Rest and Recovery

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Rest and Recovery

by BrittleBonez

Summary

**Summary Updated**
Hanna Cooper is witty, careful, and strategically minded. She is a wounded war veteran who is magicked away to Thedas after an argument with her fiance two nights before their wedding. Coming to terms with living in a fictional world is so much harder when you never had time to play a time-consuming RPG. Lucky for her, she's not the only Modern Girl in Thedas. In this overly self-indulgent slow-burn, Hanna will find love, friendship, and a purpose.

The story starts just before the events of Inquisition and will go until it ends.
Hanna slammed the car door and ran. She didn’t know why she had chosen the words that would upset her soon-to-be husband the most. Jack hated when she doubted her worth. He told her often how much of a positive impact she made on those around her. He was the actual “best thing to ever happen to her”™ Even worse, it hadn’t been Jack who upset her. His mother probably didn’t mean to have said what she said within earshot of Hanna. Saturday, their wedding, was supposed to be their happiest moment, joining families. Now it was another anxiety raising nightmare.

Jack’s mother, Jessica, excused herself from the rehearsal dinner to tour the ceremony space adjacent to their reception hall with a friend. The rustic pine alcove was complete with a large wooden cross, a perfect complement to the faith at the center of Hanna and Jack’s union. It truly felt like a holy place. Sadly, Hanna just happened to overhear the conversation between Jessica and her friend from the restroom window.

“The ceremony space is truly lovely,” Jessica’s friend paused, “too bad we have to watch your baby boy destroy his life there Saturday.”

“Oh Cathy, I know, but I couldn’t stop him. I told him that Hanna probably used to be a nice enough girl, but she came back so broken…” Jessica’s words drifted. Hanna shuddered and braced for the emotional impact as Cathy interrupted.

“I remember you told me she tried to kill him shortly after they met. Her service to this country is undeniable, but the military shouldn’t let their crazies go so easily. She really should be institutionalized. She can barely even function. Jobless, broken, borderline insane, Jack doesn’t deserve to be saddled with all that. She is a menace to society and herself.”

Jessica hummed in agreement. “He swore that she was better, and better yet,” She scoffed, “he said if she wasn’t, they would work through it together.” She sighed in defeat, “Her family can support her; she doesn’t have to bring my son down with her. That horrible, selfish brat sunk her teeth into my Jack. He never could resist a damsel in distress. My son has too much honor to abandon her now, I pray he will wise up before it’s too late…”

Hanna’s brown fashionable boots were not made for the pace she chose as she ran into the woods outside of the apartment complex that had been her home for almost a year. She felt the edges of her vision blur as her feet plowed through the undergrowth. The adrenaline in her blood threatened to tear her from reality completely. She could already feel the heat from the ghost of a fire that only exists in her memory. The invisible, acrid smoke flooded her mouth and nose drowning out the smell of burnt flesh and phantom pain from the shrapnel once lodged in her abdomen. Hanna screamed as she tripped, doubled over and vomited on the marshy ground near the stream at the edge of the woods. The splash of cold water slammed Hanna back into reality. Even so the memory overwhelmed her.
Hanna felt the world break for a moment, her eyes stung and her throat constricted. She was suddenly in a familiar warm embrace. Risa, her best friend and maid of honor had been nearby and rushed in when she heard Hanna cry out. Now she stroked Hanna’s back and cooed to her ‘Everything is fine.’ Risa softly reminded Hanna she is in Michigan preparing to marry the man of her dreams. Her brother John had flown in from New York. The gang had all come together just for her. She is surrounded by family and friends. Two days until the happiest day of her life. She would be fine.

Risa was not at all convinced that it was the stress of the quickly approaching nuptials that had sent Hanna into a panic attack. Especially when Hanna stiffened as, the next closest and therefore quickest to respond, Jessica and Cathy came into the enclosed space with attempts at reassuring words. Hanna bowed her head in shame and apologized for the disturbance. She begged Jack to say their good-bye’s early and depart. When his mother had commented on Hanna’s frail constitution and its effect on the wedding, Jack defended Hanna to his mother. Jack did not see Hanna as broken or weak. Hanna, his soon-to-be wife, deserved respect and understanding three nights before their big day. He claimed anyone, everyone experiences anxiety before big steps like marriage.

Hanna’s family said their goodbyes quickly and she held her mom for a long moment. Hanna knew her mother was proud of her. She saw Colonel Riley Cooper in Hanna’s blue eyes. The man she had loved enough to follow from Korea. “I hate the way she treats you Hyun Ae” Her mother said softly into Hanna’s ear, using her middle name, as they hugged.

“Mama, I’ve gotten this far. I can take the heat.” she lied reassuringly. Hanna was already plotting her next move.

It had come up as they stopped the car in the parking lot outside their home. She had to let him know. He didn’t deserve her. And she undoubtedly didn’t deserve him. He had a medical degree and treated trauma victims for a living. He lost his job and prestige for her. Hanna had no life outside of the Army. She had joined during college shortly after the terror attacks in 2001. Losing her father in the attack on the Pentagon, a retired old soldier deserved to live long in the world he fought for... She had been in the military for 13 years. Before she had hopes of pursuing music, law or medicine. Now she had linguistics, tactical, and weapons training that means next to nothing in the real world. Especially next to her medical diagnoses.

When Hanna wasn’t approved to return to active duty. She resented the idea of some desk job. So instead she stayed home and watched cat videos. Hell, she hadn’t even really planned the wedding. Through her mother’s grace and Risa’s hope that a happy memory might outweigh all the bad, Hanna could float through life with a purple heart and a distinguished service cross. Honors that did not fit, she did not deserve, but could not refute. Still in their cases, her medals served as ghosts of the team she had failed.

No more. Hanna could not, would not allow it anymore. She had ruined so many lives. She would not let Jessica watch her son ruin his life through association with her.

“Jack, let’s just call this off. It’s a mistake. I can’t give you a family. I can’t promise forever. Your mother doesn’t give her blessing. I can’t be a wedge between you and your family.” She paused to think, but her blood was rushing in her ears. She felt her face flush and eyes flood. Jack would want to help her now, and Hanna had to shut him down to protect him. His mother was right she wasn’t strong enough for this.
“My beautiful princess, I don’t deserve any less than the perfect woman I see right now. You are exactly who I want to spend my life with. We can come up with problems and begin to discuss the end of our marriage tomorrow, tonight I want to celebrate a successful, if not bumpy rehearsal.”

“Jack, I am not a princess. I do not know what I said to deserve this unconditional surrender. I will ruin your life. I have no prospects. I can’t do this to you. I can’t be the reason you throw your life away. Not anymore. Your mother thinks so, Catherine agreed. Your father sees me as a veteran first, a blameless hero, never a daughter-in-law.” She was talking too fast. Her heart pounded in her throat as she dug in to deal the final blow. “This isn’t working. I’m not working. Just look at me, I am worthless as the day I woke up in that hospital with a hole in my gut. A huge waste of time.” Hanna punctuated her point with the slamming of the car door. She couldn’t wait for him to talk her out of it, so she ran.

As the flash of memory ended, Hanna’s breathing slowed and she closed her eyes. She felt like she had been hit by a truck, and worse Jack would be worried about her. He would wait to call the police because this would inevitably be attributed to her PTSD. Somehow stories of wounded war heroes on a PTSD tear always made it to the media. Hanna used her breathing exercises in an attempt to return her body to homeostasis. Another wave of nausea threatened when she tried to stand, so instead she tried to roll away from the freezing water. She could suddenly feel the chilly autumn air against her bare legs. Exponentially worsened by the cold water of the stream, she shivered and pulled her muddy dress to meet her knee-high boots as she sat up. This was not the worst day of her life. She would push herself up and go back to Jack. He had to be terrified. Why had she been so selfish? Any normal person would have just talked to him. Why couldn’t she be normal again? Just have an argument with her spouse without running away from him. Everything had become fight or flight, but she had no fight left in her.

Hanna knew the answer. The first night over at his house she attacked him. She had a nightmare and she was back in her commanding officer’s tent when they were ambushed. She didn’t know Jack from Adam. That night her body had chosen fight without even asking her brain. Luckily, Jack worked with wounded vets and could break himself from her stranglehold and talk her down. When she came back to herself, Jack had that look of fear. The one that made her think she was crazy. She was crazy, still is.

“No, I’m not there. Stop thinking about that now. Jack is safe at home. I’m going to get up and walk back home. I’ll apologize and we’ll snuggle up and watch Netflix.” Newly resolved, by yet another coping strategy, Hanna opened her eyes to the brightest light she had ever seen. She wasn’t sitting anywhere anymore. She was floating with nothing, but green and black as far as the eye could see. “Or I will have a completely new hallucination.” She quipped to herself. As she finished her third round of breathing, the light stopped and she was dropped unceremoniously onto the cold wet ground again. It was dark and miserable, but at least the hallucination stopped. Maybe her brain was on the fritz, or her medicine needed to be adjusted. She hoped that she could make it through the wedding without changing her medicine.

When there was a familiar, but unexpected crunch of snow under her boots, Hanna reflexively reached for her cell phone. “It’s October, and the weather forecast was calling for weather in the 80s. Maybe the weather needs new medicine too.” She checked the blank screen of her phone. With hope, she pressed the power button hoping for that last minute of battery. Sadly, it was completely dead. She cursed and stuffed the phone back into her jacket pocket. Instead of wandering aimlessly, Hanna stopped and listened for any noise that might indicate the direction of the apartment complex. It shouldn’t have been this dark either. The trees in the woods had been losing their leaves for weeks.
The creaking of wagon wheels stunned her, but not as much as the large shadow pulling the wagon in the distance. Who was pulling a wagon with an ox in the middle of the suburbs? Hanna shook her head. She wasn’t looking a gift horse, er… ox?, in the mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's just the prologue. I have the next few chapters written, but I'm working on editing still. I hope this is a strong start. I may update weekly or bi-weekly. We'll have to see.
You wanted a welcome wagon, LT

Chapter Summary

Where did she come from? Where did she go? Forget cotton-eyed Joe. Hanna is in a coma induced mega dream. Or she was inexplicably whisked through time and space.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hanna ran towards the torchlight and shouted when she was close enough.

“Hey, can I bum a ride?” She chided herself with inner monologue ‘Classy choice of words there, Hanna’

“Of course,” The strangely dressed man stopped his ox and answered. He huffed a chuckle as she jumped in the back of the wagon. “Did you lose a bet, my lady? It’s terribly cold to be making the pilgrimage to Haven in your nightclothes.”

“Haven?” Hanna shivered, “I live in Southridge Apartments just through these woods.” Indicating the trees surrounding them, she almost missed his response.

“South Reach, you say. Arl Bryland’s by family I assume, My lady.” Hanna looked at him incredulously. What was this guy, some sick reenactor? “M’name’s Frodin.” Hanna nodded and told him hers. Just her first name, she didn’t want some deranged man stalking her online. “Myself and mine we’re Marchers, dwarven traders by craft. I’ve come by way of Denerim. You Fereldan’s know how to show a man winter.” He chuckled again. When she didn’t answer the short man, who wore a large fur coat over what looked like leather clothing, shrugged and offered her a large blanket from beneath his bench on the front of the wagon. “Can’t have you catching your death before you get your chance to witness history at the Conclave.”

“Conclave?” she asked with rising fear that something wasn’t right. If they were going in the right direction, they should have made it home by now. More realizations hit her slowly then all at once. These trees weren’t deciduous; they were all fir and pine. She was able to make out clear signs of mountains as the trees became more scarce. That was not an ox pulling the cart, but she had no Godly or Earthly idea what it was. Hanna was less and less sure she had made it out of her hallucination. She masked her growing fear with a smile.

“Look, giving me a ride home is nice and all, but I didn’t think it was an invite into whatever crazy roleplay group you have going on. Can we please just go back to my complex? It’s at the corner of 10th and Knox Drive. We can’t be far; I went for a run and got lost.” Her hopes fell with his expression. It was a strange mix of confusion and distrust. “Jack, my fiancé, he saw me go this way and has to be worried sick looking for me.” Hanna tried to clarify, but the more she spoke the more suspicious Frodin’s eyes became.

“My lady, South Reach is far more than a stroll from here. I would hope that with rest in Haven you will continue your pilgrimage to the Temple of Sacred Ashes.” He leveled her with a stern, foreboding look. Finally, he grunted out, “However, if ‘twas bandits that sent you, my cargo is protected by runes. You’ll find neither riches nor food. You can ride as far as Haven either way,
Maker help you.”

‘Maker? Bandits?’ she puzzled internally. She felt the shame flood her face. Hanna may not have understood all of the things he had just told her, but one thing she did understand: He thought she was crazy mcmurderface. She recognized that look in a person’s eyes. The look Jack had given her the first night she had an episode in his bed. She shuddered at the memory. Shaking it off, she attempted to ask further what he meant, but her mouth couldn’t form the words. When she finally worked up the courage to open her mouth, her words were stolen by a gasp. The tiniest little village was nestled in the valley ahead of them. Fires burned, roughly illuminating the rugged wooden cabins surrounding a large stone chapel. Further out from the cover of the trees, Hanna’s breath caught in her throat. There were two moons. TWO. One right next to the other.

“What in the flying fuck is that supposed to be?” Literally breathtaking, she’d never seen anything like it on Earth. “Toto, It looks like I’m not in Kansas anymore.” Hanna mumbled under her breath.

“My Lady, you say the strangest things.”

“You sir, have no idea.”

Existential panic took over her brain. If she was hallucinating, she could be anywhere in the real world. She could be talking to an imaginary dwarf trader in an imaginary world with two moons. Hanna hadn’t ever remembered being this calm when she hallucinated. Therefore, she reasoned that she could not possibly be hallucinating. Rather, she imagined herself dreaming. If she had fallen unconscious in the woods, she may just be laying in the woods until Jack found her. She would be found, placed under medical supervision, and the wedding would be postponed. No big deal. Well, it was a big deal, but less of a big deal than being spirited away to dwarf world.

Thinking of the best-case scenario relaxed Hanna. It didn’t silence the worst-case scenario playing in the back of her mind. Who knows, she might fall asleep in some cute mountain village and wake up surrounded by family in a hospital bed. Finally, Hanna came to the conclusion that this dream was entirely benign. Or at least as benign as a coma dream could be. Hanna felt a chill run down her spine, but shook it off. She could enjoy this for now. Letting go was easier than fighting, besides Frodin seemed chill enough. Maybe everything would turn out okay.

“My Lady, that town is Haven. If you look up the mountain, you can make out the Temple of Sacred Ashes where The Conclave is to happen.” Hanna nodded. “Andraste’s Ashes were found in the temple just about ten years ago, by the Hero of Fereldan.”

“Frodin, I’m going to be honest. Just about nothing you just said made sense. So, I’m going to ask you to do something for me. Pretend that I have been stuck under the largest possible rock, and explain every word you just said like you were talking to a child.” Hanna recognized herself compartmentalizing. It had been over a year, but she saw a glimmer of what was left of pre-FUBAR operation Hanna. The Hanna that could take the mission in stride and strategize the best way to survive. The Hanna that deserved Jack.

Frodin’s eyes lost some of the suspicious glint. In its place was a sort of amusement. “Whatever you say, My lady.” He chuckled as he explained that Haven was the absolute tiniest of villages, but had gained notoriety after it highlighted in the adventure of the Hero of Fereldan. The Hero of Fereldan was a member of some organization called The Wardens. She had single handedly led a small party of mages, rogues, and warriors, like herself, to save the world. The world needed saving from the Blight which was spread by the Darkspawn.

“Hold on, you’re telling me that there was an army of undead soldiers led by, of all things, a dragon?” Thedas had many charms on its surface. The breathtaking scenery ranked very high.
Hanna was almost certain that she couldn’t make up an undead army lead by a dragon. The hyper realism of this coma dream was something else. She had a hard time believing that she could make all this shit up unconsciously.

“Aye, My Lady,” Frodin jested, “I’m a might worried that you’re deaf as well as sheltered.” Frodin continued telling her tales of Thedosian glory. A very abridged history of the relationship between the Free Marches, Fereldan, and Orlais. In order to get to the meat of what the Conclave might be, a meeting between the Templars, the Mages, and the Divine. Sadly, they had traveled the trail leading to the village, and Frodin’s fatigue told her that she wouldn’t hear anymore that night. Graciously he offered to purchase her lodging in a nearby cabin that had been haphazardly transformed into guest rooms. Hanna couldn’t refuse his offer. Once safely behind closed doors, she quickly stripped her wet clothes and burrowed into the scratchy mattress and blankets.

Chapter End Notes

I finished editing this last night, but thought I should take a quick look at it again in the light of day. Thanks for checking in!
The First Day in Thedas

Chapter Summary

Now Hanna has arrived and met a friend. What is the Conclave? When will it happen? Most importantly, is this a coma dream or is this real life?

So many questions, so few answers...

Chapter Notes

Hey look who's ahead of themselves. It's me. I have to stop editing and type new chapters or I'm going to hit a brick wall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hanna woke the next morning in a warm bed. She hadn’t dreamt last night, which was not a common or unwelcome occurrence. Also, she was vaguely aware that she was not in her own bed. So, reality was crushing when she looked to the side and noted the distinct lack of Jack. Tomorrow they were supposed to walk down the aisle. Today they wouldn’t walk anywhere near each other.

In spite of the situation, or perhaps encouraged by it, Hanna said a quick prayer. She thanked God that she had met with Frodin and he had been so kind to her. She crossed herself ending the prayer. It was a comforting gesture that helped ground her. Stretching, she reluctantly stood up from the warmth of the bed. She had stripped down to her skivvy’s last night to avoid the uncomfortable chill of sleeping in still wet clothes. With that thought, her eyes drifted to where someone had set a nicely folded stack of clothes on the bureau with a note on top.

“Ζητώ συγγνώμη για τα σκληρά λόγια μου με αυτά τα ωραία ρούχα από το απόθεμα μου - ΡΓόάι”

“Okay what in the name of Christ is that supposed to be.” She said a little too loudly and there was a knock at the door.

“Everything to your satisfaction, my lady?” She heard the distinct voice of Frodin through the door. Hurried by the prospect of him catching her nearly nude, Hanna dressed. Frodin did not enter, he waited outside patiently. Hanna exited the warm room to see his jovial face about equal with her chest. “I wanted to apologize for assuming your guilt last night. I know I left the note, but sometimes our actions warrant words.” Hanna shook her head. She had really not expected anything that Frodin
had done for her. He set her up with a private room, a decent meal, and apparently procured weather-appropriate clothing.

“Excuse me for asking, but what language did you use writing that note?”

“Why, my lady, I used Common. Are you not learned?”

“I can read and speak at least five different languages, but...” Hanna searched for the right words, “That was... I mean it looked like...” She smirked, “This is Greek to me.” She sighed, at her own terrible and useless reference. She thought about not being able to read while she was here. Wherever here was. It was even stranger that she wouldn’t recognize a language in her own subconscious. In the back of her head a tiny voice whispered that maybe this wasn’t a dream. She ignored it.

“My lady, I’m afraid I must have misheard you, Greek?” Frodin seemed as lost as she was. Then an idea struck Hanna.

“Here let me write and show you what we use where I was born, it is very different. You might recognize it once you see it.” Hanna waited as Frodin retrieved a quill, ink and parchment. Hanna eyed the writing implements suddenly unsure. ‘How does a quill pen work exactly?’ she thought and shrugged. She lightly dipped the quill tip in the well and watched the ink flow up the metal grooves. Her first attempts made scratches instead of letters, but her penmanship improved quickly. She wrote the sentence with all the letters of the alphabet "The quick red fox jumped over the lazy brown dog." Twice.

“Okay, I wrote the top line in basic print and the bottom line in my best formal writing.” Frodin looked from line to line with a curious expression.

“I’m sorry to say that I don’t recognize these letters you have used, but it does look familiar somehow.” He paused, seeming lost in thought. “If I didn’t know better, I might say it looks like Tevene.” Something in his tone betrayed that writing in Tevene was probably not the best way to make friends. “You are an odd case, My Lady.” Hanna nodded and considered if Frodin had any idea of how right he was. “You speak strangely, dress stranger, and write stranger still.”

“Imagine how you look to me.” She smiled as she turned around. “When in Rome...” Hanna folded her things in a bundle and Frodin handed her a satchel. She bowed her head, speechless at the dwarf’s thoughtfulness. She tossed the satchel over her shoulder and followed Frodin out into the main room of the inn. All in all Hanna felt lucky. She hadn’t been eaten by wolves in the forest, she’d slept in a warm bed, and even made a friend. This place wasn’t that bad.

Even so, Hanna’s mind circled on the fact that she was not at home. She needed to be home. She was already late taking her mood-stabilizing medicine. She could consciously feel her anxiety raise. Hanna had been taking several prescriptions since she’d woken up screaming at a medical facility in Florida after a medically induced coma. How long could she keep herself in check? Had she made any progress in nearly a year out of inpatient treatment? Since this could all be a strange dream, maybe she didn’t need it? Did her surge of anxiety mean that this wasn’t actually a dream? Hanna had to stop this. The questions would only continue to evolve. She would just have to deal with every situation as it came.

Hanna looked around the cabin for something that seemed strange and out of place. She eyed Frodin in his small stature. His blond beard braided below his chin. He had a dagger in his belt which she hadn’t noticed before. She eyed the patrons of the makeshift inn. Each of them had some manner of weapon on their person. Everything was strange and out of place. Did that mean this was or was not a dream?
Hanna’s heart started beating faster. She raised her hand to check her pulse, and began thinking about each breath. She closed her eyes and thought of Jack’s voice. He could talk her through anything.

When she was once again in control, Hanna opened her eyes. She thought of her chosen mantra, Matthew 6:34, and repeated it quietly. Another silent prayer. “Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Sufficient unto the day its own evil.” She felt tears well in her eyes as her words settled inside of her. Her vision was hazy and when she blinked her eyes focused on Frodin. He had turned and placed a hand on her check.

Frodin asked, “My lady, are you alright?” His eyes checked hers. “Are you in need of a healer?” Hanna eyes widened, and he nodded. “Many a pilgrim come to the temple of Sacred Ashes to find healing. It is not difficult to believe that you might be one of these, my lady. In fact, it explains why a woman of your birth might travel so far on your own.” Satisfied with his newly found explanation for Hanna’s bursts of strangeness, Frodin turned to lead Hanna to a healer. “Come, my lady, we will find you a healer.”

“I…I…” Hanna stuttered and followed him. “I don’t need a healer. If I could just get home, I could take medicine there.”

“South Reach is at least a week’s ride. I’m sure we will be able to find everything you need here. Between the Divine, the Grand Enchanter, and the Templar Order someone will have any resource you might need.”

It only then occurred to Hanna that Frodin was still under the assumption that she was some sort of noble. From a place called South Reach, which she couldn’t know anything about. What made her look like a noble? Was it the straight black hair that contrasted with her electric blue eyes? Did her Asian American features translate into high birth here? How did Frodin know which clothes to give her? He didn’t measure her in her sleep.

Hanna huffed and followed Frodin into the brisk morning light. Immediately, she regretted leaving the warmth of the cabin and hid a shiver by straightening her surprisingly well fit clothes. “How did you know my size? Which clothes to give me?” She asked with an accusing tone, then considered and amended her words. “How did those clothes get into the room anyway?” Hanna was thankful for the warmth of the overcoat, but wary about an, admittedly kind, strange man invading the room as she slept.

Frodin’s cheeks were pink when he responded. “I am a traveling merchant. I ought to be able to gauge a good fit.” He paused “I placed them on the bureau last night after you’d gone to sleep. I felt guilty for my harsh words. I should have known that you weren’t a bandit.” Hanna gave him a short, unconvinced nod as they approached another merchant. The man’s wares were spread on a table and he was having a serious conversation with a woman in light leather armor with a bow on her back.

“When the Nightingale arrived last night, she sent several agents to acquire as many blankets as we could to furnish the arriving armies,” she cleared her throat when she saw Frodin approach and spoke loudly. “Seggrit, send the supplies at once, by order of the Divine.”

Seggrit nodded and acknowledged Frodin with a grin. “I thought I was the only merchant with the courage to make the trek from Denerim for the Conclave.”

Frodin laughed and answered. “Ah, but you don’t have that much luck. We can talk shop in a moment, but first, I need to know where I can find a healer.” Seggrit’s eyes surveyed Frodin with concern. “Not for myself, but for my friend. I found her wandering the forest on my way up the mountain. She’s a pilgrim searching for a cure for her condition.” As Frodin spoke, Hanna turned red.
and looked away. She felt Seggrit assess her condition. Hanna felt shameful asking for help when her malady was almost completely mental.

“Well sadly the bulk of the healer’s camp has moved just outside the temple to tend to the incoming armies.” Hanna’s expression fell. Seggrit’s voice gained a reassuring tone. “Not a problem, you can hitch a ride with me and my supplies up the mountain. You saw that the Divine’s caravan has sent a request for all of my available supplies.” He turned and addressed Frodin, “I’m sure you can bring what you have too, friend.”

Frodin nodded, “I’ll retrieve my wagon from the stables and we can leave at the next bell.”

Seggrit agreed and turned to a waiting customer. “Ah, you have a fine eye for bows, sir,” Appraising the scout’s selection.

Frodin left Hanna to wander the village proper as he made arrangements for the sudden trip. Hanna quickly ate the light breakfast of bread and broth served from the large church in the center of town. Strange that the inside of the church was very open with almost no pews. Two ladies were out in front of the church doing what she could only describe as chanting seemingly rehearsed lines to the open air. Something about ‘Fire is her water’ and ‘The seat of the Maker’. Something about listening felt a little blasphemous but a little familiar. Hanna hurried away from the dissonance of the feelings.

She meditated and forced her training back into her mind. Hanna gathered what information she could about her strange surroundings by eavesdropping in the center of town. She felt like she had been dropped into some strange LARP/Renaissance fair. Only peculiar, if not completely unfamiliar, words found her ears ‘Lyrium’, ‘Templar’, ‘Chantry’, and strangest of all ‘mage’. Yeah, magic. She had chalked Frodin’s explanations last night to the shock of being where ever she was. However, everyone around her was also under the impression that magic was a real thing. Apparently, the approaching armies were made up of mages and Templars. Templars being knights with the specific purpose of protecting the civilians from mages.

She felt sick to her stomach as she digested the new information. Her mind constricted around the idea that she was not on the same planet anymore. That this wasn’t a dream. She convinced her brain that having an anxiety attack may not be the best survival strategy, not that it normally mattered. Hanna was a survivor if nothing else. She would exercise control. She would not fail. Between her army training and service as a green beret, Hanna was one of the strongest, fastest, and smartest the army special forces had to offer. She was. Had been. Past tense. Now she was weak little Hanna. PTSD zombie. Couldn’t even stand up for herself with her fiancé at her back: Hanna Hyun Ae Cooper.

‘Stop.’ She corrected mentally. She needed to focus. Not think about things she can’t control. Like how stupid she was to run away and end up in this situation in the first place.

‘I said, Stop.’ She thought more forcefully. Hanna sighed. Negative thoughts could send her into a panic attack or worse an episode. It had been months since she’d had a PTSD episode. She refused to let this, whatever this place was, take her self-control.

“You have the saddest eyes, I’ve seen in sometime.” Startled, she looked up to find the woman who had previously been conversing with Seggrit. “The Orlesian’s have had enough warfare to name it,” the woman smiled kindly, “‘maladie du pays’. You may think you’re broken, but you’re not. You looked like you could stand to hear that. Forgive me if I’m mistaken, m’lady.”
“Hanna, please, call me Hanna. I’m thankful for the open arms of this village. I’m afraid I would never have made it through the night without the kindness of strangers.” Finally, Hanna’s eyes scanned the woman’s face. She found the woman’s ears were longer by far than expected and stared quite pointedly. Hanna wanted to ask, but the woman seemed to notice her focus on her ears and turned in a huff.

“I’m Charter, if you care to know the name of a knife-ear.” Hanna felt the sting of another faux-pas. She needed to blend in to survive. She had to let people know she belonged, but she didn’t have the slightest idea of what counted as social courtesy when faced with a non-human. Or was she a human that just happened to have long ears? She decided an apology was called for.

“I didn’t mean to stare, I’m sorry, I’ve never seen ears like yours before.” Which served to upset Charter more.

“Yes, I’m an elf and an agent of the Nightingale. Sorry you had the displeasure of interacting with someone so below your station.” Hanna opened her mouth in shock. How had she so seriously offended this woman. She had said only maybe ten words. Instead of continuing to speak, Hanna bowed in apology.

“Please, I am not from…here. My…I…didn’t mean. Forgive my unabashed curiosity. My mistake, truly.”

“What are you doing?” Charter snickered. “Bowing to me? You’re really not from around here.” Hanna went red. She did bow as a reflex from her childhood. Her mother made a staple of the Cooper household. ‘You’re Halmoni will expect this if we visit her’. Her Korean grandmother was coming to Michigan for the wedding. It would have been the first time since grade school that she saw the spry elderly woman. This thought brought tears. She needed to get home tomorrow for the wedding.

“Sorry, it’s an old habit.” Hanna fought the tears welling. She couldn’t be emotional. She needed to maintain control. “What time does the next bell ring?” Charter gave her a strange look. Had she misheard the unit of time? “I’m supposed to meet Seggrit and Frodin at the next bell.” Hanna clarified further. Charter nodded and eyed the sun.

“You should start walking that way. See you around Strange Hanna.”

“That’s the best you could do?” Hanna squinted. “Kids in school used to make fun of the way my eyes look when I squint, shoot for that next time. I might cry if you time it right.” She smiled and turned with a chuckle. Charter would be a good friend if she needed one later. Hanna shook her head lightly, no she wouldn’t need friend here. She was in some sort of coma. She’d wake up and two weeks will have passed. Hanna didn’t believe the thought as it crossed her mind, but it did make her stomach feel a little less on edge.

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The walk up the mountain was short in comparison to the wagon ride from the night before. Seggrit and Frodin told stories and talked trade routes the whole time, which left Hanna to her thoughts and fears. What was Jack doing right now? They were supposed to get married in less than a day and worse case she had disappeared, best case she had passed out in the woods. She was always ruining his life. It had almost been a year since Hanna moved to Michigan with Jack. She had been honorably discharged with a purple heart and a medal of distinguished service. Hanna wanted to go back when she recovered. Hanna knew how to be a successful soldier. However, she did not make adequate progress in her recovery to be reinstated to active duty. The loss was crushing.
She needed to find her life as a veteran. She planned to complete her original degree in music. Pay her way with music lessons. Instead, she hit on her medical advisor, successfully, and subsequently he lost his job. Jack found a job outside of the military recovery facility and she moved in with him post-discharge. In the end, he told her that he got paid more to help more people. Jack always made Hanna seem like the star in the movie of his life. She didn’t feel the tears fall before…

“M’La..” Frodin cleared his throat remembering her request that he call her by her name when she met with the merchants at the stables. “Hanna, we’ll see to it that you’re taken care of” He smiled brightly. “Now, come let me tell you a story about a farmer’s son who bought a fine silk petticoat for a special lady… she was a very fetching goat, I suppose” Hanna’s smile crossed her face slowly until it caught her eyes. She nodded along as Frodin spun his strange tales.

