicious?”

“No, but I shouldn’t have played the illness card,” Felix replied. “I thought he would be fussing over
me all day.” He turned to Owain and continued. “My father’s joined a cult of Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves the Venatori. Everything he’s done, he’s done it to get to you.”

“All this, for me?” Owain said, breathing out a laugh. “I’m flattered. But why tell me all this? Why would the two of you betray your father and your mentor?”

“I love my father,” Felix replied. “And like Dorian, I love my country. But these Venatori are extremists, and what my father is doing is far too dangerous.”

“The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable,” Dorian added. “You saw how the rift you just closed seemed to twist time onto itself? How it sped some things up and slowed other things down? Soon there will be more like that. We already have a hole in the sky. We can’t afford a hole in time, too.”

“No, indeed,” Owain sighed. “We have our hands full with the breach as it is. Well, if I’m his target, I suppose we can expect to hear from Alexius again. What will you do?”

“I’ll be in touch,” Dorian said. “Alexius doesn’t know I’m here, and I’d like to keep it that way. But whenever you’re ready to deal with him, I want to be there.” He turned to leave before throwing over his shoulder, “Oh, and Felix, try not to get yourself killed?”

“There are worse things than death, Dorian,” said Felix.

Owain tried not to think about that.
Owain found himself in a dungeon, standing almost knee-deep in cold, murky water. His ears were ringing, and he was out of breath, like he’d been punched in the gut and the air forced from his lungs. He blinked hard, trying to stop his head from spinning. Dorian stood a few feet away, looking just as dazed as he felt.

He tried to recall how they had gotten here, what had happened just before. He remembered being in the castle hall and confronting Magister Alexius. Cassandra and Sera had been with them—he looked around wildly for them, but he and Dorian were alone. Everything had been going to plan. He had distracted Alexius while Inquisition scouts infiltrated the castle and took out its defenses. Alexius had realized his disadvantage and lashed out like a cornered animal, setting off a spell Owain had never seen before. And then all he could remember was a bright light that abolished all sight and sense.

He collected himself and waded over to Dorian. “What happened? Where are we?” he asked. Why Dorian should have the answers, he couldn't say, but he couldn't help asking anyway.

“It looks like we’re still in the castle,” said Dorian, taking in their surroundings. “Alexius must have used the amulet as a focus and transported us to the nearest confluence of arcane energy… Of course! The better question is not where, but when are we. His spell must have sent us through time.”

“Through time,” Owain repeated. He was barely absorbing Dorian’s words. “What was he trying to accomplish, exactly?”

“I believe he was trying to alter time so that you never existed. Had he succeeded, you would never have been at the Conclave, and you would never have interfered with his Elder One’s plans. But we forced him to cast the spell before he was ready, I countered it, and the magic went wild. And here we are.”

“Did we go forwards or backwards?” He was still trying to process what had happened. “Either way, we need to go back. I mean, can we go back?”

“There might be a way,” Dorian said, holding a hand to his chin and furrowing his brows. “Though we didn’t travel through time so much as punch a hole through it. I can’t even begin to imagine what we’ve just done to the fabric of the world… But yes. I have some ideas. They will require that we find Alexius and his amulet in this time, however. I suggest we start by leaving this dungeon.” He lifted a foot out of the water, looked at it in disgust, and stepped toward the nearest doorway.

“What about the others?” Owain asked. “Cassandra. And Sera. Do you think they could have been pulled through with us?”

“Unlikely,” Dorian replied. “I don’t think the spell was wide enough to pull them in, too. Alexius wouldn’t have risked catching himself or Felix in its radius. No. My guess is they are still where and when we left them. In some sense at least.” He paused, seeing Owain’s look of concern. “We won’t find out by standing here, yes? Not to worry, Herald. I’m here. I’ll protect you.”
Owain snorted but followed Dorian out into the passageway. It was just as dark and dank here, but thankfully the floor sloped slightly, and the water level dropped as they advanced. Dorian halted as he reached another doorway and gestured through it to Owain. He could hear two men speaking in Tevinter accents. Dorian looked pointedly at Owain and then through the doorway. Owain responded with a nod.

They went through to find two guards in Venatori armor. Before they could react, Dorian had trapped them in a cage of lightning, while Owain lit them up with his flames. They fell quickly. Owain patted them down and pocketed the loop of keys he found.

They moved carefully through the dungeons in similar fashion, taking out two more guards but finding no one else. The maze of dark passages seemed endless. As they entered yet another hallway, Owain heard a woman’s voice and stopped.

“The Light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world, and into the next. For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water. As the moth sees light and goes toward flame, she should see fire and go towards Light…” It was Cassandra, reciting the Chant of Light.

When he realized it was her, he called out her name, and his feet seemed to move of their own accord. He burst around the corner and into the room, ignoring Dorian’s warnings to slow down, keep quiet, and wait, lest they alert more guards to their presence.

He found her kneeling on the stone floor in a small, dark cell, surrounded by spikes of glowing red lyrium that hummed softly at the edges of his awareness. She looked dirty and ragged, her cheeks pale and hollow. Her armor hung loosely on her frame. Owain’s hands shook as he tried key after key until he found one that finally turned the bolt in the rusty door.

“It’s you,” she said, her eyes wide. “But that’s impossible. You’re dead. We watched Alexius obliterate you.” She stared at him in disbelief. “Or is this truly the end of days, that the dead walk again?”

Owain wrenched open the door and sank to his knees in front of her. His throat caught and his stomach knotted to see the weariness in her face. He reached out to touch her but stopped himself, drawing back and clenching his fists on his knees instead. “It’s me,” he said, hoarsely, searching her eyes and finding relief that they, at least, burned as bright as ever. “I didn’t die, Cassandra. The spell misfired and sent us through time. Do you know what the date is?”

“The date?” She had to think about it. “Harvestmere, 9:42 Dragon.”

“9:42?” Dorian said from over Owain’s shoulder. He had almost forgotten Dorian was there. “Then we must have been sent into the future. We’ve missed a whole year!”

He turned back to Cassandra. Maker, had it really been so long? “Are you alright? Are you hurt? What’s happened since we left?”

Sorrow filled her warm hazel eyes. “When you died, I cried out to the Maker. How could he have allowed this? How could he have brought you to us, only to take you away? I was so sure you were sent to help us… We lost hope that day.”

His heart broke for her. For a woman of faith like Cassandra, these were heavy words indeed. “And Alexius? The Venatori?” He needed to know but was afraid to hear the answers.

“Alexius serves the Elder One,” she explained. “A being of incredible power. Without you, we were unable to close the Breach. Empress Celene was murdered. The Elder One raised an army of demons
from the Fade and conquered all of Southern Thedas. The Inquisition, everything we had hoped and planned, it all failed. Nothing could stand in their path.”

He sat motionless, numbed by the horror of the picture she painted. All that, in a world without him? Could his death have had such an impact?

“But that doesn’t need to happen,” Dorian said firmly. “We can go back and defeat Alexius. We just need to find him in this time and reverse the spell.”

Cassandra stood and looked at Dorian, her eyes blazing with renewed hope. “Can you truly make it so that none of this ever happens?” She stepped closer to him. “Then you must! The Breach must be closed. The Elder One must be stopped! I will do everything in my power to help you succeed.”

Her determination roused Owain out of his stupor, and he pulled himself to his feet, meeting her gaze again. “We will, Cassandra. I promise.”

She nodded. “I heard the guards say Alexius barricaded himself in the throne room. That’s where we need to go.”

They walked on and came to another cluster of cells, where they found Grand Enchanter Fiona. Here, the red lyrium sang with an intensity that seemed to press on his mind, making it hard to concentrate. The lyrium had spread to fill the entire room, and as they moved closer, he could see that it merged with Fiona herself.

“You are alive,” Fiona said, her body twisted in a hunched posture, half standing, half leaning against the cell walls. She struggled to speak, and even to breathe, it seemed.

“Yes,” Owain replied. “Alexius’s magic failed and sent us into the future, to this time. But we think we know a way to go back, to change things.” He came closer and started fitting keys into the lock. “Is the lyrium… growing in you?”

“If you are near it long enough, you become this,” she replied, with painful effort. "And when I die, they will mine my body to grow more. Don't waste your time trying to free me. It is too late to save me.”

He had already opened the door and reached for her hand. It burned hot to his touch, and the lyrium song was even more oppressive at this proximity. She waved him away.

“Go!” she said. “You must go, Enchanter Trevelyan. Stop Alexius. It is the only way. Your spymaster, Leliana. She is here. You must find her. You must stop Alexius before the Elder One knows you are here!”

They heeded her and walked on with greater urgency, taking the last corridor they had yet to search. This one led through a larger chamber where they met another set of guards. They went down like the others, succumbing to Owain and Dorian’s combined magic. Cassandra picked up a sword and shield from one of them and armed herself, testing their weight with a slight smile of satisfaction.

They found Sera in the next room. She was standing in her cell, staring through the bars, humming and muttering to herself as if trying to recall the lyrics to a long-forgotten song. She jumped and backed against the wall at the sight of Owain as he approached. “Ah! It's a ghost! You're him! But you're dead! Ah!”

“I'm not a ghost, Sera,” Owain reassured her as he worked the lock. “And we’re not dead.” She looked even skinnier and dirtier than usual, her hair a tangled nest atop her head.
“But I saw. He killed you! The day you died, I ran out of arrows making them pay.” This last she said quietly, with such seriousness that it clutched at his heart.

She startled him by wrapping her arms about his neck as the door swung open. He lowered his arms to pat her reassuringly on the back, though he wasn’t at all certain this would end well.

They wandered on through the bowels of the castle, searching for the way up to the main hall, Alexius, and their only chance of returning to the past. They came to a study of some kind, full of books and scrolls and alchemical equipment. Dorian walked to the desk in the corner and sifted through the scattered papers, picking up pages and examining them one by one.

“This is in Alexius’s hand,” he said, gesturing at the notes and running his eyes over them. “It seems our confrontation in the hall was something of a failure for him. The appearance of the Breach was a breaking point for this time magic... He’s been trying since then to go back to a time before the Conclave, but with no success. And to a time before... Ah. Yes.” He looked up at Owain. “Do you know about Alexius? And about Felix’s illness?”

“Should I?”

“Hmn, I suppose not,” Dorian replied. “The short version is, Felix has the Taint. Alexius’s wife and Felix were traveling without him, and their caravan was attacked by darkspawn. His wife was killed, and Felix was infected with the blight. Alexius never forgave himself for not being there to protect them, and he was never the same after that. You’ve seen how he obsesses over Felix’s health.”

“So that’s what this is all about for him,” Owain mused. “Felix. The Elder One promised to heal him in return for changing the past. All of that destruction and death, to save one life...” He remembered their conversation in the throne room, just before Alexius cast his spell.

“Yes, though it looks like he was doing a bit of experimentation on his own, too,” Dorian said, rifling through a new stack of parchment with a deep crease in his brow. “Using human subjects. Purposefully infecting them and testing their reaction to the blight. Hoping to find a cure.” He stepped back and dropped the papers back on the desk.

“This sounds like blood magic,” said Cassandra, voice thick with contempt.

“Well, you know how we Tevinters love our blood magic,” Dorian sighed. “I do wish my countrymen would be a touch less cliche sometimes.”

They were interrupted by a chilling scream, coming from somewhere close. They followed the sound to the next chamber, another darkened room, this one filled with the sour smell of blood and death. They crept past a corpse on a rack, its flesh flayed and bloodied beyond recognition.

Owain spotted Leliana at the end of the room, suspended by her wrists from chains that hung from the ceiling. A Venatori interrogator had his back to them and was questioning her, waving a dagger menacingly in her face, a face that shook Owain with how changed it was. Her skin was pocked and pitted, traced with white scars and stretched unnaturally over the bones of her skull. Her eyes looked sunken and dark in their sockets, and they burned with hate. Upon seeing them, she kicked her captor in the head and wrapped her legs around his neck, squeezing until it snapped with an audible crack and he fell lifeless to the floor. Owain moved quickly to free her from her bindings.

“You’re alive,” she said, as if there was no question in her mind. “Good. Do you have weapons?”

Owain nodded. Leliana walked past him and proceeded to pick the lock on a chest in the corner, pulling from it a bow and quiver of arrows.
“You’re not going to ask how we got here? Or what happened?” Owain asked, disturbed by the icy efficiency of her manner. “Alexius sent us through time, a year into the future. We need to go back to ensure that this time never comes…”

“I didn’t ask because it doesn’t matter,” Leliana interrupted with cold fury in her voice. She adjusted the bow on her back.

“But it changes everything!” Dorian said. “We need to find Alexius and reverse the spell. We can defeat him and make sure none of this ever happens!”

“You mages!” She wheeled on him, and her gaze was like another weapon. “You speak of traveling through time like it’s a game. Don't you see? No one should have this kind of power! This is why the world fears magic! This is all pretend to you, a future that will never come to pass. But for me, this was real. I suffered. We all suffered.”

The intensity of the hurt and anger in her eyes was too much to bear, and he could think of nothing to say. Owain looked away and worried that she was right.

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They made their way to the castle hall, pushing aside the broken furniture and debris that blocked the doors. Alexius stood waiting for them at the head of the room, staring into the fire that burned in the oversized fireplace. Felix crouched at his father’s side, looking frail and skeletal, far worse than he had when Owain saw him last.

“I knew I would see you again,” Alexius said without taking his eyes from the flames. “Not that it would be now, but I knew I hadn’t killed you. One final failure.” He turned and faced them. “But it doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters. The Elder One comes for us all.”

Leliana appeared behind Felix and held a dagger to his throat.

“No!” Alexius shouted. “Please! I’ll do anything!”

“The amulet, Alexius,” Owain said. “Give it to us, and we’ll let him go.” Though he wasn’t even sure if this Leliana would comply.

“I’ll give you anything,” Alexius pleaded, reaching his hands toward his son. “Anything you want!”

“I want the world back,” Leliana said, still gripping Felix. Then she drew her blade across his throat.

Alexius howled in fury, releasing a wave of energy that sent Leliana sprawling across the room. The others drew their weapons and advanced on him. Cassandra occupied his attention from the front while Sera and Leliana flanked him with arrows and Owain and Dorian cast their own spells in return. Outnumbered as he was, Alexius still put up a difficult fight. He was a powerful Magister, with nothing left to lose. But he, too, was no match for their combined might.

Dorian walked up to the body of his former mentor and crouched beside him. He sighed and shook his head. “Poor Alexius. All of this to save his son. He lost Felix a long time ago, and he didn’t even know it. He was a good man once, like a father to me. I still can’t believe it came to this.”

Owain felt sorry for Dorian, but he had a hard time finding any sympathy for a man who had visited so much horror on the world, even if he was ultimately motivated by love. Love could be selfish, too. He removed the amulet from the dead man’s neck and held it out to Dorian. “How much time do you need?”
Dorian looked up at him and took the amulet. He frowned. “Give me about an hour to work out what spell he used, and we should be on our way…”

A low rumble shook the castle like an earthquake, loosing bits of masonry from the ceiling.

“It’s the Elder One,” said Leliana, looking at the two of them. “He is coming. Do it now. You don’t have an hour. You have as much time as I have arrows.”

“We will go outside and do what we can,” Cassandra said. “When the doors open, you will know we have fallen.” Sera nodded, subdued and agreeing with Cassandra, for once.

“No!” Owain protested, looking at Cassandra. “I won’t let you commit suicide like this!”

She returned his gaze, steady and sad and resolute, and she shook her head. “I won’t fail you again, Herald. I won’t watch them take you again.”

“Look at us!” said Leliana, savagely, throwing her arm out wide. “We are already dead! The only way we live is if you go back and make sure none of this happens!”

He opened his mouth to argue further, but Dorian dragged him to the front of the room and started working the spell. With a final glance, Cassandra and Sera left to face the horde outside. The doors closed behind them with a thud. Leliana nocked an arrow and readied herself in front of the entrance.

Owain could hear the blood pumping in his ears as panic quickened his pulse. Was this really happening? Were his friends truly about to sacrifice their lives for him, even in this alternate time?

He could hear the shrieks of demons and the clash of metal from outside, growing louder and closer as the minutes ticked past. There was a loud boom against the doors before they burst open. Cassandra’s limp body fell through the doorway and slid across the flagstones, her sword clattering to the floor. Two arrows protruded from her neck and her face was bloodied and slack. Demons poured in through the opening and fell upon her, tearing at her with their claws even though she had already ceased moving.

The next few moments passed in slow motion. He stopped hearing, stopped seeing anything else. He screamed with rage and could feel anger and mana surging in him. He conjured flames and cast fireballs in rapid succession at the incoming demons. He was vaguely aware of Leliana trying to beat them back, and of Dorian still intoning the time spell beside him. He moved to rush forward but Dorian clutched the back of his coat, holding him in place and jolting him back to himself. “If you move, we all die!” he shouted in Owain’s ear.

Owain obeyed, reluctantly, collapsing to his knees and watching the rest of the scene unfold with his heart full of anguish and helplessness. Tears ran down his face, and he couldn’t remember when they started. He watched monsters flow in over Cassandra’s lifeless form. He watched Leliana fall, overwhelmed by the wave of demons and Venatori soldiers, watched them rush toward him at the front of the room, until the world blurred again into a swirl of light and motion, until he and Dorian were again pulled into that space between times and deposited right back where--and when--they had started. Standing before Alexius, with Cassandra and Sera and Fiona and Leliana. All alive, all whole, as if none of this ever happened.

But for him, it was real.
Owain sat in his cabin, alone in the semi-darkness, the candles on his table having burned themselves out and the fire reduced to ash and coals on the hearth. It was late evening, probably, and he was on his third (fourth?) glass of rye.

It had been three days since they returned from Redcliff with the free mages as their new allies, and he had barely slept in that time. Closing his eyes, his mind would drift to the horrors he had seen in the future, that dark, alternate timeline that they had averted but lived on in his memory. Cassandra torn apart, Leliana’s last stand, Sera quiet and serious. He couldn’t shake the images.

So he drank and searched his own heart. Why did this affect him so deeply? Did he really believe in these people and this cause? When did he start to care?

There was a time, when he was young, that he dreamed of changing the world. He would take his place in his father’s legacy, or maybe join the Templars. He would be a knight in shining armor, he would slay dragons and save damsels in distress, he would be a hero, and people would love him for it. Things seemed so simple then. And then the magic came, and his world fell apart. It turned out he was everything he had been taught to fear and hate and scorn. He buried all his hope and idealism with the remains of his old self. He learned to survive and keep his head down, to shrink his life and his dreams to fit within the walls of a Circle tower. For a long time, he convinced himself that was enough. Even when Althea tried to get him involved in the mage rebellion, to care about freedom and their own rights, he had stayed out of it.

Until the Conclave changed everything again. And Cassandra and the Inquisition showed him that he mattered. What he did mattered, and a world without him went to hell. So he had dared to dream again. Maybe he really could make a difference. Maybe this thing that had happened to him wasn't so bad after all. Except... it was, when it hurt the people he'd started to care about. When the price of those dreams came due.

He opened his left hand and stared at the mark, watching it shimmer with green, otherworldly light. Then he wrapped his fingers into a fist and let it drop to the wooden table.

A sharp knock on his door broke through the silence, and he flinched at the sound. He didn't respond or move, just swallowed another mouthful of whiskey.

The door opened, and Dorian’s face appeared in the gap. He let himself in and sat down in the other chair, setting a ceramic jug on the table.

“Maker’s breath, Herald,” he said, taking in the disheveled state of both the room and Owain himself.

Owain shook his head. “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine,” Dorian replied. “Maker’s breath, Owain. You look like shit.” He picked up the half-empty
bottle of whiskey and sniffed it, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips with approval. “But at least you have good taste.”

Owain smiled darkly and raised his glass for another sip.

“In all seriousness though, did no one ever teach you not to drink alone?”

“Nope.”

Dorian sighed. “Well, someone had to come check on you. Would you believe I drew the short straw?” He stood and searched the room briefly, turning up some new candles that he set on the table and lit with a flick of his fingers. Owain reached to pour himself another drink, but Dorian grabbed the bottle and corked it, setting it aside. He took the jug he brought and poured it into the empty cup instead. Owain narrowed his eyes.

“Water,” Dorian said, pushing the cup in his direction. “You need to hydrate. And might I suggest using some of it to clean up?”

Dorian looked him over again in the candlelight, and Owain got the sense that his opinion had not improved. Owain looked down at himself. He hadn’t changed in days, his coat hung open, and his shirt was still stained with sweat and blood. He ran the back of his hand across his chin, where his usual stubble had blossomed into the beginnings of an unkempt beard.

“It's bad, isn't it?”

Dorian wrinkled his nose and nodded.

Owain wrinkled his nose and nodded.

Owain sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I just… I can’t forget what happened at Redcliffe. It haunts me.”

Dorian said nothing at first, staring off into the middle distance as if remembering that horror for himself. “That's the rub with this time travel,” he said. “We came back, but now we have to ask ourselves what was real. We had to see things no one else saw and wonder whether we really did change the future. Did we save the day or do irreparable damage?” He trailed into silence, and they sat there for a time, each lost in their own thoughts.

It was Dorian who looked up first. “Have you told her?” he asked.

“What?”

“Cassandra,” Dorian clarified. “Have you told her how you so obviously feel about her?

Owain drained his water and stared into the empty cup. More things he didn’t like to admit to himself, more feelings he didn’t want to probe. “I'm not sure what that has to do with anything.”

Dorian shrugged. “Anyone with eyes could see how you broke down when you saw her.”

“Right.” Owain fidgeted with his cup and avoided Dorian’s gaze. “Well. It's complicated. Not a good time. We've got bigger problems to deal with.”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “Of course, of course. It's always complicated, until it's not.”

“Anyway, it's not just that.” Owain pushed on and voiced the other worries he'd been wrestling with all evening. “What if we fail and that future happens anyway? What if nothing we do matters, and we all give our lives for nothing? If we do all this and the Elder One still wins?”
Dorian studied him for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was grave. “We all know what’s at stake here. We know what the cost is, whether you want to admit it to yourself or not. Cassandra knows it, I know it.”

He leaned forward and continued. “Do you know why I stayed? It’s not your delightful Southern weather, that's for certain. Or your cuisine. I stayed because I wanted to be part of something, this thing you’re building. To represent the Imperium and show that we're not all moustache-twirling blood mages. And then maybe, when I go home--assuming we succeed and I still have a home--I can change things for the better. But it starts here, with the Inquisition and closing that breach in the sky. I believe in you, Owain. We all do, or we wouldn't be here.”

Dorian's words filled him with gratitude. They didn’t sweep away his fear or his hopelessness, but at least he felt a little less alone. He was glad that someone else had been in that dark timeline with him, that someone else could bear witness to that horrible possibility, could prove that it wasn’t just the product of his own insanity.

“Thank you for that, Dorian. And thank you for staying.”

Dorian simply inclined his head and poured another cup of water, which Owain drank obediently. Then he stood to go. “I’ll wish you goodnight then, Herald. We’ve got a breach to close tomorrow.” He paused and picked up the whiskey, raising his brows in question. Owain waved his permission. Dorian smiled and tucked the bottle into his robes before stepping lightly out the door.

Owain stumbled to his bed and fell immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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He woke feeling like his brain was being hit with a hammer in five different places. When he sat up, the room spun and his stomach lurched into freefall. He groaned and lay back down, regretting every life decision that had led him to this point.

Several minutes later, after more self-loathing, he dragged himself out of bed and drank another glass of water, using the remainder of Dorian's jug to shave for the first time since Redcliffe. Feeling better, he rummaged his room for a relatively clean shirt and put it on, shaking out his coat and putting that back on, too. He found a dusty bit of elfroot in one of his pockets and chewed it, hoping to take the edge off the headache throbbing in his temples. A quick comb of his fingers through his hair, and he set out into the cold Haven morning in search of breakfast.

A hot meal reduced the pain in his head to a dull ache and settled his stomach to only occasional swooping. He walked out of the meal tent and headed toward the Chantry for the morning meeting at the war table.

As he reached the upper parts of Haven, he saw Cassandra arguing with a man in mage robes, and he paused where he stood. He was embarrassed to admit he'd been avoiding her since their return. Redcliffe had robbed him of his ease around the Seeker. Seeing her filled him with relief that she was alive and well, but he dreaded the images of her death that came unbidden to his mind. Beneath this ran the undercurrent of his feelings for Cassandra herself, feelings he preferred to keep unexamined for now. Part of him suspected he might be in love with her, but the rest of him wasn't ready to know that yet.

It was too late to turn around. She noticed him from the corner of her eye, so he continued at an easy pace. As he came within earshot, the outlines of her conversation with the mage became clear. He was one of the new recruits from Redcliffe, and their accommodations in Haven were not up to his standards.
“We need better quarters,” he demanded. “Along with more tents, blankets, and warm clothing. We were not advised about Haven’s conditions in advance! Furthermore, the Inquisition’s Templars must be kept away from our camp at all times! We will not tolerate them in our midst!”

Cassandra listened with patience that was obviously reaching its breaking point. “As I’ve already told you, our supplies are limited and must be shared equally among all of the Inquisition’s forces,” she said through gritted teeth. “This is not the Circle. The Herald welcomed you to Haven as our allies, not our charges. You must learn to fend for yourself.”

“B-but the Herald is a mage himself! He would never let his fellows suffer like this! How are we supposed to-”

“Deal. With. It.” She cut him off with a blistering glare and a note of finality.

Owain reached them at this point, and the mage appealed to him with a look. Owain said nothing and just smiled at him placidly until he stormed off in a huff.

"Ugh. I don’t know who told them I was the one to complain to.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re so approachable and understanding.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m sending the next one to you.”

They turned and walked together toward the Chantry. “Will we be ready for the breach today?” he asked.

“I spoke with Fiona this morning. The mages will be ready, despite their complaints.” She sighed. “They are here as our equals, and they need to learn what that means. This is your doing after all. You’re the one who brought them here.”

He didn't expect to hear accusation in her tone. “I did the best I could, Cassandra,” he said, trying to justify his actions. “I had to think on my feet, and an alliance seemed like the best option, for them and for the Inquisition.”

“Oh,” she said, stopping to look him in the eyes. “It does sound like I’m blaming you, does it not? That is not my intention. I do not disapprove. In fact, I think you did well. You made a decision when one needed to be made. The goal at Redcliffe was to secure the help of the mages, and you did that. I wish I could say I had done this.”

The praise was a surprise, too. He couldn't help smiling. “Now who’s the one giving compliments?” he teased as he held the door for her.

She rolled her eyes before walking past him, and he followed her into the war room.

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After all their preparation, closing the breach felt almost like an afterthought. They gathered again at what was left of the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and Owain’s mark had glowed brighter and brighter the closer he got to the breach. He could feel its power surging as Solas, Vivienne, Dorian, and the free mages focused their magic on him, and he channeled all of it into the tear in the sky. There was a crack and a flash of light, and a wave of energy that knocked them all to the ground, but at the end of it, they succeeded. The breach was closed, and the sky was whole once more.

All of Haven rejoiced that evening, opening casks of ale and laughing and dancing around the campfires. Owain joined in, accepting the praise and admiration that was heaped his way, but he
tired of it after a while and crept away in search of solitude.

His feet carried him back to that lonely dock just past the gates, and he sat on it again, marveling at everything that had happened in the weeks since he was last there.

He had committed to staying with the Inquisition until the breach was closed, and now that it was, his job seemed done. He looked down at his hand again, and the mark winked back at him. What would they do now? What would he do now?

His options seemed even more limited than before. The Herald of Andraste was a known entity now. He couldn’t exactly walk away. Where would he even go? Althea and the rest of the Ostwick Circle were headed here to join the Inquisition, like the other rebel mages. If anything, his place would have been with them. So where was his place now?

He heard footsteps on the dock behind him, and he knew without turning that it was Cassandra. She sat down beside him. “Well done, Herald. They are telling stories about your heroism today.”

“Well done, Herald. They are telling stories about your heroism today.”

“Which are greatly exaggerated,” he said, turning to look at her. “Do they know I’m here almost entirely by accident? And that you probably deserve more credit for all this than I do? Not to mention Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen.”

“True,” she nodded. “We all played a part. This was a victory of alliances, the first in recent memory. So many different people working together- this hasn’t happened since the last Blight.”

The night was cold, but not unpleasant. He leaned back on his hands and looked up at the sky, taking in the brilliance of the moon and stars and letting stray snowflakes brush against his face. “So what’s next? Where do we go from here?”

“The Inquisition will find a new focus,” said Cassandra, staring off across the lake. “Many mysteries remain. We must look into the things you saw at Redcliffe: the Elder One, the murder of Empress Celene, the demon army. We still do not know who opened the breach in the first place, or why.”

“Or what this mark is or why,” he added, holding his open hand in front of him.

“Yes. Tomorrow we will begin to answer those questions.”

“And tonight?”

“Tonight, we celebrate a victory.”

Her eyes glowed warmly at him, and he said nothing but returned her soft gaze. All thought of leaving the Inquisition fled from his mind then. He would be the Herald of Andraste, he would face the Elder One, he would do anything if it kept him at her side.

He had to say something, at least. “Do you remember the last time we sat here? You asked me whether you had done the right thing. I didn’t have an answer for you then, but I do now. You were right, Cassandra. You were bold and did what no one else would, and you were right. If I believe in anything, I believe in you.”

Her eyes went wide at his words, and then she smiled, slowly. “I was right about you, too.”

“Right about me, how?” He wasn’t sure what kind of answer she’d give.

“You are the leader we needed, and you have done the Maker’s work, whether you believe it or not,” she said, sounding so certain. Her eyes twinkled as she added, “And you’re a hopeless
flatterer.”

He laughed in surprise. *Maybe.* Maybe in a world without the breach he could be honest with himself. He thought about that as he memorized the way her smile lit her face, how the severe lines softened when she let her guard down. He wanted to trace them with his fingers and feel them under his lips. He wanted her to look at him like that always. He wanted… a lot of things.

The sound of alarm bells shattered the night. They turned their heads toward camp, where there was a flurry of activity, and with a worried glance they stood and sprinted toward the gates. There they met Leliana and Josephine, with Cullen running close behind.

“What is it?” Cassandra asked.

“Enemy forces,” said Cullen, breathless from rousing his men to arms. “Scouts spotted them coming through the pass. No banners.”

“How many?”

“Too many,” Leliana answered. “More than we can hope to defeat in open battle.”

As they stood there coming to terms with this news, there was a banging on the gate. A voice seeped through the crack. “Let me in! I need to come in! I have a warning!” Owain looked at the others, who stood motionless, confusion on their faces. He turned and pulled the door open, and a pale, waifish boy in a large, floppy hat slipped through. “Are you the Herald of Andraste?” he asked, in an odd, wispy voice.

“Yes. And who are you? What are you doing here?”

“You can call me Cole,” said the boy. “I’ve come to warn you. It’s the Templars. They’re coming to hurt you.”

“Templars?” Cullen asked. “Is this their response to our alliance with the mages? To attack blindly?”

“The Red Templars went to the Elder One,” Cole said. “Do you know him? He knows you. He’s coming for you. He’s very angry. He’s angry that you took his mages.”

He pointed to a rise above the valley. There, set against the white snow, was a mass of shadows and torches and light glinting off armor, all of it suffused with a reddish glow. Owain recalled with dread the red lyrium song from his nightmare future.

“Give me a plan, Cullen.”

The commander closed his eyes and took a deep breath before speaking. “Haven is no fortress. The Chantry is the only building with any hope of withstanding an attack, and even then it probably won’t hold for long. If we want to have any chance of holding them off, we need to control the field.” He pointed beyond the gates. “There are trebuchets along the outer defenses, but they’ll be overrun before long. We need to hold them and keep the enemies clear for my men to fire.”

“Done,” said Owain, his mind already moving to assignments. “Cassandra, Dorian, Blackwall—with me. We’ll take care of the trebuchets. Bull, take your Chargers and hold this gate. Mages and archers, on the walls. Hit them from a distance and keep them out as long as you can. The rest of you get the villagers to the Chantry.”

Everyone nodded to his orders and scattered to their places. He hurried down the path after Cassandra and could hear Cullen rallying the troops behind him. “To arms, Inquisition! For the
Herald! For your lives!"

They reached the first trebuchet and readied themselves to defend it as a crew of Inquisition soldiers wound and loaded the mechanism. Blackwall and Cassandra took the front, while Dorian and Owain stood a few paces back on higher ground. The first Templars rounded the corner, and their twisted forms gave Owain pause. They wore the order's plate, but crystals of red lyrium grew over and through their armor, as if fused with their bodies. They came in various stages of advanced growth. Some looked almost normal, while others looked barely human. His mind flashed back to Fiona in her Redcliffe cell.

Not only did the Red Templars look different, but they were stronger and faster, too, the lyrium giving them unnatural abilities. They shrugged off Owain's fire attacks and pushed him and his companions back toward the trebuchet.

With his usual spells not working, he needed a new strategy. A different element, perhaps? He signaled to the warriors to hold the enemies’ attention as he circled behind and set ice mines. Dorian corralled them with lightning and pushed them toward the traps, where they froze almost instantly. Cassandra and Blackwall rushed in with shield bashes and lunging strikes, shattering the lyrium in the Templar armor and weakening them to further attack. More traps, more lightning, and the Templars fell.

They made their way to the second trebuchet and then the third, clearing each wave of enemies as they came. But just as the Inquisition soldiers were loading the last machine, a new group of Templars appeared, different than the rest. These were further along with their red lyrium transformation. Two had long, gangly limbs, which they used to launch glowing red projectiles at the men loading the trebuchet, piercing them through the chest. The third Templar towered above the others. Its head and torso were solid lyrium, completely unrecognizable as human.

Owain and Dorian dealt with the ranged enemies while the warriors handled the behemoth. Dorian cast a barrier over the party and a cage of lightning over the Templars, who retaliated with more spikes of lyrium. Owain blocked them with a well-timed wall of ice. He fade-stepped toward them and planted his mines at close range, freezing them where they stood. A powerful bolt from Dorian shattered them, while a final fire spell from Owain blasted apart the remains.

The mages turned their attention to the final foe, who was keeping Blackwall and Cassandra well occupied. It swung its massive fists while they dodged and weaved around its feet. Owain rushed over to help, setting another mine before stepping quickly out of the way. Blackwall banged on his shield, and the enemy rushed forward into the trap. It was so large that the spell froze only its legs, but the Warden charged in anyway, bashing at them with his shield and slashing with his sword. The creature howled in pain and fell to its knees. In the opening, Cassandra leapt onto its back and buried her sword in the base of its skull. It shrieked again and tried to shake her off, but she held on, driving the blade still deeper until its cries went silent and its writhing ceased.

Maker, she's amazing. Owain stared in admiration as she pulled her sword out and jumped down, triumphant and breathless with exertion.

They finished the job and loaded the last trebuchet. The machines hit their mark, setting off a cascade of snow and ice that blocked the path of the oncoming forces.

The Inquisition troops cheered, but their joy was short-lived, as a loud, chilling screech rent the air. Owain heard the beat of wings and rush of wind as a dragon flew low over the walls of Haven. The creature opened its mouth and breathed fire over its path, demolishing one of the trebuchets and sending soldiers scattering for cover.
Shit. Templars were one thing, but a dragon was another. He called for retreat and waved everyone toward the gates as the dragon prepared to strafe again. “Fall back! Fall back to the Chantry!”

They retreated up through the village, beating back Templars at every step. Owain ran past the burning tavern but halted when he heard a call for help. He looked at Cassandra, who raised her shield to hold off the enemies blocking their path, while Blackwall smashed open the door. Owain ran inside, getting a face full of smoke and heat that stung at his eyes. He covered his nose with his sleeve and squinted, looking for the source of the cries. He saw the elf bartender crouched in the corner, surrounded by burning beams. The roof wouldn't last long. He fadestepped to her side and threw down an ice spell, buying them a brief respite from the heat. He wrapped his arms around her and led her out of the burning building.

They came out the door and stopped immediately as a wagon near the herbalist hut burst into flames. Owain ducked and threw them both aside to avoid the explosion. His heart pumped with adrenaline and fear as the dragon screamed overhead. The bodies of the Inquisition’s herbalist and tranquil researcher lay broken and blasted near the burning wagon. He felt small and helpless in the middle of it all. Innocent people were suffering and dying, and there was nothing he could do about it.

They kept moving until they reached the Chantry, where Cullen pushed the heavy doors closed behind them. Owain leaned against the door and took a moment to breathe. “They have a fucking dragon,” he gasped between gulps of air.

Cullen’s face was deadly serious. “I know. It’s cutting a path for that army. We’ve already taken heavy losses. There’s no way we can withstand a siege from that thing, even in here. I’m running out of ideas.”

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village,” Cole said from Owain’s peripheral vision. “He only wants the Herald.”

Owain turned to look at the boy. “If it will save these people, he can have me.”

“Herald,” Cullen said. “There are no tactics to win here. The only thing that will slow that army is another avalanche. We could turn the trebuchets and cause one last slide.”

Was Cullen suggesting suicide? “But we’re overrun,” Owain pointed out, confused. “If we hit the enemy, we’ll bury Haven, too.”

“We’re going to die, but we can decide how,” Cullen replied in a voice heavy with resignation. “Many don’t get that choice.”

“There’s another way,” said Cole. Owain noticed that he was holding Chancellor Roderick, an old Chantry cleric who’d spent the last several weeks accusing him of murdering the Divine. Roderick was gravely injured. He slumped weakly against the boy, and blood had soaked the front of his robes crimson. “He says there is a path, a way out of the valley. Andraste showed it to him in a pilgrimage, a way to save the people.”

He looked at Cullen. “Will it work?”

“Possibly, if Chancellor Roderick can show us the way. If it’s the only option we have...” He leveled his eyes at Owain and straightened his shoulders. “You’ll need to reset the trebuchets. Keep the attention of the Elder One and his dragon, and wait until we’re above the tree line before firing. It just might buy us enough time to get out of here.”

Owain nodded. If there was a chance for survival, they had to take it, even if he paid the cost.
Enough people had died because of him today. He turned toward the door again.

“Trevelyan.” Cullen gave him a final look. “Good luck. Let that thing hear you.”

He nodded again and opened the door, heading back into the cold with Cassandra, Blackwall, and Dorian. They fought their way back through the village, stepping over the splintered remains of the main gate and hurrying to the remaining siege machines. As they pushed the first into position, he told them what he'd decided on the way down. “I’m the one they want,” he said. “If things get bad, I want you to give me your word that you’ll fall back. Take that escape route with Cullen and the others. Get out.”

His companions were quiet as he looked at them one by one. Dorian nodded, his expression reluctant but knowing, and Blackwall bowed his head. Cassandra, however, stared back at him, her hazel eyes hot with defiance.

“Please, Cassandra,” he begged her. The images from Redcliffe flashed in his memory. “I need you to promise me this.”

She nodded once, to his infinite relief, never taking her eyes from his.

They continued around the outskirts of Haven, adjusting the trebuchets and readying them for launch. As they loaded the final one, the dragon swooped over them, breathing a trail of fire and landing heavily in front of Owain. He shouted at the others to retreat, and without looking back, he turned to face it. He dodged its flames and went on the attack, but his magic was no match. It swatted him with a heavy paw, breaking his staff and tumbling him to the ground.

As he struggled to his feet, he could see that they weren’t alone. A tall, horrifying creature walked out of the flames, its body a grotesque amalgam of bone, metal, and raw muscle. It held a spinning orb in one of its skeletal hands and addressed him in a low, booming voice. “Pretender. You toy with forces beyond your ken, but no more. Know me. Exalt the Elder One. Know the will that is Corypheus. You will kneel.”

“Never!” He stood his ground as the creature approached. He could feel his mark reacting and sputtering with power, glowing bright amid the smoke. Whatever happened here, he needed to buy time, as much as possible for the others to escape.

“I am here for the anchor, and I will have it.” Corypheus held up the orb and reached toward Owain. The mark surged and crackled with light. Owain gripped his left hand with his right as it pulsed with pain, drawn toward the Elder One and his spell.

“This is your fault, you know,” the creature continued. “You interrupted a ritual years in the making, and instead of dying, you stole its purpose. How you survived I do not know, but what you have been marked with, what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens!”

He moved toward Owain and picked him up by the wrist, lifting his feet off the ground and bringing them eye to eye. Owain struggled in vain. “I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the old gods in person. I found only chaos and corruption. Now I have gathered the will to return under my own name. To champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world. Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty.”

Whatever he was attempting, it was unsuccessful. The mark still flashed on Owain’s hand. The Elder One howled with rage and released him, slamming him against the wooden siege engine.

“The anchor is permanent! So be it! I will find another way to give this world the nation and god it
requires. I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You must die!”

Owain looked down at the trebuchet. If he was quick, he could set it off before Corypheus knew what was happening. He brought his attention back to the creature in front of him and let his voice ring out. “Enough talk,” he said. “If I’m going to die, I will not go alone!” He dove for the lever to fire the machine, sending its load flying high over the village to the mountain above. The rumble of falling snow told him it had worked, but he didn’t stop to confirm.

He sprinted away from Corypheus and the dragon, running blindly. He spotted a hole in the ground, half covered with wooden planks, and threw himself at it headfirst. He crashed through layers of rotted wood, ice, and snow before flopping to a rest at the bottom, where his world went dark.

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The popping of the mark roused him, and he woke with a gasp, clawing snow and ice from his face and struggling free of the heap he had landed in. His chest and shoulder hurt, but whether that was from the fall or the dragon or Corypheus, he didn’t know.

He conjured a flame for light and assessed his surroundings. It was some kind of tunnel or cave beneath Haven. He followed the wall until he found a passageway that seemed to slope upwards, and with no better options, he took it. He was wet and cold and low on mana. Melted snow had soaked through his breeches and traveled up his sleeves. He wrapped his coat tighter and shivered, holding the flame closer for its meager warmth.

He was right about the passage, at least. It led him to the mouth of the cave, where he looked out onto whiteness as far as he could see. As if the avalanche wasn’t enough, the weather had picked up since the battle. The wind was driving snow almost sideways.

What were his choices? He could stay here and freeze slowly, or go out there and freeze quickly, with only the smallest chance of catching up to the rest of the Inquisition. But if he stayed, he would certainly be left behind.

He thought of Cassandra and the others, and the answer was clear. He reached for that slim chance, stepping out into the blizzard. He picked a direction and walked.
Owain lost track of how many times he drifted in and out of consciousness. Waking, sleeping, reality, the Fade. Their edges blurred and mixed around him, like a bath of oil and water.

He woke at one point early on, in a haze of pain and heat. He lay in a tent, heaped with furs. Coals burned in a brazier beside him. He could just make out the dim forms of his advisors at the entrance. Solas was propping his head up with one hand and pouring a bitter solution down his throat with the other. “You very nearly froze to death,” he said as he administered the potion. “This will warm you and help you sleep.”

Owain was too exhausted to protest or even speak. He could see Cassandra hovering over Solas’s shoulder. It was her face he held in his mind as he slipped below the surface once more.

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He was alone in what must be the Fade, wandering a landscape that was at once both alien and familiar. It looked like ancient ruins at first, the kind they saw in the Hinterlands and elsewhere in Thedas. Crumbling stone walls and arches taken over by creeping vines and weeds. Then he turned a corner and found himself in the middle of a formal garden like the ones he saw in Val Royeaux, a maze of neatly trimmed hedges, elegant statues, and bubbling fountains. He stepped through a gate, and it became his childhood home, the Trevelyan manor in Ostwick. He remembered these places, the stables, the kitchen gardens, the imposing front doors.

He walked into the courtyard, and a small rift appeared, hissing and spitting in the air. It spawned a half-dozen demons that ran screeching toward him. He grabbed his staff and fadestepped out of the way, raising a wall of flames in his path. Whirling to put the flames at his back, he threw down a trio of fire mines and set to immolating any demons that made it past his defenses. This was almost routine now, and he finished them quickly. Then he held up his hand to close the rift, as he had done so many times before.

But nothing happened.

He looked at his left hand, flexed his fingers, and turned it over. It looked… normal. There was no mark, no green glow. Which meant no way to close this rift. He felt a pang of disappointment, mixed with relief and displaced by rising panic as the rift crackled again. A massive pride demon fell from
the breach and landed with a loud, earth-shaking thud. It stood and stretched toward the sky, laughing its deep, thunderous laugh as it looked down at him. “Pretender.”

Owain reached again for his staff, but it was... gone? His hands were empty. It was not on his back. He could still cast, of course, but defeating this monster would take more than he could do without a weapon. *Shit.*

He was defenseless. Powerless. Weak.

The demon laughed again and reached out to him. With no other option, Owain spun on his heels and ran. He ran through the courtyard and back into the manor, which had changed into an endless, twisting labyrinth of passages.

He could hear the demon gaining on him. He pushed himself, heart hammering, lungs heaving, legs pumping at full tilt. Turning corners, up and down stairs. No matter how hard he ran, it wasn’t fast enough. He was too slow and too heavy, as if his boots were made of lead.

He came to a long, wide room filled with people, many of them in Inquisition uniforms. They looked ragged, injured, and dying. They called out to him, pressing forward, clutching at his coat, begging for his attention and help. He could do nothing, say nothing. There was a monster coming, couldn’t they see? He pushed his way through the crowd, still moving too slow. He turned a corner and kept running until he came to a dead end and turned around, finally spent, doubled over and panting for air.

The demon reached the opposite end of the hall and stopped. Now it took the form of his father, and it smiled, leering at him with his father’s hard eyes and laughing with his cold voice.

“Pathetic,” the demon spat as it advanced slowly up the hall. “Look at you. Cornered like the rat you are. No son of mine would turn and run. Hah! Did you think you would learn anything in that Tower? You would have been better dead. Magic *ruined* you. Magic made you *weak*.

“Did you think you could do this? Did you think you mattered? You’re nothing. All you do is fail, like you failed those people in Haven. Like you failed your friends at Redcliffe.” A horde of demons and walking dead flowed in behind the demon, crawling and limping down the hallway. There was Cassandra with arrows in her neck and Leliana scarred and skeletal, bleeding from her chest.

Owain backed against the wall. Fear gripped his heart and cold sweat ran down his brow. Looking around frantically, he found a door to his right. Had that always been there? He didn’t care. He lunged for the handle and stumbled through it, pushing the door closed behind him.

He found himself in a bedroom, surrounded by sudden quiet and the soft glow of candlelight. His pulse slowed as the panic drained from him, leaving bone-deep exhaustion in its wake. His eyes were drawn to the bed in the center of the room. On it lay his mother, ill, as she often was while he was growing up. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were clasped over the covers. Her lips were moving and he could just make out the murmur of her prayers.

He approached her, slowly, and somehow he was a boy again, small, the mattress coming only to the middle of his chest. He leaned close and rested his head on her shoulder. She put her hand on his head, and peace flowed over him. He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

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He opened his eyes onto tent canvas and the glow of dying coals. His eyelids felt heavy, and he blinked slowly to bring it all into focus.
The tent was empty now, except for Cassandra, who knelt at his side, her head bowed and eyes closed. The fading light cast shadows on her face, which was calm except for a slight crease between her brows.

She hadn’t noticed him waking, and he decided to keep it that way, so he stilled himself and studied her quietly. Her hair was messy and her armor still speckled with blood and dirt from the battle at Haven. Her sword and shield were elsewhere, and she had taken off her gloves to rest her bare hands on her knees. Her eyes shifted behind their lids, and her lips moved with whispered prayers. The light caught the tracks of tears down her cheeks, and he flattered himself to think that maybe a few had been for him.

It made his heart ache. This strong, passionate, beautiful woman. He wanted her. And he wanted to fold her in his arms, to tell her it would be alright, to shield her from the hurt and the danger of this world. But she would never allow that. And in this moment, with the pain in his limbs, he wasn’t even sure he could pull it off. The truth was, she was the one protecting him.

The comfort in that thought carried him off again into the abyss.

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He was ascending a narrow, circular stairway. Stripes of sunlight fell through slits in the stone walls, illuminating the particles of dust that danced in the air. He reached a landing and exited onto a hallway lined with doors. The pattern in the walls, the floors—it was all familiar, and yet not. This was the Circle, he felt, rather than thought.

It was quiet and strangely empty. He was searching for something, something he desperately needed, but what that was, he couldn’t say. He wandered in and out of rooms. Here was the library, with its towering shelves and desks stacked with books. Here was the great hall, with its long tables and benches set for a meal. Here were the dormitories, the only spaces a mage might call their own, hidden behind rows of doors lined up like a prison.

He met no one in all his wanderings until he reached the small chapel on the first floor. There, he found Cassandra kneeling before the altar and the gilded statues of Andraste. He walked slowly toward her, passing through the rows of pews and patches of multi-colored light that filtered through the stained glass windows. At the sound of his steps, she turned and looked over her shoulder at him. A slow smile spread across her face as she watched his approach, and she rose to meet him.

She said nothing, and indeed, he could think of nothing that needed saying either. He looked at her for a long moment, drinking in her beauty, and then he reached out a hand to gently, lightly, brush her cheek with his fingers. She smiled again and closed her eyes, and before he could stop himself, he stepped even closer, too bold by far, and placed his lips on hers.

She gasped in surprise, and he pulled away slightly, his heavy-lidded eyes searching hers for rebuke or anger, but finding only warmth in that bottomless hazel. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. A proper one, deeper and longer. Her tongue licked at his lips, seeking access he was more than happy to grant. He pulled her closer, tighter, bringing their bodies flush, surrounding her in an embrace that felt right.

The room faded to grey around him, setting off the pops of red, green, and blue that swirled at the boundaries of his vision. He pulled his mouth from hers, and her face flickered with disappointment that he dispelled by pressing a row of slow, unhurried kisses along the sharp line of her jaw, up to her ear and down to her collarbone. His stubble scratched against the smooth skin of her throat. Eyes closed, she arched her body toward his, and he responded with a groan that came from his very core. He held her hips and pinned her back against the edge of a heavy something. Exactly what, he didn’t
know or care. She kissed him again, as hungry as he was, meeting her lips to his, sliding her tongue across his. Her hands gripped his shoulders, his neck, his cheek, the hair on the back of his head.

His hands found the hem of her tunic—she wasn’t wearing armor, somehow—and slid upwards to her waist, finding bare, warm skin that only made him want more. He ground his hips into hers, not caring if she could feel his desire. No, wanting her to feel it. As if she read his mind, she brought a hand down to brush the front of his breeches, and he groaned again.

Burning hot now, he growled low and kissed her hard, smashing his lips into hers, scraping his teeth along her writhing, twisting tongue. He pushed her gently but urgently to the floor, following her down, never taking his mouth from hers. She wrapped her legs around his hips to pull him closer, while his hands moved higher to cup the curves of her breasts. He swiped the rough pads of his thumbs across their tips, and they hardened at his touch. She whimpered softly into his mouth, and like that, she melted what was left of his self-control.

It was all a haze of heat and want and her, and right then he desired nothing more than to lose himself in it. He pulled the tunic over her head and kissed a line down her throat, rocking himself against the heat between her thighs. He traced circles around one nipple with his thumb and took the other in his mouth, teasing with his tongue. Maker, she was intoxicating. It filled his senses. The sound of her pleasure, the twist of her fingers in his hair, and the pressure and promise of still more to come...

But then, everything went dark.

Something wet and cold—very cold—was on his forehead, and something warm at his cheek. He reached up to grab it, and when his eyes focused, he found himself holding Cassandra’s hand. Still heated from his dream, and without thinking, he took it and brushed a kiss on her palm before turning back to her with a ridiculous grin.

She looked at him with surprise, brows quirked in confusion. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it and drew back her hand with a soft cough. “Herald,” she said. “It’s…it’s good to see you awake, finally. It seems your fever has broken.”

The sound of his title slammed him back to earth, and he wiped the smile from his face as he remembered where he was. He looked down and thanked the Maker for the furs that still covered him from the waist down, saving him that embarrassment, at least.

He pulled the cool cloth from his head and tried to sit up. He was stopped by both a sharp pain and Cassandra’s hand on his chest. “Be careful. You cracked a few ribs, and they will take time to heal, even with Solas’s potions.”

He winced as he lay back and gingerly prodded his ribs through the bandages circling his chest. “What happened? How long has it been?” He had genuinely no idea of the answers. The last thing he remembered was wandering through a blizzard, cold and desperate, waiting for his own death. How did he get here? Had it been hours? Days?

“We found you just outside camp, collapsed in the snow. We had almost given up searching for you until we saw the light from your mark. You were barely conscious. Cullen and Blackwall had to carry you here. That was almost two days ago.”

He remembered now. Haven, the battle, the dragon. All that death, all that destruction. “What about the others? And Corypheus?”

“Dorian, Blackwall, and I fell back as you ordered,” she said, her voice weary. “We caught up with
the others in the pass, just as the avalanche fell. We feared the worst for you. Many were lost at Haven, and many more are injured. There’s been no sign of Corypheus so far, but we will need to move soon. Our supplies are running low.”

“Where will we go?”

“To be honest, I do not know,” she sighed. “But now that you are awake, perhaps we can agree on a plan. I should go and alert the council.” She rose to go.

“Wait,” he said, holding up a hand and turning to meet her eyes. He swallowed hard before speaking. “I… I just wanted to say thank you, Cassandra. For being here. For watching over me.”

Her eyes were shiny in the dim light, her lips drawn in a tight line. “I brought you into this mess. I started this. When I thought we had lost you… I could never forgive myself. I knew I should have stayed with you.” She took a deep breath and looked down at her hands. “But you saved us. Without you, none of us would be here. We need you, Owain. The Inquisition needs you. It was the least I could do.” She smiled softly, then ducked under the tent flap and was gone.

Alone now, he sighed and rubbed his face, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyeballs. Fuck. He was an idiot, and it was only luck that he hadn't made things worse.

It had been a long time since he had dreamed so vividly, and even then, it was only under the influence of lyrium. He raked his fingers through his hair and made a mental note to ask Solas about his potions. Though in the end, perhaps, he could hardly blame someone else for the content of his own subconscious.

Slowly, and ignoring Cassandra’s warning, he pushed himself to a sitting position and tried to dress himself. It took several minutes and many deep breaths just to drag a shirt over his head and torso. It took several more to shrug into his coat and summon the strength to stand and stagger toward the entrance.

Just as he reached the flap, Mother Giselle appeared. “Pardon, Herald. Cassandra said you were awake. A word?”

A chat with the cleric was, frankly, the last thing he wanted right now, but he was in a contrite mood. His interactions with Cassandra, both waking and sleeping, were still fresh in his mind. “Of course,” he said and masked his irritation with practiced politeness.

“You should be resting,” Giselle said. She marked his obvious discomfort as he sat again on his bedroll.

“I’ve rested enough for the moment,” he lied. “We can’t stay here forever.”

“True, but we are safe for now. We have seen nothing of Corypheus or his forces. Perhaps they cannot find us. We hardly know where we are ourselves, after all. Or perhaps he thinks you dead.”

Owain propped himself up with one arm and clutched his ribs with the other, wincing as he shifted his weight. “He was almost right on that front,” he said, with more lightness than he felt.

“The people are still struggling to make sense of what you’ve done. We saw our defender stand against evil. We saw you fall, and now we have seen you return. The more the enemy seems beyond us, the more miraculous your actions appear, and the more our trials seem ordained.”

“I escaped the avalanche, you know. Through a mine shaft or something. I didn’t die and come back to life. And I did what anyone else would have done. There was nothing miraculous about this.”
“Perhaps not,” Giselle said, shrewdly. “The dead cannot return from across the veil, of course. But the people know what they saw, or, perhaps, what they needed to see. The Maker works both in the moment and in how it is remembered. Can we truly know that he is not with us?”

“I just don’t see how what we believe matters,” Owain replied, remembering all the dead villagers and Inquisition soldiers at Haven and his own inability to save them. “Corypheus is a very real, physical threat, as we saw at Haven. That’s a fact. We cannot match that with hope alone.” His patience for this conversation was wearing thin. He got up and moved for the entrance. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

He emerged from the tent and realized he had no idea what lay outside. He found himself in the middle of a large, makeshift camp. Inquisition soldiers and refugees were gathered around tents and small campfires around him. Fresh snow crunched underfoot.

Cassandra and the rest of his advisors were standing around a wooden crate covered in maps and charts—what passed for a war table here, it seemed. They were pointing and arguing. About what, he couldn’t hear, but he assumed it was their next course of action. Some things didn’t change.

Mother Giselle appeared at his shoulder, having followed him out of the tent. “Another heated voice won’t help, even yours. Perhaps especially yours.”

He said nothing to that and pulled his coat tighter around himself, taking care not to pull at the bandages. He sighed, and it was a visible puff of steam in the cold air.

“An army needs more than an enemy, Herald. It needs a cause,” she added.

And then, without warning, she started singing. Softly at first, then growing in volume. People around them stopped to listen, and then they, too, began to sing. He frowned at her. Was this really happening? He had the distinct impression that he was being used. She just smiled at him and sang on.

He was at a loss. He looked at his advisors, but they were no help. Leliana and Cullen had joined in. Josephine just smiled at him, and Cassandra, she looked at him thoughtfully, her expression unreadable.

The song was uplifting and beautiful in its way. He could see it uniting the camp around their common cause, with him at its head. Perhaps Giselle was right, and this is what they needed. And yet, it left him feeling profoundly empty. He felt like a fraud, undeserving of this devotion. He would rather face another avalanche than carry the weight of all their faith and hope.

So he stood there, alone, as their voices rose to the cold, clear heavens.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for a bit of bait and switch. But dreams != real life...
A Break, A Pause

Chapter Summary

Some down time in Skyhold.

A cold, crisp wind swept down from the mountains as Owain walked the battlements of Skyhold. He liked the way the pre-dawn light washed the stones with grey. In an hour or so, the sun would rise to drench it all in blinding brightness.

They had been here for little over a week, and workers were already putting the place back together. Allies and new recruits were arriving every day, swelling their numbers and their resources. Even in the castle’s current condition, it was nice to be surrounded by solid walls again after their journey through the Frostbacks. Skyhold was enormous—the perfect home for the Inquisition, really. Solas had shown them the way. Something he’d seen in one of his trips through the Fade, perhaps. Owain wished his own dreams would show him such useful things.

He was back to not sleeping. After a few hours of tossing and turning on his bedroll each night, he would give up and pace the castle walls in the early morning quiet. Solitude was infinitely better than the images that crowded his sleeping mind these days.

He paused and leaned his elbows along one of the walls, looking down at the empty courtyard. It was still scattered with tents that served as temporary shelter while they cleared the castle’s interior. Piles of fresh lumber and salvaged stone were stacked along the perimeter, and the outlines of a training ring were sketched in the dirt. He snapped his fingers idly and watched the tiny flame play across his hand and dance in the breeze.

The free mages had set themselves up in one of the crumbling towers on the south side of the fortress, camping in the lower courtyard as they restored the structure. The Ostwick mages had arrived two days ago, having re-directed from Haven after its destruction. He was up on the walls when they came through the gate. Althea had caught his eye and beamed at him from below. “You did this,” her face seemed to say. “You made this possible.”

She found him when he came down to welcome the members of his former Circle. “You’re a real hero now, Owain,” she’d said in his ear, smirking and wrapping him in a full-body hug. “I knew you had it in you.” It was surreal, to be surrounded by old friends and rivals, teachers and colleagues. The connections of his former life, clashing with the man he was now. And who was he, now?

Yesterday they named him Inquisitor. They handed him a giant sword and gathered the entire Inquisition to witness. He couldn’t say no with all of them looking at him so expectantly. Especially Cassandra. The Inquisition needed a leader, she’d said, and who better than the man who was already leading it? In spite of all his reservations, he hoisted that silly sword aloft. He would do it for the mages, he’d said. To set an example, to show that mages could do good and deserved the freedoms they had tried to claim for themselves. Dorian, Vivienne, and Solas smiled and nodded their approval from the crowd. Fiona, Althea, and the free mages cheered.

That was the easy part. The real work was still to come. The work of rebuilding Skyhold, of investigating Corypheus and what the hell he wanted with Owain and the mark he had called the anchor. Varric had stepped in to offer assistance on that front. He and his friend Hawke, the
Champion of Kirkwall, had apparently faced Corypheus before. Had thought they’d killed him, in fact. Hawke was on her way to Skyhold to provide what help and advice she could.

Owain heard a door slam behind him, and he turned to look. It was Cullen, coming out of the tower he had claimed as a makeshift office. He hurried forward a few steps, stopped, and then grimaced, rubbing his temples with his fingers. He muttered something under his breath and then walked toward the stairs. He didn’t notice Owain until he was nearly upon him.

“Morning,” Owain said, lazily. “If this qualifies as morning.”

Cullen looked startled. “Inquisitor! My apologies. I didn’t see you there.” He cleared his throat and collected himself. “The walls are usually quiet this time of day.”

“They are, indeed,” Owain agreed, from personal experience. “Are you always up this early? Or is something keeping you awake, too?” Cullen’s eyes were bloodshot. He looked exhausted and haggard, his face unshaven and hair in an unusual state of disarray. Probably not far from how Owain looked himself, honestly.

“What?” Cullen asked. His brows were furrowed in confusion, and he brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck. “Oh, it's nothing. I was just hoping to get some tea. From the kitchens.” Owain looked at him quizzically. “I've been writing,” Cullen added. “Letters.”

“For work or pleasure?”

“To the families,” Cullen responded grimly. “Of those we lost at Haven. I want them to know that their sacrifice wasn’t in vain, that they gave their lives for a worthy cause.”

Owain chided himself for his lame attempt at levity. Of course it was something serious and work-related. This was Cullen. He looked down and spoke soberly. “I saw the list that Leliana gave you. That was a lot of names.”

“Yes,” Cullen said with a deep breath. “We lost a lot of good men and women that night.” He turned to Owain with a determined fire in his eyes. “And I assure you it will not happen again, Inquisitor. Haven wasn't built to withstand an attack like that, but Skyhold is. We could make a stand here, if needed. We won't let Corypheus win again.”

“Good.” He didn't know what else to say.

Cullen continued, looking away and rubbing his neck again. “I’ve also been meaning to say thank you, Trevelyan. We wouldn't be here without you. That final avalanche, the sacrifice you were ready to make… I… haven’t always gotten along with mages, you know, but I’m glad. Glad you…”

“Didn't die?” Owain finished for him. “Are those the words you're searching for?”

Cullen breathed out a laugh, looking out over the walls.

“Well, you, too,” Owain said. “Who else would I get to train the Inquisition troops? Cassandra? She would punch anyone who stepped out of line, and we'd be out of healing potions in a week.”

“That sounds… exactly like her,” Cullen chuckled, shaking his head. They watched the sun brighten the sky beyond the Frostbacks.

“Would you like help?” Owain asked. “With the letters?”

Cullen seemed surprised. “I- Well, sure. I'm sure a letter from the Inquisitor himself would provide a
fair amount of comfort.”

“Still can't get used to that name,” said Owain as they walked back to Cullen's tower. “I just stopped cringing at 'Herald of Andraste.'”

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Owain stayed until mid-morning writing letters. He took his time with each one, saying the names out loud, trying to recall faces when he could, and asking Cullen about them when he couldn't. There were far too many he didn't know. He regretted that. These people had given their lives for the Inquisition. They had died in his name, but he didn't even know theirs.

Too many names. They hardly made a dent in the list, but Cullen insisted they break for the day. He had other duties to attend to. Owain promised to return each morning until they finished.

He made his way down to the courtyard, which was now bustling with activity. Workers carried building materials and supplies back and forth, and the sound of hammering filled the air. He decided he wanted something else to keep him busy, to keep his mind from darker thoughts. He headed for the forge—perhaps his skill with fire could be of use there.

He opened the door and heard angry, shouting voices from the second floor. Cassandra. And… Varric?

He hurried up the stairs and found them deep in a heated argument.

“You knew where Hawke was all along!” Cassandra accused.

Varric threw it back at her. “I sure did!”

“You conniving little shit!” She swung at him, and he ducked around a chair, which Cassandra kicked viciously out of the way.

Without quite considering the danger, Owain stepped between them, his hands up in a placating stance. Cassandra stepped toward him and then stopped inches from his face, redirecting her fist at a wooden post and grunting in frustration. He flinched involuntarily. He could swear he saw dust falling from the floor above, shaken loose by the impact.

“I think we’ve all seen enough violence lately that we don't need to fight amongst ourselves,” he said. “What’s going on here?”

She glared at him and folded her arms across her chest. “Varric is a liar,” she said, voice dripping with contempt. “He kept Hawke from us when we needed her most. She should have been at the Conclave. If anyone could have saved Most Holy, it was her. He could have prevented all of this!”

“He’s not responsible for what happened at the Conclave,” Owain reminded her.

“I was protecting my friend!” Varric protested. “Was I supposed to trust someone who kidnapped me? Interrogated me? Hawke is here now. That’s the important thing. We’re all on the same side!”

Cassandra grit her teeth at him. “I know whose side you’re on, Varric, and it’s not the Inquisition’s!”

“That’s a bit unfair,” said Owain. She snorted and turned her head aside. “Varric’s earned his place here, like the rest of us. And we can’t change the past.”

Varric exhaled triumphantly, but Owain cut him off with a stern look. “Don’t,” he said. “Any more
lies, and you’re done here.”

Varric’s face fell and he nodded, throwing his hands in the air. “Alright, I understand,” he sighed and turned to go. “But you know what I think? I think if Hawke had been at the Conclave, she would be dead, too, and we’d still be in this mess. She deserves some peace. You people have done enough to her.” He disappeared down the stairs.

Owain sighed and turned back to Cassandra, who was now leaning on her elbows, looking down over the railing. He approached slowly and leaned back beside her, his arms crossed over his chest. He said nothing and looked at his feet, waiting. He knew she would get impatient and start talking, eventually.

He was right. “I believed him,” she said, shaking her head. “He spun his story for me, and I just swallowed it. This all could have been different. If only I had explained to him why we needed her, if only I had made him understand.”

“You don’t know that,” he said gently. “It might not have changed anything. And maybe Varric is right, and Hawke would have just died at the Conclave, like everyone else. What’s done is done.”

She looked up at him. “When we first considered reviving the Inquisition, Leliana and I searched for the Hero of Ferelden, but she had disappeared. So then we looked for Hawke. She was the Champion of Kirkwall and a mage; she would have been respected.” She sighed again. “But honestly, she may not even have agreed to become Inquisitor.”

She pushed off the railing and paced around the room, settling on a chair by the table in the center. “This isn’t really about Varric,” she said, hanging her head in her hands. “Or Hawke. I should have known. I should have been smarter. I should have seen through his lies. I should have been there at the Conclave to protect Most Holy.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, Cassandra.” He pulled up a chair to sit beside her. “You can’t beat yourself up over what could have been. I meant what I said back in Haven. The Inquisition was the right thing to do, and none of it would have happened without you. I believed in you. I still do.”

She raised her head to look at him again, eyes glittering in the low light.

“Plus, it’s nice to know I was your third choice,” he added, smiling faintly.

She stood and put a hand on his shoulder. He could feel the warmth of her touch radiating through her gloves and his coat, and he couldn’t help imagining how it might feel without all those layers of cloth and leather.

“Maybe if we had found Hawke or the Hero of Ferelden, the Maker wouldn’t have needed to send you,” she said quietly. “But he did. You’re not what I pictured. But I don’t regret that, and if I’ve learned anything, it’s that I know less than nothing.”

He reached a hand up to cover hers. Her fingers slipped through his as she pulled away.

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If Owain had learned anything from Haven, it was an awareness of the limits of his own power. Their enemies were only going to get stronger, and he needed to be stronger, too. The last few years in the Circle had made him complacent about advancing his own abilities. He couldn’t afford that now.

He needed to know more about the anchor, about the powers it gave him. Yes, he used it to close
rifts, but remembering Corypheus’s words, he had the sense there was much more to it. Perhaps there were ways to manipulate the Veil, to draw on the power of the Fade and use it to his advantage on the battlefield.

He went to Solas, who seemed to know about such things. Instead of the lecture he expected, the elf handed him a stack of books and told him to come back once he had finished them. Owain sighed and took them back to his quarters, memories of his lessons at the Circle flashing in his mind.

He selected a volume at random and headed out to the castle grounds, intending to find a quiet corner up on the battlements where he could read in peace, away from the constant construction noise that echoed off the stone walls. On the way to the stairs, he saw Cassandra perched on a rock outside the forge with a book of her own, and he changed direction. She looked up as he approached.

“I didn’t know you were a reader.”

“Is there a problem with that?” she asked, defensively. She noticed the tome tucked under his arm. “I didn’t know you read either.”

“Well, no one ever bats an eye at a mage carrying a book,” he shrugged. “Do you mind if I join you?”

She shook her head and turned back to her reading. He sat down under a nearby tree and leaned back against the trunk.

He flipped to the first page and began. It was a treatise on the Veil, with notes from a study on fade rifts. He found it surprisingly interesting. Perhaps there was something here that could explain his experiences with the mark.

From the edge of his sight, he could see Cassandra look up periodically and steal a glance at him with a guilty cast to her eyes. It amused him, and he could feel a smile tugging at his lips. He was sorely tempted to meet her gaze and catch her in the act, but he set himself a challenge to resist for as long as possible.

“What are you reading?” she asked, at last. It gratified him that she broke first.

He looked at the cover. “Power Bleeds: Harness the Flow. Title’s a bit dramatic, but it's quite interesting so far. I'm hoping it will tell me more about controlling the power of the rifts.”

“Oh. That sounds very… practical.”

“I hope so. And you?”

“It’s… nothing,” she said, closing the book in her hands. “Just something frivolous. Nothing that would interest you.”

“You, frivolous?” he laughed. “Now that's where you're wrong. Sounds like something highly interesting to me.”

She made a disgusted sound and looked away. When she looked back, he was still waiting for her. He wouldn't let her dodge that easily. “It's… literature,” she said finally. “Smutty literature. It's one of Varric’s books, the latest chapter of Swords and Shields.”

“Latest chapter? Meaning you've read them all? You must be quite the fan then.”

“Don’t tell Varric!” she said, hastily. “I couldn’t stand the smug look on his face if he knew I read his
books.” She sighed a bit wistfully and ran her hand over the cover. “They’re terrible... and also magnificent. This one ends in a cliffhanger, but I know he’s working on the next one. He must be.”

He stared at her in amazement.

“What?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. “Why are you smiling?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to be such a romantic, Cassandra.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. You think because I am a warrior, because I wear armor instead of frilly dresses, I can’t be romantic? Romance is passion. It’s being swept away by the pursuit of an ideal. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all,” he said, taken aback by the strength of her response. “I quite like this side of you.” And he did. One of the many unexpected things he liked about her.

“I do not swoon,” she huffed.

“I meant the passion.”

“Well, isn’t this adorable,” Dorian interrupted, breezing past the forge and spotting them sitting outside. “And they told me the library wouldn't be finished for weeks. So we’re reading out of doors now? No one invited me.”

“Just a little break, Dorian,” Owain said, looking up at him. “You're welcome to join if you like.”

“Ah. Well I'd have to find something decent in the Inquisition’s collection first. You really ought to put someone on that, Trevelyan. The selection is rather basic at the moment.” He noticed the book in Cassandra’s hands. “I see you’re reading your favorite torrid novels again, Seeker.”

“No one asked you, Tevinter!” Cassandra glared at him.

He waved her off. “I couldn't even finish the one you lent me, it was so bad. I actually feel dumber for having tried. At any rate, you two seem to be doing well enough without me. I’ll leave you to it.” He quirked his eyebrows at Owain and then sauntered off in the direction of the main keep.

“Maybe I should read this book if you like it so much,” he said, turning back to Cassandra, who was still burning holes in Dorian’s back with her eyes.

“You? No!” she exclaimed, mildly horrified.

“Why not? You lent it to Dorian, apparently.”

“That’s different! You… you're the Inquisitor.”

“So? What’s that supposed to mean?” Owain himself didn’t yet know what it meant. A very real worry occurred to him. Was this how she saw him? As The Inquisitor, larger than life?

“You can’t possibly…” she spluttered. “You… have much more important things to worry about, I’m sure. Although...” She looked down at the book in her lap and considered for a moment before blurtng out her next words. “You could find out if Varric is working on the next chapter. You could command him to-- Ugh.” She checked herself, and her expression clouded over.

“Pretend you don’t know this about me,” she snapped. Then she rose and stalked off, back into the tower.
He sat there in stunned silence before laughing to himself. So a soft heart beat under Cassandra’s armored shell. If she wanted him to forget it, that was one request he had no intention of honoring.

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Persuading Varric to write the next chapter of *Swords and Shields* was surprisingly easy. Marian Hawke had just arrived in Skyhold, and Owain found the two of them catching up over drinks in the newly rebuilt tavern.

“Wait, you’re saying *Cassandra* reads my stories?” Varric had asked while Hawke snickered into her pint. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same Cassandra? Tall, grumpy Seeker? Likes to stab things?”

“Maybe she wants to use it for sword practice, like your last one.” Hawke smirked, draping an arm over the back of her chair.

“Not until she’s read it at least five times,” Owain said. “Look, it’d be a hell of a peace offering. I know the two of you don’t exactly get along, but would you do it? As a favor for me?”

Varric had sat back and studied him for a moment. “You really are trying to impress her, huh? Alright, Ser Owain, I’ll do it.” He shook his head and laughed again. “I can’t believe she reads the romance serial. It sold so poorly, I wasn’t even going to finish it. The fact that it’s so terrible almost makes me want to do it even more.”

That was a week ago, and Varric had made good on his promise. Owain carried the finished manuscript with him as he walked down to the forge and Cassandra’s usual haunt. She was nowhere in sight, but he sat down anyway. She would turn up eventually. He cracked the book open and started reading.

*Maker, this really is terrible.* He groaned at some of Varric’s particularly purple prose, but it only made Cassandra’s devotion to it all the more endearing.

She walked by a few minutes later and stopped in front of him. She noted the cover of the book in his hands and frowned. “So you are reading it after all.”

“I am,” he said, barely keeping the grin off his face. “The latest chapter, in fact. Just came out today.”

“Wh- what?” Cassandra asked, her eyes wide with a confusion of surprise and cautious excitement.

“Fresh off the presses,” he said, closing the book and handing it to her. He let his smile off its leash. “You,” she said, looking at the book and then back at him. “You did this. For me?”

He nodded. “But it's Varric you should be thanking, really. Especially after your fight earlier.”

“I told you not to tell him.”

“Alright,” she said grudgingly. “I'll talk to him.”

“Ugh. I don't think he would’ve believed me if I said I was his biggest fan. I'm not that convincing.”

She walked a few steps away and then halted, turning back and giving him one of her beautiful, disarming smiles. He was never quite ready for them. “Thank you, Owain,” she said. Then she sat down and immediately started reading. The rare use of his given name made his heart swell.

He picked up the other book he’d brought with him, another one of Solas’s assigned texts. He looked
up at Cassandra every now and then, but there were no furtive glances this time. She was too engrossed in her reading. He found he didn't even mind.
Althea made a slow circuit around the room, marveling at the rich furnishings that decorated the Inquisitor’s quarters at Skyhold. The ornate fireplace, the elaborate stained glass windows that framed a breathtaking view of the Frostbacks. “Maker,” she breathed, laughing at the large four-poster in the center of the room. “I think your bed alone is bigger than our rooms at the Circle.”

“Don’t forget the private wine cellar to your left,” said Owain, sitting down at his desk, which was also enormous. “Though... is it still a cellar if we’re in a tower?” He tapped a finger on his chin and turned his eyes up in mock contemplation.

“Ass.” She rolled her eyes at him.

He shrugged his shoulders like he couldn't help himself.

“So this is what you get for being Inquisitor,” she said, crossing the floor to him. She leaned back on the edge of the desk, propping herself up with her hands and crossing her legs at the ankles. Her head swiveled around the room again. “Not bad.”

“Well, they do make me work for it.” He gestured at the tall stack of reports in front of him. “Speaking of work,” he said, taking in her new Inquisition scout uniform, “Leliana tells me you’ve volunteered. I didn’t think she accepted mages as agents.”

“She doesn’t, usually. It's a bit of an experiment. But we expect that some magical expertise in advance parties will be a good thing, especially as we start investigating Corypheus and the Venatori. There's only a handful of us so far. We’ll be embedded in her scouting units.”

“It’s a dangerous job.”

“I can handle myself.” She flipped her brown braid over her shoulder.

“I know. I told Leliana she was lucky to have you. Where’s your first assignment?”

“Crestwood. We leave tomorrow morning.”

“Makes sense,” he said, thinking out loud. “Hawke told us her Warden contact is somewhere in the region, but Cullen and Leliana want a thorough lay of the land before we move in.”

“There have been rumors of demons and undead terrorizing the village,” she added. “That whole area of Ferelden was heavily hit during the last blight. It may have affected the Veil there. I expect we’ll find more than a few rifts for you to close.”

They lapsed into friendly silence as Owain scanned the morning summaries from his advisors. Althea picked up the objects on his desk and examined them one by one.

“So, tell me more about your Commander,” she said with a sly smile as she rattled his box of quills.
“The grumpy one in the fur coat who never smiles. He’s rather dashing.”

“You mean Cullen? He’s a recovering Templar. Hardly your type.” Althea, as a rule, hated all Templars and everything they represented.

“What would you know about my type?” she challenged, her brow arched at a dangerous angle. She didn’t wait for an answer but pursed her lips wickedly. “Oh, but I know all about yours. Or are you the only one who’s allowed to fuck Templars?”

“She is not a Templar, and we are not fucking.”

“No? Have you not done anything about that yet? Really.” Her look was a mix of pity and exasperation. She pushed off the desk and faced him. “Are you afraid she’ll say no?”

“No.” He was afraid she would say yes. He was afraid to have her, because it would kill him to lose her. And there were so many ways to lose her. “It’s complicated, Thea.”

“Ugh.” She gave him an exaggerated eyeroll and walked over to the fireplace, where she stared into the flames and watched them follow her hand as she waved it back and forth. “We’re at war, you know. Any of us could die at any moment. You don’t have time to waste dithering around with your complications.” She sighed and shook her head before turning to him again. “Honestly, Owain. Sometimes I think you’re the architect of your own unhappiness. You’re not in the Circle anymore; you don’t have to keep living like you are.”

There was far more truth in her words than he could stand right now. He looked away and shuffled the papers on his desk.

“Was there an actual reason you came all the way up here?” he said, trying to change the subject. “That’s an awful lot of stairs to climb just to lecture me about my love life.”

“I would climb any number of stairs to lecture you about your love life--you know that,” she replied, smirking again. “But actually, yes. There was a reason.” She produced a small sealed letter from her coat pocket and placed it on the desk in front of him.

“I know you asked Leliana and Josephine to put aside all the letters from your Trevelyen relations, but I saw this and thought you might want to see it. It’s from your brother.”

He blinked at the letter. He picked it up and read the directions, twice. He held it between his fingers and tapped it slowly on the desk.

“I haven’t heard a word from Merric since the day I left home. He could have been dead for all I knew. I could have been dead for all he knew.”

He tossed the letter back on the desk.

“You’re not even going to open it?”

“Twenty years at the Circle, and he never once wrote,” said Owain, years of stored up bitterness and anger leaching into his blood. “Not even when our mother died. I had to hear about that later, from a near stranger.” He paused and stood abruptly, his chair scraping the stone floor behind him. He looked out the window, staring at nothing. “I would expect that from my father, but from Merric? He’s a grown man. He could have contacted me years ago if he wanted to. What could he possibly have to say to me now? All of a sudden I’m the Inquisitor and he wants to rekindle brotherly connections?”
“Maybe there's a reason, some kind of explanation. Besides your father, he's practically the only family you have left, and you're just going to throw that away?”

“You forget,” he wheeled on her, his voice full of venom. “They threw me away first. A long time ago.”

It was Althea's turn to look away.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take it out on you. I just…”

“Get irrationally angry when anyone brings up your family?” Her blue eyes sparkled at him.

“That’s… about right,” he sighed again, completely deflated now. “Every time I think I’m over it, every time I think I’ve let it go, it all just comes flooding back.” He sat down again and leaned in his chair, ruffling his hands through his hair.

“You need closure,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Maybe what’s in that letter will help you find that.”

He tapped the missive with his fingers and looked up at her. “I'll think about it.” He picked it up and put it away in a drawer. Then he gave her a sideways glance. “Do you think it’s too early for a drink?”

“Have I ever said yes to that question?”

“Well, you never know,” he said, already pulling two glasses and a bottle of whiskey from his shelf. “People change.”

“No, they don’t,” she replied, watching him pour a healthy serving for each of them.

“I doubt your dashing Templar would approve,” he said as he handed her a glass.

“That’s a good thing he’s not mine. Yet.”

He laughed and clinked his glass against hers.

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Owain waved to the guard as he walked out the gates, headed down to a small wooded grove just outside Skyhold. He carried his staff on his back, along with three training dummies he had bundled together out of straw and twine that morning. He needed space, which was quickly becoming harder to find around Skyhold. He had tried practicing his new rift magic in the courtyard the day before and very nearly took down some scaffolding with an errant spell. Josephine had banned him from training in the yard until he had better mastered his skills.

Besides the physical space, it was nice to gain some mental distance from the demands on his attention that seemed to bombard him constantly within the castle walls. There was an endless supply of reports and decisions that the Inquisitor was required to attend to. It felt like a rare treat to shed that mantle for a few stolen moments, however temporarily, to just be human. To just be himself.

Afternoon sun filtered through the leafy canopy above him as he entered the grove. Shifting patterns of light and shadow dappled the soft moss and crisp leaves that alternated under his feet. Other than the occasional bird call and the stirring of the trees in a light breeze, it was quiet here. All silence and stillness.
He found a clearing among the trees and set his targets down in a rough triangle, spaced several feet apart, and he applied himself to his practice. He tried to recall Solas’s instructions on how to concentrate on the Veil, on drawing power from the Fade and applying it to the physical realm, and guiding it all with his own will and mana.

It was hard work. After several attempts, he had still only managed to shift the targets a few inches closer together. He switched spells, working on improving the aim of his stonefist instead. He could conjure the stone consistently, but guiding it toward his intended target still took a fair amount of concentration. He only hit his mark a portion of the time.

Sheltered from the mountain winds that swept Skyhold itself, the grove was rather warm, and before long, Owain was overheated. He shed his coat, and eventually his shirt, using it to mop the sweat from his brow. His stonefist was improving, so he tried combining it with ice spells, freezing a target and then shattering it with the projectile. The pull of the abyss, however, still eluded him.

He lost track of time and of himself in the magic. He focused on the energy of the Veil, reveling in the surge of power he felt as it mixed with his own strength, as he directed it and shaped it to his will. He faadestepped back and forth, practicing his close-combat skills, mixing in his fire magic, experimenting with new combinations and sequences of spells.

Through his haze of concentration, he heard a loud clank of metal and crunch of fallen leaves and turned his head to see someone approaching the clearing. He readied a spell and faadestepped in their direction, stopping about a foot behind them. The figure turned, and he recognized Cassandra, looking over her shoulder at him with a flash of startled fear on her face and one hand frozen on the hilt of her sword.

He extinguished the flame in his hand and felt the intensity fall from his face as he returned to himself. He stepped back and breathed hard, relaxing into a slouch as he leaned on his staff. “You know, for a warrior, you really are rather stealthy, Cassandra. It’s dangerous to sneak up on people like that.”

“I was not sneaking, Inquisitor,” she huffed, taking her hand off her sword and crossing her arms. “Perhaps you need to keep a better awareness of your surroundings.”

“Fair enough,” he shrugged, still catching his breath. “What can I do for you, Seeker?”

“You’re wanted up at the castle. Initial reports have come back from Crestwood, and Leliana wants to move our departure to tomorrow at daybreak. She and Cullen want to review the plan with you before we make final preparations.”

“There’s always something, isn’t there?” he sighed, looking at Cassandra before turning to collect his practice targets. She followed him back into the clearing.

“What were you doing here? You’ve been gone for hours.”

“Training,” he said, launching into an explanation of the skills he had been trying to master. “There’s this one spell I can’t quite get. It involves using the energy of the Veil to create a tiny rift to pull enemies to a central location. It would do a great deal to help control the field of battle. But I can’t seem to tune my mana to the right frequency to tear the Veil in just the right way…”

She looked at him and smiled, slowly.

“What?” he said, pausing his speech to look up at her.

“You’re starting to sound like Solas.”
“Hah.” Owain laughed and ran a hand through his hair. Sweat made it stand more on end than usual. “Promise you’ll kill me before that happens?”

“With pleasure.”

She smiled at him again, and he could feel her eyes lingering on his bare torso. It made him self-conscious, so he picked up his shirt and pulled it on over his head. A more demure woman might have looked away, but he doubted anyone had ever accused Cassandra of being demure. The thought warmed his blood ever so slightly.

“Your scars,” she said with her brows knitted, watching him as he worked the laces at his neck. “How did you get those?”

He had more than a few scars, but he knew which ones she meant. The blistered skin that ran from his collar down the right side of his body, down his arm and to the bottom of his rib cage. Time and healing magic had faded it to a tracery of pale, raised lines across his shoulder, chest, and back. It licked up the side of his neck and kissed his right cheek.

He stilled his fingers as he thought about how much he wanted to tell her and finally decided to keep nothing back. He picked up his coat and shook it out, pausing a moment to watch the Inquisition emblem catch on a spot of sunlight.

“I don’t mean to intrude, if it’s a sensitive topic…” she said, when he didn’t respond.

“No, you should know.” He threw the coat over his shoulder and sat down on a large rock. His eyes went distant as he told his story.

“My magic manifested when I was almost thirteen. A little late, comparatively speaking. I was terrified. My father hated all things related to magic, and my mother was a devout Andrastian. Our entire family was built around our devotion to the Chantry, and being a mage felt like a betrayal of everything I’d been raised to believe in. I didn’t tell anyone. I managed to hide it for months.

“It was my brother’s sixteenth birthday. My father held a small tournament in his honor, hoping to finally make a man out of him. Or at least the kind of man he thought his heir should be. Merric was never much into riding or swordsmanship. He preferred his books and studies. I was the one who was good at those things, but nothing I did was ever good enough for our father. There was always something more, something I could do better. Looking back, I see how he manipulated us and controlled us. I would have given anything for his approval back then.”

He looked down and went on, fiddling with the Circle ring on his right hand.

“Anyway, Father pitted us against each other, as he always did. He knew exactly what to say to provoke us, and he put tremendous pressure on both of us. And something in me just broke. We were fighting on horseback, and my magic flared. I couldn’t control it, so it burned me. The fire was trapped in the lining of my armor. My horse bolted and threw me clear, but Merric’s reared and fell on him, crushing his legs. They weren’t sure if he would walk again.

“I had never seen my father so angry. In his mind, he lost both of his heirs that day, even though both of us were still alive. All because of magic. My magic. They barely had time to bandage me before the Templars arrived to take me to the Circle. I haven’t seen my family or my home since.”

“How terrible.” She studied him quietly, her eyes filled with pity. He looked up at her and saw his own pain reflected there, feeling an odd sense of peace and relief at that. The anger that had lashed out at Althea the other day was nowhere to be found. “I wish more parents considered their actions
before inflicting the consequences on their children.” She seemed to be speaking about more than just his parents.

Owain stood and shrugged into his coat, leaving it unbuttoned. He hoisted the straw targets over his shoulder and picked up his staff. “It made me who I am,” he said, as they set off on the path back to Skyhold. “Ironically, sending me to the Circle probably saved my life. The healers did everything they could, and I still took months to recover. It was more than I might have gotten if I’d stayed at my father’s house. The scars are ugly, but I like to think it just discourages me from excessive vanity.”

“I don’t think they’re ugly,” she said, with a sidelong glance. “As you said, they are part of who you are. Your history and the path you have walked.”

He chuckled, unable to keep a smile from his face. “Well, now you’ve done it. I’ll be swanning around like Dorian if you keep that up.”

She made a disgusted noise and rolled her eyes at him.

“So how does it feel then, knowing all my secrets?”

“I think I understand you better, knowing this.” She met his eyes again, and her look said more than her words could. He felt understood in a way he hadn’t since he joined the Inquisition, like she was seeing him—really seeing him—for the first time. And she wasn’t repulsed by what she saw. Rather, the opposite. He had no words to say to that. It overwhelmed him.

They walked together, side by side, until the gates of Skyhold came into view. “Inquisitor. Seeker.” The guard saluted them as they passed through. Their titles and masks snapped back into place as they headed into the keep, and it felt like a loss.
Rocks and Hard Places

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, there are no good choices.

It was raining when they arrived in Crestwood. Owain shook water from his hair as he ducked into the tent for his briefing, and he could hear it pelting the canvas with an endless drumbeat while Lace Harding gave her report.

“Crestwood has been overrun by demons and undead ever since the breach opened,” she explained. “Most of the residents have fled to safer ground, but the mayor is still holed up there. We’re pretty sure he knows more than he’s letting on, but he won’t talk to us. Maybe you’ll have better luck, Inquisitor.”

“Any idea about the source of the undead?” he asked.

“We traced them back to the lake,” Althea said, picking up for Scout Harding and pointing to the map spread on the table between them. “It’s as we expected. All the activity during the blight has thinned the Veil here, and the surge of energy from the Breach broke it open. We’ve located a number of rifts in the region, but this one is the largest. Based on our measurements, the epicenter should be located below the lake itself.”

“The village on the hill is actually new Crestwood,” Harding added. “The area where the lake is now was the old town. It seems to have flooded some time near the end of the last blight. We’re hoping there’s a way to drain it again, but you’ll have to figure out how. I suggest you start with the mayor.”

Their direction clear, Owain nodded and headed back outside to follow Harding’s advice. The mud sucked at his boots as they trudged up the road to Crestwood village. He tried to remember what it felt like to be dry but couldn’t.

They passed empty fields and abandoned buildings as they neared the outskirts of town. The screeching of demons punctuated the constant patter of rain, and the green glow of wraiths flitted in the gloom at the edges of the fields. Owain ignored them, for now. There would be plenty of that later.

The town was built into the side of a hill, rows of buildings perched on terraces. There was no one outside. The only signs of habitation were the twitch of curtains at windows and the hint of eyes through doors cracked and quickly closed as they passed.

Owain picked one such door and rapped his knuckles on it. There was no response, but he heard the scuffle of feet inside and knocked again. It opened after a long pause, and an old woman glared out at him. “What do you want?” she said, running her eyes over him with clear distaste.

He swallowed the glib response on his tongue and cleared his throat, putting on his most diplomatic face. “Pardon the intrusion. We’re looking for the mayor. Could you point us in the right direction?”

“Who’s asking?”

“The Inquisition.”
“The what? Never heard of you.”

“No?” He’d gotten used to a different kind of response. “The Herald of Andraste? The Breach? Ever heard of them?”

“Nah.” She slammed the door in his face. He stood there, momentarily stunned.

“Tough crowd, boss.” The Iron Bull’s bass rumbled from over his shoulder. Varric chuckled from somewhere to his left.

Owain shrugged and walked on. He spotted a larger, finer-looking house near the top of the village and decided to try there. As they approached the door, there was a sign telling him he was right: “Mayor Gregory Dedrick.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” he muttered before knocking.

A tired-looking man opened the door just wide enough for his face to peer suspiciously out at them.

“Greetings,” Owain began, polite again. “Are you the mayor of Crestwood?”

“Aye,” he replied. “And who are you?”

“We’re with the Inquisition.”

“I told your people at the lake to get out while you still can. We’re overrun here.”

“That’s what we’re here for, actually. We just need some information—”

“Forget it,” the man cut him off. “There’s nothing you can do.” He made to shut the door.

Cassandra stepped forward and kicked her foot in the gap. “Listen, you fool,” she said, with steel in her voice. “This is the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste. He closed the breach in the sky, and he can close that rift in the lake. All we need of you is information. Or will you sit here and wait for death because you could not be bothered to talk to us?”

At first, Dedrick seemed shocked by her directness, but then he relented. He sighed and slumped his shoulders as he opened the door and walked back into his home, motioning for them to follow. Owain shot Cassandra a look of gratitude as they crossed the threshold. She nodded at him.

“The undead started coming out of the lake after that green light appeared,” Dedrick said wearily, standing in the middle of the room with his arms crossed over his chest. “Most of the people have gone. It’s all the rest of us can do to keep them out of the main village. My men are exhausted. The fields are neglected. I’ve sent to Denerim for help, but the crown does nothing. At this rate, we’ll either starve to death or die before the end of the season.” He shook his head and sighed again.

“Our scouts have traced the problem to a rift under the lake,” said Owain. “Is there anything you can tell us about what may be under there or why there are so many undead?”

The mayor was quiet for a moment. Wrinkles lined his face, and thinning grey hair was slicked back over his head. He looked older, and his voice sounded pained when he spoke. “The Herald of Andraste, eh?” He studied Owain and then seemed to make up his mind about something.

“Old Crestwood,” he explained. “It was built over Dwarven ruins. The rift must be there, in the caves under the village. It all flooded at the end of the last blight. We had taken in refugees that were infected with the blight sickness, and the darkspawn followed them here. They destroyed the dam
controls and flooded the lake during the attack. We lost many of our people that day...” He trailed off into a thoughtful silence.

“To stop the undead, we’ll need to close that rift,” Owain said. “Is there a way to drain the lake again?”

“There’s a mechanism on the dam on the other side of the lake, but to get there you need to go through Caer Bronach. Used to be a Ferelden stronghold, but it’s been taken over by bandits since the undead appeared. You’ll have to get rid of them first if you want to control the dam.”

“Sounds like something we could help with.”

Dedrick nodded. “Those walls would have gone a long way in protecting us against the undead. Here, take this key. You’ll need it to reach the dam.”

“Very well,” Owain said, pocketing the key and turning to leave. “Anything else we should know?”

“Whatever you find down there at the bottom of the lake,” the mayor said as he walked them to the door, “don’t judge us too harshly.”

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Caer Bronach towered over them like a colossus as they crept along the shore of the lake just below. The dark bulk of it faded into the heavy clouds above, still dumping their contents onto the hapless people on the ground. Owain pushed back his hood for more visibility. It had ceased keeping his head dry ages ago.

Inquisition scouts had gone ahead and assessed the fort’s defenses. The walls were high and sheer; no real weaknesses to exploit there. The hold was home to maybe two dozen men, mostly garden variety thugs, give or take a few mabari and a handful of archers. They had styled themselves the Highwaymen—bandits weren’t known for their originality. There was, however, another entry to the castle down on the beach somewhere that ran through a small underground cave system and up into the fortress. Outnumbered as they were, surprise would be a welcome advantage.

They reached an area where the rock face met the sandy shore, and Owain spotted a narrow entrance cut into the earth, obscured by some overgrown brush. Pushing the plants aside and lighting his way with a small flame, he found an iron gate set several feet into the stone. He tried the door, and it was locked, of course.

“Varric?” Owain called over his shoulder, moving aside to let the dwarf into the narrow passage. He stepped back to wait beside Althea and Cassandra. Iron Bull took up the rear.

Varric cracked his knuckles and stepped forward, reaching for the tools at his belt. His picks clicked in the lock and the bolt squealed as it slid back. He bowed as he pushed the door open. “After you, Ser Owain.”

Owain led the way into the tunnel, which ran deep into the rock at the castle’s base. It ended in a wide chamber containing a narrow wooden staircase. It was dark here. Owain and Althea’s magic was the only light.

He tested the stairs before committing his weight, but they seemed solid enough, and he climbed them quietly, stopping to listen at the wooden hatch that covered its top. He heard faint voices of at least two people above and signalled to the others below. They would have to move quickly and overwhelm these men before they had time to alert the rest.
He threw open the hatch and jumped up into some kind of storeroom. It was longer than it was wide, its walls lined with barrels and wooden crates. Three bandits sat at a small table at the far end, looking stunned to see him and his companions bursting into the room. Their mouths were agape; one man still held his mug of ale in the air, stalled in its trip from the table to his mouth.

Owain lost no time, fade-stepping toward them and throwing down an ice mine to freeze them in place. He looked around for a more lasting way to restrain them and spotted coils of rope in one of the corners.

“Tie them up,” he said, nodding at the bandits. “No need to make this more bloody than necessary.”

He walked to the door and cracked it just wide enough to peek outside. It opened onto the main courtyard of the keep. He could see a few bandits keeping watch. An archer patrolled the top of the walls at an easy pace. All looked calm.

He closed the door again quietly. The plan was for Harding and the other Inquisition scouts to approach the fortress from the road, sniping at the bandits guarding the entrance, generally causing chaos, and drawing attention to the front gate. Meanwhile, Owain and his team would attack from within, taking advantage of the confusion to strike decisively.

With the bandits in the storeroom securely gagged and tied, there was nothing to do but wait. Bull picked up one of the mugs on the table and sniffed it before shrugging and draining it. Althea looked askance at him, and Cassandra made a disgusted sound.

“Oh, that’s good stuff,” said Bull, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Let’s hope there’s more of that around once this is over.”

Owain breathed out a laugh, but his ear was still tuned to any noises from outside. A moment later, a cry of alarm went up, and he opened the door to peer out again. He could see the bandits hustling toward the gate and taking up arms. He held a hand up to the others in the room, and they readied their weapons. Varric loaded Bianca, and Althea threw up her barriers, spectral blade at the ready.

As a small group of bandits ran past, Owain nodded to his party and kicked open the door, rushing out into the courtyard. He stepped out to that initial group and put down an array of fire mines, which burst into flames as the men waffled in confusion. Bull, Cassandra, and Althea charged forward to engage them just as more Highwaymen, alerted to the intrusion, turned back from the diversion at the gate and joined the fray in the yard.

Owain kept to the outer edges of the battle, well out of the way of the clashing swords and shields of the warriors. His flame walls and mines kept the enemies positioned as needed, for Varric to pick off stragglers or for Iron Bull to catch them in his deadly whirlwind.

Varric called a warning to him as an enemy rogue dropped out of stealth behind him and swung a dagger at his neck. Owain ducked just in time, feeling the whoosh of the woman’s knife come dangerously close to its target. He lashed out with his staff, catching her torso with the tip of his blade as she jumped back. He thrust forward quickly to press his advantage, but she dodged and used her superior speed to flank him. He spun and caught her attack with a block, feeling the sharp daggers bite into the wood of his staff. Grunting, he pushed them up and away and followed with a kick to the gut. She reeled backwards, and he pulled his hand up to cast an explosion at her feet, immolating her where she landed.

He had barely a second to breathe before an arrow came whistling through the air near his head. He looked up, and another came winging down from the battlements and lodged itself deep in his left shoulder. Piercing pain flooded his senses, and the impact of it sent him spinning on his feet. Shit.
He dragged himself to the low wall Varric was using for cover, his right hand clutching at his wound. It came away covered in blood, and he blinked at it numbly, trying to push away the panic and collect his own thoughts.

Another volley of arrows came down into the main fray, some hitting flesh and others splintering into the stone floor. Cassandra blocked one with her shield, and another hit Bull squarely in the chest. It rang off his armor, and he responded with a roar, swinging into his enemies with even greater fury.

“Varric!” Owain shouted. “I need those archers off those walls!”

“I’m on it!” Varric said, loading Bianca with an explosive bolt. He loosed it at one of the archers, who erupted into flames and ran screaming off the wall. Owain launched a stonefist at another archer, knocking him from his perch to the unforgiving ground. Varric took out the rest, much to Owain’s relief. That last spell had been costly. He sat back, panting, still trying to staunch the bleeding from his wound.

The battle was quieting now. Most of the bandits lay defeated. Two were slowly backing away from Bull as he advanced on them, and Althea was chasing a swift rogue up the stairs. Cassandra, however, was facing off against one remaining warrior. He was tall and broad, and from the look of his armor, a particularly hardened fighter. The leader of the Highwaymen, perhaps? His weapon was a two-handed maul, and even at this distance, Owain could tell it was of finer make than that of the average bandit.

The Seeker and the bandit circled each other with a singular focus, both breathing heavily, both splattered with mud and the blood of their enemies. The others actually paused their fighting to watch, both sides curious about who would win this matchup. The bandit struck first, letting out a roar as he rushed forward for a heavy strike. Cassandra caught it with her shield, but the blow clearly winded her and left a large dent in the metal of her shield.

The bandit chief laughed. “Chantry bitch. Are you the best they could send to root us out of this fortress? Hah! I can’t decide if I should kill you before or after I fuck that tall warrior cunt of yours.” He spat on the ground and leered menacingly at her.

Anger seethed in Owain, and he struggled to sit up straighter. Varric held him down. “Easy there, Ser Owain. The Lady Seeker can take care of herself. Wouldn’t want the Inquisitor bleeding out on us now, would we?”

He knew it was useless to argue, and whatever threats he might make, he was powerless to back them up in his current state anyway. It disgusted him, this helplessness. It was almost worse than the pain stabbing him in the shoulder.

Cassandra was undaunted, of course. She dodged the bandit’s next attack and ducked into his space before he could recover, slicing under his arm at a gap in his armor. He reared back in pain before lunging forward in another brazen attempt. She was ready for him and ducked again, bashing into him with her shield and all of her weight behind it. Her attack threw him off balance, and she landed another blow at his side, stabbing up under his breastplate.

The bandit staggered back now, blood dripping visibly from his wounds. He leaned on his weapon and laughed again. “Not bad, I’ll give you that. Beaten by a wench. Fuck.” He shook his head before adjusting his hold on his maul, readying himself for one last charge. He rushed toward Cassandra, who stood her ground and parried his blow easily. With a grunt of effort, she bashed at him again and sent him stumbling to the ground. He struggled to get up but fell, dropping his weapon and wincing in pain, on his hands and knees on the wet stone.
Cassandra threw her shield aside and gripped her sword with both hands as she stepped toward him. “Do it!” he screamed at her, and she obliged, taking his head off with a single, clean slice.

It was quiet for a moment, then the remaining bandits threw their weapons to the ground in surrender. It was over, and Caer Bronach was theirs.

Owain watched in awe as Cassandra wrenched her helmet off and stood, exhausted, gulping in air. Her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat and rain, and her eyes blazed with triumph, and still, she left him speechless. He would never not be impressed by her prowess and strength, her warrior’s grace. She turned, searching the yard, and her eyes widened in fear when she spotted him, slumped as he was against the wall with the arrow still in his shoulder. She dropped her helm and ran towards him.

Pain was starting to take over now. He felt cold and dazed. Sounds were muffled. He could see Althea by his side already, scared, yelling something at him as she held his mouth open and poured a potion down his throat. He felt a jerk as Varric cut the shaft of the arrow in his shoulder, and heat as Althea worked healing magic into his wound. All of it was happening to someone else. Cassandra reached them and knelt in front of him. Her lips moved, saying something he couldn’t hear. Darkness blurred in from the edges of his vision, and then he could remember no more.

--

He woke late the next evening feeling immeasurably better. The magic and potions had done their work. He tested his shoulder, and it was stiff under its bandage, but the pain had dulled to a slow throb. They had moved him indoors at some point, and he was pleased to realize his clothes were almost dry for the first time in days.

He went outside to find that the rest of his party had built a large, blazing fire in a pit in the courtyard and were gathered around it, enjoying well-earned food and drink. The fortress was, as Bull had hoped, well stocked. The rain had fizzled into a light mist for the time being, and it was a small joy just to be outside and not be soaked to the bone.

Owain found an empty spot on a bench next to Althea, though he sat on the ground and leaned back against the wood, preferring to stretch out his legs and support his injured shoulder.

“You’re finally up,” she said, smiling and handing him a plate of warm stew and a mug of ale that could not have been more welcome. He wolfed it down, content to simply eat and listen to the banter of his companions as they nursed their drinks by the fire. Victory and alcohol were a potent recipe for high spirits.

“So, Althea, you’ve known our Inquisitor for a long time,” said Varric, his tone playful. “You must have stories about him from way back when. What was he like before he was touched by Andraste?”

“Oh, not so different,” she began, turning to look at Owain. His mouth was full of stew, so he raised a brow at her, unsure how she’d answer the question. “Maybe a little younger and dumber.” She smirked and crossed her legs. “We caused a fair amount of trouble in our Circle days. He used to get caught sneaking to my room in the middle of the night. More than once.”

“Stealth has never been one my gifts,” he said between bites of food.

“I don’t even know how many times they tried to punish you for it. Locking you in your room? Skipping meals? Cleaning the latrines?”

“But was it worth it?” Bull asked. “That’s the important thing.”
Owain shrugged noncommittally.

“Oh, please,” Althea scoffed. “Fuck you, Owain Trevelyan.”

“Well...” he said archly into his mug.

She gave him a look of outrage and a hard shove, making him spill ale down his front.

“Now look what you made me do,” he laughed. "And my shirt only just dried.” He brushed the liquid off his coat and flicked it at her.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Anyway,” she continued smugly, “I did the sneaking after that. And I never got caught.”

Owain stared into the fire and smiled at the memories of what now felt like such innocent times. Young and dumb, yes. That he was. He felt eyes on him and looked up to find they were Cassandra’s. She turned quickly away.

“Well, Varric,” Althea went on. “If we're going to talk about our love lives, how about you? Is Bianca named for a real person, or just a bit of wishful thinking?”

“Maybe a little bit of both,” Varric replied, smirking. “And a whole lot of none of your business.”

“Oh, come now!” Althea persisted. “You started this, after all!”

“It's more than a bit complicated,” he said, shaking his head. “And it’s the one story I’ll never tell. All I can say is, we dwarves can sure be stuck in our ways.” Then he grinned wickedly and turned to Cassandra on the bench beside him. “But what about the Lady Seeker? Aren't we going around the circle here?”

“Yes!” Althea said, leaning forward with interest. “How about it, Cassandra? Any conquests to report?”

“Other than what you did to that bandit out there yesterday,” Iron Bull added, raising his eyebrows suggestively. “That was... Mm. You know, if you ever need any help, working out any frustration back at Skyhold...”

“Never going to happen, Bull,” Cassandra said flatly.

“Aw.”

She sighed. “There was someone, once. He was a mage. We adventured together when I was young. He was dashing, unlike anyone I had ever known. But that was a long time ago, and what we had was fleeting.”

“A mage! How romantic!” Althea exclaimed. Owain could sense her looking at him meaningfully, daring him to make eye contact, but he refused. He bowed his head and studied the cup in his hand instead. It was far too empty. “And what about now?” she pressed on. “No more recent affairs? No one else has caught your eye since?”

“I’d... rather not talk about that right now,” Cassandra replied quietly.

“Are you blushing, Seeker?” Varric chuckled. “Maker, the world really is coming to an end.”

“Speaking of conquests...” Iron Bull jumped in, mercifully, and launched into a raucous retelling of his exploits with certain curious noblewomen in Val Royeaux. Owain stopped listening, lost in his
own thoughts. So she had been with a mage before. That did explain some things. He was surprised she had shared that at all. He lifted his eyes from the flames again to meet Cassandra’s across the fire, and this time she didn’t look away.

He caught her gaze and held it, and under the gloomy night sky, with everyone else focused on Bull’s story, it seemed almost like they were alone. He thought he read doubt in her eyes, and he tried to put everything he felt about her into his own, as if he could sweep away that uncertainty with just a look. A look that spoke of his infinite respect for her, his admiration, friendship, desire, and so much more.

And then fat drops of rain hit his face and broke the spell.

--

Althea and Scout Harding left in the morning to take news to Skyhold and get reinforcements to hold the fortress. Its location along the King’s Road between Ferelden and Orlais made it an ideal base for managing the Inquisition’s spy network. Leliana would be pleased.

Owain and the rest of his party set out to finish their original task of sealing the rift under the lake, which still glowed green beneath the waters. They found the mechanism for the dam on the other side of Caer Bronach and used it to open the floodgates. They returned to the keep to wait for the water to drain.

“You’ve all fought darkspawn, right?” Varric said, as they were walking the path back to the fortress. “And that didn’t seem odd to you?”

“What do you mean?” Owain asked.

“Those dam controls were awfully neat. Not the kind of condition I’d expect if darkspawn had gotten to them and flooded the lake during the blight.”

“Maybe they rebuilt it? It has been ten years.”

“Maybe.”

The ruins of Old Crestwood came into view as the water receded, and they picked their way through the rotting wooden structures, heading toward the rift near the far shore. It was a bigger settlement than the current village. Owain could still make out the beams and foundations of old homes, choked with weeds and covered in algae. There were human remains, too, throughout the old town. The villagers must have truly been caught off guard when the waters rose.

They found the caves at the edge of town and made their way through them, passing through the natural caverns and exploring the old Dwarven ruins beyond. They met little resistance—a few demons and undead here and there—until they reached the rift itself, which was protected by rage demons and an arcane horror. Like all the others, though, the rift was defeated and sealed by the mysterious power of the anchor, the abilities Owain could wield but still didn’t fully understand.

They emerged from the ruins into bright, blinding sunlight that felt like a miracle after all those days of gloom and rain. The cave exit was in the hills above the village, and Owain looked down at the view and couldn’t believe it was the same place. Under a clear sky, the land was green and lush. Red rock formations jutted out of the landscape and rolled out along the hills.

They climbed back down to deliver the news to the mayor. The village itself was changed, too. There were people in the road, children running and basking in the sunlight. When they reached the mayor’s house, the door was ajar. “If you’re looking for the mayor, he’s gone,” called a villager
passing by. “Just up and left this morning.”

They entered anyway and looked around. Owain found a note on the table addressed to him. It was a confession. The truth was that Dedrick himself, not darkspawn, had flooded Old Crestwood. So many refugees had been infected with the blight, and it was spreading so quickly, the only way he saw to save the remaining villagers was to flood the town, drowning the darkspawn and the blighted with them. The undead that had terrorized Crestwood were his own people, killed by his own hand. The guilt was too much for him to stay.

“So this is what he was afraid we’d find at the bottom of the lake,” Owain said, remembering the mayor’s parting words.

“I knew his story didn’t add up,” Varric said.

Bull grunted and shook his head. “Coward. Running away instead of facing up to it like a man.”

“What a horrible choice,” Cassandra added. “Sacrificing the sick to save the rest of the village.”

“But they were innocent,” Owain pointed out. “They had done nothing wrong, even if letting them live would have endangered more people.” He sighed. It was a sickening amount of power, this, choosing life or death for others. How could you weigh the value of one life versus another? Even if one was infected with the blight? An impossible choice indeed.

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They returned to Skyhold almost two weeks later, after seeing the fortress secured by Inquisition troops and meeting with Hawke’s contact from the Wardens. Owain had just ridden through the gates and dismounted when Josephine ran out to meet them.

“Inquisitor!” she called, clearly agitated about something. “Thank the Maker you’re here! The war room, immediately, if you please. A bird has just arrived with the most urgent news!”

Owain threw a glance back at Cassandra standing next to her horse behind him, but she merely reflected his own worry back at him. He followed Josephine into the keep, practically jogging to keep up with her.

Leliana and Cullen were already in the room, pointing at the map and arguing heatedly as he entered. They stopped their discussion to greet him as Josephine closed the door behind them.

“Inquisitor,” Cullen began. “It’s good you’re here. We just received a bird from one of our scouting units. They were assigned to investigate some rumors in the Emerald Graves but deviated from plans to contact and bring in another rebel mage cell. In the process, they lost their way and were pinned down by a group of Avvar in the foothills of the Frostbacks and have sent an urgent request for reinforcements.”

Cullen continued, marking locations on the map as he spoke. “Now, the only troops that could possibly reach them in time is a squad I’ve deployed to track Corypheus’s Red Templars. They finally have a good lead and are close to pinpointing the location of their base and lyrium sources. A swift bird might reach them in time, but if we call them off the search now, we’ll lose weeks of work. There’s no telling how long it will take to find the trail again.”

“But these are our people, Cullen!” said Josephine. “We cannot simply abandon them. If the Inquisition cannot protect our own, then how will we convince others that we can protect them?”

“If we can find and stop these Red Templars, we could save countless more lives!” Cullen argued
back. “Think of the destruction they caused at Haven. If we could head that off now, it would save much more bloodshed down the line.” He paused, rubbing his temples with his fingers. “I don’t say this lightly, but all of our men are prepared to make sacrifices if necessary. And these scouts were acting outside their orders. They must have known the risks.”

They all looked at Owain then, and it slowly dawned on him that they were asking him to decide. They were asking him to choose: save his own scouts and this group of allied rebel mages, or forsake them for the chance to find these Red Templars and cut short whatever evil they were doing in Corypheus’s service. What was more important? A few certain deaths now, or the chance to avoid unknown but countless deaths in the future?

“There’s one more thing you should know,” Leliana said, looking him in the eyes, her mouth a grim line. “The scouting unit—it’s Althea’s.”
Owain’s insides iced over at Leliana’s words, and all his moralizing went out the window. A million questions sprang up in his mind, for which there were no easy answers. What had Althea been thinking? How did they find these rebel mages? Had she been planning this all along? Was there no other way out?

And yet, among all those questions, he didn’t doubt that it was true. It was exactly the kind of thing she would do. Exactly the kind of risk she would take, fully confident that her skill and wit would carry her through, as they so often did. Just not this time. And with more at stake than even her own life.

He looked at each of his advisors in turn, hoping for answers, for something, for a miracle that didn't call for good people dying. “If we left right now…” he ventured. His voice felt tighter than normal.

“You would still never reach them in time,” Leliana finished for him, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor. These truly are the only options.”

He sighed and leaned on the war table, palms flat on the polished wood, eyes pointed at the map but not really seeing. Echoes of Crestwood came back to him. Terrible power and responsibility, an impossible choice from any perspective. And he wasn’t just making decisions for hypothetical soldiers in his army. Althea was his oldest friend, the truest family he had in this world. It shouldn’t have made a difference, but it did.

“Consider, Inquisitor.” Cullen broke into his thoughts, his face earnest, hands resting on the pommel of his sword. “My men are so close to a breakthrough with the Red Templars. We could prevent more innocent people from being infected with that lyrium, more good Templars from being corrupted. You saw how they looked at Haven, how it twists them into monsters. We could save more men and women from that fate.”

Owain turned his head aside and closed his eyes. Familiar images played in his mind—Redcliffe and the hum of red lyrium in a nightmare future, Inquisition soldiers run through with crystals the same color as their blood, Cassandra thrusting her sword into a behemoth’s skull, the twisted figure of Corypheus himself. Could they truly prevent more of that? Could they save more lives, at the mere cost of a few now? More images—injured rebel mages at the Crossroads, Althea’s knowing smile and the clink of whiskey glasses, and... shit. The rest faded away. He wanted to believe Cullen, to see the bigger picture, but it wasn’t that simple. There were just too many unknowns, stacked against the certainty of loss. When he looked up, they were waiting for him, and he made his decision.

“Divert the soldiers. Send the bird.”

Cullen balled his hands into fists and let them fall on the table. Fury and decorum warred in his expression. “You would choose these--these apostates--over stopping the Red Templars? The chance to thwart Corypheus and prevent more corruption?” He exhaled sharply through his nose and shook
his head. He gave Owain a hard look and then walked toward the door.

“I signed on to be the commander of the Inquisition, not the mage rebellion,” he said over his shoulder. Then he stalked out of the room.

Owain watched him leave and then turned to Leliana. “Send the bird.”

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He opened the door to the forge and was halfway up the stairs before he realized Cassandra was already talking to someone. It was Cullen.

“You’ve asked me for my opinion, and I’ve given it,” she said, sounding exasperated. “Why would you expect that to change?”

“I expect you to keep your word,” Cullen replied, his voice strained. He rubbed his knuckles against his temples before throwing his fingers wide in front of his face. He grimaced. “It’s relentless. If I can’t fulfill the vows I’ve made--”

“You give yourself too little credit.” Cassandra crossed her arms, but her eyes were sympathetic. “You’ve built our forces up from nothing, something few others could have done. By all measures, you are doing an excellent job. You just need some rest. You can’t keep pushing yourself like this. It’s not good for you, and it’s not good for the Inquisition.”

“All the more reason I should be replaced! All the more reason I should--” Cullen stopped short as Owain stepped fully into the room, and his expression darkened. The air in the room seemed to chill. Cullen’s eyes flicked between Owain and Cassandra, and he set his jaw. Without another word, he brushed past Owain and went down the stairs.

Owain walked to a chair and slouched into it. He stared up at the ceiling and let out a massive sigh.

“What was that?” Cassandra asked, turning to him with her eyes narrowed. “Are all the moody, angry men of Skyhold coming to find me today?”

He turned his head slightly and squinted at her, still leaning back in his chair. “Is Cullen angry at me? He seems angry.”

“Does he have reason to be?”

“Perhaps.” He explained the events in the war room, and Cassandra listened thoughtfully.

“Was I wrong?” he asked. He was starting to second guess himself. “Should I have listened to Cullen and kept those soldiers on the trail?”

Cassandra shook her head and sat down opposite him. She sighed. “It was a difficult choice, and it’s impossible to know what was truly right in that situation. We do not know what the Red Templars will do next or whether keeping those soldiers on their mission would have saved lives. We do know that denying the call for reinforcements would have meant death for our scouts and those mages.”

Owain said nothing, staring at the ceiling again. “I keep thinking about Dedrick, sending innocent people to their deaths, sacrificing them for some perceived greater good. Am I no better? What right do I have to make that kind of call?”

“You are the leader of the Inquisition,” she said, somehow managing to sound both matter-of-fact and gentle at once. “It is your right--and responsibility--to make that kind of decision for the people
who follow you. Even to do nothing is a kind of choice. In any case, this is different than Crestwood. You did not engineer the murder of innocent people. And no one will blame you for refusing to abandon your friend to certain death.”

“Cullen seems to,” he replied, and then he named what was really bothering him. “He says I’ve turned the Inquisition into the mage rebellion by another name.” Owain leaned forward and looked down at his hands. “And the more I think about it, the more I think he may have a point. The free mages are our biggest allies so far, especially after our losses at Haven. We’re fighting against Templars, corrupted though they may be. Vivienne, Dorian, and Solas have very visible roles in the Inquisition. And, well, there’s me, obviously. I wonder how many others look at us and see the same thing.” He looked up at Cassandra, unsure what he wanted most from her right now. Assurance? Validation? Sympathy?

She gave him truth. And she spoke firmly. “Even if he is no longer a Templar himself, Cullen still feels a strong affinity for his former order. It is not surprising that he would look at the plight of his Templar brothers and want to save them from the red lyrium, just as you might naturally feel stronger about bringing the rebel mages under the Inquisition’s banner. You each have your prejudices in this matter, whether you realize it or not.”

Her words rang in the silence that followed, and they struck him deep and true, like a crossbow bolt to the heart. It was sobering to hear her say such things out loud, but he searched himself and knew she was right. It was too easy for him to value mage lives over Templars, to count the concerns of his fellows as more important. It wasn’t the only thing behind his decision today, nor was it a thing he would acknowledge in his rational thoughts, but it was there, lurking below the surface. Maybe likewise for Cullen.

“It’s not fair,” he said, after a long moment.

“No, it is not. But it is human.”

She went on. “As for the Inquisition, we are much more than just mages, even if you are our leader. We are still growing, and people join us because they agree with our common cause, not because we are all alike. Our strength comes from being able to unite in spite of our differences.”

Owain slumped in his chair and stared at his hands again, convicted of his own biases. The mark winked at him, mockingly. The Inquisitor was supposed to be more than this. Better than this. Leading mages was easy. He understood mages. But could he really be a leader to Templars in the Inquisition, too? To the rank-and-file soldiers fighting in his army? To an old woman in Ferelden who didn’t even know about the Breach? Since when did this matter to him, anyway? Maybe it was all too much. Or maybe he just needed to start somewhere.

“Did Cullen mention any of this with you?”

“No, though I don’t doubt it was fresh in his mind.” She paused and looked him in the eyes. “Has Cullen told you he is no longer taking lyrium?”

“No. But… that explains much.” In his mind, Owain rapidly reordered all his interactions with Cullen over the last few months, and they made much more sense now. The bloodshot eyes, the lack of sleep, the headaches. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Perhaps he didn’t want you to worry. Or perhaps, as a mage, he didn’t think you would understand. Or care.”

“And why you?”
Cassandra stood and walked over to the window, leaning against the frame and looking out into the courtyard. Afternoon sun streamed through the glass and lit her face as she spoke. “We had an agreement long before you even joined the Inquisition. As a Seeker, I could watch over him and evaluate his condition. If he ever became unfit for duty, I was to recommend a replacement for him. That is what he asked me to do just now.”

“Has the withdrawal gotten worse?” Owain asked, turning in his chair. He tried to recall anything he knew about lyrium addiction from his time in the Circle. “It can be fatal, can’t it?”

“Yes,” she sighed, meeting his gaze again. “You mages have made your suffering known, but Templars never have. They give their lives in service to the Chantry, mind and body, with someone always holding their lyrium leash. There is a reason why not many leave the order after taking their vows. Cullen has a chance to break that leash, to prove to others—and himself—that it is possible. He has come so far. To go back now would destroy him.”

Owain berated himself for not seeing it sooner. For not even considering its possibility and being so blind to the struggles of Templars, of his own commander. Then he realized the implications of her words. “Go back? You mean he’s thinking of taking it again?”

Cassandra nodded. “He thinks it will help him do his duty, to give more to the Inquisition. I’ve told him it’s not necessary, but...” She looked pointedly at him.

He caught her meaning but wasn’t sure he agreed. “You want me to talk to him. You really think that will help? Am I not just the embodiment of everything he fears? About mages, about the Inquisition?”

“Cullen has more reason than most to fear mages, to hate them, even. And yet, he has come a long way. You are part of that, and he respects you, perhaps in spite of what you are. I think it would help if you talked to him.”

Owain blew out a breath and nodded. The faith he saw in her eyes was both an encouragement and a burden. He could only hope to live up to it. He ran a hand through his hair and rose to go.

“Thank you, Cassandra, for the wisdom,” he said, tilting his head and looking at her warmly.

She smiled slightly. “You seem surprised,” she snorted. "I am more than just a sword and shield, you know.”

“Indeed,” he said quietly, letting his eyes linger a moment longer.

He turned to go and paused at the top of the stairs. “So, shall I tell Dorian to come up next? He seemed to be in a mood, last I saw him.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “The Inquisitor was hilarious. That's what they'll write someday. You'll see.”

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The sun was just coming over the mountains as Owain walked the parapet connecting the main keep to Cullen’s office on the outer walls, casting grey shadows across the weathered stones. Skyhold was still quiet at this hour. Bull and Blackwall were sparring in the yard below, and the occasional clash of their weapons was the only sound that floated up to his ears.

He filled his lungs with cold, clean air, and marveled at the difference the morning made. A hot meal, a bath to wash away the last fortnight of travel, and a night in his own bed (even if sleep still mostly
eluded him), and he was ready to follow Cassandra’s advice and make peace with his own commander.

His conversation with the Seeker had been humbling but necessary. He was forced to rethink what it meant for him to be the Inquisitor, and not merely a Senior Enchanter, or even just Owain Trevelyan. Would he have made a different decision yesterday? Probably not. But he might, tomorrow, or the next day. It wasn’t just about closing rifts and rescuing lost druffalo after all.

He pulled his hands from his coat pockets and knocked twice on Cullen’s door. It was answered with a sharp, growling, “WHAT.” Owain let himself in.

Cullen was sitting at his desk, his elbows resting on its wooden surface and his fingers twisted in his own hair, which was messy, like he had been pulling on it. In front of him was a rectangular wooden box filled with glowing blue vials and assorted small implements. A Templar’s lyrium kit. Cullen’s eyes looked wild, bloodshot, and altogether shocked to see Owain in his office. He looked, in short, a mess.

Cullen stood quickly, his chair scraping loudly on the floor behind him. “Inquisitor! I’m sorry! I- I didn’t expect you this morning. I-” He looked down at the kit and up at Owain, and stammered into silence, at a loss for words. He slumped his shoulders and leaned forward on his desk.

Owain said nothing but closed the door softly behind him. He sat down in the chair across the desk and nodded at the lyrium. “Cassandra told me. How long has it been?”

“Months. I stopped when I left the Templars and joined the Inquisition.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Cullen looked up at him. “Would it have made a difference?”

Owain narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know. Would it have?”

Cullen sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, turning away to stare out the window behind him. “You don’t know what it was like. Ferelden’s Circle was taken over by abominations. I had to watch them slaughter the other Templars--my friends. They tortured me, tried to break my mind, used magic to read my deepest secrets and use them against me. How can you be the same person after that? ...But still, I wanted to serve, so they sent me to Kirkwall. I trusted my knight-commander, but her fear of mages drove her to madness. Kirkwall’s Circle fell, and blood flowed in the streets.” He turned back to Owain with fire in his eyes. “Can’t you see why I want no part of that life anymore?”

“Of course,” said Owain, trying to sound reassuring. He hadn't known the full extent of Cullen's past. “I’m not here to convince you otherwise. On the contrary, I rather respect what you’re doing. It’s a kind of… freedom, really. From dependence, from the Chantry’s control. In a way, it’s not unlike what we mages have sought through rebellion.”

Cullen didn’t seem to hear him. “I should be taking it,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I should be taking it!” He screwed his eyes up in frustration and punched the bookcase beside his desk. He breathed heavily and rubbed his eyes before opening them to look at Owain. “I will not give less to the Inquisition than I did to the Chantry!”

Cullen's behavior was verging on alarming. Owain rose and took a step toward him, extending his hand. “Cullen! Give what you will, but we would never take from you! I would have you serve out of loyalty, not blind obedience.” Owain’s eyes met the commander’s and then looked away. “And I’m sorry,” he added, “If I’ve failed to fully earn that loyalty.”
“Ah,” Cullen said, and some of the tension fell from his shoulders. “You’re referring to what I said yesterday. For that, I am sorry. That was beneath me. I didn’t realize the... extent of your relationship with Scout Althea, and it was unfair of me to ask you to make that kind of choice and expect it to end otherwise.”

“No, it was honest. And you opened my eyes to things I have failed to see until now. I know you have reason to hate mages for the pain they have caused you, and I can’t blame you for that. But I am not those mages. What we--what the rebel mages want is not Kinloch or Kirkwall.”

“I’m not blind, you know,” Cullen sighed. “I know there have been excesses by the Templars. And as I said, I’m not proud of the man I was in Kirkwall.”

“Perhaps the Inquisition is a chance to change that, to build something new,” Owain suggested.

Cullen nodded. “Yes, perhaps so...” He paused and grunted in pain, blinking hard and leaning on the desk for support.

“Are you alright?” Owain asked, reaching forward again. He watched Cullen with concern as the wave of pain passed over him. “Isn’t there a chance this could kill you?”

Cullen brushed him off and spoke as if he was talking to himself as much as he was to him. “It hasn’t yet. I can endure it. I chose this.” He wiped his hand across his brow and seemed to decide something. He flipped the lid closed on his lyrium kit and pushed it across the desk toward Owain.

“Please, Inquisitor. Take it. Use it, throw it over the walls, burn it--I don't care. I just need it out of my sight.”

Owain looked at the resolve on Cullen’s face and nodded slowly. He picked up the box and took his leave, closing the door on his commander sitting at the desk again, his head in his hands.

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Althea downed her first drink and slid the glass toward Owain for a second, which he poured without a word. They were sitting at the desk in his quarters. It was dim. A fire crackled on the hearth, fighting the evening chill that flowed in through the open windows.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” she said, watching firelight catch the golden liquid swirling in her glass as she cradled it in her hands. She was dressed in a new uniform, and her hair was clean and freshly plaited, but a few cuts and scrapes on her brow and a weariness about her eyes belied the struggle of the past several days. “Lieutenant Kestral told me about their mission to hunt Red Templars. You shouldn’t have pulled them from the trail.”

“Believe me, I know,” he replied, sipping his whiskey.

“They could have found those Templars, cut off their supplies. Stopped them from--”

“Maker’s breath,” he interrupted. “Are you really going to be upset with me for saving your life?”

She sighed. “No, I guess not.”

“Good. Shut up and drink.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes at him, but said nothing. They sat in silence. She stared out the window. He sipped his drink and watched her. In the quiet, all his questions bubbled to the fore again, and he picked the one that nagged at him the most.
“Did you know about that rebel cell when you went out there?” he asked, looking her in the eyes. “Tell me you weren’t planning that all along.”

She opened her mouth as if to speak and then closed it, pressing her lips together in a fine line. “I can’t tell you that,” she admitted.

“Fucking hell, Thea.” He stood and walked over to the fireplace, leaning an arm against the mantle and looking down into the flames. “Why am I not surprised.”

She turned to look at him, her eyes chastened but still shining with a touch of her usual defiance. “They wrote to Fiona while you were still in Crestwood, asking for assistance, and I happened to be headed toward the Graves. I didn’t think it would be an issue.”

Owain shook his head, frustrated. He glared at her. “Don’t you get what I’m trying to do here? Do you have any idea how this looks? The mages are allies of the Inquisition, but we’re not here to fight the rebellion for you. I can’t afford to just think about myself anymore. I can’t just think about mages, even. It’s bigger than that.”

She studied him quietly for a long moment and then got up and joined him by the fire. She came behind him and put her arms around his waist, resting her chin against his back. “Maker,” she murmured. “They really did get you with this Inquisition stuff, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Owain sighed out his anger. “Any other hidden agendas I should know about?”

“No. I promise.”

“Good.” He shrugged off her embrace and reached into his coat. He pulled out a small bundle of notes and handed it to her.

“What’s this?”

“Redemption,” he said, nodding at the pages in her hands. “Or a chance at it. Those are the last reports on the whereabouts of the Red Templars. I want you to find them. Put a team together. You’ll report to Commander Cullen.”

She looked from him to the papers and back, and her blue eyes glittered as she spoke. “Consider it done.”
Owain struggled to keep his balance as he perched on a stool in Josephine’s parlor, which had been transformed into something of a workshop of late, filled with bolts of fabric, dress forms, and boxes of ribbons, buttons, trim, and any number of things he couldn’t begin to name. A large mirror leaned against the wall before him, and his own impatience stared out at him while a small Orlesian man darted around, measuring, pinning, and muttering to himself.

A faint memory of childhood surfaced in his mind—himself as a boy, standing in front of a mirror like this one, his mother telling him to keep still, soothing and remarking on his latest growth spurt as she pinned and marked the clothes on his back. He had hated it then, and he hated this now.

He was being fitted for a new formal outfit for their upcoming visit to the Orlesian imperial court at Halamshiral. He and his party had spent a week in the Dales quelling demons and undead, earning the appreciation of Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons, whose troops were stationed there during the ongoing civil war. His invitation to the Winter Palace had arrived at Skyhold almost as they did, and it had sent Josephine into a frenzy of activity. All the preparations and strategy going into this endeavor were not unlike what they would have done before a major military battle. Josie could be as much a commander as Cullen, except on her field, armor consisted of silk frocks and gilded masks, and the weapons were secrets and scandal.

“...de Montfort, Duke Germain de Chalons, and Duke Bastien de Ghislain,” Josie was saying when he tuned in again. “The seven members of the Council of Heralds are all highly influential, and it would be wise for us to court their approval of the Inquisition. I suggest you meet and speak with each of them at the Winter Palace, Inquisitor.”

“Though only six of them will be in attendance,” Vivienne added over the rim of her teacup. She sat in a chair by the fire, presiding over the scene. “One of them is currently… indisposed.”

“Bastien is still not well enough to travel?”

“No.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” Josie scribbled a note on her parchment.

“As am I, my dear.”

The tailor draped a length of bright red fabric over Owain’s shoulder. It was a thick, heavy wool, and so, so red. Exceedingly red.

“No, no, monsieur. Not the red for the Inquisitor,” Vivienne instructed. Owain breathed an internal sigh of relief. “Try the dark blue. Yes, that’s much better. Do ensure the fit is close around the shoulders and waist. That should help sway a few of the more susceptible members of the court.”
He scowled at being so objectified. Any gratitude he felt about the color morphed into disgust, and he addressed it with his fellow mage. “Is everything a tool to be used in this Game?”

Vivienne set her cup down on its saucer and looked at him patiently, like he really was a child to which one needed to explain things very slowly and simply. “It would be foolish to think otherwise, my dear.” She picked up her cup again and took another sip. “Besides, as a mage, the court is already predisposed to dislike you, though my presence will certainly help in that regard. You will need all the weapons you have at your disposal.”

The pragmatist in him sensed she was right, but Owain glowered at her through the mirror anyway. If Vivienne noticed--and he was sure she did--it didn’t register at all in her expression.

Josephine cleared her throat. Ever the diplomat, even at home in Skyhold. “So, that covers the major players who will be there. I will have a copy of my notes sent to your quarters for further study. Leliana will cover all of our current intelligence on the assassination plot tomorrow in the war room.” She checked the list on the writing board that was her constant companion. “That just leaves… dancing. You do know how to dance, do you not, Inquisitor?”

Why hadn’t it occurred to him that a ball would involve dancing? Childhood memories, indeed. This whole operation was a minefield of them.

“Well, I can’t say there were many balls at the Circle,” he replied. “I did have lessons at one point. But that was a very long time ago.” When a politically advantageous marriage was yet a possibility. When he was the second son of Bann Trevelyan and his value lay in raising the status of his father’s house. Familiar bitterness clouded his thoughts. Still, he had to admit he hadn’t hated those lessons. And it seemed they were about to pay off after all.

Josephine looked thoughtful. “Hmn. To be sure, I believe we should have a demonstration.” She set her quill and papers on the desk and pulled a delicate-looking music box from one of the drawers. She wound its key, and it began to play a sweet, tinkling melody.

Demonstration? He stepped off the stool and glanced tentatively at the two women in the room. Vivienne dismissed him immediately with an icy look and turned to speak softly to the tailor, who seemed to have finished with his measurements. Miffed by this rejection of an offer he hadn't even made, he turned back to Josie and extended his hand awkwardly. She took it with perfect grace and composure that contrasted sharply with his own lack of both.

It really had been a long time. He struggled to recall the posture, how to lead, and where to put his hands and feet, but a minute or two later his muscles fell into a groove of remembered movement, and he smiled with satisfaction as they turned in the small space. Dancing had always been romantic to him. Even his adolescent self had viewed it as mostly an excuse to have a pretty girl in his arms. Perhaps it was the physical closeness, or the matching, mirrored steps, or the give-and-take tension of leading and following. Whatever it was, it felt good.

The music box played itself out, and they spun to a halt beside Josephine’s desk. He looked at her and smiled, stepping back and dropping into a formal bow. Her eyes shone at him as she curtseyed and smoothed her hands down the silk ruffles of her skirt. “Well. That will do,” she said, slightly breathless.

“Very Marcher,” Vivienne commented from across the room. “No one will mistake you for Orlesian, my dear, but perhaps that is not such a bad thing.”

He turned his head to throw a snarky look in her direction, but he stopped when he noticed the open door and Cassandra standing in it. She stood frozen in that moment, one hand still on the door, her
eyes wide and mouth slightly open as she stared at him and Josephine. He probably looked just as
stunned. He mastered himself and looked away, snapping his mouth shut and taking another step
back, running a hand nervously through his hair.

Josephine cut neatly through the silence. “Cassandra! I’m so glad you finally came. If you will just
step up here, Monsieur Reynaud will take care of you.” She smiled and gestured toward the mirror
and the pedestal Owain had recently vacated. Then she addressed him. “Inquisitor, I believe that is
all for today.”

Owain nodded and walked back toward the mirror, stopping to scoop up his coat where it lay on the
floor behind the stool. Cassandra was already standing on it. He locked eyes with her reflection as he
straightened, holding his rumpled coat in both hands. There was a question held there and that hint of
doubt again as she looked at him, her hands pausing as they worked the buckles of her breastplate.
He opened his mouth to say something, but then he couldn’t think what.

Vivienne cleared her throat and arched a brow at him, and he remembered where he was.

“Right. Yes. Leaving.” He threw the coat over his shoulder and wrenched the door open.

From the edge of his vision, he could see Vivienne turning to the Seeker. “Cassandra, dear, are you
certain we can’t talk you into a dress for the Winter Palace?”

He thought he heard a disgusted sound as the door shut behind him.

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Owain watched the towers of the Winter Palace come into view as his carriage pulled up to the gates
at Halamshiral. They were nearly there. He rolled his shoulders and pulled at the collar of his new
coat. The wool was a little scratchy, but it did fit well, and the cut was a flattering choice, he
grudgingly allowed. Curse Vivienne and her ruthless competency.

Josephine sat across from him, arrayed in a voluminous ballgown of blue and gold silk. Like him and
the rest of their party, her outfit included a sash and a badge adorned with the symbol of the
Inquisition. She stared out the window with a slight crease in her brow. He could almost see her
mind running through a checklist of reminders and plans, all in the name of being overly prepared.
He was less worried—he had full confidence in her abilities as their ambassador.

“Remember, Inquisitor,” she turned to him as the carriage slowed to a stop. “How you speak to the
court is a matter of life and death. It is not simply a matter of etiquette and adhering to protocol.
Every word, every gesture is measured and evaluated for weakness. The eyes of the empire will be
on you at all times.”

Owain sighed, having heard this speech several times already. “I know, I know. I’ve prepared myself
for a very tiresome evening.”

She pressed on. “The political situation here is tenuous at best. The Empress fears that our presence
will upset the balance, and Gaspard is only too happy to have us attend at his invitation. Any
disruption we cause creates an opportunity for him, and potentially an advantage.”

He paused and put a hand on hers to reassure her as he moved to exit the carriage. “It’ll be fine,
Josie. Really.” He heard her sigh and breathe out a prayer to Andraste as they emerged onto the
castle grounds.

They were greeted at the gate by Grand Duke Gaspard himself and exchanged bows. Like all
Orlesian nobles, Gaspard covered his face with a mask, but his dress armor and military bearing
distinguished him as a chevalier as well.

“Welcome to Halamshiral, Inquisitor Trevelyan,” Gaspard began. “It is an honor to finally meet you. Tales of your victories have captivated many of us in Orlais in recent days. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the support of the rightful Emperor.”

“The honor is mine, I assure you,” Owain replied. “And you believe yourself to be that rightful Emperor?”

“Of course,” said Gaspard, smiling and looking him in the eyes. “I am not a man who forgets his friends, Lord Trevelyan. You help me, and I will help you.”

“That’s quite an offer. I’ll keep it in mind, your grace.”

Gaspard continued in a confidential tone as they made their way through the gardens toward the palace itself. “If I may speak frankly, I suggest you be wary of the elven ambassador, Briala. My people have found her agents all over the palace, and I suspect she will attempt to disrupt the negotiations. She was once a servant of Celene’s, until my cousin had her arrested to cover up a political mistake. If anyone here wishes Celene harm, it would be her.”

Owain nodded, making a mental note to discuss with Leliana. They entered the castle and climbed a set of stairs leading to a pair of ornate doors that would open onto the ballroom. Here, Gaspard paused and took a deep breath, releasing it as a quiet sigh of resignation. “Be discreet, Inquisitor. I detest the Game, but if we do not play it well, our enemies will make us look like villains.”

He nodded again in agreement, surprised that an Orlesian, of all people, would express exactly how he himself felt about the night ahead.

They entered the ballroom, and Owain and the other members of the Inquisition were introduced. He met the Empress, Gaspard’s sister Florianne, Ambassador Briala, and the other major players in the room without making a fool of himself, and then he found himself at a bit of leisure.

He searched the room for his companions. The sheer size and scale of the palace was enormous, far beyond Vivienne’s chateau in Val Royeaux, not to mention anything he had ever seen in Ostwick. He spotted Cullen along the wall near the front of the room, surrounded by fawning nobles and looking utterly miserable. Unlike Owain, he had not escaped the bright red coat. Josephine was on the opposite side of the room, deep in conversation with a young woman who shared her dark hair and warm, brown eyes. A relative, perhaps? Vivienne held court in a corner by the entrance, clearly in her element, dressed in her horned crown and a flowing gown in brilliant white. The height of fashion, no doubt. Like all of them, however, she went unmasked. The better to set them apart from the Orlesians.

His eyes came to rest on Leliana standing near a window just a few yards away, and he moved to join her.

“How about Lady Cambienne’s shoes?” she said, clearly talking to him but staring at a woman across the room. Owain followed her line of sight.

“They look alright to me?” he shrugged.

Leliana shook her head and smiled, turning to look at him. “They’re too much! Trimmed with pearls and emeralds? And those buckles? Ridiculous.”

“I suppose?” He still wasn’t sure he saw the problem. “You know, for someone so concerned about shoes, I’m surprised you opted for the standard red uniform.”
“I am here to observe tonight, Inquisitor, to see rather than be seen,” she replied shrewdly. “You can learn much about someone by the clothes they wear. LadyCambienne, for example. Gold and jewels on a dancing slipper, something so easily soiled or lost—it is a vulgar display of wealth. But her family has recently lost most of their holdings. They have their titles but little else. So where did she acquire such a slipper? What has she done? Who has she bedded? These are all useful questions, no?”

“You're right as always, Leliana,” he conceded. “This is why I'm glad we're on the same side. So what do my clothes say about me, other than that I have a very aggressive former court enchanter dictating my outfits?”

She looked him over with a thoughtful eye. “Vivienne is an accomplished player of the Game. She chose that clothing for a reason, that you may show as the hero they have heard in the stories, powerful but not too threatening. A mage but of noble birth, foreign yet familiar, fashionable enough to show you can play their Game but not so much that you will upend it.” She nodded at him approvingly. “It is a delicate balance, and you wear it well.”

He snorted and looked away but could think of nothing to say to that. They watched a handful of couples twirl on the dance floor. “You seem different here, Leliana. More approachable, perhaps.”

“This is Halamshiral, the Imperial Court, the beating heart of the Grand Game. It is all a dance, Inquisitor, and some of us have been playing the Game for so long that we could perform the steps in our sleep. But like all dances, it can be learned.” She smiled at him again, not unkindly. It was all a bit unnerving from his normally severe spymaster.

He took his leave of Leliana and wandered outside. He found Dorian in one of the gardens, wearing opulent robes of white and scarlet and an air of wry satisfaction.

Dorian spotted him, and his face lit up. “You must try this spicy punch, Inquisitor! It's delicious!”

“Does this remind you of home, Dorian?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied archly, gesturing with the half-empty glass in his hand. “All we need is a few sacrificial slaves and a good blood magic duel, and I could almost imagine myself back in Minrathous. The double-dealing, the elegant poisons, canapés—it's all the same.”

“Be careful. I'm sure not everyone here looks kindly on Tevinters in their midst, even if you are with the Inquisition.”

“That's true. You should see the way some of them wrinkle their noses at me. You'd think I smelled like cabbages. No matter. I'm rather used to being a pariah at this point. A devastatingly well-dressed pariah.”

“Indeed,” said Owain. “Well, don't drink too much. I'd hate to be down a mage when we locate the assassins.”

“You ask so much of me, Trevelyan,” Dorian sighed, clutching at his heart like a martyr. “But anything for the Inquisition.”

He moved on, searching the rooms and gardens for the one person he really wanted to see. He found her, finally, on one of the balconies off the main ballroom. Cassandra was listening to a middle-aged noble talk animatedly about something, completely oblivious to the growing impatience in her expression.

He picked up two glasses of Dorian’s punch from a passing servant and walked out onto the balcony
He felt Cassandra’s eyes follow him, and he quirked an eyebrow at her in passing. He set the punch down on the balustrade and spread his palms on the cool stone, looking out onto the empty garden below. The golden glow of the candlelit ballroom faded into blue moonlight here, and the relative quiet was a blessing all its own.

It was quiet enough to hear the tap of approaching footsteps, though he didn’t turn toward them until Cassandra was at his side. “I thought he would never leave,” she said with a groan and a roll of her eyes.

“Is he an admirer?” He handed her one of the glasses, which she accepted with gratitude. “Shall I have him killed?”

“The only thing he seems to admire is soup.”

Owain laughed and let the invisible mask he’d been wearing all night slip from his face as he looked at her. “Well, then he must be blind,” he said, softly. Cassandra’s brows shifted upwards with surprise, and the ghost of a slow smile curled at her lips. He cleared his throat and looked away, nervous, suddenly. “I see they couldn’t talk you into a dress for this evening after all.”

She made a disgusted sound. “I am a warrior, Inquisitor. I am here to protect you from enemies that would hurt you, not to swoon and flirt. If this uniform is good enough for Commander Cullen, it is good enough for me.”

He turned back to her. “I think the color is lovely on you, Cassandra.” And it was. That vivid red, so garish on the bolt, seemed radiant on her. Perhaps, too, it was the first time he had seen her in anything but armor, and it was... nice. She seemed more vulnerable somehow, softer, the wide sash at her waist accentuating the swell of her breasts and flare of her hips in a way he found utterly distracting. Or maybe it was just the answering warmth in her gaze as she looked back at him.

She flicked her eyes forward and took a sip of her drink. “You... look rather dashing as well, Owain.” He thought he glimpsed a bit of pink coloring the tips of her ears. Was this shyness? From Cassandra? The idea that she might be as nervous as he was gave him a small burst of confidence.

“Why, thank you,” he said, taking a step back to stand straighter and look down at himself. “I can take absolutely no credit for it.” He returned to the railing and leaned closer, so that their shoulders were nearly brushing. She didn’t seem to mind. He could feel the heat of her body warming the air around them, and a whiff of her scent, which reminded him of a clean, simple soap. Part of him wanted that moment to last forever. The rest of him didn’t, but only because it wanted that heat against his own skin, and that scent filling his lungs.

“What do you think of the ball so far?” he asked, questing for another topic. “I seem to recall you love parties.”

She snorted. “It is a waste of time, like all Orlesian foolishness. They like to pretend their petty squabbles are a ‘game.’ Oh yes, let us treat murder, corruption, and deceit as amusements. How delightful!”

“It is a bit perverse, isn’t it? But it seems we’re forced to play it, for tonight at least.”

“We are here to save Empress Celene, and it galls me. Why does she merit our protection? The empire would be better off without her. Gaspard is the leader Orlais needs in this crisis.”

“We’re acting on the visions Dorian and I saw at Redcliffe, remember? Her death helps Corypheus conquer Southern Thedas.” He considered her words, serious now. “You would support Gaspard in
overthrowing the Empress?"

“Of course not,” she went on, dismissively, her expression hardened. “Chaos is what Corypheus wants, and we must oppose him. Were it up to me, however, I would let Celene fall and let Gaspard take the throne. He is a man of action and would recognize the true threat, not spend his time throwing balls and writing letters.” She spat these last words with disdain.

Owain sighed. Perhaps he shouldn’t have brought up politics. As if he needed more reminders of the real reason they were here. Couldn’t they go back to being two friends chatting on a balcony?

“I don’t suppose you would like to dance, Cassandra?”

The question caught her off guard. “Dance? Now?” She looked at him with genuine confusion, and then her instinct for duty took over, and it was Seeker Pentaghast, the Right Hand of the Divine, that answered. “This is… hardly the time,” she sputtered. “We are here to find an assassin. We should do that and get out of here as soon as possible.”

He shouldn’t have brought up politics.

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Politics proved inescapable, anyway, for the rest of the evening, and by the end of it, he had had enough to last a lifetime. Owain found himself standing again on that balcony, alone, taking stock of the new world order he had wrought in the space of a few hours.

They had roamed all over the Winter Palace and its grounds in their efforts to uncover the conspiracy against Celene, but each new piece of information seemed only to add another layer of plot and counterplot. It was impossible to follow all the threads, to know which leads were most trustworthy, to assign blame or exonerate. Celene, Gaspard, Briala… Everyone seemed to be scheming against everyone else, and he still wasn’t sure, even now, who was truly right or wrong. Most frustrating of all, it didn’t seem to matter.

In the end, it was Grand Duchess Florianne who was working for Corypheus, using her skill with the Game to play her own brother and cousin against each other and sow chaos. Who knows what that ancient Tevinter had promised her to win her complicity, but in a way it was no different than the more mundane bribes and favors that were the currency of everyday Orlais.

It was Florianne who had pulled a dagger and plunged it into Celene’s heart in front of the entire imperial court. Owain had watched from the sidelines, had let it happen before his forces swooped in to keep the peace. He had let a woman die in the service of politics. They had known by then. They could have stopped it, but they didn’t. On one hand, Orlais had done this to itself—why should they intervene? But the Inquisition had a stake in this Game, too, and Gaspard’s words echoed in his mind: “You help me, and I will help you.” To make doubly sure, he had supplied Briala with the means to control Gaspard from behind the scenes, to remind the new Emperor about honoring his obligations.

Only time would tell if he had made the right choices. The dizzying weight of his decisions settled on him now and made him sick to his stomach. First life or death, now the fate of empires. It was fucking terrifying. Worse, he felt utterly alone in it all.

Their investigations had kept him in and out of the ballroom all night, with little opportunity to speak with Cassandra again. He had tried, once, catching her eye from across the room as he returned from rummaging the library for further evidence. But he had barely taken three steps before a voice had called to him and forced him to stop and turn. It was Florianne, demanding a dance. Not knowing
what he knew now, he obliged. Their words had maneuvered around each other as deftly as their feet, and the court had approved of his performance, but beneath his calm, diplomatic mask seethed resentment of another quiet moment with the Seeker, denied. When he stepped off the dance floor, Cassandra was nowhere to be found.

That dance with Florianne had foreshadowed a much deadlier encounter later that evening, as the Grand Duchess tried to evade capture while Celene still lay bleeding on the polished floor. He and his party had chased her out into the gardens, where her speed and poison-tipped arrows had given them considerably more trouble than expected for a coddled noblewoman. Cassandra’s shield saved his life more than once tonight, as the combined might of three powerful mages finally brought Florianne down. It was done, Corypheus had been thwarted, and the throne of Orlais settled.

He was exhausted and battered, his clothes torn and stained with blood and ichor from the battles of the evening, but he heard footsteps on the flagstones behind him, and for a fleeting moment his heart leapt with joy that it might be Cassandra coming to join him in the moonlight once again. But a second later, he realized there was no way this soft shuffle could come from the Seeker’s heavy boots. It was Josephine, and he tried but failed to hide his profound disappointment at that. He had no more energy for masks tonight.

“Are you alright?” she asked, looking at his face with concern as she handed him a glass of wine that was a small consolation in his current state.

“I will be,” he said grimly as he drained half of the drink. He blinked hard and tried to speak more casually. “Where are the others?”

“Vivienne and Dorian are still inside,” she said, mentally ticking off a list of Inquisition members. “Leliana is meeting with Ambassador Brialia, and Cassandra and Cullen left to secure the prisoners for transport to Skyhold.”

“I see.” Duty had called for the Lady Seeker yet again.

“You’ve done well, Inquisitor. The throne of Orlais is secure, and it is in our debt. Perhaps just as importantly, the Inquisition has shown itself to be a true power. People will not soon forget what we have accomplished tonight. Not bad for your first Orlesian ball.”

Owain squinted at her and took another substantial gulp of wine. Then he shook his head and sighed. “I don’t know how you do it, Josie. The politics, the conspiracies, the lies… It’s enough to drive one mad.”

She laughed, a gentle, joyous sound. “It is a skill, Inquisitor, honed over many years of practice. One cannot expect to learn all of its intricacies in an evening.” She looked out over the treetops, now swaying in a slight breeze. “Besides, there is a certain satisfaction in a well-played Game. I know this is not the kind of battlefield you are used to, but this is how I fight for the Inquisition.”

“And I’ll forever be glad that you do, if only so I don’t have to.” He finished his wine and set the glass down on the railing and was struck by a sudden whim.

He stepped back and bowed. “Would you care for a dance, Lady Montilyet?” Even with Cassandra gone, he couldn’t let his only partner at the Winter Palace be a backstabbing, demon-allied murderer.

She smiled and dropped into an elegant curtsey. “I thought you would never ask, Lord Trevelyan.”

He offered her his hand and placed the other on her waist, and they swayed slowly to the music that
filtered out from the ballroom windows. It was lovely, and they moved well together, and it did much to erase the memory of his only other turn on the dance floor that evening. It did nothing, however, for the deep-rooted wish of his heart, that he might have held an entirely different pretty girl in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I would totally play an entire game like Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts, except with 100% more politics and 200% less coin and statue collecting.

This was inspired by my actual playthrough, in which I failed to lock in Cassandra's romance before going to the Winter Palace. She refused to dance with Owain, and I refused to redo a three hour quest. :'D
Cassandra found him in the training yard. Owain could hear her boots crunching the gravel as she approached and knew it was her. He was practicing again, making his targets collide into one another with a satisfying thump. His rift magic had improved enough that he was no longer a danger to the ongoing construction works.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

“Technically, we already are,” he said, without breaking his concentration on the spell he was casting.

“I meant privately.”

Her voice was so quiet and unlike the brash Seeker he knew that he stopped what he was doing and turned toward her. He saw the nervous look on her face and dropped his attitude like a hot coal.

“Is everything alright?” Hastily, he rolled down the sleeves of his tunic and threw his coat on over it. He followed her as she led them up the stairs to walk along the battlements. She paused in a quiet corner, where they stood overlooking the snow-covered mountains glittering in the mid-morning sun. He leaned his elbows on the stone and waited for her to start.

She chewed her lip and threw him a sideways glance before speaking. “Althea. What is she to you?”

He turned his head to look at Cassandra’s profile as she studied her own gloved hand resting on the wall in front of her. Maker. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected this to be about, but it certainly wasn’t Althea.

“She’s my friend?” he replied, wondering why he was being asked to explain their relationship months after she had already joined the Inquisition. “Since my family cut me off, no one has known me for as long as she has. She used to be the only person I could trust. At least, until I joined the Inquisition.” He squinted at Cassandra. “But you know all that. What is this about?”

She twisted her hands together. In all the battles and challenges they had faced, he had never seen her so flustered, and it was disconcerting.

“It’s… the flirting,” she said, her voice tighter and higher than usual. “With me. I’ve… noticed it. Unless, it’s all just my imagination. And you… and her… Which is entirely possible. And… fine…” She was choking on the words, like she was having to force them out by sheer will, one by one.

Oh. Oh. He tangled a hand in his hair and looked down at his feet. Did this mean she was jealous? His heart fluttered at that possibility, and then sank as he considered the other implications of her words. Had he offended her? Sent mixed messages? Probably. He preemptively cursed his own
thoughtlessness.

“Um. We’re… It's nothing like that. Hasn't been for a long time. And no, it’s not your imagination.”

He looked up at her when she didn’t respond immediately. Her brows were furrowed and her lips set in a tight line that touched off a blaze of panic in his veins.

“I- I’m sorry,” he added quickly. “If I’ve made you uncomfortable, I can stop.”

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes. “No. It’s just… you can’t. You cannot court me.”

“Court you?” His fingers ceased their tugging at his scalp. That sounded awfully formal. Is that what he was doing? Is that what he should have been doing? “But why can’t I court you? Is that what you want?”

She made a disgusted sound, the biggest he had yet heard from her. “No!” she said, before throwing her arms in the air and stalking away toward Cullen’s tower.

What just happened? Should he go after her? He stood there in indecision, a riot of half-formed thoughts swirling in his brain. And then he saw her stop. Her shoulders rose and fell with a heavy breath, and she came stomping back. He watched her return with a question on his face.

“I take it back,” she sighed. “That is what I want. I want a man that sweeps me off my feet to give me flowers and read me poetry by candlelight. I want the ideal!”

He was still reeling from the beginning of their conversation, and this confession took him further aback. “I didn’t expect you to feel this way.” He didn’t know what else to say.

“I know what you see. I am a warrior, I am blunt and difficult and self-righteous. But my heart lies beneath all that. It yearns for these things I cannot have.” Her voice quavered with passion. “If you cannot see that, then desist. What enamours you is but the surface.”

He studied her in that moment, the hard lines of her face softened with unguarded emotion, a plea. At the same time, she was trying to push him away, ready to retreat into the safety of her armor, her stern demeanor, her image as a Seeker of Truth. He had come to like--no, he should just say it--love her face and all these things about her, and maybe now, since she was forcing his hand, he could be ready to admit that. To himself and to her. He remembered her favorite books, and it all made perfect sense. Here was that romantic heart, that passion, opened to him in a rare instant of vulnerability. He had the sense that if he backed down now, if he flinched away from this challenge, it might slip away and be lost to him forever.

She was so tall, he barely had to tilt his head to look into her eyes. The cold wind blowing across the battlements had scattered the short hairs framing her face. Impulsively, he reached up and with the tips of his fingers gently smoothed the dark strands that had fallen across her forehead. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

“You’re wrong, Cassandra,” he said softly. “I see it. I see you. More clearly than ever. And I’m sorry if I hurt you or failed to see it earlier. I can be that man.”

She opened her eyes and pulled back, frowning. “No, you can’t. You’re the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste.”

The titles cut more sharply than a blade, and his confidence came crashing down as he leaned back against the wall. There was a lump rising in his throat.
“Is that what I am to you? A title and a symbol? ...a duty?” There it was. He laid himself bare and gave her the weapons to break him, if she chose. He waited for her to speak, and it felt like eternity.

“No,” she said finally, shaking her head and meeting his anxious eyes with her own steady gaze. “You are more than that. Much more.”

He let out the breath he was holding and tried to piece together all the meaning behind her words.

“Wait- then what are you saying?” He turned and squared his body with hers. “So, it’s not our feelings that are the problem, it’s the way I’m addressing them?”

“It’s not that simple. We have a mission, Inquisitor. We face death at every turn. The world hinges on our actions.”

He didn’t need to be reminded of that. The fear of losing her had haunted his sleepless nights since Redcliffe. Althea’s words rattled in his brain, about dithering and complications and war. Since when was he on the other side of that argument?

“That doesn’t change how we feel,” he said, refusing to let it go.

“It changes everything,” she said, and then she walked away for real, leaving him there on the wall, stewing in his own agitation.

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Althea kept her promise to track down the Red Templars. She and a small team of scouts traced their supply lines to a quarry in the Emprise du Lion. Cullen detailed their report in the war room, and Owain deployed immediately with Cassandra, Blackwall, and Sera to investigate further.

They arrived at the Inquisition base camp in Sahrnia a few days later. Light snow was falling, coating everything in powder and a hushed silence. Owain breathed white puffs of air as Althea walked them through the small town and briefed them on the Red Templar activity.

“Sahrnia is a pretty small village, clearly,” she said. “It took heavy damage in the civil war, and then the Red Templars moved in and things just got worse. The quarry was owned by an Orlesian noble named Mistress Poulin, but she signed it over to the Templars a few months ago in exchange for supplies. They come back periodically to conscript more workers for the mines, but the people who go don’t tend to come home.”

He could see the evidence of her words written in the ruins of the town, the broken down buildings and the weary faces of the few remaining villagers. They reached a rise in the land just beyond the village, where Althea paused, hugging her jacket tightly around herself. “Things are bad here. The people are starving, they’re low on supplies, and winter hasn’t even really started yet. We’ve given them all the food and blankets we can spare, but it’s still not enough.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Send a bird to Josie, and see what she can do. We should be able to divert some supplies from Skyhold. What about the Templars?”

“They’ve taken over Suledin Keep to the southwest as a base of operations.” She pointed to a tower in the distance. “But the quarry is more directly south from here. They have smaller camps set up along the way. You’ll probably want to clear those while you’re at it. We can come along behind and set up outposts to secure the area.”

Owain nodded. He stood with his hands in his coat pockets, taking in the view of the landscape. North of the village, he could see the ruins of a massive columned bridge, likely elven, spanning a
frozen lake. To the west, an icy waterfall spilled down the face of a rocky cliff. It was unlike anything he had ever seen in the Marches or their travels through Ferelden.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Althea said, following his gaze. “I’d like it better if it weren’t so fucking cold.”

He let out a short laugh. It was another place, another experience he never would have had in his life at the Circle. He needed to stop tallying what that captivity had cost him.

They set out for the quarry, hiking through the snow. Sera and Blackwall walked ahead, leaving Cassandra and Owain to follow. He could see Sera gesticulating wildly with her arms and distinctly heard her say the word “titscicles.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“I was thinking about our conversation the other day,” said Cassandra, breaking the silence between them. “You know, it wasn’t meant to be a challenge.”

“Wasn’t it?” He certainly saw it that way. They hadn’t solved anything that day, but something had shifted between them all the same. He thought he knew where he stood with her, and he knew what she wanted.

“You needn’t do it just because I said you couldn’t.”

“That’s not the only reason. I said I would do it, and I will. You deserve to be courted, Cassandra. Is that so hard to believe?”

“I…” She hesitated, then made a disgusted sound. “You enjoy complicating things, don’t you.”

“I live for it.”

She rolled her eyes in response.

“Oy! Lovebirds!”

Cassandra sputtered beside him while he snapped his head forward to look at Sera and Blackwall, who had stopped along a low ridge just ahead of them.

“Over there.” Sera jerked her head toward a Red Templar camp on the other side of the rocks. He could see five or six Templars, mostly warriors, in a small cluster of tents surrounded by wooden barricades. Their party was outnumbered, but just barely.

Owain motioned to Sera to set up on higher ground and snipe at them from a distance. He would make the first move with his rift magic, pulling the Templars off their feet and into a central location, where Blackwall and Cassandra could move in and strike as hard as possible. If it worked, they could even their numbers in that initial push and mop up the rest with relative ease.

The plan succeeded beautifully. The Red Templars were caught completely off guard, and by the time they recovered from the pull of the abyss, only three of them were left standing. Against Sera’s arrows, Owain’s magic, and the swords and shields of the warriors, they didn’t stand much chance.

They searched the camp in the aftermath, finding a few documents and letters about lyrium shipments that he kept to give to Cullen later. Toward the rear of the camp, they found a large red lyrium vein, shimmering and buzzing in the cold air. They could not afford to leave these intact, and Dagna, the Inquisition’s archanist, had given him some explosive charges for just that purpose. Owain took one from his pack and set it among the crystals, lighting it with a flick of his fingers. They shielded their eyes as the device did its job.
A few paces beyond the camp, they came to a large caged wagon, like the kind that might be used to transport prisoners or slaves. At first glance, it was empty, but as they got closer, Owain could see the crumpled figure of a young woman inside. They hurried to reach her, and he could hear a low groan as he tried the door, unsuccessfully. He nodded at Sera, and she ran forward, pulling her picks from her pouch as she moved. “On it!”

The lock was off in a moment, and Blackwall gently lifted the woman out onto the ground. She was not in good condition.

“What’s your name?” Owain asked, kneeling in the snow by her head, one hand on his knee. “Can you speak? What happened to you?”

The woman’s eyes fluttered in confusion and she groaned again, turning her head to look blankly from side to side. Unintelligible words croaked from her mouth, and then her head fell back, and she lost consciousness.

Owain could feel the hum of red lyrium coming in waves off her body, and it reminded him of Redcliffe. “She must be one of the villagers from Sahnia, corrupted with the lyrium. Maybe this is what happens when you work in the mines for too long.”

“Creepy,” said Sera.

“Worse than creepy,” Blackwall added, folding his arms across his chest. “Evil.”

“And that woman, Mistress Poulin, sold her people to the Templars for this?” Cassandra shook her head with disgust. “Despicable.”

“Little people always getting the shit end of the stick,” Sera said. Owain couldn’t agree more.

They walked on, taking out more Red Templar camps and finding yet more cages of villagers. Their stories were all similar: taken by the Templars, given doses of red lyrium, made to work processing and shipping the material. Those who were weak didn’t last more than a few days after exposure—“seeding,” as the documents called it—while those who survived were given more. The truth about the “quarry” slowly dawned on them as they put the pieces together. It wasn’t about taking lyrium from the earth, it was about infecting villagers and using them as living hosts.

Owain couldn’t find words to describe the horror of what they discovered. It was far worse than they had even guessed. Feeding red lyrium to willing and deluded Templars was one thing, but forcing it on innocent people to grow and harvest it from their bodies? That was a whole new level of evil.

They fought their way down to the quarry, which was a complex of twisting passages and open pits covered in wooden scaffolding. It was also well fortified with Red Templars. They attacked as before, Owain’s rift magic and a quick strike from the warriors putting a dent in the first wave of enemies. He was weaving around the battle, putting down mines and casting spells, when he heard Sera’s shout from her vantage point on the scaffolds. “Incoming! Ten and three o’clock!” Her words were punctuated by the twang of her bow as she nocked and shot arrows at a furious speed. “Die!”

He turned his head and saw that she was right. Reinforcements were pouring into the pit from elsewhere in the quarry. He signalled to Cassandra and Blackwall to fall back toward Sera’s position. He fade-stepped up beside her and started launching spells from above, while the warriors stood side-by-side, holding the line below and cutting down any Templars who tried to cross it.

He thought they were turning the tide as the reinforcements slowed, until he saw a mass of moving, glowing red crystal lumber out of a tunnel and into their clearing. It was like Haven all over again.
There were four: two ranged creatures with crystal projectiles, and two behemoths with giant fists of red lyrium. *Shit.* He had a sinking feeling that this would not go well.