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It seemed as if three armies were converging on a single building at the top of the mountain. The temple of sacred ashes was a large building built on top with a cavern system that seemed to span the mountain depths. Opposing armies held tension on the edge of a sword. Large groups of brutish men in shining armor out of King Arthur’s tales huddled around modest campfires. Mages in contrast drew runes and heated their areas with fire produced from thin air.

Shortly after arriving, Frodin and Seggrit busied themselves with distributing their wares. Frodin had directed her towards a makeshift infirmary, but left her to her own devices to ask for help. Hanna did approach the area, but noticing the intensity of wounds being tended she lost her nerve. She did not have a broken leg. She was not vigorously bleeding. She did not have frostbite. Her needs could wait.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, someone addressed her, “You there, don’t just stand there gaping, hop on and get us some of those blankets.” The man nodded towards a supply tent, and Hanna moved despite herself. She felt like she was walking in a dream.

She waited for orders, until she could anticipate the needs of those around her. This bed was running low on bandages. The cooks needed help dispensing rations. When she was busy, she couldn’t think of home. When following simple orders, doing simple tasks, her anxiety fell. Here, she was useful. Hanna didn’t even stop to contemplate how nice it felt to be helpful to those around her. No one was looking at her, beyond a hope that she could fulfill a need.

Thankfully the day passed quickly in this way. By nightfall, she had learned a few names and was ready to approach a healer to try to find a comparable medication. Sadly, when she came back from her final task, the healer she picked had moved into the temple to attend a meeting with a quartermaster. Hanna wandered the camp outside the temple to find Frodin and recount her unsuccessful attempt to find a healer. When she didn’t find him, Hanna sighed. “Now what?”

“Have you seen the Commander? We have had a report of bandits in the caverns.” A man reported behind her. He lowered his voice when she jumped and turned. “I was sent to report to him directly.”

“He is overseeing a meeting with the quartermaster in the temple.” The heavily armored man responded with a thumb over his shoulder. Hanna wondered who the Commander was, but not for long as the first soldier came back leading a taller blonde. They were having a hushed conversation as they walked quickly past her. The man, Commander, glanced at her with some small amount of recognition.

“Frodin, told me you were from South Reach. Perhaps you have heard word. My sister Mia has been living there with my other siblings. She is very outspoken, I wondered…” The soldier coughed impatiently, and the Commander nodded. “I will take care of this bandit encampment, but we will
speak of this later.” Hanna’s head was spinning. Frodin had mentioned her. Even more pointed her out to this leader. She couldn’t even form the words ‘SouthRidge, not South Reach’ or ‘simple misunderstanding’ before he was promising to confront her again about questions she didn’t know how to answer.

It was then she realized that she needed to head into the temple to find Frodin who was possibly attending this quartermaster meeting as well. So, she might as well attempt to get the attention of the healer when it was over. The guards at the door didn’t spare her a second glance as she pushed open the door to enter. She was surprised to find that the interior of this medieval temple was adequately lit. Emboldened Hanna wandered the hallways. She only slowed when she felt all the air suck out of the room as a woman in a purple hood passed her. Hanna put her head down as the woman passed following who she assumed was an Agent of the Nightingale based on the similarity of the clothes to that which Charter had worn.

Hanna pushed on and eavesdropped as she moved. Whispers mentioned the strangeness of the Commander and Nightingale leaving the temple and the Divine at the same time. She listened for mentions of the meeting with Frodin and the healer and the quartermaster.

Eventually she heard nothing and realized she was either lost, had missed the meeting, or both. A young elf approached her from behind and asked where the Divine was staying. He was chipper and strikingly handsome. So much so she hardly balked at his facial tattoos. Shrugging, Hanna began walking again. The man followed her. She was just about to tell him, using words this time that she didn’t really even know who the Divine was, much less where they were staying when a voice rung out.

“Bring forth the sacrifice.” Hanna looked back to the elf and then back to the door in front of them.

He ran passed her and said with more eloquence than she could muster. “What’s going on here?” Hanna followed it up with a “What the absolute fuck?!” As the scene became visible to the pair, everything fell apart. A deformed man held a green, glowing orb and pointed at them. Several armed men approached them. An old woman was being held against her will. Words were spoken, plans fell apart. The orb bounced towards Hanna and the elf. He pushed her to the side and touched the orb with his left hand. Hanna felt the left side of her face burning from contact with his right hand like second-hand contact with a live wire.

Then darkness.

Flashes of green light. Spiders.

A golden woman.

Nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I always wondered what the night before the explosion would look like. How was the Divine left unattended for so long? In my imagination Cassandra was still leading Varric back when the temple blew up and Varric was like...well, shit these chantries keep blowing up. Also, I wanted to make Hanna Catholic because I wondered how the Chantry would challenge her faith. I guess it's challenged in other ways too though
soon. Oops.
**Dreams and Fade**

**Chapter Summary**

Hanna blacks out, has a fever dream and wakes up bound next to a confused elf. She's pretty sure this isn't a dream anymore. Maybe she died. Then, what is with everyone's accents? Are there no Americans in Hell? That seems pretty damn unlikely. The following trip up the mountain illuminates many things including Hanna's face.

**Chapter Notes**

This chapter is not very descriptive of a terrible memory. Be prepared for a flashback to the final mission Hanna undertook as a Green Beret AKA army Special Forces.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A familiar nightmare fell upon her in fits and starts. She was on her final mission with her Special Forces team, and they really had worked well together. Captain Edward Markson was the field commander. Hanna, aka 1st Lieutenant Hanna “Coop” Cooper, was second in command. They had a strong mix of weapons specialists, demo specialists, and a medical specialist. Hanna had built up a reputation of making plans, backup plans and ‘ah-fuck-it’ plans that got her boys home. They called her a combat engineer, a jack of all trades. Everyone was certain that Coop was the best at making sure everyone got home safe.

This mission was no different. Intel was that a cell of terrorists had holed up in the area and terrorized the local population. The cell was led by Mustafa Mohamed Fadhil. An accomplished terrorist, Mustafa had bombed several embassies. He was now given a higher position in Al-Qaeda. He ran communications through this area in Afghanistan and it was the team’s responsibility to eliminate him through capture (preferable to Markson who was looking for a quick promotion) or death. Markson’s family had a pedigree of Green Berets achieving the rank of general young. She felt the pressure as clearly as he did while they compiled information. Their orders were to scout, plan, infiltrate and extract within two weeks. Communication was difficult between the members of their unit. Five of their members were a smoke screen to cover the real operation. Which left two smaller groups of three and four to take up positions in the shadows and quiet investigations. Everyone was confident this would be their final mission as she was up for a promotion to Captain and she just needed one more stellar report and Hanna wasn’t alone in her ambition to rise in the ranks.

The team located the cell’s hideout in four days. Markson stealthily arranged a meeting to hash out a plan. Hanna and the captain devised plan A (distraction, infiltration, extraction) and plan B (blow the hideout sky high and check the rubble for survivors). Hanna hammered out several back-up and oh-shit plans, before getting cocky and saying, ‘let’s hit it.’ Sitting next to Markson, nothing could take them down. Everything was going so damn well. That was of course before a member of the smoke screen Team C shit the bed behind enemy line, spoiling the Captain’s team’s hidden surveillance position. With communications dark, they were slaughtered in their sleep. She preferred to think that
whichever member of Team C had just let it slip, it was better than having a mole.

It didn’t really matter anyway, Hanna was second in command. When the shit really hit the fan, it was her fault. Her backup plans or lack thereof, failed her team. There shouldn’t have been an opportunity for ambush. Not three separate and increasingly terrifying ambushes. Hanna had fucked up and nine men died. The nightmare took on a new glint. The darkness seemed more sinister than it had that night.

She could feel spiders crawling at the edges her peripheral senses. Hanna knew she was dreaming. She could change the narrative, but the fear drove her on. She saw Gunnery chief and sniper extraordinaire, Mark “Q-tip” Wallis look at her for the go ahead to begin the next phase of the operation when Markson’s unit didn’t show up to the party. She nodded and moved to spot for the sniper.

Simultaneously, Medical specialist Jaron Thompson moved up with the resident demolition expert Gary Mathis. The absence of team A had her team in a bind. They could move in and plant the charges to demolish the building and everyone inside rather than as a distraction, abandoning chances for Edward to score a promotion. It wouldn’t guarantee a confirmed kill, but it would have to do. The plan moved forward, and she distracted herself with her binoculars. She watched the brave pair with a knot in her stomach. “Come on Eddy, we’re waiting for your ass” She scanned the edges of village for a familiar signal. But found only dim lights and darkness.

She flashed her light once to signal the boys to light her up. The encampment went up in flames and she felt her apprehension fall. She would give Markson shit for being late, but from the looks of it they had been successful in ending Mustafa’s leadership. She watched for a signal from Mathis, who was tasked with checking the wreckage for immediate signs of survivors. When she saw it, Hanna motioned for Wallis to tear down and moved to investigate Team A’s position.

When they arrived to a hail of gunfire and a direct mortar blast, Hanna cursed. She nearly blacked out from the initial assault. Her eyes scanned the area as she crawled to secure herself behind cover. Blood was caked on makeshift cots in the hidden camp. The acrid smoke gave everything a haze and she coughed up blood that told her to avoid looking at her abdomen which had been open to shrapnel from the mortar. Her hand was doing nothing to staunch the blood. She found Wallis in the corner of her eye, he was safe behind a collapsed stone wall. He pulled out his rifle and went to work finding and eliminating threats. The silenced shots carved an opening for their team to regroup and escape.

Hanna took the opening to pull herself further into the tent. Markson’s three-man team was all accounted for, all three men were dead or on their way there. Her vision blurred and blackened. When she came to Thompson was working over her with tears in his eyes. Mathis held steady over her bleeding gut. “We blasted the fucker. They found the other teams, but you led us through. Coop, if you fucking die on us we’ll never make it out.”

She giggled. Or chortled. She had gotten them into this mess. Eight men died because she wasn’t perfect. She hadn’t planned for this. She always planned for everything. Even so, this dingbat thought she could reason them out. With what, a bloody cough? “Shit, Mathis, I didn’t know you were a comedian.”
Hanna awoke with a start. She gasped loudly and coughed several times. Her eyes did not adjust well to the torchlit dungeon. Her dream ended abruptly, but before the worst part. She was thankful, but confused. How did she end up in a dark, smelly dungeon? She could make out the shadows of three others in the dim light. Across from her was a vaguely familiar young man, he seemed to be awake as well.

“Hey,” She attempted to lift her arms and found them bound. “Who are you?” The man took a breath to answer and in that time a woman entered and demanded answers.

“Silence. I have questions and if you prefer to leave this room with your lives you’ll have answers.” She brought lackeys with her and more torches which illuminated her severe features. Short dark brown hair, scars on her cheeks, her expression was as bitter as her temperament.

“For the love of Christ, I don’t have an answer to my questions let alone yours.” Hanna answered the threat derisively. If she was going to be stuck in some LARPer’s wet dream, so be it. However, she was pretty sure that this wasn’t some weird fever/coma dream. The bindings chaffed her wrist and she felt like she’d been hit like a truck. Dream pain didn't have the same punch as real pain. This was real pain. Hanna distracted herself the best she could. It wasn't difficult, the woman looked comically angry which just made Hanna want to antagonize her more.

“You…” The woman approached with the intent to show a consequence for Hanna’s noncompliance, when she was stopped. A familiar woman with a purple hood placed a hand on the severe woman’s shoulder. She whispered a reminder that the prisoners are the only leads in what happened. The purple woman directed a pointed gaze to Hanna. Hanna couldn’t shake the feeling that she had seen her before. She couldn't imagine a positive reason behind the familiar feeling. After a pause, severe woman finished the sentence albeit amended, “will do as you’re told.”

Adrenaline firing on all cylinders, Hanna tried to place the accents of the people in the room. The severe woman had a muddled, maybe Slavic accent. The woman in the purple hood spoke with what may have been a French accent. The man across from her seemed to have some sort of mild Irish or Scottish lilt. Leaving Hanna to wonder just where the fuck she was. Again. She studied the body language of each. Severe woman was pissed, not in a calm fury, but more of barely controlled grief. She had lost someone very close to her. And she blamed Hanna and the elf for that loss. If severe woman was barely in control, purple woman was calm, too calm. She was completely controlled. Based on severe woman's emotion, Hanna suspected that purple woman was just better at compartmentalizing. Better at concealing. A spy. Suddenly severe woman was not the scariest person in the room.

After several questions about the conclave, the Divine, and the hundreds of dead. No one was happy. The woman in the purple hood left abruptly. The man across from her was a young elf. Like Charter. And Dalish. Apparently not like Charter. He was very disappointed with the turn of events especially the green, flashing mark on his left hand. It seemed to be causing him and inordinate
amount of pain. Eventually, the severe woman determined Hanna and the man, who introduced himself as Mahanon Lavellan, not be immediate threats. As such, the severe woman introduced herself as Cassandra Pentaghast, and led them to what she called the breach. Hanna balked at the large green hole in the sky. What was she going to do about that? Why was it her responsibility again?

“We’ll go first to the rift. The others wait for us there.” Cassandra announced. It was clearly an order. Hanna didn’t have enough gall to question the order when the other people surrounding them seemed less inclined to let them walk freely than Cassandra was. As they approached a bridge, the breach spread and Mahanon fell the ground holding his arm. Hanna knelt to help him brace for the pain.

Cassandra pushed them to proceed. She mentioned, nonchalantly, a correlation between the spreading of the breach and the mark on Mahanon’s hand. Adding somewhat sardonically that it was killing him. Hanna worked with Mahanon to help him stand and move through the pulses. When they were halfway across the bridge a green meteor broke the supports and spilled the group of three on to the lake’s frozen surface below. Cassandra was first to recover. Hanna could hear her sword swing through the air and connect with flesh. The unearthly growling was her first clue that she shouldn’t look up to see what was attacking them. When she inevitably did, she saw it was a cruel amalgamation of flesh bound together by an evil fury. Some gruesome demonic creature. Sadly, the creature Cassandra fought wasn’t alone. Two others approached Mahanon and Hanna's rag-dolled bodies. She looked around for a method to protect herself. Mahanon was way ahead of her. He lifted a sword and shield to his defense out of a nearby weapon’s cache. Hanna similarly searched for a familiar weapon, she found a short dagger similar to the combat knife she had trained with for CQC. Only longer. While close quarters combat was not her specialty she had training regardless. She found that fighting these creatures in close quarters was not a preferable activity. Black blood like fluid oozed from the creature's wounds. She worked on dodging and observing the creature’s reaction to attacks she managed to land. She found that longer slashes caused the thing to recoil more significantly and worked that into her attack plan. She danced around the creature until it fell unceremoniously to a backstab from her bloody dagger. Cassandra and Mahanon had similarly dispatched their opponents when Cassandra turned on the pair.

“Disarm” She commanded and Hanna dropped the dagger to the ice where it clattered and slid away. Mahanon shook his head, and followed suit.

“You can’t expect to defend us up the mountain.” He said incredulous.

The warrior sighed, and paused. “I suppose I cannot.” Cassandra finally conceded. Hanna nodded and retrieved her dagger and a twin from the weapon’s cache. She slid a quiver over her shoulders and grabbed a bow to hopefully avoid any more close-up combat.

“I would rather not bathe in monster blood every time we fight.” Hanna murmured.

Cassandra grunted and Mahanon smiled. “You like to follow orders, don’t you, Hanna?”

“It used to be my job to follow order’s, Mahanon.” She answered. Her tongue tasted bitter as she said ‘used’.

“Oooh, I see I found a sore spot in the stoic shem.”

“Shem?” Hanna’s ears understood that he was making fun of her, but she didn’t recognize that word.

Once again, just as Mahanon tried to answer, Cassandra cut him off. “Let us continue on. It is not far now.”
The sounds of conflict carried over the hill and Cassandra ran ahead announcing that help has arrived. Mahanon followed excited to meet these ‘others’. Hanna felt exhausted from the near constant fighting, running, and emotional distress of returning to what so closely resembled a war zone. She stumbled over a barricade of rubble into the fray. Hanna’s composure fell to the gravity of the impending battle. Cassandra and Mahanon had joined two of the strangest looking people by far this world had to offer. Similar in stature to Frodin, she noticed a dwarf luging a crossbow. There was also bald elf in leggings and a tunic straight out of the old Legend of Zelda games.

The second man flung a thick branch of a staff and launched various spells at the same black ichorous opponents that came out of the green glass dispersed by the breach. Only it seemed that these monsters had climbed through a floating mass of green breach glass. His ‘magic’ was the first magic she had seen used offensively. It was both stunning and fascinating to her to watch the elf struggle with managing the battle. He unlike everyone else she had met wore no armor and by God no shoes. He managed to maintain a safe distance by a semi-graceful dance between blasts of magic. Hanna managed to look away in time to dodge a green ball of fire flung by a same color wraith. She speculated the weakness of the ghost as she moved to fight a more familiar opponent. She noticed a gang of three black monsters had surrounded Cassandra and moved to draw attention to herself and relieve the warrior. She found more attention than she wanted when two of the three followed her. Hanna could dance around the two enemies efficiently, but attacking one would leave her open to attack from the other. She snuck in short blows where she could, but Hanna knew her energy was running low. She managed to bring one monster down and the second was impaled by a hail of arrows from the dwarf. As her enemy fell, she saw the bald elf grab Mahanon’s hand and thrust it towards the green glass door to hell.

Mahanon’s face betrayed an unbearable sort of pain as green lightning shot from his glowing hand. Suddenly the lightning returned in a clap and the door to hell was closed. Mahanon spoke with awe in his voice. “How did you do that?”

“I did nothing. The credit is yours.”

“No, you lifted my hand. I didn’t know it would do that.” Mahanon corrected him.

“I merely theorized that the mark upon your hand was the key to sealing the rifts. Any effort was surely on your part.” The bald elf responded. Hanna had enough.

“As fascinating this is, do you think we can move on? Cassandra said the mark spreads the longer the breach remains open. I haven’t known Mahanon long, but I would prefer not to watch the damn thing swallow him.” She felt the steam rising from her ears. Hanna couldn’t remember the last time she had asserted herself in a conversation. It felt strangely like coming home.

“I’m just glad he was right about you being the key, kid. Here, I thought we were going to be ass deep in demons forever.”

The dwarven archer approached the group from his prior fighting position. “Varric Tethras,” He introduced himself. Hanna internally groaned. Did these people not understand the danger Mahanon was in? She had to admit Varric's chest hair was a bit distracting as he spoke. “Rogue, storyteller, occasional unwelcome tagalong.” He winked at Cassandra who grimaced in response. Maybe Hanna would grow to like this guy. Cassandra attempted to dismiss Varric’s help and he asserted he would be staying to help make the world right again.

“Nice crossbow, Varric.” She commented to break the silence.
“Bianca? She and I do alright.”

“You named your crossbow Bianca?” Mahanon laughed. He seemed to like the rogue’s personality as well.

“It’s a long story.”

Solas interrupted. “If there are to be introductions, I am Solas. I’m pleased to see that you both still live.”

“He means that he saved your lives after you fell out of the breach.” Varric turned to Mahanon. “We should keep moving. I would hate to see all Chuckles effort go to waste.” Varric led the group towards a gate. Since they were moving Hanna felt more willing to participate in introductions.

“Well then, I suppose we should thank you. I’m Hanna Cooper, and this is Mahanon Lavellan, we met just recently in a dungeon.”

“I get Mahanon having them, but I gotta ask, you gotta thing for facial tattoos, Hanna?” Varric asked with his brightest smile.

“Facial tattoos? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean you have one on your left cheek. Looks like you spent a little too much time with the Dalish.” He turned to Mahanon, “No offense, but it looks right on you, a little weird on her.”

Hanna lifted her hand to her left cheek. She could feel an irritation, some of the skin was raised in an unfamiliar way. She felt a violated sense of horror and searched for a reflective surface to check her face. Now on the list of things she needed to do was get home and then have a tattoo removed from her face. She supposed she had already missed her wedding and would have a little time to work on it.

Tattoo removal became the least of Hanna’s worries as her cheek began to burn. It was a peculiar feeling like a muscle straining to its breaking point. Her eyes widened when she saw a faint blue glow emanating below her eye level.

“Oh look, it’s glowing. I knew a guy with glowing tattoos once. Did you get those done in Tevinter?” Varric’s face fell when he noticed Hanna’s expression. “You didn’t have that tattoo a few days ago did you?” She shook her head and tears came to her eyes.

Suddenly the tension broke and Hanna’s knees buckled, but she never hit the ground. Vertigo plagued her stomach as she opened her eyes to see she had not only not fallen, but also changed locations. Everything was completely still and tinted blue. Hanna tried futilely to collect her bearings. She observed the freeze frame before her. Directly in front of her stood an armored black woman. Hanna’s mouth gaped at the battlefield surrounding them. The castle courtyard where they stood was covered in refuse and corpses. Hanna didn’t have time to turn around to see what woman was fighting because time resumed as inexplicably as anything that had just happened.

The warrior woman swung her blade through Hanna before she could react, but Hanna was unscathed. She looked down to check her body, but found nothing instead. It was as if she was watching the events through a free-floating camera. The battle continued to rage around her. She heard shouts rain down from the majestic woman’s allies, “Alyiah, the archdemon is taking the castle.” As if on cue an unmistakably draconic roar sounded and alarm bells rang. The woman turned to follow another warrior in similar armor.
She stopped him placing a comforting hand on his shoulder and said, “Alistair, we will make them pay for all of it.” The woman’s warm southern accent sounded so remarkably familiar. Hanna blushed and looked away when the warriors shared a heated kiss. Hanna wanted to be anywhere else until they broke apart.

“Do all women kiss like that where you’re from?” He asked with a goofy smirk.

“All of us, after all, there is something of the legend to the Georgia Peach.” She spoke softly. Hanna wanted to run to the woman and ask her what she knew about Georgia. Before she could speak, the pulling sensation began again. Hanna tried to fight it off. She had to ask if Alyiah was from Earth. Instead, the tension snapped and Hanna’s knees hit stone and snow.

“Alyiah!” She shouted as she fell back into her own body. Her head lolled and she tasted bile before she lost what little was in her stomach. She felt consciousness attempt to leave and forced herself to cough deep in her gut to remain alert. She remained on her knees until the waves of nausea faded.

“Alyiah?” Varric asked confused.

“As in, The Hero of Fereldan?!” Cassandra confronted the disoriented woman. “Do you know her? What happened?”

“I don’t know. My face burned and then I was watching a warrior…. No, a pair of warriors, Alistair and Alyiah. They were fighting outside a castle with a dragon. That’s what I saw. I don’t know where I was, did my body move? What did you see?” The words left her faster than her brain could tell her that she sounded crazy.

“The end of the fifth blight, the Battle of Denerim.” Solas announced. “You did not move, but your spirit must have traveled through the fade.” He moved towards her and placed a hand on her chin to better observe the mark on her chin as its glow faded. “Most peculiar…”

“Okay, both of us fell out of the Breach with weird marks.” Mahanon interrupted. “Since her’s is fading and mine is growing perhaps we can work on fixing this first.” Hanna couldn’t blame him. Instead, she pushed through her disorientation. The group fought together as they travelled. Solas and Varric threw her concerned looks as they marched. She was not handling the journey gracefully. I guess they were right about not returning to active duty, this is going to kill me at this rate .

Cassandra seemed to relax as they approached a hill leading to a gate. As they got closer however, Mahanon stifled a gasp of pain. Another green abomination of space opened in front of the gate. Cassandra called out a warning about the rift and green lightning heralded the arrival of several demonic enemies. Hanna felt the fatigue getting the best of her. Still, she swung her daggers with a more practiced grace, and avoided close combat with her bow. Solas saved her ass several times as enemies were beginning to ride her flank to her weaker left side. When Mahanon managed to close the rift again, Hanna pushed open the gate right into the biggest headache of a man she had ever met. Chancellor Roderick, dick face extraordinaire.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think, even if it's horrible. It's fun to hear what people think about what I write.
Hanna had enough of this. Roderick had been told to sod off effectively, but now Cassandra and Leliana asked for her input on the best way to approach a gaping, green hole in the fabric of reality. The quicker head-on approach or the meandering side passage through the caves in the mountain. When she heard that scouts were stuck on the side of the mountain, she was inclined to say go up the cave path.

However, Mahanon’s condition only continued to go downhill. In fact, the bronze tint of his skin was flushed and he seemed to be waver ing between consciousness and unconsciousness. Perhaps that is why she was being given this decision, the elven warrior was too out of it to have a say. He needed the faster route. In the end, her tactical brain’s consensus was that this was above her pay grade. She was tired, her emotions were frayed, and she was scared that she would have another time traveling/fade freeze frame party unexpectedly.

“I’ll take Varric and Solas up the mountain path. Mahanon needs to get medical attention and all of the medics are serving the army near the breach. You take him there and wait for him to recover as long as it takes us to go through the mountain path. We should be along shortly enough.” Addressing Cassandra to ensure Mahanon’s safe arrival, Hanna announced her decision as she made it. Cassandra glanced to Leliana, who nodded approvingly. Hanna felt suddenly like she had passed a pop quiz.

Mahanon’s group left quickly. Hanna decided to take a rest and find some meager rations. She was able to stealthily palm some nuts out of a nearby crate. A nearby guard shared a strip of dried meat out of pity. Solas offered her a sip from his canteen. She was astounded by her thirst and embarrassed to hand back an empty canteen.

“Poor thing, the Seeker probably didn’t offer much in the way of food.” Varric chuckled. Hanna snorted. She felt like she hadn’t eaten in days.

“Yes, chains are not quite the choice meal I’d serve my guests back home.” Hanna tried to joke, but it fell flat in present company. Varric gave her a charismatic smile, and Solas’s stoic expression remained. She let her shoulders fall as she led the way to several ladders and platforms that would lead to the, hopefully still living, scouts.

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“Thanks, I needed to work off my snack.” She spat to the final rung of the final ladder as she led the trio over the top. Finally, a chuckle left Solas. Hanna had attempted to make him laugh to cure the daunting task of climbing an absurd number of ladders. Sadly, Varric had a comment and, of course, a nickname for Hanna.

“Wow, Sunshine. You got Chuckles to laugh watch out I hear that’s his way of flirting.”

So, the pair traded insults as they spelunked through a demon infested cave. The adrenaline of climbing and fighting was wearing on her again. Hanna was exhausted. When she saw a perfectly flat rock at the top of a hill outside said cave, Hanna ran with the last of her energy already feeling the smooth rock under her back. As her approach came to its fruition, she groaned, “Jesus Christ, does it ever stop?”
“Cheese the what, now?” Hanna turned and gave Varric a confused look. Unfortunately, this was no time for evangelizing, as the scouts were fighting for their lives beside her dream, make-shift bench of napping.

“I’ll tell you a story all,” Hanna’s words were punctuated by the ensuing battle, “about Him if we survive this.” She performed a quick sign of the cross as a silent prayer. Another rift had formed here and the scouts were fighting a losing battle. In order to stand a chance, she had to convince the scouts to abandon the battle. Without Mahanon, they couldn’t close the rift. She worked on clearing the current wave of demons to have enough time to convince them.

“If we’d brought Mahanon along, this might have been easier.” She grunted as she dodged a blow from a shade.

“If we’d brought Mahanon along, he would have died in the caves or climbing the ladders.” Solas answered blasting shade back with fire.

“Hey, Sunshine, I don’t mean to interrupt.” Varric announced from behind her dream rock.

“Out with it Varric.”

“You’re glowing again.” Solas reached out for her wrist and pulled her behind him.

“Wha..?” Hanna wasn’t able to finish her question as she felt the pull again. It happened much quicker this time. Suddenly the blue light swallowed her vision and she snapped outside of her body. She saw the glow on her face clearly for the first time. It was a strange wispy symbol, or perhaps branches. It looked like the scars left behind when someone was struck by lightning

She was so distracted it wasn’t until her head turned that she glanced away. Suddenly the final demon of the wave fell. She watched her own eyes widen. Her body stiffened and her hands wandered up from her hips. Like she was patting herself down.

“Hanna?” She heard her voice say.

“That’s right Sunshine, you alright?”

“No, that’s not right… How did I? What?”

“Hey, you! That’s my body!” Hanna shouted unheard. Her body turned and faced the rift as the next wave began. Demons, scouts, Varric, and Solas went to work again. Her body and whoever was in it, stood dumbstruck.

“We have to clear what we can and retreat. We cannot hope to close the rift without Mahanon.” Solas announced to the battlefield. Hanna assessed him from her forced outsider’s perspective. For someone so solitary and hobo-esque, he took charge. He might make a decent field commander or general. Whatever the ranks of military may be here.

When Solas called ‘Mahanon’, her body jumped into action. She grabbed a single dagger and swung it with practiced accuracy. Her movements were not fluid, lacking her usual grace, but controlled like she had always fought with a single blade. Hanna thought that she had seen the style before, but couldn’t place it. As the last demon fell, the others retreated. Her body seemed to move as if by reflex to hold up her left hand, and everything fell into place. Somehow Mahanon was in her body. Somehow instead of transporting her in time, her face had transported Mahanon to her body.

Why? Maybe it was to close the rift? Could he close the rift without the mark?
At first nothing happened, and Hanna doubted her instincts. Then, a green light arced across the sky. Bouncing off her like a lightning rod or electrical pylon, the light connected with her hand and then sealed the rift.

Every face gleamed with awe. If she had a face, she might have matched the look. It didn’t last long, however. The rift closed and the person controlling her held her hand began to scream.

Hanna felt the pull come and she braced for the transition. The first sensation of pain was a slight discomfort. It grew as she returned to herself. First, her check itched, then it burned. First her hand prickled then it stung. Finally, she felt a pain similar to a coal burning through her skin.

“What was that, Sunshine?”

“I suppose that you and Mahanon are both capable of sealing the rifts. Intriguing…”

Hanna couldn’t speak. Their voices sounded far away. The searing in her jaw was becoming more diluted with time. The searing in her hand however grew to replace it. Tears stained her face and she felt her breath coming too fast.

Varric and Solas shared a glance. Mahanon had not reacted so negatively. Something was different, wrong.

“Let’s not try that again, okay? You look like shit.” Varric helped her to move to the wonderfully smooth flat rock. She curled in on herself gripping her hand in a feeble attempt to alleviate the pain. Hanna forced her breathing to slow. She steadied each breath, holding it longer after each inhale. The pain seemed to recede finally.

“Better?” Solas asked and a warm light radiated from his hand to hers. She realized belatedly that he was the cause of the receding pain. It seems as though magic can both harm and heal.

“I’m not okay, but I’m getting there thanks to you, again.” Hanna thanked, Solas and stood. Testing whether her legs would hold her. “Well, all in all. That was weird.”

“ Weird doesn’t even begin to cover it, Sunshine.”

“Baby, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” Hanna felt better, but she still resisted breaking into a soulful rendition of the song.