Shards of red lyrium came flying up toward Owain and Sera, and he pulled her down to the wooden planks just in time. He looked back at the sharp fragments lodged deep in the ice behind them and swore again. He motioned to Sera, and they jumped down to the ground, landing behind Cassandra and Blackwall and the shelter of their shields. Owain blocked the next volley of shards with an ice wall and went on the attack.

He heard the crash of broken glass beside him, which told him that Sera had consumed another flask of tempest potion and was shooting at an even more frantic pace. “Aim for the ranged ones!” he shouted at her, while cloaking himself in ice armor and stepping out through the fray to drop mines at their feet. The combination of his freezing spells and Sera’s shattering barrage ended the flurry of red lyrium shards. One positive, at least.

The behemoths, however, were much more problematic. Cassandra and Blackwall already had their hands full holding off the regular Red Templars, but having to block and dodge the swings of these monsters broke up their line, and they were soon fighting back to back, surrounded by enemies.

Sera was back up on the scaffold, launching grenades and expletives down at the enemies below—always a sign she was running low on arrows. Owain did his best to pull enemies from the warriors, setting mines and weakening them with his rift magic, but he could tell that Cassandra and Blackwall were tiring, blocking more and dodging less, and his own mana reserves were running dangerously low. Not good.

They were down to the two giants and a handful of regular Templars. Blackwall held the attention of one of the behemoths on his side, while Cassandra faced down the other. She parried the blade of one of the Templar knights and turned to thrust her sword through a gap in his armor. He fell toward her and pushed her weary legs off balance, right into the path of a red lyrium claw as it came swinging in on her flank.

The behemoth raked her along her side and tumbled her to the ground. Owain saw it happen, and a shout tore from his lungs. He fadestepped toward Cassandra, launching a stonefist that hit the enemy square in the face and sent it reeling backwards. At the limits of both his strength and his mana, he dropped his staff, sinking to his knees in front of the Seeker. The Templar shook its head and roared at Owain, and as it started toward him, he knew then that they could not win.

He looked down at his hands in despair, where the anchor twinkled at him and gave him a crazy idea. A desperate hope, a last-ditch prayer in the wind, he threw his hand up and released all the power he could summon, just as he had done at the breach. White-hot pain ripped through his arm and burst from his palm. A blinding green light appeared, and a rift opened just above the heads of the remaining Templars. A great flash of light and a rush of air, and the rift closed a few seconds later, swallowing all sign of their enemies.

He clutched his hand in the ensuing silence, doubled over in pain and disbelief that the battle was over and they were still alive. Blackwall rushed toward him and then past him, to Cassandra’s prone form on the ground. Owain turned and forgot his own pain as he saw the Seeker laying there, holding her wound and panting white breaths into the cold air. Blackwall, the soldier that he was, lost no time while Owain sat paralyzed in fear. He was undoing the buckles to her armor, trying to gain access to the wounds underneath. Even Sera had rushed over to help.

He came out of his stupor to the Warden shouting his name. “Inquisitor! Trevelyan! Once I get this off, you need to stop the bleeding! If she loses too much, she’s done for!”
Shit. Shitshitshit. He wiped his hand across his eyes and tried to remember all the healing magic he knew, wishing in vain that Solas or Dorian were here. Hell, even Althea was better at this than he was. Fuck.

Her breastplate off, Sera pulled up her tunic to reveal a deep gash in Cassandra’s side that was oozing crimson onto the snow beneath her. She was in shock, breathing rapidly and staring up into the sky. Owain’s hands shook as he touched her wound, hot and slick with blood, and then he realized he didn’t even have enough mana to cast the necessary spells.

He clenched his hands into fists to stop them from trembling and remembered the lyrium potions in his pouch. He pulled a glowing blue vial from his belt with shaky hands and bit the cork off, thinking about the reasons he so rarely used these. He hated the artificial sense of power, the fuzziness that clouded his mind, and the exhaustion that set in when the effects wore off. But none of that mattered now. The woman he loved lay bleeding out in front of him, so he threw back the vial and shuddered as mana flowed back into his veins. He put his hands on her wound again and poured magic into it, knitting her flesh back together as best he could. He glanced at her eyes as he worked, and it gave him strength to see them locked on his own. “Stay with me, stay with me,” he muttered.

Once the spell was done, he collapsed back onto the snowy ground, his hands still red with blood. Blackwall held Cassandra’s head up and administered a healing potion, and only then did Owain feel like he could breathe. The magic and potions would reverse the worst of the damage, though she was still weak, and it would take time to fully heal.

They set camp in the shadow of an elven ruin, far enough from the quarry that they could no longer hear the red lyrium’s song. Cassandra could barely walk, so Blackwall and Owain supported her between them as they staggered slowly out of the mine.

He settled her on her bedroll in one of the tents and helped her take off her gloves and boots. They were too tired to speak. Words were inadequate anyway, to express his immense relief that she would recover. He spread furs and extra blankets over her, anything they could rustle from their packs. All that done, he looked in her eyes and touched her shoulder before rising to leave. She stopped him, reaching for his hand.

“Stay,” she whispered, looking back at him.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, and he was powerless to say no.

He left the tent, briefly, to grab his pack and let Blackwall and Sera know he would be keeping watch over the Seeker. In case she needed more potions or healing overnight, he pointed out. They didn’t argue, though Sera peppered him with enough kissy sounds and eyebrow waggles that it tried his patience. He didn’t care. He would not leave her side, not now, not after what happened today.

She was already asleep when he ducked back inside. Exhausted himself, he spread his bedroll beside hers and sat with his hands clasped between his knees, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. He could hear the others by the fire outside, Sera’s high-pitched cackle strung across the Warden’s deep rumble of a laugh.

He opened his left hand and massaged the palm with his right thumb, watching the green light shift and shimmer in the dark tent. It had hurt, that final desperate blast in the quarry. He felt as if all the energy from his body had been sapped and poured into that rift. The dull ache of it now seemed to pulse in his very bones.
He had nearly lost her that day. It was his worst fear since he joined the Inquisition, so close to being made real. The closest they had ever come, but he knew now that there would only be more occasions like this. Every time they went into battle together, there was a chance that one of them wouldn’t walk out. So what, then? Would they live in that fear, always? Would they continue to insist that the risks were too great, that such danger precluded any joy and peace they might find in each other’s arms? Or would they reach out and grasp what they could?

He closed his left hand and opened his right, calling forth a small flame that warmed and lit the interior of the tent. He watched it lick idly across his palm, the bright reds and oranges and yellows searing into his vision. He could feel the effects of the lyrium wearing off, leaving a scorched earth of utter fatigue in its wake. Even his usual sleeplessness would be no match for this. He closed his hand on the flame and took off his coat, falling asleep almost as soon as he hit the ground.

He woke sometime later, his eyes opening to a still dark tent, and the warm, shadowy form of Cassandra resting against his own. He started to pull back but stopped when he realized the weight on his outstretched arm was her head pillowed against it. He stilled himself, not wanting to wake her. Her back was to him, pressed against his chest. His pulse quickened at the warmth radiating between them, skin separated only by the thin fabric of their shirts.

How had they ended up in this position? Had he moved, or had she? Impossible to tell. She shifted slightly against him, and he froze, realizing that the contact was evoking a response from him. He moved carefully to angle his hips away from hers and cursed his unconscious body for being the worst kind of traitor.

He listened again to the steady inhale and exhale of her breath as he tried to quiet his own. He couldn’t help noticing her scent. It comforted him, and he drifted back to sleep.

When he woke again, there was pre-dawn light seeping through the canvas. He felt the weight of Cassandra’s head still resting on his arm and knew better than to move, this time. When his eyes focused, he saw that she was facing him now. She was close, her knees brushing his legs and her face inches from his chest. One of her hands was twisted in the cloth of his shirt, and he could feel her breath warm on his skin. He pulled back just enough to see her face more clearly.

He lay there in the quiet and studied her, memorizing every feature, as proof against any repetition of yesterday’s near miss. Her face was serene and relaxed in sleep, and to him, sublimely beautiful. Her lashes brushed the tops of her cheeks, and her eyes shifted beneath their lids. Her lips, though dry and chapped in the cold air of the Emprise, were full and slightly parted. He tried not to think about how they might taste.

He sighed, and she stirred. With her eyes still closed, her fingers gripped his shirt more tightly. She pulled herself closer, burying her nose in it. A soft sound escaped her, and his heart turned liquid in his chest. Even so, he didn’t dare to move.

She pulled back and her eyes fluttered open, pools of deepest black and hazel that looked up at him from beneath heavy lids and those long, dark lashes. She blinked slowly at him, and there was an unmistakable heat in her gaze that stoked desire in his belly. “Owain,” she said, softly, and hearing his name on her lips made his blood pound in his ears. She tugged on his shirt again, and it took every scrap of his self-control not to press his body against hers and cover those lips with his own, not to take this as far as she would let him.

Ignoring the treason in his breeches, the last rational part of his brain reminded him that she was injured and drained, and he couldn’t possibly risk hurting her or taking advantage of her condition. What’s more, this was absolutely not part of proper courtship, by any definition.
So, he pulled her close like she wanted, but instead of pressing his lips to hers, he bent his neck and kissed the braid on top of her head and whispered her name into her hair like a spell or a prayer, like the key to the jumble of feelings that were filling his heart. She gave a soft sigh of contentment and fell back to sleep, and he curled his body protectively around that which had become most precious to him, the woman he would give anything and everything to defend.

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Flowers were hard to come by in Skyhold. There was little room for the purely decorative in a wartime castle. The limited space in the gardens was devoted to herbs and roots that could be used for healing potions and practical elixirs. So Owain settled for wildflowers and told himself that was better, anyway, for a woman who shunned frivolity and ostentation.

He scoured the hills below the keep for them, though they were scarce this time of year, and added them to a handful of renegade, late-season roses he had found creeping up a wall behind the stables—they were the crown jewels of his collection. It was not yet dawn when he left that morning, but the sun was well risen by the time he assembled a respectable bouquet and returned to the castle. He tied it with a bit of twine and left it propped against the practice dummy where Cassandra came to train every morning.

He took the long way back to the keep for the morning council meeting, pausing on the wall where he could gauge her reaction from a distance. He judged that she would show up for training in a few minutes, and he was right. She picked up the flowers and held them close to her chest. She looked around, guiltily, for any witnesses, and seeing none, she held them to her face, closed her eyes, and inhaled their scent.

He grinned like a fool the whole way to the war room and didn’t even try to hide it. It would have been impossible, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate chapter subtitle: The One with All The Feels.

The "I want the ideal" scene with Cassandra is one of my favorites, so I tried to do it justice here. Thanks for reading! :)
Chapter Summary

Rumors, dancing, and moonlight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cullen’s door opened with a groan, and as he stepped inside, Owain had the distinct impression that he’d interrupted something. Althea leaned smugly against the desk while Cullen looked startled, the remains of a smile still hanging on his face. Owain flicked his eyes between the two of them and couldn’t help breaking into a grin.

“I didn’t realize you were busy,” he said. “I could come back later.”

Cullen raised a hand to rub the back of his neck. “Ah, no, that won’t be necessary. Scout Althea was just leaving.” He and Althea exchanged a quick look.

“Inquisitor. Commander.” Althea nodded at each of them and turned, trailing her fingers along the edge of the desk and walking slowly toward the door. Owain watched her leave, a smirk still playing at his lips. She caught his eye and mouthed the words “tavern” and “later.” He acknowledged her with a twitch of an eyebrow and then turned his attention to Cullen by slouching into the chair in front of his desk.

Cullen had been watching her, too. The door swung shut, and he cleared his throat before moving to business. “Scout Althea was giving me the latest news from Sahrnia. Our supplies have been distributed among the villagers, and it seems conditions are improving, especially with the Red Templars gone.”

“Good,” said Owain, letting his hands hang between his knees as he leaned forward in his seat. “Any word on the villagers that were infected with the red lyrium? The ones we freed?”

Cullen sighed and looked down at his desk. “That’s less encouraging, I’m afraid. Most of them have died, though a few have managed to survive this far. We’ve dispatched Dagna and a special team of healers to attempt treatment. Or at least learn what we can so their deaths won’t be in vain.”

Owain nodded. His mind crowded with images of red lyrium crystals sprouting from corpses, but he pushed them aside. “And the Red Templars? Have you reviewed the documents from the quarry?”

“Yes, those papers were exactly what we needed, thank you. What the Templars were doing there… Growing lyrium from people…” Cullen dropped into his chair and shook his head. “I can’t believe the Order has come to this.”

He went on. “You managed to disrupt their primary supply in the Dales, but I’m afraid that’s not the end of them yet. According to the documents, they’re led by a man named Samson—a former Templar. I actually knew him in Kirkwall… The letters don’t mention their base of operations, but we should have enough clues to track them down. It’s only a matter of time now.”

“You knew him? How exactly does a former Templar from Kirkwall come to lead Corypheus’s
army?”

“To be fair, Inquisitor, a former Templar from Kirkwall leads your army.” Cullen sighed, glancing quickly at Owain and then away. “We shared quarters when I was assigned to Kirkwall after… Well, when I first arrived. He seemed like a decent sort, though I didn’t know him well. He was expelled from the order sometime later, and I know he was addicted to lyrium, begging for it on the streets last I heard. It’s possible that need drove him to… to do terrible things.”

“Makes sense. Unlimited lyrium supply, not to mention quite a promotion from beggar to general. Why was he expelled from the order in the first place? What did he do?”

“There was a mage… Maddox was his name, I think. Samson used to smuggle letters between him and his sweetheart. Knight-Commander Meredith found out and had Samson removed from the order as a result. Maddox was made Tranquil.”

Owain sat back and made no effort to hide his horror. “You made a man Tranquil over love letters? Maker’s breath. And people wonder why mages rebelled!”

“The official charge was corrupting the integrity of a Templar,” said Cullen, lacing his fingers together and leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk. “Meredith wielded the brand for much lesser offenses, believe me. I already told you she was mad. In any case, Maddox became a talented enchanter of magical artifacts. He was still in Kirkwall as far as I know.”

“This seems a little personal for you, Cullen.” If he knew Samson, how many other acquaintances and former brothers-in-arms might be among the Red Templar ranks? “Are you sure you can fight people you know?”

Cullen took a deep breath and fixed him with a steely look. “Feel bad for that mage if you will, Inquisitor, but if Samson serves Corypheus, then he deserves none of our sympathy. What he did to innocent Templars, what he did to people in the Dales… He corrupted the Order, used their devotion to twist them into something they should have stood against. Never mind what his Red Templars did to us at Haven. It’s unforgivable.”

“Samson will pay for what he’s done. We’ll make sure of that.”

Cullen sighed and pushed his chair back to stare out the window behind his desk. He blinked hard and rubbed his fingers into his temples.

“How are you feeling?” Owain asked.

“Better, today. It comes and goes. Some days are better than others.”

“Is there anything I can do? If you need a break, or if there are herbs we could get…”

“No—” Cullen said quickly, turning to face Owain again. “I mean, thank you, Inquisitor. You’ve done enough already.” He smiled faintly. “What about you? You have enough burdens of your own, I’m sure. How are you holding up?”

“I’m managing,” Owain replied, surprised at the concern. “As well as can be expected, I guess.”

“I imagine all this Templar business can’t be easy for you, with the mage rebellion and all, what you must have seen at the Circle. Is it difficult then, to be with a Seeker? They’re not the same as Templars, but…”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about Cassandra?”
Cullen halted mid-sentence, rubbing the back of his neck again and turning his eyes to the far corner of the room. “Oh! My apologies, Inquisitor! I thought that you-- I mean-- Oh, Maker’s breath. I should know better than to listen to soldiers’ gossip.”

“It’s alright,” said Owain, feeling a little sorry for Cullen in his fluster. “I can guess where that idea came from.” He made a mental note to wring Sera’s neck later. Or at the very least set her hair on fire. “It’s not... entirely off-target, to be honest. But perhaps a bit ahead of the real state of things.”

“I don’t mean to pry, Trevelyan,” Cullen said hastily, still trying to make up for his blunder. He rubbed his neck and sighed. “I’ll admit I don’t have many friends, especially from before the Inquisition. But I owe a lot to Cassandra. If she hadn’t brought me here and offered me this position, I don’t know where I would be. I just want her to be happy, that’s all.”

Owain nodded. “Me, too.”

--

He swung his leg over the bench and took a seat opposite Althea. It had been a while since they'd talked. They were on the second floor of the Herald’s Rest, where the noise of the crowd downstairs faded a bit into the background. It was relatively early in the evening, and the tables around them had yet to fill up.

He sniffed the drink she poured for him and reached over to examine the bottle. “How did you convince Cabot to part with a whole bottle of his finest?”

“I told him it was for you.” She watched him, propping her chin on one hand and running a finger around the rim of her glass.

He chuckled and took a sip. “Close enough.”

“You're not going to ask what your commander and I were discussing this afternoon?”

“Should I?” He twinkled his eyes at her. “I assume it was all highly professional and perfectly proper.”

“Of course,” she said, with an answering sparkle in her bright blues.

“All about Sahrnia and supplies and red lyrium, according to him.”

“Sounds right to me.”

“Mm. And whilst you were batting your eyes at him, did he explain how he was vehemently opposed to me rescuing you? That you wouldn’t be here if he had his way?” That came out sounding more defensive than he intended. He hoped she wouldn’t notice.

“He did,” she said with a shrug. “He apologized, profusely and unnecessarily. It doesn’t bother me--I know it wasn’t personal. And frankly, he was right, and it probably would have been a better decision, given what we found in the Dales.”

She paused, looking down at her glass and then back at him, her eyes narrowed. “What’s your problem, anyway? I thought you liked Cullen.”

“I do,” he said, combing a hand through his hair. “He's a good man, in spite of all the shit he's been through.” Owain shook his head and blew out a breath. “Sorry. I'm just being stupid. Habit, I guess. I spent most of my life trying to keep Templars away from you, Thea. I never expected you to go
running toward one, even if he is an ex-Templar.”

She stared at him with a dark, inscrutable look. “Yeah. Well, this is different,” she said quietly before turning her eyes away.

The matter seemed closed, so he left it. For now, anyway. He took another sip of whiskey.

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” he said. “I need a favor. Next time you go through Redcliffe or Val Royeaux, can you keep your eye out for a certain book?”

“A book?” she asked, a smile brewing at the corner of her mouth. “Why are you asking me to get you a book? You’ve got people stocking your library already, can’t you just add it to the list?”

“Well,” he coughed. “It’s… a little more personal than that. I’d do it myself, but we’re headed to the Western Approach in a couple days, and I don’t expect I’ll have time for shopping. It’s… I need some poetry.” He slid a scrap of paper across the table. “Those are just a couple possible titles, but if you see anything that might work…”

Althea unfolded the parchment and blinked at him, her expression now a full-on smirk. “You’re fucking kidding me. You want me to get you sex poetry?”

Owain almost choked on his whiskey. “Shit.” He coughed again. “When you put it that way…” He made to reach for the paper, but Althea snatched it out of reach and tucked it safely into her jacket.

“I’m going to assume this is for your lady love and that you haven’t developed a sudden literary interest?” she said, picking up her drink again with a sly smile.

“Obviously,” he replied, rolling his eyes. “Does this mean you’ll do it?”

“Of course. Anything to get the Inquisitor laid. Maker knows he needs it.”

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes for the second time that minute.

“One condition, though,” she said, pausing with her glass in the air.

“What?”

“Teach me to play chess?” Her eyes shone at him across the table, and he could tell she was being sincere, for once.

He nodded and let a slow, knowing smile spread across his face. “Deal.”

Their quiet companionship was interrupted by Dorian sliding onto the bench next to Althea and helping himself to their bottle.

“I’m told you two are the reason we’re always low on the good stuff,” he said, already mid-pour.

“Closing rifts and kissing noble ass is hard work, Dorian. It’s only fair that we be duly rewarded.” Owain raised his glass to the Tevinter.

“You almost make that sound like an invitation, Trevelyan.” He took a sip and sighed appreciatively. “Now, what’s going on here? Are we discussing our favorite strapping young Templars?” He smirked at both of them.

“She’s not a Templar,” Althea said, before Owain could scramble a response. “Or so it’s been explained to me.”
“Seekers, Templars, whatever.” Dorian waved it off. “Semantics. Tell me, what is it with you Circle mages and Templar types, anyway? Is it the thrill of illicit affairs? The allure of the forbidden?”

Owain and Althea exchanged a look, but she spoke first. “Maybe. Who can resist a little star-crossed love between traditional adversaries?” Then she twisted her mouth wickedly. “Almost like Tevinters and Qunari, perhaps?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dorian sniffed.

Owain choked on his drink again. “Qunari? You mean... you and Bull?” He really was behind on his gossip.

They looked at him with pity.

“You ought to pay more attention, Trevelyan,” said Dorian, sipping at his glass. “Though I suppose we can’t blame you too much. Most of the talk lately is about you and your heroics in the Dales. They say you defeated a whole pack of Red Templars to protect her, that you saved her life with healing magic and kept a vigil over her through the night. I’m hardly an expert, but surely that’s enough to make any woman swoon, yes?”

“Cassandra does not swoon,” said Owain. “And nothing happened anyway.”

“Well, you would know better than any of us,” said Althea. They looked at him with matching satisfied grins.

“Ugh. I’m going to kill Sera.”

An arm appeared around his neck then, accompanied by a whiff of sour breath near his ear. “Did I hear my name?” Sera ruffled a hand through his hair as he tried not to spill his drink. Varric and Iron Bull joined them at the table.

“Is poor widdle Inky thinking about his lady? You’ve got a thing for her, don’t you? Your thing. Her thing. Doing things.”

“Nope, nothing like that.” Gripping Sera’s wrist between his thumb and forefinger, he plucked her hand from his head and extricated himself from her hug. She dropped onto the bench beside him.

“Aw, what!” she said, pressing her shoulder to his and leaning over confidentially. Which was pointless, given the volume of her voice in his ear. “You do know how to treat her, right? D’you need me to show you? If you get me a peach...”

“Oh, he knows,” Althea grinned from across the table, clearly enjoying his misery.

Maker’s breath. He glared at all of them and threw back the rest of his drink. “I hate every single one of you,” he said, as he reached for the bottle.

Varric cleared his throat and pulled a deck of cards from his pocket. “Alright, Buttercup, let’s lay off the Inquisitor. I’m sure the Lady Seeker is making him miserable enough as it is. Anyone for a game of Wicked Grace?”

Owain shot him the most appreciative look he could muster. “Deal me in.”

Just as he often began his days with a stroll on the battlements, Owain liked to end them there, too,
walking off the cares of the day and trying to tempt his body to sleep. As bright and beautiful as Skyhold could be during the day, the castle at night held an altogether different kind of charm. The heavy stone walls and towers formed a backdrop of black, pierced by points of light from candlelit windows and torches along the walks. On clear nights, he would watch the distant stars blink in the sky or observe the moons holding court high above, bathing everything in their otherworldly light.

But tonight was different. Tonight, he had convinced Cassandra to join him as he made his slow tour of Skyhold’s walls, and with her at his side, the air felt electric, charged with possibility. He breathed deep and filled his lungs with it.

They walked in silence at first as they set out from the main keep. He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and turned to look at her every now and then. One of the things he liked about Cassandra was this easy quiet, the understanding and relief that he didn’t need to fill the space with words.

“Did you like the flowers?” he asked, finally breaking the silence as they left the stairs and started along the eastern wall.

“I did,” she said, smiling. “They were beautiful. Thank you. Where did you manage to find roses at this time of year?”

“Ah, but I can’t give away all my methods now, or there won’t be any left for next time. Need to maintain some level of mystery.”

The battlements were mostly empty at this hour, but they met the occasional guard on watch as they made their way around the walls.

“They will talk, you know,” said Cassandra, after the second such guard saluted them in passing. “About what the Inquisitor and the Seeker are doing walking together at night.”

He snorted. “It’s too late for that. They’re already talking. I can only imagine how bad it must be if even Cullen mentioned it to me.”

“Commander Cullen? I can’t believe he would give credence to such rumors. You do not care what they say?”

“Why would I?” he said, turning to look her in the eyes. “Why would I be offended about being linked with the most beautiful woman in the Inquisition?”

She sputtered at his compliment. “I— But it’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Not yet, he wanted to say. “What if I wanted it to be?”

She huffed and looked away. He thought she might be blushing, but it was hard to tell in the dark.

They kept walking, and as they approached the tavern, he could hear music pouring out of the open windows, even from up here on the battlements. It was more lively than Maryden’s usual standards. He could make out the beat of a drum and the strains of a fiddle along with the minstrel's mellow chords. It gave him an idea.

He jogged forward, pulling open the door to the tower next to the Herald’s Rest. It was empty, as always. The debris and broken furniture that littered the floor were low on the list of priorities for Skyhold improvements, and people didn’t tend to linger here. The music was muffled as Cassandra shut the door behind them, and he doubted his plan until he cracked the door to the tavern’s third floor and sound came rushing in to fill the space. Yes, this would do just fine.
She stood there, puzzled, waiting for him with a question on her face. Silvery moonlight filtered in through the mostly missing roof, and a slice of faint candlelight shone from the open tavern door. Still, it wasn’t quite enough. He rummaged in the pile of rubbish next to the splintered remains of a wooden bedframe and turned up a small stub of a wax candle. “Aha!” he said, before setting it down on the floor and lighting it with a snap of his fingers.

“What are you…?” She trailed into silence as he dusted himself off and stood squarely in front of her, dropping into his best formal bow.

“Would you care to dance, Lady Cassandra?”

“What? Dance? Here? You can’t be serious.”

He said nothing, but just stood there, holding his bow and offering his hand.

“Oh. You *are* serious.” She put her hand in his but narrowed her eyes.

“You wanted to be courted, Cassandra,” he said, as he held her hand firmly and wrapped an arm around her waist. She let out a soft gasp as he snuggled her body against his. “What could be more courtly than a dance? Besides, there are no assassinations to stop tonight.”

She gave him one more look of disbelief before her lips curved into a slow smile, and she put her free hand on his shoulder. “Alright. I suppose this isn’t terrible.”

“Flatterer,” he said. And then he moved them into the dance.

She was a bit stiff at first, as if remembering the steps from a very long time ago. He held her close, perhaps closer than was strictly appropriate, but she didn’t seem to mind. This was no Winter Palace, and there were no eyes here other than their own.

As the first song turned into the next, she seemed to relax, easing into the steps and the circle of his arms as he led them around the small space in that tower. It was everything he wanted it to be. They moved as one, their coordination on this makeshift dance floor no less than their collective grace on the battlefield. His heart soared on it--her closeness, the heat of her body under his hands, the warmth in her eyes as he looked down at her, warmth that told him she was enjoying this as much as he was.

They spun to a halt as the music faded away in the tavern, and the candle guttered out, having finally given its all to their cause. They stood there together in the renewed silence, in no hurry to separate. It was darker now without the candle, but he was close enough to see her face clearly in the light that remained. Her breath brushed his neck and her eyes drew him in. She was so close. He could kiss her now. He should. He would.

“Can you love another mage? They’re so different. Long brown hair, piercing green eyes. You liked those eyes, the way they looked at you when you-”

“Cole!” Cassandra said, sharply. The two of them sprang apart as the young man’s shadow darkened the doorway to the tavern. They hadn’t even noticed the door swinging open.

Owain glanced at Cole and then at her. Were these her thoughts?

“Safe when you're with her. Bold. Colored, patterned light, blue and green and red, last time. That wasn't real, but it was. Warm skin and hot breath, the taste of her on your tongue…”

And… those were definitely his. Time to go. “Ok, Cole, we’re going to go now. We’ll see you later.” He headed quickly for the opposite door with Cassandra right behind him.
They made their escape and emerged again into the brisk night air. They found a quiet corner of the battlements and stood there, recovering, side by side. He was a little breathless from the dancing, not to mention Cole’s surprise appearance and his own disappointment at the missed opportunity.

“Cole needs to learn not to pry into people’s private thoughts,” Cassandra sighed.

“Honestly? I forget he even exists, sometimes.”

They leaned against the cool stone and watched the stars twinkle over the mountains.

“You’re a good dancer,” he said. “I suppose that’s not surprising, for Nevarran royalty. Josie should have made you do a turn in Halamshiral.”

“Believe me, she tried. It has been some time since I danced, but it was ingrained in me from when I was very young. My uncle made me take lessons. I was like a little doll to him, with dresses and dancing and curtsyes.”

“I’m having a hard time picturing that.” It was quite a contrast with the warrior woman he knew, and it reminded him of his own abbreviated education in noble pursuits. “Did they ever throw suitors at you? Your family, I mean.”

“Oh, yes,” she nodded. “Waves of them. Until I broke the arm of one of them. Then there were fewer.”

He laughed. “I should be careful then. I’m a bit attached to my arms.” She punched him lightly in the bicep, as if to prove the point.

They lapsed again into silence. The moons had moved overhead, and he could see the wind gusting snow across the hills below. The anchor surged, and he looked down at it, the familiar glow twinkling on his palm. Absently, he opened his right hand and conjured a flame that flickered in the breeze.

Cassandra turned to him, leaning her hip against the wall. She looked him in the eye and took his hands into her own, holding them by the wrists and watching the opposing green and orange light play across his skin. He let her touch him, his eyes scanning her face for her thoughts.

“Why do you do that?” she asked.

“What?”

“This thing, with your hand and the flame. You do that, often.”

He supposed that was true, if he thought about it, but he didn’t, usually. He frowned and closed his fingers on the flame. He looked down from one hand to the other and searched himself for an answer to her question.

“When I look at my left hand, all I see is the anchor, and it feels foreign to me. I still don’t know what it is or why I have it. But my magic—I can see myself in that. I can look at that flame and think, ‘Yeah, this is me. This is what made me who I am.’ I suppose it’s comforting, in a way. A reminder, after all we’ve been through.”

She didn’t say anything but creased her brow slightly and continued studying his hands. He watched her, his heart beating faster in his chest, thrilling at her slow, unhurried pace. Still holding his left wrist, Cassandra opened his fingers and ran her thumb across the mark, watching it pulse with light beneath the surface of his skin. The smooth leather of her glove left a cool trail that tingled across his
palm. His blood started to heat at the unexpected intimacy of it all.

She looked up at him and searched his eyes for something he couldn’t guess, and then she released his left hand and took up the right. The fire was gone now, but she spread his hand flat anyway and traced her fingers slowly across it, from the pulse at his wrist to the lines on his palm and the calloused tips of his fingers. The fine hairs on the back of his neck prickled at her touch, and he shivered slightly. He couldn’t help it.

He felt his eyelids grow heavy and his breath ragged. She smiled at him again, and it felt like she was telling him a secret meant for him alone. She raised his hand to her lips and brushed a kiss on his palm before pressing it to her cheek.

He held his hand there and looked at her, stunned by this woman who had so completely captured his heart. He ran his thumb along the deep scar on her cheek and thought about how it didn’t make her any less beautiful to him. If anything, the opposite was true, that her determination and bravery only made her more amazing in his view. She closed her eyes at his touch and then opened them again to meet his gaze.

At last, her boldness sparked courage in him, as it so often did in battle or in the war room, and in everything else they had done together. He curled his free arm around her waist and pulled her body tightly toward him, his hand on her cheek tipped her face up to meet his, and he covered her lips with his own.

Like her dancing, her mouth was stiff at first, and then surprisingly soft and yielding under his. She moved her hands up to his chest, holding him close as she gripped the lapels of his coat, holding on even after he released her. He settled his hands on either side of her as she leaned back against the wall, resting his forehead against hers. He looked into her eyes, breathless again.

“Cassandra. I… You’re so…” Words were failing him, escaping him. Every word except her name, which he wanted to repeat over and over and over again.

There was want rising in his belly, and answering heat in her dark eyes.

“Stop talking.” She yanked him against her and crashed their lips together again with her trademark impatience. He smiled into the kiss at how very Cassandra that was and matched her urgency beat for beat, licking at the line of her lips, sliding into her mouth, and letting his tongue dance around hers. She bit at him, catching his lower lip between her teeth, and he groaned helplessly.

He forced himself to lean back again, to look at her. She made another sound of impatience, but he resisted for just a second, wanting to memorize that moment. The way the moonlight framed her figure against the wall, the way she looked at him with naked desire.

If their first kiss was quick and chaste, and the second bruising with intensity, the third, fourth, and fifth were a slow, relaxed exploration of each other. The taste of her was endlessly fascinating. He surveyed her mouth with his tongue, biting, sucking, licking just to see what sounds she might make in response. He kissed along her jaw, along her neck, breathing in the sweet smell of her skin and discovering the spot behind her ear that made her whimper and roll her hips against his. He nuzzled her throat with his stubbled chin, making her squirm and buck against him.

But Cassandra Pentaghast was not a woman to be trifled with, and everything he did to her, she dealt back in full. She kissed the corner of his mouth and scraped her teeth along the rough edge of his jaw, drawing a line to his ear. She swirled her tongue around its border and whispered his name, making him shudder with the thrill down his spine. Her hands reached up to his shoulders and pulled him down to her while her fingers tangled in his hair. She hooked a leg around his and pressed...
herself against his cock through his breeches, and it was the most exquisite kind of torture. He groaned again and thought about forgetting this whole courtship thing. Who needed poetry when he could have her right now? Right here? Rumors be damned.

He wrapped his arms around her and let his hands wander as they kissed, running along the smooth leather of her breeches, up the curve of her hips and perfect, perfect ass. Up, up, up to the dip of her waist and the... cold hard metal of her breastplate. He grunted in frustration and pulled away, breaking their kiss.

“What?” she asked, brows knit with confusion and a twinge of hurt.

“You armor,” he said, one arm still draped around her waist, her body still flush to his, trapped between him and the stone wall. He tapped his fingers on the metal over her sternum. “It’s so very... protective.”

She snorted with laughter. “You do not complain about that when it saves your life on the battlefield,” she pointed out, as he resumed his meticulous mapping of the parts of her not encased in steel.

He spoke between licks and nips at her throat. “That’s because-- on the battlefield-- it’s not preventing me-- access-- to your beautiful body, Cassandra.”

Her breath hitched as he found that sensitive spot near her pulse again. “Oh, really? I’m not sure I am convinced. Tell me. Tell me what you would do if I was not wearing this armor.”

He pulled back and looked at her, his hands still gripping her hips, pushing them back against the wall as he ground himself into her. She met his gaze with lust-darkened eyes, and her smile now was a challenge. She rested her arms on his shoulders, her fingers drawing slow circles in the hair on the back of his head.

He swallowed and let his eyes move hungrily over her clothed body from head to toe, fully aware that she was watching him do it.

“What would I do?” he said, softly. He trailed his fingers lightly over the metal. Slowly, letting them linger in time with his words. “I’d kiss you. Here. And here. And here.” She bit her lip as she watched him with rapt attention, and it only spurred him on.

“I’d touch you, here,” he said, as he cupped the curve of steel over her breast. “And here,” as he swiped his thumb across the spot where her nipple would have been, under those layers of metal and leather. Her eyes fluttered, and she drew in a halting breath.

“I’d put my mouth--”

“Ugh.” She didn’t let him finish before her fingers flew to the clasps of her armor and started working at the straps that held it in place. He tried to help her, but he was slow, his fingers fumbling in the dark at unfamiliar fastenings.

As they struggled with her armor, a hapless guardsman approached, holding his torch aloft. The light was blinding after all this time in only moonlight. They froze in place.

“Who’s there?” the guardsman asked. They glared back at him, and his expression turned to horror as he realized who he was talking to and guessed what he had interrupted, as evident by the flush on their faces and the half undone state of Cassandra’s armor. He stepped back, muttering a stream of apologies, and hurried down the wall like there were demons on his heels.
It was over in half a minute, but Owain could feel that the spell had broken. He breathed hard and came back to himself, looking at Cassandra doing the same, and he knew the moment was gone. It would not be reclaimed, not tonight. He sighed and watched with resignation as Cassandra re-fastened the buckles of her breastplate.

He knew what she would say, but he couldn’t stop himself from trying anyway. “We could go somewhere else,” he said quietly. “Somewhere more private.” He tried not to sound like he was begging.

She looked at him warmly, but a bit sad, and he knew then that she shared his disappointment, but it wasn't enough to overcome her sense of duty. She touched his cheek with her gloved hand and kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Another time. Perhaps this is for the best. We leave early in the morning, Inquisitor.”

She took her leave then, looking over her shoulder at him just once as he watched her walk away. When she was out of sight, he slammed his fist on the stone wall and huffed out his frustration.

He started to plot, then, how they might find a way to be together again. Truly alone, away from the constant responsibilities, from mind-reading spirit boys and conscientious night watchmen. He would find a way. He owed them both that much.

Chapter End Notes

This kind of got away from me, lengthwise. But I’m not really sorry. ;) Thanks for reading and for the kind feedback, as always!
Chapter Summary

Reimagining the night in the grove.

Chapter Notes

NSFW, aka The Smut That Was Promised. Plus, you know, feelings, etc.

The journey to the Western Approach was a long one. Owain and his companions rode clear across Orlais, stopping only when needed to resupply or rest their horses. As always, they camped out each night and spent evenings around the fire, sharing food, drink, and conversation. He would sit and listen to Alistair’s stories about the Fifth Blight or laugh at Hawke and Varric’s sharp banter. And endure Dorian’s knowing smirk every time he exchanged a look with Cassandra.

They were always in close quarters on the road. Little time or space for private conversations, let alone anything more. He had to settle for a brush of his fingers against Cassandra’s as they sat next to each other by the fire, or a tap of her boot against his. A secret smile as their horses walked side by side. Once, that might have been enough for him, but that night on the battlements was seared in his memory and had left him hungry and greedy, desperate for more.

Traveling did allow plenty of time for quiet reflection, and he was embarrassed to admit that the Seeker filled his thoughts in increasingly frequent and inappropriate ways. He wanted Cassandra, and the ache of it had settled on him like an illness, like a fever. It had become part of him, a fact, a thing as real and tangible as the length of his nose or the number of toes on his feet.

He did manage to kiss her, once, when they arrived at the Approach. She came to his tent to deliver a message from one of Skyhold’s birds, and he couldn’t resist pulling her against him. She had gasped in surprise, a sound he’d swallowed as he brought their lips together and lost himself in her mouth. She had tasted better than he remembered, even after a long day of travel and with the ever-present dust that seemed to cover all surfaces in that Maker-forsaken desert. He could feel the hot metal of her sun-baked armor through his gloves, pressing against his chest as they embraced. It only made him miss her more when she smiled at him and pulled away.

And then the ride home had been sober, after what they’d found in the desert. Grey Wardens using blood magic to bind demons from the Fade, duped by a Venatori Magister who certainly fit the moustache-twirling stereotype, as Dorian had put it. That ancient, honored organization, sworn to protect Thedas from the Blight, driven by fear to become Corypheus’s demon army and sacrificing friends and comrades to do it. It made him sick to his stomach, and they could not let it stand.

He thought about these things as he walked the path down from the castle gates to the small grove where he had once escaped the demands of Skyhold to practice his magic in solitude, where he had sat and told his story to Cassandra on that sunlit afternoon, months ago. It was early evening now. The red-orange rays of sunset were still coloring the sky when he left the keep, but here in the shadow of the mountain, the light was the deepening blue of dusk.
They had returned from their journey less than a day ago, late last night. He was still exhausted from
the travel. Today had been taken up with meetings in the war room as he and his advisors debated
the best course of action regarding Magister Erimond and the Wardens, a discussion that culminated
in a decision to bring the Inquisition’s army to bear on the Warden stronghold at Adamant. It was a
major undertaking, involving massive troop mobilizations, siege machines, and supply chains, not to
mention reconnaissance and leveraging their newly-built Orlesian alliances. It would keep all of them
busy in the coming weeks. After all that, Owain finally managed to find a moment to himself. He
took the opportunity to find Cassandra and ask her to meet him here, outside the castle walls and
away from prying eyes.

He ran a hand through his hair, still damp from his bath that afternoon. He’d put on a clean shirt and
breeches and shaken out his coat. It was unbuttoned, as usual, a look Vivienne liked to call
“slovenly,” but about which he could never bring himself to care. He doubted Cassandra did,
anyway.

He brought with him a wool blanket and his pack, which he’d emptied of its usual supplies and filled
with new wax candles. He touched his coat pocket, where he carried the small book of poetry that
Althea had bought for him. It was laying on his desk when he returned, with a simple note tucked in
the front cover: “You owe me. -T.” Indeed. He’d teach her all of his best chess tactics the next time
they were both in Skyhold.

As he reached the outskirts of the grove, he spotted a cluster of crystal grace and picked a few
blossoms to give to Cassandra later. He lifted them to his nose and inhaled their sweet scent before
making his way deeper into the trees. He paused when he reached the clearing, taking in the scene. It
was unchanged from the last time he’d been here, other than what might be expected from the
changing season. Still quiet, except for the chirring of insects in the grass, and still calm, sheltered
from the mountain breezes that buffeted Skyhold. He looked up and could see the darkening sky
through the breaks in the trees. Perhaps there would be stars there, later.

He opened his pack and started taking out candles, setting them on the ground around the edges of
the clearing. That done, he spread the blanket in the center and sat down to wait.

He waited for a while, and still she did not show. Perhaps he should have been more specific about
the time. He lay back on the blanket and pillowed his head on his hands. Doubt started to creep into
his thoughts. What if she didn’t come? What if she didn’t want to? But no, the look in her eyes had
been clear. She wanted this, too. He just needed to be patient. It hadn’t been that long.

Laying there, his exhaustion caught up with him, and his eyelids grew heavy. Soon, the quiet calm of
the grove lulled him to sleep.

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Owain startled awake to something solid pressing against his chest. There was a moment of panic
when he realized it was a boot, but then he saw that it was Cassandra’s, and he smiled. She looked
down at him with her arms crossed over her chest, frowning.

“Hello,” he said.

“If I was an assassin, I would have slit your throat by now.”

“Then it’s a very good thing you’re not.”

She snorted and lifted her foot, and he rolled out from under it into a sitting position. He searched
around briefly for the crystal grace and presented it to her as she knelt on the blanket beside him.
Their fingers brushed as she took the flowers, and he noticed that she wasn’t wearing gloves. Nor any armor at all for that matter, just a simple tunic in soft, faded purple. The fabric flowed over the curves of her body, no longer caged in steel. His smile hitched a bit wider at that.

She lowered her head to sniff the grace. “Did you bring me here just to give me more flowers?”

“No,” he said, with a shake of his head. “Not just that.” He raised his hand and lit the candles around the clearing with a pulse of his magic.

Her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open at the golden light that now surrounded them. “You did all of this? For me?”

He leaned a hand on the blanket behind her and reached out with the other to brush his knuckles lightly against her cheek. “You’re always so surprised, Cassandra,” he said softly as his thumb grazed the sharp line of her jaw. “Is it still so impossible that I’d want to? That you deserve all this, and more?”

She just looked at him, her face full of disbelief and a touch of sadness. He leaned closer, until their foreheads were nearly touching. He searched her eyes for answers to his unspoken questions, and she responded with warmth and an almost imperceptible nod.

He kissed her then, slowly, gently. He drew a slick, lazy line across her lips and slid his tongue past hers, savoring the taste of her and letting his mouth silently say what his words could not. He kissed her not with the thrill of exploration from that night on the battlements, nor the searing desperation of that tent in the desert, but with the patient control of a man confident that they had the whole night ahead of them. The grove was theirs. He was in no rush.

Cassandra, however, had no such plans. Her initial shyness burned quickly away, leaving all impatience and passion and demands in its stead. She brought her bare hands up to his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling their faces still closer. He let her tongue into his mouth, and she claimed it, snaring one of his lips between hers and drawing embarrassing sounds from the back of his throat.

Then she gripped the supple leather of his coat and fell backwards onto the blanket, pulling him down after her. He broke their kiss and caught himself, balancing on his hands and knees. She looked up at him with hooded hazel eyes, running them boldly down his body, and caught her lower lip between her teeth. The sight of her beneath him nearly broke his resolve to draw this evening out. Who was this woman, freed of her steel shell and stern looks and righteousness, tempting him like a desire demon? Maker, she would be his undoing. And he would follow her gladly into the Void.

His heart thundering in his chest, Owain shifted his weight and lay on his side. She turned to face him, and he ran his free hand slowly up the side of her body, tracing a sinuous line from her thigh to her hip, from her waist to her breast.

“You’re not wearing armor tonight.”

“No, I am not,” she said, with a sly smile and a flick of her tongue across her parted lips. It was a challenge, a dare, and it fired his blood.

He threw his plans to the wind and pulled their bodies flush. He kissed her mouth, her jaw, her neck, scraping his rough stubble over her skin and soothing the burn with his tongue. He filled his lungs with her clean Cassandra scent and treasured every soft sound that escaped on her breath. He reached up to cup her breast through her tunic, raking a nail across the pebbled tip through the fabric. She jerked at the sensation, and he rocked his hips into her, just once, making her moan and squirm.
for more. Not to be outdone, she hooked a leg around him and dragged herself against his hardening cock, forcing an answering groan from his lips.

She shifted her weight and rolled them. He landed, breathless, on his back, with Cassandra straddling his hips. She leaned over him, her hands on his chest, lips capturing his. She kissed at the edge of his mouth and pushed her hands under his coat, letting them roam over whatever parts of him she could reach.

He was distracted by the edge of something solid beneath him, jabbing uncomfortably at his spine, and he remembered the book in his pocket. He inhaled sharply and sat up, letting Cassandra slide down into his lap. He leaned back and struggled to free the volume from the folds of his coat, while she watched with increasing annoyance.

With one arm still curled about her waist, he held the book up and grinned. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re going to read? Now?”

“Your list was very specific, Cassandra. Flowers, candles, and--” He hissed as she squirmed impatiently in his lap, her legs still wrapped around his hips. “Poetry.” He cleared his throat and opened the book to a random poem, trying to ignore her best efforts to divert him from his task.

He started reading. “On aching branch do blossoms grow, the wind a hallowed breath.”

She punched him lightly in the shoulder. “That’s the poem you chose?” He continued pointedly ignoring her.

“It carries the scent of honeysuckle, sweet as the lover’s kiss.”

She stopped moving and listened in spite of herself.

“It brings the promise of more tomorrows, of sighs and whispered bliss.”

She snatched the book from him and looked at the page. “Carmenum di Amatus,” she read, her brow arching. “I thought this one was banned.”

She continued where he left off. “His lips on mine speak words not voiced, a prayer, which travels down my spine like flames that shatter night.”

Hands empty now, it was his turn to go on the offensive. He wandered away from her waist, down to grip her ass, up under her tunic to fill his palms with her breasts. He buried his face in her neck and kissed a teasing line across her collarbone and up the smooth column of her throat, making her gasp and halt in her reading.

“His eyes reflect the heaven’s stars, the maker’s-- light. My body opens, filled and-- blessed, my spirit there, not merely housed in flesh but-- brought to life.”

“Shall we read another?” he whispered near her ear. He could hear the book drop to the ground beside them. Then he felt a sharp tug as she gripped his hair and tilted his head back to crush his lips under hers.

She deepened the kiss and resumed her grinding in his lap, and he groaned into her mouth at the feeling. It took all of his focus to hold himself together, to not flip her on her back and ravish her right then, though he knew she would let him, would maybe even welcome it. He reminded himself that he was trying to make this last.

But again, Cassandra seemed determined to thwart him. She straddled him still, her knees bent on
either side of his hips. She pushed him backwards and smiled at him before grabbing the hem of her tunic and pulling it up and over her head. He leaned on his elbows and watched her, his eyelids heavy with lust. Maker, was his mouth open? He snapped it shut.

She was so beautiful. Her eyes glittered darkly and a slip of a smile curved her lips as she watched him watch her. Her olive skin glowed in the candlelight. Her breasts were perfection, their dark peaks calling him to worship with his mouth. He told himself there would be time for that and tried to savor this moment, drinking in the sight of her.

He sat up and leaned closer, letting his eyes and hands drift slowly, reverently, over her bare skin. Her chest rose and fell with shaky breaths as she followed his movements. His fingers traced a line from her collar to her navel. They sketched the curves of her breasts, trailed over the scars that marked her warrior’s body. He came to the newest one, an angry, jagged scar along her side. The faint traces of his own magic resonated there still. He looked up into her eyes and winced with regret.

“I’m sorry, Cassandra,” he said, his voice low and rough. “I should have done a better job with this.”

She picked up his hand and kissed it before placing it over her breast. “You do not need to apologize. The alternative was death.”

The look on her face broke whatever was left of his resolve. He kissed her hard on the lips and moved down to her breasts, kneading with his hands and kissing, licking, sucking. She hummed and moaned and rocked her hips against him, which only made him burn brighter in turn. His cock strained painfully against his breeches, and his blood felt like it was on fire, no Seeker powers needed.

He could feel her plucking at his coat and growled--actually growled--at the distraction, until he realized she was just trying to push it off his shoulders. Well, it was only fair. He looked at her with dangerous eyes as he shrugged out of it and then whipped his shirt over his head. He fell back on her with renewed fury as her hands explored him, fingers and nails and palms running, scratching, squeezing at his back, his shoulders, his chest, the muscles of his stomach where they disappeared into his breeches.

He groaned and broke off their kiss when he felt her fingers fumbling with the ties at his waist. He pushed her hands away, shaking his head, as if to say, no, not yet, you first. He pushed her back onto the blanket and went down with her, kissing from her mouth to the space between her breasts, down the firm muscles of her belly, relishing each whimper and gasp that passed through her lips.

He reached the top of her breeches and tugged hard at the laces, loosening them so he could work them over her hips and down her impossibly long legs. She helped him, kicking off her boots and lifting her hips off the ground, watching him with lust-filled eyes, from beneath long, fluttering lashes. To his surprise, she hadn’t worn any small-clothes, and knowing that she had been sitting in his lap, rubbing against him this whole time with nothing on under the soft leather of her breeches… Fuck. He didn’t think it was possible for him to want her more.

As he pulled her clothing away, he paused one more time to look at her, completely naked before him. Completely naked and completely ready. He could smell her arousal, and his cock ached in protest. He put it off for one more second. Like everything else about Cassandra, her body was an irresistible mix of contradictions, of hard lines and soft curves, and he wanted to know each cord of solid muscle, to plot every lush slope and valley. He would map them with his hands, measure them with his tongue, dedicate his life to that study.

But not right now. Right now, she was impatient again, pure desire, grasping, moaning, pulling, wrapping her legs around his, drawing him down onto her. He kissed her breasts and reached down
to push aside the wet—fuck, so wet—curls between her legs and stroke the bundle of nerves at the apex of her spread thighs. She gasped and bucked her hips, hands scrabbling desperately over his shoulders.

He watched her, mesmerized, as he drew slow circles with his finger, reveling in how she responded to his touch and resolving to make her want him as badly as he wanted her. He paused, only to slip first one and then two fingers inside of her, making her jerk against his hand as he continued to tease her with his thumb. The heat and clench of her around his fingers was almost unbearable, and he tried—but miserably failed—to avoid imagining how they would feel around another part of him.

She looked up at him, eyes fluttering, beseeching. “Please, Owain,” she whispered thickly into his ear. “Please.” And that was it. He pulled his hand away and rolled off of her, kicking at his boots and tearing at the laces of his own breeches.

He had no sooner kicked free of his clothes when Cassandra pounced on him, planting her knees astride his hips and her hands on his chest. His cry of surprise turned into a deep groan as she grasped him, lined him up, and sank slowly down his length with a sigh. They were both still for a moment, as he filled her completely. The hot, tight, pulse of being inside her exceeded even his wildest imaginings.

Then she started to move, rolling her hips against him, and sparks burst across his vision. He could think of nothing else, could barely even process the feeling. He reached up to squeeze her breasts, rolling her nipples between the tips of his fingers. He gripped her ass and her hips, pushing her down onto him, even as he bucked upwards to meet her. But mostly he watched her, watched her close her eyes and throw her head back, watched her bounce with the rhythm of their fucking. The slick clench of her around him and the sight of this beautiful, powerful woman riding him and grinding out her pleasure against his cock—it nearly sent him over the edge.

Her cries grew louder and more frantic, her movements more erratic, and he knew then that she must be close. He rubbed his thumb against that spot where their bodies met, and she gasped one more time before flying apart under his touch. He had never witnessed anything so beautiful. She stopped and shuddered, her arms shaking as they propped her up against his chest. He could feel her muscles fluttering and squeezing, and it reminded him of just how close he was himself.

She collapsed over him, and he held her close, lifting her with him as he sat up. He pushed a hand roughly into her hair and tilted her head for a bruising, breathless kiss. Then he turned and laid her swiftly on the blanket. He covered her body with his and rocked into her as she looked up at him with sated, languid eyes and wrapped her legs around him again, urging him on.

It didn’t take long before, with a final thrust, he flung himself over the cliff after her. He buried his face in her shoulder as he finished, shuddering and whispering her name into her skin. She kissed his face and smoothed her hands over his back, running her calloused fingers up and down his spine until he was still.

He rolled to the side, and they lay there, silent, catching their breath and basking in the glow of the candlelight and their love-making. If he had any sensible thoughts in that moment, they were composed of disbelief and wonder at this woman that lay next to him. This woman that he loved, that he desired beyond what he had ever thought possible, that maybe felt the same way about him.

They stayed like that until their breathing slowed and the sweat dried from their bodies. A rare breeze blew through the grove, and Cassandra shivered slightly. With fire so close to the surface in him, he was rarely cold, but she must be. He found his coat at the edge of the blanket and spread it over them, pulling her close to let her share his heat. She rested her head against his arm, just as she had done that night in the Emprise du Lion. She smiled up at him with such warmth that he felt like his
The braid that crowned her head had come loose from its pins, so he reached up to pull it gently free. He found it oddly fascinating and silked it through his fingers as she watched him.

“They will say one of two things about me,” she said, breaking through the silence. “One, that I stood at the Inquisitor’s side, his lover and his protector, that it was meant to be. Or, that I was led astray from the path of faith by the wiles of a madman.”

“In your defense, my wiles can be very effective.” He flicked his eyes to hers before continuing to stroke her dark hair. “And anyway, I don’t care what anyone else says. What does Cassandra think?”

“I believe you were sent by the Maker to help us, even if you do not. I believe you will do great things and shape the world as we know it. I think you are capable of anything, and it frightens me. I have never known anything like it.”

“So... you fear me? That’s how you feel?”

She shook her head. “No, I— That is not what I meant to say.” She sighed. “I— I am not good at this... I have only been with one other man in my life.”

“You mentioned him when we were in Crestwood. He was a mage.”

“Yes. His name was Regalyan. He... died at the Conclave.”

Ah. Now things made more sense. Her rage and grief in the dungeon at Haven had been about more than losing Justinia. Owain couldn’t help being curious about this man, he of the piercing green eyes. What had he been like? Were they similar at all? And then he shoved those thoughts aside. What was it about human nature that made us need to know about the people who preceded us in our lovers’ hearts?

“I’m sorry, Cassandra, truly. He must have been a great man to deserve you.”

“He was,” she said hoarsely, blinking back tears. “What we had ended long ago, but we remained friends through the years. He was there to assist with the peace talks, to urge calm and sense among his fellow mages...” She inhaled a ragged breath, losing the battle against the tears as they flowed down her cheek.

“I’m sorry,” she went on, when she could speak again. “I should not have brought this up here, not tonight, after all this.” She touched his chest and smiled sadly at him. “If you wanted sweetness and light, you chose the wrong woman.”

The sight of Cassandra Pentaghast, warrior and Seeker of Truth, weeping affected him to his core. He touched his hand to her face and gently brushed away her tears with the pad of his thumb.

“There is nothing to apologize for. You’ve had no time to grieve, with all we’ve been doing. He was your first love, and if he deserves these tears, you should shed them. Even with me.”

He held her close to him as the tears continued to flow, tucking her head under his chin.

“So was Althea your first love?” she asked.

He was speechless for a moment. This was not a subject he expected to broach tonight. Not something he talked about, to anyone, lest it be used against him. Even Althea knew only the barest outline. He looked down at Cassandra and then away, turning this eyes up at the leafy canopy and
deciding that she deserved nothing but honesty from him.

“No,” he sighed. “There was someone else, when I was younger, still an apprentice. She was a Templar, new to the Order. Ostwick was her first assignment. She was beautiful, kind, and good, and I lost my heart to her. I know she felt the same.”

“A Templar? I’m sure that did not end well.”

“It didn’t. The guilt ate at her. Then she was assigned to assist during my Harrowing, to strike me down if I—well, you know.” He stared up at the trees again. “It went fine, and I passed, but it wasn’t the same after that. She requested a transfer, and one day she was gone. I never saw her again. One more thing the Chantry took from me.”

He remembered who he was speaking to, and it occurred to him that perhaps he shouldn’t have added that last part.

“I lived in fear for years after that, thinking it was my fault, or that I’d be punished, that maybe she’d confessed everything to someone before she left. But it seems that keeping our secret was her last gift to me.”

Cassandra touched his cheek. “I’m sorry, Owain. Even if it was against the rules, that doesn’t diminish what you felt. Or what you lost.”

It felt strangely cathartic to hear her say that. He touched his forehead to hers in gratitude. “I guess we are neither of us sweetness and light here.”

She smiled back at him, eyes still shining with the threat of tears. He kissed her forehead and then her lips and held her close until they both drifted to sleep.

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They woke some time before dawn, with the sky beginning to grey overhead. The candles had long since burned out, and morning dew coated the grass around them. Owain pulled himself up reluctantly. Last night, it seemed like he had all the time in the world. This morning, it was nowhere near enough.

They dressed in the dim light, and he indulged himself with one last look at Cassandra before she covered herself again. At least now he had his memories, the next time he saw her back in her armor. He retrieved the little book of poetry and put it back in his pocket. He picked up the candle stubs and shook out the blanket, stuffing them into his pack and slinging it over his shoulder. And like that, the evidence of their time there was erased.

They walked back to Skyhold, side by side, as the sun started to rise over the mountains. He took her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. Nothing needed to be said between them that wasn’t already communicated in that touch.

As they approached the gate, he paused, turning to her with a question on his face, ready to pull their hands apart if that was what she wanted. But she looked at him with warm resolve, that fierceness he so admired in her, and he beamed back at her. He twisted his fingers more tightly around hers and nodded to the guard as they passed, not caring who saw or what they would say. It didn’t matter anymore, because it was true now: the Inquisitor and the Seeker were together at last.
Into the Abyss

Chapter Summary

...and out again.

Chapter Notes

NSFW, y'all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He would remember that day in pieces. Images, snippets of sound. Fragments of thought and memory that would never fit together smoothly, even if he tried.

Owain flattened himself against the wall beside the gates of Adamant. Each blow of the battering ram rumbled through his bones. Arrows from the Grey Warden archers clattered against the stones underfoot. One rolled harmlessly against his boot. Restless, he shifted his weight and listened to the din of battle all around him: soldiers shouting on the walls, clashing metal, the whistle and boom of the Inquisition’s trebuchets bombarding the fortress defenses.

One of Cullen’s lieutenants signalled to him as the gate began to splinter. Another good hit and they’d be through. Owain stepped away from the wall and rolled his shoulders, gripping his staff in one hand and readying his barriers with the other.

With the blunt snap of shattering wood, the doors creaked open, and he cast a great plume of flame into the opening. Fadestepping through his own spell, he dropped a trio of fire mines on the first line of Wardens waiting on the other side, blasting them off their feet in a burst of flame. He could hear the cries of Cassandra, Blackwall, and the other Inquisition forces as they poured in behind him, and he moved to stand with Varric at the rear, casting the rest of his spells from a distance.

Cullen found him when the skirmish ended. There was a weariness in the commander’s eyes and a tightness to his jaw as he sheathed his sword so they could speak.

“Inquisitor. Our men will buy you as much time as possible so you can reach Warden-Commander Clarel. She should be in the main hall, near the center of the fortress.”

“Thanks,” Owain replied, meeting his eyes. “Just keep our people alive, Cullen. Don't take any unnecessary risks. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Cullen considered for a moment and then jerked his head toward the battlements. “Hawke is up on the walls. Our men are having trouble getting a foothold there. They could use some support.”

“Done.”

Cullen clapped him on the shoulder before drawing his sword again and turning back to his troops. “Maker be with you, Trevelyan.”
Their route through the fortress was fraught with Wardens—rogues and warriors, as well as mages with their bound demons in tow… or was it the other way around? It turned his stomach to see them in thrall to such evil. He imagined himself in their place, and it triggered some of his deepest, oldest fears. It was everything he’d been taught to resist, everything he’d battled since his magic manifested all those years ago. But he had no time to be afraid, not here.

They found Hawke and a small squad of Inquisition soldiers, pinned down by a pride demon and its entourage of lesser creatures. The warriors charged in on their flank, while Owain worked his way toward Hawke.

As he approached, a terror demon leapt up from the floor, catching Hawke unaware and knocking her down with a rake of its claws. Owain hurried to her side and launched a stonefist at the demon, pushing it back and buying them space. It advanced again with an ear-piercing shriek, but he stepped deftly aside and slashed at it with his staff, feeling the blade bite into boney flesh. He followed with a burst of flame that sent it collapsing in a heap of char and smoke, and then he turned to help Hawke to her feet.

“Not bad for a Circle mage.” She smirked, standing and clutching a bleeding cut on her upper arm.

He rolled his eyes. “Hawke. A delight, as always.”

They turned their attention to the pride demon, which had just replenished its guard and was whipping a lash of lightning at Cassandra and Alistair, who were dodging carefully, trying to weave close enough to slash at its legs. Blackwall was dealing with a shade several feet away, while Varric launched explosive bolts at a Warden mage near the stairs.

Owain and Hawke exchanged a look. The pride demon was clearly the biggest threat, and they needed to find a way to create an opening for the warriors. He nodded at Hawke, and she took off, racing toward the demon, ice crystals gathering white in her hand. He cast a barrier over her and readied his next spell.

Hawke appeared behind the demon and summoned a pillar of ice, freezing it long enough for Owain to release his stonefist and shatter it, leaving it dazed. Cassandra and Alistair made the most of the opportunity, plunging their swords into the creature’s legs, bringing it to its knees while it roared in frustration. The Seeker struck the final blow, driving her blade deep into the demon’s neck until it stilled and dissolved into a pile of ash at her feet.

Owain turned to Hawke and caught his breath in the ensuing calm. “How many more are there? Have they really managed to call this many demons from the Fade?”

“A lot more,” she said, swallowing a healing potion and binding a rag around the wound on her arm. “This was just the tail end of one group. The battlements are crawling with them.”

“Shit,” he breathed. “Where’s Clarel? We need to stop this at the source.”

Hawke nodded toward the stairs at the far end of the wall. “The Wardens have been falling back that way.”

He set his jaw. “Then let’s go.”

He would never forget the look on the old Warden’s face as Clarel drew the knife across his throat.
Such willing sacrifice and blind trust, set against the sadness in the Warden-Commander’s eyes as she murdered her old friend for a horrifying cause. Sadness that turned to fear and uncertainty as Owain and his companions rushed in to stop the blood magic ritual.

The Wardens had opened a rift, which glowed and shimmered in their midst. He could see an enormous, terrifying demon just on the other side, and that glimpse alone told him they must, at all costs, prevent that thing from coming through.

Magister Erimond sneered at them from Clarel’s side, and even when she saw reason and turned on him, he didn’t stop praising Corypheus, who he hailed as a god. Then the dragon came swooping down over the fortress, landing with a crash and a fall of broken stone. Its screech split the air, and Owain’s stomach dropped into his boots as the sound seemed to echo through his body, calling up flashes of Haven and the twisted form of that would-be Tevinter deity.

They ducked for cover as the creature sprayed a gout of red lyrium, melting through stone, metal, bodies, and anything else in its way. Erimond and Clarel ran for the walls, and Owain and his party followed in close pursuit.

They fought off the demons that swarmed along their path. Even with the Wardens subdued, the army they had summoned from the Fade had taken on a life of its own. Cassandra bashed her shield into the face of a rage demon as it came barrelling toward them, while Owain darted around her and cast a spear of ice through its middle. Varric and Hawke covered their rear with arrows and chain lightning. Blackwall and Alastair guarded their flanks.

The dragon strafed overhead, its cries still sending chills down his spine. He saw it land hard on the battlements and crawl forward on its menacing claws, toward the corner of the fortress where Erimond and Clarel did battle.

The Warden-Commander was by far the superior mage. She sent the Magister sprawling across the stones, his staff rolling uselessly to the side. But even she was no match for a lyrium dragon. It swatted her to the ground, and Owain winced because he knew how that felt.

For all her irrational fear and misplaced trust, he had to say this about Clarel: she was no coward, in the end. He saw her face harden with determination as she cast one final blast of electricity at the dragon, sending it tumbling into the air and taking a good portion of the walls with it. He remembered the floor crumbling under his feet. Then falling, the crackling of his mark, and a flash of green light before his mind lost track of his senses.

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He landed in a tangled heap of limbs, staff, and armor, though with less force than expected for such a long fall. Gravity itself seemed different here, wherever “here” was.

The landscape around him was devoid of life, populated only by jagged rocks and spires, interspersed with pools of water that lay calm as glass. To his left, a rough path was carved into a craggy rise in the land. To his right, a vast, waveless sea stretched to the horizon. The sky above him glowed the shade of green he had come to associate with rifts and the mark on his hand, which glowed brightly and pulsed with a dull pain.

He was in the Fade. He recognized it, barely, from his dreams, but something was different. He looked down at himself, touching a hand to his face, to his coat. Everything about him seemed normal. And he wasn’t alone. He looked up to see the rest of his party standing around him, as disoriented as he was.
His first clue was the smell, the scent of smoke and sulfur and something faintly rotten in the air. He couldn’t remember the Fade ever having a smell, and that’s how he knew this wasn’t a dream.

“This is the Fade,” said Hawke, coming to a similar conclusion, her eyes scanning the area around them. “But…”

“But we’re not dreaming,” Owain finished for her. “I think we're actually... here. I must have opened a rift, and we fell through it.”

“But that is impossible,” Cassandra said. “No one has walked physically in the Fade since…”

“Since the Magisters entered the Golden City and created the Blight?” he continued. “Magisters like Corypheus? Perhaps we just did what he’s been trying to do all along.” He looked at the anchor again. It winked at him.

“That’s all very well and good,” Alistair said, leaning his hands on his knees and squinting at their surroundings. “But I’d like to know how we get out. We were just getting to the good part back at Adamant.”

Owain was at a loss for answers to that question, but Hawke pointed toward a swirl of green in the sky.

“The rift the Wardens opened was in the main hall, which wasn't too far away. Maybe that’s it there? Maybe we can use it to get back?”

That sounded as good an idea as anything else he could think of, so Owain shrugged his agreement, and they began picking their way across the alien landscape.

“If this is what it’s like when you people dream, I can’t say we’re missing too much,” said Varric as he pulled his feet out of a shallow puddle, shaking off the water with disgust.

“My dreams involve a lot more cheese,” said Alistair.

The Fade was no less strange than it was in Owain’s dreams, though instead of his own fears and wishes, he saw the evidence of other people’s, vignettes of almost ordinary objects—a table and chairs set for a meal, a scholar’s desk littered with books, a child’s bed and toys. But they saw no actual people or any living creatures at all, until they spotted a figure clad in luminous white, standing on a hill just ahead of them. As they approached, Cassandra stopped in her tracks.

“Divine Justinia. Most Holy.”

Owain snapped his head forward and saw that she was right. It was Justinia, or at least it looked like her.

“It can’t be…” said Hawke, just above a whisper. “You perished at the Conclave.”

“Yes, in my experience, people don’t glow,” Alistair added, arching a brow. “That’s something spirits do.”

Justinia simply nodded and greeted them all by name.

“How could this be?” Cassandra asked. “It is said the souls of the dead pass through the Fade and sometimes linger, but...”

“Is it so hard to accept?” Justinia replied. “You walk in the Fade, and that is also impossible, no? I
“am here to help you, and that is what you need to know.”

“What is this place?” Owain asked. “Why are we here, and how do we go back?”

“You are in the realm of the Nightmare. It is a fear demon, the memory you forget upon waking. It feeds on our terror, and it serves Corypheus. The demon army you fear in your world? He commands them. But you have been here before, have you not, Inquisitor?”

Had he? He couldn't remember, and he admitted as much with a slight shake of his head.

“That mark on your hand. The anchor. That is the key. That is what allows you to enter the Fade, and it is what Corypheus wants, to tear down the Veil and open the doors to the Black City. The Nightmare has taken your memories from the Temple of Sacred Ashes. That is how it gains strength, feeding on the worst of our fears, stealing our memories.”

“It takes away our worst memories?” Hawke interjected. “Wouldn’t some call that a blessing?”

“Perhaps, Champion, in the short term. But our memories are part of how we grow, how we learn. It is no gift to have them stolen from you.”

Justinia turned back to Owain and went on. “The Nightmare has taken a piece of you, Inquisitor, and you must recover it. That is how you will escape this place.” She pointed to the other side of the hill, where a small group of wraiths bobbed around a small pool. “There. Those are your memories. You must retrieve them.”

He cast her a wary look and turned to his companions, but they seemed just as lost. He sighed and pulled his staff from his back. It seemed he had no choice but to trust this woman, whoever or whatever she was.

He ran down the hill toward the wraiths, slinging spells as he went. They put up little resistance, and as the last one faded into dust, he was overwhelmed by a vision, by memory flooding back into his mind.

He was at the Conclave, at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, back when it was more temple than ashes. He had barged through a door to find the Divine surrounded by mages in Warden uniforms, being bound in some kind of ritual. Corypheus was there, the ugly, malformed hulk of him, clutching an orb in his skeletal hand. Justinia shouted at him, and as Corypheus turned, the orb flew spinning out of his grasp. Without thinking, Owain scrambled to catch it, and when he picked it up, searing pain shot through his hand. The Magister howled in fury, and a white light drowned out everything else.

His eyes were screwed shut, but he pried them open and was back in the Fade, surrounded by his companions, who looked at him in shock. They must have seen that, too.

“That was the Divine,” Hawke said, bristling with accusation as she turned toward Alistair. “Being held by Grey Warden mages.”

Alistair frowned. “I can’t believe they would... No. Corypheus must have stolen their minds. You’ve seen how that can happen. That’s the only possible explanation. Wardens would never serve the Blight.”

Hawke’s eyes flashed with anger. “All of this—the Conclave, Corypheus, the demon army. The Wardens started it all. What, were you bored after the last blight? Don’t even get me started on how much blood magic is going on here.”

“Oh, please,” Alistair shot back. “You’re one to talk...”
“Enough!” Owain snapped, slicing his hand through the air between them. “Save it for when we get out of here. You can bite each other’s heads off when we’re back on the right side of the Veil.”

Alistair snorted and threw his hands up as he turned away. Hawke crossed her arms over her chest and continued to glower at them all.

Owain didn’t want to think about the part of the vision that bothered him most: the confirmation that he had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, that he had stumbled into the anchor and this role of the Herald of Andraste, of the Inquisitor. Not chosen at all. He had suspected that all along, but for some reason, knowing it hurt anyway.

Retrieving those memories seemed to alert the Nightmare to their presence, and the demon’s booming voice laughed at them as they made their way toward the rift.

“Some foolish little boy comes to steal the fear I kindly lifted from his shoulders,” it said, and Owain knew it was speaking to him. “You should have left it where it lay, forgotten. You think the pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your mind with such drivel! The only one that grows stronger from your fear is me.”

“Did you really think you could succeed, Inquisitor? You’re a failure, a pretender, and you know it. She will know it, soon enough, when it gets her killed. When all of your friends die for you and your silly cause.”

He swallowed and grit his teeth. He said nothing and kept walking, twisting his staff viciously into anything that crossed his path.

Cassandra touched his shoulder and looked at him with concern. “Do not listen to its lies, Owain. It knows where to cut us.”

He nodded, but that didn’t make it easier to bear.

“Cassandra!” said the Nightmare, shifting its target. "Your Inquisitor is a fraud. Yet more evidence there is no Maker, and all of your precious faith--and all your love--will come to nothing.”

“Die in the void, demon!” she shouted back with a shake of her fist.

The Nightmare made its way through the rest of his party, picking at their fears, one by one.

“Varric, once again, Hawke is in danger because of you. You found the red lyrium. You brought her here. How will you live with yourself if she doesn’t walk out?”

“Ah, Blackwall. There’s nothing quite like a Grey Warden. And you are nothing like a Grey Warden.”

“Did the king’s bastard think he could prove himself? Your whole life, you’ve left everything to more capable hands. The Archdemon, the throne of Ferelden… Who will you hide behind now?”

“Do you think it mattered, Hawke? You couldn’t even save your city. How could you expect to strike down a god? Fenris is going to die, just like your family, and everyone you ever cared about.”

They had no choice but to go on, doing their best to ignore the demon’s taunts, following the form of Justinia as she led them across the rocky terrain.

They cleared another group of wraiths, and another vision flooded his mind. This time, Owain was in the Fade, running from a horde of oversized spiders. Fear seized his heart as they nipped at his
heels. Justinia was with him, and as they came to the exit, an archway glowing with green light, he reached to pull her through with him, but his hand closed on empty air. “Go!” she said, and before he could refuse, she pushed him on into the rift. He looked back in horror, just in time to see her fall in the crush of demons, before everything disappeared in another flash of light.

“It was you,” he said, when he returned to himself. “Everyone thought it was Andraste who saved me from the Fade, but it was you.”

Justinia nodded.

“So I’m not the Herald of Andraste at all,” he said, speaking quickly as he put it all together. ”And Justinia died to save me. Here, in the Fade. So what are you, then? Are you her spirit? Have you been waiting here all this time, just to help us?”

“If that is the story you wish to tell yourself, it is not a bad one. But we must hurry. The Nightmare is near.” The image of the Divine faded away, replaced by a glowing spirit that flitted ahead of them, spurring them toward their goal.

There was so much he didn't understand, but he had no time to think about it now. They rushed after her, emerging from a cavern to finally face the Nightmare itself, a hideous, spider-like creature that towered above them. Owain recognized it as the demon he had glimpsed at Adamant, and sure enough, he could see the rift shimmering just beyond.

Justinia, or the spirit that took her form, paused before them. “Tell Leliana, I’m sorry. I failed her, too.” And with that, it flew directly at the Nightmare, driving it back with some unknown magic.

The Nightmare left another demon in its place, a minion standing between them and the rift. It lunged at them with its spindly arms and summoned a swarm of spider-shaped fearlings that rolled toward them like a wave on the ocean.

They fell quickly into fighting formation. The warriors circled the demon itself, striking at every opening. Hawke caged it with lightning and hurled bolt after bolt in succession. Varric kept his distance, shooting at the demon as it teleported around the battlefield, while Owain did his best to control the fearlings and keep them off the others, corralling them with his rift magic, immolating them with his flames.

It was a battle of attrition, and against these endless enemies, they were losing. He could see his companions tiring, drinking health potions, trying to keep their shields up, and he knew he had to end this for good. He shouted at Varric to cover him and drove his staff into the ground at his feet. He summoned every last shred of his mana and willpower, focusing it into his most powerful spell. When the first meteor fell from the sky, he knew it had worked. Winded, he picked up his staff and moved out of the way as flaming rock rained on the field, leveling their enemies and reducing them to ash in a raging firestorm.

He ran toward the rift, waving the others on ahead of him until only he, Alistair, and Hawke remained. As they moved to follow, the Nightmare reappeared, its dripping fangs and empty black eyes looming over their path.

The three of them looked at each other and immediately understood the situation. One of them needed to stay, or all of them would die.

Hawke spoke first. “You go. Corypheus is mine.”

“No,” Alistair shook his head. “You’re right. The Wardens started this. A Warden should finish it.”

They both looked at him, and Owain had been Inquisitor long enough to know that such decisions always fell to him. The enormity of it almost tore his heart in two. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it was no escape.

“Hawke,” he said, his throat closing on her name.

She nodded once, her eyes hard and blazing with defiance. “Apologize to Varric for me,” she said, before gripping her staff and sprinting toward the Nightmare.

Don’t think, just go. Owain ran toward the rift with Alistair right behind him. He leapt through it and landed on solid ground. It had worked, and he was back. Back at Adamant, back in the real world. He turned and reached his hand toward the rift, closing it with a burst of green light.

He collapsed to his knees when it was done, his mind dizzy with relief and churning with deferred pain and pent up questions. There was still no time to deal with that yet, because the crowd around him was cheering, celebrating what they saw as a victory.

Cullen pushed through to his side and helped him to his feet. “Well done, Inquisitor. The dragon flew off just after you disappeared. We’ve dispatched the remaining demons and captured Magister Erimond. The battle is over.” He turned and gestured toward the small group of men and women in griffin armor standing in the middle of the yard. “All that remains is what to do with the Grey Wardens. The ones who were not corrupted helped us defeat the demons.”

Alistair staggered forward, and Owain looked him in the eyes but pitched his voice for all to hear. “The Grey Wardens will serve the Inquisition. Alistair believes you can be redeemed, and I trust his judgement. I will not turn away those who are willing to help.”

The Wardens collectively sighed, while the Inquisition soldiers cheered. He spotted Blackwall nodding his approval in the crowd.

Alistair nodded, too. “Very well. I will report to the leadership at Weisshaupt. Corypheus will not catch us with our trousers down again.”

He continued in a lower voice, shaking his head. “What you did… You walked physically in the Fade and defeated a demon with the help of the dead Divine. I know what happened, but your followers will say their Inquisitor has performed another miracle.”

Owain took a deep breath, feeling the familiar burden of faith and hope on his shoulders again. He clasped Alastair’s hand and smiled. “I’m just glad that some of us know the truth.”

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It was still dark when he staggered toward his tent. He had no idea what time it was, other than somewhere between midnight and dawn. He paused outside, one hand on the canvas flap, dreading the emptiness within. There was no Cassandra here. Whatever this was between them, it was still new and had yet to extend to sleeping arrangements in camp. But the heaviness in his heart threatened to break him, and he knew he couldn’t face this night alone. So he pivoted and walked back toward the Seeker’s tent.

In hindsight, perhaps he should have knocked, or whatever the equivalent was on a soft-sided tent. She was standing with her back to the entrance when he ducked inside. She glared over her shoulder at him, ready to rebuke an intruder, fingers frozen on the straps of her armor, but her look softened when she recognized him, and she turned back to finish her task. He stood there silently, watching
her as she removed each piece and set it in a neat stack on the ground.

It only took two steps to reach her. He wrapped his arms around her back and bent to bury his nose in the crook of her neck. She smelled like sweat and blood and sand. He took a deep breath and released it, a shaky, jagged thing.

She turned in his arms and put a hand on his face, looking up into his eyes. Could she read his despair, his brokenness there? Maybe, because her weary eyes turned a bit sadder, and she kissed him gently on his lips before lowering his arms to pull off his gloves. He stood there, numb and empty, and let her remove his armor piece by piece. She set his staff down next to her sword and shield, pulled his coat from his shoulders and folded it beside her plate. Lined their boots up near the entrance.

She looked him over, then grasped the edge of his shirt, tugging it upwards. He raised his arms to help her, and then she folded that, too, laying it on top of his coat in the corner. His limbs felt heavy and his mind foggy. Watching her was all he could do. She took his hand and led him to her bedroll, pulling him down with her. She lay on her side, and he settled behind her, curling his arms around her again, her back snug to his bare chest.

He sighed and let go of whatever it was still holding the pieces of himself together. His next breath was a single, broken sob into her shoulder. Her fingers gripped his arms, pulling him tight around her. She didn’t say anything, which was a relief, because he couldn’t find words to describe what he was feeling anyway.

There was the crushing weight of loss. Of all those soldiers that fought for them, the Wardens who died needlessly. Hawke. And then there was his own role in it, the return of his memories from the Conclave, the final decision of who to leave in the Fade: a hero of the Fifth Blight or the Champion of Kirkwall? What _right_ did he have? Maker, the look on Varric’s face. Fear and doubt and pain clouded his mind.

They lay there, not sleeping but not talking either. After those hours in the Fade, it was enough just to hold her, to know that she was real and solid and alive. It gave him hope that maybe he was, too.

He surfaced from his thoughts to realize that Cassandra was pressing back on him, and his body was responding of its own accord. How could he be hard at a time like this? She moved her ass against him experimentally, and he sucked in a breath at the friction. She looked over her shoulder at him, her expression a slight smile and a question, all at once. He groaned softly in response, and heat crept into his gaze.

She took that as permission to continue squirming in his lap, and something in him broke open at that. He put a hand on her hips to still them, so that he could control their pace. He pressed himself roughly against her, as if to show her what she had done to him. She gasped and turned her head again, and he leaned over to catch her mouth with a fierce, teeth-clashing kiss. Breaking away, he whispered her name in her ear before moving his lips down her neck, sucking and biting at the angle with her shoulder. She whimpered and resisted his hold on her, doing her best to push herself onto him, reaching to grasp at his arm or his hip, whatever she could reach.

He let her go, but only to move his hand up under her tunic, brushing lightly at the sides of her breasts and plucking at their hard tips with his fingers. His mouth still busy at her neck, he moved his hand downward, grazing her firm belly and dipping below the waistband of her breeches.

“Maker, you’re wet for me,” he murmured into her skin, as he teased her with his fingers. She cried out and bucked against his hand, wanting more, trying to pull him deeper. She hooked her leg around his to give him better access.
“Quiet,” he whispered hoarsely into her ear. “Do you want the whole camp to hear? Do you want everyone to know how badly the Seeker needs the Inquisitor’s cock right now?”

“Ugh.” She groaned and pulled his hand out of the way, fingers flying to the laces of her breeches and pushing and kicking them off her legs. He took the time to loosen the ties of his own pants and tugged them down just far enough to free himself from their binds.

Clothing out of the way, he pulled her hips toward him and pushed into her with one hard thrust. She cried out again, and he clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. As arousing as it was to hear how much she wanted him, he really didn’t want the whole Inquisition to know what they were doing.

He started moving then, taking her hard and fast, driven by this need, this uncaged thing that burned inside of him. They were not making love; they were fucking. His free hand teased her as he drove again and again into her warm, inviting body, relishing her tightness in this position. He sucked and bit at her earlobe, at the delicate skin on her neck. Perhaps he’d leave a mark, and though he didn’t care either way, the idea of it pushed his lust still higher.

Her fingers clung to his hand as it covered her mouth, or they tangled in his hair as she reached for him, looking for purchase, some part of him to hold onto. She sank her teeth into his hand to silence her cries. He didn’t mind. The pain of it, like the pleasure of her, pierced the numbing fog in his brain like a ray of sun or a bolt of lightning, and maybe that’s what this was all about, anyway.

She came quickly, her body stiffening, her muscles clenching around his cock. He held her firmly against him as he finished almost immediately after, burying his face in her neck, spending himself inside her. He lay back then and released her, exhausted and boneless, breathing hard and staring at the back of her head.

His mind cleared, and he began to feel a twinge of guilt, embarrassment that perhaps he had let his desire get away from him. Maybe he had been too rough with her, too harsh. Bad habits from the Circle, where sex was almost always fast, quiet, and secret. Time wasn’t a luxury he was used to having, but it was one he wanted to spend on her, like that night in the grove back at Skyhold.

His worries melted away when she turned and faced him with a satisfied smile. She tipped his head toward hers and brought their lips together for a slow, relaxed kiss. She hummed with pleasure, pulling back and smiling again. It still disarmed him, every single time.

He watched her as she trailed her fingers over the scars on his chest and shoulder, tracing the lines as they swirled over his skin. She followed them up his neck and to his cheek, resting her hand there. He blinked slowly and savored her touch.

“Owain.” She made his name sound like a blessing.

“I love you, Cassandra.” The words burst from him, and he realized it was the first time he had told her, even though he had known it for months now.

“And I love you,” she replied, soft eyes searching his face, voice full of a certainty he wasn’t sure he deserved. “I will not let Corypheus win. I will not let him take you from me.”

There were so many things he wanted to talk about—to ask her, to ask himself—about what they had seen today. But he pushed all of that aside for now, because here, at least, was one thing he didn’t need to fight for. And it was the best thing. And for that, he was infinitely grateful.

He sighed and pulled her close, her head pillowed on his shoulder. With his free hand, he conjured a
tiny yellow flame that flickered on his fingertips. He watched it until he fell asleep, when it danced on into his dreams, a point of light in his otherwise dark world.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and for all the comments and kudos! *Mind boggles*

They keep me going, because for real, who ever thought I’d be 70,000 words deep in this thing?? "Not I," said the cat...
Owain never thought he’d be so happy to see grass. They had reached the Exalted Plains, where it rolled out ahead of them, cool and green, promising an end to the baking heat and blowing sand that had been their constant companions for what felt like forever.

He pushed his hood back and closed his eyes, feeling the breeze ruffle his hair as he slowed his horse to a walk. It was only the four of them. Cullen was following behind with most of the Inquisition’s army, but Owain was needed back at Skyhold. Though they had ridden hard the past few days, the journey had been somber, each of them wrapped in a cloak of their own thoughts. No matter how fast they travelled, they could not shake the ghosts of what had happened in the Fade.

His eyes scanned the horizon for a likely campsite and settled on a line of trees running to the east. The land sloped gently towards it. A stream, perhaps? He turned to signal the others and urged his horse in that direction, pulling to a stop in a flat, grassy area where he dismounted and waited for his companions to catch up.

“Seems like a decent place to stop for the night,” he said when they joined him.

“Stop?” Cassandra questioned. “But the sun is still high. We have hours of light before dusk.”

He shrugged. “I think we’ve all earned a bit of a break, don’t you? Surely we can spare an afternoon to celebrate getting out of the desert, if nothing else.”

“But, Skyhold…”

“Loosen up, Seeker,” said Varric. “We’ve got a head start anyway. Curly won’t beat us back if we take a few hours off.”

“I suppose a break wouldn’t hurt…” she conceded, brushing dust from her armor.

Blackwall was already unloading his pack.

Owain went to water their horses, and when he returned, the camp was set up but empty. Blackwall was the only one there, chopping up a large piece of driftwood he had hauled up the stream bank.

“Where is everybody?” Owain asked.

“Varric went for a walk.” The Warden nodded toward a grove of trees on the far side of the stream. “Said he would set a few snares to catch us some dinner, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up. His heart’s not been in it since Adamant.”

Since Hawke, he meant.
“Mm,” Owain replied. What he wouldn’t give for some fresh meat, or anything other than the jerky and traveler’s bread that made up the bulk of their provisions on the road. “Do you think there’s any fish in that water?”

Blackwall turned and glanced over his shoulder at the shallow stream. “Might be,” he shrugged. “Though we’ve no nets or any way to catch them.”

Owain flexed his fingers. “I might give it a try.”

The Warden raised his brows skeptically.

“If I fail, you’ll just have to wait until Val Royeaux for a proper meal. Where’s Cassandra?”


Owain threw his pack in a tent and prepared to follow her.

“You and Cassandra make an adorable couple, you know that?” Blackwall added, glancing at Owain and chuckling softly. Then he shook his head. “I never thought I would use the words ‘adorable’ and ‘Cassandra’ in the same sentence. But there it is. Love suits her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve just never seen her smile so much. You two have each other, and that’s something. Especially in the times we’re in.”

“Warden Blackwall, don’t tell me you’re a secret romantic, too,” Owain said, leaning on his staff. “Though, come to think of it, I’ve seen those flowers on Josephine’s desk. Heard they were your doing.”

“Aye,” Blackwall nodded without looking up from his axe. “But nothing will come of it. We know what we are, and what we are is too different. Cherish what you have, Inquisitor.”

He left Blackwall to his work as he went in search of Cassandra. He followed the stream as it cut across the plain and found her sitting on a boulder near the water where it widened into something of a shallow pool. Thin trees provided what could barely be called shade. She sat with a book in her lap and a quill in her hand, a bottle of ink at her side. She wasn’t reading, she was writing.

She looked up and smiled as he approached. He stopped and leaned his elbows on the rock next to her.

“Are you writing me a love poem? If so, I prefer the ones that rhyme.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. “I couldn’t, not even if my life depended on it. Poetry takes finesse. It takes grace.”

“You don’t think you have those things?” He wished she could see herself as he did.

She shook her head again.

“Well, I think you do.”

“You are biased.”

“That doesn’t make me wrong.”
She squinted at him again and then looked away, sighing deeply. “Writing does not come naturally to me, as I’m certain you can imagine. But one day, historians will ask what happened at Adamant Fortress, in the Fade. I was there, I saw it with my own eyes, and it should be recorded.”

“That’s a very admirable idea.”

“Admirable, yes. But not easy. I still don’t know what to say about Justinia. I saw her there. I heard her voice. Yet, I cannot claim with certainty it was really her.”

“Do you think it was a ghost?” he suggested. “Or her memories? The remnants of her will? It could just be a spirit that took her form.”

“Yes, it could have been any of those things. The Chantry teaches us that the souls of the dead pass through the Fade, but no one knows for certain what happens when we die. The important thing is that it helped you, as Justinia herself would have.”

“Then maybe it doesn’t matter what she really was.”

“It matters to me, to what I must write,” she replied, meeting his eyes. “I must interpret what I saw, yet I am no priest, no philosopher.” She paused and looked down at the quill in her hand. “When I realized we were physically in the Fade, I was terrified, almost beyond reason. The last time such a thing happened, we created darkspawn. The world needs to know the truth this time, no legends lost to the ages.”

Owain recalled the unsettling landscape of the Fade, the memories from the Conclave, the Nightmare’s words. It didn’t take much effort to summon them; these things were never far from his thoughts these days.

“Does it bother you?” he asked, a question he had been turning over in his mind since that day. “To know that I’m not really chosen? That I’m not the Herald of Andraste after all?”

Cassandra studied him, her gaze as penetrating as ever. “How do you know you were not chosen?”

“I- What?” Owain started. Her question was the last thing he expected. “How can you still think that? You saw what happened at the Conclave. All I did was walk in on Corypheus’s ritual and interrupt the spell. And Justinia was the one who helped me escape the Fade. It had nothing to do with Andraste at all.”

“The Maker works in many different ways,” she said. “Just because you did not have a vision or hear a voice telling you what to do does not mean he is not at work. Why did you feel the need to investigate those voices, to walk into that room? Why did you stop that ritual? Why you at all?”

He was speechless. In all the times he had run through these mysteries, he had never thought about them that way. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Chance, I suppose. Bad luck?”

“Where you see chance, I see the hand of the Maker. I believe you were brought to that place in that moment for a reason, and that few could have done what you have done.”

Her unwavering faith in him was staggering. And profoundly humbling. He blinked away and sighed.

“I feel like a fraud,” he confessed.

“You are not,” she said, her eyes burning with conviction. “You have proven yourself in the decisions you have made and the things you have accomplished. It is not what happened at the
Conclave that made you the Inquisitor, Owain, it is what you have done since.”

He opened his mouth to reply but could think of nothing to say. He just stared at her and tried to tame the doubt still swirling in his gut. Maker, she was too good for him. Why couldn’t he just believe her? It would make everything easier.

She bent over her writing again. Owain walked over to the stream and dug the tip of a boot into the loose gravel at the water’s edge. A few moments later, his eyes were drawn to the silver flash of fish darting in the shallows. Remembering his conversation with Blackwall, he took off his coat and pushed up his sleeves, then set to removing his boots and rolling up the bottoms of his breeches.

“What are you doing?” Cassandra asked.

“Going to catch us some dinner.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“Just watch,” he said, catching her puzzled look from over his shoulder.

He waded out into the stream, his toes sinking into the fine silt along its bottom. The water felt good on his skin. He reached a large rock, climbed onto it, and crouched, waiting for the mud he had kicked up to settle again.

The water cleared, and after a time, he spotted a fish a few feet from his position. Slowly, he stretched his arms out and dipped his hands into the stream. As his prey swam closer, he pulsed lightning from his palms. Nothing too strong, but enough to shock a creature of that size. The fish stiffened and floated motionless to the surface—dead, or at the very least, stunned.

“Hah! It worked!” he shouted in triumph. Then he splashed into the water after it, scrambling to collect his prize before the current carried it away. The fish was not large, only a bit longer than his hand, and his fingers circled it easily. Still, he wasn’t complaining. He held it up to show Cassandra.

“Never let it be said that mages are useless in the wild.”

Cassandra had abandoned her pen and paper and stood on the bank for a closer look. Now she folded her arms across her chest and snorted. “You sound surprised. You’ve never done this before, have you?”

He shrugged. “I was reasonably confident.”

“Is that your motto for everything? Inquisitor Trevelyan: ‘I was reasonably confident’?”

He tossed the fish at her. She yelped and glared at him as it flopped against her boot and came to rest on the grass at her feet. He laughed and returned to his perch on the rock.

“You are lucky I cannot reach you from here.” She huffed and went back to her writing, while Owain turned his attention to the water again.

He caught four more before wading back to the bank. He lined them up on a rock and surveyed his catch with satisfaction. Then he drew his knife from his belt and set to cleaning them, slitting their bellies with the blade and washing them in the stream.

Cassandra watched him curiously, coming to stand beside him as he worked. “Where did you learn how to do this? And don’t tell me you learned it at the Circle.”
Definitely not. He chuckled at her. “Ostwick is on the Waking Sea, you know. You don’t grow up there without knowing your way around a fish.”

He finished his task and stooped to rinse his knife and his hands in the water. After replacing his knife in its sheath and wiping his hands on his shirt, he turned to Cassandra, who was standing behind him, still regarding him with a bit of awe.

Curling his arms around her waist, he drew her close, feeling the heat of her body under his still damp hands. She tilted her head, and he ghosted his lips down the side of her neck, making her shiver beneath his touch. It made his heart beat faster in his chest.

“You smell terrible,” she said, in her matter-of-fact way.

“Mm. You smell wonderful.” He murmured the words low against her skin. “Do you think anyone will mind if I have you right here?”

“I will. Owain, there is a pile of dead fish by your feet.”

“You’re going to make me regret catching them.”

She made a disgusted sound and punched him in the shoulder as she pulled away. He just laughed again as he scooped up his catch, and they walked back to camp.

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They sat around the fire, satisfied after the best meal they had had in more than a week. Owain passed his bottle of whiskey around the circle.

He turned to Varric, who had been uncharacteristically quiet all evening. He knew why, but it was time they talked about it.

“I’m sorry, Varric,” he said. “About Hawke. I wish things could have been different.”

The dwarf sighed and sipped at his drink. “You don’t have to keep apologizing, Ser Owain. It’s not your fault. I don’t blame you.” He glanced at Cassandra. “Or even you, Seeker.” She pressed her lips together but said nothing.

Varric shook his head. “If anyone’s to blame, it’s me for dragging her back into this mess. But honestly, I don’t think anything could have kept Hawke away once she found out Corypheus was behind it. He was unfinished business to her.”

He looked at Owain. “I bet she argued pretty hard that she should be the one to stay in the Fade.”

Owain lowered his head in assent, remembering her fierce will and courage, even in the face of certain death.

Varric breathed out a laugh. “Of course she did.”

“She was a hero, Varric,” said Owain. “She saved me and Alistair. All of us, really. If that Nightmare had come through the rift, we’d all be dead.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve written enough stories to know how things end for heroes.” Varric sighed again and held out his cup for more whiskey, which Owain happily supplied.

“Did I ever tell you about the time Hawke was on a merchant guild hit list?” Varric asked, his voice distant, deep in a memory. “Hawke’s uncle got into an investment scheme with a couple of merchant
caste businessmen. They took a lot of people’s coin to arrange the import of wandering hills from the Anderfels. A delicacy, I’m told. Their weird foreign foodstuffs arrived alive, and one of them, true to its name, wandered off in the middle of the night.

“The guild traced the shipments to Hawke’s uncle. But as usual, he was so far in debt he couldn’t see daylight. So they went after Hawke instead. They sent guys from the local Carta to Hawke’s estate one night. Five big dusters, armed to the teeth. They kick in the door, and Hawke yells, ‘You’re just in time!’ and drags them over to a game of Wicked Grace.

“They played two hands of cards before the city guard showed up to take them away. A couple of them even became regulars in our weekly game. Hawke just had that effect on people.”

Owain raised his cup to the Champion of Kirkwall.

Varric threw back the rest of his whiskey and pushed himself to his feet. “Thanks. I’ve always wanted to tell that one.” He handed his cup to Owain. “I think I’m going to call it a night. I’ve got some letters to finish before we reach Val Royeaux.”

He bid them goodnight and ducked into the tent he was sharing with Blackwall. It lit up with candlelight a moment later.

Cassandra rose next and declared that she, too, was going to bed. Owain had first watch that night and regretted it as he watched her hips sway toward their tent. He thought about following her, about what might transpire if he did. But he didn’t. Instead, he poured another drink and settled himself on the ground.

Blackwall moved around the fire to sit beside him. “Do you mind if I watch with you for a bit, Trevelyan?” he asked, nodding toward his tent. “I think Master Varric could use the solitude right now.”

“Not at all,” he replied. They sat in easy silence for a while, listening to the frogs call to each other in the mud and watching the fire send sparks into the night sky.

“Someone I knew once described Adamant to me,” Blackwall began, still staring into the flames. Owain turned his head to listen. “‘Adamant is and always will be the Order,’ he said. The guardian at the edge of the abyss, the lone soul that stares into oblivion and doesn’t waver. That’s what Warden-Commander Clarel tried to be. What they all tried to be. They went to their deaths willingly, and Corypheus twisted their sacrifice to make it his own.”

“We saved as many Wardens as we could,” said Owain, sitting up straighter and propping his arms on his knees. “They’re part of the Inquisition now.”

“And for that I’m thankful,” Blackwall agreed. “But we couldn’t save all of them. And they died thinking they were doing something good. Even Clarel’s intentions were righteous. Her desire to protect was so great that it led her astray. It’s not right. To want to do good, to be good, and have that turned against you.”

“But you never wavered. You and Alistair, you weren’t swayed by the false Calling. You didn’t fall for Corypheus’s lies.”

Blackwall shifted and stared into his cup. “It’s not the armor or the trappings of the Order that make us what we are. It’s not the joining. At the heart of it, all a Warden is is a promise to protect others, even at the cost of your own life.”

And hadn’t he done that, many times over? Owain had never met a man so bent on doing the right
thing. “You’re a good man, Blackwall.”

The Warden scoffed and shook his head.

“When I was a boy, there were these urchins that roamed the streets near my father’s house. One day they found a dog, a wretched little thing. They caught it, tied a rope around its neck and strung it up. And do you know what I did?”

“You saved it? Cut it down?”

“I did nothing,” Blackwall said with disgust. “Not a damn thing. I saw it suffering, and I just went back inside and closed the door.”

“You were a child.” Why was Blackwall castigating himself for something that happened so long ago? “Surely we’ve all done things we regret?” Owain certainly had.

“I could have done something or told someone. But I didn’t. I just pretended it wasn’t happening. Don’t you see? That’s our problem. It’s not just about what happened back then. There’s always some dog out there, some fucking mongrel who can’t stay away. We could make the world better, it’s just easier to shut our eyes.”

Owain studied the Warden’s face and remembered their first meeting in the Hinterlands. “When we first met, you were saving peasants from demons and outlaws. You’re not a man that shuts his eyes.”

“Am I?” Blackwall argued, his voice edged with anger now. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re the Inquisitor. You make saving the world look easy. The rest of us can only dream of matching what you’ve done.”

There was so much Owain could have said to that, if he could find the words. About how it wasn’t as easy as it looked. About how the mantle of Inquisitor was something he himself was struggling to live up to. How the weight of it bowed his shoulders and scarred his heart. When would he become what he was pretending to be?

Varric’s light went out. Blackwall heaved himself to his feet and took himself to bed, leaving Owain to finish the watch, alone with his own thoughts.

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They reached Val Royeaux two days later. After securing their lodgings for the evening, they split up to take care of business around the city. Varric went to post his letters, Blackwall to purchase supplies for the onward journey. Owain and Cassandra went to meet with the Inquisition agents stationed there.

They emerged from their meeting to a large crowd gathering in the square. With a glance at Cassandra, Owain pushed forward to investigate.

It was an execution. A thin, tired-looking man stood on the gallows, his hands tied behind his back, a noose hanging loosely about his neck. The masked hangman stood on the platform behind him, ready to earn his pay. Both of them waited for the bailiff beside them to finish reading the charges, while the crowd jostled and buzzed with excitement.

“Cyril Mornay,” read the official on the platform. “For your crimes against the Empire of Orlais, for the murders of General Vincent Callier, Lady Lorette Callier, their four children, and their retainers, you are sentenced to be hanged from the neck until dead. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”
The accused said nothing. Judging from his blank stare, he seemed to barely register the words.

“Stop.” A gruff voice rang out, and all eyes were drawn to the broad, bearded man who stepped onto the platform clad in Grey Warden armor.

It was Blackwall. Cassandra gasped beside him. Owain cursed under his breath. What was he doing up there?

“This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him,” Blackwall declared, his voice loud and resolute. “Orders were given, and he followed them, like any good soldier. He should not die for that mistake.”

The Orlesian official scoffed. “And what evidence do you have for these claims? Where is the man who gave the orders?”

“I am that man. My name is Thom Rainier, and I am responsible for the murders of the Calliers. The crime is mine.”

The crowd exploded with noise. Owain stood frozen to the spot. Guardsmen seized Blackwall--no, Rainier--by the arms and shoved him roughly off the platform. He put up no resistance.

Cassandra touched his elbow, rousing him from his paralysis. She nodded at the Inquisition agent, a slight elven woman in a scout uniform, who beckoned them to follow.

The agent led them to the prison, where Owain descended a set of narrow steps leading to the underground cells. He walked slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust to the dim. The air was dank and sour, and his boots splashed in a puddle of unidentifiable liquid.

Rainier was in the very last cell, slumped against the wall in the corner.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he croaked. “You should go. Leave me here to rot.”

Owain ignored his words and leaned against the cold metal bars. “Is it true?”

“Aye. I was a captain in the Orlesian army. Well regarded, respected. But it wasn’t enough. A noble offered me gold to assassinate General Callier, and I took it. I gave the order to kill him and his entourage. I lied to my men about what they were doing. And when it came to light, I ran. And those men, my men, paid for my treason while I was pretending to be a better man.”

Part of Owain had hoped it wasn’t true. It seemed so impossible, that the man who had done that could be the man he knew. Or thought he knew. His stomach twisted with revulsion.

“And Blackwall?” he pushed on. “The real one?”

“Dead,” said Rainier, pressing the back of his head against the stone wall and staring up at the ceiling. “We met when I was on the run. He wanted me for the Wardens. But there was an ambush. Darkspawn. He was killed. I took his name to stop the world from losing a good man. But a good man like him wouldn’t have let another man die in his place.”

“The bailiff said Callier was traveling with his family, his wife and children. You had them all slaughtered?”

Rainier’s voice was strained now, laced with pain. “I didn’t know he would be with his family. I assumed only soldiers, armed guards. But my men had seen battle. They knew how war is waged. Like it or not, it’s names that carry weight in this world. Bloodlines. Heirs. No one likes to talk about
Owain wiped a hand down his face and heaved a deep sigh. “There was no need,” he said quietly.

“True,” Rainier acknowledged. “There was no need for any of what I did.”

“None of your men questioned what you were doing?”

“I told them it was an important mission, and they trusted me, just like your men trust you.”

“My men follow me because they believe in our cause.”

“They serve your cause because you tell them to,” Rainier retorted, turning to look Owain in the eyes. “But they follow you. You lead them, whether you believe it or not. My men trusted me, and I betrayed them. This is what I am, Inquisitor. A murderer, a traitor. A monster.”

Owain crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes at the man he knew as Warden Blackwall. He refused to leave it like that. Rainier was doing his best to bury himself here, but for some reason, Owain couldn’t let him go. There was more to him than that. There had to be.

“Would a monster have given himself up?” he shot back. “Or done what you’ve done for the Inquisition? What happened to all your talk about being good? About righteous intentions? Was that a lie, too?”

Rainier just sat with his head in his hands.

“I think somewhere along the line you stopped pretending. It’s not just our past that defines us, it’s what we do about it now.” Cassandra’s words echoed in his thoughts.

“Don’t talk about us like we’re the same,” Rainier spat, scowling up at him. “We are not the same.”

Owain’s expression hardened then, and something clicked into place in the depths of his mind. “You’re right,” he said, biting off the words. “We’re not.” Because he was the Inquisitor. Because there were people he was responsible for, even the guilty, broken man in front of him.

He turned to his agent beside him. “Who do I need to talk to to get him out of there?”

“For a crime of this profile, the Minister of Justice, perhaps, or possibly the imperial court itself...”

“Get me a meeting,” he said, his tone all steel.

“But—but Inquisitor!” she sputtered. “The favors that will be required, the cost. It will be extravagant!”

Owain glared at her. What was the point of influence if he couldn’t spend it? His fury crackled in the air around him.

“Do it,” he said coldly, speaking to the woman but looking at Rainier. “I don’t care what he calls himself. This man belongs to the Inquisition. I want him remanded to Skyhold for judgement.”

The elf hurried to obey, not daring to argue a second time. Owain threw a last hard look at the man in the cell, whose face was a mask of wretched misery and defiance. Then he turned and stalked toward the stairs without another word.

Chapter End Notes
I managed to distract myself from actually writing this chapter by thinking about events that are coming later, but on the plus side, that means I've mapped out where this is all headed. So, wooooo! Let's go!
Seeking the Seekers

Chapter Summary

Searching for truth and finding hope for the future.

“There you go again, Seeker, getting an eyeful of Inquisibutt.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I see where your eyes are. He’s not just an object to quench your desires, you know. You should make sure to undress him with your eyes respectfully.”

They were hiking through the wilds of Ferelden on their way to Caer Oswin, following a wooded ridge that ran parallel to the main road. They had moved off the road for the last mile or two, wary of alerting any hostile forces to their presence. Owain turned away from Dorian’s thoughts on the utility of mana-charged barriers against physical projectiles to look behind him and cock an eyebrow at Bull and Cassandra.

“What are you two talking about?” he asked.

“Your body,” said the Iron Bull. “Well, I’m talking about it. Cassandra’s just glaring and turning red.”

“Then for the record,” Owain said, twinkling his eyes at the Seeker, “there’s no need to be terribly respectful. Or to use only your eyes, for that matter.”

Bull laughed. “That’s the spirit. Go wild, you two!”

Cassandra made a disgusted noise. “You certainly take your own advice. Need I remind you that our tents are not soundproof?”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Bull retorted, wiggling his eyebrows. “That almost sounds like a challenge, Cass. We could turn this into a little competition...”

“Do not bring me into this!” Dorian huffed from Owain's side. He could practically hear Dorian’s eyeballs rolling in their sockets.

Owain opened his mouth to respond but stopped short at the sound of hooves pounding the packed dirt road below. He signalled to the others, and they fell silent, moving to the top of the ridge for a better look.

It was a single rider, clad in heavy armor, Templar heraldry emblazoned on his shield and plate. Heading north, just like they were, on the road to Caer Oswin. Owain doubted it was a coincidence. He threw a quick glance at Cassandra, whose face looked grave. At least they appeared to be on the right track.

The rest of the journey was quiet, all levity dissipated into the cold, damp air. The rider had reminded them of their mission and what almost certainly awaited them at the end of it: battle, death, and more evidence of Corypheus upending the order of the world.
It started to drizzle. Not true rain, but enough to make the leaves slick underfoot and leave beads of silver in their hair and eyelashes. Owain didn’t bother covering his head. The wet cold had already seeped into his clothes, and besides, there was something he found wild and invigorating about it.

He had returned to Skyhold with Cassandra and Varric less than a week ago. Leliana’s agents had finally made a breakthrough on the whereabouts of the Seekers, and Cassandra had been eager to follow up on their leads. It seemed an opportune time, anyway. Cullen had yet to return with the Inquisition’s troops, and Josephine was still negotiating Blackwall’s release from Orlais.

There was a great deal of fretting and hand-wringing from Josie on this last point, though he could never be sure how much of it was due to the tremendous outlay of favors and influence it was costing them and how much was caused by the shocking revelations about Blackwall himself. Thinking about Rainier still felt like a punch to the gut. He did not envy the ambassador’s task. But then again, he never did.

The fate of the Seekers was a great mystery, one Cassandra had been trying to solve ever since Haven. No one had heard anything from Lord Seeker Lucius since their confrontation in Val Royeaux, and they had never seen any Seekers among the ranks of the Red Templars. The Seekers had started the war with the mages and were supposed to police the Templars. With everything going on, how could such a powerful organization suddenly go silent?

It was baffling even at its most innocuous, and the truth was likely to be far more menacing. He and Cassandra had discussed various theories in their tent last night. Surely Corypheus had something to do with this, but what? And why? Seekers did not use regular lyrium and were resistant to the effects of the red variety, which would make them more difficult to corrupt than the Templars. Without that leash, was it possible to control them at all? Or had Corypheus simply wiped out the entire order? Cassandra assured him that would have been no easy task, which implied there was something else at work here, either great power or great treachery.

They would soon find out. He glanced again at Cassandra as they reached the road to the keep. Caer Oswin was the seat of Bann Loren, a rather ordinary Ferelden noble known for being pious and little else, according to Leliana’s reports. How did a man like that get mixed up in the schemes of an ancient Tevinter magister? Sillier things had happened, Owain reminded himself. Like an Ostwick Circle enchanter being named the Inquisitor.

The castle sat on a hill, and the grounds were oddly unguarded. They reached the keep itself with no trouble at all. They circled the structure and targeted an entrance at the rear, cut into the grade of the land.

He tried the door, and it was locked, because nothing in his life was ever that easy. He nodded at Iron Bull, who stepped up with his axe and reduced the door to splinters with a single swing. Cassandra and her shield led the way into a short passageway, with Owain following closely behind.

They found themselves in a small antechamber of sorts. It was occupied by one very surprised-looking soldier in heavy, Templar-esque armor. He charged wildly at Cassandra and quickly met his end at the point of her blade.

The noise of it alerted the men in the adjoining room, a wider dungeon lined with dark, barred cells. There were four of them in total, wearing armor like the unlucky fellow in the first room. They had their shields and swords up as Owain and his party entered. One of them spotted the eye on Cassandra’s breastplate and held his weapon aloft.

“Death to the Seekers!” he shouted, before rushing toward them.
Owain knocked him off his feet with a stonefist, while Cassandra and Iron Bull came in swinging, bringing sword and axe crashing down on shields and steel plate. Moving carefully in the small space, Owain fade-stepped behind their line and set his fire mines, rushing out of the way as Dorian’s horror spells sent their enemies fleeing into the trap with lethal results.

They searched the room afterwards. Cassandra stooped to pick up a scrap of paper. After reading it, she frowned and passed it to Owain.

“What’s this Order of Fiery Promise?” he asked, after scanning the parts that were legible.

Cassandra sighed, straightening and pushing stray hairs out of her eyes with her gloved fingers. “It is a cult with… strange beliefs about Seekers. They believe they are the true Seekers, the only righteous ones. They say we robbed them of their powers long ago, preventing them from ending the world.”

“Ending the world?” said Dorian with an eyebrow arched. “What will the fanatics of Thedas come up with next?”

“The only way to truly rid the world of evil, in their eyes,” Cassandra continued. “The world will be reborn a paradise—that is what they believe. Utter rubbish.”

“There seems to be an obvious solution here,” Owain said. “Why haven’t the Seekers dealt with them?”

“We have,” she sighed again. “Several times. They just reappear after a time, like weeds. Nobody knows how.”

In one of the cells along the walls, they found a dead Seeker. His body was thin in his armor and bore the marks of physical torture. It did not bode well.

“The Promisers will pay for this,” Cassandra seethed through gritted teeth. “I still do not understand how the Seekers ended up here. Or what any of this has to do with Corypheus.”

Owain had no answers for her, so they kept going. They worked their way up through the keep, reaching a central courtyard where the cultists seemed to be making a stand. He peered out the door and counted over a dozen men, with still more emerging from other parts of the castle. He let out a deep breath and counted his stock of healing potions, handing half of them to Dorian.

Then he nodded to Bull, who kicked open the door and let out a great war cry, charging out into the yard at full speed. Dorian cursed under his breath and hurried after him, scrambling to get their barriers in place before they reached the enemy.

Owain glanced at Cassandra, who gave him a quick nod of steely composure and tightened her hold on her shield. She led the way, and together they stepped out through the doorway.

They worked in pairs, Bull and Dorian taking the enemies on the left, and Cassandra and Owain handling the ones on the right. It was still drizzling outside, and he decided to use the added moisture to his advantage, switching to ice and lightning over his favored fire element.

He cast a pull of the abyss as Cassandra charged into a group of Promisers. Then he cloaked himself in ice armor and fade-stepped toward her as she engaged the first of them. The metallic clash of swords and shields rang in his ears as he reappeared just behind her.

While the Seeker held the line against the enemies in front of them, he cast a wall of ice to cover their backs and scanned the field for ranged enemies. Spying a pair of archers on one of the walls overlooking the courtyard, he called down a bolt of chain lightning that sent them twitching and
convulsing to the ground, the deadly voltage ripping all the more easily through their wet armor and clothing.

Cassandra shouted at him, and he whirled to find two knights bearing down on their flank. He failed to dodge in time, and one of them managed to land a blow on Owain’s shoulder. His armor caught the brunt of the impact, but still he staggered back from the force of it. Recovering, he spun his staff and focused his mana on drawing water from the air to snare the enemies’ legs in a thick, paralyzing layer of ice. Disoriented by the sudden lack of mobility, their eyes widened in fear, and they flailed their weapons uselessly at Owain until his staff blade found unprotected skin at the edge of a helmet, or Cassandra’s sword exploited a gap in their breastplate.

They dispatched the rest of their foes in similar fashion. The Promisers might have been dressed like Templars and pretended to be Seekers, but Owain was silently thankful that they were neither. Not having to deal with anti-magic abilities or spell purges made this an easier fight than it could have been.

He leaned heavily on his staff and rubbed his bruised shoulder, catching his breath as their enemies lay fallen. Bull took care of the last of the Promisers, while the ghostly blue forms of Dorian’s marked spirits finished their work and faded into the mist. Necromancy was a school of magic he would never quite understand.

Cassandra sheathed her sword and started searching the bodies, looking for more clues that might explain how or why the Seekers had ended up in the clutches of an obscure cult in this quiet corner of Ferelden. Her efforts unearthed a folded parchment on one of the Promisers, and she stood reading it before addressing Owain.

“It’s a letter signed by Samson, commander of the Red Templars. As we thought, the Seekers proved resistant to the red lyrium corruption, and they were of no use to Corypheus. So he turned them over to the Order of the Fiery Promise.”

Samson again. Owain recalled his conversation with Cullen about the Red Templar general and mentally added this to his list of crimes.

“That still doesn’t explain how they ended up here or what’s been done with them. Surely the Seekers wouldn’t be so easy to round up and capture, right?”

Cassandra shook her head. “No. Something must have lured them here, and it must have been compelling. I just cannot imagine what.”

They moved on to search the rest of the keep, turning up the remains of a few more Seekers but no further explanations. Cassandra seemed deep in thought, her brow creased and mouth pulled in a deep frown. Owain touched her arm lightly as they picked their way through the ruins of a large assembly hall.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly, his eyes searching hers. “You seem worried.”

“I am,” she replied, meeting his gaze. “This does not look good. I may have disagreed with them, but I cannot abandon them. The Seekers are my family.”

“We’ll find out what happened, Cassandra,” he said, knowing his words were scant reassurance. “There must be answers here somewhere.”

She just nodded and turned her eyes back to their path. “I hope so.”

At the base of some stairs, they found a young Seeker slumped against the stone step, coughing and
struggling for breath. Unlike the others they had found, he was alive, though just barely, it seemed. As they drew closer, Cassandra’s face lit with recognition, and she hurried forward, dropping to her knees at the man’s side.

“Daniel!” she gasped, her voice colored by conflicting emotion—joy at seeing a friend alive and horror at the clear hopelessness of his condition. “Daniel, can you hear me?”

“Cassandra,” the man croaked, barely able to get the words out between fits of dry coughing. “It—it’s you. You’re alive.”

“As are you. I’m so glad I found you.”

“Cassandra, it’s the Lord Seeker. You have to find him, stop him. Lucius betrayed us. He sent us here to die, one by one. An important mission, he said. Lies.”

“Lucius?” Owain said, crouching next to Cassandra. Close up, the young Seeker looked even worse than he had at first, his face thin and ashen, veins dark and protruding thickly beneath his skin, eyes hollowed and red with blood. “But how can that be? We saw him in Val Royeaux, with the Templars.”

“That wasn’t him,” Daniel replied, coughing again. “It was a demon, masquerading. He allowed it, let himself be used. So he could be here.”

Cassandra and Owain exchanged deeply troubled looks. Here was the missing piece of the truth. “We will find him, Daniel,” Cassandra said. “We will put an end to this.”

She started to rise, but Daniel clutched at her hand. “Wait! Don’t- you can’t leave me like this.” Then he dissolved into another fit of coughing.

“What have they done to you?” she asked.

“They- they put a demon inside me. It’s tearing me up.”

“You can’t be possessed. That’s impossible.”

“Not possessed. They—they fed me things. I can feel it growing.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Owain asked, glancing at Cassandra and then at Dorian standing over her shoulder.

“I doubt it,” Dorian replied, sadly. “Not if he’s ingested it, as he says.”

Daniel shook his head weakly in agreement. “Only one thing you can do. Don’t let me die like this. Please.”

Cassandra’s eyes went wide with sorrow, even as her jaw tightened with resolve. “You should have left with me, Daniel,” she said quietly. “You didn’t believe in the war any more than I did.”

He grimaced and gave a short laugh that ended as a cough. “You know me. I wanted that promotion.”

She stood and drew her sword as Owain and Dorian stepped back.

“Go to the Maker’s side, Daniel. You will be welcomed.” Daniel closed his eyes and curved his lips in a slight smile as Cassandra’s blade sang through the air and granted him the peace he sought.
She turned to Owain when it was done and exhaled a long, shaky breath. “He was my apprentice. I have never known a finer young man.”

Owain could think of nothing to say that would be helpful. He just stared sadly at her, at a loss for words.

“How about we find this Lord Seeker and make sure he pays for this?” Bull suggested.

“I fully intend to,” she replied.

They ascended the stairs and emerged into another courtyard, coming face-to-face with Lucius and a handful of knights in Templar armor.

“Cassandra,” Lucius drawled as they came into view. “Here you are. With a man I can only assume is the new Inquisitor.”

Owain glared back and gripped his staff tightly. “And here’s the man who betrayed his own order.”

Lucius sneered. “I presume you know the Seekers were once the original Inquisition? Oh yes, we fought to restore order in a time of madness long ago, as you do now. And then do you know what happened? We became proud, Inquisitor. We sought to remake the world, to make it better. But we created the Chantry and the Circles of Magi. A war that will never end.”

“We are not the original Inquisition.”

“Of course. You say that now.”

“So you did all this because you hate our order?” Cassandra asked.

“We Seekers are abominations, Cassandra,” Lucius replied. “We created a decaying world and fought to preserve it even as it crumbled. We had to be stopped.” He paused and tossed a heavy tome at her feet.

“See for yourself. These are the secrets of our order, passed down from Lord Seeker to Lord Seeker, since the time of the first Inquisition. When it came to me, the war with the mages had already begun, but it was not too late for me to do the right thing.”

“Lord Seeker, what you have done...”

He didn't let her finish. “I have seen the future, Cassandra,” he interrupted, voice rising in pitch and volume. “I have created a new order. A pure order. The world will end so we can start anew. Join us! It is the Maker’s will!”

Lucius held out his hand to Cassandra, and Owain looked between the two of them. He felt primed for battle, taut like a drawn bow, but this was her fight, and he would follow her lead. She didn’t take her eyes off the Lord Seeker. The muscles twitched in her jaw as she ground her teeth with rage. Then she drew her sword and lunged at Lucius with a snarl.

Owain hurried after her and shouted to Dorian and Bull to cover him, though he needn’t have said anything. They were already moving, the mage busy casting barriers as fast as he could and Bull plowing his axe into the nearest knight. Owain spun his staff and darted about the field, planting mines and casting ice spells to hamstring their enemies, following them up with stonefist strikes and bolts of lightning.

They did their best to fend off Lucius’s men, leaving Cassandra free to duel the Lord Seeker. The
Seekers circled each other, trading blows and blocks. Her grunts and the ringing of their weapons echoed through the wet courtyard. They were well matched, but hours of fighting earlier this afternoon had taken their toll on Cassandra’s stamina, and she was tiring quickly.

Lucius landed a ferocious shield bash and swung hard with his mace, knocking her shield out of her grasp and flipping it to the ground. But his gambit had a cost, and he struggled to lift his weapon from where it had lodged in the sticky mud. Cassandra recovered swiftly and took her sword in both hands, using that narrow opening to thrust forward for a killing blow.

The Lord Seeker seemed to stop struggling in that split second before her blade hit home. Owain could have sworn he saw him smile, in the end, before he fell to the ground with a thump. It was over, and Cassandra was spent. She dropped her sword and sank gasping to her knees, chest heaving for air.

Owain jogged to her side, worried that she was hurt. She shook her head and held a hand out to stop him, as if answering the question he was going to ask. She yanked off her helm and closed her eyes, lifting her face to the sky, heedless of the light rain still falling from the grey clouds above. He stepped back and watched her, feeling helpless. His own heart clenched with the pain he could see writ on her face, but he understood her need for space just then.

The rain passed after a time, and they built a makeshift pyre in the courtyard out of firewood, bits of broken furniture, and other debris they hauled out from the castle. When it was ready, Bull carried Daniel’s body and laid it on top with surprising delicacy. He stepped back, and Owain looked at Cassandra. She nodded, and he waved his hand slowly, sending flames licking through the kindling beneath the dead Seeker.

They stood in silence, watching as the fire leapt higher and listening as Cassandra recited the Chant of Light. When she was finished, she turned and walked to the low stone wall that bordered the yard and looked out onto the countryside below.

Bull and Dorian wandered away to set their camp for the night, leaving Owain alone with her. He followed her to the wall and folded her gently into his arms. This time, she accepted his comfort, pushing her arms under his coat to wrap them around his waist and burying her face in his shoulder.

The wet soaking into his shirt was too warm to be rain. He said nothing but kissed the top of her head and held her tighter as her shoulders shook with silent sobs. He looked out at the horizon and realized that the clouds had cleared, and the setting sun had arrived to paint everything a glorious red-orange.

He lost track of how long they stood there, but it was a long time. Long enough for her breaths to turn steady against his chest and for the day to slip into night.

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When they returned to Skyhold, he found Cassandra in the forge, poring over the book she had received from Lord Seeker Lucius.

“Not as exciting as your usual reading, I take it?” he said, dropping into a chair across the table.

“On the contrary, it’s quite riveting, I assure you,” she said, with a slight smile on her lips.

“Oh? Then what great secrets have you learned, Seeker?”

She paused and looked down at the pages spread before her, taking a deep breath before answering.
“I trust I needn’t explain Tranquility to you.”

He narrowed his eyes and blew out a bitter laugh. “Hard to be a Circle mage and not know. Not when the threat is dangled over you at every moment.” He searched for words to describe the mingled dread and disgust it inspired in him. “For every infraction, no matter how minor, part of you fears that will be the day they decide to do it. To sever your emotions and leave you an empty husk of yourself for the rest of your life. A fate worse than death, to some.”

Cassandra bowed her head. “It should only be used in the most extreme cases, on those who truly cannot control their abilities. But that has not always been the case.”

“That’s putting it rather mildly,” he said sharply, remembering Cullen’s story about Maddox and his love letters.

“Perhaps so,” Cassandra acknowledged, before pressing on. “In any case, what started the mage rebellion was the discovery that the rite of Tranquility could be reversed. The Lord Seeker at the time covered it up, harshly. It was dangerous knowledge, and the shock of it, in addition to what happened in Kirkwall, is what sparked the war in the first place.”

He thought of several arguments to make to that and crossed his arms over his chest, though he held his tongue and let her continue.

“But it turns out we have always known how to reverse it. The Seekers created the rite. I told you of my vigil, the months I spent emptying myself of all emotion? I was made Tranquil and didn’t even know it. And then a spirit of faith touched my mind, breaking tranquility and granting me my abilities. The Seekers understood this and did not share it with anyone, not even the Chantry.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and struggled to grasp the full import of her words. “So, you’re saying this horrible rite, this, this abominable cruelty was created by your order? And you could have cured it but kept it a secret all this time?”

“Yes, yet another of our crimes,” she replied, making no effort to defend her order and their actions.

“Do you really think it can be cured?”

“It will take some research and further investigation, but I believe so, yes.”

He didn’t answer but sat deep in thought, his mind running through just a few of the implications. Not only would people who were currently Tranquil have the option of reversing the process, but no longer could it be used as a weapon against mages, a bludgeon to keep them in check. This had enormous repercussions for the Templars, if they continued to exist, as well as the free mages and their ability to govern themselves. No wonder the rebellion had started over this.

Cassandra broke into his thoughts. “There’s more. Lucius was not wrong about the order.”

She stood and stepped toward the open window behind her, the sun streaming in to light her features as she spoke.

“I do not think the Seekers have been doing the Maker’s work, not truly,” she admitted. “Perhaps we believed it once. The original Inquisition was created during a terrible time. But now? We create secrets and let them fester. We act to survive but not to serve. That is not the Maker’s work.”

“Then what is the Maker’s work, exactly?”

“No one knows for certain. That is why we must keep seeking. Perhaps that is why we lost our way.
Because we stopped looking.”

She turned to look at him. “At some point, power becomes its own master. We cast aside ideals in favor of expediency and tell ourselves it was all necessary, for the people. I wonder how much we resemble what they used to be.”

He could not deny that was a very real risk, and Lucius had been right on that, if nothing else. Owain could insist all day that they would never become like the first Inquisition, but didn’t everyone start with good intentions?

“Perhaps knowing the danger is half the battle?” What more could they do?

“Perhaps. It cannot hurt.” She studied him for a long moment and then turned and cast her eyes out the window again. She folded her hands behind her back and sighed.

“I had thought to rebuild the Seekers after victory is ours, but now I’m not so sure they deserve to be rebuilt.”

He sat and stared at her back, repeating the words in his mind. *After victory is ours.* He knew she was talking about the Seekers, but it was this phrase that caught his imagination. This was the first time she had ever mentioned a future after all this, and somehow, it freed him to do the same. What would he do after victory was theirs? Would he go on being the Inquisitor? Would the Inquisition even continue after the rifts were closed and Corypheus was defeated?

And what about the two of them? Surely they were part of this future, too? A door opened, one he thought had closed to him forever the day he stepped foot in the Circle. Hope raced ahead of him, sowing a thousand possibilities in his heart. He saw himself and Cassandra, together, happy, in a sunlit world of peace. He saw them making a home together. Perhaps even a child—a family—together. It was almost too much to grasp. He swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat.

“Owain?” she looked at him expectantly, and he started. He could not for the life of him recall what she had asked him.

He shook his head to clear it. “I’m sorry, Cassandra. What were you asking?”

“The Seekers,” she repeated, with a touch of impatience. “Do you think I should rebuild them?”

He looked at her and considered his response. The Seekers had gone astray, clearly, but their original charge had been laudable, and their knowledge of a Tranquil cure had to be preserved if it was ever to come to anything. Though he didn’t believe in the Maker’s will, he did believe in checks and balances. Perhaps in a world where the Templars had gone mad and the Chantry was in disarray, Thedas could use an organization that rooted out corruption and kept them all honest. And who better to ensure they stayed true to their righteous goals than Cassandra herself?

“I think there is still good the Seekers could do,” he said finally. “And if anyone is going to rebuild them, it should be you. But only if you want to, Cassandra.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you. I could not have done this without you.”

He rose and joined her by the window, leaning against the sill beside her and fixing her with an earnest look. “No matter what you decide, you have my support. And my love.”

Her hazel eyes glowed up at him and her lips parted ever so slightly. He pulled her against him and kissed her slowly. Thoroughly. When they separated, he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. He took a deep breath and felt that his heart had never been so full.
Waking up beside Cassandra always felt like the extension of a pleasant dream, one he had the privilege of having every night. Waking up beside her in his own bed, however, was a novelty. So much of their time was spent on the road, in cramped tents and on thin bedrolls. Owain could probably count on his hands the number of nights they had spent together at Skyhold.

He slept better next to her, but his old sleeplessness hadn’t left him completely. Today, like most days, he woke first. Tucking a hand under his ear, he turned on his side and blinked his eyes open.

Early morning lit the stained glass windows, tinting the room purple, yellow, and blue. Cassandra was still sleeping, her eyes closed and breath steady, shoulders rising and falling in a cadence he tried to match with his own lungs. She faced him, clutching most of the covers in her arms as usual, but he didn’t mind. Her hair drifted in a scattered fringe across her forehead, her long, thin braid curling over the bare expanse of her shoulder.

As if she could sense him watching her, her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled slowly as they focused on him. He responded with the barest smile of his own, more eyes than lips, and cherished that lovely, quiet moment. He wanted to preserve it, to save it forever, but it was delicate as frost on a window, and just touching it would change it into something else entirely.

Not that that was a bad thing. He scooted himself closer and pulled the edge of the covers from her hands, tossing it over his shoulder to join her underneath. He propped his head on one hand and slid the other down her back, stopping just above the curve of her ass.

He stretched, luxuriating in the warm, smooth press of her naked body against his. Her breasts brushed his chest, and their legs intertwined between the soft sheets. Real beds had benefits, and this was one of them. He relished the feeling, looking down into her just-woken eyes.

“Sleep well, my love?” he asked.

“Mm. Very well.”

“Better than the forge?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Don't gloat.”

“Me? Never in my life.”
It had been surprisingly difficult to convince Cassandra to sleep in his quarters. They spent several nights crammed into the bedroll where she normally slept, in the alcove above the forge. Each time, he pointed out that he had a very comfortable, very large bed in a spacious room in the main keep, but all his logical arguments came to nothing, like so many waves breaking on a stone wall. It was only when he accidentally kicked over her stack of books for the third time that she finally rolled her eyes and relented.

“I said I would make it worth it,” he added.

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I can think of a few ways.” A lot of ways, in fact.

He shifted over her and tilted his head to catch her lips in a slow, lazy kiss, his tongue greeting hers in what was sure to be the first of many meetings this morning. Her fingers grazed his cheek and danced along his shoulders as he pulled back to look at her, his eyelids growing heavy with desire.

His cock was an increasingly solid weight between them, trapped against her belly. It did not go unnoticed, because she smiled wickedly and squirmed under him, and he couldn’t stop the groan that flew past his lips.

She drew his face down for another kiss, her thumbs sliding along the line of his jaw. Every fiber of her demanded deeper, harder, more. Breaking from her mouth, he moved down to her neck, nipping at her pulse, at the now familiar spot behind her ear that never failed to elicit the gasps and moans he loved so much.

Supporting his weight on one arm, he ran his free hand up and down her body as he kissed her, traveling from her hip to her breast, squeezing slowly, teasing everywhere but her nipples until he had her panting beneath him. Just as his own patience gave out, he covered one of them with his mouth and scraped the tip of his thumb over the other, and she cried out, her body jerking up from the mattress.

Smug satisfaction curled at his lips, and he doubled his efforts, dedicating tongue and teeth and hands to his cause. She writhed against him and carded her fingers through his hair, scratching her nails against his scalp in a way that tingled down his spine. His cock begged for attention, but he ignored it and shifted his focus lower.

She whimpered with disappointment as he ducked under the sheets and moved his lips down her ribcage and stomach, down past her navel. Only when he planted a soft kiss on the curls between her legs did she realize his intent, and she froze, clamping her legs together and pulling them out of his reach.

“What are you doing?” she asked, propping herself on her elbows to look sharply at him over her bent knees.

He threw the covers aside and sat back on his heels, studying the apprehension on her face. It was rare for Cassandra to be timid about anything, but part of him loved this. He enjoyed being the one to discover these moments of shyness, like secrets only he knew, just as he enjoyed showing her there was nothing to be afraid of.

“I said I would make it worth it, and I will,” he said, wetting his lips with his tongue. “Besides, I’m sleeping with a woman who can set my blood on fire if she chooses. My survival instincts tell me I should keep her happy.”
She stuttered, unconvinced. “But—but I’ve never… No one has ever…”

He reached a hand out and placed it on her leg, lightly. He could feel her tense under his touch. “Do you trust me?” he asked, looking into her eyes.

She stared at him a beat before answering with a small nod and easing her legs back onto the bed.

He started slowly, pulling her knees apart gently and crawling on his elbows until he settled between them. On one leg and then the other, he trailed slow kisses up her inner thighs, stopping just short of her sex each time. He scraped his stubbled cheek against her skin and smoothed over it with his tongue, taking his time. Periodically, he looked up to gauge her reaction, and it gratified him to see that she watched with rapt attention, her eyes losing their worried cast and darkening with desire.

Encouraged, he pushed her curls aside and spread her open before him, running a finger along her wet folds. It reminded him that his cock was hard and feeling sorely neglected. But he was a man who liked to finish what he started.

He locked his eyes on hers, and without breaking that heated gaze, he breathed deeply of her and touched his tongue to that most sensitive part of her. She bucked and tried to close her legs, but the width of his shoulders between her knees and his hands on her thighs kept her pinned to the bed, like a butterfly under glass.

“Do you want me to stop?” He teased her again as he spoke. It was almost cheating, he knew. She gasped and shook her head.

A wicked part of him wanted to push her further. He withdrew his fingers and exhaled. “What was that?” he said in a low rumble. “I can’t hear you, Cassandra. You’ll have to tell me what you want.”

She whimpered again at the loss of his touch and at the cool of his breath as it fanned over her. Her eyes flickered darkly at him. Still, he waited.

She caved almost immediately, and it was perfect. “Please, Owain,” she whispered. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

That was all the ask he needed. He obliged with a lick along the length of her before closing his lips over her pearl. She gave an open-mouthed cry and arched her body again, her hands scrabbling at the sheets for purchase.

It spurred him on, his cock twitching at her responsiveness, his heart swelling with pride at the pleasure he wrought from her. He was relentless, working her with lips and tongue, even as he brought his fingers up to thrust into her slick core, finding a rhythm that made her moan and gasp his name. Her hands moved from the sheets to his head, tugging at his hair, pulling him down while she rocked herself against him. He didn’t mind any of it. The scent and taste of her was musky and feminine and Cassandra, and that was good enough for him.

His attentions brought her to the edge, and with another stroke of his tongue and curl of his fingers inside her, she stiffened and cried out his name. He persisted as she rode out her pleasure, until she melted breathlessly into the mattress, spent. Wiping his mouth on the sheets, he crawled up beside her once more.

He kissed her, knowing she would taste herself on his tongue and not caring. He touched her cheek and took in the sight of her, running his thumb along her scar.

“You’re so beautiful. Do you know that?”
She knit her brows and shook her head in denial. “Some men would say I am too tall. Or too strong. Too determined.”

He scoffed at the shame of it. “Well, that’s their loss,” he said quietly, losing himself in the deep hazel of her eyes. And then he kissed her again, so she would know it was true.

He felt her fingers wrap around his cock, as if to say she hadn't forgotten about that. He closed his eyes and groaned, thrusting into her hand like he couldn’t help himself. Because he couldn’t, really. His self-control was in tatters. She smiled and pushed him onto his back. Before he knew what was happening, she had crawled down his body and taken him in her mouth, obviously bent on returning the favor.

He groaned deeply again as the feel of it rolled through him. The wet heat of her mouth was incredible, like the tight circle of her lips, the smooth caress of her tongue over his tip, the firm grip of her fingers around his shaft. But it was her eyes looking up at him that almost pushed him over the brink. He touched his hand to the back of her head as she bobbed over him and fought desperately to avoid spilling right then.

It was a battle he was losing. And as good as this felt, he decided that her mouth was not how he wanted to finish. He stopped her and pulled back, moving until he was sitting up against the headboard. He beckoned to her, and even without words, she understood.

She planted her knees on either side of his hips and steadied herself on the wall, looking heatedly into his eyes as she loomed over him. Yes, beds have their advantages. He thought about that vaguely as he gazed up at her with single-minded lust. He gripped her ass as she slowly impaled herself, and a garbled noise left his throat as she took him to the hilt. She smiled and tipped his face up, crushing his mouth under hers, not gentle now but urgent. She broke away to throw her head back as she rode him, and he rose up to meet her, planting kisses along her throat and collarbone, reaching up to knead her breasts as they bounced in front of him.

He held her tight to him as he found his release, squeezing his eyes shut and mangling her name as that single point of pleasure broke over him, leaving him shivering and twitching in its wake. He let her go and fell back against the headboard, muscles slack, letting his head hit the wood with a blunt knock.

His love for her was the only thought in his brain, and he stared up at her in a haze of complete awe. She was everything he could have dreamed or hoped for, everything he never thought he would find or be allowed to have, and she was here, impossibly, in his arms. She smiled down at him again and brushed her fingers through his sweat-damp hair. He grabbed her hand and kissed her palm, kissed the beating pulse at her wrist.

“Can we stay here forever?” he asked, more than half serious, still holding her fingers in his.

She laughed at him and shook her head. “You are the Inquisitor, remember? You have judgments today. You must go down.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “What if we just locked the door and never came out?”

“You know Josephine has keys to all the rooms in the castle. You would not last fifteen minutes.”

“I could set mines,” he suggested, bringing her hand to his lips again. “They’d have to find a mage to defuse them. Could take hours. You know what we could do with hours?” He flicked his tongue across her wrist.
Her eyes glowed at him, even as she sighed and reluctantly pulled her hand from his grasp. “I can imagine, Inquisitor. But it is time to face the day.”

With regret, he watched her rise from his lap and stand to dress, her body framed in a fall of sunlight. He wished again that he could save that moment forever. It was a dream he never wanted to end.

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He hated passing judgements. No other task made him so acutely aware of the unwarranted authority that had been foisted on him in his role as the Inquisitor. He was called upon to decide fates—life or death, mercy or punishment—and no amount of practice ever made it any easier.

The prisoners were variously remorseful, repentant, or defiant. Some begged for leniency, others spat insults and venom. It was his job to sit stone-faced on that ridiculous throne and take it all. It wore on him, hardened his heart and frayed his nerves.

Today’s docket was particularly long. It read like a litany of his journeys in Thedas. There was Gregory Dedrick, the mayor of Crestwood—to the Grey Wardens with him, to atone as best he could. Mistress Poulin, the mine owner from Sahniia, sentenced to serve the villagers she had wronged. A Warden from Adamant, wracked with guilt over killing a comrade to bind a demon from the Fade. He sent her to find her own end in the Deep Roads.

Then came Erimond, the unrepentant Magister, still singing the praises of Corypheus even as he knelt in chains in the heart of Skyhold. Nothing cowed him, not the threat of death or imprisonment. Owain refused to even consider Tranquility, though Josephine suggested it could be an option.

He thought of the Inquisition soldiers that died because of this man, and it filled him with rage. The brave but misguided Wardens. Clarel. Hawke. It made him want to punch Erimond in his sneering, mustached face.

So, he did. Before reason could catch up with his impulse, he launched himself from his seat, fadestepping toward the Magister. He barreled out of the Fade fist first, connecting with Erimond’s jaw at full strength and sending him sprawling to the polished stone floor.

The spectators in the room gasped in shock. A few screamed. Others recoiled in fear at the clearly unhinged mage Inquisitor. Josie looked aghast, not because of him, he guessed, but in anticipation of the ruffled feathers she would have to smooth later. Cassandra, however, wore a small, curious smile, and he was pretty sure Cullen hid a smirk behind his gauntlet.

It was completely unnecessary, but it felt good. Owain shook his hand out and flexed his fingers. His knuckles would bruise, for sure, but he didn’t care. He looked down with disgust at Erimond, who still lay on the floor, ranting something about gods and Tevinter. Then he turned and walked slowly back to his throne.

“Livius Erimond, I sentence you to die,” Owain pronounced when he reached his seat again. Whatever the Magister might say about glory in death, dead was dead. And after what he had done, he did not deserve to live.

The guards dragged him away and brought in the last prisoner of the day. Blackwall. Or Rainier, rather. He stood in front of Owain with a slump in his shoulders. Josie read out his crimes while he aggressively avoided eye contact, keeping his gaze directed firmly at the floor.

Owain studied him and absently rubbed his sore knuckles. Gone was the anger and defiance he had witnessed in the prison in Val Royeaux, replaced with defeat and resignation. He had thought many
times over the past weeks about what he’d say in this moment. He had already resolved on a pardon, but part of him was curious what Rainier might say for himself now. Would he make it difficult?

“How do you answer the charges?” he asked when Josie had finished.

Rainier raised his head for the first time to meet Owain eye-to-eye. “I don’t,” he said simply. “They’re all true. The crimes are mine, and I deserve to pay for them. You should have left me in Orlais.”

“I’m afraid that wasn’t possible.”

Rainier scoffed. “You want to act like you’re not a noble, my lord, but you’re just like the rest. Using favors to get around the law, to avoid justice. You should have let me hang.” He glanced at Josie then. “I’m afraid your ambassador has wasted her efforts.”

Difficult, then. Still, Owain once thought he had never met a man as determined as Blackwall to do good and right his wrongs, and that hadn’t changed. In his estimation, Rainier had paid for his sins already, and perhaps the depth of his guilt would ensure he continued to do so.

“You’re part of the Inquisition, Rainier. Or at least, you were. That means you are mine to judge, and I judge you to be a free man. Free to pay for your crimes as you see fit.”

The crowd murmured, and Rainier’s eyes widened. His mouth opened, but it took a moment for the words to come.

“So that’s it?” he asked. “Just like that? Free?”

“Yes. You are free to atone as the man you are, not the traitor you thought you were or the Warden you pretended to be.”

“The man I am? I barely know him. And I have a lot to atone for…” Rainier bowed his head and took a deep breath before speaking again.

“If my future is truly mine,” he continued, “then I pledge it to the Inquisition. My sword is yours, Inquisitor, to wield as you wish.”

Owain nodded deeply and signaled to the guards, who removed Rainier’s chains.

Rainier rubbed his wrists and exhaled a short breath. “If I’d said anything less, would an arrow from the rookery have snuffed me like a candle?”

Owain sat back on his throne. He opened his hands and let the anchor crackle on his left while he conjured a flame in his right, letting them burn for a second before balling them into fists.

“I don’t need arrows.”

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There was always paperwork after judgements, and it was late in the day by the time Josephine had finished with him. Feeling drained and restless, Owain went in search of Cassandra, looking for a reminder of all that was good in his life.

As he reached for the door to the forge, it swung inward, leaving him grasping at air and stumbling forward to catch himself. Mother Giselle stood in the doorway, looking annoyed. She paused to greet him before breezing through as he stepped out of the way.
“Talk to her, Your Worship,” said the cleric in passing, nodding over her shoulder. She was indicating Cassandra, who followed a few paces behind, striding toward the door with a frown on her face and purpose in her gait.

Cassandra stopped just outside and stood with him, watching Giselle move out of earshot as she walked back to the keep. He followed Cassandra’s line of sight before snapping his eyes back to hers. Unsure what this was about, he waited for her to speak first.

She shot him another look and turned to walk toward the training yard, intending for him to follow.

“I suppose you’ve heard that Leliana and I are both candidates to be the next Divine?” she began.

He hadn’t heard, actually. He halted where he stood. “What? You and Leliana? How is that even possible? You’re not priests.”

Cassandra shrugged and folded her arms across her chest. “It is not without precedent. As the hands of the Divine, we were at least part of the Chantry hierarchy. However, because of what happened at Halamshiral and adamant, the Empire favors you, and thus everyone close to you. So they throw our names around without even asking us first.”

He crossed his arms like she did and shifted his weight as he considered this news. “Well, is it something you want? Do you want to be Divine?”

She was silent, thinking, looking down at the ground before bringing her eyes up to his. “The Chantry needs to change. It should be a source of faith and hope. Compassion. But it has become a shadow of what it should be. The Circle of Magi, the Templars, this pointless war. It has set itself on a path and cannot veer from that course, even in the face of certain death. It needs reform.”

“I’m a little surprised to hear you say that.”

“Oh?” she said with a raised brow. “Am I not the same woman who declared the Inquisition in defiance of the Chantry’s wishes? In all my years as a Seeker, I did what I was told. My faith demanded it. But now my faith demands something else. That I see with clearer eyes.”

She sighed. “And yet, being the Divine is not just about faith. It involves politics, playing the Game, persuading people to accept change.”

“Everything you hate, in other words,” he said, running his fingers through his hair. “You seem to know a great deal more about this than I do. Why did Mother Giselle want me to talk to you?”

“Perhaps she thinks you could convince me. Or, as the Inquisitor, your word carries great weight in Orlais, including the Grand Cathedral. If you were to make a recommendation for Divine, it would hold considerable sway over the proceedings.”

She paused again, taking a deep breath and looking away. “There is something else you should know. The Divine devotes her life to the Maker. She can never marry. She cannot... have a lover.”

He looked at her sharply. “Then you will refuse it, if it’s offered?”

She opened her mouth to reply but stopped herself, and doubt flickered in her eyes. That second of hesitation told him everything he needed to know.

“Oh,” he said, moving unsteadily toward a nearby rock and sitting down on it, hard. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to calm the whirring of his brain to process the meaning of her words.
“So, let me get this straight,” he said, over the pounding of his pulse in his ears. “You’re asking me to recommend you for Divine, so you can leave me?”

“I… It’s not that simple.”

“Actually, I think it is.”

“It’s an opportunity, Owain,” she huffed. “The Chantry needs to change if it is to survive. I have never believed in asking another to do what you are unwilling to do yourself. I owe it to myself and all of Thedas to seek the Sunburst Throne.”

“What about what you owe us?” he shot back. His voice was needlessly loud. “Haven’t we given enough? Sacrificed enough? What about—” He stopped himself mid-sentence. What about our future, he wanted to say but couldn’t bear to. He took a ragged breath instead. “How can you make these decisions without consulting me? This affects me, too.”

“I am consulting you now.”

“And it sounds like you’ve already decided. Does it even matter what I say?”

She made a frustrated noise and shook her head. “This is bigger than the two of us. Owain, this is the chance to shape the Chantry for years to come. To restore it to the ideal it needs to be. How can I say no to that?”

He hung his head between his knees, pressing his fists to his forehead. His happiness that morning, all the unspoken hopes he held for the future, they turned to dust in his hands. The judgements earlier that day had left him brittle, and now the cracks were forming. His heart was breaking, and raw emotion was bleeding to the surface.

“So I mean so little to you?” he asked quietly, squinting up at her. It wasn’t fair, he knew. But a mean, petty part of him wanted to hurt her as she had hurt him.

She looked stricken. “No!” She nearly choked on the words. “No… I love you.”

But not enough. It was a savage thought, one he couldn’t bring himself to say out loud. Never enough. He would always come second, to the Maker, to the Chantry, to the duty of the day. “I told you,” said the mean, small voice in his head.

She pushed through the icy silence and tried to reassure him. “Perhaps it does not matter anyway. They merely speak my name for now. It is quite possible they will name another.”

When he still didn’t respond, she tried again. “Even if they did select me, defeating Corypheus remains our first priority. It would be some time before I would need to go anywhere. Nothing needs to change.”

He breathed a laugh of contempt. She was trying to contain the damage, but it was far too late for that. Things had already changed. He pulled his lip back in a snarl and gave her a hard look as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Why bother?” he said, fueling his spite with the pain in her eyes. “Let’s not waste our time.”

She stood rooted to the spot, as if he had slapped her in the face. He turned and walked quickly away, leaving her there in the yard. Not because he was still angry, but because he was about to fall to pieces, and the last thing he wanted was for her to see.
I’m the worst. Buckle up for the angst, my friends...
“Hey, Blackwall. You ever get the feeling that you’re… you know… *replacing* someone? Another warrior who usually travels with the Inquisitor? Mean sword arm, nice ass?”

“I’m here because the Inquisitor needs me to be. Whatever happens between him and the Lady Seeker is none of my business.”

“Ri-ight. I thought so. Well, you know what I think? I think they just need to bone.”

“Is that how you solve all of your problems? Just fuck your way out of it?”

“Not all of them. Sometimes I use my axe.”

They were riding along a narrow road threading through the foothills of the Frostbacks, down to the plains of Orlais on their way to the Shrine of Dumat to the northwest. Owain swiveled in his saddle to throw a sharp glare at Bull and Blackwall behind him. One-and-a-half pairs of eyes blinked back at him.

“Can’t you find something else to talk about?” he asked, not bothering to mask the irritation in his voice.

“Sorry, Boss,” Bull replied. “Just can’t help noticing that Cass isn’t with us. She seemed pretty upset about it back there.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” he snapped, turning back around and urging his horse forward at a slightly faster clip.

They continued in silence for a bit, until Dorian pulled up beside him. “You know, for someone who is so little fun herself, you are considerably *worse* company when she’s not around.”

Owain threw him a dirty look out of the corner of his eye.

“Fine, fine,” he replied, waving it off. “I’ll let you sulk. But, banter aside, Trevelyan, have you actually tried talking to Cassandra about this whole Divine thing? Maybe you could change her mind? It hardly seems decided, no?”

That was it. Owain grunted in frustration and kicked his horse into a gallop, putting a good stretch of road between him and his companions. He knew they meant well, but talking about the state of his relationship with Cassandra was the last thing he wanted to do right now. He could hardly form coherent thoughts about it, never mind words that he wanted to say out loud. It was all still too raw.

He hadn’t spoken to her since that conversation in the yard. He’d avoided being alone with her for days, throwing himself into work instead, and when Cullen reported that he’d finally located the Red Templar base, Owain jumped at the chance to get away from Skyhold.
To get away from Cassandra, really. But that meant leaving her behind, something none of them was used to. Ever since he joined the Inquisition, he had never once traveled without her, and it was a strange experience for them all.

He didn’t tell her beforehand, couldn’t even bring himself to face her in that way. Instead, he simply saddled up without her, like the gutless bastard he was. She came storming into the courtyard as they were mounting their horses. She was dressed for travel, her shield on her back and sword at her hip, pack swinging from her shoulder. Quickly assessing the situation, she strode toward him and stood imposingly in front of his horse, dropping her pack at her feet and folding her arms across her chest. The glare she gave him could have melted ice.

Owain had frozen in place, his hands on the saddle, one foot in the stirrup. Bull, Blackwall, and Dorian, already mounted, looked nervously between him and Cassandra, unsure what to do next.

He shook his head to clear it and hoisted himself defiantly onto his horse. Frowning, Cassandra took hold of its bridle. He glanced at the others and jerked his head toward the gate.

“Blackwall, Bull, Dorian. Get started without me. I’ll catch up to you on the road.”

They didn’t move, still looking nervously at the Seeker.

“I said, go!” His voice was sharper than it needed to be.

They shot him one more concerned look and then turned their horses to follow the order.

Cassandra hadn’t taken her eyes off him.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice dangerously low, bristling with held-back rage.

“Heading to Orlais to deal with the Red Templars.” He tried to sound casual. “Cullen’s gone ahead to secure--”

“Without me?” Her eyes sparked with anger.

Owain set his jaw and ripped his eyes away, looking down at the reins in his hands and twisting them between his gloved fingers. “Right. Well, I thought it would be better for both of us if we had some time apart. To think about things.”

“You cannot do this.” There was pain, now, mixing with the anger in her face. “I will not be left behind!”

“Can’t I?” he replied, steeling himself to meet her eyes again. “We’ve all been so busy the past few months. Perhaps it’s good for you to take a break.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Or maybe the right thing. She was fuming.

“Is this about the Divine election? Are you punishing me?”

Yes. “No.” He shook his head. “Look, I need to go. We’ll talk when I get back. I promise.”

“You. I can’t believe… Ugh!” She dropped her hands into fists at her sides and scowled at him. He threw her a last, hard look before taking off, urging his horse away through Skyhold’s gates. Behind him, he heard a cry of frustration and the sound of something, probably her pack, slamming into the ground.

Now, having gone far enough from his party, Owain slowed his horse to a walk and pulled off the
road where it widened into an overlook affording an expansive view of the grassy plain below. He
slipped the glove from one of his hands and closed his eyes, pressing the tips of his fingers to his
eyelids and breathing deeply. It was the kind of grey winter day that smelled like impending snow.

He hated himself for running away from her like that, twice now. A better man would have stayed
and faced her. A better man would have understood the lure of the Sunburst Throne, would have
stepped aside and acquiesced to duty. A better man would have let her go.

But he wasn’t a better man. He was a fucking coward.

What was he so afraid of, exactly? Certainty, for one thing. Knowing that what they had might be
broken or irretrievably lost. Suspecting it was bad enough. To know for sure, to hear the words from
her lips—that he couldn’t handle. Not yet, anyway.

He had imagined losing her a hundred different ways, but never like this. A blade blocked too late,
an unlucky arrow, sure. But losing her to the Chantry? To her own sense of duty? That he had never
anticipated. To say nothing of his own poor handling of the situation.

Why did it have to be the Chantry? Old resentment burned within him. All the Chantry had ever
done was take from him. His home, his family, his freedom and future. Love. Cassandra was all
those things to him now, and he was about to lose her, too.

He thought for a moment about Liat, the Templar he had given his heart to, once. It was so long ago,
he could hardly remember anything about her but her face, which still appeared in his dreams as the
embodiment of everything he used to want so badly. Approval, acknowledgement, a normal life. He
tried to tell himself this was different, that the guttering flame of his first love was nothing to the
consuming blaze of his feelings for the Seeker. But his pattern-seeking mind couldn’t help drawing
the parallels.

He was being left, again. Abandoned, thrown away. Given up in the name of duty and faith, because
of who he was and what he was, things he had no control over. Familiar anger and hurt, long-buried,
bubbled up from the fissures of his heart. It made him feel reckless and restless.

He should have known better. He cursed himself for falling so hard, for letting her get so deep under
his skin. He thought… Maker, he thought he was safe with Cassandra. He trusted that it would be
them against the world, just like it was on the battlefield, that they would face any challenges
together. He never thought the biggest challenge would come from within, and the sharp edge of that
betrayal cut him to the core. If only he had been wiser. Had kept her at arm’s length, left it at
Inquisitor and Seeker. If only he had listened to her own advice about courting her…

But, no. He remembered then. The smell of her hair in a tent before dawn, the press of her lips on a
moonlit battlement. The glow of her bare skin in candlelight and the flare of desire in her eyes. His
name made beautiful in her voice. He couldn’t bring himself to regret any of it.

He rubbed his hand over his face and breathed, feeling the cold air stinging his lungs. *Fuck, he
missed her.* Her quiet presence at his side, her counsel, her sword. Her unwavering courage and
strength that sharpened his own best instincts. Her warmth in his bed.

He should get used to that. His horse pawed the dead grass at its feet. A long sigh turned to mist in
front of him.

He had no one to blame but himself. Against his better judgement, he had built this house of hope for
himself, and now the ground was falling away beneath it.
He blinked hard, to release the tears, letting the wind whip them away before they could fall.

--

Cullen greeted them when they arrived at the Inquisition’s forward camp, a mile or so from the Shrine of Dumat.

“Inquisitor,” he began, even as Owain was swinging down from his horse. It had started to snow, big flakes that caught in his hair and left wet spots on his coat. “It’s good that you’re here. Our scouts have spotted activity at the shrine. Movement, smoke. We suspect they know we’re coming. It’s imperative that we get there as soon as possible, before they can retreat and we lose their trail.”

Owain paused beside his horse and glanced at the rest of his party, who looked wearily back at him at this news. They had ridden hard the past few days and were looking forward to at least a hot meal before the attack on the shrine. But there was nothing for it. He looked back at the urgency on Cullen’s face and sighed.

“Very well,” he said, patting his horse on her neck. “We should get fresh mounts, though, if possible. I think ours have earned a rest.”

Cullen nodded and barked orders to his men to make the necessary arrangements, and without further delay, they set off to close the remaining distance between them and the Red Templar base.

They arrived at the outskirts of the shrine and found it oddly quiet. There were no guards posted outside, not a Red Templar in sight. They could see smoke rising faintly from the rear of the structure, as the scouts had reported. Owain slid from his horse and drew his staff from his back.

“On your guards, everyone. Watch for traps.”

He regarded Cullen at his side. The commander adjusted his grip on his shield and hefted his sword in his hand. There was an air of nervous energy about him. This was significant to him, the culmination of months of searching. Time to face Samson at last.

“What’s the intelligence on numbers?” he asked. “How many can we expect?”

“The latest reports were of a couple dozen Red Templars, at least.” Cullen replied with a crease in his brow. “Plus Samson and his lieutenants. But I would have expected someone to be posted outside. Something’s not right here.”

Owain nodded, stretching his shoulders. A full day on horseback had taken its toll on his joints, but there was nothing to do about that now.

They made their way to the doors, and he pushed them open. They were hit immediately with a nauseating wave of red lyrium energy. It seemed to vibrate the very air. Owain winced and stole a quick glance at the others. Dorian’s scrunched-up features matched his own feelings. Cullen, too, was reeling. Even Bull and Blackwall seemed taken aback.

He took a deep breath and pulled himself together. There was nothing to do but go on. That seemed to be the theme of the day. He stepped into the cavernous interior of the shrine, a large room topped by an arched ceiling and lined with thick stone columns. Crimson banners with the Templar crest fluttered along the walls, and glowing spires of red lyrium jutted up from the floor. Just like the courtyard outside, it was suspiciously empty and quiet.

Wide walkways surrounded a central opening to the floor below, now filled with flames and acrid smoke. The heat was oppressive, as was the smoke stinging at their eyes. Added to the constant press
of the red lyrium on his consciousness, Owain already couldn’t wait to leave this place.

“They must be covering their tracks,” he said, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “Let’s hope there’s at least some evidence left.”

They picked their way down a massive staircase, and there at the base, they finally saw a small group of Red Templar knights, perhaps five or six in total, flanked by a handful of horrors and shadows in advanced stages of corruption.

He glanced at his companions, who were moving into battle formation. The warriors formed a line while Dorian busied himself casting barriers over them all. Owain made the first move, fade-stepping to drop ice mines on the cluster of Templar knights. Bull followed with a spinning, shattering whirlwind, while Cullen and Blackwall moved in on his flanks.

The chaos of battle ensued, and Owain lost himself in the fight. He darted behind the knights, doing his best to deal with the horrors and shadows, aided by Dorian’s lightning from afar. He dodged the claws of a screeching horror, driving his staff blade into its foot to pin it in place, holding it still while he summoned a spire of ice to plunge into its heart.

Another horror came tearing toward him even as the first dissolved into ash, and he spun to meet it, blocking its claws with his staff and sending it stumbling back with a stonefist to the face. Yet another took its place behind him, getting close enough to tear through the tail of his coat and land a glancing slash down his thigh. The wound burned, and he cursed under his breath as he retreated, fade-stepping to the rear beside Dorian.

He held a hand to his leg as he fished a potion out of his pocket and couldn’t help thinking that it was the kind of blow Cassandra would have blocked for him, the kind of thing he normally didn’t need to think about. He missed her again, their effortless familiarity with each other’s style and rhythm. Blackwall and Cullen were great warriors, to be sure, but they didn’t move like she did. They didn’t know him like she did.

They emerged victorious and mostly unscathed, other than a few cuts and bruises and Owain’s minor injury. He limped a bit as he approached the large double doors that dominated the far end of the hall. He pushed them open to reveal a smaller chamber. This one, too, contained clusters of red lyrium, along with signs of a living area and workshop.

He was distracted from his survey of the room by a shaky voice from his peripheral vision. He turned to see a man in mage robes slumped against the wall by the door. As he got closer, he could see the tell-tale brand of the Tranquil stamped on his forehead.

“Inquisitor,” the man said.

“And you know me?” Owain didn’t know him.

But Cullen did. “Maddox,” he said, jogging forward and kneeling beside the man.

“Knight-Captain Cullen,” the Tranquil replied. His face was pale and sheened with sweat, and his hands shook with a small tremor.

“Not anymore. Are you alright? Should I summon our healers?”

“It’s too late for that,” Maddox croaked, his voice barely above a whisper. “I drank my entire supply of Blightcap Essence. It won’t be long now.”

“We only wanted to ask you questions. There was no need for that.”
“That is exactly what I could not allow. I destroyed our camp with fire. We all agreed it was best. Our lives ensured Samson had time to escape.”

Cullen’s face twisted with disbelief. “You threw your lives away, for Samson? Why?”

“Samson saved me even before he needed me,” Maddox gasped. “He gave me purpose. I wanted... to help...” His head lolled forward then, and he fell into silence.

Cullen rose slowly and turned to Owain. “We should check the camp. He may have missed something.”

“We can’t just leave him here,” said Owain, remembering the man’s story and feeling a surge of pity for him. “He should be properly laid to rest.”

“You’re right,” Cullen sighed. “I’ll have someone take care of it. If even Samson did his best for Maddox, we can do no less.”

They rummaged the room for clues, for anything that might shed light on Samson’s escape route, his activities, or the enchanted armor that reportedly made him invincible.

Cullen picked up a scrap of paper, oddly unblemished, unlike the rest of the charred documents that littered the room.

“It’s a letter,” he said, frowning. “Addressed to me. ‘Drink enough lyrium, and its song reveals the truth. The Chantry used us, you’re fighting the wrong war. Corypheus chose me as his vessel of power...’ Oh, Maker’s breath. What nonsense. Does he think I’ll understand?” He threw the paper back on the desk and sighed in exasperation.

Owain picked up a set of metal implements, charred and bent, but not broken. “What are these?” he asked, looking at Dorian, who paused in his search of the desk drawers and came close for a better look.

“They appear to be tools for working lyrium,” Dorian replied. “I’ve seen similar ones used by craftsmen in Minrathous. They’re quite rare, almost certainly worth a fortune.”

“That’s it!” Cullen said. “Those must be the tools that Maddox used to make Samson’s red lyrium armor. Tranquils often design their own tools for specific jobs. Perhaps Dagna can make sense of these and tell us how the armor was made. And how to unmake it.”

He handed the tools over. Cullen pulled a banner from the wall and wrapped them carefully in the cloth, tucking the bundle under his arm as they made their way back to the entrance.

Owain was eager to get away from the lyrium, a headache now raging in his temples. The cold, fresh air outside was a blessing, but any relief he felt evaporated as he heard the familiar roar of a Red Templar behemoth.

They exited the shrine to find themselves surrounded by what was undoubtedly the rest of the company of Red Templars. It was easily double the size of the group inside, with knights, horrors, and behemoths in their ranks.

Shit. His stomach turned to ice in his gut. Fuck.

They were vastly outnumbered. He considered their options. They could retreat back into the shrine, but there was no other exit, and they’d only be returning to the haze of smoke and red lyrium. Not an ideal place to last out a siege. In every other direction, they were cut off. The only path forward was
to fight their way out. Or die in the attempt.

A Templar knight in high-ranking plate stepped forward out of the crowd. Red lyrium covered his shoulders and neck, crystals sprouting from his face and forehead. He wore no helmet, no doubt because one wouldn’t fit over those growths.

“Inquisition!” the Templar sneered. “You thought to capture Samson, the vessel of Corypheus? You dare to defy the will of a god? You underestimate the power of the Templar Order! You failed, and you will die here!”

The Templar leader raised his warhammer and shouted, and his men, if they could be called that, rushed forward at Owain and his party where they stood by the doors.

Quickly, Owain dropped an array of mines in front of them and cast walls of ice at their flanks. The warriors formed a line in front of him, while Dorian threw new barriers over them all.

“I’m too pretty to die,” he sighed, gripping his staff and sparking lightning from his fingertips.

Owain swept them all with a grim look.

“Whatever happens, it was an honor to serve as your Inquisitor.”

“The honor was ours, Trevelyan,” Cullen replied. Blackwall nodded in agreement.

“Don’t look so glum, boys,” said Bull, hefting his axe. “Let’s take as many of these bastards with us as we can. We’re not done yet.”

Owain readied a fireball in his hand. “I hope you’re right.”

The first wave of Red Templars crashed into them, and any more talk was drowned out by the screeching of the behemoths and horrors and the clash of metal on metal. The mines and shattering blows of the warriors put a dent in the first line of Templars, but the next wave broke through their defensive formation. Owain ended up next to Cullen, throwing spikes of ice and fireballs, setting mines and slashing with his staff as rapidly as he could.

Looking for a pocket of space to cast one of his bigger spells, Owain fadestepped back toward the doors. He downed a lyrium potion from his pouch and rolled his shoulders as the extra mana flowed through his veins. Thrusting his staff in the ground, he gathered his will and focused it all on the Veil, summoning a firestorm from the Fade to rain down on their enemies.

The spell left him winded, so he paused a moment to take in the scene as stone and fire fell whistling from the sky.