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Hanna let out a huff as she slid down a ledge to the temple. The area had been cleared of demons, but charred and burning remains of unlucky Conclave participants littered the area. She spotted the army’s camp where Mahanon was leaning on Cassandra for support.

“Mahanon! Did something happen?” She asked despite knowing, very well, that something had in fact happened. Obviously, his stay in the camp and little adventure possessing her hadn’t been as restful as she had hoped. Her way was blocked by an imposing figure suddenly.

“Are you a mage?” A gruff voice spat at her.

“A mage? Like Solas?” Hanna evaluated the situation. Mahanon must have been as disoriented as she was. He must have told them he was forced to occupy her body. She looked up at the imposing figure and recognized the golden hair and furry mantle of The Commander. He had lost the look of concern he had given her… wait when had she seen him again?
Regardless, her answer was less than satisfactory if the Commander and Cassandra’s shared look meant what she thought it did. Solas and Varric were at her side in a moment ready to describe their experience on the mountain path. Hanna felt both betrayed and traitorous. She couldn’t react, didn’t know how to react to this accusation.

“I did not sense magic within her in the dungeon, and might I add neither did you.” The Commander sneered at Solas’s tone. At that moment, Mahanon looked visibly distressed. Hanna knew something happened when he was in her body to cause that discomfort.

“What did you do to me?” His voice was a disquieting mix of pain, confusion, and betrayal.

“I didn’t...,” She glanced around. Something had happened and everyone knew it. Something happened, it was pointless to deny it. “I don’t know.” She spoke softly, regretful. “I didn’t do anything. My face lit up again and” She snapped, “I was gone...Out of my body. And poof! You were there. It couldn’t have been much better for me.” The Commander and Cassandra seemed unconvinced by her explanation.

Varric was speechless. Solas had tried his hand to no avail. Mahanon grasped his wrist his expression tightening. Guilt consumed Hanna, “Fine, arrest me. Do what you must. Mahanon doesn’t have this kind of time.”

Startled out of the moment, the Commander called to two soldiers who promptly, needlessly restrained her. Mahanon passed only then, the Commander, Cassandra, and Leliana following. Solas gave her a strange helpless look, that could only be some sort of apology. Varric finally found his voice.

“It’s alright Sunshine. Shiny will be taken care of and we’ll clear all of this up. I saw what that did to you. There’s no way you did that on purpose.” He spoke for her ears only. He patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

Overwhelmed, Hanna cried. Ugly tears covered broken sobs. This was too much. This was a breaking point. All of her frustration released. These people were so tenuously brought together, they were quick to turn on each other much less herself.

*Forget it, I’d rather be in chains*, she thought curling into a ball behind her jailors.

Eventually there was a large blast of energy, then sounds of a ferocious beast. One of her guards moved to investigate and was waved back by the other guard. Hanna waited. Finally, a shout carried through the ruins of the temple. Hanna watched. Cassandra and another soldier carried a very disoriented Mahanon to a cot that was promptly loaded on a wagon.

The Commander followed behind the rest of Mahanon’s retinue. Solas spoke heatedly with Cassandra, Cullen, and Leliana. Cullen turned from the group and stalked towards her. He handed chains to the men guarding her. They tightened cuffs around her wrists.

“You are under arrest for attacking the Herald of Andraste.” He stated in a matter of fact tone like he was reading a very dull book. She was so numb and exhausted she missed that Varric had followed Cullen from the impromptu meeting.

“You’re making a mistake. Here I thought you had changed since I last saw you.”

Cullen made a restrained noise in his throat. Varric was hinting at skeletons in the Commander’s closet. Hanna catalogued this tidbit for later. Assuming later she would be able to dig into it.

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The soldiers kept a brutal pace down the mountain. They nearly dragged her down the mountain by her chains. Hanna nearly fell unconscious from pure exhaustion. She thought about the pull in her cheek, hoping to trigger an escape, even just for a moment.

*Even though that’s what landed me in this position.*

Instead, she sank back into a dark corner of her mind. A faded half reality she hadn’t visited in over a year. Her counselor called it a saving grace a dissociative state that let her survive the abuse of the failed operation and subsequent torture and escape. She called it her windowed vista to hell. It took more time than she remembered to fall into that deep dark pit. When she found it, she no longer felt the chaffing of the cuffs against her wrists, sore muscles, or deep exhaustion.

No one spoke. Still she heard whispers of a time long passed. Prayers in Arabic, unbearable heat, searing abdominal pain, and guilt. It settled on her like a baby blanket filled with poisonous spiders. Comforting and deadly. Heartwarming and chilling. Tears filled her eyes again, but she denied them. Four days. She had made it four days in this world of monsters and magic before the hallucinations set back in. In her mind, she protected herself from the whispers with her own. A droning repetitive prayer, the Rosary she could recite it in her sleep and it provided a familiar cadence, a light to her quiet corner.

She was moved to the dungeon below the chantry. Hanna began to let her prayers become a whisper in the dark. Slowly raising her voice with the fear that the dark brought. She prayed to drown out the whispers of her past. She prayed to wake up sound and whole in the hospital on Earth. Time passed slowly. Hanna’s body was overclocked in her stressed state. Isolation. She was intentionally being left alone in the cold, damp dark for hours. Maybe days. She wanted to let sleep take her. Eventually it would regardless of the stress. She would fall asleep and without her medicine to level her out. She would tear out her hair and destroy her body blind and numb in her sleep broken and bleeding in her nightmares. Isolation was better than sleep. She could handle the dark and the lonely better than killing herself.

She varied her prayers adding in a prayer to St. Anthony of Padua. Notoriously the saint of lost things. A prayer to her guardian angel. The more ingrained the prayer the brighter her imaginary light. When in doubt, she prayed the Rosary. She wasn’t alone if she could imagine her mom and her dad holding her hand at the foot of her bed. She caught herself dozing four times and assumed that at least a day and no more than three had passed.

A flash of light caught her eye, it was like a cat’s eyes reflective even in the dark. She was sure that her hallucinations were growing worse until a fire sprung to life in the first of four braziers. Hanna watched as a meager girl with elf ears like Mahanon moved from pan to pan. She squeaked when she looked up again to see Hanna staring unabashedly at her. The girl turned to leave.

“Wait!” She called, “Please stay for just a moment.” The girl nodded.

“Please, miss, don’t possess me.” The girl was doe eyed. Fear seeped from her being. Hanna felt horrible.

“I can’t make any promises,” Hanna joked. The girl didn’t seem amused. “How long have I been down here?”

“Two days have passed miss.” She shrugged uncomfortable, but terrified to run away and face Hanna’s mysterious ‘possession powers’. “We thought that maybe you had been talking to a demon. All those words, they echoed through the temple at night.”

“Shaila, you were to light the fire and leave. Do not speak to her.” A matronly woman appeared just
out of the fire light followed by a familiar shadow. The nightingale.

The elf and woman left, but Leliana stayed. Standing just out of sight in the shadows of the flames. The point of isolation was to break a person’s spirit. If she played up how broken she felt, maybe Leliana would let up.

“Hi! I’ve been dying to talk to someone. My name is Hanna. It is damp, cold, and lonely down here. I’m not sure what you want me to do, but I’d love a hint.” Hanna spoke with a cheery, desperate mask.

Leliana didn’t acknowledge her at first. Hanna thought she had failed. Wasted precious energy on a worthless plea. The silence was chilling, disappointing.

“Who are you?” She asked in a deliberate tone.

“What?” Hanna asked confused.

“Reports said you were from South Reach, Noble born. However, no nobles from South Reach are named Hanna. This is true we have the records and accounts. So, I ask you again. Who. Are. You?”

Baffled Hanna laughed. She had forgotten about Frodin misunderstanding her point of origin. And thought to ask about Frodin’s wellbeing. She decided that regardless of a positive or negative response she didn’t want or need to know.

“Oh, I see, ha ha. Okay, well, the thing is I never said I was from South Reach. Frodin said that when he didn’t understand me.” Hanna wanted to explain further, but stopped. “You’d never believe the truth either.”

“I’ve been doing this a long time, Try me.”

“You asked for it.”

Hanna introduced herself with her full name. Hanna Hyun-ae Cooper. Former piano/vocal major at a prominent music school. Former United States Army Special Forces 1st Lieutenant. Renown field strategist. Born in New York, joined the army after her father died in 9/11 at the pentagon.

“Or is this like when high school English teachers ask ‘Who are you?’” Hanna shrugged dismissively. “That was a stupid question and I still don’t know how to answer it.” Surprisingly Leliana didn’t look at her with disbelief.

“I was going to be married a few days ago. I was running in the woods and bam I’m in this weird world with two moons and magic. Actual Fucking Magic. Jesus Save Me.”

“Where were you the night of the conclave?” Leliana asked. Hanna related the events from her arrival to the healer’s tent.

“Frodin and I were separated. I went to go find him in the temple, then I remember nothing. Just flashes of things that don’t make much sense. Spiders and a golden woman and Mahanon ahead of me.”

“Do you remember passing me in the hallway?” Hanna shook her head.

“Anyone else would have thought my story was crazy. You are just taking it in stride like visitors from Earth are a dime a dozen.”
“I don’t know what that means, but I will tell you. One, you clearly believe it to be the truth. Two, I may have known someone with a similar story.”

“Aliyah. Did you work with Aliyah and Alistair?” Hanna didn’t wait for an answer. “I saw them in a vision. Sort of like with Mahanon only I didn’t pull her here I just watched them fight in the Battle of Denerim or something.”

“It was Denerim. And Cassandra mentioned it.”

“I didn’t mean to do what ever happened with Mahanon. Is he okay? It sounded like things got rough sealing the breach.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Thank you for your candor.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a roller coaster from start to finish. Thank you for all the comments and kudos! I'm working very hard to keep this story going.
Interlude

Chapter Notes

I was just picturing this as the song Hanna plays in her dream.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbYojjF9-Zo

Shortly after Leliana left, 50 hours of near constant consciousness wore on her. She fell asleep slowly. All at once she was in a dream. In her dream, she felt none of the anxiety she had fallen asleep feeling. Instead she was playing piano. This piece was somewhat familiar, she couldn’t place when she had ever played it before. It was soft and calm, but it did not feel entirely peaceful. Hanna's focus was not on the piano. Her fingers moved of their own accord without her attention. The crowd was full with a quiet murmur. Suddenly she felt like she had 13 years ago. Hanna had been well known for her skill with the piano from a young age. She abandoned playing piano when her father died.

She looked out to the crowd for her father. He had never missed a performance, and her dreams were often the most reliable place she could see him. Yet, today, she didn’t see him. Without delay tears came to her eyes, how alone did she have to be that even in her dreams she was abandoned. The piece increased in intensity or perhaps it just seemed to in her emotional fervor. She turned to look back stage and to her surprise she saw a bald elf. She didn’t stop playing, but couldn’t help but wonder aloud.

“Solas?”

The elf appeared just as startled as she was. Perhaps more so as he seemed speechless. As he contemplated their situation, Hanna continued to play.

“How did you get here?” He asked finally.

“This is my dream. I should be asking you. What are you doing here?” Her hands stopped.

“I was journeying through the fade when I found you here. Strange what the fade reveals about a person.” His words seemed to mean something more than she understood. He walked out onto the stage. She stood to stop him. He couldn't come onto the stage during her performance! However, as she stood and turned the auditorium was now hauntingly empty. Hanna’s dreams had always been vivid, but Solas seemed to be intruding. Worse he was ruining it. It seemed easiest to blame him for her father's absence.

“You shouldn’t be here.” He ignored her statement as he approached the piano in front of her. He pressed a key and a note rang out. His curiosity was interesting, but disconcerting.

“This is marvelous. What is this?” His face held a small smile. She could probably only see it because of how close he had to be to play the piano. His proximity also came with a stutter in her heartbeat. He radiated power that he had not in the waking world. She could sense the magic around him, and it was awe inspiring. Terrifying. Hanna felt courage rise at the challenge of his radiance.
“Have you never seen a piano before?” She asked. Solas once again ignored her. “Then maybe... it is not for you to know about.” Solas clicked his tongue like a displeased schoolteacher. Suddenly, he was visibly disturbed. As if stating there might be something he should not know was a threat to his very being. The invisible power around him shuddered, and Hanna felt very afraid.

“A piano, interesting. How do you make it sing so beautifully?” He recovered smugly. Now Hanna moved away slowly. She did not like the feeling of Solas being here. It wasn’t her choice. Not that her dreams were entirely under her control. He shouldn’t be here.

“Please leave.”

“I wish to protect you. A mind like yours is a target out in the open like this. In fact, we can discuss this more when you. Wake. Up.”

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Hanna startled awake. The darkness settled in and she realized the fire had burnt out. Suddenly the silence was broken by footsteps. The muffled sound of skin on stone. Hanna jumped when the fire suddenly flared to life illuminating the dungeon and revealing the man who had rudely intruded on her dream.

“You are a mage. How did you hide your mana from the Commander, the Seeker, and I?” His tone spoke of betrayal and anger. Shouldn’t Hanna be the angry one? What kind of world let some creep set in on your dreams then wake you up and yell nonsense at you? Okay, so he wasn’t actually yelling, but he was angry talking in her general direction.

“Excuse me. I am not a mage and if I was I wouldn’t hide it. You’d think I’d know if I were a mage, yeah? Light some shit on fire, freeze a nice cold drink, smite a bully with lightning. Check all those boxes with a fat no, okay?”

“You can deny it and hide it, but the fade tells no lies. You are a mage.”

“If I’m a mage, you’re a monkey’s uncle.”

“I understand wanting to hide it, but…what’s a monkey?”

“Little animal with brown fur. Hops around doing this...” Hanna scratches under her armpit and pantomimes a monkey sound. When Solas shows no recognition, she blows it off. “Look, it doesn’t matter, because you’re not a monkey’s uncle because I’m not a mage. I’d never really seen magic until we came up that hill and you were flinging spells like nobody’s business. I’m sick of this. I’m not hiding anything. If I am a mage, I wasn’t before I got here. Like to this dungeon. The first time.”

Realization was a marvelous expression to watch pass over Solas’s features. It started with a drop of the mouth. Then rose to a twitch of the nose. Finally it reached his eyebrow which rose at least an inch. “You are from a place where there is no magic?” He asked, but continued speaking without waiting for a response. “No mages?”

“None.” She cut him off. “No elves, no dwarves...well, not really any dwarves. Definitely no demons and for f***sake no dragons. I am not from here. Here is not the place I am from. I am scared half to death and you people seem to keep throwing me in jail without much cause!” She paused to breathe, and perhaps for dramatic effect. “Trust me, if I could go home I would. Maybe with magic I could. So tell me what do I do? Abracadabra? Bippity, boppity, boo? This obviously doesn’t come naturally to me.”

“I will report my findings to the Herald and the Seeker.” Solas regarded her one last time with a look
of thinly veiled interest before turning to leave.
I felt like the last chapter was shorter than I had planned, so you get a bonus chapter today!

Shaila came back relieving Hanna from hours of uninterrupted isolation after Solas left. Even more surprising she spoke first. “I’m to take you for a bath, my lady. The War Council has convened and will sentence you.” Hanna thought Hell must have frozen over. Nothing she had said had helped up to this point. One dream and she was m’lady again.

Hanna followed the girl quietly. She had briefly considered running, but thought if they were going to kill her they probably didn’t need a trial. Well maybe, but she definitely didn’t have to be clean to be killed. Shaila left her in a poorly lit cellar with a wooden basin of lukewarm water. In the chill of the basement, the water was soon tepid and then chilled. As Hanna washed, Shaila reappeared with a plain blue dress. It didn’t fit right around Hanna’s chest, and was overall too tight or too loose in all the wrong places. The girl looked apologetic, but indicated to go up the stairs ahead of her. Hanna hated to turn her back even to the timid maid. Everyone in the inn with Frodin had at least a dagger. Who says Shaila wasn’t secretly carrying some manner of weapon.

The door to the stairs was about halfway through the inner sanctum of the Chantry. She wouldn’t know she was lead through exterior doors directly to the dungeon the last two times. When the door opened, conversation ceased. All eyes were on her, the person that tried to kill the Herald. How far removed were they from their brains? The people of Haven would have killed him with no qualms the last time she saw them. Now she was the bad guy. She didn’t even try to kill him. It was all wonky fade business.

Based on her position, wonky fade business did not make it any better. In fact, she got the distinct feeling that being a mage was going to make living here a nightmare.

Shaila indicated to turn to the left. Hanna spotted armored guards and assumed that was her destination. If she could do anything, it was march with her head held high. When she did move through the room, whispers started. Most were deliberately too quiet for her to decipher. However, the voices from within the door were not quiet. A discussion was going on between Cullen and Mahanon. A discussion about whether or not a mage should be given free reign of the town. Only discussion was the kind word, it was an argument. An argument that ceased when the door guard turned to knock and announce her arrival.

Hanna walked through the door followed by Shaila. Shaila made eye contact with Leliana and stepped away from Hanna to the wall nearest the Nightingale. Hanna realized that Shaila had been an agent of the Nightingale and had acted in concert with her in that initial meeting. Of course, no chambermaid would be sent to light the dungeon. Hanna suddenly felt like all she had done since leaving her cell had been a test. She couldn’t know for sure if she had succeeded.

The Nightingale had machinations that delivered her to this point she was sure. The only thing Hanna was uncertain of was whether Leliana had shared with everyone her experience with Alyiah was her reason for believing Hanna. Or if the extent of her alien existence in Thedas was known to everyone in the room.
As she continued to survey the room, Hanna suddenly felt very small. Solas was not present. He was the only one who had been on somewhat positive terms the last time she had seen them. He seemed to understand her better after their last meeting. Hanna wondered what was expected of her during this “trial”.

“Hanna, welcome to the war table. This is your sentencing. Solas has shared with us that you are indeed a mage. From elsewhere. Somewhere without magic.” Cassandra began. Hanna started to interject that she was not a mage at the start. But the icy stares from around the room were not inspiring of confidence.

“If I may Lady Seeker,” Frodin’s voice spoke from the other side of the table. He had been standing beside Leliana and behind Cullen. In the excitement, she hadn’t seen him. “The first time I saw Lady Hanna, I found her freezing in the forest.” He held up the satchel containing everything Hanna had brought from Earth. “These were the only items she had on her, poor thing. She told me the next morning that she was ill. We made a ride for the conclave with her initial protest. She seemed very out of sorts. I do not believe that she came to the conclave a mage or with any ill intent.”

Hanna smiled to Frodin and waved in greeting. Leliana gently took the satchel and slowly revealed the contents. Her plaid fall dress and brown sweater, her worn brown boots and socks, finally her cell phone.

“So, her clothing is strange that doesn’t mean she doesn’t understand the implications of having magic. She is a mage. I can’t believe we are humoring this.” Cullen spoke indifferent to the evidence. “What is that black box?”

Finally, all eyes turned to Hanna. She would be allowed to speak. “It’s my cell phone. When charged with electricity, it lets you do stuff. Like communicate with other people who have cell phones.” She really wished she could say something else. “Even if I could charge the thing, it probably wouldn’t work here.” She pointed up. “I’m taking in context clues that say you don’t have satellites. I could probably listen to music though.” It was strange how comforting that sounded.

“What’s a satellite?” A Hispanic woman in a bright yellow dress asked. When Hanna looked at her confused, she nodded. “I’m the Inquisition’s ambassador. My name is Josephine Montilyet.” Hanna could not help but smile at the idea of a Spanish Inquisition. She put the thought onto the ‘Long List of Questions to Ask People When They Don’t Want to Kill Me’.

“Nice to meet you.” Hanna said reflexively. But eyes around the room told her that she was still expected to answer. “At least you didn’t ask what music was.” Hanna smiled despite the mood in the room. No one else did, ‘Tough room’ She thought mirthlessly.

“Satellites are machines that we send up into orbit to reflect electromagnetic signals to amplify the range of electronic devices and transmit data from place to place. It sounds complicated, but for everyday people it’s not a big deal.” She delivered the information with a smirk. She had just spit out technobabble word vomit to this counsel that would decide her future in this shitty place.

Hanna knew it was stupid, but she felt smarter than the others because of her knowledge of the basics of technology. ‘Psh, if you were really smart you would’ve kept your head down. If you were smart you would be married to the best man on Earth.’

At least Cullen and Frodin seemed completely baffled by her spiel. The ladies and Mahanon were much better schooled in their expressions. Hanna met eyes with Mahanon. He seemed much calmer. Less intensely upset with her than he had been immediately after the mountain ‘incident’

“Well then, we have established that Hanna is from another place. How do we know that it is
“Can I ask one quick additional question to this one?” Hanna quickly blurted. “I think I have figured out a lot in my short time here. In fact, just about every new word. Except Lyrium. What exactly is lyrium?”

“You tell me. This will demonstrate your knowledge of magic. What do you use Lyrium for? Can everyone use it?” Mahanon asked. Hanna supposed if she knew about Lyrium she would be able to lie. Regardless the question worked in her favor, and she wasn’t about to point out that she could lie. Why lie when her guilt was still on the table?

“I was asking because I don’t know. We don’t have it on Earth. It sounds like an element. Like zinc or potassium. Or gold and silver? Maybe you use it for money. I think people were referring to trade. So wouldn’t everyone use it? You asked very leading questions.”

“On Earth?” Josie asked.

“Yeah, that’s what we call the planet.”

“Like Fereldan and Orlais?” Frodin tried to clarify.

“No like the whole damn thing.” Hanna indicated the map on the table in the center with her arms out stretched.

“Oh like Thedas.” Mahanon offered.

“Maybe.” Hanna stated feeling suddenly like she was playing charades in another language. It seemed as though the consensus was New York and Michigan were just over the nearest sea, not millions of light-years away on another planet. Hanna didn’t know how to explain that they were wrong. She wasn’t from another country, she was definitely from another world.

“Lyrium is not like Sovereigns and silver. It is very specifically used for magic and the disruption of magic by templars. It is dangerous.” Leliana explained. She turned to her agent. “This is Shaila. I have had her watching Hanna. She is here to share her observations.”

With a distinctly stronger voice Shaila announced, “I have never seen or heard tell of a mage that wouldn’t use her magic to provide a light in the darkness. For days Hanna was alone in the dark, and not once did she shine a mage light. I provided her with chilled water for bathing. She did not heat it even in my absence. I have no reason to believe that she has magical abilities.”

Hanna eyes were wide. She had been watched the entire time. She had not been left alone, but for a trap to see her use magic?

“I can tell you that she prays to strange gods. Mother, Father, someone called Jesus, Anthony, Guardian, Angel. It is a strange cadence to her chant. Not a religion I have heard of before.” Shaila finished explaining her experience watching Hanna and was dismissed by Leliana.

Hanna felt a fire rise in her chest. She had been isolated not for torture, but as a trap. She had been lied to and tricked. Her heart felt heavy in her chest, and she decided she wanted to be out of this room now. With determination, she spoke.

“Have you established firmly that I am from another planet, and I have no working knowledge of magic? Despite the magic school bus tattoo on my face and my apparent connection to this ‘fade’.” Hanna looked around. The occupants shared glances and Cassandra started a vote.
“Can we at least agree on that much?” All hands showed in agreement.

“We can not very well have an untrained mage wandering the town. The threat of an abomination is too great.” Cullen implored.

“She’s lasted this long in deplorable conditions, if she were going to turn into an abomination it would have happened by now.” Leliana argued.

“We will need to have templars at the ready just in case. While she is trained.” Cassandra offered.

“I will leave that up to you. We only had two mages in clan Lavellan the Keeper and her first. I know nothing of shem mages.” Lavellan agreed to always have a templar near Hanna while she trained. Despite the argument she heard on her way in. She supposed she would trade a dark, damp cell for surveilled freedom. Something in the way Cullen talked about abomination, and her. She was not up for that.

“Ho ho hold on a second there. That’s a new one. Someone want to explain to the new girl what an abomination is?”

“You can’t be serious.” Cullen pursed his lips and shared an exasperated look with Cassandra.

“Stay vigilant and avoid demons. You won’t have to worry about losing yourself to your magic.” Cassandra advised.

“Oh, yeah, that sounds super easy. Thanks. Avoiding detail in explanations is the way to make sure nothing bad happens. Whew, saved me from all that worried about non-descript magic/demon self-termination.”

“Your training with Solas will begin tomorrow.” Mahanon dismissed Hanna as if she were not the person he had angrily imprisoned for at least three days. “Your sentence for your crime is service to the cause for three months.”

Frodin collected her effects from the table and followed her out. “My lady, I mean Hanna, you have no idea how pleased I was to learn you had survived the explosion.” He stopped her at the entrance to the temple. He turned slowly and looked at her with tears in his eyes. He clapped her on the shoulder. “Maker, your face. How did that happen?” Tears formed in Hana’s eyes.

“I don’t remember. It must have happened at the conclave. I don’t remember anything after I went looking for you.”

“After the Commander left, the quartermaster postponed the meeting. It saved us all.”

“It saved you. I’m still stuck in this place, but now with more magic. And no home.”

“That’s it, until you are back on your feet, you stay with me. My cabin is far too large for just me and my stock. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need.”

Frodin smiled. Hanna cried and followed him to his cabin. Frodin provided food and a change of clothes. Hanna was so thankful she didn’t know what to say.

“Thank you. I’m sure that I’ll need a friend in the coming days. I’m glad I found you in the woods that night. Without your kindness... I would never have made it this far. If I can ever do something for you, I will.” Hanna walked to the bed in Frodin’s cabin.

“Hanna… you are far too kind. I would never leave you to fend for yourself. Stay safe, train well.
That’s all I need from you.” Frodin followed her and checked the fire. “Sleep here, I’ll wake you up before sunrise.”

“I just hope I’m not more trouble than I’m worth.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” With that, Hanna fell asleep and dreamt of calm seas.
Perspective

Chapter Notes

Ah! I got behind with editing. And the next few chapters sounded better in my head, so I've been rewriting and rewriting. I'm still not 100% satisfied. Oh well, here you go.

Solas left the dungeon feeling relieved. Hanna seemed trusting enough that he could use her in the case of Mahanon’s continued distrust. The Dalish elf was less than enthused by the Elvhen mage. Solas understood that he had made a misstep in their first post breach encounter. He didn't see why, really. It didn't take much to know that he was on Mahanon's bad side. He was being left behind in Haven while Mahanon went out to the Hinterlands. His interactions with Solas had been spectacularly icy.

Solas reflected again on the offending incident.

As a warrior for clan Lavellan, Mahanon had respect for mages. He seemed inclined to respect Solas as his elder, but Solas had lost that respect. Shortly after waking up after stabilizing the breach, Lavellan had come to him to ask about his understanding of the Fade. He seemed to be looking for a connection between them as elves. For understanding of his new position within the organization the humans had started. Somehow Solas had not provided the comfort he looked for. Perhaps Lavellan held the culture and knowledge of the Dalish dearly, and Solas’s dismissal of the Dalish as a whole was heavy-handed.

Not that the Dalish had thought twice about dismissing Solas.

There was no use getting upset about the mistakes of his past. Solas had to make another plan in case he was unable to convince the herald his intention was not to offend. He merely hoped to instruct. Ignorance and the mundane were his enemies. The result of his mistake.

Solas was naturally inquisitive, so when Seeker Pentaghast asked him for his opinion of Hanna, Solas offered to investigate her past. He asked Mahanon of his experience on the mountain. When he had been forcibly been removed from his body, and used the mark from another’s body. He said the experience was not terrible, but was confusing. Until, Mahanon tried to use the mark from Hanna’s body. When the confusion melted into pain, and he felt like he was on fire. The young elf had compared it to being burned at the stake.

Cassandra reported that Mahanon’s body went cold and the mark grew in the absence of his spirit. Approximately when Mahanon used the mark from Hanna’s body, the mark sent lightning through the tent Mahanon was staying in and set the canvas on fire. The arc of lightning was surprising to the army massed on the mountain. Luckily it attracted attention and Mahanon was saved from the tent fire. When Mahanon came to, he was in a cold sweat. More exhausted than when he arrived. Which was an astounding feat. Cassandra and Cullen had been discussing a strategy for approaching the center of the breach and were nearby. Mahanon’s experience sounded like possession and spurred their actions.

Solas found the dwarf asking for a woman that matched Hanna’s description, and asked him to
explain what he knew about her. The strangeness of her sudden appearance in the forest. Her few strange belongings and her strange manner overall were leads Solas couldn’t ignore. Solas searched the fade for answers or evidence of a mage walking the fade in her dreams. For two nights, he heard that she didn’t sleep, but repeated chanting prayers to a father, mother, Jesus. He recognized it as a name she had joked with Varric about. They sounded rehearsed and well memorized, but no religion he knew of encouraged the prayer of memorized lines other than the Chantry. And judging by the reaction of the Chantry patrons to her prayers, the words she spoke were not the chant of light.

His investigation took him to Cullen. Asking what he remembered of his interaction with Hanna before she entered the temple of Sacred Ashes. He said she was normal. Nothing was out of the ordinary and she did not act like a mage or carry a staff. The Commander admitted to being distracted by matters at hand. He regretted not investigating further at the time, but that was neither here nor there.

Leliana shared that she had spoken with Hanna and believed that she was not from Fereldan. That she was from a similar and equally distant land to that of the Hero of Fereldan. Hanna claimed to be born of a land called New York which was north of the land called Georgia where Alyiah came from. Leliana stated that when Alyiah had joined the Grey Wardens she had never seen magic before either. That there may be a place in the world where magic was completely eradicated.

This thought was terrifying to Solas. He knew that he had made mistakes. The fact that his mistake had completely eliminated the connection to the fade for thousands of people was concerning. Everything was worse than he thought. And continued to spiral downward.

When he found Hanna in the fade, he was surprised and angry. She had lied to everyone. Here she was, obviously a mage. She had complete control of the fade and was able to manipulate and invent an instrument he’d never heard of. Then he was even more upset that she was doing so openly. She had no wards. No protection from the spirits inevitably drawn by such a display.

She was surprised to see him as well. She was coy and continued to withhold information. Solas decided to play to his curiosity. Hanna remained withdrawn. She either didn’t understand the gravity of the situation or she was pretending she didn’t. In the fade, Solas couldn’t decide, so he moved their conversation to the waking world. And what an enlightening conversation it was. She admitted that she could be a mage, untrained and powerful with the abilities she had shown thus far. Solas was excited about the implications of his investigation.

Immediately after, Solas sought out Lavellan and Cassandra to explain his findings. Luckily he found them together discussing the upcoming trip to the Hinterlands to find Mother Giselle. The one he was unceremoniously uninvited for.

“May I interrupt?” He inserted himself into the conversation. “I have just had a very productive conversation with Hanna and I have uncovered something remarkable.”

“Go on,” Cassandra prompted.

“Hanna is from a place with no magic and no mages.” Solas stopped to emphasize the discovery. “She traveled to the temple of Sacred Ashes searching for a cure to an illness. When she arrived to the temple according to several witnesses, she was disoriented, but had no magical abilities until after she came back from the fade with Mahanon. The source of her connection to the fade is the mark on her face.”

“That’s not possible.” Cassandra huffed.