They were doing better than expected, and he started to think that maybe they would survive this. They’d managed to clear the majority of the Templars, leaving a pair of behemoths and just a few remaining knights. Nothing they couldn’t handle, surely.

Blackwall and Bull were engaging one of the behemoths and a couple of knights, aided by Dorian and the ghostly spirits of a few fallen Red Templars. Cullen was facing down the other behemoth on his own, so Owain rushed back to support him.

He reached his hand forward and summoned ice from the ground, freezing the creature’s legs where it stood. It stumbled and roared in frustration as Cullen attacked with his sword and shield. Owain cast an ice spike through its torso, and it screamed again in agony.
As he prepared to cast another, he felt a shockwave pulse through him, a familiar, horrifying pull in the pit of his stomach and a deadening of his senses. He knew what it was—a spell purge, severing his connection to the Fade, interrupting his magic. He barely had time to curse before he turned and noticed the Red Templar leader pulling his hammer back for a massive swing.

He did the only thing he could think of, which was to raise his staff to block it. But with no barrier or supporting magic, it was no match for the Templar’s enhanced strength. The hammer ripped through his guard, shattering his staff to splinters in his hands. Its momentum barely slowed, the weapon hit him squarely in the chest.

He felt his armor crumple, heard the sickening snap of his own bones and felt a blinding pain blossom through his chest. He didn’t even have time to fall to the ground. The Templar followed the blow with a shield bash that sent him skidding across the paving stones.

Pain overloaded his senses, blocking out all other thoughts. He could see the Templar bearing down on him, a sneer twisting his ugly, lyrium-covered face. Owain struggled to get up but couldn’t, struggled to crawl away, but couldn’t. He thought of the knife at his belt, his only remaining weapon. He made to reach for it, but his hands wouldn’t budge, his limbs apparently no longer responding to the commands of his brain.

Well, shit. This is how it ends. There was ringing in his ears, and he seemed acutely aware of the pounding of his heart, but everything else seemed to happen at half-speed. He saw the Templar pull his weapon back again, and he waited for the final blow. Shouldn’t his last thought be something pleasant? That’s all he had now. He thought of Cassandra, of course. He could just picture her slow smile, eyes still sleepy as she lay beside him in his bed, that braid still curled around her shoulder…

So he waited, but death didn’t come. Owain watched as the Templar fell to his knees and his hammer dropped to the ground. A blade pierced his neck with a spatter of dark blood, and his eyes rolled back in his head as he fell face first to the earth. Death had come for him instead.

Cullen was suddenly upon him, rolling him carefully onto his back, his face stricken with fear, mouth open like he was shouting, shouting something Owain couldn’t hear. You have to speak up, Commander, I can’t hear you. He had to think it instead of speaking, because his mouth had stopped working.

He didn’t even hurt anymore. His body had gone numb. His vision grew dim around the edges, black spots blurring his sight.

Pleasant thoughts, he reminded himself. And then he saw no more.
Owain woke in his own bed at Skyhold and couldn’t recall how he had gotten there. He fluttered his eyes open and tried to get his bearings, momentarily blinded by the ray of sunlight that fell across his eyes.

The last thing he remembered was the battle outside the Shrine of Dumat--the spell purge, the Red Templar, Cullen’s face hovering over him. He had thought he was dying, though that clearly hadn’t happened.

“Ah, you’re awake,” said Dorian from near the windows, where he was pulling back the thick velvet curtains.

Owain blinked mutely at him, opening his mouth to respond but finding his throat too dry to speak. Dorian handed him a glass of water, helping him tip it carefully toward his lips.

“How,” he began, coughing as his vocal cords came back to life. “How did I get back here?”

“With great difficulty, I assure you,” Dorian replied, stepping back to replace the glass on the bedside table. “You’re incredibly lucky, Trevelyan, has anyone ever told you that? Lucky that Cullen managed to kill that Templar before he could finish you off, and that I had enough mana left to stabilize your condition until the healers arrived.”

Owain remembered his injuries then and reached a hand up to his chest. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, but cloth bandages were wrapped tightly around his torso. He gingerly pressed his fingers to his collarbone and winced at the sore flesh he found there.

“What was the damage?” he asked, looking up at his fellow mage.

“A broken collarbone, dislocated shoulder. I don’t even know how many broken ribs. You’re fortunate you didn’t puncture a lung, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to set that many bones?”

“How long has it been?” Now he probed the outlines of his ribs through the dressings. “I don’t remember any of it.”

“You were heavily sedated. The healing process for injuries such as these can be rather painful. We did try waking you at one point, but you weren’t... in full possession of your senses, let’s say.”

Owain struggled to lift himself to a sitting position but stopped at the dull pain that throbbed in his
upper body when he tried to move. He winced and clutched again at his chest.

“Easy,” Dorian said, reaching out to assist, propping pillows behind his shoulders. “We've repaired your bones, but you still have significant bruising, and your muscles are weakened. It will take time to fully recover.”

“How much time?” Owain asked as he settled back on the pillows.

“I'd give it a few more weeks.”

He sighed with frustration and mentally decided he would beat that estimate. He let his eyes wander the room, surveying the familiar surroundings, and he was startled to find that the two of them were not alone. In an armchair by the fire, Cassandra sat with an open book in her hand. As if sensing his eyes on her, she looked up, and he averted his gaze, bringing it back to Dorian with an accusatory glare.

“Oh, don't look at me like that,” Dorian sniffed. “She threatened violence, and I refuse to take a punch for your pride.”

Owain rubbed the back of his hand along his jaw and frowned at the growth he felt there. Self-conscious now, he reached up to touch his hair.

“Don’t bother,” Dorian waved. “It’s not going to help. Besides, she’s already been here for days.”

He combed it with his fingers anyway, while Dorian crossed his arms over his chest and studied him with a curious look.

“You know, you might want to consider the beard,” he said, tucking a hand under his chin in thought. “It’s actually not a bad look.”

Owain turned his head to the side and framed his jaw with his fingers. “Oh? Does it make me roguishly handsome?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “I see your terrible sense of humor has returned. If you're well enough to joke, you're well enough for me to leave.”

He turned to go, pausing briefly at the foot of the bed. “I'll send some food up from the kitchens and have a healer check on you in a few hours.”

Ignoring Owain’s protests, Dorian swept toward the stairs, greeting Cassandra with a nod as he passed.

“Seeker.”

“Tevinter.”

He watched the door close behind Dorian and then dragged his eyes back to Cassandra. He could feel her watching him. Their eyes met for the first time in what felt like forever, and a riot of emotions swirled in his heart. Apprehension, relief, love—it was all there.

She walked slowly around the bed and perched on its edge beside him, setting down the book she was reading. He noticed the familiar cover.

“More Swords and Shields?” he asked, nodding at the dog-eared volume.

“Not more. The one you gave me is still the latest.”
Owain couldn't help smiling at the memory. “I guess we have been keeping Varric busy the past few months. Perhaps I should just leave him at Skyhold and order him to write.”

She didn’t reply, but tilted her head and ran her eyes over him in appraisal.

He fell silent and watched her, waiting and dreading her judgement. She looked tired, the strain of restless nights showing in the shadows under her eyes, and he wondered just how many hours she had spent curled up in that chair.

She extended a bare hand and ran the tips of her fingers along his jaw. He flinched at her touch and hated himself for it.

“It does,” she concluded, looking at him with a hint of a smile.

“What?”

“The beard.”

That wasn’t even on the list of things he expected her to say, and he felt his eyes go wide with surprise. But even that slowly fell away as he looked into her eyes. He forgot he was supposed to be angry with her. Gone was the cold fury, the mask he had worn the last time they spoke. It was all gone, replaced with the honest pain and longing that filled his heart.

Maker, he missed her. How long had it been since they’d touched?

Without fully considering the consequences, he reached up and took her hand, relishing the feel of her cool, calloused fingers in his. He closed his eyes and slowly pressed his lips to her knuckles.

When he looked up, her face was a storm of raw emotion. She looked torn, as if she couldn’t decide whether to kiss him or throttle him. In the end, she did neither, taking a ragged breath and drawing her hand back, casting her eyes away instead.

She cleared her throat before speaking. “You almost got yourself killed.” She launched the words like an opening salvo.

The blame in her tone set him on edge. “Didn’t they tell you what happened? It was an ambush. We were trapped.”

“You should never have left here without me.”

“What, you don’t think we can survive without you?” The very implication annoyed him. “We handled it, Cassandra.”

“At nearly the cost of your life. The anchor is vital to our mission, Inquisitor. You cannot afford to take such risks.”

Inquisitor. She knew exactly where to slip the knife. “Right,” he said, letting his face harden and his voice drip venom. “The anchor is vital. Of course. So we’re back to that now?”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Fine. You are vital. Irreplaceable. I will not stand idly by and watch you throw your life away.”

“Irreplaceable? To the Inquisition, or to you?”

Her eyes went wide and then narrowed in anger. “You know the answer,” she hissed.
He did, which was why he was flinging it in her face. He was being ridiculous, and he knew it. Lashing out like a wounded animal. He scrubbed his hands down his face and sighed, squeezing his eyes shut and then opening them.

“Forgive me. You’re right. You don’t deserve that.”

She sighed and looked down at her hands, shaking her head slowly.

“Owain, no matter what happens between us, it pains me to see you hurt. As a Seeker, I am your best weapon against Templars, you know that. The next time you face them, when you battle Samson, take me with you, please. Let me protect you. Let me do my duty.”

There it was again. He was the Inquisitor, the anchor, a duty. Every word a stone in the wall she had built around herself, built between them. He thought they had gotten past that, but maybe they never truly did. Earnestness burned in her eyes as she looked at him, and he was powerless to deny it. He pressed his lips together and nodded his assent, not trusting his voice just then.

Silence used to be easy for them, but not anymore. Now, it only made him feel empty. He smoothed his fingers over his sheets, trying not to wonder if they might still smell like her.

“So,” he said, a few minutes later. “Have you given more thought to what you would do as Divine? Should I support your claim?”

Cassandra blinked at him, as if surprised by his choice of subject. “I have,” she said, taking a deep breath. “As I said before, the Chantry needs to change. And perhaps I should be the one to change it.”

“How would you do that?”

“The Circle of Magi needs reform, of course. I believe the mages should be able to govern themselves, with the Chantry’s help.”

“So you would reinstate the Circles?” He ran through the questions in his mind. “Would they be compulsory? Would you put me back in a Circle? Or the rebel mages that have been our allies?”

She made a small frustrated sound. “Of course not. You are no longer merely a mage. You are the Inquisitor. And the rebel mages would remain part of the Inquisition, if they so choose. We would remake the Circles, yes. But with greater freedoms and accountability. Not as prisons.”

“That’s... a start, I suppose,” he allowed, though it was not likely to be enough for Fiona or the rest of the rebels. Or even him, for that matter. “What about other rights? Would mages be able to marry? To have children and families?”

She looked at him for a long moment and nodded. “Yes, I believe they should be permitted that much.”

He laughed inwardly at the irony. Making Cassandra Divine would both win him those rights and render them meaningless to him. She was the only woman with whom he could ever imagine that kind of future...

“And the Templars?”

“They, too, would be reformed into a new order. They would no longer act as jailers but as protectors of the innocent. We must balance vigilance with compassion to all peoples of Thedas, mages or no.”
“So you would bring back all of the old institutions? Set them back to first principles?”

“I want to respect tradition, not break it. We can do better, and we must, but people need time to accept change, gradually. It cannot simply be forced upon them.”

“What’s to stop them from simply falling back into their old ways?” he pointed out. “Won’t we just end up in the same place fifty or a hundred years from now?” He shook his head. “What you envision sounds good but will be difficult to achieve. And as you say, you can’t just force people into submission. It will take finesse, politics, negotiations.”

“They said what we have done with the Inquisition was impossible, too.”

He sighed, unable to deny that truth. “I just… I don’t want to see you give up everything we have for a cause that’s doomed to fail.”

She met his eyes, her gaze steady and determined. “Perhaps I will fail. I cannot know for certain. But I must try. I believe it is the Maker’s work.”

“Are there not other ways to serve the Maker?” He was desperate now, grasping at other ideas. “What about the Seekers? What will become of them without you?”

She showed pause for the first time in their conversation. “I could perhaps still oversee their rebuilding as the Divine, though certainly I would not be so directly involved…”

He shouldn’t have been surprised that his arguments were getting nowhere. She would not be moved, not by his logic or his practical reasoning. She was stubborn and resolute as ever. He had loved her for that, once.

“Will it make you happy?” he asked quietly.

She didn’t answer right away but looked in his eyes and hesitated, grief flickering in those hazel depths, and he felt his heart break on that pause. What was worse, that she loved as he did, or that she would do nothing about it?

“My happiness has nothing to do with it,” she said, looking away.

And so, neither did his.

“Of course.” He bowed his head, defeated. There was a tightness in his chest completely unrelated to the bandages over his ribs.

Was it something he had done or not done? Some mistake he had made, or a fatal flaw he possessed? What was it that made him so unworthy?

He choked back tears and realized he had never told her about his dreams for their future, about the life they could have had. Was it too late now?

“You know, I used to think that… someday, after all this…” He tried, but he couldn’t bring himself to finish.

“What?” She urged him on, eyes bright and suddenly eager to know. “What did you used to think?”

The words caught in his throat. What was the point? What could he gain by letting his fragile hopes fly out into the world, just to watch them die when they hit the air?

Nothing, that’s what. He slammed the cage shut.
“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

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Owain was determined to regain his strength as quickly as possible. Defying the advice of his healers, he insisted on dragging himself down to the war room to meet with his advisors, though he arrived half an hour late and sweating profusely, collapsing into a chair almost immediately inside the doors. Even so, he preferred feeling the ache of his healing body to the helplessness of laying in bed like an invalid. Nothing like a hammer blow to the chest to make him appreciate simple things like standing upright and walking more than a few yards without needing a break.

Now, he was limping his way up the stairs to the rookery to meet with Leliana, glaring at the scouts and messengers that shot him sympathetic looks as they zipped up and down, or worse, offered to help.

She was waiting for him when he reached the final landing, gesturing toward a seat she had pulled for him and offering a glass of wine that he accepted all too gratefully. She stood and watched him drain half of it, leaning against the railing and smiling mysteriously. It was quiet, except for the occasional caw of her birds among the rafters.

“It is kind of you to come all the way here to speak with me, Inquisitor. Though I would gladly have come to you.”

“But where’s the challenge in that?” He wiped his temple on the sleeve of the loose tunic he wore over his bandages. Maker, was it always so warm up here?

They chatted a bit about preparations for their next assault on Corypheus, centering on a complex of elven ruins in the Arbor Wilds. He asked again about the latest scouting reports, though he had heard a summary earlier that morning. Leliana was quick to see through the pretense.

“Shall we talk about what really brings you to the rookery, Inquisitor?” She folded her hands behind her back and rocked on her heels.

Owain chuckled and looked into the bottom of his empty cup. “Why do I even bother being coy with my spymaster?”

“You and Lady Cassandra have been spending less time together in recent days.”

“That’s a diplomatic way of putting it, yes.”

“She does love you, you know. If not for you, I believe this would be a much easier decision for her. There would be no question of her pursuing the Sunburst Throne.”

“It still feels pretty easy to me,” he said, turning the goblet in his hands.

Leliana studied him before speaking again. “Tell me, Trevelyan, what would you be doing if you had never joined the Inquisition? What were your plans for your life?”

What an odd question. “Assuming I didn’t die at the Conclave? Well, before the rebellion, I used to think I’d spend the rest of my days in the Circle. Maybe I’d still be in Ostwick. Or maybe I would have come to you anyway, like Fiona and the others. Either way, I’m a battlemage, a weapon. I’m sure someone would have found a use for me with all this war.”

“And what do you think about your future now? Has it not changed because of your role as the Inquisitor? Because of your relationship with Cassandra?”
He pressed his lips in a flat line. She was right, of course. They could joke that Leliana knew everything about everyone in the Inquisition, but it wasn’t that far from the truth.

“Perhaps you have changed her plans, too,” she continued. “I have known Cassandra for a long time, Inquisitor. All her life, she has been a warrior, a Seeker. She served, she did what was needed—that is all she has ever known. But with you, I believe she has learned there can be more to life. And that gives her pause.”

He said nothing, mulling over her words. More than anything, he wanted them to be true. But was it enough? With a grunt, he pulled himself to his feet and joined her at the railing, leaning on it with one arm and rubbing at his injured shoulder with the other. He sighed and changed the subject.

“What would you do, Leliana, if you were Divine? Isn’t your name spoken as well?”

She smiled and turned her eyes to the small altar that adorned the wall behind them. “Cassandra and I both believed in Justinia’s vision for the Chantry, though our memories of that vision may be different, as well as our methods.”

“She says she would reconstitute the Circles and bring back the Templars,” he said, looking down into the library below. “She claims things would be different, that we would have more rights, but I have a hard time believing that kind of change will last.”

“If only all of us valued our ideals as much as Cassandra. The Chantry needs to change—on that, we agree. But the time has passed for the Circle of Magi and the Templar Order as we knew them. We must build new structures and open ourselves to all the peoples of Thedas, if the Chantry is to survive. What better time for change than after Corypheus has been defeated and when the memory of this war is still fresh?”

She went on, her voice determined, her eyes lit with a fire that was almost unnerving.

“Justinia wanted the Chantry to grow, but her reforms never took root. She was held back by tradition and was too gentle to force change. I won’t make that mistake. I owe that to her. She started this work, and I will finish it. There are those who would cling to the old ways, of course. But they will see. I will make them see.”

“Have you spoken to Cassandra about it?”

“I have,” she nodded. “Whatever happens, we will work together. If she is named, I will do all I can to support her, as she would for me.”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, as conflicted as ever. “What do I do, Leliana? What would be best for Thedas?”

She smiled at him again, kindly now. “We all like to believe what we do makes a difference, Inquisitor, that our actions shape the world in some way. Perhaps for you that is more true than for many. But there is no shame in making a choice to be with the ones you love. That is a decision only you can make.”

He was afraid she would say something like that.

--

He chose the next day to resume his early morning walks along the battlements, hoping the cold air and solitude would be a balm to his spirits. He made it as far as Cullen’s tower and decided to stop in. There was no immediate answer to his knock, so he tried the door. It was unlocked, swinging
open as he stepped inside.

He called out even though he could see the room was empty. It was still early, but perhaps he had missed Cullen after all.

He had turned to go when the commander’s face appeared in a hole in the ceiling, above the ladder to the loft that contained his bedroom.

“A moment, Inquisitor.”

Owain nodded and shut the door, leaning against the wall to wait.

True to his word, Cullen appeared a minute later, scrambling quickly down the ladder and dropping the last few rungs to stand in front of his desk. He looked as if he had dressed hastily, his shirt untucked, hair uncharacteristically mussed. It was odd to see him without armor. He seemed smaller somehow, more human. It made Owain feel guilty, like he was intruding.

“Sorry to bother you so early. I was out for a walk and thought you might be up.”

“Not at all. What can I do for you, Inquisitor?” He wiped his hands on his shirt, flexed his fingers, and then put them on his hips. It was as if he didn’t know what to do with himself without a sword on his belt.

Again, Owain felt terrible for bringing up work at such an hour, but he was already here, and it was too late to turn back.

“I wanted to follow up on our mission at the Shrine. Has there been any progress on Samson’s armor? Has Dagna made any sense of the tools we recovered?”

Cullen turned and pulled a report from one of the stacks on his desk. “Some progress, yes. She’s familiar with these instruments in general, though Maddox seems to have made quite a few custom modifications.”

He handed the parchment to Owain. “It’s mostly nonsense to me, but perhaps you can make more of it than I. From what I understand, she’s working on a way to undo the enchantments that grant Samson his powers.”

Owain scanned the report, scrawled in the archanist’s crabbed handwriting. Something about the “median fissures of lyrium.” He handed it back to his commander.

“It’s a pity Maddox thought his sacrifice was the only answer.” Cullen returned the paper to its pile. “Samson may have escaped, but we’ve struck a blow. We’ve cut the Red Templars down to the core, leaving him with a severely curtailed army and enchanted armor he can’t maintain.”

“Do you think he’ll be in the Arbor Wilds, with Corypheus?”

“Almost certainly. We lost their trail at the Shrine, but our scouts have reported Red Templar activity in Southern Orlais. Corypheus seems to be massing his armies there for a major operation. With the Wardens gone and the rebel mages and Orlais allied with the Inquisition, they’re all he has left.”

Owain nodded and scratched his chin idly. “Good. I’m sure you’re looking forward to finally putting this to rest. By the way, I never thanked you for what you did back at the Shrine. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you.”

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck and looked at the floor.
“Ah. It was nothing, Trevelyann. I was only able to get to you in time because you’d taken out that behemoth earlier. Thank the Maker I know my way around Templar armor. And all its weak points.”

“Is that Owain?” A familiar voice called down from the loft, and both of them looked up. A face appeared in the hatch. It was Althea.

Owain looked swiftly at Cullen, who was refusing to make eye contact, and then back up at her, and it all made a perfect kind of sense. She disappeared for a moment, and he could hear the sound of footfalls and rustling fabric.

He crossed his arms over his chest and waited, squinting at Cullen, who finally met his eyes with a sheepish smile.

Althea reappeared and swung down onto the ladder. She, too, looked like she had thrown her clothes on in a hurry, and now he had a very good idea why. Her feet were bare, and her hair floated in messy brown waves around her head.

“Thea, I thought you were going to stay upstairs,” said Cullen as she neared the bottom. His use of her nickname did not escape Owain’s notice.

“I was,” she replied without taking her focus from her descent. “But I’m making an exception for certain pigheaded Inquisitors.”

She dropped the last handful of rungs just as Cullen had and advanced on Owain. Before he could react, she was in his face, jabbing her finger into his chest.

“You! You fucking idiot.”

“Hey!” He batted her hand away and stepped backwards. “I’m a little injured, didn’t you hear?”

“I heard. I heard you almost got yourself killed.”

“Almost. Lucky your boyfriend was there to save me.”

She moved to poke him again, but he dodged, backing up to the wall.

Cullen reached a hand to her arm, gently. “Don’t you think that’s enough?” She shrugged it off.

“Someone has to talk sense into him,” she said fiercely over her shoulder. “Everyone else here is too in awe of the precious Herald of Andraste. But I know better.”

She wheeled back to Owain, her hands on her hips. “What is wrong with you? You have one of the best warriors in the Inquisition, a Seeker with anti-Templar powers, and you leave her behind because you’re too proud to apologize for being an ass?”

He groaned. “Maker’s breath. Does everyone around here know my business?”

“Please. She spent the entire time stomping around the keep like an angry bronto, beating that practice dummy to pieces.”

“It’s true,” Cullen added from behind her. “The quartermaster said he had to rebuild it twice while we were gone.” They ignored him.

“I found her nursing a bottle of wine in the tavern,” Althea continued, pointing at him again. “She said she tried to talk to you about the Divine election, and you went off on her. I tried to tell her you weren’t worth it, but she wouldn’t let it go. She’s as stubborn as you are. You’re fucking perfect for
each other.”

“You don’t get it,” Owain said, shaking his head. “It’s not that simple.”

“Don’t you dare use the word ‘complicated’”

“It’s— Ugh!” He threw his hands in the air. “What do you want me to say? She wants to be Divine! And you know what? I can’t blame her. It’s the chance to change history, change the lives of millions. That’s not something you just walk away from! Not for a woman like her.”

“Have you told her how you feel?” Althea pressed on, undeterred. “Have you actually asked her to stay? Or are you too busy feeling sorry for yourself?”

“I… Thea, I can’t,” he sighed, slumping his shoulders. It was too much effort to hide the pain, so he blurted it all out. “What if it’s not enough? What if I beg and it doesn’t work? What if it does work and she stays for me and regrets it? What if she ends up hating me for it?”

Althea sighed and shook her head, looking at him with pity and more than a hint of disgust.

“If you want to live your life in fear, Owain, that’s your choice. But you don’t have to. You can be honest with her and work it out like adults, or let her go, and spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been. I’m telling you, that woman loves you, and if you’re going to shrink away like a coward, then you don’t deserve her.”

The heat was gone from her voice, but those final words stung more than all the shouting that came before. He stood there, dumb, not knowing what to say. She turned away from him and stepped toward Cullen, leaning her forehead against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

He’d been dismissed. Owain nodded to Cullen and took his leave, opening the door and stepping outside with a heavy heart. The lock clicked home as he walked away, and it made him unspeakably sad, because it reminded him of something he had lost.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, guys. This angst train is the local; we're making all the stops. But we're on the upswing now, I promise!

And thanks for your patience with my turtle writing pace. You know what they say about slow and steady...
Owain gave himself a deadline. He promised himself he would make a decision about the Divine election, once they returned from the Arbor Wilds.

Did he really have to make one? Maybe not, but as Cassandra herself had told him once, doing nothing was a kind of choice, too.

Until then, he didn’t want to think about it, and, it seemed, neither did she. So they fell into a tentative peace. He couldn’t manage to stay away from her, but at the same time, they didn’t talk about the future. There didn’t seem to be anything more to say.

Instead, they simply spent time together. He would bring his paperwork to the forge and keep her company as she wrote letters or continued her account of the Fade, or she would read in her chair by the fire while he worked at the desk in his quarters. They would talk about innocuous things: Inquisition business, their companions, preparations for the next battle. Sometimes, it almost felt like nothing had changed. Sometimes, he could almost convince himself this was good enough.

But there were other times, moments when he would catch her looking at him with a hint of sadness in her eyes, a ghost of desire and longing that would disappear as she turned her gaze away. It made his heart squeeze in his chest, and then he would look at her just the same way.

Because no matter what lies he told himself, things weren’t the same. In all the time they spent together, at no point did he try to touch her, to rekindle the physical intimacy of their relationship. Not because he didn’t want to, because fuck, he wanted to. But it was only going to make things worse—make his decision more fraught and their possible—no, probable—separation all the more difficult. At least, that’s what he told himself. In truth, he was so Maker-damned desperate around her already that his pride demanded he draw a line somewhere. On this, he was determined. If she wanted him, she would have to come to him.

Other than reading and doing paperwork, they would spar together as he recovered from his injuries. The last time had been in the practice yard at Skyhold. He had thrown his coat aside and rolled up his sleeves, swinging his new staff and admiring its balance and heft in his hands, its perfect resonance and attunement to his mana.

He had commissioned this staff specially after extensive consultations with Dagna and Harritt, determined to avoid a repeat of the battle at the Shrine of Dumat. Dragonbone, courtesy of a Ferelden Frostback they felled in the Hinterlands, turned out to be the answer, strong but lightweight and innately suited to the fire magic he preferred.

Cassandra had faced him in a battle stance, holding a practice sword and shield, bristling with her usual impatience. He rolled his shoulders and squared himself in front of her, casting a protective
barrier that shimmered in the surrounding air.

He made the first move, going for a direct strike that she blocked easily. He dodged her counterattack, and they circled, slowly and deliberately. This was a dance he loved.

They exchanged more blows, Owain spinning and thrusting with his staff, Cassandra parrying and blocking. Give and take, give and take. Their breaths became quicker, white fog drifting, weapons whistling and singing as they sliced the crisp winter air. Their feet traced patterns into the cold, hard earth.

Her sword caught an opening at his hip, bringing down his barrier in a burst of light. He stepped back, jolted by the recoil.

“You still favor your left side,” she said, nodding at his recently healed injuries. “It makes you predictable and leaves you open on the right.”

He grunted in response and refreshed his barrier, trying to maintain his focus. He mixed in more magic, throwing flames and stonefists along with the jabs and swipes of his blade. He blocked an attack with his guard and fadestepped to her flank, swinging his staff at her feet. He knew instinctively which way she would jump. And when she did, he stepped to the opposite side, pushing with his staff and sweeping with his leg, tipping her off balance just enough.

She landed on her back, and before she could rise, his blade flashed near her throat. She froze, a scowl on her lips.

He couldn’t believe he had won—the first time since his injury, and a rare occasion even when he was perfectly healthy. It felt good. He raised his weapon, offering his hand to help her to her feet.

“I was going easy on you,” she said as she brushed dust from her armor.

“Maybe you don’t need to.” Victory made him cocky.

She snorted but smiled slightly as she adjusted her grip on her sword, resetting her fighting stance. Owain readied himself to go again.

Ice armor this time, laying down mines for her to weave around, slicks of frozen mud to avoid. But she came at him hard and fast, finding power and speed that defied his best attempts to slow her down. His attacks gave way to defense, his dodging turned to blocking, and before long, her shield was smashing through his armor.

It was his turn to end up on the ground. She tackled him, knocking the staff from his hands and laying him out flat, pinning him beneath her and holding her sword at his chin, panting and grasping the hilt with both hands.

He rolled his eyes back in his head, trying to find the breath she had knocked from his lungs. When he found it, he laughed, shaking his head.

“It take it back. Go back to going easy on me. I liked that better.”

She dropped the threat of her blade and sat back, catching her breath and smiling at her win. But she didn’t get up immediately. Instead, her look softened and a surprising heat crept into her eyes as they locked on his.

He was caught up in that look and in her, and his awareness of the world seemed to fade around him. How many times had he looked up at her from this exact position? How many times had he thought
about it since? It brought up every memory of what they once were, flooding his senses. Forgetting himself, he put a hand on the curve of her hip. She didn’t stop him. He sat up and reached toward her face.

“Cassandra, I…”

He might have kissed her then, if she had waited another second. So deep had he fallen into the glow of her hazel eyes and the warm weight of her body on his.

But instead, she gasped and flowed quickly to her feet. She tossed her sword in the dirt and stalked off toward the forge without another word, leaving him empty-handed and reeling.

It was mere seconds, but it felt like an eternity and an instant, both at once.

He thought he heard laughing, as if from a distance. The Iron Bull’s low chuckle and Sera’s shrill giggle. He couldn’t bring himself to care, didn’t even bother looking in their direction.

He sighed and ran his hand across his forehead. Then he picked himself up and went to collect his staff and coat.

They stopped sparring, after that.

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The Arbor Wilds were unlike anywhere he had ever been before. The forests were full of strange plants and trees and teeming with odd fauna: wide-eyed lizards with frills around their necks, birds dressed in every color of the rainbow, insects that seemed too big to be real.

Owain stood outside his tent, pitched on a rise at the rear of the camp, and surveyed the scene, a typical morning in an Inquisition war camp: soldiers and scouts hurrying to their posts, breakfast cooking around the fires. With winter in full force everywhere else in Thedas, the climate in southern Orlais was downright balmy, he thought, running his hand over the back of his neck, which was already sticky with the humidity.

Having amassed their allies and resources here in hopes of a decisive win, the Inquisition was battling the remainder of Corypheus’s army, beating them back along the river, working their way toward the temple for the elven goddess Mythal that lay at the heart of the Wilds.

Their best intelligence indicated that Corypheus was after an ancient elven artifact in the temple—an eluvian, a magic mirror that formed a portal to other locations and potentially to the Fade itself. Morrigan, Empress Celene’s “pet apostate,” as Vivienne termed her, had brought an eluvian to Skyhold and taken him through it to the crossroads between worlds. He had to agree that such a thing should not be allowed to fall into enemy hands.

Owain was itching for a chance to face Corypheus head on, to bring this all to an end. The Wilds were crawling with his Red Templars, but he had yet to show himself. That might be about to change, however. Owain could have sworn he heard the screech of a dragon earlier that morning.

He looked at the men and women gathered around the cookfires, preparing their weapons and armor. Orlesian chevaliers fought alongside rebel mages, Inquisition regulars and mercenaries marched with hardened Grey Wardens. All the people he had recruited along the way had come together under one banner. Rather impressive, if he stopped to think about it, though he had to give most of the credit to his advisors. Without Josephine’s diplomacy, they would be alone here, and without Cullen’s strict discipline, it would have fallen apart before it even started. Not to mention the valuable information fed to them by Leliana’s scouts and spies. The Inquisition had come a long way. *He* had come a long
Cullen was standing with Althea outside his tent, in front of the table strewn with maps and papers that served as his office here in the field. They discussed something animatedly. Or, at least, Althea was animated. Cullen merely shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest, which seemed to annoy her more. Still, he stood and listened, never taking his eyes from her face. Wise. Owain never could stop himself from shouting back with Althea, and it had always made things worse. He looked away as Cullen wrapped her in his arms and leaned down for a kiss...

His eyes searched for Cassandra, with whom he never felt like shouting. He found her sitting on a wooden bench near one of the campfires, polishing her sword. He turned and made his way toward her.

She glanced up at him but said nothing, keeping her attention on her task, holding up the blade to examine the edge in the sunlight. He sat astride the bench beside her, watching her as she worked.

The sun turned the ends of her hair a rich brown, and its light skinned the planes and angles of her face. Despite time and familiarity and their current state of… whatever… her beauty had never dimmed for him. She frowned in concentration, and a tiny crease appeared between her brows. He was struck by the overwhelming urge to smooth it with his fingers.

No matter what was happening in the rest of their relationship, it had felt good to fight beside her again the past few days. Their love had been forged on the battlefield, and he knew he could always trust her to have his back there, at least. That hadn’t changed, and he hoped it never would.

The anchor flared green on his hand, and he balled it into a fist, gritting his teeth to ride out the pain. The episodes had grown more frequent lately, and more intense. Just when he thought he was getting used to them, they would get worse.

Cassandra paused and shot him a sympathetic look. For a moment, he wished she would take his hand into hers, and then he immediately banished that thought.

“It hurts you,” she said, not as a question, but a statement of fact.

He didn’t reply at first, just squeezed his hand again and shook it out.

“It’s an awful lot of trouble, really, just to get to the Fade.” He watched the anchor continue to shimmer. “And then all this with the eluvians. Sometimes I wish I could just let Corypheus have it. Would make things a lot easier.”

Cassandra was quiet, her eyes, like his, mesmerized by the shifting light of the mark. As always, she heard what he meant behind the words he spoke.

“It’s almost over, Inquisitor. We will defeat him here and bring an end to this madness.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But I wonder sometimes, what will happen after. Corypheus said the anchor was permanent. What happens when he’s gone and all the rifts are closed? Will it fade? Will it disappear? Or am I destined to have this thing on my hand forever?”

“I do not know. No one knows, not even Solas.” She looked up into his eyes. “But we will find out, together, when this is over.”

“Will we? Won’t you be busy when this is over? Doing... whatever it is the Divine does?” The words tumbled out, and he mentally kicked himself for it. He wasn’t supposed to talk about this.
“That is far from certain.” She looked down at the sword in her hands. “The clerics could—”

“Oh, come on,” he cut in, tired of hearing her question herself. “You’re the best for the job, Cassandra, and you know it. Even I do, at some level.”

And he did, if he was honest with himself, though he hadn’t been until now. But what was there to question? He looked at her, at the woman he loved, and thought about everything he admired in her. Cassandra was good and brave and bold. She would do what needed to be done, as always. The Chantry could use someone like that. They all could.

“Is that what you truly want?” Her eyes filled with emotion, and he couldn’t stand it.

No. Fuck, no. Stay with me, never leave. He wanted to shout it, but he didn’t. “You would be good for Thedas, Cassandra,” he said instead, looking away and willing his voice to be steady. “I might as well get used to the idea…” The last part was more for himself than for her.

“You’re no longer angry with me?”

He closed his eyes and waited a long breath before opening them to look at her again. “I was never really angry. Not at you.”

Maker, what an idiot. He hadn’t meant to say any of that. Now her eyes were shining at him, searching him, and he was afraid they would uncover the truth. Another moment would unravel his self-control. He would say—or do—something he’d regret. Even more than he already had.

He cleared his throat to change the subject. “Anyway, first things first. We still have an ancient Tevinter magister in our way, not to mention his pet dragon and the Red Templars.”

“I hear you have a strategy to defeat Samson’s armor.”

Owain put his hand inside his coat and from an inner pocket he drew out the rune Dagna had crafted using the remnants of Maddox’s tools. It was small, about the size of his palm, with red markings that seemed to shift and glow in the sunlight. He handed it to her. She turned it over a few times in her hands before passing it back to him.

“How does it work?”

“It was explained to me, but I’m not sure I understood well enough to repeat it. Though I trust Dagna has done her research. The only downside is that it requires physical contact with the armor itself. Which means we will have to get rather close to Samson to activate it.”

“Do not worry about that, Inquisitor.” Her voice was steady and strong, and her hand wrapped tightly around her sword. “We will cut you a path. That is what we are here for.”

He knew what she said behind the words and could think of no adequate response. Her eyes seemed to pierce his soul, and this time, he couldn’t tear himself away.

Someone cleared their throat nearby, and only then did he look up. It was Cullen.

“Inquisitor. I don’t mean to interrupt. But Corypheus has been sighted at the temple. It’s time to go.”

Owain nodded and glanced at Cassandra one more time.

“Then let’s go.”
They fought their way through the Temple of Mythal, a maze-like complex of open courtyards and stone passageways covered in statues and intricate mosaics honoring the gods of ancient elves. They watched Corypheus die and resurrect himself in horrific fashion from the body of a fallen Grey Warden. They walked the pilgrim’s path, completing rituals to reach the heart of the temple and make a pact with its protectors. They survived demons and Red Templars, Corypheus’s lyrium dragon, and Morrigan and Solas sniping at each other over elven history.

They learned that the treasure hidden in the temple wasn’t an eluvian at all, but a source of wisdom known as the Well of Sorrows. This was what Corypheus had come for. This is what the elven sentinels and the rituals were meant to protect. For Owain, this knowledge changed little. They had come to defeat Samson and thwart Corypheus, and those goals were unchanged.

Exhausted by their journey through the temple, they stepped into the final courtyard and were relieved to finally see the Well at the far end. In between, however, stood Samson and a squad of Red Templars, ready for battle.

“Inquisitor!” Samson held his arms wide in mock welcome. He spotted Cullen at Owain’s side and grinned. “And Knight-Captain Cullen. I must admit, I didn’t expect to see you here. With all your tough talk about mages being less than human, I never thought I’d see you standing with one.”

Owain glanced quickly at his commander. To his left, he could see Althea frowning and doing the same.

“I am not a Templar anymore, Samson,” Cullen replied, meeting the gaze of his former comrade and gripping the hilt of his sword. “No more lyrium, no more leash.”

“Hah! You haven’t changed at all, Knight-Captain,” Samson sneered. “Still serving Andraste’s puppet, still a dog of the Chantry.”

“I’d rather serve the Inquisition than an evil like Corypheus.”

“I serve a god!” Samson bellowed, shaking his fist at them. “He chose me. Twice. First to be his general, and now as the vessel for the Well of Sorrows. I will carry its power to him. With this wisdom, we will scour the world. He will breach the Fade, even without your precious anchor, Inquisitor.”

“Your friend Maddox is dead, Samson,” Owain said. Fighting seemed inevitable, but, just maybe, words could diffuse the situation. Or, at the very least, distract. “He gave his life for you. Is Corypheus really worth it?”

“Then he died as one of us! One of the faithful. You are the ones who killed him. His death is on your hands.” Samson drew his sword and pointed it at Owain. “Enough talking. I will claim the Well for Corypheus, and you will not stand in my way. Kill them! Kill them all!”

Cassandra, Cullen, and Blackwall stood in a defensive line while the mages cast barriers and readied their spells. Owain counted about ten Templars, a mix of knights and ranged horrors. They were outnumbered, but not terribly so. The biggest challenge would be Samson himself. The Red Templar general stood at the rear, his greatsword raised and his armor giving off the stench of red lyrium.

They had to thin the herd before they could deal with Samson. Owain cast a pull of the abyss on the oncoming knights. Solas followed with a weakening spell, and Althea went next, trapping their foes in a static cage. The warriors pushed forward, surging toward the weakened Templars with a fury.

He wove in and out of the warrior line, doing what he could to support, keeping their barriers up,
freezing with his mines and protecting their backs with fireballs and ice. As always, battle had a kind of rhythm for him, thrumming through his blood to the beat of clashing metal.

He looked up as a ball of smoking red lyrium crashed into Blackwall’s shield, breaking into chunks that smoldered on the ground. It was only the first of many, as more of the same came whistling through the air. Cassandra batted one away with her shield, while Cullen dodged another before driving his sword into the helmet of a Templar knight.

The source was a cluster of horrors at the other end of the courtyard. Owain caught Althea’s attention, and she nodded her understanding.

They fadedstep their way across the yard, avoiding the battling knights and warriors. Owain landed among the horrors and dropped a set of mines, encasing them in ice. Althea appeared beside him and slashed her spectral blade into one of them, nearly hacking him in two. Meanwhile, Owain turned to the horror beside him and shot a stonefist at point blank range. It hit the enemy in the chest and shattered him, sending him crumpling to the ground. Owain snapped his fingers to immolate the remains.

Althea called to him, and he looked up to find that the third horror had freed itself from the ice and was bearing down on him with its claws. He ducked aside and brought his staff up to catch the blow on his grip, following with a kick to the gut that created space to maneuver. He conjured a great shard of ice and drove it through the Templar. Almost at the same time, Althea’s glowing blade sliced across its neck and took off its head, which rolled to the ground with a sickening sound.

Owain paused for a breath and leaned on his staff, nodding at Althea as the body of the last horror slumped to the ground between them. She pressed her lips in a grim line and brushed stray hair from her eyes as she refreshed her blade and their barriers.

He turned to look back at his companions. Blackwall and Solas were mopping up the rest of the remaining knights, but Cassandra and Cullen were dueling Samson, and they were struggling. His sword rang off their shields, and though they strained visibly with the effort, he shrugged off their attacks like nothing. Samson’s armor was still active, and as long as that was the case, they didn’t stand a chance. Owain touched his hand to his coat and knew he had to get close enough for the rune to do its work.

He signaled to Althea and adjusted his hold on his staff, cloaking himself in ice armor in addition to his barrier. They made their way toward the warriors, flinging fire and lightning. Just like the physical blows, however, magic seemed to glance off Samson’s armor, leaving not a scratch. As they approached the fray, Samson swung his greatsword and powered past Cullen’s parry, sinking the tip into the Commander’s thigh. Cullen sank to one knee, fighting to keep his shield up.

Owain heard Althea gasp and felt her fadedstep past him, materializing between Samson and her lover.

"Thea, no!" he shouted, as if that would have stopped her.

She met the Templar’s blade with her own, the clash sending up sparks of ethereal blue. With a grunt, she pushed him back, but when he swung again, she was no match for his lyrium-fueled strength. Deflected by her block, the sword bounced off course but still managed to bite deep into her arm, throwing her back with the force of her broken barrier.

She ended up on the ground beside Cullen, clutching at her wound, glaring in pained defiance. The hilt of her weapon was still in her hands, the blade itself having flickered out with the shock of her injury. Samson laughed and stepped toward the pair of them.
“Witness the power of Corypheus!”

Owain swore under his breath and fadestepped toward Samson, intending to put himself in front of Cullen and Althea. Cassandra had the same thought and beat him there, taking the force of the Templar's blow squarely on her shield. She winced at the impact and fixed him with a look.

"The rune," she said, and he nodded. He felt a brief pang of guilt at leaving her to face Samson alone, but this was no time for chivalry.

He dodged around the Samson’s sword and stepped to his flank, drawing the rune from his pocket as he moved. Cassandra gave a great cry and charged. The point of her sword lodged in his armor, but Samson merely smiled, grasping the blade with his gloved hand. The armor pulsed with red lyrium energy. It traveled down the length of her weapon, and she cried out, releasing her grip and stumbling backwards.

Panic flooded Owain's brain as he saw Cassandra fall, but he grit his teeth and forced himself to stick to his task, to not waste the opening she had bought. He lunged at Samson, fixing the rune to the back of his plate before rushing toward Cassandra where she knelt on the ground, holding her injured sword arm.

The rune’s effect was immediate. The red glow that had suffused the armor dimmed and blinked out, leaving ordinary-looking steel in its place. Samson howled with rage.

"My armor! My power!"

He wheeled about and fixed his eyes on Owain.

"You!"

Owain stood his ground, keenly aware of Cassandra's vulnerable condition behind him. He gathered the remains of his mana, summoning flames and a stonefist that hit the Templar in the chest, slowing but not stopping him.

Samson laughed again, and cold fear seeped into Owain's blood.

"I don't need my armor to deal with mages like you.” Samson held out his palm, and that familiar, sickening wave hit Owain in the stomach. He could feel his connection to the Fade being snuffed out.

He barely had time to think “not again” before Samson was upon him, swinging his sword at Owain's head. He dodged, but just barely, and brought his staff up to block the next attack. The impact sent shocks down his arms, almost buckling his knees. Even without his invulnerable armor, the Templar was strong, and the spell purge had left Owain weakened. At least his staff had held, this time.

But he wouldn't last long. A few more hits had him collapsing to the ground. He considered his dwindling options as Samson advanced again, laughing that laugh Owain had come to hate. He had to stop Samson from reaching his injured companions, from reaching Cassandra. But how? Without his magic, what did he have left? He looked down at the anchor, flickering faintly in his palm. Perhaps he could use that again.

He didn't get to find out. As Samson raised his sword for what might have been a killing blow, his body seized mid-action. He froze, his mouth hanging open in a soundless scream, his eyes rolling up and back in his head. His hand went slack and the sword fell clattering from his grip.
Owain swiveled his head, looking for the cause of this sudden reversal, and his eyes locked on Cassandra, who was on her feet now, walking slowly past him. Her eyes glowed a strange blue as they focused on the Templar, and her lips moved with a whispered chant. Her hand stretched out toward Samson, fingers curled in a loose fist.

Maker, she’s magnificent. All he could do was watch in fearful awe as Cassandra made full use of her Seeker powers, bringing Samson to his knees. He fell unconscious to the ground, and only then did she let up, her shoulders slumping in exhaustion and her eyes regaining their usual hazel.

Owain wanted to take her in his arms, but he was so drained himself that it was all he could manage to stumble toward her and clap his hand on her shoulder, letting his eyes express wordless thanks.

Cullen limped past them, his wound closed by Solas’s healing magic. He knelt next to Samson and checked his pulse, satisfied to find it still beating.

"We should take him alive and return him to Skyhold for judgement."

Owain nodded, amazed that Cullen could think so rationally after the battle they had just survived.

A dragon’s shriek rent the air, heralding the presence of Corypheus and reminding them all of where they were and why they were there.

"Inquisitor," said Solas. “The Well. We must hurry.”

Owain nodded and shook himself, taking up his staff and holding it tightly, still feeling the effects of Samson’s spell purge. Leaving Cullen and Blackwall to handle the Templar, he hurried across the yard, leaping up the steps that lead to the Well. The Well itself looked like a rather ordinary pool of water, its surface still and mirror-smooth, its shallow depths lifeless and clear as crystal. There was an eluvian at the far side, almost an afterthought.

As he stood there wondering what to do, a raven flew past him and changed form, revealing itself to be Morrigan as it landed at the water’s edge.

"Nice of you to join us again." How convenient, to reappear after the imminent danger had passed.

Morrigan brushed it aside. “We don’t have time for that. We must claim the power of the Well, Inquisitor. Corypheus must not be allowed to take it. If I may, I volunteer myself for this task.”

“Wait,” he said. “Why you?” Morrigan’s motives were always shrouded in mystery, and he didn’t trust her to have their interests at heart, no matter what she might say.

“Why not me?” she shrugged, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “I have the knowledge and the magical training to make use of the wisdom of the Well, and I will use it to aid you in your quest to defeat your enemy.”

“We don’t even know what this Well contains. If it should be a mage that drinks from it, why not me? Or Solas?”

He turned to his companions.

“Do not ask me, Inquisitor,” Solas said, with a note of sadness, or perhaps warning, in his voice.

“Don’t drink, Trevelyan,” Cassandra added, with concern in her eyes. “It is not worth the risk. Power rarely comes without a cost.”
“I am willing to bear such a cost.” Morrigan jumped in again with her offer.

Owain racked his tired brain for answers. Surely there was some kind of catch here. Harnessing this ancient wisdom could not be as simple as it appeared. But what were his options? What was least risky?

The dragon roared again, and they ducked as its wings beat the air overhead. The creature flew low this time, spitting a gout of red lyrium that toppled columns at the edge of the courtyard. He had no time to debate this.

“Fine, Morrigan. Do it. Drink from the well.”

She nodded and turned to step into the pool. A bright light illuminated the water as she dipped her head below the surface. When it subsided, the water was gone, and Morrigan stood in the center of the empty Well.

At that moment, the lyrium dragon landed with a crash in the center of the courtyard, and out of the dust stalked Corypheus himself. He rushed toward their position at the Well.

“Come! Quickly!” Morrigan beckoned them toward the eluvian on the other side of the Well and stepped through it.

They had no choice but to follow. As much as Owain longed to face his enemy, he was in no condition to fight. He waited, waving the others through first. Blackwall and Cullen supported Samson’s limp form between them.

Just as Corypheus reached the stairs to the Well, Owain went through the mirror. He stepped into the crossroads, that space between worlds, where the silence seemed to swallow him whole, silence punctuated only by the distant sound of breaking glass.

Chapter End Notes

I’M STILL HERE, GUYS. Sorry about the slow updates and for leaving my boy in the dumpster for so long. Real life getting in the way of Important Things like writing. Boo.

As always, thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Facing a new reality.

Chapter Notes

NSFW (!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Owain, wait.”

He paused at the entrance to his quarters and turned to see Cassandra calling to him from across the great hall. Curious, he ran a hand through his hair and leaned against the door to wait for her.

They had returned to Skyhold hours ago thanks to the magic of the eluvians, but that time had been busy: securing Samson in the dungeons, a debriefing in the war room, and sending birds to Josephine and their remaining troops in the Arbor Wilds to inform them of the change in plans. He had just come from wolfing down a quick meal in the kitchens and was looking forward to some much needed rest.

And yet, here was the Seeker. Like him, she was still in her armor, which did nothing to obscure the hypnotic sway of her hips as she moved toward him. He was far too tired now to suppress the stray thoughts that clouded his mind as he watched her approach, so he simply stopped trying.

She halted in front of him, and he pulled his mouth in a smirk, the question he wanted to ask written in the angle of his brows.

She answered by tipping her head toward the door, looking unusually nervous. She bit her lip slightly, and it was more distracting than it should have been.

“Can we talk?”

“You mean... privately?”

She snorted, but he was already opening the door and holding it for her, letting her pass before following her through.

He fished the key from his pocket and was just fitting it into the lock, but she didn’t let him finish before she pulled him around, grasping the lapels of his coat and drawing his face down to meet hers. The key bounced loudly on the stone floor.

The taste of her was both familiar and better than he remembered. He kissed her back, his tongue sliding against hers. But like a drop of water to a man lost in the desert, it threatened to overwhelm him.
He forced himself to pull back. His self-control was swiftly fraying, but it was his only tether to rational thought, his last chance to resist the wave of desire that was surging within him.

“Cassandra,” he whispered hoarsely, his heart thundering in his chest. “Are you sure?”

Her eyes glittered dangerously in the low light. “Stop talking,” she murmured, before yanking him close again.

So he let go. Let the cord snap. Let himself be carried away.

He kissed her hard, gripped her hips and pivoted, pushing her roughly against the wall, encouraged by the moan that hummed against his lips. She pulled at him with a desperation that seemed to match his own, pushed her hands under his coat and ran them over the muscles of his back, his chest, his stomach. She shoved his coat from his shoulders, and he took his hands off her only long enough to slip his arms from the sleeves, letting it slide to the floor in a heap of leather and mail. Her mouth twisted against his, greedy. She caught his lip between her teeth, making him groan at the heady mix of pleasure and pain.

All the emotions he’d held in for weeks, the hurt, the anger, the longing, they flowed freely from him now, mixed and melted into this incandescent desire, this want to possess her, to master her, to worship her, to surrender to her. Everything, all at once.

A sharp rap against the door jolted him back to reality, pulled his drowning head above the surface to register the widening gap between the door and its frame.

“No!” He and Cassandra both shouted simultaneously, their arms shooting out to force the door shut. They stood there staring at each other breathlessly, hands still pressed against the wood.

“I-Inquisitor? I have a message from Leliana. A bird has arrived from the Wilds, and she wishes to know—”

Owain had already stopped listening. He ran his eyes brazenly over Cassandra, who looked back at him through heavy-lidded eyes, her tongue flitting over her lips, still wet from their kisses. He drifted his hands up her waist and tapped a finger on her breastplate.

“Off,” he ordered silently, jerking his head to the side and mouthing the word with a smile in his eyes.

She curved her lips and brought her hands to the buckles of her armor. Then she turned to walk backwards up the stairs, slowly, her eyes never leaving his.

“Gregor.” Owain interrupted whatever it was the scout was still prattling about.

“Y-yes, Inquisitor?”

He stooped to locate the key on the floor and shoved it in the lock, twisting it home before turning back to watch Cassandra continue up the stairs, dropping pieces of armor as she went. A gauntlet here, a pauldron there.

“Tell Leliana to reply as she sees fit, and we’ll discuss it tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Worship.”

She had reached the landing and unfastened her breastplate, the last piece. It fell to the floor with a clang that seemed to echo in the narrow stairwell.
“And Gregor?”

“Yes?”

“If anyone else so much as knocks on this door before morning, I will have them transferred to the Fallow Mire for a month. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Worship!” He could hear the scuffle of boots as the man hurried away.

Cassandra stood on the landing, her armor gone, about to ascend the final steps to his quarters. She shot him a sly smile over her shoulder, her eyes reflecting the flickering light of the sconces that hung every few feet along the wall. He recognized that look as a challenge, one he fully intended to meet.

He threw her a predatory glance from the foot of the stairs. Then he leapt up the first few steps, two at a time, before fade-stepping the rest of the way. He reappeared beside her, one hand catching her around the waist to pull her body flush, the other pushing into her hair to tip her face up to his, crushing the gasp that escaped her lips under the demands of his own hungry mouth.

He backed her against the wall again, kicking her feet apart to make room for him to rock his hips against her, letting her feel the hard length of him as he pinned her against the stone. She moaned again and twisted her legs around his, pulling him still closer. Her arms wrapped around his neck, fingers tangling in his hair. He pressed his hand against the wall beside her head, the anchor glowing faintly green. The torches flared as his mana rose with the tide of his desire.

“Did you miss me?” he growled as he brushed his lips along her jaw, following a familiar path to the pulse behind her ear. She whimpered softly and shivered under his touch. His free hand moved under her tunic, caressing the warm skin so often hidden under her cold, hard armor, and reached up to fill his palm with her breast. “Because I missed you,” he said, flicking his thumb over her nipple.

She gasped his name and arched into him, rubbing herself against his cock through his breeches. With an impatient sound, she grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head, letting it fall who-knows-where in the dark.

*Typical.* He chuckled and trailed gentle, licking kisses in a slow line down from her throat, closing his mouth over the tip of one breast while he continued to tease the other with his fingers. She cried out, standing on her toes and pushing against the wall to give him better access, every part of her still desperate for more.

With his hands on her thighs, he lifted her. She was lighter than expected without all that steel. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she braced her arms on his shoulders and caught his mouth in an all-consuming kiss. Despite the distraction, he wobbled only slightly as he carried her up the remaining steps to his quarters.

He deposited her on the edge of the bed and proceeded to divest himself of his clothing. She did the same, kicking off her boots and shimmying out of her leggings, all while raking her eyes over him, letting them linger on his cock as it bobbed free of his leathers.

He would never tire of the sight of her: her long, lithe legs, her naked, toned body stretched over the smooth, clean sheets. He savored it, committed it to memory.

But even that pause was too long for Cassandra. She grumbled at the wait and hooked a leg around his knees, tipping him forward so he landed on top of her, barely catching himself with his hands. She looked up at him and smiled—*that* smile—and it stole the breath from his lungs. She squirmed beneath him, and he hissed at the friction. It only added to the pressure that was already building
He needed to be inside her then, and he couldn’t deny it any longer. Bracing himself over her, hips centered between her bent knees and spread thighs, he slid into her with one smooth motion, watching her eyes flutter as he filled her.

The feeling overwhelmed him, and it wasn’t just her wet heat wrapped tightly around his cock, though that was part of it, certainly. He felt right. Complete in a way he hadn’t felt since he and Cassandra first quarrelled, like a lost part of him had come home.

He shifted to lean on one elbow, freeing a hand to brush his knuckles against her cheek. His eyes searched hers as if he could see forever in their depths.

“Cass,” he whispered without thinking. “Stay. Stay with me. Don’t go.”

Her eyes widened at him, but she said nothing. Instead, she pulled him down and kissed him, full and deep. He had not the brainpower to process what that meant.

He closed his eyes and groaned against her mouth and started moving within her. He rested his head on her shoulder as he found his rhythm, adjusting his angle to hit that spot that never failed to please her. She wrapped her legs around his waist to take him deeper. Her gasps and moans spurred him on, her hands grasping and pulling at his hips, his back, his ass, nails leaving impressions in his flesh. It only made him burn brighter. He fucked her with abandon, snapping his hips against hers, driving her down into the mattress with each thrust. She locked her eyes on his and met his every stroke.

They finished together. She muffled her cries by sinking her teeth into his shoulder, while he gave a wordless grunt as he pushed deep and spent himself inside her. They held each other, trembling slightly as their breathing slowed. As his mind cleared, he began to think again, and questions collected in the furrow of his brows.

“Why?” he asked quietly, to the back of her head. “Why now?”

She turned in his arms and looked at him. Her eyes shone with emotion. She brought her hands to his face, tracing his features with the tips of her fingers.

“We faced so much death today, Owain. So much evil. I needed to remember. I needed something good.”

Her hands stilled, and she simply held them there, framing his face.

“And today, with Samson, there was a moment when I thought… I thought that one of us might not survive. I know we have not been…” She paused, swallowing, as if the words were stuck in her throat. “I would not have your last memory of me be a bitter one.”

Her words made him sad, but she was right. Guilt lanced through him as he remembered how he had treated her, and he regretted all the time he’d wasted being frustrated and angry at the world. That was time they could have spent together, time he would never get back. There were more important things in life.
He turned his face to press a kiss against her palm. “I’m sorry, Cassandra. For everything. I’m sorry for being an ass. I should have listened to you. I should have understood.”

She smiled sadly and brushed her thumb across his lips. “And I am sorry, Owain, for the pain I caused you. I have been alone much of my life. I am not accustomed to my decisions affecting another.”

He closed his eyes and touched his forehead to hers, breathing deeply, inhaling the warm, soft scent of her. Everything that mattered in the world was here in his arms.

There was still the problem of their future, but he held it back. Not here, not now. Tonight, let us have this. He could deal with reality in the morning and still keep his promise to himself.

So he pulled her close, tucking her head under his chin. Here with her, he felt safe, felt peace he hadn’t known in weeks.

He whispered into her hair as they drifted to sleep. “You’re my good, too, Cassandra.”

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He woke with a start from a dreamless sleep, and it took a moment to remember where he was. Cassandra was still asleep, snoring quietly, the covers clutched in her arms. His hand was numb, but he dared not move for fear of waking her. He watched her, matching his breathing to the slow rise and fall of her chest. Maker, he’d missed this. Falling asleep tangled up with her, waking with her still in his arms.

The sky was dark outside his windows, but he guessed it was some early morning hour. He was supposed to make a decision today. His mind ran through their conversation from last night. With a groan, he remembered how he’d asked her to stay and how she hadn’t answered. Of course not. He couldn’t ask questions like that with his cock buried inside her.

Still, doubt nagged at him. Had she refused to answer because she didn’t want to say no? He watched her eyelids shift with her sleeping thoughts and considered what she hadn’t said last night. She had apologized for how she handled it, but she hadn’t said she was changing her mind. She hadn’t said she would stay. Perhaps because she still intended to go.

Could he live with that? Could he truly be as understanding as he should have been all along?

He thought about the Arbor Wilds, about the battle at the Well. She was right. They had almost been defeated. He remembered kneeling on the ground, running out of options, and waiting for that final blow. He’d been so ready to defend her, to trade his life for hers.

Then he reflected on all the decisions he’d made as Inquisitor. How he decided to save Althea instead of pursuing the Red Templars, how he let Hawke cover their escape from the Fade. He had never been good at sacrifice. Haven was the exception, not the rule.

He sighed deeply and studied her again, soaking in the warmth and peace of having her in his bed. If he was willing to give his life in death for Cassandra, shouldn’t he be willing to give it in living, too? Her influence had always spurred him to be a better man, and that was never more true than now. He could be better, for her. Even if it cost him a broken heart.

He made up his mind and carefully slipped from her side, tucking in the covers to retain as much heat as possible as he rose from the bed. He stood and pulled on his breeches, brushing the hair back from his forehead. He scratched his fingers along his jaw and frowned, making a mental note to take care of that later.
He sat at his desk and turned to consider the darkness outside his window. Then he pulled his chair forward, plucked a clean sheet of parchment from a drawer, and dipped a freshly trimmed quill into a pot of ink.

Everything he admired about Cassandra he poured onto the page. At least, everything fit for public knowledge. Her faith, her devotion, the purity of her ideals and her unwavering determination to see them through. Her sense of justice and goodness. Her care for the people of Thedas. Her belief in the mission of the Chantry. In short, everything that would make her a perfect Divine.

He dropped the quill on the desk and sat back when he finished, dragging his hands down his face. He stretched and shook out his cramped writing hand, rereading the page with satisfaction. Cassandra was still sleeping. Light from the rising sun had begun to color the edges of the sky.

Too agitated to sleep now, he pushed his chair back and reached for the bottle of whiskey on the shelf above his desk. He poured himself a healthy serving and carried it out to the balcony.

It was cold outside. The wind buffeted his bare skin and the stone floor was chill beneath his feet. He let his magic surge, and he was warm again, despite the temperature.

He set his glass on the balustrade and leaned his elbows against it. Clouds obscured his view of the mountains, but it hardly mattered. His mind was elsewhere.

He reviewed his plan again. He would give her his endorsement and let her choose. He would support her no matter what she decided, but he would not try to sway her. He would not beg. He would not do that to her.

But now that he had written the thing, his nerves were failing him. He sipped his drink and prepared himself to lose her. Tested the idea in his mind. What would his life look like? What did it mean to be Inquisitor without her by his side?

He could throw himself into work. Dedicate himself to rebuilding Thedas, crafting a world where mages could live better lives. He could find purpose in that, perhaps even work with her on that. Surely the Inquisitor and the Divine would have reason to cross paths on a regular basis? He could see her. They could talk, even if things weren’t the same. If he had to lose her as a lover, he could still have her as a friend. Right?

“Owain?”

Startled from his reverie, he turned abruptly at the sound of her voice.

“What are you doing out here?”

He opened his mouth to answer but was momentarily silenced by the sight of her. She was wearing his shirt, and only his shirt. He remembered that hers was somewhere in the stairwell, probably. It hung loosely on her, the open neck revealing a glimpse of her collarbone, the tails barely covering the tops of her thighs. Seeing her in his clothing did strange things to his heart.

It did nothing, however, to keep her warm. She folded her arms over her chest and shivered as she stepped out onto the balcony. He crossed to her as if drawn by some invisible force and wrapped her in his arms. He brought his hands to her face and drew her close for a long, lingering kiss. He kissed her like it was the last time, perhaps because some part of him felt like it was.

He pulled back and brushed wayward hairs from her forehead, letting his eyes rove over her face. He told himself to remember this moment, the way she looked, the way she felt in his arms. He stored it all up, like provisions for a long winter.
She furrowed her brow at him, confused. “I asked what you were doing out here. The wind was blowing through the door.”

He didn’t answer, too lost in the gravity of the moment. He warred with himself, with what he was about to do. Seeing her now, like this, his courage had ebbed. He had walked back from the edge.

*Do it. Do it, you fucking coward.*

He kissed her again. *One more.* Then he took her hand and led her back inside.

“Come. I have something to show you.”

He walked to his desk and picked up the sheet of parchment covered in his words and handed it to her. She looked at him dubiously before turning her eyes to the page.

“This is a letter,” she said as she read the header. “Addressed to the clerics at the Grand Cathedral.” She glanced up at him and frowned.

He nodded, inviting her to continue.

She finished reading and looked up at him, her face clouded with mixed emotions. “I don’t understand. Is all of this true? Is this how you feel?”

“Yes,” he replied, adrenaline pumping through him now, the only thing keeping him from shaking with fear. “You’re an amazing woman, Cassandra. And you would make an excellent Divine.”

He took the parchment from her hands as she stood there, speechless. Folding the letter, he sat in the chair and pulled a bar of sealing wax from a small box on his desk. He conjured a flame and melted the wax between his fingers, letting the liquid pool on the paper like so much red blood. He waited for it to cool slightly before stamping it with the seal of the Inquisition.

She watched him silently, the crease between her brows only growing deeper. He rose and handed it to her.

She took it numbly, blinking at him, and then set it back on the desk. “I still do not understand,” she said, shaking her head. “I thought you were against this.”

He leaned back against the edge of the desk and curved an arm about her waist, pulling her close so that she stood between his knees. He brought his other hand to her cheek and grazed his thumb along her scar. She covered his hand with hers and held it there.

Then he launched himself from the cliff.

“I want what you want,” he said, looking steadily into her hazel eyes. “Serving the Maker has been your life’s work. This chance, this opportunity, it’s more than either of us could have expected. The world is broken, and you could do so much good. If this is what you want, I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

“But what about…” She trailed off into silence, but he knew what she meant.

“My heart is yours, Cassandra.” He was more sure of this than he had ever been about anything in his life. “More now than it ever was. I love you, and if you want me to do that from afar, I will.”

She blinked hard, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She curled her fingers against his bare chest and beat a fist lightly over his heart. He held her fast, pulling her closer to rest her head against his
How long they stayed like that, he didn’t know. He willed himself to be strong for her, to hold himself together while she fell apart.

When she finally raised her head, her eyes were red but no longer crying. She fixed them on his.

“Last night,” she said softly. “Did you mean it? When you asked me to stay?”

Her question was the last thing he expected, and it disarmed him, utterly. This wasn’t part of the plan.

There was nothing to do but tell the truth.

“With all my heart,” he admitted, nearly choking on the lump in his throat.

She held his gaze for another moment and then stepped back, deciding something. He knew that shift in her eyes. He let her go, feeling defeated, his arms hanging limp against his knees. He could think of nothing more to do or say. All the steely resolve that had carried him this far suddenly disappeared, evaporated into the air.

He watched numbly as she pulled on her breeches and boots. Then she went into the stairwell to collect her things, returning with an armload of leather and steel. She stacked her armor on her chair by the fire.

“May I leave this here?”

He nodded.

Lastly, she took off his shirt and replaced it with her own worn tunic. She folded his garment carefully and laid it on the corner of the bed. It made him sad, and he couldn’t explain why.

She came toward him and took the letter from the desk beside him. She touched his face and kissed him briefly.

“I must speak with Leliana about this.”

He nodded again. “Yes, of course.”

He waited until the door closed behind her before falling to pieces. He pressed his fingertips to his eyelids and wiped away the tears that had gathered there. He took a few steps toward the balcony doors before backtracking to retrieve the bottle of whiskey from his desk.

Outside, he drained what was left in his glass and poured himself another, trying in vain to gather his scattered thoughts. He tried to remind himself why this was for the best, that he was being a better man, that… *Fuck, what’s the point?*

So he gave up. Instead, he steeped himself in memory, filling his mind with images of Cassandra, his favorite moments from their time together. He leaned against the railing and wallowed in his misery, drinking and watching the sun rise in the sky.

A flurry of ravens swooped down from the rookery and winged off toward the distant mountains. He wondered which of them carried the letter he had written, and with it all of his dead hopes and dreams.
Someone called his name, as if from a distance.

He pried his eyes open, in defiance of the headache pounding in his temples. Turning his face from the pillow, he could see it was Cassandra. She sat beside him and touched a hand to his shoulder as he stretched face down in his bed.

Eyes still bleary, he blinked at her.

“Are you a desire demon?” he muttered thickly. “Come to tempt me?”

She shook her head and smiled at him. “No, Owain. I am your love, come to stay.”

“Wait.” He wiped his face on the pillow before turning back to her. “What?”

“I spoke with Leliana. It is decided. I will refuse the summons, if it comes.”

He forced himself up, clearing the fog from his brain.

“But, the letter,” he said, remembering the ravens silhouetted against the morning sky.

She produced the fold of parchment, still sealed but slightly crumpled, and pressed it into his hand.

“You should write another. For Leliana this time.”

He stared at the paper, still reeling with disbelief. He let himself drop onto his back and shifted to lean his head against the headboard. She moved closer, laying alongside him and resting her cheek against his chest. He made room for her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders almost automatically.

“What about the Chantry? And serving the Maker?”

“Leliana and I have discussed it, and I am satisfied with her vision for the Chantry.” He recognized the decisiveness in her tone. “It is not what I would have done, but I believe she has Justinia’s wishes at heart, and I will support her in what she plans.”

He listened, stroking his fingers absently up and down her arm.

“It is as you told me once--there are other ways to serve the Maker. Leliana is devout, but she is also a bard. She is adept at The Game. She understands how to influence others, how to bend people to her cause. Her skills are better suited to the work of a Divine. I am a warrior. My place is with the Seekers. And with you.”

“You’re not just a warrior, Cassandra.”

“No.”

His next breath was a strangled sob that echoed in the quiet room, and tears of a very different kind fell from his eyes.

He looked again at the letter in his hand and set it on fire, watching the flames lick across the parchment in his palm before shaking away the resulting ash.

“It’s a shame,” he said, laughing shakily. “I worked hard on that.”

She smiled and took his hand, lacing her fingers with his. “It was a very good letter.”
He kissed the top of her head and sat with her in silence that was effortless once more. His mind whirred, rearranging the somber thoughts he had entertained only a few hours earlier. He still couldn’t believe this was real.

But it was.

He rolled on top of her and propped on his elbows, smiling down at her. He couldn’t stop smiling.

“I love you, Cassandra.”

“And I love you, Owain.”

He leaned down and kissed her, deep and slow, unrushed. Not the last time anymore. Not nearly. It occurred to him that she was wearing far too much clothing.

“Ugh,” she groaned, wrinkling her nose at him as their lips separated. “Your breath is terrible.”

“Mm.” He ran his tongue across his teeth and tasted the sour remains of his whiskey as he sat back and tugged her breeches down her legs. “Too bad you already decided to stay.”

She chuckled, pulling her tunic over her head and wiggling to help him yank the clothing free of her feet.

“I could still change my mind.” Her words belied the flush in her cheeks and the heat in her eyes as she lay naked beneath him.

He flashed his eyes at her.

“Then I guess I’ll just have to put my mouth elsewhere.”

She squealed with laughter as he fell upon her. He had never heard her make that sound before, but he thought it was the most beautiful thing that ever reached his ears. He vowed he would hear it again. And again. To the end of his days.

It was after dark when they finally left his quarters.

Chapter End Notes

Bull was right, in a way. ;)

Also, I’ve been trying to get to this chapter for months. MONTHS. Thanks for reading! Appreciate the love, as always.
It ended where it began.

It would have been wiser to wait. To stall until their troops returned from the Arbor Wilds. If they rushed, if they sent the healthy forces on ahead and left the injured and the supplies and the equipment to follow later, they could be back at Skyhold within a week, Cullen said.

But they didn’t have a week.

Corypheus showed himself at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and the Breach flashed a bright, livid green they could see all the way from Skyhold. Demons were pouring out of the Fade.

They didn’t have a week.

And Owain was tired. So tired. Of fighting. Of death. Of chasing that up-jumped Tevinter magister back and forth across the continent. No more. It needed to end.

“That’s what he wants, Inquisitor!” Cullen protested, leaning his fists against the war table. “You are playing into his hand. Let us wait. Let us make a stand here! Skyhold is not Haven. It is defensible. It will hold.”

“The goal is not to hold, Commander,” Owain replied, having already decided. “The goal is to end.”

And so they rode out to meet the evil. Owain and his inner circle, a handful of volunteers from the garrison at Skyhold. Cutting their way through the demons, the Red Templars, the dregs of Corypheus’s army.

It chilled his blood to be there again, among the jagged ruins that had forgotten what they were, the humming clusters of red lyrium that pushed up from the scorched earth. The passage of time and weather had washed away most of the ash and remains of the Conclave, but even now, almost a year later, there were still no plants or animals, no signs of life. But he was not there to admire the scenery.

Counting the number of dragons he’d slain would require all of his fingers and a few of his toes. But the roar of Corypheus’s lyrium monstrosity was something else entirely. The sound penetrated his mind, scrambled his very thoughts. Cold fear rippled down his limbs and pinned him in place, even as the creature came diving out of the air. Coming for him.

But then an answering screech and a green blur rushed from the edge of his vision and barreled into the dragon, sending them both careening into the night sky. It was Morrigan, in dragon form. Owain blew out the breath he was holding. It was not for nothing that she drank from the Well.
Cassandra called to him, and he shook the chill from his thoughts, wheeling to hurl a ball of flame at an incoming demon. He fade-stepped to her side and put his back to hers, swinging his staff at the rage demon bearing down on her flank. He pushed it back and threw his hand in the air, summoning an ice spell that locked it in place. As if on cue, the Seeker pulled her sword from the ashen remains of her last kill and turned to thrust it deep into the enemy’s frozen maw. It shattered almost instantly, falling to pieces around her blade.

The scowl she always wore in battle softened minutely as she turned to him. She jerked her head toward the steps to the temple ruins, where Corypheus had fled.

“These demons are endless,” she said. “We are wasting our time.”

Owain signaled to Cullen, who had just drawn his sword wearily from the armor of a fallen Red Templar. Althea stood behind him, sparking lightning in one hand, spectral blade in the other.

“Cover us,” he ordered.

Cullen dipped his head with understanding, his mouth a flat line. He rolled his shoulders and shifted the weapons in his grip, turning to shout directions to his men. Althea looked at Owain and held his gaze for a second longer. She gave him the faintest nod before turning to follow the commander. It made him want to smile.

There was no more time to waste. Owain hurried up the stairs with Cassandra on his heels. A horde of demons made to follow, but Cullen and his men blocked the path. Sera and Varric covered their rear, pelting arrows into the crush of enemies.

They reached the plateau of the temple and were greeted by Corypheus’s menacing laugh. The orb flashed in his hand, and the ground shifted beneath them. He fell to his knees as the stone tilted and swayed. The rush of air on his face and the pull of gravity in his gut told him they were moving upward, swiftly. High into the cold night air.

A shrill scream tore his eardrums, and a dark figure plummeted to the ground. Morrigan, alive but badly hurt. Her body seized as she coughed, spitting blood. Owain waved to Dorian and left her in his care, his hands already working healing magic.

His determination sharpened, Owain focused his mana and called forth a storm of flame. He directed it at Corypheus, but it never reached him. The dragon landed heavily instead, quaking their island of rock. Owain’s spell glanced off its scales, and it roared in wounded anger.

Shit. Shiiiiiiiit.

It screamed again, swinging its spiny neck in a wide arc and blowing a cloud of red poison. He stood rooted with indecision. Fear and despair clutched again at his heart.

Thankfully, not everyone had the same problem. Behind him, he heard the clink of shattering glass. Something small and shiny flew overhead and exploded on the dragon’s snout. A great buzzing filled the air, and an undulating cloud of black particles swelled around the creature’s head, even as it snorted and stomped with irritation.

Owain squinted. Were those… bees?

“EAT ARROWS, CORYPHY-SHIT!”

And then the twang and snap of a bowstring and the rapid-fire whoosh of flying missiles and
Sera’s fury roused something in the rest of them. The warriors rushed forward, blades flashing at the
dragon’s legs, trying to bring it to its knees. The archers aimed for its wings and its face, tearing the
thin membranes to keep it earthbound, piercing the fine scales around its eyes and nostrils. The
dragon reared as the arrows found their marks, thrashing its head and churning the air with damaged
wings, sending the warriors weaving between its stomping paws.

Not forgetting their true enemy, the mages dueled Corypheus while keeping barriers up and spells
timed to deflect his attempts at protecting his pet. Owain supported the warriors where he could,
dodging the lash of the dragon’s tail and the swipe of its claws, sending fire and ice and stone to
control its position, to attack weak spots.

It was Cassandra who actually killed the dragon, true to the Pentaghast name. They had brought it
low at last. Its head hung near the ground on its outstretched neck. Seeing the opening, she ran
forward, sword gripped in both hands, and with a great cry she plunged it into its throat, twisting the
blade through its flesh. Red-black blood splattered as it stretched its neck one final time, wrenching
the sword from her hands. It fell to the ground, heavy and dead.

Corypheus bellowed and something seemed to go out of him with the loss of the dragon. Their spells
were suddenly more effective, their arrows truer.

They backed him to the edge of the floating rock, weakened and cornered. Owain reached forward
with his left hand. It blazed with green light, and as if it had a mind of its own, Corypheus’s orb flew
spinning out of his grasp. It leapt into Owain’s hand—the second time he’d held it. Pain lanced
through his palm, so sharp it made him gasp, made his eyes water. The anchor flashed still brighter as
he forced it up toward the sky, toward the Breach that had started it all. Power far beyond his own
magic poured out of him into the heavens.

And then it was over. A wave of energy pulsed through him, leaving strange quiet in its wake. The
Breach was closed. The sky was whole. The orb slipped from his fingers, hemispheres falling to the
ground.

Owain advanced on Corypheus, who knelt defeated. If you want into the Fade, I’ll send you. He
held his hand out again, opening a new tear in the Veil and feeling no regret at the mask of horror on
the magister’s face. Corypheus disappeared in another dazzle of green light. The anchor went quiet,
subsiding to a faint glow beneath his skin.

It was almost too easy. Owain turned to his companions, who looked as stunned as he felt. But
before they could register anything else, the rock shook beneath them, and they began to fall.

The ruins crumbled, rubble falling, tumbling toward him. Cassandra shouted his name and pulled
him roughly to the ground. Stones thumped against her shield, which she held over her shoulder,
blessed shelter over their heads. He braced himself and set his teeth against the inevitable demands of
gravity. He clung to her. Held her so tightly.

They slammed to the earth, and the impact knocked the wind from his lungs. But the ground was
solid beneath them. Cassandra released her held breath, and he could feel it sweep across his face.

When nothing else threatened his life in the next half minute, he dared to rejoice. He squeezed his
arms around Cassandra and craned his neck to claim a kiss. Her lips tasted like dust and blood and
victory. It was over, and they were alive, and that was all he needed to know.

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Josephine had outdone herself, in spite of the short notice. Owain would wager that even the Orlesian nobles who came to bask in the glow of the Inquisition’s triumph could find little to complain about. Skyhold’s great hall never looked so fine. The stone floors had been polished, the walls draped with tapestry. Candlelight shone off the stained glass windows, making them glitter like jewels. The long tables were covered with the kitchen’s best, while ale and wine flowed generously. A small band of musicians filled the air with spirited atmosphere.

He stood at the back of the room and took in the scene, watching the soldiers, scouts, and workers of the Inquisition laugh, drink, and enjoy this hard-earned celebration. He reached up and tugged absently at the stiff collar of his formal coat. It was just like the one from Halamshiral, but newly made. They never could get the bloodstains out of the original.

Leliana appeared beside him with a twinkle in her eyes.

“A beautiful evening, isn’t it, Inquisitor?” she began, folding her hands behind her back and observing his gaze.

“Indeed,” he nodded. “You know, it feels strange to be celebrating. To think that our job is finally done. There was a time when I didn’t think this day would come.”

Leliana laughed. It was rich and musical, always unexpected from a spymaster whose currency was counted in secrets and death. “Your job is far from over, Inquisitor.”

He looked at her sharply. “But the Breach is closed. Corypheus is dead.”

“Yes, and a hundred more problems will take his place. Every noble in Southern Thedas is clamoring to meet with you. They will want your opinion on everything, whether you wish to give it or not.”

“Makes me wish for the days when I was just a filthy heretic mage,” he sighed. It felt like a lifetime ago, and in some ways, it was.

She smiled at him. “The work can wait for one night.”

He snorted, as if that was a kindness.

“Any word from the Grand Cathedral?” he asked.

“I expect it will be public any day now.”

“Shall I start calling you ‘Most Holy’?”

“Please!” she laughed again. “I will still be Leliana. And it will be some time before I officially take the Sunburst Throne. Enough to get our business in order and train my replacement.”

“Did you have someone in mind?”

“I was thinking of Charter. You remember her? She has the Crestwood command.”

“Caer Bronach, yes. If you think she’s up to the task, then I trust you.”

“I do,” she replied, nodding deeply. “There is one other thing, Inquisitor. I’ve had my scouts scouring the area for Solas. There have been no leads. The battle at the temple was the last anyone saw of him.”

He was not surprised. Owain had no doubt that if Solas did not want to be found, he was more than
capable of keeping himself hidden.

“We will keep searching,” she added when he didn’t respond.

“Please do,” he said, looking her in the eyes. “Thank you, Leliana.”

He needed a drink. Badly. He turned to take his leave. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I only have one night off, so I’m going to make it count.”

After a requisite amount of mingling, Owain settled at a table to put some food in his belly, the better to cushion the effects of what was now his third glass of wine. The bench creaked with added weight as someone sat beside him.

“They’ll write songs about you, you know. Epic poetry. Heroic shit.”

Owain turned toward Varric and couldn’t help twisting his mouth in a wry smile.

“They? Or you?”

“Not me,” Varric snorted. “I prefer my humble prose, Ser Owain. I’ve got it all planned out. ‘This Shit is Weird, The Inquisitor Trevelyan Story.’” He waved his hand through the air, underlining his words with an imaginary quill.

Owain paused with his cup halfway to his mouth and squinted at the dwarf. “Seriously?”

“It’s a working title,” Varric shrugged.

“Maker, I hope so,” he said, taking a long sip of wine. “I guess you’ll be heading back to Kirkwall?”

“Eventually,” Varric replied, staring into his mug. “It may be a shithole, but it’s my shithole.” He looked at Owain. “Don’t worry, I’ll stick around for a little while. Still need another game of Wicked Grace before I go. Let Curly win back his honor.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Owain chuckled, draining his cup and setting it back on the table.

Feeling eyes on him, he looked up and caught Cassandra staring from the head of the room. What was most intoxicating--the drink, the warmth in her eyes when she refused to look away, or the relief of knowing that the world wasn’t ending anytime soon? Maybe all of the above. Whatever it was, it made him bold. He stood and straightened his coat.

“Where are you going?” Varric asked.

“Going to give you something to write about,” he threw over his shoulder. Varric snickered into his ale.

Owain locked his eyes on Cassandra’s as he strode purposefully across the hall, ignoring anyone who tried to talk to him. She watched him approach with a curious look, brows furrowed and mouth curved with a question. She seemed to glow in her red formal coat, the color setting off her scrubbed olive skin and dark hair, the blue sash accentuating the curve of her waist. He entertained and then banished the thought of what it would be like to remove it.

She had been listening to Josephine, who fell silent as Owain stopped in front of them. He nodded at Josie, who smiled in return, before bringing his attention to Cassandra. He dropped into a bow and offered his hand.

“May I have a dance, Lady Cassandra?”
Her eyes flickered over the scene, and she opened her mouth to protest, but he held his eyes steady on hers, and something changed within them. She put her hand in his and smiled slowly.

“Of course, Owain.”

He pulled her close, relishing her quick breath as their bodies met. He put his hand at the small of her back, and she rested hers on his shoulder as he led her into the empty expanse of floor at the front of the hall.

It was as if the whole room stopped to watch. The crowd cleared a space for them. The band swapped the piece they were playing for something soft and romantic.

It barely registered with him. It was all peripheral, a blur at the edges as he put his focus on the woman in his arms. He knew he held her far too close. There was too much heat and too much possession in his gaze. But he didn’t care. Not when she blushed sweetly at him, her eyes full of the fierce, determined love that was the best thing in his life. Why would he ever want to hide it? She was his, completely, and he was hers in equal measure. Let the world know that.

Their feet moved in concert without conscious thought. Every sway and turn and spin was perfectly matched, as natural as breathing. He knew her movements--the length of her step, the span of her reach--just so. He could feel them, could sense them, like they were his own. Except they weren’t, and that seductive tension between the familiar and the unknown sparked a flame in his belly. A flame fueled by the firm/soft grip of her fingers, the idle circles her thumb rubbed into his shoulder, the mysterious glint in her hazel eyes. Maker, he felt like burning.

The song ended, and they slowed to a stop. The crowd cheered. Owain noticed them like waking from a dream.

The musicians struck up another piece, something quicker, more lively. He shifted his hand on Cassandra’s back and quirked a brow at her, as if to say, “Another?” She smiled back and leaned closer, nuzzling her cheek to his. He took that as a yes.

They weren’t alone this time. Some members of the Inquisition had joined them, along with a few of the nobles. He was pretty sure the loud, blond top gyrating at the edge of the room was Sera, dancing by herself. If that could be called dancing. Josephine sailed by in Blackwall’s arms, a spark in her eyes and charmed laughter on her lips. He was a surprisingly capable dancer, Blackwall. There were depths to Thom Rainier, Owain realized, that he had barely come to know.

“What are you smiling?” Cassandra asked, noting the faraway look in his eyes.

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Oh, besides the obvious? I was just thinking how lucky I am, to have met all these people. To have met you. But after tonight, everything changes. Everyone will go their separate ways, go back to their lives and their homes.”

Her eyes searched his face. “Everything is always changing, my love,” she said quietly. “Better in victory than defeat.”

“Of course. I’m not sorry we won.”

“We fought together,” she went on, her voice certain and strong. “We survived together. Some ties are stronger than time and distance. And you will always have me.”

“Yes,” he said, pausing their dance to look at her fully, “and that will always make me smile.” He made good on his word and kissed her. He almost forgot where he was, for the second time that evening.
The music changed again, and a heavy hand appeared on his shoulder.

“Mind if I cut in?” It was the Iron Bull. “I might not get another chance with the Lady Seeker. Gotta make sure you know what you’re missing out on, Cass.”

Owain laughed as Cassandra rolled her eyes. “If the lady doesn’t object.”

Cassandra huffed but took Bull’s offered hand. He swept her away with what might have been a wink at Owain. Was it still a wink if you only had one eye?

He shook his head and made his way to the perimeter, where he found Cullen standing stiffly in his dress uniform. Althea frowned silently beside him, her arms folded over her chest.

Owain arched a brow at her. “You two look miserable. Not dancing?”

“I-- ah. I don’t dance, Inquisitor.” Cullen rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. “Never had much reason to, in the Order.”

“And I don’t know how,” said Althea, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Don’t know how?” Owain repeated. It was the wrong thing to say.

“No,” she ground out, shifting her hands to her hips. “When would I have learned? All those dance lessons at the Circle? We didn’t all grow up in fine noble houses, Trevelyan.”

He opened his mouth to retort but thought better of it. She was right, of course, and he’d been thoughtless with his assumptions. To make amends, he bowed and held out his hand.

She narrowed her eyes at him and glanced quickly at Cullen, who simply shrugged, before tentatively accepting. Owain closed his fingers around hers and led her to the edge of the dance floor.

He set her hand on his shoulder and pressed his firmly to her waist. “Your part is easy,” he said. “All you have to do is follow.”

Althea snorted. “And when has that been easy for me?”

“You might be better at it than you think. Just move with the music.” And then he led her in a simple waltz.

They didn’t speak as she tried to pick up the steps. It wasn’t so bad for a first attempt.

“Don’t look at your feet,” he said, pressing her closer when he caught her looking down. “That only makes it worse.”

She made a frustrated sound and forced her eyes up, wandering the room before landing back on him. Her bright blue eyes scanned his face, and she smirked.

“What?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I can’t believe you did this,” she said, shaking her head. “Saved the fucking world.”

“It was a group effort.”

Her smile softened, which for Althea always presaged a bit of sincerity. “Do you remember when we were kids back in the tower, dreaming about what we’d do with our lives?”
“I remember.” And he did. Childhood dreams of knighthood, chivalry, and ideals, shredded to line
the walls of his Circle cage. A shot of bitterness clouded his mood.

“Did you ever imagine it’d be like this? That you’d lead an army? Be a hero?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I didn’t even think I’d leave the Circle, Thea. Never been that
creative.” He reflected her question back. “What about you? Did you ever think you’d rebel? That
you’d fall in love with a Templar?”

“Maker,” she grumbled. “He’s *such* a Templar sometimes…”

Owain breathed a laugh and tilted his head. “Isn’t that why you like him?”

She huffed again and looked away. “So Cass decided to stay?”

“She decided to stay. It’ll be odd to have a spymaster as the Divine.”

“We’ll get used to it, I’m sure.” The concerns of the Chantry would never be among her priorities.
“Fiona is serious about the College. Once the arrangements are in order, they’ll set up in Val
Royeaux.”

“You’ll go with them?” Everyone was leaving him.

She nodded. “But I’ll be back. I’ve got reasons to come back.”

“Reasons, or reason?”

“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “Seriously. You know there would be a place for you there, if you
wanted it? You’re still one of us, Owain, even if you are the Inquisitor.”

There was a time when he would have jumped at her offer, when he considered himself a mage first
and Inquisitor second. He startled himself by realizing that that was no longer true.

“Thanks,” he said anyway. “I’ll think about it.”

The song wound to a close, and they stopped. “See? That wasn’t so bad.”

“Easy for you to say,” she shot back.

A flourish of brilliant white and scarlet silk appeared beside them and cleared its throat. “A dance,
my lady?”

Althea threw back her head and stretched out her hand in her best impression of an Orlesian
dowager. “But of course, Lord Pavus.”

Dorian gathered her in his arms and dismissed Owain with a word. “You’re good, Trevelyan, but
you’re not that good.”

Abandoned again, Owain complained to no one and walked off in search of another glass of wine.
That quest accomplished, he returned to the edge of the room where Cullen stood alone, attempting
to blend into one of the long velvet curtains that spanned the height of the room. Owain looked out
and caught a glimpse of Dorian sweeping by with Althea. Cassandra was dancing with Blackwall.

“Are you… hiding?” he asked the Commander of the Inquisition.

“Are they still there?” Cullen peered around drapery at a gaggle of Orleans. “Maker’s breath,”
he muttered.

“Admirers?”

“Vultures, more like.”

“You do know what would solve this?” said Owain before sipping at his wine. “More alcohol. Or dancing.”

Cullen exhaled a nervous laugh. “Someone needs to stay sober, Inquisitor. I’ve assigned the regular watches tonight, but I… suspect they won’t be carried out to our usual standards. And tomorrow, there’s the inventory from the Wilds to finish. Not to mention anything else that may come up. Corypheus may be dead, but our work is far from over.”

“So I’ve heard,” Owain sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You know, there will always be plenty of work to do? You are allowed leave it for one night.”

“I— you’re right,” Cullen conceded after a pause, rubbing his neck again. “Of course you are. Part of me still can’t believe it’s over. The Breach. The demons. The dragon. It was well done, Trevelyan.”

“We mages are alright after all, hm?”

“Hah… Yes…” Cullen trailed off, his eyes going distant. Perhaps he was thinking about his mage. Then he turned back to Owain like he’d made up his mind about something.

“Excuse me, Trevelyan. I think I just might… after all…” Owain lost the rest as Cullen marched into the crowd on the dance floor, looking a bit like a man going to the gallows.

Dorian appeared at his side a minute later, balancing a goblet of wine in his fingers. “I’ve been replaced.”

“Now you know how I feel,” Owain replied over the rim of his cup.

“Can’t blame her, really,” Dorian said, watching the passing couples with a slight wrinkle in his nose. “Though he is a truly awful dancer.”

“Blind leading the blind. But at least they’re having fun.”

Dorian made a noncommittal sound before turning to Owain. “Did you know, I was crossing the great hall this morning, and a servant girl saw me and squealed? She dropped a whole basket of laundry. Such a mess. ‘You were at the battle of the breach with the Inquisitor!’ she said. And then she hugged me. Hugged me! This is your doing.”

“You’re a hero now, Dorian. Get used to it.”

“Is that what this is?” Dorian mused. “Hah! Well, I can’t say I hate the idea of being ‘the good Tevinter.’ The blacksmith nodded to me yesterday when I went to pick up some armor. And he spat when we first met! I hope my father hears of this. He would shit himself.”

“Does that mean you’re going home, too?” Owain tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Oh, not for a while yet,” Dorian waved. “I’ve decided to stay with the Inquisition for the time being. Tevinter lacks my few and only friends. It will keep.”

Owain gave a small sigh of relief and raised his wine in salute. “I’ll drink to that.”
“That’s not saying much, for you.” Dorian tapped his cup to Owain’s and took a healthy sip. “But anyway, you need someone to keep you from getting yourself killed, yes? Now that that hobo apostate is gone.”

Owain tugged at his collar again. “I was hoping to have a break from life-threatening injuries. For a time.”

“True. We’ve all earned a bit of pleasure, I think.”

The Iron Bull was hard to miss as he parted the crowd, horns rising a head above all others. Owain watched his approach. “Speaking of?”

Bull paused in front of them and bowed, a surprisingly delicate move for such a large man. He grinned and extended his hand. “Dorian! Let’s dance!”

Dorian was speechless for a moment. A rare thing.

“You and I?” he spluttered. “Here?”

Bull nodded and stretched his smile wider.

“But—“ He turned and threw a glance at Owain, who leaned over and took the goblet from his hand.

“Don’t look at me. People have been leaving me all night.”

Dorian placed a cautious hand in Bull’s. “Alright then,” he said softly, just above a whisper.

Owain watched as they glided away in a swirl of silk and horns. And then he left to find Cassandra, because with all this romance in the air, he already missed having her in his arms.

--

They found themselves back in his quarters some hours later. Exactly how many, he had no idea. It was dark up here. The embers in the fireplace gave off a dim glow barely enough to see by. He bent to add a fresh log and waved a hand to help it along. It caught in a blaze of light and heat. As he straightened, the room seemed to revolve slowly around him.

His fingers felt thick and clumsy as he fumbled with the buttons of his coat. Seeing him struggling, Cassandra came to help. She was so much better at it that he gave up, dropping his hands at his sides to watch her.

He tossed the coat over the back of a chair and seized her by the waist, pulling her tight for a slow, dizzying kiss. Then he tugged at the knot securing the sash around her jacket.

“So you know how long I’ve been thinking about getting you out of this uniform?”

She laughed and spun in place to unwind the length of silk. Free of that, she went to work on the buttons of her own coat. Owain leaned close to help her, his fingers nimble now.

“Oh, so you can undo my buttons but not your own.”

He crinkled his eyes at her. “I just need to be properly motivated. I’m a very goal-oriented man, Cassandra.”

The jacket finally open, he pushed his hands under it and hummed with satisfaction. She gasped with
pleasure as he drifted his mouth down her throat, filling his lungs with her sweet scent, nipping at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

He walked her back to the edge of the bed and tipped them onto it. She smiled up at him and hooked a leg around one of his, hands reaching for the laces of his breeches.

_Not yet._ He clicked his tongue in reproof and swatted her hands away, catching her wrists to pin them above her head. Her eyes were full of fire for him, and she squirmed in his grip, biting down on her lower lip.

“So impatient, my love,” he whispered, brushing a thumb over that lip before flicking his tongue across it. The noise she made beneath him was both helpless and greedy, and it went straight to his cock.

Shifting his weight to an elbow, he ran an appreciative hand up her body, lingering over her thighs and her hips, snaking up under her shirt to worship her warm skin and soft curves. He cupped her breasts in his hand and grazed his thumb over their tips, smiling at every sound that fell from her lips.

Without warning, she slipped her hands from his hold and wrapped her legs around his hips, flipping him onto his back. He landed with a grunt and pressed his hands to her ass, beaming. He didn’t mind being bested, by her.

“You’re delightful, did you know that?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “You’ve mentioned it.” He stretched his neck up for a kiss, but she leaned her hands on his chest to keep him down. “And you are drunk.”

“Am I?” He dropped his head to the mattress, still smiling. Maker, he couldn’t stop.

“Yes,” she reiterated, widening her eyes at him. Then she shivered and looked toward the windows. “And you left the door open again. It is freezing in here.”

She rose from the bed and went to the door, pausing to look out at the night sky.

“I could warm you up,” he called after her.

She glanced back at him and shook her head. Then she walked out onto the balcony.

Owain sighed and scratched his fingers through his hair. He got up reluctantly and followed her, doing his best to ignore the mild see-sawing of the floor as he crossed it.

She was standing at the stone railing, looking out at the sky. And what a magnificent sky. The moons had set, leaving the stars bright. Where the breach once hung, an aurora shimmered like an iridescent ribbon, purple, pink, and green set against the blue-black heavens.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Mm,” he agreed, moving to stand behind her. He pressed his chest to her back and folded her in his arms, resting his chin on her shoulder. “Do you remember the last time we celebrated closing the breach? We sat on that dock back in Haven?”

“That feels like a very long time ago.”

“Yes.” He remembered how he felt for her, what he had wanted, even then. “Tell me. What would you have done if I had kissed you that night?”
She was silent for a moment, thinking. And then she answered. “I would have throttled you.”

He laughed. Laughed so hard that his stomach hurt and tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes.

She turned her head and looked at him like he had lost his mind. Perhaps he had. When he caught his breath, he brushed her hair back from her forehead and planted a kiss there.

“Well, it’s a good thing I waited. Did you know there are people who don’t think you’re funny?”

She frowned at him. “I was not trying to be humorous.”

“I know,” he said, on the verge of laughter again. “That’s part of it.”

“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes and settled back in his embrace.

Feeling the chill in the air, he leaned forward against the balustrade and warmed them both with his magic. She covered his hands with hers and turned them palm-side up.

The anchor gleamed on his left, unchanged by the closing of the breach. She traced a finger across the light.

“It’s still here,” she said softly.

There were no words to his reply, just a yellow flame that flickered in his other hand. He couldn’t see her smile at that, but he sensed it anyway. He let it burn for a few seconds before closing his fingers over it.

Reverently, and with infinite gentleness, she took that hand in both of hers and opened it flat. She brought it up and blessed his palm with a kiss.

It meant the world to him, that gesture. Overwhelmed, he pulled her snug, curling his left arm around her waist. His right hand he slipped down her neck, past her collar and into her shirt, resting it over her heart, his skin to hers. What beat there was a rhythm precious, the cadence of his love, his life, his everything.

He pressed his lips to her neck and whispered into her ear those three words that formed a truth he would never tire of telling her. She didn’t even need to say it back, but she did.

“Shall we go inside?” she added.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He fell asleep as soon as he hit the bed.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been writing this for… *squints at the date* ...a year now? Apparently? Which is crazy for something I started on a whim. Thanks for joining me on this ride, especially if you’ve been here a while. I see you! <3

AND we’re not even done yet. Join us next time as Owain lives that post-canon life. Fluffy with a chance of angst. ;)
BIRTHRIGHT

Chapter Summary

A visitor forces Owain to face some complicated truths.

Chapter Notes

“Besides your father, he's practically the only family you have left, and you're just going to throw that away?”

“You forget,” Owain wheeled on her, his voice full of venom. “They threw me away first. A long time ago.”

--Clean Burn Ch. 9, Scar Tissue

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Bann Merric Trevelyan of Ostwick to see you, Inquisitor.”

Owain looked up from the half-written report on his desk and blinked mutely at the messenger. Idelle was her name, a wisp of an elven woman, one of Josephine’s runners. Cassandra had looked up from her chair by the fire. He glanced briefly at her before turning his eyes back to the elf.

Had he heard correctly?

“Who, did you say?”

She repeated herself. He had. Heard correctly.

Merric.

Owain heaved a sigh and dropped his quill back in its well, lest it drip still more ink across his already blotted desktop. “He’s here? Downstairs?”

“Yes, Your Worship. In Lady Montilyet’s office.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Idelle. Tell them I’ll be down in a moment.”

She bowed and took her leave. When he heard the door shut behind her, he shoved his chair back with a juddering scrape and rose to his feet. He turned and dragged a hand down his face, staring out, unseeing, at the morning sun that streamed through the tinted glass.

It was like diving headfirst into memory. One moment, dry ground. The next, in over his head. It had been sunny that day, too. He remembered the awkward weight of the ill-fitting armor, still too big for his growing frame, the heavy leather grip of the sword in his hand. His father’s withering disapproval. Fear, humiliation. The pounding of hooves beneath him. Adrenaline and rage within. Magic that could not be contained. Flames. And a terrible, terrible smell...
Cassandra’s boots scuffed the stone floor. Her hand was a light touch on his arm that pulled him back to earth.

“Are you alright, my love?”

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath, blowing it out between his lips. He could feel his pulse thundering in his veins. Then he blinked open to meet the concern on her face.

His words came out in fits and starts. “I didn’t— I never—“ He sighed again.

The line between her brows lengthened. She pulled his body square to hers and touched his face with her cool fingers. He wrapped his hand tightly around hers and drew on her steady strength.

He found his voice at last. “I had twenty years to think about this moment, and I’m still not ready for it.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why he is here?”

Owain shook his head.

“Have you any reason to believe he wishes you ill?”

He wrinkled his nose and cast his eyes at the floor. “Not particularly, no. We were close as children, before my father drove us apart. But I haven’t seen or heard from him since I left home.”

“Then you have nothing to fear,” she said, pressing her fingers to his chin and forcing him to meet her eyes. He looked at her, unable to hide the misery and uncertainty in his heart. She always managed to see the truth, no matter how deep he tried to bury it. “Owain, you are the Inquisitor. A battlemage, a warrior. You defeated Corypheus and saved all of Thedas. You have nothing to fear.”

He sighed again. The rational part of his brain knew she was right, yet the prospect of this meeting made him feel less like the man he was and more like the callow boy he had been all those years ago. When it came to his family, it was as if no time had passed.

Seeing him still unsure, Cassandra rocked forward on her toes and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. It was a small thing, but it made him believe her words, just a little.

“Come with me?” he asked, searching her eyes and brushing back the wayward hair at her temples.

“Are you sure?”

He shrugged. “If he’s not here for ill, as you say, then he should meet you. And if he is… Well. He should still meet you.”

She snorted but followed him anyway as he straightened his shoulders and moved toward the door.

Halfway down the stairs, he paused, his heart racing again.

Idelle had called him Bann. Only then did Owain realize what that meant.

---
When he pushed open the door to Josephine’s parlor, Merric was standing by the fire, one hand on the mantle, the other leaning heavily on a polished walking stick. He stared silently at Owain, just as Owain stared silently at him. Owain was vaguely aware of his legs carrying him halfway across the room before slowing to an unconscious stop. He didn’t know how to begin. What should he say? How did one greet a brother after so many years apart? He knew no protocol for this.

He had, at times, wondered how it would be to meet Merric again. What would they be like as grown men? In his mind’s eye, his brother was forever the gangly sixteen-year-old he had been on his birthday, and he a still-round-faced boy of thirteen, behind in height and reach but already an equal in skill.

It was, he discovered, a bit like looking in a smoked mirror, or at his own reflection in a shifting pool. Impossible to deny they were kin when they stood side-by-side. Merric was a bit taller still, but slimmer, which would be more evident if he was able to stand straight. As it was, with his crooked legs and reliance on a cane, they saw just about eye-to-eye. This, like the scars Owain wore on his face and body, was the legacy of that day. They had both come away marked for life.

Merric had inherited more of their mother’s beauty, Owain their father’s harsh angles. Merric’s brown-black hair was sprinkled with salt and long enough to tie back from his face. But their eyes were the same, differing only in the number of lines that surrounded them on their faces and the various moods that passed behind them. The same elusive shade of grey—their mother’s—the same cool capacity for anger, from their father.

Josephine broke the silence, and he could have kissed her for it.

“Ah, Inquisitor!” she said brightly, skirting the tension that had wrapped him in a paralyzing embrace. “Bann Trevelyan is here to see you.”

Owain nodded deeply. “Merric.”

“Your Worship,” his brother replied with a shade of amusement in his tone.

Merric’s eyes drifted to Cassandra, who had walked in behind Owain.

He supposed he should introduce her. “This is Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, my—er…” He paused, and it occurred to him that he didn’t know how to formally address their relationship. He had never really had to; everyone in the Inquisition knew they were together. She was his what, exactly? “Well, this is Cassandra,” he finished lamely. Should have let Josie handle that.

Merric bent at the waist and bowed. “Lady Pentaghast.”

Cassandra greeted him in turn, dipping into an elegant curtsy, not a move she often employed. Owain bit back the sly grin tugging at his lips.

Merric looked between them, his calculating gaze deducing the meaning Owain’s words had failed to convey. “So the rumors are true then? The Inquisitor’s consort is none other than the Right Hand of the Divine?”

Owain’s face fell. Consort? Not the word he would have chosen. He narrowed his eyes and deflected. “Rumors?”

Merric exhaled through his nose. “You think people don’t talk about you? If you thought the marriage game was a nuisance as a Trevelyan, that’s nothing compared to when you’re the almighty Inquisitor.”
Owain glanced at Josie, who shrugged and smiled at him, unruffled. He flexed his hands at his sides, unsure what to say to that.

Merric shook his head and sighed, pinching the inner corners of his eyes. “Sorry. I did not intend for us to begin like that.” He circled the armchair by the fire and sat heavily, his grunt belying the effort it must have cost to greet Owain on his feet. “How have you been? It’s been so long.”

Owain stayed where he was. “Well enough, I suppose. Considering.” He took a deep breath before asking the question that had been burning in his mind for the past ten minutes. “So it’s Bann now, is it?”

“I could say the same to you, Lord Inquisitor.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Their eyes locked and held for a long moment. Merric broke away first. “End of last year,” he said quietly. “Just after we heard you were named Inquisitor. I did try to write.”

Owain remembered the unread letter somewhere in his desk upstairs, and the air seemed to collapse in his lungs. There was a tightness in his chest, but what emotions were at the root of it, he couldn’t begin to pin down. He looked at his feet, and then up at Josie.

He cleared his throat. “May we have the room? Do you mind?”

“Not at all, Inquisitor.” She was already sweeping toward the door. “Take all the time you need.”

Cassandra started to follow, but Owain touched a hand to her elbow. “Not you,” he said softly. “Stay. Please.” “I need you,” were the words unvoiced, begged with his eyes instead.

Her expression flickered with understanding, mouth twitching with the faintest smile of reassurance. She turned and lowered herself onto the loveseat before the fire.

Owain moved to Josie’s desk as the door closed behind her and poured himself a glass of wine from the decanter. He raised his brow with an offer to the others, but Merric merely pointed at the full glass already perched on the table beside him, and Cassandra just shook her head. Owain drained his first cup and poured himself another, carrying it with him to the last empty chair in the sitting area.

“I always thought I’d be happy to hear he was dead,” he mused, looking down at the liquid in his hand. But was he? He wasn’t sure.

“Believe me, I know.”

“How?”

“It was nothing dramatic. Age, or perhaps all that bitterness getting to him in the end. He hadn’t been well the past year or so.” Merric reached into his coat and extracted a small bundle of parchment. “I’ve been going through his papers.” He held out the parcel, and Owain leaned forward to take it, feeling his lungs constrict with a mix of curiosity and dread.

He set his drink aside and tugged at the knot of twine holding the packet together, letting the length of it slither into his lap. The papers were old, wrinkled and yellow at the edges. He separated the top one from the stack and pulled it carefully open.

Young Trevelyan makes steady progress in his studies. His prior education does him credit. The burns have healed well and cause no observable impairment in his range of movement. There was a
minor incident some weeks ago involving another apprentice in his dormitory, which required Templar intervention, but it was resolved with no permanent effects...

Owain’s heart hammered in his chest. He skimmed the rest, to prove it was real, before darting his eyes to the bottom of the page. It was signed by First Enchanter Albright. His mouth fell open, and he shuffled quickly through the rest of the bundle.

“This--” he sputtered. “How did--”

“They’re all like that.” Merric reached for his wine and nodded at the pile in Owain’s hands. “They go on for years. Drop off at some point--perhaps the bribes ran dry. But he kept them after all this time. I found them among his things.”

Owain realized his mouth was still open and snapped it shut with a clack of his teeth. “I don’t understand. Why was he spying on me? Why would he go to so much trouble?”

Merric put his glass down and squinted at him like the answer was obvious. “You were always his favorite. You do know that, right?”

Impossible. Owain shook his head. “That’s… But you were his heir. His firstborn.”

Merric laughed, but there was no joy in it. “And you think he loved me for that? I was a disappointment from the moment I chose books over swords. You know, when we sparred, I used to think he wished it was real, that I’d die and you would inherit. I’m still not sure that isn’t what he wanted. No doubt he would have been happier if I had turned out to be the mage.”

“Everything he used to say… I thought he hated me.” Owain’s head spun as he reconsidered the facts of his past. Yet there were so many missing pieces. “Why not just talk to me instead? Why not visit? Or write? It would have been allowed. I heard nothing from him in twenty years. Not a word since he sent me away.”

It was Merric’s turn to shake his head and sigh. “I’m the last person to make excuses for him. He said and did terrible things, and this doesn’t change that. I just thought you should know.”

Owain ran his fingers over the aged parchment. Still so many questions. “What about you? Why didn’t I hear from you all those years? Or Mother?”

Merric screwed up his face. “Would you believe we thought you were dead? It’s what he told us. I was in and out of consciousness for days after the accident. When the fever broke, you were long gone. They had taken you to the Circle, and Father said you died of your injuries there. Even sent back a box of ashes for us to mourn and bury in the family plot.”

“Shit,” Owain breathed.

“That’s not even the worst of it. He let Mother die thinking her son was dead.”

Owain had no words for that. He had lived his life with the belief that his family had thrown him away, that they had turned their backs on him. It was part of him, had defined him, made him who he was. But what if it wasn’t true? Or not entirely so? And yet, one point was clear: his father had not wanted him to be part of their lives, and he had made that decision for all of them, had deprived him of the connections he had been born to, had knowingly and purposefully left him utterly alone. And that, he decided, was unforgivable. No secret letters would change that.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there stewing in his hate, a whirlpool of bitterness and resentment. When he looked up, he caught Cassandra’s worried eyes on him, and it was like a lifeline. He clung
to it tightly, letting her pull him toward safety and shore.

Merric had been content to sip his wine and stare into the fire, lost in his own thoughts. He startled when Owain interrupted the silence with another question.

“And you?” he asked. “What have you been doing all this time?”

Merric turned and fingered the silver knob at the tip of his cane. “I left home not long after you did,” he explained. “It took some time to recover. I had to learn how to walk again. But I couldn’t get away fast enough. Father had this way of looking at me that I couldn’t stand. Like I disgusted him.”

Owain pressed his lips together. His brother’s life had not been easy, either, and for that, he felt more than a little responsible. “I’m sorry,” he said, knowing the words weren’t enough. “Truly. About the accident. My magic... everything.”

Merric waved it off. “One of our old tutors had a connection at the university in Val Royeaux. They offered me a place there, so I took it. I didn’t go home for years. Not until Mother took ill. I went back after she died and took Celia with me. We eloped.”

Celia Stanwick, Merric’s betrothed, was the daughter of one of Ostwick’s wealthy merchant families. Owain recalled a clever, pretty girl with a sharp tongue and a spark in her dark brown eyes. She used to laugh at him.

“Didn’t Father approve of the match? I thought that was settled ages ago.”

“Funny how people change their minds when you can no longer walk properly,” Merric snarked. “She didn’t care, of course. But her parents weren’t eager to have a cripple for a son-in-law, even the heir to the what—seventh or eighth—most illustrious family in Ostwick? It didn’t help to know there was magic in our blood. Father broke it off at the first sign of hesitation. His pride couldn’t handle the insult. So we were a love match after all.”

Owain chuckled. At least there was happiness in that. “Any children?”

Merric shook his head and smiled wistfully. “Yet another way I failed.”

“I’m sorry.” He was saying that a lot.

“Don’t be,” Merric sighed. “It’s not anything we can control. But it reminds me. You should know that I’ve had you restored in the line of succession. If I die childless, the estate and title will come to you.” He paused, glancing at Cassandra. “And any issue.”

Cassandra was studying the rug, her mouth drawn in a tight line.

Owain started to point out the obvious flaw in this plan. “But, mages…”

“They say our new Divine intends to change all that,” said Merric, “or is the gossip wrong for once? She still works for you, does she not? In any case, I’m sure exceptions would be made for the Inquisitor.”

He guessed that was probably true. “I-- Thank you, Merric. You didn’t need to do that.”

“I’d rather see you have something to show for all this than give it to one of our grasping cousins. Besides, can you imagine how furious Father would be to see his legacy fall to a mage?”

Owain snorted, and Merric grinned, his face softening with the expression. Owain could almost
recognize the brother he had loved. Then Merric reached for his cane and hauled himself to his feet.

“Let’s go outside. I didn’t come all this way just to talk.”

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“I’ve only been back in Ostwick for the last four or five years,” said Merric as they passed through the Great Hall. “Father’s memory had been declining. I thought it best to come home and learn how to handle the estate. And Orlais wears on you, after a time.”

“Enough to put up with Father?” said Owain as he waited for his brother to catch up. Cassandra had gone on ahead, so it was just the two of them now.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Merric continued. “The old man was miserable. And we had our arguments. But we reached an equilibrium of sorts, eventually. It was probably hardest on Cee, to be honest.” He stopped for a short rest when they reached the outer doors, his breathing labored now. “I’ve been thinking a lot, you know, about family, since he died. About what it means. ‘Blood is thicker than water.’ Isn’t that what they say?”

“But when I came back that first time, I heard you were alive. Just rumors at first, tradesmen that did business with the Circle. But I looked into it after I got back to Orlais, and I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe we had left you like that.

“I meant to do something about it, I really did. But I was ashamed. Ashamed that I had believed the lies. What you must have thought of us! So I told myself it could wait. We weren’t children anymore, what use could you have for us now? And then years passed. And you became Inquisitor, and it was impossible to ignore any longer. But I’m sorry. I am. And if you hate me for that, I don’t blame you.”

Owain felt his heart go cold as a chill ran down his spine. Merric had known. He had known. For years. For so long, in the depths of his loneliness, Owain had tried to convince himself that his family didn’t matter, that he didn’t need them, and after all those years, it had very nearly worked. But how would his life have been different if he had known he was part of something bigger? That he mattered to someone beyond the walls of that Circle Tower?

Even after everything else he had learned that afternoon, this was too much for him. It broke something inside him, and years’ worth of stored-up pain flowed from the floodgates of his heart.

“Is that what this is, then?” he spat, feeling his face harden into a scowl. “Renewing brotherly ties with the Inquisitor? At what point were you going to ask for a favor?”

Merric’s mouth hung open, and for the first time, he looked truly unsettled. “Never,” he insisted. “I swear it. That’s not what this is.” He shook his head and tapped his cane on the flagstones. “We come from the same poisoned roots, Owain. Now that I’m head of this house, I want to change that. I want to change our legacy. I don’t want to repeat the past.”

Owain sneered and turned to go back into the keep, now wanting to be anywhere but here. Merric reached a hand out to stop him, grasping at the back of his coat.
Without warning, Owain wheeled at this contact, his eyes flashing with rage. The anchor on his hand sparked, and the torches on either side of the door flared with his mana. Merric’s eyes went wide with real fear. He faltered, losing his hold and stumbling backward.

But as quickly as Merric’s confession had stoked his anger, seeing that fear in his brother’s eyes touched something else deep within him. Perhaps it was guilt, or regret, or some remnant of love he had taught himself to forget, but it brought him back to that fateful day and quenched the fire in his heart. He returned to himself and let instinct take over, reaching out to grab the front of Merric’s shirt, pulling him back to solid footing. They stood there looking at each other, their faces reflected in mirrored grey eyes, searching for forgiveness and understanding that seemed almost within reach.

Owain unfurled his fingers, and the torches returned to their normal level. Merric adjusted his grip on his cane and closed his eyes, breaths still coming in rapid order.

“You’re right,” Owain muttered, turning to go down the stairs. “Let’s not repeat the past.”

A handsome carriage stood in the Skyhold courtyard with the Trevelyan arms painted neatly on its doors. *Modest in temper, bold in deed.* Owain stood beside it as his attitude cooled and wondered how closely he’d hewn to those words after all.

Behind the carriage stood a handful of horses, tall and proud like the ones they raised on the estate. Dennet was supervising a group of stablehands and assistants as they tended to the beasts.

“I didn’t come empty-handed,” said Merric, joining him at the foot of the steps. He hobbled forward, stopping in front of a stoic black mare. She was beautiful, all black except for the white at her feet and the tip of her nose, like charcoal ashed over. She stared at Owain through black eyes and flicked her ears in greeting.

“This one’s for you,” Merric said, curving his mouth like a proud father. “One of the fastest we’ve ever had. Do you remember Midnight? That mean beast? She’s from his line.”

“I remember,” Owain replied, taking her bridle and patting her nose. “He was terrifying.”

“Well, she’s got his speed, but not his temper.”

Owain smiled in spite of himself and turned to see Cassandra standing a few paces back with a slight frown and arms crossed over her chest. He quirked a brow at her and stepped back, inviting her to join them. She shook her head.

“Not fond of horses, Lady Pentaghast?” asked Merric.

“They are dung monsters with hooves and tails,” she sniffed.

Merric smirked and turned to Owain, pitching his voice confidentially. “Are you certain about her?”

He laughed and twinkled his eyes at the Seeker. “She has other redeeming qualities.”

She rolled her eyes and made a disgusted sound.

Merric turned the horse over to Dennet and waved toward a dark, sullen-looking boy, aged 11 or 12, who was standing by the carriage’s back wheels. His face turned serious as the boy approached.

“I know I said I wasn’t here to ask for favors, but I do have something to ask of you. Just not for my sake.” He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Do you remember Master Upton, father’s steward when we were young? This is his grandson, Will. His father runs the stables for us, and I promised
him I would get the boy here in one piece.”

Will bowed. Owain nodded and then frowned at his brother.

“What are you getting at, Merric? The Inquisition is no place for a young lad.”

“Will started showing signs of magic four months ago,” he explained. “Almost burned down the stables twice. It’s not safe for him back home. He needs an education, to be with other mages, but we have no other options. There is no more Circle in Ostwick, and the Templars are in disarray. Bringing him here was the only solution I could think of.”

Owain propped a hand on his hip and rubbed at his temples. It was true that the disbanding of the Circles and the mage rebellion in general had broken the traditional structures for handling those with nascent magical ability. Surely Fiona and the College of Enchanters would build new, better systems for educating young mages and teaching them to control their powers. But had he ever considered what they were supposed to do in the meantime?

The boy looked up at him, his wary eyes burning with a blend of defiance and fear. Owain couldn’t help but see himself in that look.

“Very well,” he sighed. “The boy can stay.”

Ruby red port gleamed in the firelight as Owain swirled it in his glass. Sweet and rich, another gift from Merric. He leaned back in his chair and watched the flames as they danced on the hearth in his quarters.

“There was so much I wanted to say,” he sighed. “I had this whole speech planned out in my head…”

“Including how you’d scowl and snort with disdain as you listed out his sins?” Dorian added from his seat directly opposite. “I know the feeling.”

“At least you got your reckoning with your father,” said Owain, recalling their meeting with Halward Pavus at the inn in Redcliffe. “You got to say your piece. And he listened.”

“I have you to thank for that. If you hadn’t convinced me otherwise, I would have walked right out of that inn.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t get to make that choice. It was made for me, like everything else in my life. I’ll never know what he would have said to me, after all these years.”

Dorian went quiet and studied him, running his thumb along the rim of his glass. “Your father loved you, Owain, in his way. Even if he had a terrible way of showing it. You might never know why he did what he did. Even if he was alive.”

“I know, I know,” he said, taking a sip and savoring the taste on his tongue. “Thea says I need closure. Learn to let it go.”

“You know I always take her side.”

Owain snorted and shook his head with mock disappointment. “And here I thought we were friends.”
"We are. Why else would I say things you don’t want to hear?"

The creak of rusty hinges and the shuffle of boots on stone turned Dorian’s head toward the door. He smirked and threw back the rest of his wine.

“That, I believe, is my cue to leave,” he said, rising. “Goodnight, Trevelyan.”

“Dorian,” said Cassandra as she passed him at the top of the stairs.

“Cassandra,” he nodded in return.

Owain sat and sipped slowly at the rest of his drink, staring blankly into the fire. He mulled over Dorian’s words and looked for answers he wouldn’t find in the flames. He could hear Cassandra moving about the room in her evening routine, undressing and caring for her armor.

He looked up as she sank into the seat Dorian had vacated, dressed in her breeches and an old shirt of his that she had taken to sleeping in. She sat with one leg tucked beneath her, her fingers picking at the padded arms of the chair. She knit her brows and frowned at him. Something was bothering her, but he knew if he waited long enough, she would explain.

“What your brother said,” she began a moment later. “About your inheritance. Is that… is it important to you?”

“You’re asking if I care about lands and titles? I should think you know me better than that by now.”

She pursed her lips. “But it’s your birthright,” she went on, voice tighter than usual. “Your family… Their legacy…”

Owain set his glass on the floor under his chair and leaned forward, propping his arms on his knees.

“What is this about, Cass?” he asked mildly, studying her face in the gold firelight. “I’m a mage. I own nothing, remember? Anything I have--everything--it’s what the Inquisition has given me. Apart from that, I have no titles. I’m not even an Enchanter anymore, now that the Circles are gone. I have no possessions or treasure to speak of.”

He looked down at his empty hands. The thin lyrium-infused band on his finger caught the glow of the flames.

“Hell, my Circle ring is the only thing I have from before the Conclave, and that’s only because silver doesn’t burn.” He shrugged and turned his gaze to her again. “Even what Merric has promised is little more than a gesture. He and Celia might still have a child. Or he could live forever. Who knows?”

Cassandra’s eyes had been fixed on his, but she cast them away now and twisted her hands in her lap.

“You… You do not wish for an heir? I am… not young, you know, and if you…”

It took a moment for his understanding to catch up to her words. He opened his mouth for a quick response but stopped himself short. Ah. Instead, he sat up in his chair, and with an open hand, he beckoned to her.

“Come here, my love.”

She did as he asked, coming to stand between his knees. He took her hands and rubbed his thumbs
gently over her knuckles and her cool, slender fingers. He let his eyes trail slowly upward until they met hers, hazel clouded with doubt he wanted to dispel forever.

“Everything that matters, I have right here,” he began, squeezing her hands in his. “I never thought I’d find you--find this--after I went to the Circle, never mind a family.” He took a deep breath and went on, his voice going rough and low. “I have no use for heirs. But a child… Made of you and me… That would be more than I’ve ever hoped for. We are not so old. If we were blessed with a child, I would love him with all my heart.”

She swallowed, her eyes shiny with the threat of tears. “And if not?” she whispered.

He shook his head. “I love you, Cassandra, and I will have no other.”

She drew a shaky breath and pulled one of her hands away to scrub the back of it across her eyes. Then she leaned down and pressed her lips to his. He could taste the salt on her skin, and it made him want to pull her close and bear it away on his tongue. He cupped his hand to her jaw and kissed her with all that he was, for everything they had been through together and for the future that was to come.

They separated for air, and he made to stand up with her, but she pushed him back into the chair. His surprise melted into a slow smile as he watched her step back and loosen the ties at her waist, pushing and kicking her breeches to the floor. She climbed into his lap, planting her knees astride his hips and pressing her hands to his shoulders.

“What’s this?” he asked, as he smoothed his hands up her muscled thighs, up her hips and the narrow of her waist, confirming that she did not, in fact, have anything on under that shirt of his.

She smiled at him, and, Maker, he would have done anything for her.

“You said you wanted a child, my love,” she whispered as she tipped his face up to hers. “I see what must be done, and I do it.”

He started to laugh, but it was lost under the crush of her mouth. Instead, a groan rumbled deep in his throat, and he surrendered everything to her. Mind, body, and soul.

She was determined, and he had learned long ago that it was useless to argue.

Chapter End Notes

Bang Bang. ;)

Thanks for your patience with this one. Hope it was worth the wait. <3
Owain stood on the battlements and waited. His eyes scanned the road below Skyhold, which remained empty, unchanged since the last pass of his searching gaze not half a minute earlier. He sighed and touched his coat, where he had tucked the single, flawless rose cut from the garden for this occasion, hidden in an inner pocket over his heart to save it from the wilting heat of his restless, fidgeting hands.

It had been two months apart. Two whole months—the longest stretch yet, and he feared they were only getting longer. His rational brain knew these separations were necessary, knew that Cassandra’s work rebuilding the Seekers—locating survivors, training new recruits, and righting the wrongs committed by her predecessor—was important, not just to her but to Thedas. And his own work, the ongoing work of the Inquisition, required him to be here at Skyhold or out there in the field, closing rifts and keeping the peace.

His head knew all this. But his heart? That traitorous part of him couldn’t help feeling the bottomless ache of her absence. It was there with him always, just as she used to be, in the cold, empty pillow where her warmth should have been, in the thin coat of dust on the books by her chair, in Blackwall’s shield at his back, not hers.

They wrote letters. It wasn’t the same, but it was something. The things he saw and did and thought during his days, the things he would have shared with her, he stored them up instead. Saved them to spill across a page of parchment later. He imagined her reading them beside a campfire along the road or in dim candlelight in some far flung inn.

His advisors had learned to deliver her letters immediately, and holding them for a more “convenient” time only meant risking his wrath. It was petulant, he knew. But—really—was it so hard to put the things in his hands?

He would tuck one in his pocket and steal away to his quarters at the first available moment, battling the urge to rip it open all the way up the stairwell. He’d hold out until he reached the sanctity of his bed, a chair by the fire, or the balcony before giving in and tearing off the seal so his desperate eyes could devour her words.

He had come to love these, the curves and lines and loops of her neat, efficient hand, just as he loved the woman herself. There was joy in reading her words, in hearing of her comings and goings, the
details of her daily life, no matter how trivial. And then there was the closing, a bittersweet reminder that she was his, always and forever, but of her words there would be no more until the next letter. He would squeeze his eyes shut and breathe and feel that ache in his chest. Then he would open them and begin again from the beginning, and repeat, until he could recite it from memory.

The last of her missives was sent from an Inquisition camp in the Dales, just a few days’ ride from Skyhold. It had marked today for her return, which was confirmed by scouts in the foothills. And so he found himself here on the battlements, watching this maddeningly empty road. A cool wind swept down from the mountains and ruffled his coat, bringing with it the crisp smell of fall.

Things had grown quieter around Skyhold these past months. Fiona and many of the rebel—no, “free,” he should stop saying “rebel”—mages had left to start the College of Enchanters, or else to go their own separate ways. A good number, however, had stayed, particularly the apprentices and old instructors. Mages still needed a place to learn, and many of them no longer had homes to return to. A formal substitute for the educational role of the Circles was one of the many items on the College’s agenda, but thus far they had been preoccupied with sorting out basic rules of governance. Nothing but indecision and petty squabbles, as Althea reported on her last visit. In the meantime, the Inquisition remained a place of shelter for mages with nowhere else to go.

Vivienne left shortly thereafter, presumably to return to Val Royeaux and counteract whatever Fiona and the others were building. There were rumors of her machinations among the “loyal” mages, though precisely what these efforts amounted to yet remained a mystery.

Varric went back to Kirkwall, but not without the promised game of Wicked Grace. To no one’s surprise, Josephine fleeced them all again, but this time Owain managed to bow out before lightening his pockets too much. He had not, however, shown the same forbearance in other areas. Just remembering the day-after hangover made him shudder to himself.

They had all gone to Val Royeaux to see Leliana installed as the new Divine. It was jarring to see her in those white robes and that ceremonial hat, a spymaster’s cowl no longer. She had lost no time in making changes, declaring new rights for mages and opening the doors of the Chantry to all. It was causing quite a stir among the clergy and nobility of southern Thedas, but Owain couldn’t bring himself to muster much sympathy for them.

Everything else was much the same. Josie continued to develop their connections. Cullen kept what remained of their forces in fighting condition, even if most of their missions now consisted of peacekeeping and rebuilding. Charter did an admirable job managing their spy network. Bull was still around, along with his Chargers. Blackwall, too, of course. Cole haunted his corner of the tavern attic as before, and Sera talked of leaving, of doing some work with the Jennies, but as far as he could tell, she had yet to do anything about it. He still checked his pillows nightly for bees.

Most evenings, Dorian would join him for a nightcap in his quarters. They would talk magic (Dorian) or the latest Inquisition gossip (also Dorian), or Cassandra’s latest letter (Owain). Sometimes they would talk about their fathers and their pasts, or about the state of Thedas now that the Breach was closed. There was unrest in Tevinter, Dorian had heard, upheaval from the Venatori and their complicity in Corypheus’s war. It would be time, soon, for him to go home. Owain didn’t want to think about losing yet another friend.

His mind drifted back to Cassandra, about his designs for their time together. It would be a brief stay, according to her letters, for her plans would shortly take her back to Orlais. But he had resolved to make the most of it, to make every moment count.

He glanced at the road again. Deserted.
Maker, he missed her. He missed her voice, her smell, the feel of her in his arms. He had no doubt she felt the same. It was always so... charged when she returned, when they reunited after a time apart. Robbed of each other’s touch, they would come together with terrifying intensity. It made his blood heat, thinking of it now, only sharpening his anticipation for her arrival.

Once, they didn’t even make it back to their room. Unable to bear the walk through the Great Hall and the delay of greetings and small talk, they had ducked into the forge, the old alcove where she used to sleep. Everything was hot kisses, gasps and moans, hands grasping and reaching and wanting.

They had shucked off their armor and clothing, or at least the necessarily pieces, and there above the furnaces, amid the crash of hammers and hiss of quenching metal, he’d fucked her, pressed his fingers between her legs to find her more than ready, freed his cock from his leathers and hilted himself in her waiting, willing heat, even as she braced herself against the wall, as her hungry mouth claimed his, as her leg wrapped around his hips and her hands clutched roughly at his shoulders. Fast and hard, hard and fast, he’d taken her. They had taken each other. Overheating. And the sounds she had made... Maker, she was perfect like that.

A banner flapped loudly in the breeze, and it jolted him back to reality. He shook himself and sighed, running a hand through his hair. His breeches were suddenly tighter, and he shifted uncomfortably in place.

Stop. It was not helping matters, and it would never do to meet her in this state.

Or would it?

Before he could get any further with that thought, a shout went up from the watch on the nearest tower, and he looked down at the road to see riders, at last. Three horses: the Lady Seeker and two more.

It was her. She was back. His heart did somersaults in his chest.

He followed their progress as they wound up the road to the fortress, as they made their way through the gates and pulled to a stop in the dusty courtyard. Cassandra swung off her mount and looked up at the walls. She knew where to find him by now. Her eyes caught his and lit with a smile meant just for him.

She handed the reins to Will Upton, who had proven himself to be quite a gifted stable hand, if a rather mediocre mage, in his months with the Inquisition. Owain felt an obligation to the boy, given their connection, but it had proved challenging to get through to the lad. At least Dennet was well pleased with him.

Cassandra had turned and was speaking to her companions. One was a tall, red-headed woman wearing heavy Seeker plate and a large sword on her back. Seeker Emery, if he recalled correctly. The other was a strapping young man with dark hair and bronzed skin in standard-issue armor. This must be Jasper, the new initiate. Cassandra had failed to mention that he was rather classically handsome.

Are you jealous? No, he decided. Or, yes, but only so much as he envied anyone who spent time with Cassandra when he could not.

He turned away from the scene in the courtyard and leaned back against the wall. His eyes wandered upward, tracking the white clouds as they skidded across the autumn-blue sky. This was a game he played with himself, this waiting, seeing how long he could hold himself back before running down
to greet her. His patience was like a cord held taut, strained to nearly breaking.

The sound of soles striking the steps in a well-known rhythm told him it was her. She paused as she gained the walkway, and his gaze slid toward her as if drawn by some invisible, undeniable force. The corner of his mouth ticked upward as their eyes met. A second later, his resolve snapped, and he all but ran toward her. She did the same, and they met somewhere in the middle, colliding in a grinning, laughing hug that squeezed the breath from his lungs and lifted her on her toes, swaying and skimming over the stones underfoot. Owain barely registered the dull crunch against his chest as he let himself get swept into the moment.

He set her down and kissed her, and all was right with the world. His fingers brushed her cheeks, and she brought her gloved hands up to hold them there. The press of her lips against his was familiar but no less precious for it, the taste of her sweeter than memory. She flicked her tongue against his, and it stoked the fire he had banked only minutes earlier. It roared to life in his belly.

They parted, and he rested his forehead against hers, still smiling like an idiot. And then, with a surge of panic, he remembered the rose in his pocket.

Shit.

He stepped back and shot her a wordless apology as he pulled the mangled flower from his coat. The stem had snapped just below the head, which dangled by a fiber now. The blossom itself was crushed, petals bruised and fanned in all the wrong directions.

There went his romantic gesture. He sighed. She said nothing but sucked her lips between her teeth and teased him with eyes full of mirth.

He looked at her and looked at the rose, and then he knew how to salvage this moment. He took what was left of the stem in one hand and pinched the petals with the other, tearing them off from the base. Still coasting on this whim, he loosened them in his palm and tossed them in the air, showering them in a flurry of petals. He grinned at her, probably looking far too pleased with himself.

Cassandra let go the laugh she was holding, but she couldn’t hide the charmed gleam in her eyes. There was very little she could hide, from him. Her face settled into a soft smile, the one he loved so much. Reaching up to pluck a petal from his hair, she brushed it slowly and gently down his forehead, between his brows, and over the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and savored it, felt his skin tingle at her touch.

She paused when she reached his lips. Opening his eyes and fixing them on hers, he pressed a kiss to her fingers. The petal was cool silk on his skin, her leather glove warm and smooth. With another smile, she pulled back and brought the petal to her nose and breathed its sweet scent.

“It is good to be home,” she said.

“Yes, it is.”

Her eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun, and he thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. But then, he was always thinking that, with her.

He took her hand and laced their fingers together to walk back toward the keep, taking the long way around.

“How was the journey?” he asked.

“We made good time. Were you waiting long?”
“No. It only felt like forever.”

She snorted. “Jasper’s horse had trouble on the road through the pass this morning. Perhaps a problem with its hoof.”

“That path has always been problematic,” he observed. “We really should put in some improvements if it’s going to be so well-traveled. As for the horse, you should ask Will to have a look at it.”

“I did. He seemed to think it was nothing a few days’ rest and an herbal poultice could not repair.”

“Then he’s probably right. If only he paid so much attention to his magic.”

“Does he not apply himself?” she asked with an arched brow. “He seems a conscientious sort.”

“He is. Selectively. I can barely get him to do his exercises. His defensive wards are all wrong, and he’s still having the dreams.” Owain sighed and rubbed at his jaw. “They’re still working out an alternative to the harrowings, but at this rate it’s only a matter of time before a demon gets through to him...”

He trailed off and looked up to find Cassandra eyeing him shrewdly.

“What?”

“Do you speak like this to him?”

“No…” Did he? “I— Well. I see no point in hiding the truth.”

“Not hiding it, but perhaps you could be more positive. Perhaps he needs you to believe in him before he can believe in himself.”

Owain chuckled. “Is the bold, brash Seeker advising me to be gentle?”

She was undeterred. “I can be harsh when the situation demands. Our soldiers in battle, or Chantry clerics...”

“Or stubborn Inquisitors?”

“Especially,” she said with a pointed look. “But he is almost a child. I have found that young students often respond better to encouragement, rather than threats.”

“I suppose it's just what I’m used to,” he muttered. “I don’t understand why he can’t grasp the concepts. I had students at the Circle, but they all showed at least some basic ability…”

He trailed off, realizing the full implications of his words. His students hadn’t had such challenges because any mage who couldn’t defend themselves against demons would have failed their harrowings. They’d be dead. Will was a frustrating lad to be sure, but he hardly deserved that fate.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he relented, remembering the stakes at hand.

“Mm,” she replied, which was her way of saying, “Of course I am.”

“And how goes the training of your protege?”

Cassandra considered a moment before answering. “Jasper makes reasonable progress. He has some bad habits with his shield that I have needed to correct. It is only by the Maker’s grace that he was on his vigil when Lord Seeker Lucius came to power, and he managed to escape the fate of his original
“Have you found any others yet?”

“No, but we have leads. Emery knows of Seekers who were sent abroad before the war. We may be able to contact them yet.”

“This is your meeting in Val Chevin.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “We may find some of them there.”

“And then?” he asked with half hope, half dread. “What’s next?” He knew that resolve in her look. It both impressed him and terrified him to hear of her plans. He was so proud of what she had done and what she wanted to do, but he feared it meant leaving him behind.

“We continue,” she said simply. “We build. The Seekers will need a new home. A place to train and gather our strength.”

He knew the answer but asked it anyway. “Can Skyhold not be that home?”

She shook her head. “You know it cannot. Skyhold is the Inquisition. To live up to our ideals, the Seekers of Truth must be independent, free from the claims of the Chantry, the Empire, and yes, even the Inquisition. We must defend the weak and speak the truth, free of any obligations that may color our judgement.”

“Must you be free of me?”

“Of course not.” She paused where she stood and tugged on the hand linked with his. Close like this, she propped her chin on his shoulder and looked up into his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

He did. A small smile played at his lips. “Then where will you go? If there is anything you need—ever—you have only to ask.”

She smiled back and turned to set her sights on the path ahead. They had almost reached the main keep. “There is a stronghold that belonged to the Seekers of old. A fortress in the Hunterhorn Mountains. Emery says it has fallen into disrepair, but the structure should be sound. It could be rebuilt, as we have done here at Skyhold. It would be an ideal place for us.”

The Hunterhorns. Owain tried to recall where he had seen that name on a map. His mind conjured a line of peaks somewhere north of Orlais, and his face fell. “That sounds awfully far.”

“It is, yes,” she admitted with a tinge of regret. “But the seclusion may be what we need at the moment.”

“Can I go with you?” he asked as he reached for the door. He was only half-joking.

“You are the Inquisitor,” she reminded him with a wistful smile, as if he could forget. “You can hardly drop everything to follow me across the continent.”

He said nothing as he held the door and followed her through it, grateful that she couldn’t see the look on his face. He could already feel that ache again.

--

In honor of her return, he had filled their room with candles. The flickering light was low and uneven, but he didn’t really need to see words he had learnt by heart long ago. Cassandra lay beside
him in their bed, head tucked against his shoulder and listening intently as he read.

He couldn’t help stealing glances at her. The soft press of her body bared against his was far more interesting than the book of verse in his hand. Her hazel eyes glowed in the candlelight, and he revised his thought from earlier. Sunlight was nice, but this was how they were most captivating.

Owain finished the poem and closed the book, leaning to toss it on a nearby table. He settled back next to Cassandra and rolled to prop himself over her.

Brushing the hair from his forehead, she hummed with pleasure and traced her fingers over the angles of his face.

“I missed this,” she whispered.

He rolled his hips against her. “Which part?”

“The poetry,” she said, smiling wickedly.

He growled with mock offense. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Everything is a challenge to you,” she chuckled, with a shake of her head. Something caught her attention, and her hands paused in their study of his face. She frowned, rubbing her thumb at a spot below his left eye. “What’s this?”

Shifting his weight to free one of his hands, he reached up and felt a fine, raised scar on his cheek. “Oh, this? Nothing. Another one for the collection. We cleaned up a nest of varghests when we were in the Approach last month. One of them popped out of nowhere and nicked me.”

She furrowed her brows at him. “I should speak to Blackwall about guarding your blind spots. He should be more careful.”

“You will do no such thing! He does a fine job. It’s my fault for being reckless. I underestimated the beasts.” He twinkled his eyes at her, both annoyed and amused by her concern. “Even you can’t protect me all the time.”

His answer clearly did not satisfy her, so he turned the question on her. “Are we doing inspections now? I could ask the same of you. What’s this here?” He pointed to a dark line along her shoulder.

“You were hit?” It was his turn to be upset. “You didn’t mention that in any letter.” He leaned back and touched a hand to the scar, feeling no magic there. “Nor did you see a healer.”

“It was a flesh wound only,” she said dismissively. “A scratch. Our potions and herbs were more than adequate.”

Owain sighed at the defiant glint in her eyes. What did it matter, these minor injuries? But somehow they felt bigger than that. They were reminders of all the moments they missed in each other’s daily lives. Reminders that they spent more time apart than together, these days. He didn’t want to think about that right now, so he leaned down to kiss her instead, to play out his frustration with a nip of his teeth and twist of his tongue. She kissed him back just as hard, and he almost forgot about the rest.

He broke from her mouth and moved down her jaw, grazing the delicate column of her throat. Every sensitive spot, he knew them all, and he made a tour of them now, drawing constellations on her
skin. Each sound he pulled from her was sweeter than the last, and it made him greedy for more.

His hand caressed up her side, from her hips to the curve of her breast.

“Are you sure it was the poetry?” he murmured beside her ear.

A soft, exquisite moan was his only answer. But as if refusing to be outdone, she dragged her hands down his body, scraping her nails over his chest and stomach, stroking her palm against the already hard length of him. He hissed out his breath and nearly saw stars. *Fuck, that felt good.*

But tonight was about her, not him, so he caught her hands and pinned them firmly in place on either side of her head.

“Don’t move,” he warned. She smirked and reached for him again the moment he let go, so he restrained her once more. “Do you think I’m joking? That’s an order, Lady Seeker.”

“Oh?” She wiggled her hips beneath him, though she stopped struggling otherwise. “I am not sure you outrank me anymore, Lord Inquisitor.”

“In this castle, I do,” he said, leaning down to brush his lips across her collarbone. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, His Worship must do some worshipping.”

Her laugh turned into a throaty gasp as he brought his mouth to her breast and swirled his tongue over its peak.

He took his time with her. Every scar, old and new, he blessed with a kiss. Every muscle and bone and curve and dip he measured with his fingers, mapped with his tongue. And she let him, keeping her hands where he’d put them with uncharacteristic patience. Patience that deserved to be rewarded.

Her knees fell open for him as he settled his shoulders between them. Anticipating what was to come, she bit her lip and craned her neck to look at him. Knowing she wanted this only made him want to tease. He paused and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, watching her watch him. He smoothed his hands up and down her thighs, making her squirm.

“Owain... Please.”

It was almost a whimper, and it was so sweet he couldn’t deny it. He locked his eyes on hers as he bent over her, starting from her navel and planting a line of slow kisses until he reached the soft curls between her legs. He parted them with a finger that he dragged along her folds, groaning at the hot slick he found there.

She jerked up from the mattress when he finally pressed his mouth to her heat. Breaking from his command, she brought her hands down to twist in his hair. Her nails dragged across his scalp as he dipped his tongue inside her, a sharper tug as he wrapped his lips around her pearl. It felt too good to stop her.

She was always so magnificent when she came. His name was like magic on her tongue.

He wiped his face on her inner thigh and stretched himself over her as she panted and quivered in her release. Leaning down to cover her mouth with an urgent kiss, he took her hand and twined their fingers together, pressing them into the pillow beside her head. His cock would wait no longer, so he pulled her leg up over his shoulder to angle her hips and spread her wide for him. And then at long last, he thrust himself home.

They both cried out as their bodies joined. The noise he made was a low, guttural groan. He hardly
knew where it came from. But fuck, she was so good. She took him so deep—so wet, so tight, so hot beneath him. Like they were made for each other. Digging her nails into the back of his hand, she bucked against him and pulled him down for a kiss that was all tongue and teeth and desire.

There was no way he’d last, not like this. From the sounds she was making, she wouldn’t either, for a second time. She arched her neck back and closed her eyes as he rocked into her, but he tilted her up to face him.

“Ah— no, please—” he begged, barely keeping it together now. “Look at me, Cass. Look at me, my love.”

She did as he asked, and he changed his mind again—for the last time, he was certain. No, as much as he loved her eyes by day or in candlelight, this, here, now was how he loved them best: heavy-lidded and fluttering in ecstasy, fixed on his, the distance of a mere breath away. She stood at the edge of a precipice of pleasure he had led her to, and she beckoned for him to follow, to fall with her, to fly tumbling and spinning over it.

And he was all too glad to go. One last snap of his hips, and he finished inside her, gasping her name, just as she did his. And it was perfect, like it always was.

He let her leg slide down to the mattress and rested his forehead against her shoulder as he caught his breath. He kissed her damp skin, just over the offending dagger scar. Then he rolled off of her, and they lay panting side by side. He was still holding her hand.

“I’m yours, Cassandra. You know that, right?”

“And I am yours. Always and forever, my love.”

--

Will waited for him at the gate, as he did most days when Owain was at Skyhold, ready with the horses for their morning ride. He was always early, no matter what time Owain arrived in the yard. Even on a wet, soggy morning like today.

Owain had taken to using these as their lessons, finding that the boy learned best in his comfort zone, and the physical exertion helped cut the awkward silences that settled on them otherwise. If he was honest with himself, he took his own selfish pleasure from these outings. They were a chance to get away from the keep and be free of the trappings of his title, if only for an hour.

“Good morning, Will,” he said brightly as he took the offered reins and hauled himself into the saddle. “Ready to practice those wards today?”

“Yes, Lord Trevelyan.” He nodded and waited for Owain to seat himself before mounting his own horse.

“You know you don’t need to call me that? I am not my brother.” They had been over this countless times.

“Yes, Your Worship.”

Well, that was no better.

He knew from experience that further discussion of this subject would get nowhere, so he just sighed and pulled his hood up against the weather. Nodding to the guard at the gate, he urged his horse through. Ember, he had named her, and she was every bit as fast as promised. Winding mountain
roads, however, were no place for speed, so he kept her at a slow trot until they reached the even ground of the valley below.

Their usual route took them down through a line of trees and along a shallow mountain stream that swelled and shrank with the seasons. It was a relative trickle now, giving them plenty of open space to walk their horses side by side.

The air was damp. Not enough for proper rain, just a thick fog that dusted their clothes with silver droplets and wreathed their view of the mountains above. A tough day for fire magic, though a good one for keeping it under control. Their lessons often hinged on the latter.

Will’s magic was all or nothing, either completely suppressed or spilling out when he least expected. It was this lack of control that worried Owain. It was the kind of thing that led to accidents, the kind of thing that left him prone to possession. Too many openings for a demon to hook its claws in, to crack your shell and make you give, make you lose everything.

Fire was Will’s natural element, just as it was his, but the one time he had tried to teach him to wield it, they had nearly started a forest fire. Without Owain’s precautionary barriers and quick reflexes, they would not have emerged unscathed.

Will had lessons with the other apprentices back at Skyhold, of course, but it was clear to Owain from the instructors’ reports that he was lagging behind. Owain tried not to make these sessions feel like remediation, but the boy had to know by now. It was plain in the way his shoulders stiffened when they met in the courtyard each morning, in the grim, stoney look that met Owain’s every suggestion.

Still, he had to try, and he thought now of Cassandra’s advice. Be more positive. Sure. The trick was always in the details.

“I heard you did a fine job with the young Seeker’s horse,” he began, trying to coax the boy out of his shell. “Master Dennet speaks very highly of your instincts.”

Will shifted in his saddle but said nothing.

“Impressive for a lad your age,” he went on. Maker, anything to fill the silence. “Did you learn all of that from your father? Back on the estate?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Did you know we used to play together, as boys? He and my brother and a few others. We had the run of the place. Did a fair amount of work in the stables, too, since I was old enough to hold a shovel. I bet it was much the same for you, no?”

“Since I was five, my lord.”

“Ah, then that makes you quite the veteran of horse shit.”

The boy furrowed his brows and shot him an odd look from the corner of his eyes. Owain had run out of things to say, so they rode on quietly for a while.

After about a mile, the stream fed into a small shallow pool where they stopped. They swung off their horses and let them drink, settling on some rocks near the water’s edge.

It was here that they conducted the bulk of their lessons. Ice magic was what they used, practicing spells that drew on the moisture in the air and in the pond. Safer than fire, and easier to contain. But
even this proved a challenge for the boy.

They started, as always, with the basics. Meditation and mental exercises to ready the spirit and gather willpower to balance and fuel their magic. For the lad, these were meant to teach focus and control, build resources and habits that would help him fend off attacks from the malicious entities of the Fade. They remained useful even for Owain, a chance to clear his mind and center himself, to sharpen his focus for the tasks ahead.

The inward nature of these exercises, however, made it difficult to tell how closely Will adhered to instructions and how diligently he practiced these skills. From the results of his spell casting, not very. Owain reminded himself again to be positive.

To his surprise, it was Will who broke the silence this time.

“May I ask you a question?”

His eyes snapped toward the boy, who hugged his knees to his chest and seemed deeply interested in the water lapping at the foot of the boulder on which he perched.

“Yes, of course. Anything.”

A pensive moment followed as Will considered his question and Owain racked his brain for what might come next.

What questions did boys ask? What was he thinking at that age? Despite his youngish appearance, Will was in fact almost fourteen. Was that too young to be interested in girls? Or boys? Or… Shit. He was not equipped to have that conversation. A wave of mild panic washed over him.

Then the boy spoke, and it was all for naught.

“How do you become Tranquil?” Will asked.

Owain tilted his head and blinked at the question. First relief, and then confusion.

“What… What makes you ask that?”

The boy shrugged, still avoiding eye contact. “I heard some of the others talking about it. They said it’s a way to get rid of your magic. So you can’t hurt anyone.”

“Why would you want to get rid of your magic? It’s a gift—”

“No, it’s not!” Will was suddenly on his feet, glaring at Owain with his hands curled into fists at his sides. “And I’m sick of everyone saying that! It’s not a gift. It’s a curse! Everyone’s afraid of me. They made me leave. I had to come here. And I can’t do anything right!”

The outburst took Owain by surprise. “That’s not—”

“I can see it in your eyes!” he spat. “You’re only teaching me because you feel sorry for me. You feel guilty. Well, sorry. Sorry you got stuck with a failure. Sorry I’m not a genius like the others!”

Owain’s brows shot into his hair, and his mouth dropped open. He didn’t know what to say, but the boy’s words touched a nerve within him. He bit his teeth together and ground out a response.

“Fine. You asked, so as your teacher, I’ll answer. The Rite of Tranquility severs a mage’s connection to the Fade. Some mages seek it of their own volition, but more often, it’s done as a punishment. A check for dangerous mages. It is done with a lyrium brand, by a First Enchanter, or Templars. And
“yes, it will get rid of your magic.”

The boy was still standing, but his shoulders had gone soft, like the fight had gone out of him.
“Then, maybe—”

“But you should know, it also gets rid of everything else.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean everything. Your imagination, your creativity, your emotions. All of it.”

“But, why would—”

“Your magic is part of you, whether you like it or not. Losing it means losing everything else that makes you you.” Owain found his temper rising, but he wasn’t willing to stop. “Are you ready for that? To never dream again? Never fall in love? Feel joy with your family and the people you care about? Because that’s what you’d be giving up. Just because you can’t bear to do a few simple exercises.”

The fists were back. Will’s brown eyes flashed with anger. “You don’t understand!”

“Then make me.”

“You’re— You’re the Inquisitor! You’re one of the greatest mages in history! I’m just—nobody! I just want everything to go back to normal. I just want to work in the stables and forget all this.”

Owain studied the boy and sighed through his nose. If he only knew how similar they really were. That Owain wasn’t so great at all. And if he could, he’d trade everything for a normal life. His anger disappeared.

“Look, you can do that if you want,” he said gently. “No one’s asking you to give up what you like and what you’re good at. We just need you to learn to defend yourself. For your safety, and everyone else’s. There’s no easy fix here. You are your magic, and the sooner you stop fearing it, the sooner you can learn to master it.”

Will said nothing. He had crumpled, curled up on the rock again. His face looked like he was about to cry.

Owain sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. Perhaps he was going about this all wrong. He tried to think back to his own development as a mage, those early days at the Circle, and his own struggle to accept what he was. How had he done it? What was it that reminded him of who he was, even now?

He got up from the rock and crossed over to the boy, crouching beside him.

“Here. Try this.” Owain closed his fist and opened it, calling forth a small, controlled flame in his hand.

The boy stared at it in wonder, and then frowned at him. “I thought you said we couldn’t do fire magic yet. Too dangerous.”

Owain shook his head. “You know the meditation we did earlier? Do that, but concentrate on pulling the tiniest bit of power from the Fade, like a thread. Channel it through you, through your mana, and control it with your will, like an extension of yourself.”
The boy was intrigued, in spite of himself. He gripped his hand by the wrist and screwed his face in concentration. A small flame burst to life in his palm. He gasped in surprise and then recoiled as it expanded into a fireball.

“Watch it!” Owain swept the magic away with a wave of his arm. “But that was good. Try it again.”

He did, managing to hold the spell for a few seconds before it sputtered out.

“Good,” said Owain, fixing his eyes on the boy and pointing to the spot on his palm where the fire had been. “Now remember. That magic? That’s you. That’s yours. You’re in control. Never forget that.”

Will looked at him with cautious understanding.

“Do it again.”

And he did. Again, and again. Until finally, he could conjure the flame at will and hold it steady, neither fading nor exploding out of control.

It was mid-morning by now, and that was enough for one day. Will was quiet again on the ride back. He didn’t speak until they returned to Skyhold.

As they parted, Will took Ember’s reins and looked Owain in the eyes. He thought he detected a newfound respect there.

“Thank you, Inquisitor.”

Owain nodded and watched the boy as he walked away. As Will headed back to the stables, he balled his free hand and opened it, fascinated by the tiny yellow flicker that danced in his palm.

Owain smiled to himself as he turned to go back to the keep.

--

Dearest Cassandra,

I hope this letter finds you well and that the road has been kind to you. We received a request from our allies in Orzammar. They’re asking for Inquisition assistance to investigate some seismic activity that’s disrupting their mining operations in Ferelden. We leave for the Storm Coast tomorrow, and I am not looking forward to fighting darkspawn again.

Don’t be too pleased with yourself, but you were right. Will has improved markedly. He can successfully handle simple spells now, and he tells me he is no longer having so many nightmares. In fact, he tells me far too many things. Who knew that boy would turn out to be such a talker? I daresay I now know more about the Inquisition’s horses than Dennet himself.

I hope your meetings in Orlais went well. I think often of your last visit to Skyhold. You’re so beautiful, my love, and I miss you terribly. Until the next time.

Yours,
O

[Enclosed: a dried rose petal]

--
My love,

We met two more Seekers and an apprentice at Val Chevin. They were as surprised as Emery to hear about Lucius and his attempted destruction of our order. But we are in agreement that we must rebuild. I have shared with them the information in the Lord Seeker’s tome. I am determined that there should be no more secrets among us, that we will all know our past sins. That is the only way to move forward. We ride now for Hunterhorn Keep, to see what may be done there.

Be careful in the Deep Roads. There is much danger that lurks there. I wish I could go with you, to be your shield.

I do not know when my path will next lead me to Skyhold, but know that your love sustains me. You are my breath and light and life.

Always and forever,

C

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the ongoing support! Your comments give me life. <3

According to my calculations, I have about 4 chapters left. Next time: Trespasser. :D
Back to the Winter Palace for politics, dancing, and found family, in more ways than one.

The longest chapter ever. A fluff, angst, smut trifecta! Enjoy!

(NSFW, of course.)

“Another parade, another bloody negotiation.”

Cullen grumbled just within earshot. Owain turned in his saddle and hid his smirk behind a friendly wave at the throng gathered to watch them ride toward the gates of Halamshiral. The crowds were a bit smaller each time they went through Orlais these days. Or was that just his imagination?

“You sound almost as enthusiastic as me,” he let slip from the corner of his mouth.

At this, Josephine swept them with a look that was at once both threatening and perfectly genial.

“Smiles, both of you,” she hissed through her teeth. “Remember, this is the Game. We must take care how we present ourselves. Our every move will be scrutinized.”

“I still don’t understand why Leliana had to call this Exalted Council at all,” Cullen sighed, making no secret of his scowl. “She’s managed to keep Orlais out of our hair for over a year.”

“At increasing political cost, yes,” Josie replied, with the air of someone explaining something for the hundreth time. (Perhaps not so many, but close.) “Even the influence of Divine Victoria has limits. And the question of the Inquisition’s role now that Corypheus is two-years dead can no longer be ignored.”

“How about leaving us bloody well alone?” Cullen muttered. “That’s a good enough answer for me.”

“If only,” Owain agreed, as if wishing could make it true. His eyes scanned the gallery of finely dressed nobles that lined the outer walls as they passed. “But I suppose they all want something from us? As usual?”

Josie nodded. “Of course. Orlais would seek to control us. Gaspard has not forgotten our role in placing him on the throne, but he has new threats to contend with, as well as those within the Council of Heralds who do not owe us such a debt.”

“If they think we’ll simply go along with whatever they plan—”
“From their many marriage proposals, Commander, I would say they have very specific plans for you.”

Cullen’s face darkened. “I thought I asked you to burn those,” he growled.

“I had to read a few. They were rather… colorful, shall we say.”

Owain snorted, and Josie turned on him with a playful glint in her eyes. “Don’t think they do not come for you as well, Inquisitor.”

He sputtered, and it was Cullen’s turn to laugh. “Still? Hasn’t word got ‘round by now that I’m not exactly available?”

“You and Lady Cassandra are not married. Even if you were, I am not entirely certain the offers would cease.” He narrowed his eyes to slits, and she chuckled. “Never underestimate nobility with something to gain.”

He could think of nothing else to say. Every time he thought he understood how this world worked, someone would prove him wrong. So he sighed and focused on the road ahead.

“In any case,” she continued, “it is the Fereldans we need to worry about. They would see us disbanded entirely. They consider the Inquisition a foreign military power. Our very presence at Skyhold unsettles them.”

Owain scoffed. “You’d think a nation that remembers the Blight would be a little more accommodating to the people who saved them from destruction.”

Even without looking, he could sense Cullen’s Fereldan pride bristling at his words. “You could say that about all of them. Ungrateful little—"

“Smiles, gentlemen!” Josie interjected. They had almost reached the palace. “We are just getting started.”

--

The Exalted Council was a highly orchestrated affair. Gaspard took no chances for a repeat of Celene’s final ball, tightening security and sending a representative in his stead. Queen Anora had done the same. The Inquisition, however, was not afforded such conveniences. Owain would gladly have sent Josephine to handle all of this, but his attendance in person was obnoxiously mandatory.

The Inquisition had sent Charter, Iron Bull, and the Chargers as a ground team to prepare for their arrival. There was plenty of work to be done gathering intelligence and learning the lay of the venue, not to mention the necessary logistics of hosting their full delegation.

They had made themselves at home over the past few weeks. A small barracks on the palace grounds had been assigned to them, and about half of it had been cleared and converted into a makeshift tavern.

“Charter wanted to play it safe and keep to ourselves until you arrived, but the boys needed a place to unwind,” Bull explained as he pushed open the door and led him into an open room split by a long table and benches. In the corner, a stack of crates served as a bar, its surface topped with an army of glass bottles. Krem was behind it pulling a pint. Where they had managed to secure such a plentiful supply of alcohol, Owain wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“INKY!”
Sera’s arms circled his neck before his eyes could even adjust to the low light.

“Sera! It’s— good— to see you, too,” he said, recovering his balance and extracting himself from her hug. “How are the Jennies?”

“Oh, alright,” she replied, releasing him to slouch against the edge of the table and rest her bare feet on the bench. “Crashed a caravan from some Lord Piddleshits in Val something-or-other on the way here. (Stupid names, Orlais.) Anyway, turns out it was full of wine! Dorian says it’s good wine, too. Expensive. That’ll teach him to cheat his people.” She paused to snicker. “You should have seen his face.”

So that’s where their stash came from. He definitely didn’t want to know. “I see...”

“But here’s you! And everyone! Glad to be back, all stuffed together again.”

“Is everyone here?” he asked, searching the room. He spotted Varric at a table by the window, arguing over a scatter of parchment with a serious-looking fellow in Free Marcher garb. Otherwise, he recognized some of the Chargers, but that was it.

“Oh, they’re here somewhere,” she said. “Rainier’s probably in the stables. Still all beardy. Dorian’s been here all week. Big nobby ambassador now. Same though.”

“Yes, he wrote to tell me about that. What about—”

“Owain!”

He turned, and there in the doorway was the answer to his unfinished question. Cassandra closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him. What breath wasn’t taken by her embrace was stolen by her kiss. Maker, it was good to hold her. He hadn’t seen her in nearly three months.

He must have held her too long, because the next thing that registered was a tap on his shoulder.

“Hey boss, they’ve got a nice room for you up at the palace, but we have some bunks in the next room if you two need some privacy.”

Cassandra pulled back and flashed her eyes at Bull. “That won’t be necessary.”

Owain laughed and took the mug of ale that was handed to him. He and Cassandra sat down at the table as Sera bounded off to speak to the others.

“Did you arrive just today?” he asked before taking a long drink.

“I left Emery and the others in Val Royeaux and rode down this morning. They will finish our business in the city.”

“Is the keep nearly done now? Perhaps it’s time to plan a visit to the Hunterhorns. I’m disappointed that I still haven’t been.”

“It is too far,” she said with a wistful shake of her head. “Josie would never forgive me if I kept you from Skyhold for so long—you would spend weeks simply traveling. It is enough for us to meet in the capital.”

She was right, of course. He dropped his voice, just for her. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I you,” she replied in a matching volume, her eyes roving his face. “The sight of you warms the heart.”
She smiled at him then, and his heart sang. Seeing her again, always it was like missing pieces of himself being pushed into place.

“Are you two done staring at each other?”

Cassandra turned toward the interloper and narrowed her eyes. “Varrie.”

“That’s Viscount of Kirkwall Varrie, Lady Seeker.”

“Viscount?” she frowned. “They put you in charge? Of all people?”

“Well, strictly speaking, no one else wanted the job. Turns out you fund a few reconstruction projects, express a few opinions, and the nobles start giving you responsibilities.”

Owain couldn’t believe it either. “Didn’t think you were the type for civic leadership.”

“They picked me because I got the harbor and the businesses running again,” Varrie shrugged. “They want shit fixed, and I can do that. Besides, my secretary Bran here does most of the work. Keeps me in line.” He gestured over his shoulder at the man he’d argued with earlier.

“I am the Seneschal, Master Tethras. Not your secretary.”

Varrie waved him off and reached into his coat for a paper packet that he handed to Owain. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. I was hoping to catch you before the summit began. Got a bit of a present for you.”

Owain unfolded the parchment and out dropped a heavy metal key. He caught it in his hand and scanned the words on the page. “Is this a deed? For property?”

“You’re the proud new owner of a Hightown estate,” said Varrie, clapping him on the shoulder. “Congratulations! You should stop by sometime. I’ve had it cleaned up. It’s pretty nice. For Kirkwall anyway.”

“Master Tethras!” Bran interrupted, wringing his hands. “You can’t actually do that! It’s against protocol. Proper distribution of empty estates requires approval from the Council.”

Varrie sighed and rolled his eyes theatrically. “What’s the point of being Viscount if I can’t abuse my power to give shit to my friends? Isn’t that tradition? Besides, I thought you were going to leave us to talk.”

“But you— ugh!” Bran threw his arms up in disgust and stalked away toward the bar.

“I hope you’re paying him well.”

“Too well.”

Owain studied the deed again. “Why does this say ‘Comte’ Trevelyan? Is that me?”

“Oh, I almost forgot! It comes with a title. Not that you need any more, but consider it a gift. I don’t know how this Exalted Council business will end for you, but this way you’ll always have a place in Kirkwall, if you need it.”

It struck him then that this was the first time he had ever owned anything outright, and the weight of it filled him with unexpected emotion. “Th— thank you, Varrie.” He cleared his throat and turned toward Cassandra. “How about it, Cass? Would you fancy being a Comtesse? Even if it is Kirkwall?”
She opened her mouth to reply but stopped short, a crease forming between her brows. Then her eyes flicked to the doorway, which had just opened.

“Ah, Cullen! Josephine!” she exclaimed and hurried away to greet them.

He stared after her in puzzlement and then leaned toward Varric. “What did I do?”

Varric chuckled and hooked his leg over the bench to take Cassandra’s empty seat. “I think the question she heard was a little different than the one you asked.”

“Ah.” Idiot.

“So have you asked her yet?”

“No…” Why was everyone so interested in that?

“But you are going to propose, aren’t you? Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“Oh course I have, I just…” He just what?

“It’s not hard, you know,” Varric pointed out. “A little romance, a declaration of your undying love. Hell, Cassandra reads my serials. I’m sure she’ll love whatever you come up with.”

Owain shook his head and thumbed the handle of his mug. “It’s not that. I just… I don’t know the first thing about marriage. I don’t even know where to start. Never even been to a wedding. Isn’t that sad? To be a grown man and know nothing about these things?”

If he was honest with himself, it terrified him. Of course he had thought about it, even before Leliana changed the Chantry laws, and yes, he wanted it. His future was tied to Cassandra’s in every other way, and there was no doubt he wanted to spend it with her.

But in the world he was born in, marriage was a contract. It was about lineage and status and branches on the family tree. Love was nice to have, if you were lucky, after you satisfied a host of other concerns. His parents’ union had certainly been that way. And after living so much of his life in the Circle, what other examples did he have? No peers of his had ever gotten married, much less had an openly acknowledged relationship. If there was another way, he had no idea what it looked like.