“There is yet so much that we don’t know about the formation of the breach. Her contact with the
formation of the breach has awakened a strong connection to the fade.” Solas could see the growing concern on Mahanon’s face. Strong connection to the fade seemed to be a negative trait for Hanna to possess. Solas remained stoic, but tried to explain the benefits. “Her magic ability may be without limit. She needs training, but would be an invaluable asset to the Inquisition with her natural ability to use the fade to travel in spirit.”

Mahanon made to speak in disagreement, but Cassandra held up a hand. “Thank you, Solas, your skills have been invaluable to the inquisition. We will bring this to the war council and serve judgement. Be prepared to train Hanna in the morning.”

Solas acknowledged he was being dismissed and returned to his cabin to think about how to train someone so inexperienced with magic. How to explain the connection to the fade in the waking world? There was the other matter. How did she hide her mana so efficiently. Effortlessly. If he had not found her in the fade tampering with the landscape, he never would have noted her connection.

When Solas slept, he watched for Hanna in the fade. Her dream started with pain and fear. He lead her to a calming beach. The waves lapping inspired a memory from her past to play itself out. Hanna watched from the background and smiled. A child resembling Hanna was jumping in the waves with an older child and a woman. The shared jet black hair and distinct facial features indicated that this was her family. They laughed and splashed and collected sea shells. Their clothing was peculiar. Colorful leaving little to the imagination. A man dressed very similarly to the young boy, lay on a blanket on the beach. He was so different from the rest of the family Solas watching from afar wondered what he could possibly have to do with Hanna. In the fade, Hanna moved closer to watch herself and her brother. Solas moved closer to the man. The soft snoring punctuated by loud snorts told Solas the man was sleeping. A particularly loud snort drove him from his nap and, when his eyes opened Solas saw the resemblance. Piercing blue eyes. An exact duplicate to those of his daughter.

Suddenly, Solas felt he was intruding. He turned and left before the not-yet-a-mage noticed his presence and berated him for it in the morning. Solas filed the details of Hanna's family into his mind. It might be useful to him if she became his backup plan.

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Cullen left the meeting of the war council in a foul mood. Cassandra, Mahanon, and even Leliana and Josephine seemed to be under this mage’s spell. She played innocent well enough, but Cullen had seen enough to know that Hanna was holding something back. She was haunted by a dark past. He should know. His past was full of regrets as well.

Even if she was not set out to destroy the inquisition, that did not mean that she would not stumble in her education and do so all the same. Cullen had to find a focus outside of having a new, assumably powerful mage in Haven. At least the council had wisely agreed to maintain a templar watch on Hanna. It was probably the only reason he was able to, with good conscience, let her go free. Cullen walked through Haven with purpose. He wanted to observe the new recruits working with Rylen, his second-in-command.
Trainee’s were working on shielding techniques in the field outside of Haven. The clanking of wood against armor was relaxing, at least he could depend on Knight-Captain Rylen to run the recruits through their paces. Cullen observed for a short moment before moving to his tent to check correspondence from Leliana’s scouts. Scout Harding had arrived in the Hinterlands and was reporting that fighting between rogue templars and mages was worse than initially thought.

It would be a long road to peace, especially after current events. The first steps had been taken. Luckily Solas had been correct about Mahanon’s abilities. Cullen only hoped that Solas was correct in his trust of Hanna. The woman was resilient he had to admit. Isolation had broken lesser people. And mages in particular did not handle isolation well. Again, he would know.

Mahanon was remarkably forgiving to Hanna when her situation was explained. He wanted to give her free reign of Haven. Cullen couldn’t understand the elf’s fondness for the mage. He wondered if perhaps they knew each other before the explosion at the conclave. That thought was too paranoid he realized after having it and regretted it. Mahanon was not as forgiving shortly after the incident on the mountain.

It was suspicious that Hanna had always put Mahanon’s needs first. The breach had put everyone on edge, but according to Leliana, his well being was important to her. Maybe, it wasn’t paranoid to think they knew each other. In the end, it was something to consider. Hanna, at the very least was suspicious.

Mahanon was the only hope they had to right the world. He had done nothing suspicious. All of his effort was to restore order. Cullen couldn’t deny that he felt a kinship with the Dalish warrior. At least the way he fought was understandable. Mahanon was similarly wary of magic, though he dismissed the need for templars to watch all mages. Cullen considered for a moment that Mahanon may be wary of humans rather than specifically mages. It seemed possible upon review of their interactions...

Cullen was distracted by the meeting. He had read the same line several times over without comprehension. Exasperated the ex-templar gave in to his wandering thoughts. He did wonder about this place Hanna came from. A land without mages. What might life be like there? Hanna did have an exotic look about her. She was soft and emotional, like a noble woman. She was fierce in battle if witnesses were to be believed. Cullen couldn’t deny that she had the muscular build of a warrior. Cullen wondered what she might fight in a place without demons. Someday he might ask her in a moment of weakness. Her skin, or what he saw of it was unscathed. Her complexion clear, teeth straight and white. She was beautiful. Cullen tried to reason that he could acknowledge that she was beautiful without catching feelings. He was a good enough man for that.

The only shadow to her beauty, her hooded eyes black and blue like a ghoul. He wondered if she had ever dreamt before the conclave. If the fade was the cause of her insomnia. He thought of the flashes that came to him in sleep. He wondered what it would be like to have the fade twist memories. If she was haunted, and he knew she was, she would probably never sleep soundly again.

Finally the line of thinking came to an end, and Cullen was able to focus on Harding’s report and his response. The Herald would be leaving tomorrow to find Mother Giselle. Solas would begin to train Hanna. Cullen would bury himself in the never ending paperwork to prepare for what may come. He would not think about how pretty she was. In fact, if he buried himself in his work enough, he was sure that he could avoid her completely.

Cullen was surprised when, two days later, Solas and Hanna stood outside his tent early in the
morning. Hanna smiled at him sheepishly. Solas seemed openly disappointed. Cullen’s brow furrowed. “What have you done now?”
I think the first part of this chapter would have done better at the end of the last. Oops, I'm not gonna change it now.

Welcome to Hanna's mage training.

With a light shake from Frodin, Hanna awoke with a peaceful smile. She dreamt of a family trip to South Carolina when they had spent hours on a warm beach shooting the breeze. Her father had been exhausted working long hours until he felt he had earned his vacation time. So, of course, he spent much of his vacation sleeping. If anything ran in Hanna’s blood, it was perseverance and a tendency to take on too much.

Still, the memory helped her feel at peace. She still heard whispers from the shadows of Frodin’s cabin, but she wasn’t entirely convinced that it didn’t have to do with being a mage. Maybe magic had magically cured her PTSD.

She felt in her gut that it wasn’t true, but the thought was enjoyable. What if she no longer had the shadow of her service hanging over her? If she could erase everything from the past 13 years, stop herself from joining the Army in the first place, she might have. Her mother reminded her that just because her father fought for his country didn’t mean it was how he wanted to die. It wasn’t how he wanted her to live.

Hanna was set to be successful in music. John teased her endlessly about how he had to study mathematics endlessly to be a successful engineer. ‘All you have to do is put your fingers to a piano and people go nuts.’ John was 11 years older than Hanna. From the beginning he never wanted a sibling. When she was born, an accidental pregnancy her mother was 36 and was not intending on having more children, John hated her for how their parents ‘spoiled’ her. She was given things he had to work for.

“Oh, Hyun-Ae, continue your studies, a job would only endanger your hands. You must keep them safe.” Her mom would say. John would seethe.

“Bluejay, you need a more reliable car than that. We’ll pay half, so you can get something newer.” Her father cooed. John’s face turned red.

He complained constantly that she was the favorite child. He had to work through high school and college. He had to buy his own car. He had to fix his own bike. He pointed to things that she got with jealousy. When Hanna abandoned her music for the army, John exploded, but not in the way she predicted. He told her not to go.

“You don’t have to do this you know.” He told her after a world class freak out in front of her mother that Hanna wished she had recorded. “I understand I’ve always been tough on you. Losing dad, it’s been hard. You don’t have to go just to prove that you loved him. You can’t kill the people responsible. Real life doesn’t…” He paused and made eye contact. “You can’t get revenge.”
“I have to go. This is my choice. I have signed the papers. I’m an adult bro. I can do what I want.” Hanna was resigned to her choice. She had doubts, but before shipping out, she couldn’t voice them or she wouldn’t go. Hanna had run and crunched and pushed until she met the requirements for a 20 year old woman to go to basic. The recruiter wanted to push her into a background field, had told her women were not allowed in combat positions. Hanna ignored it to the best of her ability. She was stubborn and grieving. She would bide her time. She got as close as she could running communications. In her first tour, she studied at an online university to complete the last year of her four year degree. She studied foreign languages, future tech, and read ravenously.

She signed up for OCS. After the required % of her tour, she was off to Fort Benning, GA. Four months later, she was a newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenant. In her free time she studied strategy, she watched. She waited. After four years with no upward mobility, she moved on an experimental group of integrated Green Berets. It was a lateral move, but she wanted to taste the blood of an enemy. Hanna busted ass. She took names. She kept her fucking head down and ground herself into the dirt.

Being one of the first women to wear the Green Beret gave her joy. Being on her first combat mission with one green asshole Edward Markson, gave her none. She did the planning. He took the credit. And he made it seem like he was doing her a favor. It tied them together. Markson would request her as his second every time. His father had told him to find a good lackey with actual promise so he wouldn’t be in the combat zone for long. After three years, one final mission, Hanna was going to be given her own command. One she would not surrender so easily as Markson planned to.

Hanna felt the dizziness that accompanied any thoughts of her team. Markson wasn’t so bad. He was a product of the system he lived in. After three years with Hanna, he wasn’t such a damn WASP. He learned to value the diversity in a team. A corporal with training as a combat medic in addition to his value as an explosives tech was worth his weight in gold. Languages were important in ops requiring a delicate touch. She talked through choices and plans with Markson and eventually Markson talked back. Kids grow up so damn fast. Hanna felt the world warp around her. She ended the train of thought. She was off of her medicine and exasperating the situation by thinking about that time. She couldn't fall down the rabbit hole. Not now, not ever.

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Hanna met Solas bright and early at his home, thanks to Frodin. She was marginally surprised to see that the elf was already awake when she arrived. The horizon wasn’t hinting pink from the arrival of the sun, and Hanna didn’t ping the mage for an early riser. Solas stepped out without a word. His cheeks were tinted pink, like a blush, but again he didn’t seem the type.

Hanna was full of questions. Unsure what to ask first, she followed silently. They were shadowed by a not so silent knight. The metal armor didn’t clang so much as it ground uncomfortably in the back of Hanna’s mind.

The presence of the templar was chilling. She was reminded of the concept of becoming an abomination through interaction with a demon. Would it be like the “Devil Went Down to Georgia”? How did templars control magic? She had so many questions. None of them were answered by Cassandra’s ‘Do a good job, avoid demons’ advice.

The sun hadn’t even risen and the trio passed the open gate. There was a crowd gathered at the
stables. The few horses available were split between Mahanon, Varric, Cassandra, and two inquisition scouts. Hanna waved to Mahanon and he waved back. She hoped that meant Mahanon was ready to let bygones be bygones. She wasn’t entirely sure that she was ready to forgive Cullen, since he gave the order and jumped to conclusions. Mahanon though, seemed like he was trying to handle being given a power he didn’t understand or have full control over. It gave Hanna and Mahanon something in common.

The group left minutes later, and Solas indicated to continue following him. Hanna did so and the brisk mountain air was both invigorating and exciting. She was going to learn actual magic today. She wondered what it would feel like. How she might form a flame in her hand, or call down lightning. Her mind was wandering when Solas stopped suddenly and she ran into his back.

Solas spun on his feet and helped to keep Hanna on hers. “I see that you were able to find clothes, a meal, and a bed on your own. Yet you can’t focus on a simple task like walking.”

Hanna was confused. His voice didn't sound angry, but that was definitely an insult. “Sorry, I guess I was distracted by the idea of magic.”

“Now, that is an acceptable answer.” Solas smiled for a singular moment. Hanna may have missed it if she wasn’t right in front of him. She cleared her throat and stepped away. She couldn’t help the distinct feeling that Solas was going to get something out of their interaction. Why else would he put himself up for babysitting the crazy fade traveller.

“Thank you for volunteering to do this.” Hanna spoke quietly, “I thought if I were a mage I would just be able to do it. I’m sorry, I’m so inexperienced.”

“Inexperience like ignorance is only temporary. You will be able to learn. Now in the fade you had created that stage and piano. Here, you will find your connection is weaker, however, you can similarly create simple objects and powerful spells.” Solas described the connection and Hanna thought about the feeling of tension snapping a line. She didn’t know if that was how this connection was supposed to feel, but she nodded that she understood the connection.

“So the fade is like, imagination land. You can bring things into this world by pulling them here from the fade through a connection.” Hanna restated in her own words. Solas nodded approvingly.

Solas demonstrated forming a small flame above his hand. “Try picturing a flame. Then move that flame from the image in your mind, through the connection, to your hand. Don’t worry I will help prevent you from burning yourself.”

Hanna closed her eyes and pictured a small flame. How it would look hovering above her hand in a ball. The picture in her mind was clear. She thought about moving the image from her imagination out into the really world. Nothing happened.

“Don’t worry. Relax and you will surprise yourself. The flame will come. Try again.”

Hanna tried the process again. A third time. Frustration hit her like a brick wall. Instead of hovering she pictured the flame engulfing her hand. Maybe it was positioning.

Nope.

Maybe it was the color she was focusing on the red, yellow, and orange too much. She pictured a blue flame.

No go.
Letting out a huff. She thought about lightning, trying to pull it from her imagination.

Nada.

“This isn’t working. Maybe I’m missing a step. Let me talk it through out loud.” Solas nodded again. It felt very patronizing. “Okay, a flame. I can picture the shape of a flame, I can picture the color. I have a fire hovering above my hand in my head. Then, I focus on the thought of it moving. It leaves my imagination, and moves to my hand, I open my eyes and it’s….” Hanna opened her eyes, “Not there, again.”

“Clear your mind of all other thoughts. I want you to think of the last two times you used magic.” Solas’s voice showed no hint of frustration. Hanna didn’t know if that made it better or not. “How does it feel? The magic connecting with you. What do you notice?”

Hanna nodded. “I feel a lot of fear. There is a pull directly to my cheek. Like tension on a string or wire. I don’t even know the string is there until it’s taut. Then it’s pulled, and it snaps. Like surface tension on a bubble. Barely there, gone as quick as it came.”

Solas had obviously not anticipated Hanna struggling with this simple of a concept. “Hmm...perhaps your connection to the fade is tenuous and weak. When your connection is strengthened perhaps through proximity to the rifts, your mind is able to transport you.” Solas continued to consider the implications of this realization.

“So, I’m only a mage when the connection is made.” Hanna acknowledged the theory. The two previous times she had been near a rift. She was afraid to ask “What does that make me when the connection is weak?”

Silence.

“Perhaps with time, you can strengthen your connection. Until then, you will not be able to use or learn to control your magic.”

“What you’re saying is, without the rifts, without the breach, I’m not a mage.”

“Not in the way that you imagined it no. There is more to it than that.”

Hanna considered this. It would be humiliating to have woken up so early. To have moved out of Haven to practice, only to be completely unsuccessful.

“I hope you can acknowledge that this is embarrassing as hell. I feel like I wasted your time.” Hanna admitted apologetically. “What else do I need to learn?”

“You must control your dreaming Hanna. Until this point I have been able to manage the fade for you. However, I will not always be there to protect you. The fade can reveal a great many things. Not all of them positive.”

“So when I’m dreaming here. I’m in the fade. Do people like not mages dream?”

“Not the way you and I do.”

“Not in the fade.”

“Correct.”

Hanna nodded. “So the fade is where these tempting demons are?”
“They are only demons when they are reflecting the negative emotions from you. Spirits have a trait they wish to fulfill. Compassion, Wisdom, Faith. These traits are not positive or negative. A spirit will not be able to tempt you if you are able to resist tempting it.”

“So, does everyone know that? Because that’s not the feeling I got from my judgement...They were talking like some devil was going to come steal my soul or something.” Hanna laughed. “I was preparing my holy water and crucifix. You know ‘The power of Christ compels you!’” Hanna pantomimed the priest from the exorcist. Solas deadpanned.

“I’m starting to think no one will ever laugh at my jokes again. It’s from a movie...which you’ve never seen or heard of so I’ll just shut up.” At that moment, Hanna’s stomach growled in an unseemly way and she blushed an extra shade. She’d left this morning without touching the food Frodin had set out for her. Now that she knew the magic lessons were a bust she was starving.

“We can return to Haven and break fast. Learning about the fade is essential to expediting your understanding of magic when you can use it.” Solas suggested. Hanna looked back to their armored guard. Her name was Lucille or something. She was not a conversationalist. Hanna waved to her.

“Returning already, huh? That was the weakest display of magic I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, thanks. Real confidence booster you are.” Hanna answered. She could handle the heckling normally, but she was truly embarrassed for all the effort others were putting in for nothing. She had always been able to work hard and overcome. It turns out magic isn’t that simple. Inadequacy overwhelmed Hanna. Anxiety hit her for the first time in days. She was out of the frying pan and into the freezer.

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Hanna followed behind Solas, but in front of Lucy. That’s why no one noticed the faint glow until it was too late. Hanna was gone once again. Her body crumpled to the ground this time. She did not return in seconds like the first time. No one inhabited her empty vessel. Solas rushed to heat her body which had rapidly begun to cool as Cassandra had described Mahanon’s doing days ago. Knight-Captain Lucinda hefted Hanna’s dead weight over her shoulder and carried her back to town.

Solas’s rift proximity theory was incorrect. Or something else had strengthened her connection to the fade.

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The snap of connection was so quick to hit Hanna, she didn’t have time to react. She tried to get her bearings faster this time. The blue tint and freeze frame lasted long enough for her to assess that she was not somewhere she wanted to be for long. There was a man in templar armor, but it was modified. Red crystals jutted out in every direction. He was standing with a man in mage robes. The were in a castle of some sort surrounded by more of the red crystals. The crystals reverberated with a cacophony of sound. It was unnerving at a distance. She didn’t want to move closer.

“The Elder One does not accept failure. This armor must be perfected for His generals.” The man in the red crystal armor spoke. “Maddox, the Red Lyrium must enhance the armor for use in combat. Without killing the user.”

“I will continue to research and improve the armor, Samson.” The man in mage robes, Maddox spoke with no intonation. His face held no expression. Worse, a sunburst was burned into his forehead like a scar from a burn. He sounded almost robotic.
Samson turned and left Maddox to his research. Hanna followed Samson like a camera crew on his own reality tv show. When out of earshot of Maddox, Samson spoke solemnly. “I saved you, friend. I’m sorry for what they did to you.” Hanna filed it away in that same list she had ‘inquisition’ and ‘abomination’. Words to ask about later.

Hanna didn’t chance making a noise here. She was afraid of this place. Samson when he left Maddox went out into the courtyard of the castle. Through the fade, Hanna saw that they were not in a castle, but a shrine to a dragon. In the courtyard of the shrine was a camp of templars. These were not the happy go lucky templars she had seen before the conclave explosion. Tainted with red crystals, these men were horrifying to behold. Glowing red eyes haunted her. Large cages held dozens of people, prisoners.

Samson walked nonchalantly as if he were walking through a field of flowers. A man came to report to Samson. “Sir, the excavation of red lyrium from Orlais is ahead of schedule. We will have enough to initiate the next step, with the Lord Seeker’s assistance, in two weeks.”

Samson smiled, but it looked more like a sneer. Half of his face didn’t smile as though he had, had a stroke. “The Elder One will be pleased. The reward will be great. You have all done very well.”

The reporting man bowed with a salute of some sort. His arm came across his chest and he left Samson to evaluate the multitude of pages on his desk. Hanna floated herself over Samson’s shoulder to view the pages.

So many were written in those Greek-like letters. A handful were written with a similar alphabet to english, but the words were unintelligible. Hanna became aware at that moment she was looking at the counterpoint to Cullen. This man was every battle-weary General she had ever met rolled into one. She got the feeling that Samson was a dangerous man and that this vision was dangerous.

She continued to follow Samson. He did not discuss his plans aloud often. Sometimes she would catch a whisper of plans for Val Royeaux. Correspondence sent to a party close to the Queen and Grand Duke, willing to betray them for this Elder One. Askance about the fate of the Grey Wardens. Nothing was discussed at length. Almost everything was written down and then destroyed upon Samson’s reading. It was precisely like he suspected spies. He trusted no one.

Finally at the end of the day, Samson returned to his tent in the courtyard. He entered the tent and retrieved a box with a vial, a dropper, and various measuring implements. Samson carefully measured a dose of blue liquid. Using the dropper he placed the dose under his tongue for quick absorption. His body shook for a moment, but then he was back in control. The effect of the blue liquid was immediate. Where Samson had appeared exhausted upon entering the tent, he was now reinvigorated. Rather than lying down to sleep Samson returned to his desk to continue reviewing correspondence.

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When Hanna felt the pull once again, she finally noted the length of time she had been away from her body. She snapped back into place and found herself staring directly at Solas’s face.

“How long was I down?” She asked nonchalantly. She really didn’t want to share that she had spent most of the day with an evil druggie. Instead, she decided to stall and tell Solas the best story she could make up in that time.

“A few hours, you missed all the normal meal times. Lucinda carried you to my cabin and we have waited to hear where you have been.” He stated pointedly.
“I was enjoying some more time watching Alyiah and company in their journey to end the blight.” She tried not to be obvious with her lie. “She definitely handled the change from Georgia to Thedas better than I have.” Hanna added a smile to sell it. Hanna didn’t feel like smiling. Not only could she not practice magic. Not only could she not control when she went on a surprise fade trip. Not only had she spent the whole day watching Baddie McBadderSamson. She didn’t trust anyone enough to share that information.

Solas looked less than impressed with her lackluster description of her journey. He didn’t question it, but she wasn’t sure that he bought her lie. “Wonderful, well until you have better control of your magic, it may be in your best interest to train for close combat.” He locked eyes with her. “You will not likely ever be able to use magic for combat, but it would be a waste to let your natural talent for physical combat go untapped.”

Hanna shook her head. “I don’t know about that…” She was still physically exhausted from the walk to and from the breach. Her body had barely been able to handle avoiding combat. Her PTSD had made her dissociate completely on the trip down the mountain in chains. Nothing about fighting in Thedas seemed like a good idea for her. “I...Did you say natural talent?” She almost missed the compliment.

“Of course, no pampered nobel child has ever shown so much promise in combat, I’m sure.” It was Hanna’s turn to deadpan. Now she was sure that her skill with magic had disappointed him so much that he was trying to off load her gently. “We will check with the commander in the morning to see if he has a regimen appropriate for you.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see me.”
Training Day

Chapter Notes

Here we go again. I can't wait until Hanna can catch a break in Thedas.

Cullen looked very not entertained. The opposite of entertained in fact. Hanna watched as Solas explained as clearly and plainly as he could. Hanna’s. Situation. Was. Different. She was never going to be a normal mage. She had almost no natural connection to the fade outside of her dreams. She had to train to be something else. Cullen looked like he was waiting for Solas to share the punchline of the joke. Mostly so that he could punch Solas for telling the joke. Not that he had anything against the apostate mage. He just did not want this spoiled not completely mundane woman on his list of shit to deal with today.

Maybe Hanna was projecting her emotions onto Cullen. She honestly didn’t want much to do with either man. She was tired. She wasn’t up for any of this. There were reasons that she was no longer in the army. Hanna knew both that she couldn’t hack it and that she would push herself beyond what her body could do. It was in her nature to meet goals. Exceed them. She stared pointedly away from Solas at the shiny plating on Cullen’s shin guards.

After explaining his piece, Solas explained to Hanna that he would come back around to collect her and instruct her more on the fade. When Solas left, Hanna looked up to Cullen’s face, which was a mistake. His amber eyes sent her back to Samson’s red glowing hellscape. She wondered if that had happened in the past, present, or future. Hanna desperately hoped she would never meet the object of her newfound fear. When Cullen spoke to her, she startled.

“I hope you are ready for this. I will not tolerate you causing tension in the ranks...” Suddenly, Hanna felt nothing but pure ire for the man. She hadn’t even had the chance to fuck up and he was already giving her the ‘you better keep up, maggot’ she hadn’t heard that speech since basic. Shoving that ‘holier than thou’ attitude right up Cullen’s ass became her new mission. Priority objective #1.

She wondered if he knew what shit list meant.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Cullen asked and broke her train of thought. Hanna seriously considered punching him. What an entrance. She’d probably end up back in the brig.

Not.

Worth.

It.

“Like what?” Hanna looked around to make sure he was talking to her and not someone else.

“Like I murdered your family and ate your dog for dinner.” Now, Hanna looked at him with an entirely different expression. Apparently Cullen read Hanna’s shock as fear. “Look, I know we haven’t started on the best of terms, but if I’m going to train you, I don’t want you to be terrified of
me.” Hanna felt so many mixed signals at the moment she couldn’t speak. Just gape wide mouthed at this man’s failure to get on with it.

She wanted to say ‘If you’re going to train me, that is exactly what you should want.’ Instead her brain muddled through her thoughts and produced the opposite of that.

Namely:

“I’... I’m not terrified of you, Commander.” She stuttered. Hanna had been lots of things. Stuttering and shivering with fear was not one of them. She would admit it. Cullen stood at least another head larger than her. His armor was intimidating, and his sword was not there for show. But Hanna had been in the military and she couldn’t be afraid of a man because he was physically intimidating. She would have shit her pants and washed out a long time ago. Time to put on the big girl britches and get going.

If she wasn’t intimidated by his physique something was surely getting her goat. Her heart was beating quickly. She felt a flush in her cheeks. Butterflies were rushing in her stomach. Maybe she was afraid of him. She couldn’t remember the last time a person made her feel so unsteady.

After silence had hung for far too long, Cullen shifted and spoke again. “Alright then,” He did nothing to hide the edge to his voice. “Have you used a weapon before, recruit?”

Hanna looked at him incredulously.

She was offended on several levels. First, of all, recruit? RECRUIT?! This was not her choice. She understood him not using her given name. Protocol probably prevented it. But, recruit? Fuck that. Second of all, she had used daggers and bow up the mountain. She wasn’t trained well in their specific use, but she did well enough that she didn’t die. Hanna felt a fury she hadn’t felt in a long time.

“I am a retired Lieutenant of the United States Army Special Forces. Not a distinction given lightly. I served in the military for 13 years, sir. I’ve used many,” Her words had the exact bite she was hoping for, “many weapons.”

She hoped she came off as intimidating. The logical voice in her mind told her that she had been in and out of a prison without a reliable source of food or water for much of the last week. She was about as intimidating as a wet puppy. Probably smelled as nice too.

Cullen didn’t really acknowledge her statement in a positive or negative way. He relaxed. He smiled. Her heart froze. Nothing good ever came out of a smile like that.

“Good, we’ll start when you get back from your run. Around the frozen lake. Twice. Follow the path. Don’t slow down.” He looked at her for a moment then waved her off. He didn’t wait until she started off to turn his back. He wasn’t going to watch to make sure she didn’t cheat. What a dick. How was she supposed to make him eat his words when he didn’t even watch her work.

Hanna had two things going for her:

1. she learned her lesson the day before and ate a solid breakfast courtesy of her favorite dwarf.
2. She knew how to run, well.

She wasn’t really sure that she could run the whole time, but she was going to give it her damnedest. The last time she’d gone for a run had been during physical therapy. When she still thought she could recover and return to her unit. That had been at least six months ago. She was still sore from all the abuse she had handled in her first few days in Haven. The morning was frigid and the air caught
in her lungs just standing still.

Hanna decided not to count the things that weren’t going for her.

Hanna followed the makeshift path, that told her running was a staple routine in the military here. Rocks had been spread and the ice and snow was full of muddy footprints. Large muddy footprints. Mostly men in Cullen’s army. No one else was on the course, which told her that the others had likely already run the circuit by the time she and Solas approached Cullen that morning.

Hanna felt a burst of pride as she passed Cullen’s tent the first time. She had kept a steady pace around the track. It was nearly a mile long if she could guess accurately. The two mile run was a staple of Army training. She wondered what other similarities she would notice through her training with Cullen.

Hanna didn’t expect to be joined on her second loop. Lucinda, the templar sent to watch her had stripped out of the bulky enchanted armor from the day before. In leather similar to Hanna, she kept pace.

“The Commander said your were slowing down. Wanted me to make sure you pushed yourself.”

“Lucy, how ‘bout you eat my dust.” Hanna knew she shouldn’t push herself to race the last stretch. She should be proud to have kept pace for two miles. She should be able to ignore Cullen’s stupid obvious ploy to stir her up. She should have ignored Lucy for the second half of her circuit. Build up to somewhat normal slowly. But Hanna was never one to turn down a challenge. She was going to break a land speed record or die trying.

Running was one thing, sprinting another. Sprinting was not Hanna’s strong suit. Her body was built for endurance not speed. She felt her knees grinding with her too heavy steps. Her stride and rotation were longer than before, but it came at the cost of her regular breathing.

She couldn’t imagine keeping this pace the last 400 meters. That was until she saw Cullen back in front of his tent. Leaning against the front tent post with his eyes closed. Why was she pushing herself to the brink, if he wasn’t even going to watch?

A sound of rage left her, and her exhaustion was no more. She felt her blood in her ears. The logical voice saying to slow down and finish normally was drowned by the sound of her heart beating like a war drum. Beating to the sound of Commander Cullen eating shit.

Since when had she been this impulsive?

Damning the consequences, she left the rocky running track. Her breathing was a growl low in her throat. Using her momentum, Hanna launched into a flying leap and tackled the Commander.

The resulting tumble was so perfect she wished she could have caught it on camera. Their combined weight on the tent post snapped it in three launching a skewer of wood into the practice fields occupied by various training recruits and bounced off of a man with a pointy metal helmet. The man turned around immediately and ran to the commotion in the commander’s collapsed tent.

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The tent post coming down caused a chain reaction that ended in the tent canvas coming down around them. Cullen was stunned and surprised until they hit the ground and he clocked his flying, spitting mad attacker in the face. In the resulting chaos he couldn’t know for sure who had attacked him, but whoever it was reeled from the hit.

Who was he kidding? He knew it was Hanna. He wasn’t sure what had spurred his sudden quest to
get under her skin. At first, he was just less than enthused to have another green recruit. When he saw the fire in her eyes in response to his ‘don’t screw up, recruit’ speech, Cullen knew he had to pick at her until she broke down. Otherwise, she would just end up starting a fistfight with another greenhorn.

He attempted to use Hanna’s surprise to push her off, but she was quicker than he anticipated. She slammed an elbow into his chest causing the air to exit his lungs. Following through with the movement and making for a well executed combo, his throat was restrained by an arm pressing heavily down and in to restrict airflow. Before the attacker’s next move, a pair of arms came around her waist and pulled her away kicking and screaming.