He had convinced himself it didn’t really matter. They were committed already. Chantry blessings and legal records meant nothing to him. Clearly, however, no one else seemed to agree.

“I just never thought it was going to happen to me,” he finished, realizing Varric was still waiting for him to speak. “It was always for someone else.”

After another long pause, Varric whistled through his teeth. “The Chantry really did a number on you mages, huh?”

“You can take us out of the Circle, but we can’t get the years back.” Owain washed down his bitterness with the rest of his ale.

“Well, give it some thought anyway,” Varric pressed gently. “Remember, this isn’t the abstract. This is you and Cassandra. You’ll figure things out. You’ve faced much worse.”

His eyes drifted across the room and found Cassandra standing near the door, listening to Cullen. She looked up and met his gaze, sending him a tiny smile that felt private, despite all the other people in the room. In that moment, it was more reassuring than she would ever know.
“I suppose it can’t be worse than the Breach,” he sighed.

“Exactly. Once you’ve defeated a darkspawn magister, everything else is cake.”

He stewed in his thoughts after Varric rose to get a drink, but he did not have long alone. Sera returned a minute later, dropping onto the bench and propping her elbow on the table. Ale sloshed over the side of her mug as she leaned in confidentially.

“So, Inky,” she whispered loudly, “what’s this about you tyin’ it?”

He lifted his shoulders in a noncommittal shrug.

She responded with a sage nod. “Better do it soon. Cass needs it on the regular.”

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Josie whisked him away for a last-minute briefing before the welcome ball set to begin in just a few hours. His head swam with names and titles, along with a litany of topics to discuss and sore spots to avoid.

Was it Duke Germain whose daughter had just eloped with an apostate? Or was that Marquis de Blanc? Was Bann Sigurd the one who bred Mabari, or was that Lord Brandon? Hell, they were Ferelden—safe to say probably both.

By the time he got away, it was already late afternoon, and he was desperate for a moment alone. He closed the door to his spacious suite in the Guest Wing and sighed at the sudden quiet.

The last light of the day filtered through the curtained windows. He went to one of them and pushed it open, admitting a cool breeze that carried the scent of trees from the courtyard below. He breathed deeply and pretended he was somewhere else.

Someone had dropped off his pack, and his evening attire hung neatly from the door of an ornate wardrobe that loomed in the corner. Ignoring it for now, he slipped his coat from his shoulders and tossed it on the bed. Then he stripped his shirt and threw that on top.

Beside the wardrobe stood an enormous tri-fold mirror, bigger than anything they had at Skyhold. What could be more Orlesian? Owain perched on the edge of the bed and looked across at his reflection. His own tired eyes stared back at him. He frowned and his brows furrowed, in triptych.

A bandage covered his left arm from elbow to palm. He studied it for a moment, then tugged the end free and began to unwind the fraying fabric. He dropped his arm, and the white ribbon of it spiraled to the floor.

As the bandage fell away, the murky light of the Fade spoiled the room’s dim calm. His mark had spread in the years since Corypheus, the rate accelerating in recent months. Where it used to pulse intermittently, the glow was now near constant, no longer confined to the gash on his hand but running up his arm in veins of menacing green. He kept it wrapped more for other people’s benefit than his own, though the pressure did help with the pain.

That, too, was an ever-present blot on his awareness, a dull throb that beat not in time with his own heart but to some alien rhythm of its own. When it flared, he could feel shooting pain along every inch from his hand to his jaw. Trying to loosen the stiffness in his joints, he stretched his arm out now, squeezed his fingers into a fist, and flexed them out flat. Repeat.

It wasn’t just physical. The anchor was also key to his abilities as a rift mage. It enabled a connection
to the Fade deeper than anything he had ever learned at the Circle or experienced in his dreams. It used to take effort and concentration to draw that power through the Veil and bend it to his will. Now, it poured out unbidden, raw and terrible, fusing with his own mana sometimes so completely that he couldn’t say where it ended and he began. His magic had never been stronger. He could feel it in every burst of flame, every bolt cast.

And he feared the cost.

He’d read everything he could find on rifts, the Fade, and ancient elven orbs. He’d written letters, searched archives, consulted every authority he trusted and even some he didn’t. None of them could tell him definitively what this was or how to get rid of it. Solas was the only one who had ever pretended to understand the anchor, and all trace of him had scattered to the winds.

He took a deep breath and shook out his hand, rising to investigate the crystal decanter of amber liquid that sat on a small table between the windows. He lifted the stopper and sniffed. Satisfied, he poured a measure into one of the offered glasses and downed the first half, leaning a shoulder against the window to sip at the rest.

No one ever entered unannounced, except Cassandra. It was her now, slipping through and shutting the door quietly behind her. She set her pack on the floor and dropped her gloves in a chair. He stayed where he was and watched.

She frowned at the sight of his glowing mark and crossed to him.

“It is worse, isn’t it? Since the last time.”

He nodded once and brought the glass to his lips again.

She arched a disapproving brow and took the drink from him, setting it on the windowsill out of reach. Taking his hand in hers, she brushed her fingertips lightly across his palm, following the trail of green as it blazed up his forearm. The anchor flared, and he winced.

Pain, fear, doubt. Here in the safety of her presence, he laid it all open. He stopped trying to hide and let it show in the strain about his eyes and every quaking breath.

It was all reflected back in the worry on her face. She stroked gently up his shoulder and up to his cheek, where her thumb traced the line of his jaw. He closed his eyes and tried to take it all in. Her touch always said more than words ever could.

“What happens when it reaches my heart?” he whispered as he blinked his eyes open.

She swallowed hard and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

He didn’t expect her to.

She rocked forward and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, cool fingers tilting his face down to hers. He looked into her eyes and let them swallow him whole. If he searched long enough, he might find the world there.

Was it the fear of death? The thought of being parted from her forever? Or maybe he just didn’t want to think at all anymore, but close as they stood, it was still not close enough. He needed more, needed her, needed them to be as close as possible, in whatever time he had left. Erase the months apart, store up promises for the future.

So he kissed her again. And again. And again. Breathed her in and filled his senses with her. He
pushed his hand in her hair, trapped her lips between his teeth, let his hunger run rampant. It was by no means one-sided. Her fingers curled at his shoulders and the nape of his neck, and a moan hummed deep in her throat. She shoved him back, hard, against the wall, and he pulled her along with him, as if they could melt as one into the plaster.

Her armor was in the way. The cold steel of it against his bare skin, set against the heat of her—the contrast made him shiver and fueled the fire in his belly. His fingers worked at the ties and clasps that held her together. He knew them by feel now.

That is, if he could focus. But her hands played at his hips, stroking the front of his breeches and tugging at the waist. It was utterly distracting.

He gasped and broke his mouth away. “That’s hardly fair, love,” he protested. “You had a head start.”

“Mm.” She smirked and smoothed her hands down his chest, making no effort to assist him. “Then you will need to catch up.”

“Not going to help me?”

She just looked at him with a sly smile and shook her head before reaching for him again and leaning up to plant slow kisses along his jaw.

Fuck. He hissed as she managed to free hiscock and proceeded to drag the wrap of her fingers along its length. Despite his familiarity with her armor and its intricacies, his mind blanked and fingers fumbled as all blood in his body rushed elsewhere.

Finally, finally, he tore the last buckle loose, and then all of it was gone. In a frenzy, he whipped her tunic up and off and crushed her to his chest, the warm, soft entirety of her finally free for his hands to claim.

And claim he absolutely would. But not here, apparently, since she pulled back and took his hand and led him toward the bed. He stumbled after her, both of them kicking off their boots and breeches along the way. As she crawled backwards onto the bed and he scrambled up to follow, his eyes caught their movement in the mirror on the other side. It gave him ideas.

“Turn around, love.”

She flashed him a questioning look, even as she did as he asked, turning to kneel away from him on the bed. He fit himself behind her, pulled her back against his chest, and kissed the pulse below her ear. Their eyes met through the glass, and then she understood.

“Look how beautiful you are,” he whispered against her skin. “I want to see you, my love. All of you.”

He meant every word, letting his eyes linger boldly over her curves, the long line of her body wrapped in his, the tension in her powerful legs folded beneath her on the sheets. His knowledge of her form was an indelible memory, but each time with her still felt like a revelation. Perhaps just as fascinated as he was, she followed his every move and bit her lip in anticipation.

He did not just use his eyes. His hands wandered in retaliation for the way she had toyed with him earlier. He swept a light touch up her thighs, skated across her hips, squeezed the swell of her breasts and rolled her hard nipples. He scratched his stubble over the sensitive spot where her neck met shoulder, then apologized with his tongue. All the while, he watched her, watched the flush rise in her cheeks, watched the heat burn in her eyes. She was his so completely like this. He made her
whimper, made her squirm, made her rock in his lap. She wanted more, and so did he, but still he held her fast.

“You can have me soon enough,” he teased. “But first, I want to watch you come apart for me. Would you like that?”

In answer, she pushed her knees apart and made a soft, needy sound that almost broke his resolve.

Almost. Instead, he smirked and trailed his fingers down her belly and through the curls between her legs. She was so wet, it made him groan.

Almost. Instead, he pressed his fingers through her slick, drawing slow circles, slipping two inside her and making her eyes flicker and roll in the mirror. She grabbed his wrist to guide him, to hold him in place as she took her own pleasure from his hand. Reaching up to grip his hair, she dragged his face close for a kiss. He didn’t stop, wouldn’t have stopped, not for all the world.

Except she pulled his hand away and looked at him—not his reflection, but him, craning over her shoulder to meet him face to face.

“Owain, I need you... Now. Please.”

That was a request he couldn’t refuse.

He let her go, and she leaned forward, bracing against the mattress as he pulled her hips to him, pressing at the small of her back to angle her just so. He paused a moment to smooth his hands in appreciation over her lovely, perfect ass, soon to be flush against his hips. She looked at him and called his name again. Always so impatient.

He pushed into her slowly, groaning with every inch. When he had given all of himself, he snapped his hips roughly, just once. She gave a sharp cry and turned to him again.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped, half plea, half demand.

“As my lady commands,” he said, doing exactly that. He abandoned all restraint, setting a hard pace, gripping her hips and driving himself into her irresistible heat, watching through the mirror as her breasts bounced with every stroke. Her hands clawed at the sheets as he took her.

It was all too much, but he refused to let himself go before her. So he reached forward and pulled her up again, kneading her breasts with his fingers and teasing between her legs. She keened at his touch and arched against him, even as she continued to move on his cock.

He was too far gone. There was no more holding back. Nothing left but to beg, bending over to whisper his petitions in her ear. “Come with me, my love... Come with me.”

And so she did. He thrust deep one more time and spilled himself within her, just as she fell apart in his arms. They cried out and collapsed in a sweaty, tangled mess. As they lay there remembering how to breathe, he leaned down to kiss the back of her neck, blessed each knob of her spine. He wished they could stay like this forever.

But his arm glowed between them, a merciless reminder of reality.

“I love you, Cassandra,” he said, his voice breaking on the words. “The time we have had... I would not trade it for anything.”

She looked at him fiercely and brushed the hair out of his eyes. “Nor would I, my love. There must
be a way to stop this, and I will find it. I will not lose you, Owain. Not to this. Not without a fight.”

Overwhelmed, he said nothing else and buried his face in her shoulder. The tears that slipped from his eyes mingled with the sweat on her skin.

He wanted so badly to believe her.

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He asked Cassandra to save him a dance, and he was soon convinced that without that to look forward to, he might not have made it through the evening at all.

At Josephine’s behest, he introduced himself to the chief representatives for Orlais and Ferelden. Duke Cyril de Montford was a young member of the Council of Heralds and a professed admirer of the Inquisition. Owain had yet to discern what agenda was hidden beneath his smooth manners and gilded mask, but as to the existence of one, he had no doubt. In contrast, Teagan Guerrin, Arl of Redcliffe, was perfectly blunt in his disdain for all the Orlesian ceremony on display. He was just as forthright about Ferelden’s position on the Inquisition. Getting both nations to agree on a suitable compromise was going to be a challenging task, indeed.

He found Leliana at the front, set a bit apart from the crowds that milled about the rest of the ballroom. Appropriate, perhaps, for the Divine. He joined her at the railing overlooking the dance floor.

“The first time I came to the Winter Palace, I was eighteen,” she said without taking her eyes from the scene. “I was dazzled. I had never seen anything so fine, so bright. It’s all still here, but I no longer see that same palace.”

“You sound as if you miss it,” he said, leaning against the cool marble.

A wistful smile curved her lips. “It is easier on the heart to see only the surface. Now, I see the suffering of those who make it shine. Many people overlook that pain, but I am Divine, and I cannot be blind.”

“It’s good to see you, Leliana.”

“And you, Inquisitor,” she replied, turning to look at him at last. “Welcome back to Halamshiral. Much has changed since the last time you were here.”

“Not so much.” He squinted at the crowd below. “Everyone out there still wants to bring us down, don’t they?”

“Perhaps not all,” she ventured. “But yes, many do fear the Inquisition. I will do what I can to allay their fears. I may not be your spymaster anymore, but I will help however I can.”

“Any way I can make it easier on you?”

She gave it a moment of thought. “Let yourself be seen. Introduce yourself to the delegates. They need a face to put to the legends.”

He chuckled. “You sound just like Josie, telling me to be social.”

“Is that surprising?”

“Not in the slightest.”
Her laugh was always astonishing. “Ah, I miss working with you. And Josie and Cullen. I didn’t realize how much I would miss them until they weren’t there.”

“We miss you, too. Charter is excellent, but she doesn’t quite have your style.”

“Few do, Inquisitor,” she said, smiling again.

Josephine appeared then to speak to Leliana. He felt like an intruder, so he left them to it and went in search of a drink.

Vivienne cornered him on his way out of the room, calling his name just as he reached the doors. Obliged to turn back, he waited as she sailed toward him, arrayed in an admittedly stunning gown of whitest silk. Dorian would be jealous.

“How have you been, darling? It’s been ages.”

“Still the Dragon Age, last I checked.”

She gave him a tolerant smile. “Your friends at the College of Enchanters are causing quite a stir.”

*Not this again.* “You mean by proving that mages can rule themselves? That we can survive outside Chantry prisons without posing a danger to those without our abilities?”

“That remains to be seen, my dear,” she countered smoothly. “Institutions are meant to withstand the test of time, and that is the standard the College must meet. There is much still to be desired regarding the education of young mages, I hear. That was one of the strengths of the Circle system.”

“It was a place to go, certainly,” he allowed. “I’m not sure everyone would agree it was for the best.”

“Perhaps. Even so, a pity to see such structures so easily discarded. How are things at Skyhold?”

“Same as always, other than this Council to decide our very existence,” he sighed. “Are you pleased that the Inquisition is being called to account, Vivienne? Full of heretical mages as we are?”

“Quite the contrary, my dear,” she replied, lifting an elegant brow. “However we may disagree on the best ways to govern magic, the fact that you, a mage, have risen to become one of the most powerful men in Southern Thedas is no small accomplishment. Something that all of us can be proud of.”

“Never expected to hear that from you,” he blurted out, immediately regretting it. Still, it was confounding. “Thank you, Vivienne. Truly.”

She nodded. “Remember, Inquisitor, it is not a bad thing to be feared. They would not have pushed for this Council if they did not feel threatened. That is a strength you should use to your advantage.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good,” she said, sweeping him with an appraising—and not altogether satisfied—look. “Josephine really should have ordered a new coat for you.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with this one,” he said, glancing down. It had served him well on those few occasions over the past year when his armor didn’t suit.

“Of course you don’t, my dear. But someone ought to think about such things. I’ll have a word with her.” Her eyes slid past him. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I believe I see Lady Mantillion, and I simply must speak with her.”
She breezed past him into the entrance hall, and thus dismissed, he really did need that drink. After securing the object of his quest in the garden wing, he wandered onto the veranda for some much needed air. There was a fountain in the middle of the courtyard, and he walked out to it, preferring the babble of water falling steadily into the pool over the drone of voices indoors. That was where Dorian found him, staring into the liquid black.

“Are the Inquisition’s coffers so depleted that you’re considering stealing people’s wishes?”

Owain turned toward the familiar drawl and greeted his friend with a warm hug.

“How long has it been?” Dorian asked. “No, wait. Don’t actually tell me. You’ll only make me feel old.”

“You and me both.” He couldn’t have hidden his grin if he tried.

“I said don’t remind me.”

“Congratulations on your ambassadorship,” Owain said, finally letting go.

“Ah, yes.” Dorian brandished the glass of wine he had brought with him. “Good thing it’s only a token appointment. A ‘reward for my interest in the South.’ If that isn’t a convenient excuse to send me away, I don’t know what is.”

“Does the Imperium not care about the outcome of the summit?”

“Nominally, we do. In reality? Think about it. Orlais wants the Inquisition tamed, Ferelden wants it gone, the Chantry meddles, and Tevinter sends but one ambassador? Trust me when I say that if the Imperium truly cared, you’d know it.”

“At least we get to see you again.”

“True, it is an excellent reason to be back among friends,” Dorian acknowledged. He turned to sit on a nearby bench, taking care not to crease his robes. “And banter aside, it isn’t nothing. Sending me here in an official capacity does mean they recognize the Inquisition’s power. Not much, but a start, yes?”

“I’m sure a clever man could make much of that,” Owain said, claiming the empty half of the seat. “How was home?”

“How was my father, do you mean?” Dorian shot him a pointed look. “It was fine. We only talked a few times while I was back. I even managed to be civil. You would have been so proud of me.”

“I’m always proud of you, Dorian.”

He laughed, nearly choking on his wine. “I missed this flattery!” he said, thumping a fist to his own chest. “Almost as much as I missed the food!”

“Plenty of that, too, inside.” They sat in friendly silence for a moment. He’d felt Dorian’s absence more deeply than he realized.

“How’s your hand?” asked Dorian a minute later.

Owain looked down and flexed his fingers, grimacing at a wave of pain and the flare of green light that seeped through the bandage. Saying nothing, he shrugged.

“I received your letter and did a full search of the libraries,” Dorian continued. “Best I could do was
a few oblique references to orbs and elven magic, but nothing substantial. And nothing about that kind of magic manifesting itself in the human body.” He shook his head in frustration. “I’m sorry. I still have a few open requests at the university. I’ll pick it up when I get back.”

“It’s alright. I haven’t had any better luck down here. Really should have asked Solas more questions when I had the chance.”

“None of us knew he was going abscond the second the Breach was sealed.”

“No, and I wish far too often that he hadn’t,” he sighed. “We have a few more immediate problems to deal with, anyway.”

“What do you want to happen?” Dorian asked. “With the Council.”

The question gave him pause. “You know, no one else has asked me that yet? We’ve all been assuming that the Inquisition will continue, but if I’m honest, there are times when I think it shouldn’t. Or at least not in the same way.”

“Sometimes endings are necessary,” Dorian observed. “We should not view them as failures. Either way, Trevelyan, I’m with you, no matter what happens.” He finished the rest of his wine and rose from the bench. “Now, I’ve kept you out here long enough. Josie will have my head if you don’t show yourself in that ballroom again.”

Back inside, Owain did his best to avoid the dance floor, but in the spirit of letting himself be seen, as well as his ambassador’s instructive looks, he found himself obliged to accept a few offers. A nervous young woman who was by turns flirtatious and painfully shy, a regal dowager who spoke to him hardly at all, and the wife of one of the Council members, who needled him with challenging questions that he answered very poorly indeed.

There were sadly no dances with Cassandra. He had glimpsed her only twice all evening, always from across the room. She had managed to make herself scarce otherwise. He longed to find her, if only to ask her the secret to that feat.

He settled instead for a moment to himself, nursing a drink beside the fire in a relatively obscure parlor. The respite proved far too short.

Out of nowhere, an Orlesian noble in a silver mask sidled up to him. He racked his brain for the man’s name, even as he cursed his own distraction for not noticing him earlier. Too late to escape and pretend he hadn’t seen. What was his name?

“Lord Inquisitor,” the masked man began. “I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you alone. Marquis Philippe, lord of Chateau Menard.”

Owain bowed. “A pleasure to meet you, my lord.”

“Ah, but I feel as if we are acquainted already,” Philippe replied in a well-oiled voice. “Your kinsmen, the Bayard-Trevelyans, they are dear friends. Perhaps you have heard them speak of me?”

The name was vaguely familiar. Distant cousins? “Regretfully, no. I seldom speak with my relations.”

“Ah, a shame. No matter. You danced earlier with my daughter, Clarisse.”

“Yes, of course,” he said mildly. “A lovely young lady.”
Philippe was a bit too pleased with that offhand compliment. “You made a handsome pair. There were many in the gallery who remarked as such.”

“Is that so?”

“You made a handsome pair. There may even be some who wish that such an attractive partnership might extend beyond this one evening.”

He bit back the acid retort that was his first instinct. “I doubt that.”

“Oh?” Philippe was undeterred. Josie was right about nobles with something to gain. “It is no secret that the status of the Inquisition lies in peril, Lord Trevelyan. There are many ways to make alliances, as you are no doubt aware.”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to make that kind of alliance,” he said, putting a bit of steel in his voice. His blood was starting to heat now.

“You refer to Lady Pentaghast, naturally. I must admit the love between you is rather famous. The bards sing of the Inquisitor and the Right Hand of the Divine. But is she not devoted to the Seekers of Truth? And Nevarran royalty to be sure, but only 78th in line to the throne?”

“I assure you, my lord, such things mean little to me.” Owain grit his teeth, and the flames roared in the fireplace. A log snapped, sending a flurry of sparks up the flue.

Philippe either failed to notice or paid it no heed. “My daughter has the blood of emperors on both sides! You, most of all, should understand the worth of a strong friendship with the Empire. I am not suggesting you end your relationship with the Lady Seeker, Inquisitor. Quite the opposite—such arrangements are commonplace in Orlais. I am merely presenting the advantages. Surely you must want for a youthful wife, one that can provide you with heirs? One who would bring valuable connections—”

Fire exploded from the hearth with a bang. Someone yelped. Ladies gasped and clutched at their hearts. Owain drew himself up and stepped close to the Marquis, who had finally fallen silent.

“Let me stop you right there, before I do something we’ll both regret.” He snapped his fingers and extinguished the flames in the fireplace. “If you think the Inquisition’s power lies only in our connections, you are sorely mistaken. Good evening.”

He stalked away, leaving behind a roomful of scandalized nobles. Josie would have words for him tomorrow for threatening a Marquis, but at the moment, he couldn’t care less. His anger was so blinding, he gave little thought to where he was headed, until he found himself in the Hall of Heroes. When his mind finally focused, he realized the statue he was staring at had gained some rather rude additions, most certainly not the original artist’s work. Looking around, he spotted Sera and an accomplice wielding brushes and a pot of red paint.

Setting aside the vandalism for now, he made up his mind about something else.

“Sera, I have a favor to ask,” he said. “And I’m asking because I think you’re the only one who can help me.”

“Pfft. Just say it already.”

“I need a large number of candles. And I’m afraid I’m going to need them in a hurry.”

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It was perfect. Sera had done all he asked, and then some. A slew of candles covered the flagstones of the empty balcony, lining the area around the door and the rails. Pleased, he walked to the edge and leaned his elbows on the stone, looking out over the moonlit gardens.

The last time he stood here at the end of a long evening, he’d been sick of politics, too. Sick of the Game, of the flirting, the flattery, and the masks. Perhaps that was just Orlais. He wasn’t made for this place. At least there was no blood on his coat, this time.

Also this time, he didn’t have to wonder whether Cassandra would come. He had found her and asked her to meet him here, and he had no doubt she would keep her word.

He was ready. At last. After months of indecision and years’ worth of desire, what was it about today that changed him? Condensed everything into this one moment of courage? Varric was right. Damn his fear, damn the unknown, and damn the Orlesians and their damn alliances. To the Void with it all. This was him and Cassandra. Together, they could face anything. Always and forever.

As if on cue, she appeared in the open door. He would know her silhouette anywhere. She smiled when she saw him and stepped out onto the balcony.

The candles, however, she did not notice until he waved his hand and a blazing carpet rolled out before her, surrounding them in a winking, flickering field of lights. She gasped and lifted a hand to her mouth, turning slowly to take it all in.

He had asked for a dance and was determined to have it, bowing low and offering his hand. She smiled and took it, and he swept her up in his arms.

Music drifted out through the open windows. He pressed his cheek to her temple and held her close as they swayed to its rhythm. The soft, sweet scent of her was a comfort, the warmth of her in his arms like home.

“What is the meaning of all this?” she asked, as the orchestra started a new piece.

“Can I tell you a story?” he replied, trading one question for another.

“All this, just for that?”

“Is that a problem? You have time for Varric’s stories but not mine?”

“Very well,” she huffed. “Tell me.”

He led them on one more turn about the balcony to gather himself.

“There was a boy, once, who dreamed of being a knight,” he began, his voice low and quiet, almost a whisper. “He was going to grow up to be a hero, just like the stories. He was going to win tournaments and kill dragons and earn the heart of a princess. But as it turned out, he wasn’t the knight at all. He was the wicked witch in the tower, who was evil and dangerous and feared. He thought that would be his life, and for a long time, it was.

Until one day, he was suddenly free. And a princess appeared, who was brave and beautiful and strong, and more knight than he would ever be. She was the one who saved him, and it changed everything. He fell in love with her, and they did it all together, slaying dragons and saving the world. It was better than anything he ever dreamed. But do you know the one thing that never changed, even after all that time?”

He paused, and she shook her head in answer.
“He still wanted to marry the princess.”

He stopped dancing to ask his final question. “So will you do me the honor? Cassandra, my love. Will you marry me?”

She said nothing right away. When the moment stretched on and still there was no answer, he pulled back and searched her face, uncertain. What had he done wrong?

“Sorry...” he mumbled. “I don’t know how this is supposed to be done.” He started to bend at the knees. “Should I have gotten a ring? Should I kneel?”

He made it halfway to the ground before she grabbed him by the coat and crushed her mouth to his. He wrapped his arms around her as he rose to full height. When they separated, he smirked and touched their foreheads together.

“Is that a yes?”

Her eyes shone at him in the candlelight, brimming with tears. She nodded and made a sound that was part gasp, part laugh, part sob.

“Yes, of course, my love,” she said, shaking the lapels of his coat. “Of course I will marry you.”

And then she kissed him again, putting the seal on her promise.

Ah.

They had been together for years. He had bound his future to hers long ago. The words shouldn’t have made a difference. But—Maker—somehow they did.

Fireworks burst somewhere far above and tinted the edges of his vision blue, purple, and red. If not for the flashes of color, he might have mistaken the sound for the joyful thundering of his own heart.

Chapter End Notes

I'M STILL ALIVE!! Sorry for the long delay on this one, and thanks for sticking with me. Work has been kicking my butt the past couple months, but we're back, and it's ON!

Also, I caved and made a tumbles. Sometimes you can find me there, if you ever want to chat: https://whatsherfacewrites.tumblr.com.
Memory was a strange thing.

There were the big moments, of course, the obvious ones, the things he expected to remember. But sometimes, the details were what stayed with him. Sometimes, just by saying to himself, “Remember this,” the mundane could be made momentous, the ordinary, significant.

He tucked his marked hand beneath his pillow, out of sight, out of mind, and twirled the cool sleek of her braid through his fingers. *Remember,* said the voice in his head as he traced his knuckles down the bold line of her arm—strong, yet soft, like her. Their legs curled together between the sheets, the embers of a dying fire and the faint glow of moonlight their only wards against the full embrace of night.

“What will they say about us?” she asked into the dark. “About the Inquisitor and the Seeker, marrying?”

He propped his head up and studied the shadows on her face. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “That I’m the luckiest man alive? That the Lady Seeker is without a doubt the most beautiful woman in the land, and she really could have done better than a penniless Circle mage of middling talent and merely adequate looks? Have you *seen* that scar on his face? Quite shocking, really…”

“Stop,” she huffed, landing a light punch on his shoulder. “You do not care what they say?”

“She paused and looked at him a moment, thoughtful. “This is Orlais. The whole court must know by now.”

“Of course they do. Probably did within the hour.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her brow. “But maybe I want them to talk. Maybe I want them to know I’m yours. And only yours.”

“Always and forever,” she said, running her thumb across his lip.

“Yes. Unless you tire of me.” He opened his mouth and caught her thumb between his teeth, biting down just hard enough to count. Even in the dark, he could sense her smile.

“Never.” She sighed and pulled her hand away, shifting her eyes over his face. “It seems
impossible,” she whispered, almost to herself.

“What?”

“You. Marriage. This life. I thought I gave this up long ago when I chose to become a Seeker. But to find such happiness now…” Her voice shook, trailing off into silence.

“Better than the books, hmm?”

Her bittersweet smile made his heart ache. He gathered her in his arms, all sincerity now.

“Oh, my love, I know,” he whispered into her hair. “I know it exactly. You’re so much more than I deserve.”

She clung to him just as tightly. “Will it change us?” she asked, her face buried in his shoulder.

“Only for the better, I hope.”

“And where will we live?” She pressed a hand over his heart, as if to feel it beat for her. He covered it and held it there. “All of Orlais lies between Skyhold and the Hunterhorns. We each have our duties to the Inquisition and the Seekers. Are we always to be apart? Husband and wife only in letters and stolen moments, on the road and in between?”

He considered for a minute, loathe to admit he hadn’t planned that far. But he did know one thing: the past two years had been difficult enough. “Ferelden and Orlais want the Inquisition brought to heel. What if I do as they wish and give it all up? Come live with you?”

“No,” she answered immediately, with a firm shake of her head. “The Inquisition is a force of good in Thedas. There is still so much to be done. I will not allow you to forsake that for me.”

“Why not?” The idea sounded better with every passing second. “You told me once that the world hinges on our actions. But that doesn’t mean we can’t take moments of happiness for ourselves. What do we fight for, if not this?” He squeezed her hand to his chest.

“It feels selfish,” she said quietly, touching the scar on his cheek.

“I never claimed to be so noble.”

“You are better than you think.”

“Only because of you,” he sighed, relenting for now. *Always so stubborn, even in this.* “We’ll find a way, my love. We’ll figure it out, when this is all over. I promise you.”

She took a deep breath and cuddled closer, her only response. They said nothing more. He stroked his fingers idly up and down her back, and she seemed to hum in his arms. So warm, so soft, so safe. Did magic exist to make this last forever?

*Remember.*

--

He did not recall falling asleep, but the sharp knock on his door reached him as if over a great distance.

Without waiting for a response, his advisors shuffled into the room. Even Leliana was there, dressed in her old spymaster’s hood, no Chantry whites in sight. There was a joke somewhere in the murk of
his thoughts, something about finding the Divine in his bedroom this late at night, but he choked it back when he saw the looks on their faces. The light from the candelabra in Josephine’s hand burned a trail of shadows into his vision.

“Inquisitor,” Josie began, clutching the wrap of her dressing gown. “Our apologies for the hour, but I’m afraid we have a problem--”

“That requires your immediate attention,” Leliana finished, trading decorum for urgency.

“Can you be more specific?”

“We found a body.”

Owain pressed his fingers to his eyelids and groaned. “Not entirely surprising for Halamshiral. Is this not something for our hosts to handle? Why us?”

“It’s a Qunari,” Cullen explained, the corners of his mouth pulled tight. “In full battle armor, with, ah--” He shook his head. “It would be easiest to just show you.”

Heaving a deep sigh, Owain blinked hard and dragged himself from the bed. Maybe, just maybe, this would be quick, and he’d be back before dawn. A cheap lie, but enough to get him on his feet.

He plucked his breeches from the floor and pulled them on, squinting to look for his shirt near the foot of the bed. Cassandra did the same. Cullen coughed quietly and turned away as they dressed, and Josie averted her gaze. Leliana, conspicuously, did not.

“Do we know how they got in?” Owain asked as he shoved his arms in his coat sleeves. “Security was doubled for the Exalted Council, and everyone’s on high alert. I find it hard to believe anyone could have slipped in unnoticed, let alone a Qunari.”

“That is part of our problem,” said Leliana, simply.

His questions were going nowhere, so he saved the rest and followed his advisors through the maze of the guest wing and down one of the corridors that branched from the main hall. Here was the Qunari, a crumpled heap at the foot of the stairs. The Iron Bull and Charter stood watch, nodding at their approach.

Owain crouched next to the body, careful not to step in the blood that pooled beneath it. Whoever this was, his last moments were painful. Most of his face was obscured by a helmet, save his jaw, which hung slack. One arm was splayed across the cold marble and the other across his belly, as if he’d been holding his wounds before succumbing to their number.

“You have anything on this?” He looked up at Bull, who towered over him, arms folded across his chest.

“Sorry, boss.” Bull answered with a shake of his head. “Nothing definite. Intel’s dried up since I went Tal-Vashoth.” He knelt beside Owain and pointed at the armor. “But I can tell you the uniform means he was Karashok, a foot soldier. He would have been a member of the Antaam, a squad mobilized as part of an invasionary force.”

“So he’s military? Not even a spy or a scout?”

“Yes.”

“Any theories about why there’s a Qunari soldier in the middle of the Winter Palace?” He looked up
at the others, but they were at a loss, just as he was. He examined the body again. “Well, he certainly met someone who didn’t want him to be here.”

“Someone who wields magic as well as a blade,” Leliana pointed out. “You see the wounds here and here? A dagger, most likely, from the size and the angle. But these scorch marks are almost certainly the work of a mage.”

Owain touched the spots she had indicated on the man’s breastplate and helm. A streak of soot came away, and he rubbed it between his fingers. “Chain lightning,” he concluded. “No basic spell.”

“I’ve spoken with our men,” Cullen said. “None of them report intercepting an intruder.”

“And there are no mages among the Orlesian or Fereldan guards,” added Leliana.

“So, we have a mystery corpse and a mystery assailant?” Owain huffed. “Is there anything we know?”

“The entry point.” Leliana turned to lead him further down the hall. She was following a trail of blood that he only now noticed, a streak of rust that stained the polished floor. She stopped outside a plain-looking door and pushed it open, stepping aside to give him an unobstructed view. At the far end of the small storage room, a tall, gilt-framed mirror leaned against the wall. It glowed faintly, a cool, unsettling blue that could only be the work of magic.

An eluvian.

Fuck.

He was not going back to bed.

“I guess there are more of these left than we thought…” he muttered as he stepped carefully into the darkened room. Or Morrigan was grossly mistaken.

He reached out and touched it. The reaction was immediate, roiling the surface and scattering his reflection. When it settled, he waved his hand slowly, watching the light bounce and shiver with his mana. Ancient elven magic—he would never understand it.

“Somebody bring me my staff,” he called, without taking his eyes from the mirror. “And wake the others.”

--

The world through the eluvian was brighter and more expansive than he remembered. Countless pathways branched into the ether, leading to more eluvians and who knew what else. He thought briefly about the one at Skyhold, collecting dust in the corner of his quarters. Could one of these lead there? If it was so easy for that soldier to gain entry to the Winter Palace, couldn’t someone do the same at Skyhold? What had Morrigan told him, once, about keys?

They followed the blood trail to another mirror, standing free at the edge of a cliff. Owain ducked through it and found himself in a narrow passage, facing a flight of stairs. Whatever building this was, it was neatly constructed, right angles and smooth stone topped with a high, arched ceiling. The air was close and dark, though a bit of brightness ahead hinted at daylight not far off. In any case, there was only one way to go.

He conjured a flame to light their way and skimmed a hand along the wall as they walked. “Reminds me of those ruins in the Emerald Graves.”
“Certainly not the Winter Palace,” said Cassandra a few paces back.

Dorian agreed. “I doubt we’re even in Orlais anymore.”

The archway at the end of their path led out onto some kind of battlement. On the threshold, they found another body--Qunari, male, and fully armored like the first.

“Still warm,” said Bull, stooping to touch a wound at the man’s side. “Couldn’t have died more than an hour ago.” He straightened and wiped his hand on his trousers. “Something tells me we’re going to find more of them.”

The landscape confirmed that they were, in fact, no longer in Orlais, nor anywhere else Owain had ever seen. They were high up on a tower, one of several standing sentry around a clear, blue lake that glittered with sunlight. From the water rose a grand building, perhaps a palace or temple, set on a trio of islands strung together with walkways. Below their current perch, lush, green canopies swayed in a gentle breeze. It smelled like summer, the air pleasantly warm.

A quick circuit of the tower top turned up another eluvian but no other way forward.

“It positively reeks of magic here,” said Dorian, wrinkling his nose slightly.

Owain had to agree. He was struck by the sense of something indescribably ancient and foreboding in this place, for all its idyllic beauty. The anchor pulsed uncomfortably at his side. He grit his teeth and watched it flash for a second.

Cassandra marched toward the eluvian, straight through his thoughts. “Let us go. We are not here for the view.”

There was nothing to do but move on. The second mirror put them on another tower, identical to the first except for the angle of the view. They met no one but dead Qunari.

“What I don’t understand,” Owain wondered aloud as they walked toward yet another eluvian, “is how a small army of Qunari found their way into a place so obviously steeped in magic. Even if they located an eluvian that led here, would an average soldier know how to use it? How would they know how to navigate the Crossroads or activate the keys?”

“Their presence here is no accident, I am sure,” Cassandra replied. “And there are mages among the Qunari. Though different from the magic of the Circle or the elves, they are powerful, in their own way.”

“Cass is right,” Bull nodded. “Mages under the Qun are called Saarebas—dangerous things. They’re kept under close watch at all times.”

“Is it true they sew their mouths shut?” Dorian asked, with obvious distaste.

“In extreme cases, if suspected of forbidden magic.” Bull threw a sober glance at his lover. “Remember, everyone under the Qun has a role to play, and for the Saarebas, that’s pure destruction. The Qun doesn’t care what a weapon has to say.”

Owain pressed his lips together. “And I thought the Circle was bad.”

Dorian simply shrugged. “If that was the punishment for forbidden magic, the Imperium would be a very quiet place, indeed.”

After traveling the perimeter of the lake, the next eluvian spat them on one of the islands in the
center. If these had been originally formed by nature, it was impossible to tell now, entirely built up as they were in the same neat, ancient style as the towers, as if they had risen from the lake itself. Whatever bridge once connected this building to the next had been reduced to rubble, the tops of which could be seen beneath the glassy surface of the water.

The other feature of this structure was a pair of large double doors covered in an intricate mosaic laid with gold and copper. The subject was an animal of some kind, dark and threatening, adorned with brilliant ruby eyes. There was no visible knob or mechanism. Cassandra pushed, first with her hand and then with the full force of her shoulder. Nothing.

Dorian stood rubbing his chin, puzzling before the doors. “I’ve seen this before.”

“It’s a bit like the mosaics at the Temple of Mythal,” Owain suggested, rifling his memory for clues.

“That’s not it, no... Ah! The murals in Solas’s old study. The rotunda below the library, yes? I’m almost certain he painted something like this.” He tilted his head and considered the image. “What is it? A dog? A wolf?”

“Isn’t there a thing the Dalish always say?” said Owain, catching Dorian’s train of thought. “Like a curse?”

“May the Dread Wolf take you,” Cassandra supplied.

“May the Dread Wolf take you,” he repeated in a whisper as he moved toward the doors. The anchor glowed bright as he approached, and when he touched the image with his marked hand, green light flashed across the tiles. The doors swung open. His arm burned.

“Well that was easier than expected.” He shook out his hand and went in first, so the others wouldn’t see the way his face twisted with pain. The spiral stairs ended in a small chamber, empty except for a lantern-like object on a pedestal in the center. It seemed to call to him, drawing him near, the color a perfect match to his mark.

Even before he made contact with the artifact, he could feel power surging within him—the same raw energy that had grown steadily over the past two years, absorbed from the Fade in an instant. The sheer force of it was staggering, the pain excruciating, bright white bursting behind his eyelids. His knees buckled, and he threw a hand out blindly—for balance, or to break his fall. Cassandra caught it and steadied him. Her worried look carried a hundred questions, but before he could say a word, a loud rumble shook the floor, showering them in dust from the ceiling.

He walled off the pain for now and bolted up the stairs with the others. Whatever this was, it would mean nothing if he ended up buried under three flights of stone.

When they regained the open air, the noise had stopped, and the source was immediately clear: by some unknown magic, the walkway across the lake had been restored. Water still dripped from the stones.

Owain found a loose rock the size of his fist and tossed it into the air, launching it forward with his mana. It landed in the middle of the span with a solid thump, bouncing once before tumbling into the lake.

The bridge seemed sound enough, so he stepped onto it, motioning for the others to follow. The unmistakable sounds of battle reached them before they got halfway across.

This was the palatial building they had seen from above. As they hurried up the steps to the entrance, they could see the interior, a wide, airy space punctuated by thick columns that held the high, vaulted
ceiling. Murals covered the walls with images of elves and wolves, drawn in vivid colors undimmed by the passage of time.

It took a moment just to determine who was fighting. One side was surely the same Qunari force whose less fortunate members they had already met, but the other was harder to pin down. Owain wasn’t even sure they were real. They were spirit warriors, perhaps, like the ones brought to life by Dorian’s necromancy, but their forms were clearly elven, clad in the same ancient armor as Mythal’s guardians in the Arbor Wilds.

Lacking the numbers to fight both sides at once, their strategy was to hang back and let the battle play out before making their presence known. The Qunari were taking losses, but they seemed to be turning the tide.

His arm felt like it was on fire, and it was getting harder and harder to ignore. Raw magic flowed stinging through his veins like poison. Building, swelling, growing with the anchor, a bubble about to burst, all his focus stretched thin. He struggled to contain it, but his hold was slipping. He was losing it… and then loosing it...

With a loud bang, the mark discharged. The shockwave took out the nearest line of spirit warriors and staggered their Qunari opponents. All eyes turned immediately to him.

Shit.

Cassandra and Bull charged forward, since it was the only thing left to do. Dorian put up their barriers and started slinging lightning, while Owain shook himself from his stupor and protected their flanks with fire. He tried not think about the numbers, which were still very much not in their favor. As the warriors crashed into the Qunari, he fade-stepped behind their lines and dropped a series of mines, scattering their formation with flames. Cassandra capitalized on the opening, bashing a soldier hard on his chin, sending him reeling, then driving her sword through his ribs.

As the enemy regained their footing and launched a counterattack, Owain stepped to her side and covered her rear, switching between spells and the flash of his blade. He blocked a Qunari axe aimed at her back, trading it for a stonefist to the chest. Cassandra danced around him and swung her shield up, catching a strike meant for his shoulder. Step, block, swing. Spin, parry, flame. Always an easy rhythm with her. It was exhilarating, a joy.

But no matter how skilled and coordinated he and his companions were, the Qunari army had a reputation for fighting hard, and he was beginning to see it was well-deserved. Every soldier fought to the death, reckless and ruthless, impervious to pain and fear that would give pause to average men.

The numbers just didn’t work. They found themselves falling back, circling defensively as the Karashok pressed around them. They all panted for breath, spattered in blood--some of it their own. Owain racked his brain for a plan, counting the potions in his pouch. How long could they hold out like this? Was there any chance for a parlay?

Energy was building again in the anchor, but this time, he was too tired to fight it. Short of other ideas and desperate now, he decided to go with it, to let himself be carried by this wave. Instead of pushing, he pulled, channelling the magic of the Fade through his mark and unleashing it on the enemies all around.

It was eerily quiet when the light faded. The Qunari lay lifeless on the floor. Owain gulped in air and clutched at his arm, which sang with mind-numbing pain.

“Nice!” Bull clapped Owain on the shoulder as he lowered his axe. His voice echoed in the stillness.
“Are you alright?” Cassandra asked.

Owain nodded and tried to smile, but he could summon no joy to his eyes. “I’m fine,” he lied. “Let’s just keep going.”

She didn’t believe him.

Neither did Dorian, who furrowed his brows but said nothing as he followed Bull across the hall. Owain shot Cassandra another half-smile and turned to go after them, his heart racing as he tried to make sense of what happened. The anchor discharges were powerful magic, but was he really in control? If he’d wanted to, could he have stopped it? The truth was, he hadn’t fully intended to use them at all.

They found their way into the bowels of the building, where the rooms were more utilitarian than the lofty space upstairs. The Qunari had been using them as a base.

“It appears they were preparing for war,” said Cassandra as they passed a workshop and racks full of weapons and armor. A side room housed a wall full of bunks. Another held provisions--barrels of ale and apples, baskets of dry bread, skeins of dried sausages.

Yet another room was mostly empty, save a handful of metal barrels in the corner. Rings of dust on the floor gave proof that the room had been packed with them. Bull sniffed the air and frowned.

“Gaatlok,” he said, crossing to the barrels and wiping the grime from their surfaces. “Qunari explosive powder. Remember that dreadnought on the Storm Coast? It was loaded with this stuff. Burns hot and fast.”

“This room was full of it.” Cassandra turned about the space, as if calculating how many barrels it might have held. “Where could it have gone?”

They split up to search for answers. Owain sifted through the documents on a table in the main room. Maps of the continent, major cities and towns. A blueprint of the Winter Palace. A hand-drawn diagram of the Crossroads. Piles of letters and notes that were mysteries in Qunlat. He motioned for Bull to translate.

“This one’s dated today,” said Bull, pulling a stained parchment from the stack and running his eye over the page. “A report on their operation. They’re calling it ‘Dragon’s Breath.’ Ran into some problems with a mystery mage who keeps attacking their men. Seems familiar with this place. An ‘Agent of Fen’Harel,’ they’re calling him.”

“Fen’Harel?” said Dorian. “The elven god? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Does it say who they’re reporting to?” Owain asked. “Did this come from the top at Par Vollen?”

Bull grunted. “The Viddasala, one of the heads of the Ben-Hassrath.”

“Ben-Hassrath? Like you?”

“Like I was. But I was Hisrad, a spy, always in the field. The Viddasala specializes in magic--finding it and stopping it.”

“Does Dragon’s Breath mean anything to you?”

“No, and it doesn’t say,” Bull replied, shaking his head. “But I’ll bet it has something to do with that Gaatlok. One of the ingredients is dragon venom. But it’s rare, and to make that much… Mm.”
Owain studied the drawing of the eluvians again, retracing their steps in his memory. There was the mirror in the Crossroads, the ones in the towers... It was all here, all the direction anyone would need to get from here to the Winter Palace. Is that why they chose this place? He shuffled the rest of the maps—Halamshiral, Val Royeaux, Denerim—were there eluvians leading there?

He didn’t know. His arm hurt again. Hurt still, rather, since the pain had never really gone away. His head swam with more mysteries, more questions. That seemed to be the theme of the day.

He sighed and gathered the documents, rolling them up in a map of Thedas. Perhaps Leliana and the others could make more sense of these. They found an eluvian at the back of the room and passed through it, back out into the Crossroads.

--

He hadn’t slept more than a few hours of the past twenty-four, and his exhaustion was beginning to show. He tapped his fingers on the wooden table in front of him and tried unsuccessfully to suppress another yawn. Josephine nudged his foot below the table.

“Ferelden will not tolerate a standing army on its doorstep! The Inquisition captured the stronghold of Caer Bronach by force, and you hold it still, even now the war is long over. Are we to continue tolerating this presence in our lands?”

“Arl Teagan, I assure you--” Josie was using her most soothing ambassador voice. He should have let her finish, but he didn’t.

“Yes,” he broke in through clenched teeth. “Yes, we took the keep. But not from your people. From bandits. Bandits that had overrun Crestwood and threatened the king’s road and all the travel and trade on it. Would you have us give it back? I don’t recall seeing any of the crown’s regulars coming to its defense three years ago.”

Teagan was unfazed. “And we are grateful, Your Worship, for your assistance of Crestwood and its people, and for the closing of the rifts. But Corypheus is long dead and the danger of the Breach passed. Don’t you think it’s time to return the fortress to its rightful liege?”

“Just like that? For nothing but your thanks? To say nothing of the blood we spilled to defend it or the time and gold spent rebuilding. Are we to simply give in to your demands? I’ve yet to hear an offer from you even worth considering.”

Josie was looking daggers at him, a dangerous flash in her brown eyes. He sighed and backed off to let her take over.

“Now, my lord, as you can see, Caer Bronach is a strategic outpost of the Inquisition and a vital asset in our peacekeeping mission. I am certain we can reach a suitable agreement over the disposition of the fortress, with due respect for the history of the keep and its unique position in central Ferelden…”

Owain closed his eyes as Josie spoke and tried to rein his temper. Pain and exhaustion had frayed his nerves. Maker, he was so tired.

Someone tapped his shoulder. Charter.

“A word, Inquisitor.” Her face looked grave.

He looked at Josie, who nodded. Then he pushed his chair back and bowed to the members of the Council. “I beg your pardon, Most Holy, my lords. An urgent matter. I will return shortly.”
“...impertinent… disagreeable… cannot even be bothered to sit for our meetings…”

He ignored the chatter as he swept from the room, following Charter out into the courtyard. A group of Inquisition soldiers stood clustered with a handful of Orlesian guards whose leader was engaged in a heated argument with the captain. What was his name? Bernard? Barrett? It bothered Owain that he didn’t know.

He stopped in front of them, and they fell silent. “Explain.”

The Orlesian guard dropped a quick bow and spoke first. “Lord Inquisitor, I am afraid there has been an unfortunate incident. One of your guards has assaulted a servant. We wish to take her into custody, but your men refuse to surrender her.”

“It is an Inquisition matter, and the Inquisition will handle it,” said Captain Bernard/Barrett.

“This is Halamshiral!” the Orlesian replied, jabbing his finger like a weapon. “We will not stand idly by when you attack one of ours!”

“Keep that up and I’ll have you clapped in irons!”

Owain pinched the bridge of his nose and tuned out the angry guards. Why was everything his problem?

He looked around at the rest of the assembly in the courtyard. A young elf in Inquisition uniform scowled beside a glowering palace servant. Here was the source of the trouble, no doubt. His eyes lit on the metal barrel lying in the grass at their feet. It was just like the ones in the eluvian.

He pitched his voice to cut through the noise. “That barrel there. Where did it come from?”

The servant began to explain. “I was ordered to bring wine for the guests, so I went to the cellars and--”

“You’re lying!” shouted the elven scout. Owain didn’t know her name either. Why not? “I caught him sneaking around where he had no business being, Your Worship, and when I asked what he was doing--”

“I refused to bow to the Inquisition’s dogs and was attacked for it!”

The guards chimed in, and the situation devolved into more bickering and pointed fingers. So tired.

“Enough.” Owain raised his hand. “Charter, take them both for questioning. Let’s not do this in the yard.”

He watched them go, then turned to the Orlesian guard. “My gratitude, ser, for your vigilance. We do not take this offense lightly and will see to it that any crimes are duly punished.”

“Of course, Lord Inquisitor. Lord Cyril will hear of this.”

Owain nodded, already walking away. “Be sure that he does.”

--

The makeshift war room was empty, blessedly devoid of anyone looking for him to solve their problems. It was still early, so he sat and waited for the others, unbuttoning his coat and loosening the collar of his shirt to check the state of his left arm.
His mark had grown rapidly worse in the hours since they returned from the Dread Wolf’s refuge, as he had come to think of that palace on the lake. The corruption had advanced well past the edge of the bandage. It throbbed constantly, and when the pain spiked, as it did once or twice every hour, it took his breath away.

It was killing him. He knew that now. Or maybe he always did and couldn’t bring himself to admit it. Either way, now that it was fact, he felt strangely detached. It was happening to someone else, not him. All he could think about was what had to be done next, what crisis to avert. Perhaps he was like one of those fish he’d read about that had to keep moving to stay afloat. If he stopped to think, he would sink and be lost forever.

Cassandra found him there, flirting with the open water, considering the depth. She held out her hand for his. “Let me see.”

He slipped his arm out of his coat and offered it to her, in all its terrible green glory. There was no point in hiding anymore. Not that he could, anyway, from her.

She pulled up his sleeve and frowned, then shifted his collar to find the sickly color beginning to creep up his shoulder. She touched his skin and flinched at its feverish heat. “How is this possible?” she asked, her eyes full of worry. “How can it have spread so much? Since only yesterday?”

He scrubbed a hand down his face and sighed. “It was that artifact on the lake. I don’t know if the Veil is thin there or if it’s just all the magic in the air, but it activated something, made it burn quicker. The anchor blasts, my magic. It’s all accelerated somehow.”

“Is there nothing we can do? Have you spoken to Dorian? Or Vivienne?”

Owain shook his head. “Dorian knows as much as I do. Vivienne gave me a draught for the pain, but…”

Now she was the one shaking her head, twisting her fingers in his shirt. “No, there must be something. There must—”

_Keep swimming._ “There’s no time,” he said, resting his hands on her shoulders. “We need to find the Qunari. We have to stop this Dragon’s Breath. It might be the last thing I do.”

“Owain, don’t—”

“Listen, whatever happens—”

“No.” Her face was starting to crumple, her voice cracking. “Don’t speak like this. I won’t—”

He swallowed her words, pulling her close to kiss her, to shut her up, and because he wanted to. She made a small sound of protest before melting into him and matching his fire with her own. He savored the tension in her lips, the sweet taste of her, the heat. Precious memory, all of it, even the clack of their teeth and the tears on her cheeks. Each time could be the last time; he had never felt it so keenly.

When they parted, he pressed his forehead to hers and told her his truth. “Whatever happens, Cassandra, know that I love you. With all my heart and all that I am. Always.”

She leaned back and searched his eyes, waiting for him to finish. “And?”

He smiled sadly. “I don’t think we have forever anymore.”
She drew a ragged breath and squeezed her eyes shut, hands balling into fists. Her voice broke into a sob, and it hurt worse than the anchor ever did.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his neck. Her breath and her tears were hot on his skin.

It was so hard to believe they had come to this. That candlelit dance on the balcony, his proposal—had that been only yesterday? He kissed the braid in her hair. “I’m sorry, my love. I’m so sorry. I thought we had more time.” She sobbed again, and it broke his heart.

He held her like that for a long time. Cullen came in and began shuffling some papers. Then Josephine, then Charter. Still, he held her.

Minutes passed, and then Cullen cleared his throat softly. “Trevelyan,” he said gently.

Owain nodded and turned his back, with Cassandra still in his arms. He kissed just below her ear and whispered, “I’m not gone yet.” Then he let her go and went to join the others at the table.

They were staring at his hand. Cullen looked even more serious than usual. Josie was on the verge of tears. He put his coat back on. “So? Where are we?”

“We found this on the servant with the barrel,” Charter began, handing him a slip of parchment scribbled with Quḷat. Owain glanced at it and then back at her. “Bull translated. It says, ‘When task complete, join the Viddasala.’ It describes an eluvian beside a bookcase. We’ve located it in the garden wing.”

“And the Gaatlok?”

“We have men combing the palace as we speak,” said Cullen. “We’ve located most of it, we think, but doing a final sweep to be safe. The quantity is substantial. Enough to destroy most of the Winter Palace and everyone in it.”

“What about the rest of it? Dragon’s Breath?”

Charter again. “We went through the papers you recovered from the eluvians. It’s bigger than Halamshiral. They had plans to do the same in Val Royeaux, Denerim, and across the Free Marches. We’ve sent word to our agents to confirm. At present, only Val Royeaux has answered.”

“And?”

“It’s there. The Gaatlok.”

“Maker’s breath.” Owain covered his face with his hands. “Dragon’s Breath, indeed. One order away from taking out the entire leadership of Southern Thedas in a single blow.”

“Everything would be thrown into chaos,” said Josie. “If Corypheus had done this after the Conclave, our task would have been impossible.”

“A rudderless South would pave the way for a Qunari invasion.” Cullen gripped the pommel of his sword.

“And everything we did would mean nothing,” he added, turning to Josie. “Does the Council know?”

“Not yet. That is a matter to discuss, in fact, how we will break this news to them.”
"They should be told, should they not?" Cassandra had joined them, taking a place at his side. He looked at her, and she nodded. Her eyes were red but dry, tears replaced by a steady gaze of fierce determination. "This threat concerns us all, not solely the Inquisition."

"There’s a bit more to it than that," said Charter. "We may be the source of the threat. According to our investigation, the barrels arrived at the Winter Palace on the Inquisition’s manifest."

Owain blinked several times in disbelief. "What?"

"We’ve taken a closer look at the background of some of our agents, including the ones responsible for supplies."

"It appears they joined us from Kirkwall," Cullen explained. "I recall after the turmoil there, many of the city elves found solace in the strict teachings of the Qun."

"Qunari spies?" said Cassandra. "In the Inquisition?"

"I’m afraid so."

Owain blew out his breath and raked his hand through his hair. "Alright," he sighed. "When we get back to Skyhold, I want a full background check on everyone. See how deep this goes. But right now, we need to share this with the Council and finish cleaning up the Gaatlok. In the meantime, I’ll find this Viddasala and…"

He was interrupted by the doors bursting open. They slammed back on their hinges, admitting a furious Arl Teagan, with Cyril de Montford close on his heels.

"Inquisitor! We demand answers!"

"Arl Teagan!" Josie stepped forward, trying to contain the situation. "If you would--"

The Arl would not be contained. "You hid a Qunari corpse from us!" he spat, pointing a finger at Owain and fixing all of them with an angry glare. "And now your guards are attacking servants! What else are you keeping from us? You think we don’t see your soldiers crawling all over the Winter Palace? And here you are, plotting behind closed doors."

"Whatever it is, Lord Inquisitor, Orlais would have been happy to help in this matter," Cyril added. "You had only to ask."

"And you wonder why we fear your Inquisition! You act like you’re the answer to every problem. How long before you drag us into another war?"

"Another war is already upon us, Lord Guerrin," said Owain, fighting to keep his voice cool despite the blood boiling in his ears. "The Qunari even now plot to sabotage this Exalted Council and exterminate the leadership of Southern Thedas."

Teagan blanched. "And at what point would you have seen fit to tell us about this threat?"

"Just now, if you’ll allow us..."

"We demand a full account, Inquisitor. And spare no blame for your own organization."

"Quite so," said Lord Cyril, folding his arms over his chest. "My men investigated the incident this afternoon. They have alerted me to the possibility of spies in your ranks."

"My lords, please..." Josie tried again.
As his temper rose, so did his mana, and the energy of the anchor with it. It crackled and flashed, sending shocks up his arm. He cried out and clutched the edge of the table. Cassandra reached for him, while Arl Teagan and Lord Cyril fell silent, looking on in horror.

Owain breathed hard as the pain slowly ebbed. “I don’t have time for this,” he gritted out. “Squabble amongst yourselves. I’ve got an invasion to stop.”

Back through the eluvians they went, hopping from world to world, each more fantastic than the last. A shattered library, the gilded halls of a grand palace, a massive fortified keep. All the splendor of a forgotten world, ancient Elvhenan, and evidence everywhere of great and inscrutable magic.

They followed the trail of the Qunari, fighting skirmishes along the way. The Viddasala was shedding troops, dispatching squads of Karashok to delay them, if not kill them.

All the while, the anchor was becoming more and more unstable, the surges in power more frequent. At first, it seemed almost a blessing, helping them defeat the waves of Qunari. But as his exhaustion grew, he was less and less able to contain it. He was forced to discharge it more often, lest the energy build to dangerous levels, and it was all he could do to keep the blasts from hurting himself or his companions. Each one cost him a bit of his control. And the pain was extraordinary.

Dragon’s Breath was no arbitrary moniker. The Qunari had managed to capture a real-life dragon. It was this that allowed them to produce Gaatlok in such massive quantities. The creature was no willing participant, however, and Owain and his companions managed to set it free, cutting off the supply of explosives and foiling the plot.

At every step, the Viddasala had managed to get away, until she ran out of men to throw in their path. Now only she remained, along with a hulking Qunari mage, her own personal Sarebaas, leashed to her at the end of a heavy iron chain. Among the crumbling stones of an elven ruin, she finally turned to fight.

“I’m surprised you’re still alive, Inquisitor,” she taunted as she drew her sword.

He adjusted his grip on his staff. “Your soldiers couldn’t stop us, Viddasala, and neither can you.”

“An idle threat from a dying man.” Her laugh was cold and clear. “I see the way you hold your hand. The forbidden magic you carry comes at a heavy cost. You should never have been allowed to walk free after fulfilling your purpose at the Breach.”

“The anchor closes rifts,” he said, flexing his fingers as the mark glowed at his side. “I thought the Qun would approve of that.”

“Did you think the consequences of the Breach were at an end? The South has always been soft on magic, and now the world stands on the verge of destruction. We should have intervened long ago.”

“That’s the reason for all this?” Owain scowled. “You disagree with the way we handle magic, so you would wipe us out?”

“Our plan was to rid the South of your spineless leaders and spare those that toil, bringing them peace under the Qun. But you agents of Fen’Harel interfered. Now we must go the way of the sword. Many that should have lived, will die because of you. Their blood is on your hands.”

All this talk of the elven god was utterly perplexing. “We have nothing to do with Fen’Harel. Why do you think his agents are part of the Inquisition?”
“You truly do not know?” said the Viddasala, arching her brows. “Who do you think prevented your mark from killing you in the first place? Who brought you to Skyhold? Who has been haunting our steps since first we came through these eluvians?”

He put it together and was ashamed it had taken him this long. “You mean… Solas?”

“You understand at last,” the Viddasala sneered. “And you pride yourself on your spycraft, Inquisitor. No matter. If it is any consolation, Solas will not outlive you long.”

She released the chain holding back the Saarebas and barked an order, which could only be a signal to attack. She made a beeline for the eluvian at the far side of the ruins.

Owain turned quickly to Cassandra. “Don’t let her leave.”

She nodded, unhooking the grappling chain from her belt and rushing after the Qunari leader.

He snapped his eyes forward as the Saarebas roared, claiming all his attention. Vivienne and Dorian had their barriers up already. He quickly followed suit.

They dove out of the way as the Qunari mage leapt high into the air and landed in their midst, shaking the ground beneath them. They regrouped and went on the offensive. Vivienne bore the brunt of the enemy’s attacks with her shields and enchanted blade, while Owain and Dorian hurled spells from range.

He thought they were getting somewhere when the Saarebas paused and clasped his hands in silence, but at a second look, he recognized it for a summoning spell. A moment later, the ground quaked again, and a score of demons rose from the earth.

Owain cursed under his breath as he fadestepped away from the claws of a leaping horror, scanning the field to check on the others. Vivienne was surrounded but holding her own, slicing at a rage demon with her blade and sending a shard of ice through another.

Dorian was facing a pride demon alone, dodging the creature’s electric whip while tossing out bolts of his own. He could spare no focus for the flock of shades advancing on him from behind. Owain raced over to help, landing among the demons and sending them flying with a spell. He added his magic to Dorian’s, casting a stonefist that stunned its target and let Dorian strike the finishing blow.

“Trevelyan!” Vivienne warned as the Saarebas charged toward them. He and Dorian leapt out of the way, hurling fire and lightning in their wake.

The challenge in battling another mage was that they all knew the same tricks: barriers and spells to deflect and defuse magic. As soon as they wore down the Qunari’s shields, they would refresh only seconds later. Their constant barrage was getting nowhere. They needed a change in tactics, to focus their damage on the tiny window when the barrier was down.

Owain signalled to the others to fall back and began laying down mines, setting up a coordinated attack. Vivienne drew the Qunari close, luring him into their targeted range, and when all was in place, they struck, fire and ice and lightning all at once.

He sensed the barrier fall, and he shouted to the others to get clear, even as he fadestepped in front of the Saarebas. He reached out with his marked hand and released an anchor blast right into the enemy’s chest. With a bang and a great flash of Fade light, the Qunari was thrown backwards, landing limp and sliding through the dirt a few feet more. He lay there and did not get up.

Owain himself had recoiled with the blast. Now, he shook his hand and breathed deep, trying to
recover from the blistering pain. He felt his handle on the anchor slip just a little bit more. So, so tired.

His eyes searched for Cassandra, who was still dueling the Viddasala. She had stationed herself between her opponent and the eluvian and was fighting defensively, guarding the exit as the Viddasala circled and jabbed, waiting for an opening.

Not knowing how much longer he’d last, he needed this to be over. With a loud battle cry, he stepped to the Qunari and crossed blades with her. He spun and sliced with his staff, summoning flames from the earth and a rain of fire from the sky. But she knew how to fight mages, that much was clear, dodging and dancing around his spells. She had the added advantage of being fresh, while Owain had been fighting all day.

In his fatigue, he miscalculated her reach, and she landed a deep cut to his thigh. He sank to one knee, catching the follow-up on his staff. She grunted and spun away, but the damage was done. He leaned on his staff and clasped a hand to his leg, dashing off a quick and dirty spell to staunch the bleeding. Seeing him hurt, Cassandra charged in and went on the attack, slashing and striking with her sword.

It was not enough. They were too tired and too worn from all the battles of the day. Owain struggled to his feet and gathered what was left of his mana, intending to end the Viddasala just as he had ended her pet mage. He stepped forward with the mark charged, but before he could reach her, something went terribly wrong. Whether the anchor itself had finally surpassed control or his own shaky strength had failed, he didn’t know, but it released early, slamming him to the dirt and knocking the air out of him. His staff rolled out of reach, and when he lifted his head, he could see, with horror, that the blast had felled Cassandra, too.

The sound that left his lips was an anguished, wordless groan.

“Farewell, Inquisitor!” The Viddasala crowed as she sprinted for the eluvian. In a moment, she was gone.

But all that was secondary, hardly worth a thought. He dragged himself up, willing his body toward Cassandra where she lay on the ground. Her head shifted, and her eyes blinked, and his heart leapt with hope. He took a few halting steps in her direction, but Dorian got there first, a healing spell already in hand.

“Go, Trevelyan! Stop the Viddasala! I’ll take care of her.”

Every fiber of him cried out in protest. He stood paralyzed as his duty warred with love.

“GO!” Dorian repeated, even more urgently than before. Vivienne had joined and was pulling potions from her belt. Still he was rooted to the spot.

_Cassandra. What would she have wanted?_

He conjured her resolute look in his mind’s eye.

_I see what must be done, and I do it._

So he did it.

With tears in his eyes, he turned and followed the enemy through the eluvian, leaving his heart behind.
I'm sorry, my love.

This was his fight, now. It was better this way, better to end it alone. More lies to keep him going.

On the other side of the mirror was another elven ruin, its remnants covered in moss and vine. Still running, he nearly crashed into something, a statue. He halted and took in its height and horns and sword... It was the Viddasala, turned to stone. She wasn’t the only one; he was surrounded by at least a dozen more.

He stood for a moment, catching his breath and trying to gather his thoughts. Then his eyes traced the path forward, stopping at the figure on the hill. It was tall and regal, clothed in shining elven armor with a wolf pelt over the shoulder.

Solas.

His mind ran again through the Viddasala’s words, and their full meaning was suddenly clear. An ally, a mentor and friend, at the root of all this? Renewed rage ignited in him, fueled by betrayal and pain and grief. He readied a spell and fadestepped up the hill, wishing momentarily that he had thought to pick up his staff. It didn’t matter. Too late for that now. He rushed forward, trailing sparks through the air. Closer and closer he got, and then…

Nothing.

He crashed to his knees, the impact juddering up his spine, all his momentum gone. His spell, his mana, his strength, everything extinguished. He had never felt so powerless.

The anchor crackled, and he cried out in pain. Solas approached at an easy pace and light flashed in his eyes. The mark calmed, and the burn eased. For now.

Solas spoke first. “That should give us some time. I suspect you have questions.”

Owain still reeled. “How—” he gasped, “how are you able to control the anchor?”

“The same way I stopped it the first time, at Haven,” said Solas, his voice cool and smooth. “Though I am stronger now. The power of the anchor was bestowed upon you by the orb of Fen’Harel. My orb.”

“Your orb.” Not simply an agent, then. “You’re... Fen’Harel?”

“I was Solas first. Fen’Harel came later. I took an insult and made it my own. ‘The Dread Wolf’ inspired hope among my friends and fear among my enemies. Not unlike ‘Inquisitor,’ I suppose. You also know the burden of a title that all but replaces your name.”

Owain wobbled to his feet, still breathing hard. “You lied,” he spat.

Solas did not deny it. “I understand your anger. In your position, I would share it.”

“So that’s it then? What’s the truth? What about the legends?”

Solas nodded, as if expecting this. He clasped his hands behind his back and turned to stroll up the hill. “I sought to set my people free from the Evanuris,” he said. “They are the ones who called me Fen’Harel, and when they finally went too far, I formed the Veil and banished them forever. Thus, I freed the elven people, and in so doing, destroyed their world. All the marvels you saw on the way here? They depended on the connection to the Fade. The Veil destroyed all of that, along with the immortality of the elves. Whatever the elves are today, it was my fault.”
Owain hobbled after him, limping on his injured leg. *Maker, he was a mess.* He was completely and utterly spent. Any more fighting was out of the question, but at least he could sate his curiosity. “You created the Veil? You who love the Fade? Why?”

“You yourself have made impossible choices,” Solas replied, waiting for Owain to catch up. “Every alternative was worse. The Evanuris would have destroyed the world. As a consequence, I lay in sleep for countless ages and woke only a year before I joined you.” He paused to stare at the distant horizon. “My people fell for what I did to strike the Evanuris down, but there remains hope for restoration. I will save the elven people, even if it means this world must die.”

Owain stopped in his tracks. “What do you mean, this world must die?”

“The plan was for Corypheus to unlock the orb and for the ensuing explosion to kill him,” said Solas, facing him again. “Then, in the chaos, I would have recovered the orb and its power. I would have entered the Fade using the mark you now bear, and I would have torn down the Veil. As this world burned, I would have restored the world of my time, the world of the elves.”

Owain goggled in disbelief, vaguely aware that his mouth was open. He closed it and licked his lips, tasting dirt and blood. “You would murder countless people?”

“Wouldn’t you, to save your own?”

“No,” he said, with a shake of his head. “I wouldn’t.”

“You must understand,” Solas huffed. “I awoke in a world where the Veil had blocked most people’s conscious connection to the Fade. It was like walking in a world of Tranquil.”

“So it’s excusable, because we aren’t even people to you.”

“Not at first. You and the others showed me that I was wrong. That doesn’t make what is to come any easier.”

He snorted. *What incredible, foolish pride.* He had no words for this. “If you’re just going to destroy the world, why even bother with the Qunari and their plot? What does it matter?”

“You’ve shown me that there is value in this world, Inquisitor,” said Solas, daring to look remorseful. “I take no joy in what I must do. Until that day comes, I would see those still recovering from the Breach free of the Qun. I am not a monster. If they must die, I would rather they die in comfort.”

*You take no joy, but you will do it anyway. You say ‘I’m not a monster.’ Oh, but you are.*

After the day he had had, it was simply too much. Had he come so far and given so much, for *this?* He started to laugh and found he couldn’t stop, dropping to his knees. “Die in comfort—how kind of you,” he wheezed.

The anchor flared again, and he collapsed to all fours, trying to breathe through the pain.

“I am sorry,” said Solas, leaning over him and grasping his left hand. “We are almost out of time. It will eventually kill you. Drawing you here gave me the chance to save you, at least for now.”

“You don’t need to do this,” he croaked. “The world doesn’t need to end.”

Solas looked him in the eyes one more time and smiled. “I would treasure the chance to be wrong once again, my friend.” Then his eyes flashed, and he let go. “Live well, while time remains.”
Agony beyond anything Owain had ever known seized his whole being, drowning all thought. The power of the anchor was bound to his own magic, their roots so deeply woven as to be part of him, inseparable. He had believed them so until now, when it was ripped away entirely, leaving torn spirit and flesh behind.

Before he even knew where he was, Solas was gone. Away through an eluvian, and the anchor with him.

Owain forced himself to his feet and staggered forward anyway, only distantly perceiving his own blood on the ground. One foot before the other, one step at a time, up, up, up to the eluvian, where he fell, face first, straight into his own reflection.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, he'll be ok. -ish. :D

Thanks for your patience and support, as always! Another difficult chapter as I try to cram as much canon as possible. Is it just me, or is this DLC particularly chock full of infodumps? Looking at you, Solas. *squints*
He was moving, but not of his own strength.

Carried, then. Strong arms supported his shoulders and knees. When his head rolled, his cheek came to rest on cool steel.

*Cassandra.*

He pried his eyes open, and the effort was like lifting stone. The world was too bright and too loud, yet muddled at the same time. The walls of the Winter Palace blurred past. Dorian lead the way. Vivienne peeled off down a different hallway.

Footsteps hurried toward them. Click, clack on the hard stone floor.

“I will send for our healers at once.”

“Let me take him.”

“No. I have him.”

“Cassandra, please. Let me help.”

He was handed over. More strong arms, more cold armor. Too tired to say a thing.

Cassandra appeared beside him, keeping pace with Cullen. “Stay with us, my love.” He struggled just to focus on her face, where tears streaked through the blood and dust. “Stay with us. Please.”

*Yes, of course. He wanted to say it but couldn’t. Where would he go? He wasn’t going anywhere. Was he?*

He blinked, sifting memory from the clouded flow of his thoughts. The Viddasala, yes. Solas, yes. The eluvians. Yes. The anchor...

He looked down at his hand, limp across his middle, a foreign thing. Covered in blood, and cold. So cold. Something tight wrapped around his arm above the elbow. Leather, maybe, a strap cut from armor. Strange.
The journey to his room took hours. Or it might have been seconds. Time was pressed and pulled out of shape. It no longer meant what it used to.

Cullen set him carefully on the bed. Cassandra hovered, working at the buttons of his coat. He tried to help, but a sharp pain stabbed him in the shoulder, and he gasped and fell back on the bed. His vision swam.

Dorian was busy doing something with the sheet but looked up at the sound. “Forget that. Cut it.” His voice sounded like it was coming from deep underwater.

Cullen pulled a knife from his belt and handed it to Cassandra. In a few swift movements, she cut his sleeve and slit the shoulders of his coat so they could slide the pieces away. Then the same with his shirt. The sheet was cool on his back. A blessing.

He felt a pang of regret for his coat, but it passed.

Cassandra and Cullen were staring at his arm, so he followed their gaze. It was a mass of black and red, old blood and new. He couldn’t move it. Numb from the elbow down, and still so cold. Cassandra turned aside and wiped tears from her eyes. Cullen clapped a hand to her shoulder.

Dorian pressed the remains of the sheet--now rags--into Cassandra’s hands. His voice was still so distant. Owain only caught every few words. “...clean... ...no ordinary wound... ...assess before... ...attempt any healing.”

Cassandra nodded. Cullen was already striding toward the basin in the corner. Owain watched silently as she dipped a fold of cloth into the bowl and swabbed gently at his arm. The water would be red by the time she was done.

Dorian rummaged through what was left of Owain’s coat and caught his eye as he lifted two vials of lyrium from an inner pocket.

“T was out,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind.”

Owain could only blink in response.

The door burst open, and Vivienne bustled in with a small apothecary’s chest. She set it on the table beside the bed. Clink. Glass on glass.

Vivienne flipped the lid open and skimmed her fingers over the vials, plucking one from its peers. She pulled the stopper and waved her hand over the mouth to sniff, then set it down to search for another. A measure of this she added to the first, mixing with a quick snap of her wrist before leaning to touch the bottle to his lips.

His eyes flicked to hers as he opened his mouth. She nodded once and tipped it in.

Bitterness flooded his tongue and coated his throat, but he choked it down all the same.

The fog cleared. He could see everything, hear everything. *Feel* everything. Every part of him throbbed with pain. And his arm... Fuck, his arm burned. He gulped in air and squeezed his eyes shut.

Vivienne held another vial to his lips. “For the pain, my dear.”

He swallowed that, too.
Whatever it was, it was strong. Sweet relief washed over him almost immediately, rounding the edges off the worst of it. Only then could he think clearly enough to look around.

Dorian held his hands over Owain’s arm, casting a complicated spell. His eyes glowed with lyrium and concentration.

“Owain.” Cassandra sat on the bed to his right, and he turned toward her now. He reached for her with his good hand, and she took it in both of hers, skin to skin.

“Cass… anda. Even as a whisper, he couldn’t get it all out.

It didn’t matter. As always, she knew what he meant. She pressed his hand to her lips. Again and again. “I’m here, my love.”

“You…” are alright. The last time he had seen her, she was on the ground, felled by his own magic. He remembered that now.

She huffed a laugh and squeezed tears from her eyes, all in the same breath. “Yes, I’m alright. But you…” She let the sentence hang, like she didn’t know how to finish it. Or didn’t want to.

He tried to tug the corner of his mouth upward, but all he managed was a twitch of his eye.

“Owain.” Dorian had completed his analysis, and the gravity in his tone commanded all eyes in the room. “Listen to me. Your hand is collapsing after the loss of the anchor and the Fade magic. The tissue is corrupted beyond repair, and it’s spreading. It will kill you. I’m afraid—” His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard to master it. “I’m afraid your only chance will be to get ahead of it. I’ll need to remove it. Even then, it’s no guarantee, but…”

Owain stared blankly for a moment, letting the words sink in. He had a feeling it would come to this, and looking down at the bloodied thing at his side, he was not at all surprised. His hand was already gone.

That didn’t make it any less terrifying.

“I’ll leave as much as I can,” Dorian added when he didn’t respond. “Take as little as possible.”

Owain leveled his eyes at his friend and nodded, summoning strength to speak. “Do it.” Whatever you need to do.

Dorian nodded in return and wasted no more time. He cut the leather strap still bound to Owain’s arm, and as blood and sensation flowed back into the limb, pain obliterated all thought. He could only imagine how it might have felt without that last potion.

Dorian went to work, closing his eyes to weave the spell. Behind him, Vivienne pounded away with a mortar and pestle while Cullen paced at the foot of the bed.

But all of them faded away as he gave his attention back to the one person who deserved it most. His eyes searched her face, studied it and savoried it. If this was to be his end, he wanted the last thing he saw to be her. She squeezed his hand and pressed it to her cheek, a sob wracking through her. He blinked heavily.

“Keep him awake, Cassandra.” Dorian again. “I need him lucid for this.”

She didn’t respond, just kept her eyes locked on his. He brushed the backs of his fingers over her face. “I’m sorry, my love…”
She shook her head. “No. No, no.” More kisses, each one a thread that bound him to her. With enough of them, she might keep him here. “Stay with me. You cannot go. I won’t let you leave me like this.”

Seeing her in pain was like raking his heart through coals, and it was all his fault. He couldn’t stop apologizing. For this, for the hurt, for their future together, for the promises he could no longer keep. “I’m sorry.” So sorry. “I wanted…” What did he want? To live. To be perfect for her, to be his best possible self. To build a life with her, grow old with her, give her the happiness she deserved. Maker, he wanted everything.

He bucked from the mattress as the spell cut his flesh.

“Hold him!”

Cassandra pressed forward to lean her arms on his chest. Cullen gripped his ankles to stop him from kicking.

He didn’t watch. Couldn’t. For some things, imagination was enough. Instead, he ground his teeth together and held her hand to his chest. His lifeline, more than ever. Which of them squeezed harder, he had no idea.

When it was over, a healer came with bandages to wrap his shoulder and what was left of his arm. Dorian heaved a sigh of relief and went to work on the wound in his leg. Owain had all but forgotten about that.

Vivienne poured another potion down his throat. “For rest,” she said.

*Rest.* He didn’t even know what that meant anymore. Only the vaguest sense that it had to do with the hand still twisted in his.

More bitterness on his tongue. Whatever it was, it was strong.

He blinked once before slipping into black.

--

The sky here is green, and it’s all wrong.

Wrong, but it hardly matters because there’s no time to stop and look. He’s running. Always running.

But not fast enough. Never fast enough.

There are so many. They chase him over the rocks, legs skittering, fangs clicking.

The nightmare’s laugh cuts right through him. It lodges deep in his chest, riding every heartbeat, pumping fear through his body. “You’re going to die here,” it says. He’s almost ready to believe it.

He’s so tired and everything hurts and his lungs are about to burst.

Push. Just a little bit further. The rift glows at the top of the hill, and he starts to hope because he’s almost there.

Almost. Until his foot hits nothing but air and he tumbles, everything falling away. Absolute terror sinks its teeth in. The ground is gone, and all he can see below him now is the drip of acid jaws and the glare of too many eyes.
That laugh again—it pierces his heart, and he falls.

--

He plunges into deep, dark water. It’s cold, and the shock of it stuns him.

He opens his mouth to breathe, but water pours in. Salt burns his throat, and he chokes on it. It stings his eyes, but he opens them anyway.

Blue and green and black. It’s bright above, but dimming, and he knows why. He’s sinking, and it might not be the worst thing.

How long would it take to reach the bottom, and what would he find there? Soft sand or jagged rocks? Mysterious creatures that never saw the light of day? He could find out.

Fitting, perhaps, for it to end like this. Alone, forgotten, here in the deep. All he has to do is let go. Stop fighting, stop struggling. Just stop.

He can picture it now—dropping, letting the pressure claim him. It would be so easy. So very easy.

But he can’t.

He won’t.

Maybe he’s a coward in this, too. Or braver than he thinks.

Either way, he needs air, so he kicks toward the light, arms pulling and straining. His lungs are empty, his limbs burn, his vision is spotted with black.

Did he decide too late? Will he drown here after all?

His head breaks the surface, and he coughs up the water, trades it for air that’s never tasted so sweet.

He floats, and he breathes, rising and falling with the swells. The sea is impossibly blue, topped with a dazzle of unfiltered sun. It’s warm on his face.

In the distance, he can see the shore, the beach, and the rocky cliffs of Ostwick. Home.

But that can wait. It can all wait.

For now, he floats. And he breathes.

--

The door to the Trevelyan manor opens on the whisper of well-oiled hinges. The air inside is heavy but cool.

No one’s home, but in the stillness, he wanders the rooms. He runs his hand along the tapestry in the hall, kicks at the ash on the wide kitchen hearth. In his father’s study, he flicks his fingers to light the candles, so he can see the stacks of papers on the desk, the books on the shelf, the portraits of his ancestors glowering from the walls.

What would they say, if they could speak? About this son of their house, who wields such terrible magic? Who shakes the world with it?

He takes the stairs to the second floor. The hallways run in either direction, and he goes right, though
he’s not sure why.

How many doors does he pass before he recognizes the Circle? All the tiny rooms, side by side, just like this. That one there is his. He knows it but doesn’t go in. He walks on by because he’s promised himself he will never go back.

There’s a staircase at the end, and he climbs it. His footsteps echo off the smooth, ancient stone, lit by the sconces that burn on every landing. He pushes the door at the top, and he knows this place, too.

There’s his bed, the fireplace, his desk.