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Hanna didn’t know what had come over her. In the heat of the moment, and the unexpected chain reaction, Cullen had punched her solidly in the face with his metal glaive. Spurred on by pain and second nature instinct, she had moved to end the fight. Using all of her body weight and momentum from reeling away from the hit, she came down with her elbows on his chest. His armor deflected most of her blow, but her intention was to put weight on his solar plexus and his armor was only helpful to that aim. His breath came in a ragged gasp and she followed the movement to place her arm on top of his throat. His hands came to her waist to push her off. She was already moving to snap his neck when an unknown observer pulled her off of him.

It was then she realized her nose was bleeding profusely and was probably broken. She stopped fighting the man who pulled her off of Cullen. When the arms around her relaxed she twisted artfully from his grip. With the motion she pushed him away and jumped back to put more distance between them. She knew she looked feral. Blood had spread across her face and into her hair. Her leather armor was covered. She spat what blood had flowed into her mouth. Lucinda had finished her circuit and approached the scene with mild confusion.

The man who had pulled her off the commander had returned to Cullen to fish him out of the canvas. Cullen stood up and brushed the snow and dirt off his armor. He didn’t look as angry as Hanna had anticipated.

“You fight pretty well.”

“Ser are you alright? What should we do?”

“Rylen retrieve a practice sword and shield. We have a new recruit.”

If looks could kill, Cullen would be vapor. He had intentionally pissed her off. “Fuck you too.” Hanna’s voice was nasally and she pinched her nose to staunch the bleeding.

“I can help you reset your nose and give you a potion to help it heal, but I’m not going to approach you unless you promise to teach me how you did that.” Cullen offered without the slightest hint of an apology. How she did what? Tackled him like he said something about her mother in a bar brawl. Shame colored her cheeks as much as exertion.

Hanna put down her arms. She hadn’t even realized her defensive stance. She wondered how much of her training was now hard wired into her brain. “Only if you stop calling me a recruit. I’m about as fucking happy to be here as you are to train me. Commander.”

Cullen approached still wary of her. As she had just run tackled him, she couldn’t blame him. He reset her nose crudely. It could be done better later she supposed. He used one hand and steadied her with the other and realigned the cartilage and bone. He smelled like sandalwood and leather and
polish. She thought it must be the blood loss because she felt a little light headed until he stepped away. He handed her a vial of red liquid with a thick consistency. She swallowed like a champ though the medicinal taste was repulsive.

“About as good as a home cooked meal right?”

“Maybe if your mom is cooking.”

“I was trying to provoke you. I didn’t know you were so vindictive.” He laughed and clapped her on the shoulder again. “Next time I won’t go so easy on you though.”

“You better hope their isn’t a next time. I would have killed you if your man hadn’t pulled me off. We don’t play fight where I come from.”

“My man? Oh Knight Captain Rylen.” Rylen had just approached the pair with a wooden practice sword and shield.

“Ser.” Rylen saluted. Like the man had saluted Samson the day before. Hanna shuddered.

“That healing potions smarts almost as much as the wound.” Cullen said misinterpreting her once again. Rylen snorted. He had tattoos all over his face. Hanna wanted to know what had spurred that decision, but it didn’t seem like the time to ask. Rylen handed her the equipment unceremoniously.

Hanna hefted the sword easily enough, but maintaining a handle on the shield was difficult. The weapon and accessory, even the fake equipment was too much for her to handle. She lost her balance quickly and used the small shield to steady her.

She had lost a lot of muscle in her core from infection due to her wounds from the mortar blast. Literally had muscle removed. Modern medicine allowed some of it to grow back. Luckily, it was enough that she could move somewhat normally with PT. What remained limited her to being unable to lift, run, and move the way she had before.

It was largely the reason that she was not physically cleared for return to active duty. If she had been physically able, everyone would have looked the other way about the obvious signs of PTSD. Since she was not physically able to perform, she was branded with R&R. Rest & Resign from active duty. One does not simply recover from a label like PTSD.

Rylen looked from the Commander then back to Hanna. “Sure that she’s one for a sword and shield, Ser?”

“Let’s see what she can do. She says she’s special forces.” Cullen nodded for Rylen to demonstrate the fundamentals of using the sword. It reminded Hanna of watching fencing in the olympics. Now she regretted switching the channel to watch swimming instead. When was she supposed to announce touche? Before or after she made a damn fool of herself?

She dropped the shield and mimicked each fundamental position. She understood from previous training to angle her body directionally to form a stronger base. Wide stance either side to side or front to back. When Rylen asked her to come at him so he could demonstrate a parry, Hanna was still struggling with the heft of the sword alone. She wanted to used both hands for what was apparently meant to be a single handed sword.

She flexed. It was enough for Hanna to swing a single time. Rylen met her swing and resisted it easily. His swing unseated her from her stance and he swung through in a way that would surely have skewered her. She turned the ‘blade’ more slowly than she wanted to. She was able to parry his swing with a hairsbreadth of time. She returned to her stance naturally with the movement and
swung again with more confidence. Rylen’s parry didn’t unseat her this time. She was able to control the swing of the sword using her other hand on the blade. Her quicker turn around surprised Rylen and he was unable to parry her recovery swing. The wood made contact with Rylen’s side just below his ribs. Rylen backed off.

“If you grip your blade like that, you’ll lose a hand.” He corrected with concern.

Hanna shrugged, “I’d love to walk around here like Luke Skywalker.”

Once again her pop culture reference fell flat.

Imagine that.

Rylen was quick to disregard her. He didn’t even ask ‘Who?’ Hanna admired his restraint.

“Your instincts are good, but I don’t think the sword and shield is for you.”

“Tell fluffy shoulders, again. I’m sure he’ll change his mind if you tell him twice.” That got a solid laugh. Hanna guessed she wasn’t the only one to question the furry mantle on Cullen’s shoulders.

“I’m sure the commander will appreciate your nickname for him. Varric calls him Curly, and it really gets to him. Probably won’t change his mind for your training though.”

Hanna liked Rylen. He reminded her of Sgt. Mark Wallis’s quick wit. She missed “Q-tip.” He always laughed at her jokes. Dry humor and sarcasm went a long way in Hanna’s book. She filed Rylen under could-be-friends. Rylen ran her through the fundamental positions one last time before pairing her with a sparring opponent.

The boy looked terrified. Hanna supposed she had a reputation at this point. Between stealing the “Herald’s” soul and tackling the Commander, who wouldn’t be terrified. He was a farm kid with a stocky build from chores. He was not used to the pervasive cold. She didn’t know his name.

“Hey kid, I’m Hanna, thanks for sparring with me.” She gave her the most genuine smile she could. “Promise to take it easy on me? It is my first day with a sword.” The kid smiled, but didn’t respond in kind. Rylen stood on one side of the training group, Cullen on the other. Rylen shouted out an exercise, had more experienced trainees demonstrate, then each pair was expected to practice.

It was a pattern. It was simple. Cullen and Rylen shouted tips as they worked. The kid didn’t get it. He was too much power and too little finesse. Hanna was struggling to hold up the practice sword after about an hour. With fatigue came inattention, Hanna dropped her sword. Her hand erupted in a bright flash of pain, the kid had struck out at her and in her attempt to deflect she estimated incorrectly and ended up blocking with the hilt of her sword. The echo of the hit flew lightning hot from her fingers to her toes and she hit the ground with a grunt. The kid was in the pattern of the exercise and rebounded for the next parry. Only her face was where her sword was supposed to be to block. His expression was one of regret as their eyes met seconds before the wooden sword cracked against Hanna’s face.

“Shit.”

Hanna would have internally judged herself for her choice of last word, but she was too shocked to think. Her mind was completely blank. She was on her back staring at the sky. She was vaguely aware that her face was wet and warm. Everything was very bright and hazy.

Her brain was trying to compensate for the lapse in time between realities. Pre-trauma and post-trauma. Hanna couldn’t remember what she was doing before she was staring at the sun on her back
in the snow. She probably had a concussion.

“Jack, I think we should go to the hospital.” She thought out loud. Something about the statement made her sad. She heard a gasp from somewhere near her.

“She knows my name, does that mean she’ll take me like the Herald?” The voice was petrified and high-pitched. Not Jack’s voice. It was kind of funny. She wasn’t taking anyone anywhere like this.

“Someone bring the surgeon and Solas.” ‘Surgeon?’ ‘Solas?’ The voice was familiar. Like family. Like John’s voice. Maybe she was playing football with her family and she got caught in the face with a ball from her brother’s rocket arm?

“John, I don’t need a surgeon. It’s a concussion. I’ll be better in a little bit.” She laughed, but her face hurt and she winced. “No more football for me. I’m pretty sure this isn’t what they meant when they said rest and recovery.” Hanna tried to sit up, but a hand pressed her back down.

“Don’t move.” A warm voice spoke. Her heart raced. She smelled sandalwood and leather. She felt butterflies. She wasn’t with her family.

“Where’s Jack? Where’s John?” She finally looked down and saw warm amber eyes. “Mom?” Hanna tried to sit up again more forcefully. She succeeded to sit up only to fall back again dizzy.

“I told you not to move.”

Hanna hit panic mode. She wasn’t playing football with her family. She was with a strange man and a concussion. She was afraid to ask. “Who are you?”

“I’m Commander Cullen of the Inquisition.” He said with the utmost sincerity and Hanna wanted to laugh again.

“Well, I guess it’s true what they say about the Inquisition.”

Cullen looked at her questioningly. “What’s that?”

Hanna’s eyes rolled. “No one expects it.” This time she did laugh much to her own chagrin.

Solas arrived shortly thereafter and took her face in his hands. She asked him who he was too. He looked upset. Hanna felt bad that she didn’t recognize him. “Do you know where my fiance is? He’s probably pretty worried. Wait! What’s today?! Oh, shit the wedding.”

“The year is 9:41 Dragon and it’s the 4th day of Guardian.” Cullen spoke from behind Solas.

“What kind of date is that? I’m getting married in October.” Solas chose that time to heal and seal the cuts and bruises that had become her left cheek. The magic felt warm. “What the...What are you doing?” Light was accompanying the warm feeling. His hands were glowing. Hanna’s eyes flashed with fear and panic. She half scooted half crab-walked away from Solas.

The events of the past week came to her all at once. She sat up and saw all the eyes staring at her. “No...no, nonononono. This isn’t real. This can’t be real.” She stood up shakily. She looked at Cullen, at Solas, at Rylen. All three looked afraid. Like she was crazy. Unpredictable

“Jesus save me. This isn’t real. This is just a hallucination.” Her right hand, most likely broken, fell limply to her side. She closed her eyes and wished that she was home. Opening her eyes, she let out a gust of a breath. “Oh, God. It’s not a hallucination.”
Finally, her eyes fell to Jack. The kid had one hell of an up swing. His eyes were bloodshot with fear. He looked like he had smacked the devil. She took a few steps toward him with open arms. “Look kid, I think we both need a drink. I’m going to go get cleaned up and I’ll meet you at the tavern later.” She skirted around the gathering of people and ran to the gates of Haven. Looking forward to some R&R with Frodin.
Cullen stared at his bed. It was time for one of his scheduled naps. He knew better than to think he would ever sleep through a night ever again. He preplanned with his Lieutenants to have coverage during these times. He needed to sleep, but he couldn’t get a certain clusterfuck causing, ball of hellfire, infuriating woman out of his head. He was worried. About her. No. For her well being as it relates to the good of the Inquisition. Yes that was a worthy excuse.

Maybe he had been too hard on her. She definitely wasn’t going to use a sword and shield on the battlefield. Why did he insist she use it?

He had to admit it was funny to watch her swing a sword. Like she’d never done it in her life. Yet she said she was in the military. What kind of military didn’t at least train in the basics of swordplay. Even an archer needs to know how to swing a sword. Cullen traced the bruise on his neck from her choke hold on him.

Maybe she was a fighter of some sort.

He sighed. Tracing the bruise made him think of the fight. She was less than half his size, in light armor, and she somehow managed to throw him to the ground, straddle and bruise him. The way she slammed on his chest with hands together was genius. How she knew where to hit him to make him gasp for air, he wasn’t sure. He was dying to spar with her when she was through the initial training.

Poor Jack, he thought he’d killed her from the look on his face when she hit the snow. He turned ashen when she called his name.

Maker save him. Cullen had noticed her getting less and less proficient at blocking on her left side. If he’d known it would end in that flagrant display, he would have sent her away to Solas early. Not that he trusted the apostate and his “fade lessons”. Yet another thing for Cullen to keep an eye on. If he’d known that this would be part of his job he might have turned Cassandra down.

Leliana and Josephine were still deciding the best course of action when discussing Hanna’s point of origin. Whether her home was indeed a separate world like she claimed notwithstanding, Hanna was not the type to slide neatly into the ranks. Her marked cheek, the rumors of her possession, and strange demeanor meant that she stood out like a sore thumb.

Leliana favored a similar story to that of the Hero of Fereldan. That Hanna had traveled here from a land across the Amaranthine Ocean. That boats have never been able to make the trip didn’t seem to factor in Alyiah’s story. No one really questioned a grey warden’s roots. Sadly, the grey wardens hadn’t been heard from in quite some time much to Leliana’s dismay. It would have been easier to make Hanna their problem.

Josephine thought that it may be better to allay concerns by concocting a false origin using connections she has in Antiva. Not that Hanna looked Antivan in the slightest. Not that she looked Fereldan either.

Either way she was dazed enough that they could pass it off as disorientation from the blow to the head. Cullen thought about enforcing recruits wearing helmets during practice. He joted the note
quickly before removing his armor and laying in his cot.

He tried to close his eyes and let the gentle sway of the cot whisk him away. Then he thought of Hanna’s last words as she left the training field. She was planning to go out drinking. With the men. With her strange manner of speech. And her head wound.

She was going to make a damn mess.

Cullen didn’t want to wait to hear about it in the morning. Better to make sure nothing happened.

Cullen sighed once more as he dressed in plain clothes to go to the tavern. He would just go long enough to make sure she didn’t get piss drunk and go on a tirade about satellites.

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Hanna gave Frodin’s note to Flissa. From what he told her, it was like a tab. Hanna was surprised to have Frodin’s blessing to go drinking. She would have thought that it was unbecoming of ‘a woman of her birth’. Frodin was still convinced that some surly lord was going to come to Haven looking for his long lost daughter. Well, he told her he believed her story, but Hanna knew better than to think he was helping her out of the goodness of his heart.

Which would have been pretty sweet.

First things first, she bought Jack a drink. The kid looked maybe 18. She wondered if he could hold his liquor. Hanna looked down at herself, she wondered if she could hold hers. She’d never been one to get drunk. Maybe when she was enlisted, but once she was commissioned she never drank with her unit. No one want’s to drink with their CO.

Maryden, the bard they called her, sang slow songs about Enchanters and Wardens. It was not a normal thing. Who wanted a slow song at the beginning of a night of drinking? Not Hanna. She swallowed down three mugs of what counts for liquid courage in Thedas.

“Mary, let me show these guys a song from where I come from.”

****

When Cullen entered The Singing Maiden, Hanna was nowhere in sight. Well, not at first glance through the booths and tables. Because the strange woman was rummaging behind the bar.

She came up with two glasses and clattered them on the table as if practicing something. She selected the taller of the glasses and started clapping, skidding and knocking out a rhythm on the table with her hands and the cup.

All eyes were on the mysterious woman and all movement ceased. When she was sure of her rhythm, Hanna started singing.

“I got my ticket for the long way ‘round
Two bottle ’a whiskey for the way”

Hanna’s eyes were closed in concentration until she sang and looked out at the patrons of the bar. Cullen was surprised when she made direct eye contact with him. She looked at him pointedly then raised an eyebrow. Clearly, she didn’t expect him to be there. He saw the startled look cross her features again. The one that said that she was afraid of him. Just short of a look of panic. It was gone in a blink and the song continued.
“It’s got mountains, It’s got rivers,
It’s got sights to give you shivers,
But it just might be prettier with you.”

Then just as suddenly a determined look. A challenge. You’re going to miss me when I’m gone. Was she sending him a message or was it just a song? Cullen cleared his throat uncomfortable with the sudden shift in the room. The atmosphere was lighter. A tinge of magic was in the air. He shook his head. No one used magic to sing. It must just be remnants of magic used by the few mages who lived in Haven.

Hanna finished her song to much applause. Flissa clapped her on the back and handed her a celebratory ale. Hanna nodded to Maryden who jumped up to sing in the renewed vigor of the patrons. With her performance over, Hanna walked over to the group of soldiers in the center of the tavern. There were cheers at the table as she sat down. She settled in for a conversation as another soldier told her about the morning's events.

Cullen sat at the nearest available seat. It just so happened to be beside Rylen.

“That one is full of surprises.”

Cullen snorted in reply.

“Who knew she was a bard. Pretty, fiery, strong and a voice like Andraste. Bet she trained in Orlais.” Rylen waggled his eyebrows applying a second meaning to his words.

“Evidently, she trained in New York. Not that I know what happened to old York.” Cullen gave Rylen a side eye over the mug Flissa had kindly slid to him. He tried to focus on eavesdropping on Hanna’s conversation. “If you’re so taken with her why don’t you ask her to dance.”

Rylen nearly sprayed his drink across the table. He held his fist in front of his mouth to quell the laughing fit. “She’s about as interested in me as...”

“A rabbit.” Both men turned as she finished Rylen’s sentence. “Hello, Rylen and Commander.” Cullen tried not to envy the casual way Hanna called on Rylen. Her eyes got hard when she said his title. Cullen regretted the title.

Hanna plopped her chair in between them. Cheery. She was a bright cheery tipsy woman. “So do you two get together to discuss all the crazy women or am I special?”

“What’s a rabbit?”

“Oh, Hell No. You can’t tell me you don’t have rabbits. Fierce, pointy-teeth, fluffy, small. Hop around like this.” Hanna put her hands up together and sucked out her front teeth like a nug.

“Oh, a nug!” Hanna shrugged and nodded. “Wait, you think of me like a nug? Ugh” Rylen turned and gagged.

“Maybe it’s not the same.” She laughed. “Cute, but ultimately better as a friend is what I meant.” Hanna smiled brightly and put an arm behind Rylen’s shoulder. “Besides, I’m spoken for...” Her eyes got a wistful look and she drifted away to a sad place. “If I ever get to go home.”

The sudden change in mood was jarring to Cullen. Where was this woman’s restraint? Did she always wear her emotions on her sleeves? Cullen was speechless. What could he say to that? Before
“Hanna Sing!” Repeated over and over. Hanna pushed her head down onto the table. She tried to melt into the wood. It was not effective. Some one pulled her up on her feet and she shook her head no.

“Guys it’s really flattering and all, but I can’t just make up a song.” Her words went unheard in the uproar. Cullen watched the crowd buffet her to the front. She was protesting, but also drunk and having trouble pushing back. Finally, Cullen stood.

“Enough!” He spoke in his Commander voice. Swiftly he ushered Hanna out of the crowded building and into the brisk night air. Tears were in her eyes, but Hanna was not behind them. She was in shock. All that she had done today and it was now that she was in shock.

Cullen placed a soothing hand on her back and she tensed. Hanna wiped the tears from her eyes and met his eyes. “I’m sorry. I...Thank you for stepping in.” Cullen tried to look comforting, open to conversation. Hanna backed away a few steps and started walking home.

“I think, I had enough for tonight.” She bowed deeply. “Thank you for your help. I can make it home on my own.” She turned and ran from him. Cullen waited a few seconds then followed to make sure Hanna would truly make it home safely.

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Hanna was blushing so red she was sure she could compete with beets. Cullen had saved her. He had the most infuriating look on his face. Like he was glad to have saved her. As if, he probably thought it was a chore. Protecting the image of the Inquisition. Yet, still she was grateful.

Cullen had saved her from an undoubtedly drunken rendition of some song that wouldn’t translate as well to Thedas as the cup song. Hanna had never been one for stage fright. For a moment, she froze trying to think of a song to sing. In that moment the Commander, sacrificing his ability to drink with his men no doubt, had her out of the building before she could blink.

She turned and ran before she could put much thought into it. Hanna noticed that his hand was warm on her shoulder. Her heart was enjoying it too much.

‘You’re supposed to be getting married. Not galavanting about with some fairy tale knight.’ She chided herself. How quickly Hanna’s heart was trying to move on to a handsome, knight in literal shining armor. When had she agreed to let her brain call him handsome? Her heart and brain were now working double time against her. Cullen made her nervous, off balance. Those were nerves in her stomach not butterflies.

Oh no, she would not say that she thought he was handsome.

It’s too cliche, he’s not chivalrous.

At least out loud, she wouldn’t admit she could fall for him.
Of course, The Cup Song (When I'm Gone) is not mine. I just think it would translate well enough to Thedas.
Also, Cullen and Hanna have both noticed that the other is attractive, but they both refuse to admit it out loud. How peculiar.
For two weeks, Hanna trained with the inquisition army and drank with the men. Every night Cullen would come to the tavern. Every night she was personally escorted home. Well, by that, Cullen would follow from a safe distance thinking Hanna didn’t see him. Every night Frodin glanced out the door and told her that Cullen was just up the path. The kind dwarf was curious as to her avoidance of the Commander, but never asked.

Hanna refused to speak at length with the Commander. Always a one word answer followed by his title. Titles provided distance. She needed distance. Thinking of Jack provided distance. She couldn’t like someone else. But thinking of Jack made her queasy. It was becoming more and more apparent that she was not going home. At least, not anytime soon.

If all else failed, she remembered that Jack lost his job for fraternizing. With her. She didn’t know the rules of fraternizing in Thedas, but she imagined it must exist. Especially, obviously for Cullen. The Commander stood alone amongst the men. He slept alone in a tent. He made keeping distance easy.

For some reason, that made him all the more endearing. Ugh.

For two weeks, Hanna wondered what had happened to Mahanon. She wished she could read the correspondence than came in on Leliana’s ravens to get an update. She was too embarrassed to ask for lessons from anyone. How could the system of writing be so foreign when everyone spoke like her...well, mostly.

Leliana and Josephine had come to an agreement. She was a ward to some noble in a country called the Free Marches. Lord, or Bann Trevelyan agreed to pretend like she had lived with him in the city of Ostwick as his sort of adopted daughter. Hanna didn’t really understand what they meant by ward. Like her parents dumped her on another lord. How could they just reinvent her? Did no one go to Bann Trevelyan’s house and see that she obviously didn’t live there?

Her protest went unanswered. It made her eccentricities easier to explain away. Her past before living with the Bann was unimportant. Cullen seemed to agree that it gave her reason for being at the Conclave as the Trevelyans had sent an envoy. Of the retainers of Bann Trevelyan’s son Leon, one had survived. Any questions could be dodged simply. She would say that it brought too much pain to think about Ostwick because of Leon’s passing.

Frustratingly, it made it sound like she had a relationship with the Bann’s son. Which was exactly the kind of gossip that distracted the lay folk. It also made people refer to her like some unwitting widow.

In her position, was she an unwitting widow? Never to see her true love again. Ugh

Bann Trevelyan, sent a notice to his remaining retainer that she was to be protected. Hanna considered what information “The Nightingale” had that would convince the man. What trade deals were offered to soften the blow? What was expected from her in return for this expense?

This Lord had never met her, yet now the man forced another dude to swear fealty to her. Poor guy.
Bartolomé Harvath was an old batty man with an unidentifiable accent like Cassandra. Slavic? Germanic? This place was confusing. He had joined the Inquisition forces in the aftermath of the explosion that killed Bann Trevelyan’s son. Hanna with her penchant for nicknames called him Barty to his never ending disgust.

Bart gave Hanna additional personal lessons on the handling of a sword. He gave up, but not before sighing in disgust. The change to dual wielded daggers for close combat and bows for distance was welcome. Hanna made progress significantly faster now that she wasn’t being nailed to the floor with heavy equipment.

For two weeks, Solas taught her about the Fade and the wonders and dangers therein. She began to understand how strange her connection to the fade was and why mages were considered dangerous. He taught her about the elves of old. Hanna enjoyed listening to the elf talk. He spoke like a college professor and if she timed it just right she could fall asleep and take a nap at the end of a lesson and Solas would let her sleep.

Not that everything was rosy between them. Solas still grated on her low key. Hanna couldn’t put her finger on it, but something about the elf oozed manipulation. She felt the cruelty of the black and white way he saw the world. He was about as enthused by non-mages as Cullen was about real mages. Why couldn’t everyone just get along?

For two weeks, Hanna had no surprise fade trips. She did notice a feeling when she sang at the tavern. It was like she was in the fade, floaty and light. When she sang, her connection to the fade grew stronger. Hanna wasn’t too stupid to notice. She imagined that others were beginning to notice as well. Hanna stopped singing at the tavern.

Two weeks.

Then Mahanon came back. Bells were ringing. People came running to the center of town. Shouting, he’s back from Val Royeaux. How come everyone else seemed to know about his travels? Added to the questions for someone at another time.

The team dismounted and headed into the Chantry. Hanna followed and was not stopped until she reached the War Room. Outside the war room was a convention of new faces. One stone faced haggard man with a beard to make the Brawny Man jealous. One tall slender woman carrying a mage’s staff and a whole lotta superiority. One glib woman with a terrible haircut and the grin from a kid in a Kraft cheese commercial. All stood in a semi-circle around Varric. He stopped mid sentence to greet her.

“Sunshine! Don’t you look refreshed. Healthy even.” Hanna realized in that one sentence that she hadn’t truly smiled since Varric left. She hadn’t smiled this wide in almost a month. It was terribly un-American. What would her father’s mother say?

“Varric, I see that the wilderness didn’t treat you half as nice? What happened to your chest hair? It seems to have gone flat.” Varric waved off her comment with a chuckle.

“Quite” The slender mage spoke. She had an air of “Bitch, Better Have My Money” Rihanna, but seemed unsure of how to approach Hanna. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Imperial Court. I’m afraid I was unaware of visitors to the Inquisition from an Arling?” She looked Hanna up and down. Suddenly, she felt like she didn’t belong here.

It was time to formally introduce herself to a really intimidating presence. “I am Hanna Cooper, formerly of New York. More recently Ostwick where I stayed with Bann Trevely an as his ward.”
Hanna tried to sell the lie, but it felt stale to her own ears. She would have to continue working with Leliana and Josephine to make it sound authentic.

“Charming dear, but when you lie make sure that you believe it yourself.” Vivienne intoned. Of course, she caught the lie. “Of course, that is of no matter to me. Please, excuse me.” The woman left the gathering to stand with some chantry sisters in the far left corner of the Chantry.

Hanna turned red. She failed again.

“Don’t worry. She does everyone that way. I’m a Grey Warden. Blackwall’s the name.” Hanna recovered quickly and gazed to Blackwall in awe. She remembered the story Frodin told her her first night here. Alyiah was a Grey Warden. Alyiah was from Georgia.

“Grey Warden. Like fighting undead dragons and darkspawn Grey Warden.”

“One in the same.” He laughed and sounded vaguely like a Santa Claus.

“Wow, I heard all of you had disappeared.”

“That’s why I’m here.” He got a far away look in his eyes. Hanna felt bad that she had brought up the obvious. No shit he didn’t want to hear about how all of his brothers and sisters-in-arms disappeared. Suddenly, Blackwall looked like a sad puppy and it was all Hanna’s fault.

“You know, bearded people are supposed to be jolly.” Hanna eyes met the brightly dressed woman with the terrible haircut. That voice was not meant to come out of that face. “Cause if not I’ll yank it.”

That’s better Hanna thought.

“Please don’t.”

“Who’re you supposed to be?” Hanna interrupted what promised to be a violently hilarious beard yanking. Sera turned to Hanna and sized her up.

“Whole world’s gone to shite and you’re waiting to know my name. Sad, innit? Don’t you have better things to worry about. Miss Lordy. M’name’s Sera.”

“I’m not a Lord Sera.”

“Well you only lack the dangly bits.”

“I suppose I never thought of it that way.” Hanna looked for an escape from this conversation. Varric seemed very entertained. He gave her a look of ‘you got yourself into another mess’.

The door opened behind Varric to reveal a very upset Mahanon followed by a chantry mother if Josie’s basic lessons had taught her anything.

“We only think that you must choose wisely, Herald. Give yourself time to know which decision will suit the inquisition best. Ask for counsel from your advisors. Don’t be so brash.” A thick French accent cluttered the woman’s words.

“Hey, Mahanon.” Hanna wasn’t able to finish her sentence before Mahanon grabbed her hand and led her through Haven and out the front gates. He gently dropped her hand well into the surrounding forest and spoke.

“Let’s walk.” An oppressive silence fell over the pair as they trudged through the fresh snow.
Minutes passed and Mahanon kept a swift pace. Hanna’s insides burned. It was the late afternoon when Mahanon’s group arrived, so she had already trained with Cullen and crew and with Barty who made an extra cruel regimen as retribution for his nickname.

“Mahanon, slow down. Let’s talk about this.” They were far into the woods. Halfway up a mountain if Hanna had her directions straight. She was worried if they went much further, they wouldn’t be able to find their way back.

“NO!” He yelled startling birds in all directions. Hanna glanced up the mountain for signs of an avalanche. They would be buried in snow if he kept shouting. She had to settle him down. Why did he choose her for the suicidal mountain shouting conversation? She wanted to have one of these conversations in a jacuzzi or on a warm beach instead.

“The side of a mountain is not the greatest for this kind of thing.” She placed a hand on his shoulder gently. Hanna rubbed soothing circles on Mahanon’s back and shoulder. At first he stiffened under her hands, but soon her relaxed and met her eyes. “It’s okay, if you don’t want to tell me, but less yelling okay?”

I don’t want to die she added in her head. He must have started talking while she was thinking, because she missed what he said at first. She had to ask him to repeat himself.

Focus, Hanna. Calm him down then worry about dying.

“You’re away from home right?” He asked with hope in his green eyes. They were close. He smelled like horse shit, dried blood, and leather oil. Hanna had long gotten over the fact that everything in Thedas was about as enjoyable to smell+ as an old person fart.

“Far, Far away.” She glanced away to hide the tears that came with admission. “So far, I don’t know if I will ever get to go back.”

“My clan, we live North in the Free Marches. My keeper sent me to the Conclave, I was supposed to witness history, take notes, and report back to my clan. It was only supposed to be a couple months. I’m supposed to be home right now.” Tears fell and neither acknowledged their traitorous pitter-patter on the snow between them. Hanna maneuvered her arm around Mahanon’s shoulder in a one-armed hug.

He held up his left hand. The light from the mark glimmering against the sunset. “Then, this.” He gestured to her face. “And that.” His hand reached out to cup her face.

“You know Hanna, no one else has touched me since I got here. Not a hand on my shoulder, not a single hug. Just you.” He looked like he was telling her a deep dark secret. Hanna noticed that people around here weren’t very touchy-feely.

“It’s probably a culture thing. I haven’t really been in contact with anyone outside of sparring.” Her mind went back to picturing tackling Cullen in a moment of weakness. She could count that as sparring.

“It doesn’t matter. It really fucking sucks. I miss home. I keep doing things for these Shemlin and they keep adding more. Not that I don’t get the breach is a big problem, I just want to go home. I want to see my little sister again. I want to hug my mum.”