He goes out to the balcony, since the door’s already open. It’s night, and it’s dark, but the moons are bright enough to see. As he reaches the railing, he hears someone behind.

It’s her.

She’s dressed in his shirt and that’s all, and she’s never looked so beautiful. It takes his breath away, but he waits.

“It’s you,” she says as she closes the distance between them. “Can it be?” She touches his chest, just over his heart, and it beats double-time. Sliding her hand over his shoulder, she traces the lines of his face--his nose, his cheeks, his jaw.

He closes his eyes and tries not to cry.

“It seems impossible.”

“No,” he whispers through the tears. He takes her hand in his and brushes his lips across it. He plants a slow, wet kiss to the pulse at her wrist. “I’m here now. Always and forever.”

She smiles, and it makes him invincible. He pulls her close and kisses her, hard. This is everything now, and he holds nothing back, chasing her heat through the darkness.

He looks up, once, and doesn’t recognize the view. These mountains are not the Frostbacks. They’re different, and he can’t name the reason. But the stars are the same. They wink at him from the blue, and they stretch to infinity.

--

He sits on the ground, and a child squats beside him, one small hand clutched in the other. Their eyes focus on the center of their open palm, while the tip of their tongue peeks between rows of white teeth.

He watches, but nothing happens.

The child gives a heavy sigh and tucks their head between their knees. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can,” he says. “Remember the exercises. Concentrate on the Veil and molding yourself--”

“I know, I know. Like a flame.”

“Yes.”

“Show me again.” The pout is gratuitous, but it works.

He holds out his fist and opens it to reveal a tongue of flame that licks across his hand. The child
watches, enthralled, fire dancing in their gaze. They reach out to touch it, pass a finger through it, run rings around it. It follows, tame like a pet.

He lets the spell burn out. The little frown returns.

“Now you do it.”

“I said I can’t.”

“And I said you can. Try again.”

Steely grey eyes glare up at him, but he blinks and gives it right back.

He wins the battle of wills, and the child sighs again, too big a sound for such a small person. A wave of dark hair falls into their eyes, but with a huff they push it away, lifting their hands to try again.

--

It was bright when he woke. The sun streaming in through the windows lit the room and reminded him where he was.

She was with him, asleep. He shifted his hand, still wrapped in hers, and her eyes fluttered open.

Haloed in soft light, she smiled at him, and he could have sworn he was still dreaming.

“You’re awake.”

He took a deep, shaky breath. In, out. “I’m awake.”

She exhaled through her nose, almost a laugh, though her eyes looked wet. She rubbed her thumb across his palm and stroked her fingers through his. Just being here, with her—it was good.

“How long was I asleep?”

“A day and a half.”

“That’s a long time.”

“You need more. Vivienne gave you a reduced dose. In case...”

He finished it for her. “In case I didn’t wake up?”

If her eyes hadn’t been wet before, they were now. She swallowed hard, but her voice was still tight. “They said you would either come out of it, or you wouldn’t.”

He said nothing to that, turning his eyes toward the ceiling instead. They were probably right. Taking mental stock of his body, there were too many aches and pains to count. Every movement was stiff. Even the flow of his mana was off, his very sense of the world and the Veil, altered. Muted. Every part of him hurt. Every part...

It was so strange, his arm, the way it simply ended where his elbow used to be. He walked his fingers down from his shoulder, probed the sore muscles, pressed his palm to the stump. He did it to convince himself, to prove it was real. And it was.

Fuck.
A suffocating pressure weighed on his chest, and he could almost taste the saltwater sting on his tongue. He breathed hard and raked his hand through his hair. Like echoes of the sea, tears slipped from his eyes and made their end in his pillow.

“Say something,” she whispered.

He turned to look at her again and saw his pain reflected there. “Like what?”

“Anything,” she said, shaking her head. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit.” He closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. His heart thrashed like a bird in a cage. “There’s not a part of me that doesn’t hurt, including a hand that’s not even attached anymore.”

“Dorian said the pain might persist for some time, even after the procedure.”

He shook his head. “It’s not just that. Losing the anchor did something to me, to my magic. It took something from me, and I can’t… I don’t even know what it is. Everything just feels wrong.”

“Perhaps that will pass with time as well.”

He didn’t want to say he didn’t believe her, so he didn’t.

“What happened, exactly, when you went through that eluvian?” she asked, moving closer and taking his hand again. “We found you in the Crossroads. You muttered something about Solas and the anchor, but that was all we understood before you lost consciousness.”

He took a deep breath and cast his mind back. Of his return from the ruins and meeting his companions, he could find no memory. But before that? He recalled what he could.

“We were fighting the Viddasala, and the anchor went off. I thought that you… that I had…”

“I know what you thought,” she said, planting a kiss on his shoulder.

“Dorian kept telling me to go, but I didn’t want to leave you. I only did it because it’s what you would have wanted.”

She nodded, urging him to continue.

“He was there. Solas. Much more powerful than he ever was with us. He turned the Qunari to stone, nullified my magic, did something to calm the anchor. And then we talked.”

“Talked?”

“He wanted to explain himself. To justify himself.”

“Explain what? Justify what?”

“Destroying the world.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he wanted to smooth his finger down that crease between her brows, but he had only one hand now, and it was taken up with hers. Only one hand. Maker.

“I’m serious. We were running around with a fucking elven god and had no idea. He’s Fen’Harel. He created the Veil, caused the fall of Arlathan, slept for ages, and we were lucky enough to be around when he woke. He was the only one who knew about the orb because that and Corypheus were all his doing, and I ruined his plans by taking the anchor. So he used us, used the Inquisition, to
defeat Corypheus and fix his mistakes.”

“Why would he tell you all this? Why now?”

“Because he’s not done. He wants to tear down the Veil and put everything back the way it was. But in order to do that, this world has to end. As for why he told me, I don’t know... We were his friends, once. Maybe that counts for something.”

“We need to stop him,” she said, still frowning. “We cannot stand by and allow this to happen.”

“I know,” he sighed. “And we will. I just… wasn’t really in a position to do anything about it.” He released her hand and waved at his arm. “And who knows if I ever will be.”

Her eyes flickered over him, seeing all. “This is not your burden alone. The Inquisition and our allies… We will find a way.”

The determination in her voice made him want to smile. He loved this about her—her resolve, her strength, her fire. But he spoke no reply, just brushed back the hair that lay scattered on her brow.

“You know what else he said? After he took the anchor? He told me to live well, in the time we have left.”

The rest he said in a whisper, not because it was secret, but because it was precious. “I want to do that. Live well. With you.”

She nodded. “We will.”

“I mean it,” he said, now running his thumb down the scar on her cheek. “I don’t want to waste any more time being apart.”

Tears welled in her eyes again, but she wiped them fiercely away. She leaned over him and touched her hand to his chest.

“We will,” she repeated. And then she covered his lips with hers.

--

He slept on and off for three more days.

He had visitors, though he wasn’t always awake to receive them. Vivienne came to check on him and drop off more potions. He thanked her for what she had done, but she simply waved it off. “Not at all, my dear. Thedas needs you well.”

Varric brought a stack of books at some point, ostensibly for him but, as they all knew, really for Cassandra. Pastries and small cakes appeared regularly in his room, most likely from Sera and most likely nicked from the kitchens, though he knew better than to ask.

Dorian stopped by a few times a day. He, too, eschewed all thanks. “You would have done the same for me, Trevelyan.”

“You sure that’s what you want? You’ve seen me try to heal.”

“Good point,” said Dorian as he removed the bandage and held his hand over Owain’s arm. “I take it back. Just put me out of my misery instead. You’re good at that.” He replaced the wrap and leaned back on his heels, satisfied. “It’s healing well. Do you still have much pain?”
“All the time.” Owain sighed, running his hand over the still sore muscles. “Though the mark was getting so bad toward the end anyway that I can’t tell what’s worse.”

“At least it’s not killing you anymore, yes?”

“An expensive fix,” he said, breathing out a laugh. He squinted at Dorian. “Are you certain you can’t just necromance me a new hand?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “That’s not how it works, and you know it.”

“Worth a try.” Owain shrugged his good shoulder.

“What about your magic? The anomalies with your mana? Still there?”

He nodded. “It comes in waves. Sometimes I feel cut off, like I’ve been silenced. Other times, I might as well be walking in the Fade. My control, my senses—it’s all off.”

Dorian knitted his brows and tapped his fingers on the sheet. “Is it possible there are remnants of the anchor still with you? Even after the fact?”

“At this point, I’ll believe anything is possible,” said Owain, shaking his head. “I keep remembering what Corypheus said back at Haven, that the anchor is permanent. Maybe Solas was strong enough to remove it all, maybe not.”

“It could just be a matter of recalibrating. You got used to having all that power at your disposal, and now you need to rebalance.”

Owain took a deep breath and pushed it out his nose. “Maybe.”

When he said nothing else, Dorian sat down on the edge of the bed and crossed his leg, ankle over knee. “It’s good to have you back, you know. You gave us all a good scare. I’ve never seen Cassandra so out of her mind. A bit terrifying. Like a dragon that lost her drake.”

Owain recalled the fear in her eyes and the tight grip of her hand on his. “Yeah,” he said, looking away and flexing his fingers. “Well, she almost did.”

“What will you do now?”

“I don’t know. It changes everything and also very little. We still have all the same problems with the Inquisition as an organization, all the same demands from Ferelden and Orlais. Just a new enemy, really.”

“You’ll have allies in Tevinter, should you need them.”

“When are you going back?”

“Soon. The Qunari have been quiet on our borders lately, and with Dragon’s Breath, we know why. After the failure of their plans in the South, who knows what trouble they’ll stir up once they turn their attention back to us.”

“There’s always something, isn’t there?”

“As good a lesson as any from all this.”

“What happens when you go back? I mean, with you and Bull.”
“Nothing.” Dorian shrugged, trying to sound casual, though Owain knew him well enough to read the truth. “We meet every now and then, somewhere halfway, when we can find the time. Or when you send him nearby with the Chargers.”

“I didn’t know the Inquisition was subsidizing lover’s retreats.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about, or so I hear.”

Owain ran his tongue between his teeth and the inside of his lip and shook his head, as if to say, “too soon,” but otherwise he ignored the jab. “That can’t be easy.”

“It’s not.” Dorian flicked his eyes to Owain’s, and then away. “And I know I don’t need to tell you that. But Tevinter is where I need to be right now. He understands.”

“Have you ever thought about bringing him with you?”

Dorian snorted. “A Qunari in Minrathous? Even Tal-Vashoth? He’d be a bit conspicuous, to say the least. No. He’s offered, of course, but I can’t—I won’t risk it. Not now.”

“I’m sorry,” said Owain, knowing the words were far from adequate. “I wish things were different.” He wished a lot of things were different.

Dorian smiled. “You’re not the only one.”

His advisors and Divine Victoria were a regular in and out presence in his room, debriefing his trip through the eluvians and updating him on the current mood of the Exalted Council. Josephine and Leliana had managed to keep the delegates at peace during his recovery, but now that his death was no longer imminent, they were growing restless.

“I do not know how much longer we can put off your attendance, Inquisitor,” said Josie, balancing her writing board on her hip. “It has been nearly a week, and they wish to know whether they can expect answers.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but Cassandra cut in. “Tell them he needs to rest,” she snapped, scowling from her seat on the corner of his bed. “He lost an arm only a few days ago. His health is more important than these games.”

“It’s alright,” he sighed, shooting Cassandra a grateful look and pushing aside the bowl of broth on his tray. Why did they always feed him soup when he was injured? What he wouldn’t give for some real food. Or a drink. “I’ll do it. I’ll go before the Council.”

“Are you certain?” she asked.

He nodded. “The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can all go home.”

“What will you say?” asked Cullen.

“Any chance we could get away with saying nothing? For the Inquisition to continue as is?”

“I’m afraid the status quo is the only option they will not accept.” Josie again. “They will point to our failures with the Qunari plot.”

“A plot that we discovered and defeated,” said Cassandra, bristling with disdain. “If not for the Inquisition, they would not even be here to complain.”

“Only after the threat originated from spies in our own ranks. They will not let us forget that, no
matter how many times we save their lives.”

Owain pinched the corners of his eyes. “Well, they do have a point. We have become part of the problem. And it’s not just the Qunari, but Solas’s agents as well. He said they were practically tripping over each other.”

“Many of our elven agents have already disappeared, practically overnight,” said Cullen. “I can only assume they were working for him.”

“Not all elves belong to Fen-Harel, Inquisitor,” said Charter. “But it does save us the trouble of rooting them out.”

“So we clean house. Reduce our reach. If the Inquisition is too big to do our job, then there’s only one solution. We can’t afford to be complacent, or we’ll end up as corrupt as everyone else.” He turned to Josie again. “Do you think that will satisfy the Council?”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “A reduction in our military forces would certainly help Ferelden and Orlais feel more secure…”

He could sense she wasn’t finished. “But?”

“But I believe the key point is accountability. The Inquisition acts on its own authority, not beholden to any nation or throne.”

“It is rooted in the Chantry,” said Cassandra. “Our authority was granted by the writ from Divine Justinia.”

“True, but it has grown far beyond that. No one could have foreseen the influence or the power we now hold.”

Cullen spoke up. “What if we were to return to the Chantry’s oversight? Cut our numbers and become something of an honor guard or peacekeeping force for the Divine?”

“Pledge ourselves to the Chantry?” Owain swallowed his reflexive disgust at the idea. He didn’t escape the Circle just to hand himself back into Chantry control, did he?

“It could work,” Charter agreed. “And with Leliana on the Sunburst Throne, we would have leeway to operate as we see fit.”

Were they really considering this? “Would the Council even accept such a thing?”

“It is unprecedented, but I believe we could make them see reason,” said Leliana. “If that’s what you want.” She looked him squarely in the eyes, as if she knew it wasn’t. “But there is another consideration, Inquisitor. If your object is to stop Solas, you may need to do more than reorganize.”

He squinted at her. “What do you mean?”

“Solas was part of the Inquisition, from the beginning. He knows who you are, how you work, your strengths and your weaknesses. He will always be one step ahead. If you truly want to match him, you will need to change everything. Find people he doesn’t know. Work in ways he will not expect.”

“What are you saying?”

“We set out to restore peace, and that peace is now upon us. Some things can only be accomplished
in shadow, without the trappings of power and the attention they bring.”

Her gaze was steady and penetrating as ever, and as she fixed him with it, he could almost believe he was still talking to his spymaster, in spite of the Divine vestments she now wore.

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Cassandra cut the empty sleeve of his formal coat and prepared to secure the open end with a pin. He flinched at the snick of her knife through the fabric. It sounded so final.

When it was done, she stepped back and looked him over, smiling slightly. Then she rocked forward and kissed the corner of his mouth. “Are you ready?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “It won’t get any better, standing here.”

“It will be over soon, my love,” she said, giving his shoulder one last squeeze.

They didn’t talk as they made their way through the halls of the Winter Palace. It was the first time in a week he had left his room or seen anyone but his inner circle, and his unexpected dread at walking about among people again had spawned a lead weight in his gut. All the confidence he’d had while making plans with his advisors was gone. Evaporated. He felt exposed and vulnerable, like a newborn animal in the light too soon.

They paused before the doors to the meeting room. His hand was shaking, so he made a fist to steady it. Cassandra covered it with her hand, and it melted again into fingers that threaded through hers.

It was time. He pushed the door open and went in.

Maker, he wasn’t ready for this.

A hush fell over the room as he entered. All eyes were on him, from the delegates at the head table to the gawkers in the rear gallery. There were so many.

He wasn’t ready. This was a mistake. He should have put it off another day.

But it was too late for that, so he held his mask firmly in place and marched himself forward, locking his eyes on Josephine, or Leliana, or Cullen, any friendly face ahead.

He named the reactions as he made his way to the front. There was shock, horror, sympathy. Sometimes a mix, or an added whiff of revulsion. Stunned silence gave way to whispers as he passed through the crowd. He tried not to listen to the words.

When he reached the front, he bowed.

“A pleasure to have you with us again, Lord Inquisitor,” said Duke Cyril with a deep nod. “Glad to see you have made a swift recovery.”

“But as swift as I’d like, Your Grace. But peace comes at a cost.”

“Indeed. The people of Orlais owe much to you, Lord Trevelyan.”

Owain walked stiffly to his seat, and whatever conversation he had interrupted by his entrance resumed. He let Josie handle it while he gathered himself.

Maker. It was one thing to meet with his friends and advisors in the safety of his room. They knew him. They saw him as he was, and, with or without his left hand, they would always look at him
exactly the same way.

But everyone else? Everyone else saw only the outside. All they knew was The Inquisitor, the image, the hero, and so fragile was that concept that a change like this threatened the whole facade.

The chatter of the crowd grew bolder as the meeting wore on, and he couldn’t help but hear it.

“How horrible!”

“I can hardly stand to look…”

“Do you think they’ll still marry?”

“Yes, quite ruined now… What a shame…”

He breathed and gripped the edge of the table to stop his hand from shaking, whether from nerves or rage, he wasn’t sure. He longed to turn and find Cassandra in one of the seats behind him, to draw comfort from a look, but he didn’t want to face the eyes of the crowd, nor fuel a fresh wave of murmurs.

To distract himself, he went over the plan in his head, the speech they had discussed. He would announce the transition of the Inquisition to an honor guard for Divine Victoria, a small force dedicated to keeping order and peace in Thedas, to reinforcing the new world order they had won with so much war.

All his advisors supported the plan, and objectively he could see its merits, but doubt still crept at the edge of his thoughts. Why were they doing this? Was it simply to continue a thing they had been doing for the past three years? Were they perpetuating the Inquisition for a higher purpose or as an end in itself? He remembered Lord Seeker Lucius and his taunts about the First Inquisition. Were they headed down the same path?

What about Leliana’s words? She seemed to say that they could work to stop Solas with or without the Inquisition as an entity, and in fact, it might even be easier without it.

And what about him? And Cassandra? And living well? Where did that fit into all this?

He knew what they wanted him to choose. And he knew what he wanted. The Inquisition, the anchor, the titles—he hadn’t wanted any of it in the beginning. Had that changed along the way? Or had he let himself, as he had his entire life, be lead along by the path he was on, allowing fate or others to make decisions for him and all but force him in one direction or another? How many real choices had he ever truly made? Did he have the courage to make one now?

More gossip reached his ears, and it pushed him to a breaking point. Anger simmered in his blood. These nobles had no idea what it had cost the Inquisition, what it had cost him, to hold this world together. If their image of him was so altered now, why not just tear the whole thing down?

He tuned in again to the sound of Josie’s voice. “The Inquisition has been far from idle these past two years. May I remind you of the improvements we have continued to make in both Ferelden and Orlais? Restoring bridges and roads in the Dales, rebuilding homes in Crestwood and the Hinterlands?”

“Yes, work that you yourselves benefit from as you continue to hold our keeps,” said Arl Teagan.

“No one has forgotten what you have done, Lady Montilyet,” said Cyril, beginning to show some exasperation. “But if the Inquisition is to continue, it must do so as a legitimate organization, not a
“Why don’t we hear from the Inquisitor on this question?” asked Teagan, eyeing Owain in his seat. “That is why he’s here, is it not?”

Owain looked to Josie, who nodded. Mentally apologizing to her for what he was about to do, he stood. The scrape of his chair pushing back echoed in the quiet.

_Do it._ He cleared his throat and pitched his voice for all to hear.

“You know what this is?” he asked, picking up the heavy tome from the table and turning to sweep the whole room with his eyes. “It’s a writ from Divine Justinia authorizing the formation of the Inquisition. From the start, we pledged to close the breach, find those responsible, and restore order, with or without anyone’s approval.”

He stepped out from behind the table and paced at the front of the room, meeting the eyes of every delegate as he passed.

“By all accounts, we have fulfilled that pledge. As you’ve pointed out, the Breach has been closed and Corypheus dead for years now. The war is over, for most of us. It is time for our soldiers to sheathe their swords and go home. To enjoy the peace and stability we fought so hard to restore, just as you have been able to do in Ferelden and Orlais, thanks to us.

“The Inquisition, as you say, has run its course. But remember, it wasn’t a formally authorized treaty that freed Ferelden’s people, nor was it carefully negotiated diplomacy that ended Orlais’s civil war. It’s not about the organization, and it never was. It was about people doing what was necessary and giving what was necessary.” He paused to straighten his shoulders, making clear the loss of his hand. “Sacrificing, when necessary.”

“There will always be more threats,” he said, making his way back to the center front. “In fact, there is worse coming than anything you have yet seen. And there are those of us who will continue to do what is necessary, no matter what banner—or none—we stand beneath.”

He flipped his wrist and let the book fall. It hit the floor with a very satisfying bang. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have a world to save. Again. Effective immediately, the Inquisition is disbanded.”

The crowd gave a collective gasp, and in that moment of suspended silence, he turned on his heels and left.

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Back in his room, he shut the door behind him and breathed hard, trying to slow the hammering of his pulse in his ears.

Maker, he was sweating. He tore at the buttons of his coat, which hitherto felt fine but was now far too small and oppressive. That off, he went to work on his shirt, struggling to pull his left arm out of its abbreviated sleeve and then yanking the whole thing over his head with a grunt.

He stood and breathed, letting the air cool the damp from his skin and the rage from his blood.

He’d done it. Actually done it.

It didn’t feel as good as he’d thought. He’d expected relief, or maybe freedom, when it was done, but he found he only felt empty.
His eyes fell on the mirror near the bed, and he moved toward it, almost without thinking. The words and faces of the people in the council room haunted him now as he looked himself over. He had never considered himself prone to vanity about his appearance, but whatever pride or confidence he did have about his physical form and capabilities turned on him now, sharp tooth and nail, tearing at what was left of his self-worth.

There was the missing half of his arm, of course. Dorian had done clean work, but the end of it was flushed and tender, skin angry at being newly remade. Branching veins of Fade green still crept toward his shoulder, less livid than before, but there, evidence of power he no longer commanded.

All this was added to the marks he already carried: the old burns, a scarred web on his chest from the Shrine of Dumat, a spot from that arrow in Crestwood. Not to mention the miscellaneous injuries he’d picked up along the way.

How would he fight, like this? Staves were not one-handed weapons. And his magic—would that ever return to normal? Would his rift spells still work without the conduit of the anchor?

The mirror reminded him of the last time they’d fucked, right there, on the bed, a week ago. She had been so good. The heat in her eyes, the way she’d rocked against his fingers, the way he’d taken her as they watched their own images in glass…

How much of that was lost to him? Would she even want him now, as mangled and marked—ruined—as he was?

There was a whole host of things he would never do again.

He turned away and stumbled toward the bed, tripping over his own feet. His hip hit the edge of the mattress, and he threw a hand out to catch himself. A simple thing made difficult, when the hand in question no longer existed. The stump of his arm crashed into the mattress, and he cried out at the pain. Sliding down the side of the bed, he sat on the floor and pulled his knees up, curling into a ball like he’d done as a boy.

Alone and adrift. Every anchor point that defined him had come loose, disappeared or rearranged. Not the Inquisitor, not the Herald, not even an Enchanter, anymore. Who was he now?

The door opened and startled him out of his thoughts. It was Cassandra, who furrowed her brows at the sight of him on the floor. Crouching beside him, she touched a hand to his knee, and he let his feet slide forward to stretch his legs flat. She shifted and sat astride his thighs.

He leaned his head back against the edge of the mattress and stared up at her. “Did I do the right thing?”

She studied him for a moment, eyes roving with worry over his face. “You made a choice when one needed to be made. There are many details to work out, but I think it will prove to be wise, in the end.”

“What do I do now? I put everything in this, and now it’s gone. What’s left?”

“You still have me.”

He shook his head and laughed without joy. “You don’t want me. I’m a mess.” His eyes started to water, but he let them wander, taking her in. “You’re so… Fuck, Cass. You deserve better. Someone less broken. Someone whole.” He turned his head aside and looked away.

She reached out with both hands and pressed her fingers to the hinge of his jaw, pulling him gently
but firmly to face her. He couldn’t handle the fire in her eyes.

“Owain. Look at me.” Her commands always were impossible to refuse. He dragged his eyes reluctantly to hers. That hazel shot right to his soul.

“No one is whole,” she said, as she brushed her thumbs over his cheeks. “Yes, you have lost, more than you should have. But I see no tragedy here. Only a miracle that you live.”

He could feel his face starting to crumple, the tears brimming over.

But she wasn’t done yet.

“I love you. And I will have no other.”

Ah.

Ahh.

It was as if she had reached out to him across miles of open ocean, to where he floated aimlessly on the current of his own self-doubt. She reached out to him and held him fast, a rock of absolute truth in his ever-shifting sea.

He leaned into her shoulder and sobbed, losing his fight against the tears in spectacular fashion. It all poured out of him now: pain, fear, relief. And gratitude, so much gratitude, for this fierce, unwavering love. Her love. Impossible love. He didn’t deserve it, but he didn’t need to. It was freely given—he could see that now.

When he regained his senses, he reached up to push his hand in her hair and pull her down for a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him there. Her lips were salt and sweet and everything he wanted.

He gasped as they parted and pressed his forehead to hers.

“You’re going to regret this,” he whispered, with a bit of a laugh.

She shook her head and gave him a slow smile, no less beautiful for being covered in tears. “I don’t think so.”

They sat there until their eyes dried and their breathing slowed, until he found the courage to face the world once more.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with me, dear readers. Y’all keep me going as we chug toward the end…

Speaking of which, ONE MORE CHAPTER!!!! Ahhhhh!! Believe me when I say there are cards I’ve been waiting to play for a very long time. ;)

Housekeeping note: I ran through and did a bit of a glow-up of the earlier chapters after I posted the last one. Nothing major, mostly to satisfy my own perfectionism, but I did drop a couple thousand words and fix a few things, so you might notice. :D
Sunrise, Sunset

Chapter Summary

Recovery is a road, not a destination.

Chapter Notes

Fluff, smut, angst--we got it all! NSFW, my friends.

I know I said this was the last chapter, but that’s only *mostly* true. I’ll be back with a brief epilogue shortly. I was going to wait and post them together, but this update has taken long enough, and it deserves a little space to breathe. Enjoy! <3

He had good days, and he had bad days.

Returning to Skyhold should have helped, and in some ways it did, but the comfort of familiar surroundings was tempered by constant reminders of his newfound limitations. They sprang on him when he least expected, these ghosts of what he was and would never be again, even in the smallest details, like the sticky door that was easy with two hands but now had to be wrenched open with one, or the heavy chair he had to push, not lift, across the floor, or the once-reliable stair rail he could no longer count on.

Those were just the little things.

Everything seemed changed after the Winter Palace, and not all of it was due to the loss of his hand. Dismantling an operation as big and complicated as the Inquisition was no trivial task.

The delegation coming back from Orlais was smaller than the one leaving, but it was some consolation to know that those who remained were loyal. Save Leliana, his old inner circle returned, too, decamping to Skyhold to sort out what they could offer in the days to come. They couldn’t hold that kind of conference within the watchful walls of Halamshiral.

The Inquisition would disband as promised. Their keeps in Ferelden and Orlais were surrendered to their former lords, their assets liquidated or applied where they might do the most good. Even after paying their soldiers generously and distributing the rest among his companions and other officers, Owain still found himself with more than he knew what to do with. It seemed wrong somehow to come out of all this, if not exactly rich, confident that he wouldn’t have material wants for a very long time. He tried expressing as much to Josie, but she merely smiled and asked what else he would have her do with the gold, return it to the nobility?

The disposition of Skyhold was a matter of much debate. Thinking of the mages and apprentices that had made their home in its towers, Owain proposed offering it to the College of Enchanters as a place of learning. An entirely mage-held fortress in the Frostbacks, however, was a hard idea to sell. As a compromise, he agreed to cede the keep to the Divine. The mages would be allowed to stay,
along with the Inquisition’s Templars who wished to continue there, helping to ensure safety for all involved. He had his doubts about giving anything to the Chantry, but he trusted Leliana and reminded himself that sometimes change was best made incrementally.

Every day there seemed to be fewer people at Skyhold. Their troops were slowly trickling away to home or wherever their fortunes called them. Owain could tell Cullen was a little put out by it, which was understandable enough. The commander had built their forces from a ragtag militia into a well-disciplined army that had overcome Corypheus and given empires pause. It had to be hard to watch that go, even if Cullen, too, was planning for the future. Leliana had promised him a small piece of Chantry land in Ferelden where he could build a clinic for other former Templars who wished to free themselves from lyrium. He would be near his family, and Althea was going with him.

The others had homes to return to or plans to make their own ways across Thedas. Rainier would resume his travels, and Bull and his Chargers would search for new work. They could afford to choose their jobs now. When Owain asked Sera about her plans, she blurted something about the Jennies and her “Widdle,” and he nodded like he understood.

As for him and Cassandra, they would remove to the Seeker keep in the Hunterhorns as soon as everything was done here. He had no place to be other than at her side, and though he had promised visits to Kirkwall and Ostwick and even Antiva at some point, he was looking forward to being with her for the foreseeable future.

The Inquisition’s network of spies was debriefed and cut loose as Leliana had advised, with a few strategic exceptions. Owain tasked Charter with personally vetting every agent that remained and what they knew and what they didn’t about the Inquisition’s secrets. With Solas as their main objective now and an uncertain path ahead, the Inquisition-no-longer needed to be nimble and rely on people he would least expect. There was no telling when, but a day was coming when friends and former allies would be called upon to serve again. Solas was not one to make idle threats.

Settling these affairs took time and more energy than he cared to admit, but Owain found ways to revive his old habits where he could. He needed some things that felt normal, in the midst of all this change.

His morning rides with Will were one of those things. Both of them were well past pretending that the purpose of these daily outings was remedial training. Will’s magic had long been good enough to fend off possession and be useful in everyday tasks, though it was clear he would never be much of a soldier or a scholar. That was perfectly fine with the lad. No, these days their sessions benefited the teacher more than the student. To Owain, they were a valuable escape from the slowly emptying keep, a way to find some peace and solitude among the hills below Skyhold.

He told no one this, but they were also a way for him to relearn his own magic in relative privacy. Returning to Skyhold after the loss of the anchor and with his powers in flux had felt like retreat, like running home to lick his wounds. But he could not afford to lay low for long. There were more battles to come, and he needed to be ready to fight them.

To do that, he needed to find a new balance, to learn again the feel of casting without the anchor and its direct line to the Fade. He had not lost that power completely, for his magic did not return to the way it was before the Conclave. Instead, it settled somewhere in between. It was as Dorian suggested, that there were remnants of the anchor still with him, even if they, too, were different.

These discoveries were the result of many hours spent in meditation and inward focus, just as he was doing now, perched on a rock at the edge of a small wood. They had ridden perhaps a mile or so down the road before turning onto a narrow track through the trees and descending into a small valley on the east side of the range. He sat still and tried to center himself, blocking out the swish of
the wind in the leaves, the snuffling of his horse in the grass, and the fidgeting of Will who was supposed to be doing his own exercises a few yards away.

He let himself forget all that and concentrated on the flow of energy within. He imagined it now in his mind’s eye, the current of his own magic. He pictured it in soft blue, like lyrium, shot through with the bright green of the mark he used to bear. It was all part of him now, including what was left of the anchor. When had it ceased to feel foreign?

In the Fade, he was whole. He still had two hands. He knew it, even if he couldn’t exactly see it. He felt it here in these moments when he burrowed deep inside himself, when he flirted with the Veil and opened his senses to the whispering of the spirits beyond. He felt it in his dreams, where he walked through strange worlds that were vivid like memory and real like life, even without the anchor. He felt it, too, in his magic. When he called on the power of the Fade and shaped its energy to his will, it was as if nothing had changed.

Besides the meditation, however, there were practical exercises to recover his strength, and in these, there were undeniable drawbacks to having only one hand.

He rose and pulled his staff from his back as Will untied bundles of straw and rope from his horse and ran ahead to set them around the field. Focusing his mana and spinning his staff one-handed, Owain conjured a stonefist and sent it hurtling at the nearest target. Then another, and another. Will gave a muted whoop of triumph as Owain felled each of them in turn. At least one person here was satisfied with his performance.

Next, he thrust his blade in the earth and stood behind it to cast, summoning an abyss to pull the targets together, following with more stone to break them apart. He pushed on, calling a bolt of lightning from the sky and a pillar of ice from the ground. All good, if exhausting.

Will hurried to reset the field as Owain freed his staff and set it aside. He took a moment to breathe and gather himself. This last round was the hardest but also the most important. He didn’t need a staff for his magic and never had, but under normal circumstances, it helped. In his condition, it was a liability, one he hoped to do without.

If he could. More shards of ice, more bolts, more fireballs and flame—he made most of his targets, but not all, and the spells that hit barely singed the straw. He huffed in frustration. Without a staff as a focus, his spells took twice the effort to cast and had half the impact he wanted. At least his accuracy was improving. Two weeks ago, he could hardly hit one.

Spent now, he waved the boy back. That was enough for one day.

Will began chatting as they packed up. Today’s topic was something about emptying the stables. Owain hauled himself into his saddle and half-listened, as usual.

“...take a few of the best with us, and what’s left of Master Dennet’s will go with him. That just leaves the exotics. Lady Josephine already has buyers for the harts, and some Orlesian collector wants the big dracolisk. Nasty one, he is. And I heard Lel--I mean, The Most Holy--wants the nuggalopes to stay. Dunno what we’ll do with the bog unicorn, though. Don’t guess anyone wants that...”

“Wait,” said Owain as they began to walk back toward the road. “Did you say, ‘take a few with us?’”

Will nodded enthusiastically, which Owain found exceedingly suspicious. “To the Hunterhorn Mountains. Master Dennet says they even make the Frostbacks look small. Is that true?”
“Don’t know, never been.” Owain squinted at him from the corner of his eye. “What makes you so sure you’re going?”

“The Seekers have horses,” said Will, as if this was obvious. “And they’ll be needing a horse master.”

“You’ll have to take that up with the Lady Seeker.”

“She said I could come.”

Owain turned fully in his saddle at this. “Did she?”

Will’s eyes widened and he froze with his mouth open. “Er… I mean… With your permission, Inquisitor.”

Owain grumbled under his breath and made a note to speak with Cassandra about this later. It wasn’t that he didn’t want the boy to come, just that… Well, didn’t he have better places to be?

“Wouldn’t you rather stay at Skyhold with the other apprentices? You could continue your studies. Learn more magic.”

“Senior Enchanter Gaius doesn’t think I have much talent…” Will trailed off, as if considering his own statement, then looked at Owain with renewed hope in his eyes. “And anyway, I can learn anything I need to know from you, can’t I?”

Owain was less convinced. “What about your family? Won’t they miss you? You could go home now that you can control your magic.”

“I wrote. Papa is proud I’ve been working for the Inquisition. He thinks serving the Seekers would be a great honor. At my age, too. And Master Dennet offered me a job, you know, but I’m not sure I want to live in Ferelden…”

“Mm.”

“So can I come?”

“I’ll think about it,” said Owain. Then he urged his horse into a gallop, before the boy could ask again.

--

Even if his magic had settled into a new equilibrium, and he could cast about as well as before, Owain’s physical combat skills just weren’t the same. It was beyond infuriating.

Afternoon sun poured down over the walls as he leaned on his staff in the training yard. The air was cool as always, but a bead of sweat slid down his temple all the same. He shrugged his left shoulder to mop it roughly with his sleeve. His arm was still good for that, at least. He was not in the mood to say the same about anything else.

It wasn’t for lack of effort. He had been at this for hours, and today was hardly the first he’d spent chasing his former prowess. He’d tried everything—changing his grip, bracing his staff against his arm or shoulder, timing his steps just so. He couldn’t make it work. The balance was all wrong, or else his hits lacked power.

Again. Staff held tight, he fade stepped across the yard, using the force of the spell to drive him
toward the dummy. He charged forward, fighting to keep his staff on course, but the blade glanced harmlessly off the burlap. Whirling to strike again, he tried to bring his weapon around, but it twisted from his grasp and rolled to the ground. He breathed a heavy sigh and plucked it back from the dirt.

Maybe it was obvious. Maybe he was a fool for even trying. You can’t wield a staff with one hand, everybody knew that. Yet, could he really blame himself for clinging to this thin strand of hope? Hope that if he only worked hard enough, he might somehow beat the odds? Was it so foolish to wish that the one thing he was ever really good at might not be totally lost?

What good was a battlemage that couldn’t fight?

He grunted and launched his staff at the target with all his strength. The blade lodged in the straw, and it hung there for a moment, the shaft bobbling once before it bounced loose and the whole thing fell clattering to the ground. He’d stumbled forward with the momentum, landing on his knees in the packed dirt. He dusted his hand and scraped it down his face, blinking hard. Then he got to his feet, turned, and walked straight to the tavern.

That was where Althea found him nearly an hour later. He had seized a bottle from behind the bar and installed himself in the darkest corner of the second floor, glaring at anyone who looked in his direction. It was highly effective, considering that no one had yet dared to bother him and the level of amber liquid in the bottle was noticeably lower than when he started. He counted it a success.

His dirty looks did not work on Althea, however, and now that he was thinking about it, perhaps they never had. She said nothing, just stood there with her hand on her hip, bright eyes judging the sorry state of him: his shirt dirty where he’d wiped his hand earlier, his leg sprawled on the bench beside him, his hair still rumpled with sweat and the pull of his fingers. He didn’t speak either but narrowed his eyes at her as he finished what was in his glass and reached for a refill.

She sighed and shoved his foot out of the way, taking its place on the bench. He let it drop to the floor like dead weight.

“What do you want?” he said over the rim of his next drink, since, clearly, she intended to stay.

She leaned her head back against the wall and looked at him, letting the silence stretch on until he blinked away. The she pulled the sword hilt from her belt and held it out to him.

He glanced at it and then back at her. “What is this?”

She smirked. “You don’t know? It’s an enchanter’s blade. Magical sw--”

“I know it’s a fucking blade,” he snapped, rolling his eyes. “But it’s yours. Why are you giving it to me?”

She set it down between them and let out a long breath, staring straight ahead across the empty tavern. “You think we don’t see you, huffing and swearing in the yard every day?”

He grunted and took another pull of whiskey.

“It’s not working. And it’s not going to work.”

“I’m sorry, were you trying to be encouraging?” He scoffed with his glass in mid-air. “Because you’re doing a shit job.”

He caught the look on her face and instantly regretted being so sharp. When she didn’t answer, he stumbled on. “Sorry. Look, I know I’m finished. I know. You don’t need to tell me. I just…” He
nearly choked, and it had nothing to do with the alcohol. He took a deep breath and swallowed it down. ‘Just let me get there on my own, will you?’

‘You’re not finished. You just have to adapt. You lost a hand, and now what? You’re going to hide up here and drink yourself to death?’

‘Been alright so far.’

‘Stop it.’ She glared and grabbed his wrist, prizing the drink from his fingers. He didn’t fight it, really, just looked away and watched as she set it on the table. ‘You’re better than this.’

The whiskey sloshed in the glass, sliding down the sides as it leveled smooth. He found a knot in the table just in front of him and traced it with a finger.

‘You know, when they picked me for training back at the Circle, I was so proud,’’ he said quietly, still not meeting her eyes. He breathed a little laugh. ‘Maker, it sounds stupid now. I know it was just so they could use me, that it was never about me, really. But I didn’t care. It felt good. That was the first time after I left home that I felt like I might actually be good at something. That I actually mattered.’

When he looked up, she was studying his face. The light was dim here, but what little there was reflected in her blue gaze. Shifting her seat, she turned and reached for the back of his neck. He let her pull him down until they were face to face. With gentleness that was rare for her, she kissed his forehead and then pressed it to hers, letting it rest there for a time.

‘You’re more than what you do on the battlefield, Owain. You always were.’

She let him go, and he didn’t trust his voice to be steady, so he just blinked and twitched his lips in a sad smile.

She picked up the hilt and offered it again. ‘And you’re still a warrior. You just need a different weapon.’

This time he took it, testing the weight in his hand, turning to examine the guard. A cracked blue jewel winked at him from the pommel, and the low hum of magic radiated from the silverite core. ‘Am I supposed to know how this works?’

‘I’ll teach you,’ she said, tossing her braid over her shoulder. ‘It’s not that hard. You already know the sword part.’ She picked up his drink and arched a brow. There was the Althea he knew. ‘Besides, haven’t you always wanted to be a knight?’

He snorted and watched as she downed the rest of his whiskey. ‘Should have brought your own glass.’

‘Why?’ she said, already pouring another measure. ‘I have yours.’

--

Owain shut the door firmly behind him and stepped up into his quarters, waving a hand at the fire to stoke the blaze in passing. His mind still buzzed with the business of the day—a stern letter from Fiona about his plans for Skyhold, a message from the Council of Heralds full of thinly veiled warnings he had barely begun to parse, plus a dispute over the sale of supply caches in the Dales. If he thought disbanding the Inquisition would free him from these headaches, he had never been more wrong.
His knight-enchanter training was also progressing slower than he liked. His arm and back ached from using muscles as they hadn’t been used in a long time. Remaking himself into a swordsman was grueling, and he was ready to be done for the night. Alone in the silence now, he sighed and rolled his shoulders, letting the heavy Inquisitor mantle fall away.

He pulled at the collar of his new coat, but his fingers fumbled with the closures. Harritt had finished with it just that morning and put it on for a final fitting. Owain had walked away with it, giving exactly zero thought to how easy—or not—it would be to take off on his own.

Not easy, as it turned out. The stiff new leather caught in the buckles. His fingers slipped on the buttons. This would have been infinitely easier with two hands. As it was, it took him five minutes just to get halfway, and his growing frustration only made him more careless. How furious would Harritt be if Owain showed up back at the undercroft with brand new armor and all the buttons torn off?

_Breathe._

He dropped his arm to his side and paced between his bed and the fire. Was he really about to lose his temper over some Maker-damned buttons?

_Calm. Down._

He stopped and squeezed his hand in a fist and took a deep breath. In. Out.

Several minutes later, he finally got the thing off and flung it at the bed. He had almost always worn his old coat open, and no one could blame him now if he did the same with its replacement.

He’d earned a drink. Walking to his desk, he pulled a bottle of whiskey from the shelf. The cork stuck in the opening, so he lifted it to his mouth and yanked it out with his teeth. He poured an inch into his glass and went to replace the stopper, thought better of it, and set it on the desk instead. No point. He’d be back for more.

It was a third gone already by the time he slouched into the plush chair by the fire. He kicked off his boots and sat there and sipped, staring absently into the flames.

The sound of Cassandra stomping up the stairs announced her arrival before she came into view. She tugged her gloves off and tossed them in the opposite chair with a huff. She was agitated about something, but her attitude shifted when she noticed him.

She fixed him with a questioning look, but he just sighed and looked away.

“Apparently I can’t even dress myself anymore,” he said, lifting the glass to his lips.

She furrowed her brow and glanced about the room, finding the coat laying where he’d thrown it. She picked it up and shook it out, examining the row of buttons down the front.

“You could have Harritt make some modifications. Make it easier to handle.”

He laughed darkly and sipped again. “So I can feel even more helpless?”

She set the coat aside and bent to take the drink from his hand. Everyone was doing that lately. He leaned back in his seat and squinted up at her as she finished what remained and set the empty glass on the table beside them.

“Perhaps you just need to get used to it. It is unfamiliar, that is all.” Resting her weight on the arm of
his chair, she took his hand in hers and placed it on her shoulder, over the buckles of her own armor. He could have sworn that look was a smirk. “Perhaps some practice is in order.”

He snorted and tried to pull away, but her grip wasn’t easy to escape. The angle of her brows meant she was serious.

“Fine,” he sighed, pulling the strip of leather through the metal loops. When he was done, she nodded at her other shoulder, and he went to work on that, too. She raised her arms so he could access the straps at her sides and the belts at her waist.

She was right. It was easier when he knew what he was doing. He pulled the final ties free, and she lifted her armor away.

“How now?” he asked, as she turned to set it on her chair.

She didn’t reply immediately but pulled off the padded vest she wore beneath her breastplate and loosened the collar of her tunic as he watched. It took him a minute longer to realize where this was going. She stepped out of her boots and shimmed out of her breeches. Then she pulled her tunic off and stood naked before him. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

His mouth went dry as he took in the sight of her. She positively glowed in the firelight, dancing shadows hugging every curve. She was so beautiful. Always.

They had not made love since Halamshiral, even after returning to Skyhold. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her. What he didn’t want was her pity or to be an obligation in his current state. It wasn’t exactly rational, for she had given him no reason to expect that from her, but, still.

It was sure to be different now. It had to be, just like everything else, and he didn’t want to know exactly how. He didn’t want to know how this perfect, precious thing, their physical love, would be forever changed by his deformity. He had already lost so much; he couldn’t stand to lose this, too. Better to remember things as they were.

But he should have known she would lose patience with him, sooner or later. He swallowed the lump in his throat as he watched her slink toward him with purpose in her eyes.

“Now you.” She tugged at his shirt, pulling it up over his head, though he did only the bare minimum to help her. When that was gone, still he didn’t move, so she seated herself in his lap and held his face in her hands. She looked into his eyes before she kissed him, slow and sweet and thick like honey. He lost himself in it, in the soft, warm press of her lips, the slide of her tongue over his. In this, in her, he could almost forget.

But then she smoothed her hands down his chest, and her fingers plied the front of his breeches, and it all came rushing back.

He grabbed her wrist to stop her and broke his lips away. “Cass, you don’t need to—”

“Need to what?” She frowned at the interruption.

He flicked his eyes down and away. “You know.”

For a moment she was motionless, studying him, seeking answers to questions she hadn’t asked out loud. Then her brows lifted with understanding. He still gripped the wrist of one hand, but she leaned back with the other—he was outnumbered; what a luxury to have two—and touched the stump of his left arm, skimming her palm over his scarred flesh.
“You think you are less? Because of this?”

He flinched at her words as much as her touch. He didn’t say anything, but his face had already given him away.

“I do not need to do anything,” she went on, shaking her head slowly and returning her hand to his cheek. She brushed her nose against his, her breath floating hot on his lips. His whole world was right here—warm skin lit gold and endless, all-consuming hazel... “But I want you, Owain.”

She tipped his head back and pressed kisses to his chin, grazed her teeth up his jaw. Her words were feather-light in his ear. “I want you,” she repeated. “Let me have you, my love.”

He groaned in spite of himself. *Fuck.* She knew his every weakness.

Defenses shot, he released her, and she smirked as her fingers resumed their journey downward, stroking him half-hard through his leathers.

He sat back and watched her, letting her have her way with him, letting her do what she wanted. Whatever she wanted, except--

She had slid from his lap and loosened the ties of his breeches, tugging them down and off over his feet. He gasped and sat up as she knelt between his knees and smoothed her hands up his thighs, wetting her lips with her tongue.

“Cass--”

“No.” She pushed him back in the chair and cupped him in her palm. He hissed at the contact. She had his full attention now.

But despite her boldness, she paused. Her eyes met his, wide and dark with desire but held back by a question. *Are you sure? Do you really want me to stop?*

No. He didn’t. Maker, he didn’t. Of course not. He was hers completely and had been forever. Why was he pretending otherwise?

With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and let go. He dropped the tension from his spine and relaxed into the chair, just in time for her to make him shudder as she touched her lips to his cock.

*Shit.*

*Shit. Fuck.*

It had been so long. Too long. His mind blanked as she stroked him with her fingers and took him fully in her mouth. He could think of nothing else, nothing but her. She was the only thought he’d ever had in his life, he was certain.

Seeking distraction, he tugged the braid from her crown and wrapped it around his hand, pushing his fingers in her hair as she bobbed in his lap. She closed her eyes and hummed with satisfaction, and it echoed to his core.

But any semblance of control was an illusion. In truth, he was entirely at her mercy. She looked up at him with heavy, hooded eyes as she swiped her tongue up the length of him and scraped the backs of her nails over his balls, making his hips jerk and his breath hitch. Maker, the heat of her, the pull. He tried to hold back, tried to keep himself from thrusting into her mouth, though she was doing her level best to make any restraint as difficult as possible.
At this rate, he wasn’t going to last, and as the pressure built within him, as he stared into her eyes, it occurred to him through the haze of his lust-addled mind that she had been doing all the work, and he had paid her hardly any attention at all. It was too selfish, and he couldn’t let it stand.

Tightening his grip on her hair, he pulled her back. His cock fell from her mouth with a wet pop and a drip that was far too fascinating for his own good. He tried not to think about it as he leaned forward and crushed his lips against hers.

“I can’t... I want...” He begged with his eyes as he pulled her up and toward him, as he leaned back again in the chair.

Like she understood what he was failing to say, she rose over him and straddled his hips. Lining him up at her entrance, she lowered herself slowly until she was seated as before—the same and yet entirely, gloriously different.

Her mouth was one thing, but to have her like this... It was too much, and he knew it. With his hand on her hip, he rocked her close and kissed her breasts, sucking and teasing, dragging his tongue over her skin. He devoured her, pressing his hungry mouth to her flesh and nipping his teeth at her throat. Anything, everything. Desperately, he tried to make up for lost time, tried to pull her with him to the heights where he soared. She keened and panted his name and dug her nails into his shoulders, and he thought for a second that maybe he’d succeeded...

But no. It was too much, and it had been too long. She rode him hard, grinding her hips, arching into him, lighting him up with the heat in her eyes. It was—she was—the end of him, and he peaked, diving into white-hot freefall.

He held her tight and cried out as he spilled. She gasped and kept moving, drawing out his pleasure, and, perhaps, still chasing hers, even as he softened within her. A wave of guilt washed over him as soon as he could form coherent thoughts.

“Cass, you didn’t— I’m sorry...”

Still bucking faintly against him, she shook her head and smiled and brushed her fingers through his hair. She kissed his forehead and then the tip of his nose. “It’s alright, my love.”

His heart brimmed with gratitude as he kissed her deeply, then buried his face in her neck. He promised himself he would make it up to her. Pay her back tenfold, spend his life balancing that debt and do it gladly.

“Thank you,” he whispered, so quietly he wasn’t sure she heard. But then he felt her smile again, and he knew that she had.

--

The spirit blade burst to blue-green life in his hand. It sang through the air, and his heart with it. He had held many swords in his lifetime, but this one was different than all the ones before, made of nothing but pure energy. It had weight, but it didn’t. It had an edge, but it didn’t.

At first it was a struggle just to manifest the spell in a consistent fashion, learning to tune his mana and maintain it, tightening the form into a broadsword that he could wield with one hand, neither too long nor too short for the purpose. Then it was a challenge to mix in other spells: barriers, fadestep, and shields, along with his usual elemental and rift magic. Though not as good as a staff, the hilt also served as a focus, partially solving his staff-less casting woes.

It helped that many of the movements were familiar. Even if his brain had forgotten the different
forms from the sword training of his youth, his muscles and limbs had not. Not entirely, anyway, and slowly, over weeks of daily training and practice, his body remembered.

He was getting better, regularly beating Althea in the ring. It annoyed her, he knew. As much as she loved him and wanted him to succeed, there would always be a part of her that hated losing.

Not that that ever gave him pause.

He refreshed his barrier and circled, tipping his blade at her with an unnecessary but satisfying flourish. She backed away and scowled, gripping her sword with both hands, already breathing hard from repelling his previous assault.

“Loser buys?” he called out.

“Winner.”

“So you’re sure you’re going to lose?”

She smirked and cast a shielding spell. “Maybe I’m just feeling generous.”

He snorted, but a second later, she fadestepped toward him. Sensing her movements through the disturbance in the Veil, he caught her attack hard on his blade and pushed her back with a grunt. Not so easily deterred, she struck again, aiming quick jabs at his flank. He ducked and parried and went on the offensive, stepping in with his elbow to break up her stance before bringing his blade around to swipe past her head.

She stumbled backwards and reset her balance, growling as she pushed off to come at him again. He was ready for her, side-stepping her lunge and kicking her foot to throw her swing wide, then smashing his pommel into her shoulder. She went down with a yelp, sitting hard and letting her blade flicker out.

He let his go out, too, flipping the hilt in the air with a flick of his wrist and catching it on the downbeat. “More?”

“Fuck you,” she said. Her face twisted in a half-smile, half-glare as she rubbed her sore shoulder.

He had a smug retort ready, something about the student surpassing the teacher, but it died on his lips as he registered the crunch of gravel behind him. Cassandra was striding into the yard, a sparring sword in her hand.

He turned back to Althea and shot her an evil look.

“What?” She had pulled herself to her feet and was smiling now. He could see every white tooth. “I like seeing you knocked on your ass. And I think you’re ready.”

She limped toward the gap in the fence, pausing to nod at Cassandra on her way. “Don’t beat him too badly. He still owes me a drink.”

Cassandra watched her leave, then snapped her eyes to him. “She said you wished to spar. Is that not the case?”

Owain was still staring poisonously at Althea’s retreating back, but he shook himself out of it. “I didn’t… Nevermind. Sorry. It’s been a while, that’s all.”

“If you prefer to wait, we could do this another time.”
“No,” he said, resigning himself and flashing a quick smile. “It’s time I had a real opponent.” His barrier flowed over him, and he readied his blade again.

She nodded and squared her shoulders, adjusting her grip on her sword. They paced a slow circle in the ring, and as he faced her across that small patch of earth, he remembered how much he missed this.

They clashed again and again, spirit energy crashing into solid steel, colliding and flying apart, spinning, twirling, lunging, feinting. It was different, dueling a true swordswoman, rather than another mage, but he had not forgotten any of his old knowledge of her moves and habits.

His ability to respond, however, needed work. Without the staff, he did not have the advantage of reach, nor the ability to block so well as before. Cassandra exploited his openings, bringing his barriers down more than once. He could be sloppy with his timing and careless with his blind spots, and she was never one to let his errors go unchallenged.

His stamina was not what it used to be either, especially not after sparring with Althea earlier. Backed against the fence now, he wiped his brow and guessed he had strength for maybe one more gamble. He cast another barrier, knowing it would be the last. With a shout lost to the ether, he fadestepped toward Cassandra, emerging almost right on top of her. He brought his blade down over her shoulder, but she turned aside just in time. Unable to alter his course, he tucked his arm in and hit the ground with a roll, popping back to his feet only to find Cassandra bearing down on him.

Without thinking, he brought his blade up to meet hers, but it was enough to dispel his barrier. She pushed him back and whirled and swung at him again. It was all he could do to block. The force of her blows rattled in his bones and made his boots skid in the dirt.

Knowing he was beaten, he recovered his footing and charged recklessly head-on. She caught his wrist with her free hand, twisting his blade away and making a traitor of his own momentum. Pulling her sword arm back, she smacked the flat of her blade across his shoulders, sending him winded and reeling to the ground.

He rolled onto his back and lay there, staring at the sky and trying to force air into his lungs. He cursed himself for losing. Then again, he had always been hard-pressed to beat Cassandra, even on a good day with two hands. Was it really any surprise?

The tip of a boot nudged his leg, and Althea appeared over him wearing yet another shit-eating grin. She propped her hands on her knees and leaned down, wagging her brows at him.

“You’re still buying,” she said, as triumphantly as if she herself had won.

Before he could work up a response, she was gone, replaced by the outline of Cassandra, who offered a hand to help him up. He teetered to his feet, but before he could speak, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him in for a dusty, sweaty kiss that left him more light-headed than their match.

He felt then that he hadn’t really lost at all. He was just back where he belonged.

--

The downside of being whole in the Fade was that his left hand could feel pain, and the hurt was very, very real, despite the absence of the physical limb. Sometimes it would wake him in the night, transporting him back to that world in the eluvians, that crop of elven ruins where the anchor had been torn away. He would lie in his bed as the pain ripped through him, curling in a ball and breathing raggedly into the dark. He would try not to wake Cassandra, but he didn’t always succeed.
She sensed his suffering and offered her silent support, in the form of her arm around his waist, her hands on his back, or her lips at the base of his neck.

Today was one of those days, when he woke in the early hours with those phantom pangs. Sleep eluded him even after they faded, so he laid waiting for her to stir, waiting to ask her the question he’d been turning in his head all that time.

Though he kept no formal countdown, the mornings waking up in their room at Skyhold were numbered and felt more precious for it. The soft stained glass light, the isolated quiet of their tower, the big four-poster bed--soon this place would be memory, bitter and sweet both.

Her eyes were still closed, but he could tell she was awake because her hand moved where it rested on his chest, fingers playing back and forth across his skin. He reveled in the pleasure of it before breaking the silence.

“Cass, I’ve been thinking. Back at the Winter Palace… We never talked about timing, but with Leliana here now, and everyone else, maybe we should do it.”

Her fingers stopped, and she blinked her eyes open. “Do you mean… a wedding?”

He nodded and brushed the stray hair from her forehead. “If you’ll still have me.”

“Ugh,” she said, with a roll of her eyes. “If you ever question that again…”

“Oh?” Her scowl made him want to smile. “Is that a threat, my love? Now I’m curious.”

She snorted and swatted him on the arm. It didn’t hurt, but it suited him to pretend it did.

“Careful, only got one of those now.”

“You do want to keep it, don’t you?”

He brushed his hand up her side and pinched a nipple through her shirt. “You tell me.”

The flash in her eyes was a warning, but he was not prepared for the burst of energy that followed. She pounced on him, hooking a leg around his waist and rolling him on his back, where she proceeded to thrash him with her pillow while he sputtered and laughed, trying to separate her from her weapon. When that failed, he went defensive, ducking and shielding his face with his arm.

“Yield! I yield!” He caught his breath as she let up and tossed the pillow aside. Grinning up at her, he let his hand slide down her back, coming to rest on the curve of her ass. She beamed at him in the morning light. “I yield.”

Her look went soft as she bent to claim a kiss as her prize. But it was bait in his trap, and when she fell for it, he caught her and rolled them again, savoring her sweet laughter as he ended up on top.

He was going to be late to the war table, and he wasn’t even sorry.

--

Dorian met him outside the stables, where he had just left Will following their morning ride.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

“Decidedly not,” Dorian replied, with a grim set to his mouth. He wrinkled his nose and waved at the air around them. “But I’d rather not talk about it here. The atmosphere leaves a little to be
desired.”

They climbed the nearest stairs to the battlements, where a fresh breeze swept down from the mountains.

Dorian sighed heavily and dropped his elbows to the top of the wall. “He’s dead.”

Owain didn’t need an explanation to know who “he” was. He leaned down beside Dorian and tried to absorb the full import of these words. “How?”

“Assassinated, I believe,” said Dorian, clasping his hands in front of his face. “No warning, just a perversely cheerful letter congratulating me on assuming his seat in the magisterium. Imagine that! We only met a few times when I was home, and he didn’t say anything about keeping me as his heir. I’m told the whole ambassadorship was his doing. I should have guessed. He must have wanted me out of the way when the trouble began.”

“So you’ll go back, then?”

“I have to.”

“And then what?”

“First, I’ll take my place in the magisterium and degrade it with my presence. Second, I’ll find his killers and kill them back. Then I’ll find those giving Tevinter a bad name and kill them. Most likely they’re all the same people, which makes it terribly convenient.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Owain asked, trying to suppress his long list of concerns about these plans.

Dorian shook his head. “It’s a Tevinter problem, and it needs a Tevinter solution.” He paused and met Owain’s eyes. “Oh, don’t give me that look. I won’t be alone, don’t worry. Maevaris has gathered a group of like-minded magisters. We’ll be an actual faction in the magisterium now. It’s a chance to make a real difference.”

They said nothing for a while. Two birds of prey flew in a spiral high over the hills below. Owain watched them ride the updrafts, unable to name the feelings swirling in his own heart.

“I know it was complicated,” he said at last, “but I’m sorry about your father.”

Dorian closed his eyes and sighed again. “Thank you. It still doesn’t feel real.”

“It might not, for a while.”

“I keep running over it in my head. What were his last words to me? What did he really think? Why give me his seat? Was it because of who I am, or in spite of it?”

“He must have known what you would do with it, and he left it to you anyway. That has to count for something.”

“Perhaps,” said Dorian, taking another deep breath and straightening to full height. “Nice to believe, anyway.”

Owain put his hand on Dorian’s shoulder and pulled him into a long hug. “I’m going to miss you,” he whispered.

“And I you, Trevelyan. Do me a favor and stay out of trouble, will you?” Dorian reached into his
robes as Owain released him and drew out a faceted blue stone. He dropped it into Owain’s open palm. “Which reminds me.”

“Should I know what this is?”

“Consider it a parting gift. A sending crystal. If I get in over my head, or if you’re overwhelmed with sorrow for lack of my velvety voice, just speak to the crystal, and... magic! Simple enough, though you won’t believe what it cost me.”

Owain stared at it in wonder, turning it in his fingers to watch it catch the light.

“What? You think I’d leave, and you’d never hear from me again?”

“Perish the thought,” said Owain, carefully pocketing the stone. An idea broke over him. “But there is one thing we should do before you go. Only because you’ll kill me if I let you miss it.”

--

He found Cassandra in the training yard, where they were to meet for practice before the midday meal. She lowered her sword as he approached.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, reacting to the urgency in his gait.

He reached her and bought himself a brief delay by leaning against a training dummy. The straw stuffing pricked through his sleeve. With a deep breath, he braced for impact. “You know what we talked about this morning?”

Her eyes narrowed, studying his face. “And?”

“What if we did it today?”

“Get married? Today? It is near noon already.” Her frown was deep and immediate and completely unsurprising.

He licked his lips and raked his hand through his hair. “Well, it’s just... Maker, there’s no good way to say this. Dorian’s father died, and he’s needed back in Minrathous. He leaves in the morning, and I may have promised him that—”

“Yes.”

He was still knee-deep in his justifications and had to stop to process her response. Mouth slightly ajar, he blinked in stunned silence. “What?”

“I said, yes.” A slow smile was already starting to light her eyes. “Let’s get married. Today.”

“Right,” he breathed, as he finally caught on to her words. “Yeah... Let’s... Let’s do it. Let’s get married.”

He pushed off the dummy and paced back and forth as his mind spun to top speed, working out the details. Cassandra sheathed her sword and watched him, her lips twitching in amusement.

“How about the grove? Sunset?”

She nodded.

“I’ll, um... I need to speak with Leliana, tell Josie, spread the word...”
In his distraction, he started walking away. Then he realized what he was doing and came back for a kiss.

“I can’t believe it’s happening,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers. She smiled at him, and it made his heart race.

He left again, remembered something, and returned once more. “Oh, and wear something nice. No armor.”

“Just go.” She rolled her eyes at him and pushed him away, though she couldn’t keep the joy from her face.

--

The grove that evening was cool and blue, the clearing lit by the fading light of day and the soft glow of candles around its perimeter. Owain closed his eyes and breathed deep and knew he had chosen right.

It reminded him of that first night they had spent together, so long ago now. And the afternoon before that, when he had bared his past to her. He had only ever been himself with her here, free of all the titles and masks, and it was this purest version of himself that he wanted to unite with her tonight.

He stood at the furthest end of the clearing, beside Leliana in her Divine habit, surrounded by his closest friends and allies and the skeleton crew of Inquisition members that still remained at Skyhold. The small crowd buzzed with excitement as they all awaited the guest of honor.

A sharp elbow jabbed him in the hip. “Don’t forget to breathe, Ser Owain,” said Varric with a smirk and a wink. “Wouldn’t do if the Seeker finds you passed out down here.”

He gave a shaky laugh and wiped his hand down his coat. Old thing, the same one from the Exalted Council. With the Inquisition disbanding, there didn’t seem much point in a new one.

A hush fell over the clearing, and he looked up to see Cassandra standing at the edge of the trees, Josephine beside her. They locked eyes across the crowd, and any nerves he felt melted away, to be replaced by something far more exhilarating.

What had he expected, exactly? Her red Inquisition coat? Or dress armor, despite his request? She was dressed in a long grey-blue tunic adorned with a pattern reminiscent of dragon scales, which, considering her family history, it might have been. Long-sleeved and form-fitting from the waist up, it flared out at the hips, flowing out behind her while revealing the leather breeches and fine boots she wore underneath. A deep red sash circled her waist, and a matching cloak draped across her shoulders, while the braid that usually nestled on her crown hung loose behind her ear.

“What was she hiding that?” muttered Dorian, from somewhere to his left.

Owain had never seen its like before, but he decided it was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever worn.

She made her way through the crowd, which parted for her, never taking her eyes from his, except when Althea stepped forward to offer a circlet of white flowers, which she bent to accept with a blushing smile. After arranging her gift, Althea beamed at Cassandra and then up at him. He answered with a tiny nod before she turned back to take Cullen’s arm.

“I did not have time to order a wedding dress,” said Cassandra when she finally reached his side, as
if there was anything to apologize for.

He shook his head and blinked back the tears pricking at his eyes. “No. It’s... You’re... Perfect.” He
bit his lip to staunch any further ramblings.

“You, as well,” she said softly, her eyes just as misty as his.

With one more shared smile of assurance, they turned to face Leliana, who joined their hands and
started the ceremony.

He knew nothing about weddings, but Leliana had coached him on what to expect. She had told him
there would be part of the ceremony for exchanging tokens that signified their vows.

As they came to that part now, Owain looked down at his hand, at the lyrium-silver band he had
worn for half his life, the only real thing he could call his own. There was no doubt in his mind that
this was what he wanted to offer. He stood there seemingly frozen for a moment as he reached for it
with his nonexistent left hand, curling his fingers in vain. Cassandra reached forward to help, but he
put up his hand to stop her. No, he would do it himself. He brought his hand to his mouth and
gripped the metal between his teeth, wrenching it up out of the groove that had been its home since
his harrowing.

He could not, however, get it all the way off, and after half a minute of struggle, he relented and
accepted her help. Taking his hand gently in both of hers, she tugged the ring over his knuckle,
twisting it free at last.

She held out her hand to give it to him, but he shook his head and closed her fingers over it. “No,” he
said. “It’s yours.”

She held his gaze for a moment before fishing in the pocket of her tunic and retrieving a heavy gold
ring. A blood-red ruby flashed in its setting, while the carved form of a dragon coiled around its
treasure. It was too fine, surely some Pentaghast heirloom. His own ring looked rather shabby in
comparison.

“Are you sure?” he asked, wishing he could offer her more.

She pushed it toward him and nodded. “It was my father’s once. And Anthony’s. I want you to wear
it.”

She was determined, and he couldn’t say no. So he swallowed his doubt and held out his hand for
her to slip it on his finger. He took his silver ring from her and did the same in return.

Then it was time to say the words, words that had been said countless times before, by countless
other people over the ages. Words he never thought he would be allowed to say, certainly not in
public in front of a crowd of witnesses, and certainly not in front of the Divine herself.

Yet for all that, the words didn’t stick with him. He forgot them almost as soon as they fell from his
lips. They didn’t matter now. None of it did--not the crowd or their clothes or the grove or the
flowers. All that mattered was her, the woman that stood beside him, pledging to be his always and
forever, as he would be hers. It was a promise he had already made many times over, but one he was
happy to repeat again and again until the very last of his days.

Leliana gave them her blessing, and when it was done, Cassandra seized him by the coat and
covered his lips with hers. Owain tugged his hand in her hair and gave it right back. The crowd
whooped and cheered around them, but in the fullness of his heart he hardly noticed.
He had good days, and he had bad days.

That was a very good day.

--

He did one final check of the wagons lined up in the courtyard, loaded with supplies, furniture, and belongings ready to be shipped to the Hunterhorns.

Finding everything in order, he clapped a hand on Will’s shoulder and repeated his instructions. The lad would be traveling with the caravan and its escort, overseeing transport to the Seeker keep, where he would assume his new role as horse master. Owain had come around on his request after conferring with Cassandra. The Seekers had a need, and they could hardly do better than Will, despite his youth.

“I know, I know,” said Will, impatient to embark on what would be the longest journey to date in his life. He adjusted the staff on his back, the one Owain insisted he carry. “Stick to the roads, travel by day, set watches at night. Captain Barrett knows what he’s about. You can trust us, Inquisitor.”

Owain opened his mouth to deliver yet more advice, but he stopped himself and settled on ruffling his hand through Will’s hair. He still had several inches of height over him, but doubtless that would not last long. Will merely scowled and ducked away. He saluted Cassandra before making his way to his horse at the head of the line, and Owain realized that the boy—young man, rather—was in her service now.

With a final wave, the caravan lumbered through the gates of the keep and away down the mountain road. Owain and Cassandra made preparations for their own departure later that day. They would travel on their own, taking time for themselves to cross Orlais at a leisurely pace.

He took one last tour of the keep. One last turn about his quarters, one last walk along the battlements, saying goodbye to the stone walls that had been home and the vistas that had given him solace in some of his darkest moments.

Skyhold itself was about the only thing left to farewell, as most of his friends had left already, except for Leliana, who was to take possession of the place, and the mages in their tower. Everyone else had gone their separate ways, and that made it easier for him to leave, too. As he’d said at the Exalted Council, the Inquisition was about the people, and without them, there wasn’t much left to miss.

The last time he rode through the gates as Inquisitor did not feel much different than every other time before. It wasn’t until they came down through the foothills and reached the grassy verge of the Dales that it hit him.

He was free.

Really and truly free. No titles, no walls, no responsibilities. For the first time in his life, he had nowhere he was supposed to be, nothing he was supposed to do. He could choose his own path.

He had dreamed of this day, as a boy in a tower. He had longed for it in the thick of his Inquisition duties. In his imagination, it had been thrilling and invigorating, full of unfettered potential and sweet, sweet relief.

Reality was none of those things. There was relief, yes, but it was far from sweet.

He felt bereft, as if he had lost, not gained. He could go anywhere and do anything, but he didn’t
want to do any of it. He wasn’t sure he wanted anything at all. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was forgetting something important, overlooking some task at the edge of his mind.

A peal of thunder rolled across the plain, and it jolted him from his thoughts. Ember had come to a stop, and they were standing paralyzed in the middle of the road. He looked up at the darkening sky only to be met with raindrops dashing across his face. He closed his eyes and soaked it in, breathing the smell of hot grass and ozone, the unsettled energy of an impending storm.

He started when Cassandra called his name.

“There is a place not far from here,” she said, slowing her horse beside him. “Some caves that would offer us shelter from this storm. We should stop there for the night.”

He nodded and raised his hood against the rain, which was beginning to fall in earnest. He kicked his horse into a run and raced her to the caves.

They made their camp beneath a rocky overhang that shielded them from the worst of the weather. They built a fire and ate dinner and made love in their tent.

The glow of the fire spilled in from the open flap as she rose and fell over him, catching the glint of silver between her breasts, where his ring hung on a chain beside a small golden locket.

He caught hold of it now, rubbing his thumb around the worn band and waking the lyrium within, marveling at all the places it had been. Could he have imagined his life now, on the day they had given it to him all those years ago?

She had stopped moving, pausing to watch where his attention had gone. He was still inside her, and her breaths were still coming in rapid order.

“It looks better on you,” he said, looking up into her eyes.

“Flatterer,” she replied.

Closing his hand around the ring and the chain itself, he pulled gently, drawing her down to him as ruby and gold flashed from his own finger.

“You only say that because it works.”

She smiled and trapped his lip between her teeth, forcing a groan from him as she resumed the rhythmic grind of her hips.

When they finished, she fit herself against him, and he wrapped his arm around her. She lifted his hand to brush a kiss on his palm, while he pressed its mate to the pulse behind her ear.

Freedom was terrifying, yes. He could go anywhere or do anything, true.

But he needn’t do it all at once. It could be enough just to start somewhere, to take the future a day at a time and remember he wasn’t facing it alone.

It wasn’t true that he didn’t want anything. He did, but it was here in his arms.

Warm and safe and together, they lay there in their tent and looked out as the day rolled into night, watching the rain fell endlessly on all the world.
As I said above, I’ll be back with a little bit more, but consider this the last *real* chapter and the end of Owain’s arc.

This story has been my free-time project for the past two years, and it’s hard for me to capture how I feel about it being done. I set out merely to flesh out my playthrough, but it evolved into so much more. This is my love letter to the game and its characters, especially Cassandra, who is such an incredibly complex and capable character that I’m not sure anyone really deserves her, though Owain certainly tries. I created him for her, but he, too, evolved into something more than I originally imagined. It continually amazes me that anyone besides myself cares about him and his wellbeing.

Thanks to all of you for reading, especially if you’ve followed along since the beginning or joined this silly bandwagon along the way. I know my updates took forever, especially these last few, so thank you so much for your patience. And if you just found this story and are reading it when it’s done, thank you, too, for making it this far. Every comment and kudo is love. <3
Cassandra had always known her husband to be an emotional man, prone to feeling deeply, even if it was seldom evident on the surface. She herself had learnt all the signs over their years together, but even an unpracticed eye could see he became freer with his tears after the end of the Inquisition, following the loss of his hand.

No more facade to maintain, perhaps. Less to lose.

Or perhaps the loss of the anchor and his subsequent near-death had stripped something bare in him, brought his essence to the fore. Perhaps the pain that dogged him even to this day had made him weary or worn his defenses thin.

Or perhaps their lives together in the intervening years had been so full of living, it was no wonder he should need such an outlet.

Nothing was ever perfect, of course. It would be foolish to expect otherwise. Rebuilding the Seekers and continuing the underground work of the former Inquisition was not easy, and there were setbacks and struggles.

But set against these were such moments of pleasure and joy as she never could have imagined.

He had cried when she told him what she suspected when her monthly bleed did not come. Later, too, when it was confirmed by a healer. And then again at the birth of their daughter, which brought out a wholly different side of Owain she had not yet seen before.

Somehow, it had been possible to fall in love with him all over again.

They named her for her brother and his mother: Antonia Vera Pentaghast Trevelyant. Only two middle names, no more.

She recognized her own coloring in Nia, the same complexion and shade of dark hair. But everything else, her grey eyes and sharp features—they were all her father’s. Owain liked to say their daughter’s expressions were just like hers, but Cassandra could never believe it so. She did not scowl in such a manner, nor wrinkle her nose in disgust quite like that. She tried to tell him this, but he would only laugh in response.

Nia was a willful child, stubborn and prone to flights of self-righteous fantasy. None of that should have been any surprise, given her parentage, but she could be sweet when she wanted to be. There were few children at the Seeker keep, and none at all of her age, but she had the run of the fortress, and all of its denizens looked out for her wellbeing.

Even beyond appearance, she was very much her father’s child. His work sometimes took him far
from the Hunterhorns, but if he was home, it was almost a certainty that Cassandra would find them sparring with wooden swords in the yard, or rounding the walls with her on his shoulders, or brushing horses in the stable with Will. Cassandra had never considered herself to be much of a maternal type, and at times she regretted this, but all it would take was Nia crawling into bed with her at night, begging to be read one of her stories, and everything would be set to rights.

Her magic manifested at age eight. Cassandra remembered it clearly. Nia had called them over to where she sat on the hearth, excited to show them something. Her heart had plummeted when their daughter raised her hand to the fire and commanded it to her will, directing the flames with a wave of her hand. Owain’s face had frozen in shock and then crumbled with raw pain before he rose and paced to the corner of the room, leaning his hand on the wall and turning his face away, letting his shoulders shake with a sob.

Nia had turned to her with wide, watery eyes. “Why is Papa crying? Is he sad?”

At this, he had turned and crossed swiftly back, falling to his knees to wrap her in his arm. Cassandra had known what this would mean for their daughter, could already see the difficulties and the potential of the road ahead, and she knew what it must mean for him. She answered for them both, since Owain seemed beyond words.

“No, my love,” she had said, tears gathering in her own eyes. “He’s not sad. He just loves you very, very much.”

She had felt the gratitude in his look, even through the tears.

That was a year ago, now. Owain had taken on Nia’s training himself, teaching her how to control her magic and navigate the temptations of the Fade. They had thought it important, however, for her to have a more varied education, to be among other mages, and other children.

That was how they found themselves in South Reach for an extended visit with Cullen and Althea. Cassandra and Owain had business in Ferelden and would shortly be leaving for Denerim, but Nia was to stay for a time. It was an ideal arrangement. The Rutherfords’ elder son, Bryant, had come into his magic some months prior, while Althea’s work with the College of Enchanters ensured a steady stream of accomplished mages appearing regularly on their doorstep.

Cassandra sat now at their kitchen table, setting aside the stack of letters she had just finished and preparing to oil and sharpen her sword. With the world at peace, she had had fewer reasons to use it in recent days, but that was no excuse to be lax in its maintenance.

Her eyes drifted toward Owain where he sat laughing with Althea as they shared a drink in front of the fire. Time had deepened the lines about his eyes and scattered grey in his hair, which was most noticeable in the full beard he now wore. Slouching in his chair, he leaned his elbow on the arm and held his glass in the air. His left sleeve was pinned up short. He had tried a few prosthetics over the years, from the mechanical to Dagna’s lyrium-fueled prototypes, but he always preferred to go without. To be purely himself, he would say.

As if he could sense her eyes on him, he looked up, and his face softened into that easy smile he reserved just for her. It could still put a thrill in her heart, even now. She couldn’t help returning the look.

Nia was sprawled on the floor, poring over a large book with Jamie Rutherford, who was a year younger but already an equal partner in her schemes. Cassandra recognized the book as Dorian’s latest gift from Minrathous, lavishly bound in gilt leather and full of extravagant illustrations. Nia and
Jamie chatted over the pictures, while Bryant sat quietly engrossed in his own book a few feet away, leaning against the lightly snoring hulk of the family mabari.

The door creaked and admitted Cullen, who walked in just as she was readying her whetstone and rags. He had come from the clinic next door, where one of the patients was having a particularly bad night. He took off his jacket and dropped heavily onto the bench across the table.

“Will he be alright?” she asked.

Cullen’s face was drawn. He reached for a clean glass and the bottle of whiskey Owain and Althea had already put a substantial dent in.

“With the right potions, he’ll sleep tonight. But we’ve had to up the dose. It’s worrisome, to say the least.”

He was quiet for a moment, sipping his drink, so she let her eyes wander back to the children on the floor. Nia was shrieking with laughter, apparently at something Jaimie had said, both of them practically rolling on the rug. As her hair flipped aside, Cassandra noticed an angry red scrape on Nia’s forehead that hadn’t been there this morning. She stared at it, trying to judge its severity from across the room.

“She took a swing at one of the local boys, I heard,” said Cullen, who must have followed her gaze. “They stumbled on a few of them in the woods behind the clinic, torturing a one-eyed cat.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes at him. “How do you know this?”

“Bryant confessed it all to me before dinner. Unprompted, I might add.”

“She made no mention of this to me.”

“He’s a bit of a rule follower,” said Cullen, with a shrug. “It’s rather important to him.”

“I wonder where he gets that from.”

He chuckled and raised his glass to his lips. “Not his mother.”

Cassandra looked at her daughter, who had gone back to her reading. Picking fights with strangers in the woods... Had they not taught her better? She shook her head and sighed. “Tell me what happened then. What about the cat?”

Cullen smirked and twinkled his eyes at her. “Lost a bit of fur from his tail, but otherwise no worse for wear. Currently living in our barn.”

She shut the door softly behind her. The Rutherford cottage was not large, and for lack of proper guest quarters, Cullen and Althea had evicted the boys from their room. Cassandra had left the children sleeping in front of the banked kitchen fire in a heap of blankets and mabari.

The room was dark, but the light of the nearly full moons shone through the windows, just enough to make out his shape. Owain had taken off his coat and boots and was leaning against the sill, waiting for her there in his shirt and breeches. At first glance, she thought he held a lit candle in his hand, but on closer inspection, she realized it was his magic, a spell that danced on his fingertips, a flickering tongue of light in the darkness.
It had been a while since she’d seen him do this, though he used to do it quite a lot. It reminded her of a night back in Haven, in the early days of the Inquisition soon after he had emerged from the Fade, when she had seen a flame just like that shining at the edge of the lake. How long ago it seemed. Could she have known then the path her life would take? Could she have guessed what this man would mean to her, that he would be her great love story?

No, she hadn’t known it then. It had grown on her, built little by little until it was the undeniable truth in her heart. Things she had long counted out of her life, love and home and family, began to be possible. And then not only possible, but necessary, things she could not live without.

How marvelous was the hand of the Maker.

Owain turned and let the flame burn out as she came near, smiling crookedly and dropping into a bow that would not have been out of place in Val Royeaux. Probably the result of a little too much drink. She shook her head but gave him her hand all the same.

He placed it on his shoulder and shifted to rest his at the small of her back--part of the adjustments they had made to account for his one-handedness. She curled her arms around his neck, he pulled her close, and they began to sway side-to-side.

“Did you know Nia hit someone this afternoon?” she asked.

He nodded, pressing his lips together to stifle a smile.

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Why am I not surprised she told you.”

“Apparently, he deserved it. But I had a word with her about justifiable force and the appropriate use of magic. She’s promised it won’t happen again.”

“Use of magic?”

“Mm. She set his jacket on fire.”

Cassandra paused where she stood and blinked at him in disbelief. “What?” Cullen had omitted a very important detail.

“They snuffed it out, no harm done,” said Owain. “Just gave him a good scare. And as I said, I had a word with her.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. He was taking this entirely too lightly.

“Oh come now,” he said, sweeping his fingers through the hair on her forehead. She resisted the urge to shiver at his touch. “Has the great Cassandra Pentaghast never acted out of righteous anger?”

“I have never set anyone on fire.”

“Only because you can’t. Unless there’s lyrium in their blood?”

She huffed and fixed him with a glare. He smirked, and it was wildly attractive and infuriating at the same time.

“A dangerous combination, isn’t it? Your temper and my magic.” He stepped close again, brushing his knuckles over her cheekbone. His hand caressed her neck, thumb grazing the old scar near her jaw. She sighed in spite of herself and dropped her arms and leaned into it.

“You do not sound sorry,” she said, with his face inches from hers.
“No,” he whispered, eyes half-lidded and full of smoke, bumping his nose against hers. “I rather like it.” Then he kissed her, and she forgot to be annoyed. She brought her hands up to the back of his head, pulling him down to deepen the kiss, feeling a satisfying rumble in his chest.

They separated, and he smiled, replacing his hand on her back and pressing his cheek to her temple.

“There are worse fates, my love, than to be a defender of cats.”

She snorted but had to admit he was right.

There was no music here, but they needed none, moving to a rhythm of their own making, one they had worked out over many years together, through good and bad, pleasure and pain, sorrow and joy. They knew it by heart.

Cassandra gave thanks to the Maker for many things, not least of all this, that after all this time, they could still find a way to dance in the moonlight.

Chapter End Notes

Damn, that green checkmark feels GOOD.

If you're reading this and have any thoughts at all, please feel free to drop a line. I'd love to hear from you. <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!