“Shem and Shemlin. Those words mean human don’t they?” Hanna thought about all the names she’d been called.

“It’s better than knife ear or the worse names they have for us.” Mahanon spoke bitterly. Hanna
nodded. She understood. Names have power. Hanna considered herself observant, and she had noticed that elves were less likely to be in power and more likely to be a servant or worker. Even in the Inquisition.

“Well Manny, I don’t think their going to stop asking for help. And without your hand they can’t close the breach.” Hanna went with the realism approach. It was the only approach she really had. “I wish it was so cut and dry why they want me here.”

Mahanon looked up. A painful expression passed over his face. He looked away. He knew the reason they wanted her. Why they spent so much money giving her a back story. Why she was still alive. He knew and was debating on whether to tell her. Now she was debating on whether she wanted to know.

“They think you can see into the future. Or you will be able to, with training.” He went with the realism approach too.

“Oh…” Hanna lost steam. Silence stretched again. The sun settled below the horizon. When Hanna spoke again it was at the same time as Mahanon.

“We should..”

“What do you..”

Hanna stopped and motioned for Mahanon to finish. “What do you think? Should I side with the mages or the templars?” Hanna gaped in response. After a few fish like mouth motions she started.

“Let’s walk back and talk.” He nodded. She began asking questions. Mahanon filled her in on the journey to the Hinterlands. Meeting with Mother Giselle who insisted they should make for Val Royeaux with great haste. Meeting with Blackwall, who agreed to join with little consideration for his previous mission. Meeting with the Revered Mother and the Templars. The Templar’s exit from Val Royeaux. Meeting with Fiona, Vivienne and Sera. A surplus of breeches, whatever those are. Pants maybe? The infuriating ride with all of them back to the Haven.

“Well, if the mages have invited you and the templars have gone out of their way to be dicks, why is this a decision again? Meet with the mages.”

“Cullen insists that the mages are too dangerous. He said that my off the cuff response, which was much like yours, reflected poorly on my critical thinking skills.”

“So Cullen disagrees with the plain logic. They asked you to decide. You chose. They will have to live with the consequences of their actions.”

Hanna felt lighter than she had in weeks. Mahanon agreed both to the nickname Manny and to future conversations before he reached avalanche mode. They reached the front gate just before the final bell signalled its closing. Waiting at the gates with horses ready and a search party formed was the ever proper and poised Commander Cullen.

“Where have you been?!?” He raged. “You can’t just go off when you feel like it.” Cullen looked worry worn and relieved at the same time. Hanna couldn’t remember the last time the guarded man had shown her an emotion outside of mild annoyance. He was normally stoic.

Hanna didn’t know how to react to an angry Cullen. The last time he’d been angry, she’d ended up in chains. Hanna shuddered at the thought.

Mahanon reached out a calming hand, but Cullen disregarded it. His anger was directed almost
specifically and solely on Hanna.

“He is the Herald of Andraste. He alone has the mark to seal rifts. You went off with him…” Cullen pointed at Mahanon emphasizing his words. Then he pointed to Hanna. A deep untapped pit of rage opened up within her.

“Unsupervised. Without you or Lucy or Bart. I used to go around alone before all this. I am an adult and so is Mahanon. He has a fucking name. If you ask him he’d probably prefer you use it.”

****

It was at this moment that Hanna turned, stomping mad and fell at the Commander’s feet. Her cheek glowing blue, her eyes unseeing and her body temperature falling.

Mahanon caught her on his knees and looked around.

“Solas!”

The bald elf followed Mahanon as he carried Hanna’s empty vessel back to Solas’s cabin.

Cullen felt equal parts guilt, confusion, and anger. He could sense no connection to the fade. No magic. Then suddenly, it was there and strong. He wondered absently if he could disrupt the connection with a Smite.

Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine met while the apostate and the herald looked after Hanna.

“She went into the trance?” Leliana questioned when Cullen entered the War Room.

“Yes. It was much like Solas said.”

“So her emotions are tied to her visions.”

“It seems to be at least a part of it.”

Cullen gripped the pommel of his sword. It felt disingenuous or cruel to force Hanna out. He knew the end goal. But that didn’t mean he had to like it. Hanna was a good soldier. She had an eye for strategy. She could be useful without the visions.

Having a seer, an oracle. It may be crucial to the mission of the Inquisition. Knowing even what is happening at any time before a raven could deliver a message. It was magic powerful enough to win wars. And Leliana was set to push their advantage in anyway she could. The Nightingale is ruthless.

Cullen left the meeting with a pit in his stomach. Hanna seemed much healthier, happier during the fortnight without a fade trip. He instantly regretted his involvement in her pain.

****

“Fuck!” Hanna shouted in anger. She looked around her. She was in front of Haven again, still. There was an army approaching. People were shouting orders. Civilians were fleeing to the shelter of the Chantry. Cullen was at the Gate with Manny, Solas, a suave Italian man and Cassandra.

“Under what banner?”

“None.”

“What do we do?”
Manny ran for the trebuchets with Cullen’s orders. Hanna decided to look through the ranks of the unknown enemy. At the forefront, with a unhealthy gaunt demonic looking man, stood the one the only Samson. A blow from the trebuchet demolished at least a third of the monsters’ forces with an avalanche. Then a giant scaled beast took out all but one of the trebuchets.

“Oh no, Manny.” Hanna flew over the field looking for the Herald. He was helping the evacuation of the town to the Chantry. People were being pulled out of burning wreckage. A man with bull horns on his head was waving people down. Solas was managing fires with the Italian looking man. Hanna watched what must be a future iteration of herself lifting fallen timber off of a screaming child as his mother picked him up and carried him to the shelter of the Chantry.

Cullen shouted for everyone to get in the chantry before barring the door. Manny huffed with his hands on his knees. Everyone was out of breath. That prick from before Chancellor Roderick was on the ground bleeding profusely. A young boy not much older than the Jack that had cracked open her face tended to him. He looked like a farm kid too. Maybe it was just the hat.

“He has something important to say.”

*Fat chance of that.* Hanna thought contemptuously

He went on about a secret path through the mountains that could buy them time. Hanna and Manny both volunteered to stay behind and fire the last trebuchet to cover Haven. The other companions volunteered as well. Hanna and Mahanon shared a look. They would send the others away at the last minute and make a final stand.

The final stand came they fought an aggressive giant templar made of red lyrium. Manny was picked up by the heavy metal nightmare who called himself the elder one. The man summoned magic that burned Hanna’s face on contact with Mahanon’s hand. She screamed in pain. Corypheus roared.

“You have spoilt it with your stumbling.” He threw Mahanon onto the trebuchet.

Hanna tried to get a better view from her floating head position. How could they survive this? They were cornered. Mahanon delivered a pretty solid one liner. Corypheus hit him with a bolt of magic and turned to correct the mistake of leaving Hanna alive. Mahanon hit the trebuchet. A mountain of snow came tumbling down. Future Hanna tackled Mahanon down into a cave behind the trebuchet she’d never noticed before.

After burying Haven in an avalanche, Hanna and Mahanon survived in a cave. There wasn’t much of a reason to tell everyone about this trip either. Other than Samson was real. He was living today. And he looked just as cruel leading an army to Haven as he had responding to correspondence.

****

Hanna’s eyes opened. She sat up suddenly she was once again in Solas’s cabin. Sitting next to her was none other than Cullen Rutherford. She seriously considered punching him in the face.

“I’m sorry.”

Hanna’s anger deflated. Cullen looked truly remorseful.

“We knew you needed a strong emotional outburst to connect to the fade. I wasn’t really that angry at you for going off with Mahanon.” Hanna looked at him. He called Manny by his real name. “I was worried about you, though.”

His eyes came up from the ground and met hers in an intense moment. He leaned in from his chair at
her bedside and their faces were maybe five inches apart.

“I’ll wear a tracker next time.” She joked leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “I accept your apology.” She said before leaning back and falling asleep leaving a very stunned Cullen at her bedside.

Chapter End Notes

What is this? Another chapter because I hate odd numbers? Yes, you get an extra chapter because I hated seeing the number 11. Congrats.
Hanna avoided the war counsel at every turn.

She had been so exhausted following her ‘vision’ as they were now calling her trips through the fade. She slept through the night and skipped breakfast upon waking. She left Solas’s empty cabin through a window, careful to avoid the watchful eyes of the Inquisition guard posted outside. No doubt, Leliana and Solas and whoever else wanted to know the product of their meddling. Hanna resolved to keep it to herself. She just had to think of an acceptable lie…

*Not like they have anything to go on but what I tell them.* Hanna thought miserably. Somehow after all the shit they put her through they trusted her to tell the truth. With one simple miscalculation, she didn’t trust any of them.

She went off to explore Haven. The original structure of the town appeared to be the very few log cabins around the center of the Chantry. As more pilgrims arrived before the Conclave, she imagined more were built further out. Suddenly a quiet town became a bustling one. Filled to the brim with bakers, merchants, mourners, and faithful. Hanna bought a shawl from a nearby merchant to hide her face and eavesdrop.

From what she heard, Mahanon had made quite a stir during his first tour outside of Haven. Several new agents arrived with pledges of allegiance, money, and power. A group of builders and soldiers headed out at first light to build guard towers to protect the horses from Horsemaster Dennet. A young man had been seen in front of the Chantry offering the support of a mercenary band, the Chargers. Children were playing pretending to be the Herald and his companions fighting off bandits, wolves, and demons.

Eventually, an alarm went out. Her disappearance had been noticed. Hanna receded further into the shadows. She climbed the cliff face behind the Chantry and noticed the path leading from behind the Chantry into the mountains.

*Keeping that path a secret is crucial to the survival of this town.*

Hanna was able to jump to the roof of the Chantry from the top of the rock face. She was able to observe the entire town from the top of the Chantry and hide in the beams. Several of her fellow soldiers spread out through the many pathways through the village. They were distinguishable from the general populace by their shining silver helmets, a requirement after her concussion, and green fabric of their uniform.

Hanna looked for other notable occurrences. She longed for her scouting equipment. A directional microphone to listen in to conversations would be helpful. Sadly, she had to live with what she could see and hear on her own. She looked for Manny’s companions.

Varric was no doubt still asleep this early in the morning. Just before the second bell. Hanna imagined the first rang at about 0600. The second rang just about 10:00. The midday bell rang close to noon. The fourth bell was near 16:30. The fifth bell was close to 20:00. About two hours after the fifth bell was the final bell that signalled the closing of the gates. Hanna guessed her benchmarks, but wondered if a clock hid somewhere in the town that would tell everyone what time it was.
Solas was inside the Chantry, but joined the search after about an hour. Blackwall was nowhere to be seen from the top of the Chantry. Vivienne was similarly absent. Cassandra and Cullen stood at the front gates as sentries. Hanna snickered. They were trying to make sure she didn’t leave Haven. Like she had anywhere to go. Mahanon and Varric appeared in the circle of tents in front of the Chantry sometime after Solas joined the search.

Safely hidden, Hanna thought about what her lie would be. She used to be proficient as a liar when the safety of her team demanded inconspicuousness, Hanna was damn near invisible in a crowd. Now for obvious reasons her brain didn’t process things the same way. Her eyes betrayed her most often. Maybe Vivienne was right. Maybe, but she was afraid to believe the lie. What if she couldn’t distinguish the reality from the farce. What if she forgot about earth and gave herself over to the Trevelyan story.

She was so lost in thought that she nearly pissed herself when Sera and Charter appeared behind her.

“See I told you lot, she went up.” Sera said triumphantly. Shit, Hanna had forgotten about the ever illustrious Sera.

“Andraste preserve me, Hanna.” Charter spoke under her breath. “If you fell... You could die.”

Hanna looked down from her perch and shrugged. *I didn’t fall. I won’t fall. So, why bring it up?* She thought petulantly.

“Elfy got his panties in a twist about you disappearing.”

All Hanna could think was, *shit how do we get down from here.*

****

Cullen pulled his hand over his face as he watched the three women descend the cliff behind the Chantry. Sera had joined the search last, and she had announced to the search party that she saw the weird human climb on top of the Chantry just before the second bell. When asked why she didn’t report it to the search party then, Sera just replied with an exasperated ‘No one asked.’

Sera cracked a joke and Hanna laughed a high floating laugh. Cullen would be terrified in her position. When they touched the ground, Sera dusted off her hands and walked away. Charter, Leliana’s closest agent, looked at her red hands and white knuckles with a mix of exhilaration and anguish. Hanna got about five feet from the ground and let go of the wall. She dropped quickly. The on-looking crowd let out a collective gasp. Hanna landed safely, stood, and bowed.

“Thank you, You’re welcome. Show’s over.” She announced throwing out her arms.

Cullen couldn’t believe his eyes. This strange woman. This pretty, strong woman. This person was suicidal. He was suddenly holding back anger. How could she care so little for her life. So little for the Inquisition. For his concern.

He realized that the kiss on his cheek had meant nothing to her. She was still hiding something, everything. He knew nothing about her. Hanna shared very little about her home, her life before the conclave. She was observant and meticulous. She learned well, quickly. She fought hard. She sang delightfully. She was like a poisonous plant. Beautiful. Dangerous.

Cullen no longer regretted using her for the best of the Inquisition. She was obviously benefiting in some way. Otherwise she would have left by now. Damn her well being and damn her feelings. Her eyes searched for his. She met his gaze and then glanced away blushing. She played him so well.

No more.
He would resist this temptation like he had so many before it.

****

Hanna was surprised by the crowd that had accumulated to watch them climb down from her perch. Rockclimbing had been a hobby of sorts. She had never really had to come back down without protective gear. Free solo climbing had at one time been terrifying to her, but in practice it didn’t seem quite that bad.

The gasp that erupted when she let go to drop onto the soft cushion of snow, surprised her even more. She wondered if she had ripped her pants. She turned quickly and tried to play it off. Cullen stood at the forefront of the crowd. He had taken a step forward when she fell. He looked shocked for a second and then pissed the next.

*I may have actually ripped my pants.* Hanna’s cheeks burned with the blush that surly covered them. She felt gingerly, surreptitiously behind her. Her seam was as fresh as the day it was sewn. She was safe. No, she wasn’t fated to be embarrassed today. These people were coming out to watch her fall to her death. Cullen was there to try to prevent it. That’s why he was mad.

Hanna wasn’t stupid. He was worried about her. Again. She had done something stupid. Again. He probably wanted her to just play Leliana and Solas’s Oracle game. Be a good little mage and do what was ‘best’ for everyone. Hanna heard vaguely about the mistreatment of mages in Kirkwall. Everyone talked about how Cullen had been there, second-in-command to crazy. The whispers told her all she needed to know about Cullen’s expectations.

He didn’t know what her knowledge might cost her. What it might cost everyone. He sure as hell didn’t know what was ‘best’.

Cullen hadn’t seen movies. Whenever someone tells about the future in movies, the future is either changed or comes about anyway sometimes to an even more gruesome end. She had to keep everyone on the idea that she could only see past events. It would save everyone heartache in the long run.

He turned away from her shortly after she made eye contact with him. His hands on his sword pommel. He walked away.

At least she didn’t have to sit through a lecture.

She followed Cullen. Solas and Manny joined them in front of the Chantry. Solas was quick to lecture her.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous your actions could have been?” Or something like that, as per the usual Hanna largely ignored the rant. Solas liked to act like he had the high ground.

*Please tell me about morals and danger, as you play with my ability like a toddler with a new toy. Tell me again how my emotional state has placed you in a difficult situation. Get in line, asshole.*

Hanna was seething by the time the door closed behind her.

Leliana, Josephine, and Cassandra were already in the war room waiting for them to arrive. The atmosphere was tense. Manny and Josephine looked uncomfortable. Stern expressions met her from every other face.

“That is the second time you have run away in less than a day. Don’t. Do. It. Again.” Hanna understood Manny’s feelings of being trapped here by the Inquisition. Leliana’s voice was almost too
pleasant. Her face was pained. Hanna wanted to recommend that she take a spa day to relax. This probably wasn’t the best time.

“I was dragged out of town by a friend in need yesterday. This morning, I…” Hanna thought carefully. Chose her words. “I needed some time to think about all of this alone.”

“All of what? What did you see?” Solas seemed too intrigued. He wanted to know the future desperately.

“I saw something horrific. I don’t know how to feel.” Hanna looked at Cullen. She thought of Samson. She thought of Maddox. She thought of the sunburst on his forehead and what she now knew that meant after lessons with Leliana and Josephine. “I think I was in Kirkwall. There were templars. Someone said something about Gallows. I couldn’t see faces.” Hanna waved her hand in front of her face trying to imply they were wearing helmets.

Hanna was batting blind. How would she know what the ceremony was around a mage being made tranquil. She would have to be as vague as possible.

“His name was Maddox, but then...he wasn’t.” Hanna let tears fall from her eyes. Her acting was superb. Though it wasn’t hard to be upset when a mage was ritualistically lobotomized. She thought about how the man probably had friends, loved ones. Then in one moment, he had nothing.

Cullen visibly stiffened. He knew the name Maddox. She suddenly wondered if he knew the name Samson. Hanna tried to gauge the reactions of the others.

“What happened?” Cassandra asked plainly.

“He was made tranquil. It all happened so fast. He…”

“Enough.” Cullen interrupted her. “Maker.”

“I wasn’t going to leave Haven. I just wanted time to think. There are templars here. I’m a sort of mage.” It wasn’t hard to let them draw their own conclusions. Let them think she was afraid. “My dreams, the fade, it’s all I have of home.” Okay, maybe she was afraid.

This time Leliana gave a tell. It was subtle, but she definitely touched her hair while adjusting her cape. Alyiah must have had dreams of home too.

Hanna had sold the lie solidly. Suck it Viv.

“There are no plans to make you, Tranquil.” Cassandra said softly.

“It doesn’t seem like you have to plan very long.” Manny said sharply.

“Plans change.” Hanna whispered and pointedly looked everywhere, but at Cullen and Cassandra.

“Regardless, we have a strong indication that your emotions are important to forging a connection to the fade.” Solas interrupted.

“But not always. I have definitely had more emotional outbursts than visions.”

“I believe that has to do with the available free magic. You have only had visions when near another mage such as myself, or the tear in the fade, such as Mahanon’s Mark.”

“It is exhausting. I’d rather try not to have them than try to figure out how to trigger more.”
“The goals are one in the same.” Hanna heard the real statement hidden between the lines. Leliana didn’t care if Hanna was ‘tired’ she was going to be experimented on and mined for information.

“I have had time to make up my mind.” Mahanon added before the meeting was adjourned. “I want to go meet with Enchanter Fiona. We will make contact then determine a way to proceed. Perhaps we can approach the templars after checking in with the mages, but this is the path of least resistance.”

Cullen’s face scrunched. He grabbed the back of his neck.

“Is that what you left to talk to Hanna about?” He said, but it sounded an awful lot like ‘you trust her more than me?’

“It is not, but even if it was. Her opinion has nothing to do with my choice.” Mahanon sounded more grounded than he had the day before. Suddenly, Hanna realized he was mad too. He was so angry to be used in a plot, even unknowingly, against her. He was lashing out at Cullen, but his eyes were on Leliana. His face was stoic, serene, but she could hear the edge, the challenge in his tone.

Hanna admired the young warrior’s control. He was fighting the good fight. A losing battle. Everything that he wanted was on hold until he left, but that didn’t mean he was just going to go along with Leliana’s plans.

Cullen stormed out of the room furious. Hanna restrained herself from “Oh”ing or shouting ‘Shots fired!’ as he left. She patted Mahanon on the hand and followed the enraged templar against her better judgement.

Hanna kept her footsteps light. She wanted to see Cullen, normally so reserved in his anger really turn it up to 11. Tear shit apart or something.

He didn’t turn to look at her. He stormed out of the doors to Haven. A messenger, came to deliver correspondence from the scouts on the storm coast. Cullen pressed a gloved hand into the man's chest and growled.

“Later.”

Now, Hanna was even more interested. He never turned down a messenger. Not even during morning workouts. Not even during training. Not even during nights drinking at the tavern. Cullen was a man obsessed with work. If he was so pissed he couldn’t handle work, she was right to follow him. He was going to wreck something.

The commander went into his tent. Hanna desperately wanted to see what was happening inside. She listened with her ear to the canvas, but was disappointed to hear nothing. She strained her ears to hear. It sounded like a wooden box was being opened just a light swish of metal on wood. Nothing happened for a long drawn out moment.

Uncomfortable with the silence, Hanna turned to leave. Cullen let out a furious roar and stormed out of his tent. He ignored her presence completely and spoke directly behind her.

“I am going for a ride. I will return before the fifth bell. Please transcribe any correspondence and leave it on my desk.”

“Ser” Rylen saluted from behind her. Hanna startled. She hadn’t noticed him behind her. She waited for Cullen to gain some distance towards the stables and told Rylen Manny had decided to meet with the mages. Rylen nodded understanding.
Hanna ran from Rylen to the stables. She had never ridden a horse before, but it was the only way she would be able to keep up with Cullen. Cullen bounded off on a beautiful black horse. She immediately asked as an agent of the inquisition to rent a horse for an important mission. She exchanged gold coin for a saddled up brown mare. She looked for hoof tracks to make up for lost time. She hopped up and thought of that one time she had ridden a pony at a county fair. She thought of every cowboy movie her father loved. She patted the horse from the saddle.

*Please like me. I will bring you carrots everyday for a year if I can just see what that man is doing.*

The horse moved fast. Faster than she expected and nearly unseated Hanna. She held on wherever her hands found purchase probably the horse's neck. Hanna had no idea where they were headed and no idea which direction Cullen had chosen for his ride. The horse rode on without her directing it. Even so, it was kind of fun. As much fun, as having no control could be.

Hanna wondered how to slow down. Did she pull on the reigns? Where were the reigns?

No matter.

After a good solid thirty minutes, the horse was spooked. When a horse is spooked, it might choose fight or flight. Her beautiful choice in horse chose fight. The horse stopped. And stomped and bucked and kicked. All the sudden, Hanna was on her ass in the snow. And a horse leg was coming down. She rolled and rolled and rolled. Eventually, the horse stopped freaking out. Hanna stopped rolling only to look up to a pair of boots. A pair of shiny boots.

A pair of templar boots.

A templar helmet gazed down at her. She looked back to Nickel the less-freaked-out-horse.

Suddenly Hanna reviewed her choices. She had chosen to run away not once, but twice. Today. She had intentionally followed a pissed off templar. On a horse, she didn’t know how to ride. Now, she chose to look up at the templar above her. She smiled awkwardly. If she was going to die, God be damned, Hanna Motherfucking Cooper was going to die funny.

“Excuse me sir, do you have a minute to talk about Jesus Christ?”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know why, but I enjoyed this chapter. Twists and turns, my friends. Will Hanna be murdered? Will Cullen save her ungrateful ass? Find out next week. Or Thursday. I really don't like odd numbers.
Three more templars came out of the woodwork after she spoke. They did not look kind and Christian. Andrastian. Whatever.

They looked angry and cold like if the Terminator were encased in silver plate armor.

Hanna didn’t know what to expect. The next thing she knew she had her hands tied behind her back and she was being led to a cave. There were boxes strewn about two horses were tied to a tree in front of the cave. One of the templars added Nickel to the group.

Hanna’s heart was beating so fast. Just a moment ago she was in unabashed glee to see a templar cut loose. Now, she was petrified it would happen any minute. She was outnumbered, unarmed, and fucking crazy. At least she had one thing going for her.

Hanna wondered if Cullen was nearby.

No.

There was no way the horse knew which way he had gone.

She was alone with her choices.

What did that mean? She had no idea what these people wanted from her. No one had spoken since her poorly timed joke. Unless you count grunts and wordless gestures. If Hanna didn’t know any better she would say she was being punked.

Maybe she was.

“Lucy, is that you?” She spoke and the three templars in the cave with her turned and looked at the entrance. Nope. Not being punked.

She was, however, gagged.

_Well, I guess I can’t call for help now. Stupid. Should have been shouting like a lunatic this whole time._

Fear was a powerful thing. A powerful emotion. Hanna suddenly became even more terrified. If there was any ‘free magic’ nearby, she would go into a vision. She would freeze to death because these assholes wouldn’t know she was dying. She had to exercise control just this once. Pre-FUBAR Hanna would have this down pat. Current Hanna was starting to have a panic attack. She was hyperventilating. Her face was turning red. She wasn’t getting enough oxygen.

While she was panicking, the templars packed up their camp. It was getting late and they were obviously not with the inquisition. They traveled at night. One templar noticed her panic. He cocked his head to one side like he had never seen someone so scared they might piss themselves.

He walked over to Hanna and smacked her. The impact of the smack closed her mouth on the gag. The force made her bite her lip and taste blood. The gag slipped off of her mouth when she hit the ground. Hanna whimpered. The templar kicked her in the stomach for good measure.
Okay, that definitely pissed her off. She needed to talk to the hand of fate.

*Next time you give me a magic ‘power’ how about the power to hulk out. That would be great.*

The templar shrugged and left her to return to his packing. Hanna felt frustration and anger and an intense confusion. She was desperately close to losing control.

*Calm down, Hanna.*

That wasn’t very convincing.

She watched for an opening. She pulled at the ropes tying her hands. She pushed and worked the rope hoping for release. If she could get free she might be able to defend herself. Maybe.

No such luck.

The templar that smacked her came back. She only knew it was him because he had gotten some of her blood smattered on his armor. He lifted her roughly and walked her to a large wooden cage. She must have been very distracted when she entered the cave. It was big enough to hold several people. It looked disturbingly familiar.

*Samson’s camp.*

Samson’s camp had been full of cages like this one. Hanna realized at once that these templars were working for Samson. They were opportunistic hunters bringing people back to Samson to mine red lyrium or something. And somehow she had run right into their snare.

*This is it. I made it through all of that, and I’m going to die due to some random chance.*

Hanna put her head down on her knees. She was ready to give up and rest. The cage was on a cart pulled by the two horses. Nickel was walking beside the group. Hanna cursed the mare in her mind. The stupid beast had gotten her into this mess.

No.

Not fair.

Hanna was the one who decided to try to chase after Cullen. Hanna was the one who thought she could manage it. Nickel was just a horse. She took back what she thought about hoping they would eat the poor horse.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hanna saw a flicker. She thought she might be hallucinating. After a few minutes, it was obvious that they were approaching a wagon. Hanna noticed that her gag was still around her neck from the smack.

“HELP!!” She shouted. “Please, they kidnapped me.” She hoped that she could get the person’s attention. Maybe it would be a kind dwarf merchant like Frodin.

Maybe she could get out of this yet.

****

Cullen rode Midnight hard. Putting the horse through it’s paces around the loop used to train the horses. About twenty minutes later he heard another rider come through to the east. Leliana must have received word from Redcliffe and sent a rider to precede the Herald and his Companions. Cullen wondered if perhaps Mahanon would bring Hanna, since he seemed to keep her confidence.
Cullen swiped at training dummies with his sword from horseback.

After hours of training, he was ready to finally return and confront the consequences of his actions. He made a relaxed pace as he rode to return. He regretted being so hard on the Herald. Mahanon reacted so poorly to the news that he would not be able to return to his clan, Cullen worried that he may leave Haven entirely.

Perhaps he should be thankful that Hanna was able to convince him to return at all. Perhaps he should apologize to both Hanna and Mahanon for his outburst.

It would have to wait until he got back to Haven. Cullen encountered very few travellers on the east road out of Haven. It was the only reason he noted that the dwarf who cared for Hanna was leaving with all of his wares packed. Cullen thought it was odd, but maybe the dwarf need to resupply and would return.

When Cullen arrived at the stables he noticed the brown mare Nickel was missing. That horse had been unstable and vicious to his cavalrymen. He wondered if the caretaker had sent it out to pasture. Cullen felt uneasy as he entered the stable to stall his horse and the caretaker and his men were nowhere to be seen. Cullen took care of his horse and looked through the barn.

The horses were uneasy and the smell carried. The stable master and caretaker had been murdered and hidden in an empty stall. Stuck in the chest of the caretaker was a dagger. Hanna’s dagger.

*That traitorous, murderous bitch.*

“Maker preserve me.”


“Maker’s Balls!” He exclaimed. “Isn’t that Hanna’s dagger?” Cullen nodded solemnly and turned to handle the situation. He would have to put Hanna to the sword for this.

“But wait…” Rylen spoke. “She was unarmed when she followed you and unarmed when she left the stables. She was on a brown ma….She was riding Nickel.” Rylen was thinking so hard Cullen swore he smelled the smoke. “She couldn’t have done this… not in the short amount of time she was in the stable. Why would she run away and leave behind her dagger? On the craziest horse in the stable?”

Cullen saw the logic in his argument. If Hanna didn’t have her weapons with her when she went into the stables, she didn’t have the weapon to murder the caretaker. Someone framed her.

Knowing Hanna’s luck, she’d probably followed him to the stable, and chosen a random horse. She’d most likely been unseated by Nickel and was either hurt in the wilderness or worse.

“Organize a search party. I’ll join once I’ve notified someone to investigate the scene and clean up this mess.”

Cullen just hoped that they would have a trail to follow. It had been hours since Hanna had left down the east road. She could be just about anywhere.

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The horses were distressed by her shout. The templar’s stilled their march and one drew a sword on
Hanna. She nodded that she understood the threat. However, it looked as though her plan had worked. The lantern illuminated the wagon as it approached.

“She hasn’t put up much resistance, and she’s about as weak as a nug. This is the one the Elder One asked for?” One of the templars spoke, his voice tinny through his helmet.

“M’lady is an odd sort. She’s valuable, an Arl’s ward that.” Hanna stifled a gasp.

*What the flying fuck? Frodin. Frodin the kindly fucking dwarf. Frodin the motherfucking reason she made it this far?*

“What about the Vint?” The man asked.

“He disappeared when the spell was complete. I was told to secure the product of the mage’s work not the damn mage.”

Hanna hadn’t heard Frodin curse before. She thought back to their first interaction. He knew she would be in the forest. Did he know where she came from? Who was this Vint supposed to be?

Hanna had heard more about Tevinter through her lessons with Josephine. She did not want to be associated with Tevinter. The land of evil magisters and slavery. She shivered. Frodin had told her that her writing looked like Tevene. She hadn’t written since.

“Follow us to a rally point, your reward awaits you. The Elder One never forgets.”

Frodin accepted the man’s offer and followed behind Hanna’s cage. The bloodstained templar came into the cage and repositioned the gag over Hanna’s mouth. She could only seethe in anger. Hanna prayed to Jesus and anyone who would listen that she be granted the power to smite smirking dwarves.

That she trusted.

That she liked.

The first tear fell unbidden to break the dam. After about ten minutes, one of the templars released Nickel with a smack to the hind end. They were creating a diversion. If the Inquisition came looking for her, they would find Nickel and determine that the horse left her to die in the snow. The would abandon the search. Hanna looked on betrayed.

“M’lady, I hope you will understand. The Elder One, he is bringing about a new world order.” Hanna glared openly when Frodin began to speak unbidden. Like a villain explaining himself to the hero in a movie. Only she was obviously not the hero in this story. She was the kidnapped, likely to be dead person. “He will welcome you into the fold and you will find power, strength beyond your wildest dreams. I will admit I wavered in my task. I probably could have found a way to make you disappear sooner.” Hanna looked away, ashamed. She had trusted this dwarf. Frodin was right he could have whisked her away in the middle of the day and she would have just followed him.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I framed you for some pretty heinous deeds back in Haven. Even if you were to escape, they wouldn’t take you back. Not after you murdered two men in cold blood.” Hanna felt a snap. Not like the ‘vision’, but a familiar break in reality. Suddenly she was watching herself from a safe distance in her mind. She let out an angry howl of frustration.

Her change in demeanor was sudden, the sound was sudden. The horses, well-trained though they were, startled. And ran the cart off the road. She was riding unrestrained as the horses worked themselves through the turmoil of anxiety. Hanna watched as her body steadied itself and ran against
the bars of the cage hoping to snap the wood or metal bindings. She screamed in pain as she shredded her shoulder on the bar. It snapped enough that she could squeeze through the opening comfortably if the horses would stop.

Unfortunately, her scream was blood curdling and the horses unsettled further. The wagon wheel to her left snapped in the furor and the cage slammed into a tree. Hanna was flying. It was pleasant like floating. She hit the soft snow and embraced the darkness that was the loss of consciousness.

****

Cullen couldn’t help but sense something off about the dwarf. He just happened to be leaving Haven when Hanna was missing. Cullen directed the search party to investigate in the direction he saw the dwarf going.

Nine of the best riders, nine of the best horses. The Herald agreed under great protest to remain in Haven. Cullen tried to explain that as Hanna’s Commander, he would bring her home safely. He hoped that would bring Mahanon peace.

Mysteriously, they found no trace of the dwarf or his cart. The road forked in several directions. None led to the merchant, none led to Hanna. Cullen thought about the last thing he had said to Hanna, or more importantly what he hadn’t said.

_I want to keep you safe, you terribly danger prone woman._

Cullen hoped that he might have the chance to make things right. He could feel Rylen watching him with knowing eyes. The insubordination killed him, but it was nice to have someone that understood him. If Cullen could trust anyone to know about his ridiculous crush, it was Rylen.

It had been over an hour, and the search had started after dark, when a scout led a very exhausted Nickel to him. The fear Cullen felt froze him. Finding the horse was a bad omen. She was very likely dead.

Every moment that passed was a grain of sand, and her hourglass was likely running low. Cullen motioned for a rider to return to Haven with the news that the horse had been found, sans rider. He could imagine the Herald’s reaction all too clearly and prepared to be joined by Mahanon and his companions.

A thunderous boom rocked the valley between mountains. The dense trees transferred noise poorly and the sound was very loud and so very near. The search party closed ranks and trudged on.

They came upon a war zone. Two horses connected by the remains of harnesses and a hitch ran wild through the rubble of what must have been their cart. Cullen thought immediately of Frodin, but the dwarf’s cart had been pulled by a druffalo. Wagon tracks led away from the scene.

Upon further investigation of the cart, Cullen noted that it had been a cage. Blood covered a broken wooden bar, along with familiar leather armor, torn and left behind. Cullen turned round and mounted his horse.

“She was here.” He indicated the busted cage. “Slavers?” Rylen shrugged.

“Unlikely, this close to Haven.”

“Ser” Both Cullen and Rylen turned. “It’s unbelievable, Hanna is...Follow me.” Kristof one of the members of the search party came and led them to more destruction.
This time with more carnage.

Several men, Cullen counted, four men in templar armor had been killed. Covered in blood, in fact blood littered the patches of snow remaining this far into the valley. The druffalo of Frodin’s cart had been set loose and grazed peacefully ignorant of the dwarf’s broken body half on the ground by the cart. The top half had been dragged no less than six feet where it sat on the lap of a sobbing Hanna Cooper.

Cullen tried to decipher the events before asking what in the name of the Maker happened.

His first clue was Hanna.

Her jaw was dislocated, maybe her left shoulder too. It lay limply to the side. She was covered in blood. Her hair was matted with mud and blood. A nasty bruise was forming on the right side of her face. A gag of cloth had been tied over her mouth and her breathing was heavy beneath it. She was shaking and in the dark it was hard to see the exact expression on her face.

She wasn’t moving. Something about her state seemed dangerous. Unhinged. Out of control. It was something he had sensed in her before. Hanna tore at the gag in her mouth to clear her mouth to breathe. She remained as still as she could be considering her heavy breathing.

Cullen could only piece together the events with the evidence he found. Slavers posing as templars? Kidnapped Hanna? Killed Frodin? Nothing was quite adding up. He would have to ask Hanna.

As he approached with torch in hand, her eyes were drawn to the fire. Her pupils were eclipsing the blue of her eyes. She saw straight through him and showed no signs of recognizing him. When he reached a drawn sword’s length from her, she shuffled, through the snow and muddy grass, on her knees away. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse.

"يا بعدياً عني." (Stay away from me.)

Cullen couldn’t understand what she said. He vaguely remembered her mentioning that she spoke many different languages. It was completely unfamiliar to him. She seemed terrified. Hanna’s eyes were suddenly drawn away from him. She was looking around as if she saw something. Someone. Someone to be feared.

"أريد العودة إلى ديارهم." (I want to go home.)

He felt compassion. She was obviously hallucinating. Hanna had to be grounded into reality before he could ask her any questions. She was raving in another language and speaking to people who weren’t there.

Cullen squated to eye level. “Hanna. It’s Commander Cullen. You’ll be safe if you come with me. Let’s go back to Haven.”

Hanna’s eyes shifted away from the spectres she was seeing. She gazed into Cullen’s eyes. She really looked at him. Hard. Cullen waited he motioned for others to stay away. Hanna followed his movements, Cullen tried to remain as close as he had been no more, no less. After the search party was situated, he turned his attention back to Hanna.

“Mahanon, he’s waiting there for you. He’s worried. We were all worried about you.” It was clear that she had either no recollection of the Inquisition, or she had gone mad. She still did not speak to
him.

Cullen watched as Hanna sunk lower into the ground. Her left arm, possibly broken, hung limply. In a flurry of movement, she stood.

“You are a liar. You want to kill me.” She threw the dirt and mud she had gathered in her right hand at his face and ran.

It was stupid, but he turned and mounted his horse to follow her into the wilderness. In this state, she couldn’t survive through the night. Soaked to the bone. Out of her mind. If she ran into free magic, a vision could cause her to freeze to death, even this far down the mountains. Especially when she ran up the mountain into the woods.

Hanna was fast. An expert runner. She had been out of practice at first, but she quickly became renowned for her speed. Cullen kicked his horse into a steadfast gallop. He should close on her quickly, but the bramble of the forest was more discouraging to his horse than it was for Hanna to clear while running. She ran as straight up the mountain as it seemed was possible. Cullen knew where this was heading. He slowed his horse to a canter then a walk. Hanna had cornered herself on a shear cliff. To her left was a small cave like indent and a twenty foot 90 degree incline. On her right, a straight drop of at least 60 feet. Hanna like she was going to jump.

“STOP!” Cullen shouted.

Hanna stopped. She turned. Cullen dismounted. With every step forward, Hanna shuffled a little closer to the edge. It was a game. He couldn’t get close enough before she would jump. If she jumped…

He couldn’t finish the thought.

Luckily, he didn’t have to.

Luckily? No, the opposite of that. He didn’t have to think because a rumble made the pair look up. Up to where snow was launching off of the top of the previously mentioned twenty foot incline. They didn’t have time. Cullen reached out for Hanna and pulled her into the cave.

He realized he had grabbed her injured arm, when she passed out in his arms. At least the torch was still lit and... that meant the horse followed him into the small cave.

“Good boy, Midnight.”

Now he could sit with his thoughts, the comatose woman of his ridiculous crush, and his horse.

Chapter End Notes

Hanna was speaking Arabic, which is not a language that I’m good at especially with the writing. Also, I always get annoyed when writers put the translation at the end, so I put it with the words. I hope it makes sense. If you’d prefer it at the end, because she will speak another language at key points in the story, let me know I can adjust.

What a chapter! I’m still not sure that I’m 100% happy with it. I liked the idea, but what a beast to write.
Anyway, let me know what you think!
The cave was cramped. Especially with the horse. Midnight turned away from him as if he could hear Cullen’s thoughts.

Cullen used the supplies he had hastily packed to try and heal Hanna’s wounds. First he popped her shoulder back into place. Hoping that he didn’t do more damage. He set the bone in her arm back together and tied a makeshift splint/tourniquet with leather from his boot. Then he poured a potion down her throat and helped it down. After a short time, she began to stir.

Cullen couldn’t help the blush that crept up his neck to his cheeks. He wondered how she would react to their situation. He didn’t want to focus on propriety, but they were unlikely to be rescued immediately. It was only going to get colder and when his torch burned out, darker.

His thoughts went out the door when she opened her eyes.

The blue of her eyes was stunning in the dim torchlight. Like the Waking Sea during a storm. Dark depths hiding the turmoil beneath. She looked at him for long moments punctuated by their slow steady breathing and the horse snorting.

“Hey.” She said dismissively. Not the exact reaction he was expecting. She sighed and took in the cave and the sealed entrance. “Avalanche?”

“Yes.” Cullen answered.

“Wait. What happened? I was on that stupid horse trying to follow you like an idiot. Then, templars. They talked about this Elder One...Frodin had something to do with me being abducted from my world.” She scrunched her face. “This is probably not good, but I don’t really remember what happened. I either had a vision or had an episode. Based on our surroundings, I’m willing to bet it was the second one.”

“Well you did not have a vision.” Cullen eyed her suspiciously. “What’s an ‘episode’?”

Hanna glanced at him, worried.

Her eyes were suddenly a reflection of his own. Exhausted. The eyes of a woman who had seen too much.

“We call it... Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I have the combat type. It means I spent too much time in a very bad place where it was kill or be killed. According to my therapist, I also suffer from survivor’s guilt. Because I went into that very bad place with eleven of the best soldiers, and I left alone.” She paused like she was trying to form the words.

“Sometimes when your mind is put under that much stress, it changes how it works. I have only ever had episodes like that after waking up from a nightmare and not knowing that it ended. My fiance he said it was like I was sleep walking through a hallucination. Other soldiers, they have killed their families or friends in that state not knowing they were safe at home.” She looked away, ashamed. “I...attacked him once. He was able to wrestle with me and hold me down until I came back. Jack was...I really never deserved him.” Silent tears fell down her cheeks Cullen wouldn’t have noticed her crying if not for her wiping her face with her sleeve.
Cullen was shocked. He wanted to tell her that he understood. He understood well. After what happened in the circle, he was never the same either. He knew the nightmares. He had attacked roommates before in his sleep. Only his resolve and his anger at mages let him work around the pain in Kirkwall. The Lyrium had helped some to take the edge off of the pain and nightmares. But no longer. He was about to reply when, Hanna continued.

“If Solas didn’t watch out for me every night in the fade...I would have nightmares every night. Sometimes I still do. Have nightmares. It’s different from dreaming. When I dream here, I can manipulate the fade. Not in the nightmares. Just like at home, but…” She started to shake. “I used to have medicine, where I come from. It helps. It takes away some of the anxiety.” She tried to give examples. “Now my shoulders are always sore and I have tension headaches like crazy without it. Not to mention the mood swings. I’d venture a guess that would say any strange behaviors I have are probably a side effect, a known negative effect, of quitting that medicine suddenly. I’ve seen it drive others crazy well ‘mad’ before.”

Cullen’s eyes blew wide and Hanna took notice. She looked at him with a questioning expression. Cullen thought very carefully before responding. Could he trust her to know about his past? It took him so long to respond that Hanna sighed and made to stand. He reached out his hand to stop her.

“Wait...I…” It was hard to believe he was really going to share this with a near stranger. “I have also, as you said, ‘spent too much time in a bad place’.” He stopped to gage her reaction. She stopped and turned to face him.

Cullen explained that the mages in the Fereldan Circle at Kinloch hold had fallen to blood magic and abominations. That he was tortured by demons and watched his brothers in arms fall. In that moment, he begged the Hero of Ferelden to kill all of the mages in the tower. That none could survive without being in danger of changing into an abomination.

Cullen explained his frustration with Alyiah’s refusal to do so and couldn’t handle remaining in his post. He was moved to Kirkwall where he happily played second fiddle to Knight-Commander Meredith. He admired her sense of duty and believed that she would never abuse her power.

He was disappointed.

Eventually, Cullen helped Varric and the Champion defeat his superior officer in a fight made worse by the red lyrium doll she possessed. Eventually, Cassandra recruited him to the cause and he came to join the Inquisition leaving the knighthood in the process. It was why it infuriated him when the templars and mages would shoehole him into the role of Knight-Commander. It was a role he didn’t believe he was capable of any more.

“Holy Mary, mother of Jesus.” Hanna touched his hand. Cullen appreciated the explicative even if he didn’t understand who she was talking about. It was something he had been curious about ever since he watched her go to the chantry to pray to her God at the foot of Andraste at least once a week.

“I left being a templar behind me. With it, the Lyrium that used to dull the pain. I have been successful in my attempt to quit thus far, but I have also seen men lose their minds by quitting or taking it too long.”

“Quite the leash.” She remarked. “I can’t imagine if the Church where I come from was forcing some of its people to take Heroin or something.” She stopped and added quietly. “Does it really improve your abilities as a templar?”

Cullen tried to explain that it seemed to be so, but that the Hero of Ferelden traveled with a former
templar recruit that hadn’t taken his vows, but was still able to use templar abilities. He didn’t mention that that former templar recruit was now the King of Fereldan.

“So, it’s one of those things that ‘they’ say, and everyone repeats without questioning.” She huffed looking at him. “Sounds oddly familiar. You know I know some things that could probably help take the edge off of the addiction. As far as the PTSD, I’m piss out of ideas. I’ll try what I can there too.” She gave him a smile. “We’re in this together.” She said in a sing song voice that didn’t match the tone of the situation.

“Sounds like a plan.” Cullen found that he was smiling at her. A wider smile than he had given anyone in a long time. Hanna smiled back and her eyes drifted over his face, falling on his lips. She stared quite pointedly at his lips. Which also did not match what he thought was the tone of the situation. Hanna swallowed and cleared her throat, backing away from Cullen as far as she could. The heat from her blush could have melted the snow off the entire mountain.

The cave was probably about 7 feet high inside the much shorter entrance. The horse could stand uncomfortably with it’s neck craned. And maybe five feet across. Cullen had lain her down and sat down beside her. There was enough room to scoot against the wall a foot away from Cullen instead of sitting directly to his left.

“Well you told me your story. If we’re going to be a support group, then I should tell you mine. It is a little fresher to me than something that happened so long ago for you. I can’t imagine how you would bear this for so long.” She relaxed against the stone and filled him in on the night everything started. She and three squadmates were pinned down at the location where their commanding officer had gone down.

“I hope this can make sense to you. We fight wars in a much different way back home. We have more ranged weapons with more firepower than an arrow. Explosives that can take down entire cities in one go. People speak so many different languages. Everything is different yet the same in ways I don’t even understand.” As she explained, she seemed to get sucked back into the past. Like she was living it over again.

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When Hanna came to, she was still in Afghanistan. She saw that her comrades were tied up on their knees with black hoods over their heads. She wanted to scream. This was not where she wanted to be. She looked down at her body. Her ACU was torn to shit and the shrapnel in her abdomen stuck out at strange angles. Welts and burns covered her stomach where Specialist Thompson had attempted to seal off the wounds by cauterizing them as Wallis and Mathis fought off the second wave of the enemy ambush. She had passed out from the pain.

Obviously, she had passed out from the pain.

She couldn’t stop the sobs.

“Lieutenant?” , “Coop”, “Fuck” They said in unison. She turned to look at them. Still whole. She tried not to remember handing a flag to Mathis’s Wife. Or Thompson’s son. Or Wallis’s Mother. A flag and nothing else, because she wasn’t strong enough to bring her boys home.

“They got us, Coop.” Thompson growled. He was the man to her furthest left. His arm was bloody. A gash open from his elbow to his wrist. The white of his bone just barely visible in the dim light from the high window. From the looks of it they were under ground in a basement. She hoped Mustafa, the target, hadn’t hidden in a basement when they blew his house to Hell.
“No shit, I thought we were in Miami at Markson’s parents. They sure fucking redecorated.” Hanna tried to put her heart into the sarcasm, but there was a little too much pain and fear that made her voice tremble. 

“You got a plan, Lieutenant?” Mathis spoke solemnly. He knew the answer. She had nothing. She was as blind as they were. Even more so waking up in an obvious torture scenario. Even underground, the climate was unforgiving. Sweat irritated her burns and made it hard to think.

“How long have we been alone?” She asked trying to make her brain work through the fog of pain, loss, and fatigue.

“Hours, minutes, days...Fuck, Cooper we can’t see shit over here.” Wallis was the youngest on the team 25 years and a sniper. He was used to distance. He was never supposed to get captured. He was losing his cool.

From what she could tell of the sun it looked to be early afternoon. But for all she knew it could be FUBAR o’clock, because she couldn’t tell for sure where the sun was in the sky based on six inches of daylight. They had been taken somewhere around 4 o’clock in the morning. She didn’t like to think that she remained unconscious for more than a few hours. Depending on how much they had pissed off the management, Hanna surmised they had somewhere between an hour and 16 before they were unceremoniously killed.

Suddenly, the door opened. Her squadmates went rigid. Hanna turned her head to the door. Her body was nearly paralyzed with pain.

Two men came in holding another army soldier in bindings with a black bag over his head.

Jeremy Clark.

His name was clearly displayed on his lapel. CLARK.

The one in the same that had been brought onto the smoke screen team because he was familiar with the Pashto language spoken by the locals. He was the eyes and ears on the smoke screen team, but he was as green as they come. He had pissed himself at least twice. The smell was vile.

The men removed Clark’s hood/bag. He shook his head. They twisted his arm and it broke. He screamed in agony. They dropped him to the ground and one placed the heel of his boot over Clark’s head, a threat. He whimpered. When they stood him back up, he nodded his head in her direction. Spelled out Cooper so they could read her ACU Lapel. They were asking him to point out the leader. He did it under duress. She didn’t blame the kid. Though, Hanna briefly wondered what that meant they had in store for her.

They dropped Clark and lifted her. She thought about the implications of Clark’s capture. They could have captured him and he would have had a basic enough knowledge of where Markson’s camp was, but not hers. That’s why they were unprepared for the attack to still go through. They thought they had washed out the whole unit. They expected someone to come and check on Markson, but Clark had managed to omit that her team was out there. Still going through with the plan. She wondered what it had cost him.

Hanna was placed in a metal chair. In a dark room. When the man in charge of her torture came, he turned on a single light. It was so bright she couldn’t see more than his outline. He spoke with an English accent. Hanna tried to use her years of linguistic training to pick out something. The way he spoke had a distinct French colonial feel of a speaker who grew up in Algeria in the late 50’s early 60’s. The man speaking then would have to be in his late forties early fifties.
He taunted her. With Markson’s death, with Clark’s foolishness. He claimed that her purpose as a woman had been ruined by the blast of that mortar. He had no medical proof, but he was right. He tried to hit her psychologically anywhere it would hurt. She focused on figuring him out instead of falling apart.

Hanna tried to detach herself from the torture. The mutilation of her wound. She tried to think of it as in the past. As a memory. When he would ask her a question her only answer was her name, her date of birth, or her identification number. She didn’t repeat it incessantly like in a movie, but she tried her best to answer questions in a way that was most annoying. Hopefully, it would buy her squadmates time for the real calvary to come along. She could have died happy there knowing that they would survive.

Hanna couldn’t name how much time passed. After a while the man tired of her. He left her in the room in the dark. Hanna cried then. She was so tired. She hurt so much. Why couldn’t she just give up? She smelled like decaying flesh. Her wound was no doubt infected. Especially now. She waited in the dark for what felt like hours. So long she worried that they were interrogating her men now.

She prayed that wouldn’t happen. She prayed like a good Catholic girl. Surely Jesus would take pity on her. If she couldn’t make it out with everyone, she didn’t want to make it out.

At some point the door opened. Six figures moved into the room. She held her breath when the light came on. One was definitely Clark. One was Mathis. They were held to each side of her. Their heads uncovered. Finally the torturer came back. He pointed a weapon at her. Stepping into the light, she could see that it was her sidearm.

“We will kill one of your friends for every question that you evade.”

Hanna never talked so fast in her life. “In that case, what do you want to know?”

She hated that the man now knew how to make her talk. She could play tough when it came to her pain, but to kill one of her comrades. That would be too much.

“Who was your target?”

“Mustafa.”

The silence that her answer drew told her everything she needed to know about her team’s success. They had definitely completed the mission objective.

“Where did you find the intel? How did you know where to locate your target?”

“I went as directed. I have no contact with army intelligence. Any contact would have been through my superior officer. Captain Markson.”

“Bullshit. Don’t you remember how this game is played princess? You talk. Your friends live. You lie. They die.” He took her gun and held it to Clark’s face. She caught the bronze color of the torturer’s skin and the fuzzy white of his hair as he did.

“I didn’t lie. I don’t know.” She replied haughtily. She tried to use her tone to placate the man. “Ask me anything. I won’t lie. I don’t know who betrayed you.”

“Betrayed,” A shot rang out, blood splattered on her face. Clark was no more. “Betrayed implies that you know it was someone inside the operation.”

“No…” She begged. “No. I didn’t know. I don’t know. I assume it was someone on the inside...Oh,
God..I’m so sorry Clark. Ah.”

“My dear, that’s enough. You know more than you let on.” He turned his gun to Mathis. Mathis looked at her prepared for the worst.

“Please, Jesus. No. I don’t know anything.” Her crying spurred a coughing fit. Her coughing spurred her internal bleeding. The chain reaction caused her to cough blood all over the man’s inexplicably tan outfit. She coughed until she passed out.

Again she woke up in the tiny room with Mathis, Thompson, and Wallis. Gasping for air her lungs burned for oxygen. She was likely drowning in her own blood. Her squadmates once again greeted her with varying degrees of awareness.

The sun had long since set, but the temperature in the room was inexcusably hot. She moaned in pain, but she had to make them escape before they were all killed.

She rolled onto her side and felt the mat underneath her. They had tied her loosely with rope, probably expecting her to die in her condition. They weren’t far off, by her honest self-evaluation. Working her arms forward and backwards, she felt the knot loosen. She prayed that no one would come and check on them before they could escape. She tried to count minutes in her head.

Finally, the knot came undone. “Guys, I have good news and bad news.” She pushed herself up and stood. They had taken her boots and socks. She ditched her ABU jacket in search of relief from the heat. She walked over to Thompson and untied him. Now it was time to ditch this place.

“Good news first, boss.” Wallis sounded desperate. Thompson waved her to rest against the wall and worked to untie the others. His skin flapped around his wound. Hanna didn’t want to know how he got it. She balked and turned away trying not to vomit.

“I lied. We’re probably fucked.” Mathis barked a laugh at her assessment.

“Well, you don’t even take a piss without a plan, Lieutenant.”

“Fine, someone look out the window to see if it’s viable as an escape route. Someone peek out the door, see if we’re clear to go there.” Mathis nodded triumphantly as he checked the window first. He shook his head. Bars blocked the path even if anyone was thin enough to make it through the window which they weren’t. Wallis walked to the door and put his ear against it. Hearing nothing he checked the handle. It turned. They hadn’t locked the door.

Who the fuck did they think they were dealing with? Hanna coughed at the thought. Her throat was dry, but there was a clear mist of aspirated blood. She stood behind the others as they snuck into the hall. She needed to stop coughing, but the first cough was like a harbinger for worse things to come. After twenty feet, Hanna was woozy in her blood loss and could hardly stand. Mathis steadied her he offered to carry her, but Hanna refused.

Hanna knew she was going to weigh them down. She had to think of an exit that may or may not include her. She told them it was important to find stairs first. Everything else could wait.

The room they started in was at the end of a hallway. Thank the Lord. The walls were sandstone and the floor concrete. Barefoot, their feet padded quietly along the ground. She wondered at their lack of shoes. New directive find everyone footwear. She directed that every room should be investigated. They could be caught, but at least they wouldn’t be subject to a pincer attack in the tight space of the hallway. Each room, Thompson and Wallis entered and cleared. Mathis would lead her in and set
her down. They would shake down the room for any important information. They found various improvised melee weapons.

Some rooms did have people in them. Prayers in Arabic were interrupted and sealed themselves in her brain. Men whispered in Pashto and were silenced permanently. In the heat, the stench of death and decay became intolerable.

Hanna vomited frequently. The blood within was most troubling. Thompson cursed it. He apologized and swore if their was a next time he wouldn’t cauterize a wound in the field ever again. Blisters on her stomach busted and puss seeped out of the wounds. Sometimes she would just close her eyes for a second to be rudely awoken minutes later by the sounds of her squadmates trying desperately to bring her back to consciousness.

Cruel squadmates. Couldn’t they just leave her there to die?

At the end of the hallway, they came to the room she had been interrogated in. She paused and held Mathis’ hand. Afraid to find what they did. Clark’s body was still on the ground. Thompson found his dog tags and put them around her neck. She was ushered quickly out of the room to wait in the hallway as they made sure the room was clear.

The stairs waited just outside the door to the interrogation room. She could tell that everyone was exhausted. Hanna demanded that she be left behind. Mathis patted her on the back solemnly and crouched up the stairs behind Thompson. Wallis picked her up bridal style and carried her up the steps when they were waved on. They found a locked door to their immediate right. A sign on the door indicated that it was the armory. To the left was an open doorway to the outside. Wallis checked the walls for cameras but signaled there were none. Hanna was in a daze.

She faded out of consciousness and was rudely awoken once more. Thompson and Mathis were returning to the closet Wallis had chosen for a hiding spot. They had retrieved weapons and found a method to call for rescue. ETA 20 minutes. What could happen in 20 minutes?

Well for one thing bad guys can arm their base with explosives. For another they can cover the exits with sniper fire. And for the last thing they can shoot a chopper out of the sky.

Mathis tried to disarm the bombs at first, but claimed there were too many separately armed.

Escape became their only option. Mathis lead as they snuck out of a door using vehicles and boxes for cover. Mathis misjudged his cover and lost his head to sniper fire.

Another set of dog tags around her neck. Like morbid Mardi Gras beads.

Thompson lead more carefully, but left their six completely open. Wallis watched as carefully as he could. Every once in awhile he would whisper something about her having the good luck to get them out. How she would go down in the record books for this escape. He was trying to make her feel better about being a their concrete shoes dragging them to the bottom of the sea.

Jaron Thompson made ‘Dammit Jim’ jokes. ‘I’m a medical specialist not tactics and recon. Dammit Jim.” When Wallis took the lead, Thompson carried her. Jaron became intolerable with them. However, he was more careful than Wallis had been not to touch her wound as they moved.

“I never knew you were a Trekkie Thompson.”

“I can hear you teasing me already, boss. When we get out of this, I’ll have to find a way to make you forget this bit of specialist trivia.”

“I’m going to be ruthless.” Hanna tried to mock a villain laugh. Which spurred a coughing fit.
Which drew enemy fire. They were found because of a joke.

Wallis was taken down first. Thompson laid her down behind a crate and provided cover fire for Wallis to crawl back into cover. Wallis didn’t last more than a minute. Thompson tossed her his tags. He gave her a wink and told her to keep them safe. A team of enemies came from behind and took down Thompson. She must have looked dead because they didn’t spare her a second glance.

The first of three choppers attempted to drop off their recovery team. The chopper was shot down shortly after dropping 6 of 8 men. The chopper landed in a nest of enemies that had shot the RPG to shoot the bird out of the sky.

The recovery team found her and placed her on the second chopper. She was evaced to a hospital where they stabilized her before flying her to Florida for intensive surgery. She didn’t have the energy to tell the team the base was rigged with explosives. The first chopper was considered a complete loss the second chopper’s team was approaching from outside of the enemy base to eliminate snipers. The third team picked up the second team and the rescue was written off a loss.

Hanna was kept in a medical coma for two weeks. When she was finally allowed to come around, she screamed in fear and pain and loss. She screamed in confusion. They had to put her back under in her agitated state she was likely to break stitches holding what was left of her intestines together. She had lost parts of several organs to gangrene. The welts of the burns on her stomach were forever etched on her. She would never have children. She would likely never eat her mother’s spicy kim chi or her grandmother’s Alabama barbecue ever again.

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Hanna eyed Cullen from her position. He looked curious, but unsure if he should ask questions. She tried to imagine how she would answer a question like ‘what is a helicopter?’ or a sniper rifle. She wondered if introducing the people of Thedas to those weapons and ideas was a good idea at all.

Wasn’t that violating first contact protocol? (So she watched Star Trek with Thompson’s son every once in awhile. It was a good way to help his family grieve and celebrate the man...Maybe she ended up appreciating the military protocol in Star Trek and binged the entire anthology of seasons and series on Netflix.)

Strangely the Commander was silent. He opened his mouth several times as if to start to ask a question, but then thought better of it. He did ask for her to explain what kind of place Afghanistan was. Why they were her enemy. Hanna tried her best to answer questions in a way that didn’t cause more questions. In the end, he clarified how intense her injury had been. Why she didn’t just take a healing potion. And how far she came in recovery.

“So that’s why…” Cullen gestured towards her stomach. “You had so much trouble supporting a sword and shield.”

Hanna snorted. Then she chuckled. Finally guffawing she answered.‘Cullen, I was never supposed to go back to active military duty. I had to learn how to stand again. I had to relearn everything that the muscles I lost used to do. Do you know how much you use your core muscles to do?’ Hanna didn’t want to answer the questions that might stem from that.

Nevertheless she continued. “I’m surprised I didn’t die from exertion climbing that damn mountain with Cassandra and Mahanon. I’m surprised I didn’t completely lose my shit in your damn dungeon. The fact that I made it to a place and time where you were expecting me to do that was a testament to my very stubborn nature.”
“I..see. I respect that about you.”

“After hearing the story about the worst three days of my life, you tell me you respect my stubborn nature. I was a coward. If I had released them from their binds and killed myself, there is no way their families would be grieving their loss. I killed them just as much as those assholes. The man that interrogated me is famous for killing commanding officers and leaving lower ranked soldiers a path of escape. They call him мясник which means “the Butcher”. He would have let my men go if I had just quit trying to stay alive.”

“Did you know that when he tortured you?”

“No.”

“Then it was your God’s will that you survived. You shouldn’t beat yourself up over it.”

Hanna started to respond, but stuttered to a stop. What did Cullen know about her God’s will? He was trying to make her feel better, but he’d gone about it clumsily.

“Did that make you feel better when someone said that to you?”

“No.”

“Good, cause it’s bullshit.”

Silence stretched between them. Hanna felt like she had been harsh in her assessment of Cullen. Maybe she thought that because she was wrong. More likely she felt bad because her armor was torn and her clothes were not conducive to sleeping in warm comfort. Most likely she felt that because she had an undeniable physical attraction for a man she was spending time with isolated from the rest of the world.

“It’s cold.” She spoke and coyly looked down at herself and up to him.

“It will only get colder when we run out of torchlight.” He reached behind his head to grab his neck. Maybe he was trying to hide his blush. He definitely failed.

“Excuse me, if I’m being too forward Cullen, but I would like to sit next to you and steal your body heat and hopefully the comfort of your ridiculously silly mantle.”

“You may sit next to me, but you have to apologize to the warm useful mantle.” They both stood up. Cullen carefully removed his chestpiece, gauntlets, shin guards and other various cuddle-blocking metal armor pieces. He folded the set neatly and placed it in a pile by the horse.

“Fine, I’m sorry.” She sat down next to him and put an arm around his back in a makeshift side hug.

“You know it’s probably going to smell like horse shit when we wake up right.”

“Oh I’m sure.”

“I wonder if we’ll run out of oxygen.” Hanna wondered idly as she tried to tamp down her wandering thoughts.

“What is that?”

“For Fuck’s sake,” She threw up a hand in exasperation, then let it fall neatly back to her side. “let’s sleep and I’ll explain it in the morning if we survive.”
Again with the heavy emotion loaded chapter. I have no apologies. It took forever to write and edit this chapter and I’m sure I missed typos. Please don’t judge too harshly.

Let me know what you think. Comments are definitely appreciated.
I felt like the last chapter was so sad and sour, that I had to give you the sweet and conspiring just a little early.

When Hanna woke, predictably she and Cullen had shifted in their sleep. Unpredictably, she had ended up laying on top of him as he slept against the rock wall in a sitting position. Straddling his hips, gripping loosely behind his neck, and nuzzled into his chest near the crook of his shoulder. Cullen, for his part, had one hand to his side and the other gently around her hip. Hanna tried very hard not to panic and startle the poor man awake.

Instead, Hanna slowly lifted her head. She silently thanked him for removing his armor before going to sleep. The woolen undershirt her wore to protect from the cold and the innumerable dangers of chaffing was less than appealing to smell and she hoped to move away from the stench eerily reminiscent of a gym locker room.

Hanna forgot one important thing. As she raised her head, she was reminded of the smell of sandalwood and leather oil and Cullen.

It was the reason that she started this whole man crush for the Commander. Without it, she may not have been in this position. And now, encouraged by the scent, she continued to look up. Cullen was stirring from his sleep and his arms started moving sending ripples through his muscles and shivers down her spine.

You shouldn’t be doing this.

The little voice of conscience and all things good tried to warn her of what would undoubtedly be the result of creeping on the Commander in his sleep. She wondered if she might like his brand of punishment.

Okay, yeah, I really need to get up and move away.

The warning bells in her mind sounded, but she was entranced by the song of his scent and the dance of his muscles. Unable to turn away her eyes glided up his neck to his lip that twitched under her exhale.

Far too close.

Too far away.

How does a man end up this beautiful?

Hanna wondered if it was some kind of trick. If it was a test by God to see if she would remain faithful to her fiance in the craziest situation. She told herself that she could. She told herself this had already gone on too long. Hanna made to stand, but she pulled back too late. As Cullen began to stir, his arms naturally wrapped themselves around her and hugged her tight. The sudden unexpected
movement caused their already too close mouths to meet in a chaste, two-second kiss. Cullen opened his eyes lazily and released her gently rubbing his back with one hand dropping his other hand to the ground to stretch his back. Hanna squealed in surprise and launched to her feet. At that, Cullen startled.

“Oh...I’m so, so sorry.” Her face was red. She didn’t mean to bow, but it was second nature. Her deep bow became a not-very-forceful headbutt.

A confused and bleary-eyed Cullen had no time to say anything but, a soft “Ow.”

Hanna, now certain she had earned her very own sealed and signed seat in Hell, scrambled away from the increasingly embarrassing incident. Still sleepy she blundered into the wall of snow dislodging it and collapsing a hidden air pocket. Showering her in snow.

Beet-red, covered in snow, mumbling apology after apology, Hanna thought carefully about how to handle this situation before she fell through the snow off the mountain.

*At least I have the benefit of a cold shower. Lord knows, I needed one.*

She uncovered herself as much as she could and walked to the furthest end of the cave. It was nearly pitch-dark without the torch. If not for the bioluminescent fungi littering the cave, she would have been completely blind. The horse did not seem to appreciate waking up in the darkness to a little girl squealing and harrumphing through the cave.

*I swear I’m a grown woman. I’m acting like a teenager with her first crush.*

Hanna didn’t chance a peek back at Cullen. He could be preparing to curse her for forcing him to violate his vows to the Maker. That idea was, admittedly, based on the gossip she had picked up on the ‘street’. She heard that Cullen didn’t have a romantic partner because he was a templar. Hanna imagined it was like a priest being married to the church. Then she remembered the previous night’s conversation.

*Wait, didn’t he say he left that life behind in Kirkwall. Maybe he doesn’t have vows of chastity anymore.*

She slowly turned her head to see Cullen patting the very upset horse until he calmed down. Cullen wasn’t looking in her direction, but they weren’t very far away from each other. He must have heard something because he turned to her. Releasing the horse, who knickered peacefully, Cullen sighed.

In the dim light, she could see that he was also blushing. He turned away quickly and rubbed the back of his neck. He was obviously not used to such attentions. Horror flooded her.

*I have violated a man of God and I am going to Hell. Jesus forgive me!*  

Suddenly, she decided to ask for forgiveness to the other wronged party here. If He was in Thedas at all.

“Oh my Jesus,

Forgive us our sins,

Save us from the fires of Hell,

Lead all souls to Heaven,

Especially those in most need of thine mercy.”
She finished and left off the ‘namely me’ that used to get a chuckle out of her friends in her confirmation group.

“Would your God truly smite us for an accidental kiss?” He laughed unexpectedly. “Have you heard about the Chant of Andraste? The Maker and his Bride definitely would excuse this harmless accident.” He was approaching her like an unfamiliar dog. Hand out in front in a calming manner, to offer for a sniff or to turn her away if she was rabid. He moved towards her slowly through the conversation.

Cullen turned her favorite joke around on her. She hadn’t realized that she had used it that often during her training, but now that she thought of it... Her go to joke had been ‘Have you heard about our lord and savior Jesus Christ?’ Like reruns of those telecommercial evangelicals.

Despite herself Hanna laughed. “No, but...
IthoughtyoumighthaveavowedthatIhadruinedyearsofchastity.” She mumbled squishing the words together.

“You thought...what exactly?” He was almost a foot away now, she could clearly make out his hand ungloved and calloused. She cleared her throat uncomfortably and he stopped short of touching her.

“I thought that maybe...I mean I heard someone say that you...That is I heard that...well you don’t have a girlfriend or a partner and people say...When you were a templar, you must have promised...” She stumbled through the words trying to find a way to say ‘I think I’m in love with you, and I’m trying not to be super creepy about it but I thought you wouldn’t be into me.’ “You know what.” She stopped stumbling and petitioned to the heavens looking up. “A good smiting might do, like right now.”

After a few minutes, Cullen reasoned through what she was saying. “So we accidentally kiss. After sleeping together, I might add.” Cullen gave her a smug look, with a smirk that tugged on his scar and sent her heart aflutter. He started laughing while speaking. “And you were worried because you thought that I had taken a vow of Chastity with the Chantry.” His laughing stumbled into a cough. He looked at her seriously, his voice lowered to a register she didn’t know he had.

“I have taken no such vows.”

Hanna almost swooned. Why did he have to say it like that? Like he thought about her like a woman as she thought about him like a man. It wasn’t fair, and he probably didn’t know what he was doing to her. Inside, she fought with her conscience. She felt scandalous. Sleeping with a man and, even accidentally, kissing him. A man who wasn’t her betrothed. Then she thought about how many other of the ten commandments she had violated in her life. This probably wasn’t in the top three. Most notable probably being that whole “shall not kill”.

Still this has to be on a list somewhere : Shit not to do even when irreversibly separated from your fiance.

Maybe Facebook.

Great now I want to see that list. Wonder how many other rules I’ve broken.

Leaving those thoughts in the dust, Hanna closed the distance between them. She looked at him carefully to gage his reaction. “Well then, I would like the opportunity to kiss you again sometime.” She leaned into him using her hands on his shoulders to place her mouth next to his ear. “Not. on. Accident.” She tried to mirror his sexy serious tone. She felt him shudder beneath her hands.
He pushed her back against the rock wall. Intent clear in his eyes when…

“Hello! Is everyone okay in there?” The familiar voice of one Captain Rylen leading a party of Varric, Solas, and a soldier known only as Jim. Rylen stepped inside and smirked to find them in their current position.

Cullen released her shoulders letting his hands fall to his side. Cursing under his breath, he turned then shielded his eyes from the early morning light silhouetting the four figures outside the hole in the snow. “We were fine.” He said adding in a mumble only she could hear “before you came.”

Hanna let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. Cullen stashed his armor on a portion of his saddle that looked as if it was meant to do just that. She followed Cullen as he lead Midnight out to meet the group.

“Uhm… thank you for saving us.” she spoke and Rylen grinned like he hoped they were doing what he thought they were doing. Something worth interrupting.

“A handsome ex-Templar General and beautiful outlander spend a night alone in the cold, dark cave. Forced to cuddle for warmth, overcoming deep seated unresolved tension.” Varric smiled. “Most people pay to read about situations like that.” He waggled his eyebrows at Hanna. “Did you and the Commander get up to any shenanigans last night, Sunshine?” Hanna couldn’t hide the blush that covered her face all the way to the tips of her ears. She swiftly shook her head in the negative.

“Oh, don’t be like that Sunshine…” Seeing that Hanna was rendered mute by his questioning he turned to Cullen. “I see you changed your mind about our new friend, Curly.” Hanna stopped commiserating in her embarrassment to watch Cullen’s response. “Complete 180, one might say.”

“We talked about our pasts. Nothing more.” He answered curtly. Varric huffed in disappointment. Hanna felt relieved that the questioning was over. Though from the look Varric passed back to her, she realized it would come up again later.

“Rylen, how did you find us?” Cullen questioned as they neared the main road to Haven.

“You mean besides the avalanche?” Rylen laughed, and Cullen nodded once and gave him a look she couldn’t see. Even so, she knew she had given that look before. “It was the mage, he was able to track Hanna because of the disturbance she caused to the fade.”

“What do you mean?” She finally piped up. “Solas, how did I cause a disturbance in the fade?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Solas answered, “We can discuss it further in Haven.” he said before hopping up on his horse. They had tied their horses up on the main road and walked to the cave. Varric rode a smaller horse, she didn’t know what kind it was probably a pony. Hanna wished she had cared more to learn about horses back home. Cullen leapt atop Midnight. Rylen and Jim planned to share a saddle and let her ride alone on Jim’s horse. Hanna paled.

“I can’t ride a horse.” She said shaking her head.

“You did it yesterday.” Rylen, looked at her confused. “You put the saddle on and rode didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Well, I was cocky and stupid yesterday. Today, I am realistic and I don’t know how to ride a damn horse.” Jim shrugged and got on his horse.

“You aren’t planning on walking back to Haven, Sunshine?” Varric walked his horse passed her.

“I can and I will and there’s nothing anyone can… oof.” While she was distracted talking the their
‘saviors’ Cullen lifted her from behind and helped her onto his horse.

“What was that Sunshine?”

“Urgh.”

“Let’s go home.” Cullen laughed when she grabbed around the trunk of him to remain steady on the saddle meant for one. Poor Midnight.

****

Mahanon was terrified. Hanna had chased after an angry Cullen, which was all in good fun, but then a strange plot unraveled around her. People were murdered to frame her. Good people. Humans he liked spending time around. She killed four templars who based on the correspondence carried on them were working for a man who went by S. to gather prisoners to mine Red Lyrium. And someone, it was unclear who, killed the dwarf merchant that looked after her.

When the avalanche triggered so late in the night, Mahanon, who had just arrived at the scene of the carnage called off the search party until the morning. He hoped that he hadn’t sent them to find the remains of his friend and his advisor.

He missed his Keeper. She always had answers and orders and wisdom. Keeper Deshanna looked on humans with distrust, but also acknowledged the value in keeping up with current events. She told him that his going to the Conclave was crucial to the survival of the clan. She sent him because of his history of interacting with humans to trade. Not because he was leadership material or capable of diplomatic speech.

Mahanon had always been very laid back. Too laid back if his sister and mother had anything to say about it. Being a charismatic leader not only wasn’t in his wheelhouse. It wasn’t in the nearby wheelhouses either. Being that person for Shem even more so.

He questioned the path the Creators had set before him. Was this adventure truly going to help him in some way? He didn’t want help outside of his clan. He wanted to go home and hear the Keeper sing to the Though it was true that he was getting more and more pressure to find a girl to settle down with at home. His parents meant well by it.

He hadn’t told them about his short stint as Alrian’s lover. His fear to let his parents know that he liked men was the cause of their breakup. Mahanon regretted the lost trust and friendship. Alrian had dark hair and dark skin and a voice so deep he longed to hear it moan in his ear again.

Mahanon closed the book he was reading in Josephine’s office.

“Is that?” Josie stood. “The bells sound Herald, the search party has returned.”

Mahanon didn’t dislike Josephine. She had greeted him in elvish when they first met and, embarrassed, admitted that she didn’t understand much more than the greeting. She was calming in the way that he imagined a diplomat should be and more accommodating to him than any of the other advisors tried to be.

He wished that she didn’t insist on narrating the events as they unfolded around him like he might not understand what the bells meant.

“Let’s go see how the Commander and Hanna fared.” He decided and walked out of Josephine’s room like he owned the Chantry. The way the Revered Mother talked about him, he might as well have.
“Ow, be more gentle!” He heard Hanna shout and ran out of the gates to see Cullen dangling her by her arm off of his horse. Manhanon was angry and about to give Cullen another scolding. She dropped to the ground and threw a snowball at him playfully. She laughed and smiled brightly.

Mahanon swallowed back what he was going to say.

“Hey, Shiny. We brought back your favorite person. Sorry we had to bring back Curly too. It seems that after a night alone together they’re attached at the hip.” Varric joked, but he didn’t look at Mahanon. Instead, he watched the otherworlder respond to his teasing. She dropped the snowball she made and walked away from Cullen and walked over to Mahanon.

“Manny, are we okay? I did not mean to get kidnapped. I hope you don’t think I killed someone from the Inquisition.” Hanna told him. “When I was taken, Frodin was there. He said he framed me for the murder of someone in the stables.” She bowed her head slightly. “I promise that I would never harm anyone from the Inquisition unless you ordered.” Before Mahanon could answer any of her charges, she knelt and saluted the way that Cullen’s soldier's saluted. Fist across the chest. He realized she was swearing an oath to him.

“Hanna, stand up.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “If anyone in this town has earned my trust it is you. No one else cared for me until I stabilized the breach. No one else forgave me for throwing them in jail for less than substantial charges. No one else has been so good a friend to me. I believe you. I trust you. You do not have to promise me anything.”

Mahanon was so glad to have his friend back that he disregarded the looks the others gave when she threw her arms around him in a hug. He missed having others so freely show affection like they would in his clan.

“Uh-oh Curly, looks like Shiny here has one up on you.” Varric teased. “Better watch out he might steal your girl.” Mahanon looked to Cullen over Hanna’s shoulder and waggled his eyebrows.

*See how you like having your emotions toyed with.*

Mahanon briefly considered trying to actually woo Hanna to irritate Cullen. It was too cruel a thing to do to Hanna, but the result might be a pissed of Commander, which was becoming Mahanon’s preferred Commander. He had never had trouble getting attention from girls. If anything, he had trouble getting girls to back off. Instead of trying to woo her, he decided to be the ultimate cockblock to Cullen.

He pulled back in his hug and looked at her face. She was probably ten years his senior. Despite her age, she had a young face. Her eyes were a little squintier than any other person he had ever seen. He realized that it was because her eyelids were different. Her blue eyes were pale in the early morning sunlight. It didn’t really matter to him, but she really did look very foreign even to him.

After taking inventory of her base appearance, Mahanon noticed that her hair was matted in blood and mud. Caked in the mix was her torn and battered armor and coat. He would commission a new set before taking her with him to the Storm Coast and then Redcliffe. Suck on that Cullen.

“Let’s get you somewhere to clean up before we meet at the War Table.” He said and Hanna looked at him gratefully.

After cleaning up, he brought her a clean set of plain cloths from Cassandra’s wardrobe. Frodin’s stock had been badly damaged in whatever fighting had taken place and he had cleared out their shared home of all of their things.
When Hanna asked about her things with fear in her eyes, Mahanon held up the pack with the clothing she wore in her first day here and her small black ‘phone’ thing. She sighed in relief and touched the phone to her chest.

“Have you ever found a way to make it work again?” He asked curious.

“No, but maybe when I find a way to safely use magic. I’ll try to do it. I don’t want to zap it with electricity if I ever have the ability.” She looked at the small black block with so much hope. He was glad to have retrieved it for her from what was reclaimable from Frodin’s cart.

She slid the phone into the pocket of her coat and left her other things in his cabin.

“Well then,” He held out his arm. “To the War Table.”

Chapter End Notes

If the last chapter was a chore to edit, this was a joy. I loved getting to really introduce Mahanon and ‘who’ he is. He will totally get up to some really great things. Maybe he won't be as sweet on Hanna after he finds out she's been keeping secrets. Maybe he really means what he says when he says he trusts her.
Hanna took Manny’s hand warily. Concerned was one way to describe her current state of mind.

It was difficult for Hanna to contemplate the implications of the changing dynamic between Mahanon and herself. She always felt protective of him as the other person who was accused of the Divine’s murder with only circumstantial evidence and a mob mentality. It was in her nature to be a mother hen in relationships and the circumstances only accelerated the degree to which she cared for Mahanon’s well being. Now, she felt awkward. He was being too nice, too generous not to be expecting something in return.

Manny had obviously misconstrued her caring for him as something deeper. The way he reacted to the return of the search party. The way he glared at Cullen. The way he looked at her like the sun rising on the worst night of his life. The poor kid was probably in love with her.

Further cementing this line of thinking was the fact that he had thought to grab her things from Frodin’s cart. He thought of her need to bath and let her, now homeless ass, do so in the privacy of his personal cabin.

*Are you so conceded? First with Cullen. Now with Manny. Do you think all of Thedas is in love with you?*

Hanna couldn’t block out the thought, but she could counter it with the fact that it seemed that Cullen at least lusted for her. From the way he held her against the rock wall of the cave, she would have been very sexually sated had the rescue party not arrived at that exact moment.

Either way, she wasn’t getting any satisfaction anytime soon. Hanna coughed uncomfortably at the thought of the Rolling Stones song. Her cheeks tinged pink. This drew Mahanon’s eyes to her.

“Are you alright?” He asked worried. He must have thought she was ill.

In a way, she was.

“I...had a thought and it made me think of a song from home.”

*An embarrassing song to bring up in conversation.*

“Oh” Mahanon’s expression changed to one of pure delight. “I had heard that you have a wonderful voice and songs from your home. You put on quite the performance from what I was told.” He stopped their progress to the chantry in front of the central fire pit. Where Varric was known to hang out…

“I heard that you stopped performing at the tavern. Maybe you’ve been serenading a certain Commander behind closed doors?” Varric suggested playfully.

“You know A and B were having a conversation so why don’t you C your way out of it.” Hanna spoke indignantly. When was the last time she used that...second grade?
“What are you talking about?” The illustrious dwarven author responded.

“You know...like the A,B, C’s” Hanna raised an eyebrow. Why did she have to explain this to an adult? Much less an author.

“No, I don’t know. Is this one of your Earth things? Like Jesus.” It occurred to her that they didn’t have the same alphabet. Somehow they were speaking the same language, but wrote it differently. Wait...oh no he didn’t.

“Jesus is not an Earth thing. Well, not just an Earth thing. He is God’s son.” Hanna reasoned. “At any rate you shouldn’t say his name in vain.”

“Take your own advice?”

Oh, the burn could be seen from space. If she had not been on the receiving end, Hanna would have Hi-fived Varric. Shit, they don’t do that here either. Childishly Hanna stuck out her tongue and left the conversation the only way she knew. Walking to the War Room.

“So, after you pout and we have this meeting...let's go to the Tavern.” Mahanon had followed her as she sulked into the chantry.

“It’s hardly the time of day for drinking. And I’m sure Barty will want me to catch up on training.” Hanna tried to come up with an excuse to not sing. She definitely did not want it getting out that somehow music strengthened her connection to the fade.

She was sure Leliana would find a way to make her the jukebox of death or something.

“There is a time of day for drinking. My, you shems are so regulated. Or is it just people from Earth.” Mahanon ribbed gently. She couldn’t resist the way he joked with her it reminded her of her brother. Hanna laughed lightly. Was it because most of the people she knew were Catholic and therefore predisposed to becoming alcoholics or because she thought if she told Manny that she thought of him as her kid brother she might crush his hopes and dreams of dating her?

Hanna didn’t know.

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Hanna was laughing when she came into the War Room with Mahanon. Cullen watched the ease of conversation between the pair with unadulterated jealousy. Hanna didn’t even glance in Cullen’s direction before taking a place beside Josephine where Manny joined her.

However, Mahanon gave Cullen a smirk before placing a hand on Hanna’s shoulder. To Cullen’s delight, Hanna stiffened for a moment. He grumbled when she relaxed after the elf whispered something in her ear. She smiled at Mahanon. Cullen tightened his grip on the pommel of his sword.

“Hanna, I trust you are feeling better.” Josephine attempted to cut the tension in the room. Cassandra entered the room and announced that Leliana would be arriving shortly.

“I am feeling much better, thank you. I suppose I have you to thank for the bath Mahanon was able to arrange in his quarters.” Hanna answered. Cullen felt a shiver go down his spine. She had bathed in Mahanon’s quarters!

“It was a simple request to fulfill. We will have to address the matter of your quarters now that…” Josephine was interrupted. Cullen felt somewhat relieved at the realization that she had used Mahanon’s quarters due to the loss of her own.
Leliana led two of her agents into the room. The heat of her glare raised the temperature in the room significantly. Cullen felt sweat gather at the back of his neck. He raised his hand to wipe it away.

“I have found evidence that Hanna was indeed framed for the murders of the previous horsemaster and caretaker.” She spoke and her voice was like ice. There was a gasp and Hanna gave one of the agents a look of recognition.

“You.” She pointed across the table.

“The merchant dwarf paid me 15 sovereigns to recommend and lend Nickel to Hanna. I didn’t know about the murders.” Hanna looked at him confused. “I told him Nickel was mad. He said you whispered to horses and Nickel would take to you.”

“You gave me a crazy horse for 15 what?” Hanna looked to Josephine and then Mahanon. “I actually don’t know how much that is.”

“It’s a lot of money to me.” the agent answered. Leliana pinched his ear and maneuvered him to the wall, giving him a look that dared him to run away. He didn’t speak again.

Hanna looked to the other agent. “So, I’m guessing you were a part of the plot as well?”

“Your friend, the dwarf…”

“He was never my friend.” She interrupted coolly.

“In any case, he paid me to spread mint along the road to attract Nickel. She loves the smell of mint and will always chase down the smell to eat some fresh mint leaves.” The woman looked up at Hanna. “I’m sorry. I heard your ride had been very rough. I thought the dwarf would release the horse to roam wild. I had no idea…” Leliana put a not so gentle hand on the agent's shoulder.

“That’s enough. Take your leave and wait for me in my tent.” She addressed the pair and they left shivering in fear.

“What happened?” Cassandra asked. Her eyes were quite a bit softer. Cullen had tried to share what little he had gleaned from Hanna’s explanation in the cave.

As Hanna told the story of following Cullen, then the ride on Nickel, and her templar captors, Mahanon’s hand moved to her back. He was rubbing soothing circles into her back as she described the fear she felt about having a vision unexpectedly. At the betrayal she felt when Frodin found her. From the way she leaned into Mahanon, it was a welcome gesture.

Cullen couldn’t focus on the story. He looked away from them to free himself. Cassandra looked at him, concern for his health flashed in her eyes. He waved it off and glared at a marker on the map instead.

“Then, I escaped from the cage by spooking their horses. The crash knocked me out. I don’t remember killing them, but I must have. Maybe I hit my head. Anyway the next thing I remember clearly was Cullen taking care of my wounds in the cave.”

Cullen knew Hanna was lying. She very clearly discussed the implications of her illness with him. She omitted several details from their night together in the cave. She lied smoothly. Cullen was entranced, earlier she was all giggles and blushes. Now she was serious and bluffing. Once again, she tricked him with an act of innocence.

He knew that she knew exactly what happened. He looked at her in a new light. If she could so
easily lie about this, what else was she lying about. If she was lying here, when she told him the truth in the cave, she didn’t trust at least one person in this room. He wondered then for the first time if she trusted anyone in this room to tell any of the whole truth. The implications of this discovery were far reaching and could affect Leliana’s plan for her.

The Nightingale would uncover the truth Maker save Hanna when she did.

****

Hanna avoided looking directly at Cullen for several reasons. His scar would drive her to distraction and she would fall apart drooling all over the map. His voice was alluring and looking at him would make him talk to her, see above result. Most importantly, she was going to have to sell a boldface lie in front of him. The rest of the advisors would not be so understanding to have a mage that lost track of over an hour of her day where she murdered five people. She would either end up dead or in a cage for Leliana to poke and prod.

Otherwise known as, #1 on the list of shit Hanna didn’t want to do today.

The breakthrough with Mahanon would mean nothing. It was also around the time that Mahanon decided that he wanted to have his hand on her. He reminded her that he missed physical contact with another in a whisper. Hanna smiled and welcomed the gesture of friendship. She hoped it was friendship. She did not want to have that conversation with Manny.

Make that #2.

It was upsetting to see that there were agents of the inquisition that were paid off to aid in her kidnapping. However, she knew that the agent’s meant her no harm. They were looking out for their own. She understood. Hanna hoped she could stop Leliana from being too hard on the unfortunate agents.

Cullen looked away from her as she told the story, and she wondered if he knew that she was going to lie. It made the comforting motions of Manny’s hand on her back all the more welcome.

“That’s” Cullen spoke up and Hanna gave him a look. She gave him her best puppy dog, please don’t tell on me eyes.

“Oh, please do tell about the night you spent together.” Manny conspired with a smile to Leliana.

“It wasn’t like that at all. We talked about my life on Earth. I told him about some of my worst days as a soldier. He told me some of his worst days as a templar. We slept and then woke up shortly before being rescued by the inquisition’s finest.” Hanna bluffed. Her heart was racing. She didn’t want Cullen getting into trouble for wanting to kiss her. Or whatever more was promised in that cave.

Hanna chanced a glance in his direction. Cullen looked gutted. She hoped that she could reconcile with him. Explain that she didn’t trust the other advisors to ignore the dangers of her condition.

With her report finished, Hanna was absolved of the murders of the horsemaster and the caretaker. The Nightingale planned a full investigation into the presence of templars and trade of red lyrium right next door to Haven. Josephine told Hanna she would look into any Tevinter Magisters who had traveled to Ferelden and disappeared without a trace. Mahanon announced his plan to leave in two days to the storm coast back through the Hinterlands and finally Redcliffe. He intended to bring Cassandra, Varric, Solas, and Vivienne.

And Hanna.
“That is quite a large party to take on such a long journey, Herald.” Cullen advised against it.

“My retainer Bartolomé, will not take lightly to me going on a journey without him.” Hanna tried not to sound too upset. She didn’t want to go with Manny, but mostly because she wanted to make preparations at Haven for the attack she saw in her most recent vision.

“Then he is welcome to join us.” Manny turned to Cullen. “I will bring those best suited to a diplomatic meeting in Redcliffe. If you are so worried, you come with us.” Manny taunted. He knew Cullen couldn’t leave his responsibilities in Haven behind for what promised to be a weeks long trip.

Cullen made a disgruntled noise, but otherwise ignored the taunt.

“Why two days?” Cassandra asked.

“I have commissioned Harritt to make some armor and weapons for the trip and he told me they would be ready in two days.” Mahanon shrugged it off, but he sounded so official. Hanna wondered if he knew he was being fashioned into a leader in these meetings with the weight of current events on his shoulders.

“If that is all we are to discuss. I adjourn this meeting.” Cassandra formally ended the meeting. Manny turned to talk to Hanna, but she pushed passed him with a pat on the shoulder.

“Leliana, wait…” The woman in purple turned. “About those agents...you know they didn’t know right? I didn’t know, and I lived with Frodin. They…” Hanna stuttered when Leliana’s eyes met hers. “Don’t deserve to be punished.”

Anger. Leliana’s body language was clearly one of anger. When she spoke, it turned Hanna’s spine to ice. She felt fragile and on the cusp of shattering.

“There are precedents to be set and examples to be made. We must have a reputation against this kind of accidental betrayal. Unless you want to carry the burden of their punishment, Hanna, their fate is not up to you.” Leliana had a hard set to her eyes, but for the first time Hanna saw how tired she was. The famed Nightingale had lost too much and the depression was eating her up inside. Hanna felt a strange kind of pity.

“So be it.” Hanna said, unwavering.

“Excuse me?” Leliana asked with a chuckle. Hanna had caught her off guard. She guessed that not many people willingly stepped into the nightingale’s line of fire.

“I said,” Hanna cleared her throat, “I will take on the punishment.” Leliana gave her a look that wanted to set her on fire. “I do not fear it, if it is truly a just consequence.” Hanna returned fire. “However, as I do believe it likely to be unjust, I will take it on in spite of my fear.”

“Oh, Maker.” Cassandra spoke placing a hand on Leliana’s chest and pushing her backwards out of the room.

“Why would you do that?” Cullen spoke his voice raised in pitch with his confusion.

“They made the mistake of getting paid for the wrong odd job. Nothing more, nothing less. Neither of those kids is far out of their parent’s house. They were surviving. I can not fault them for that. I tried to intercede, and Leliana gave me a choice. I chose. I hope she can live with the consequences.” Hanna said before following the Seeker and the Spy.

Mahanon was shocked, Josephine aghast. Cullen ran after them.
“This is ridiculous, Leliana. They are still wet behind the ears barely recruited. This is not the way she would have wanted things handled.” Cassandra was appealing to Leliana’s grief in a way Hanna couldn’t. The woman in purple turned to the seeker and let out a sound of exasperation.

“Fine have it her way. She is the wronged party in this case, but this will not interfere with how I run my network. This is neither the time or place for such ideals.” Leliana stated and the chantry became dead silent around her. Cassandra tried to conceal the argument as a conversation and move it to a more appropriately private area.

“This is the only place for such ideals.” Hanna announced looking around at the various chantry clergy and town’s folk. “If ideals were only applicable when convenient they wouldn’t be so admirable. It isn’t weakness to show mercy, and it isn’t strength to ruthlessly silence the weak.” Hanna stepped down from her metaphorical soap box and walked out of the chantry.

“Hanna!” Manny ran after her and she grabbed his hand.

“Let’s get that damn drink.”

“Why, I didn’t know it would be so simple to convince you.”

By the time Hanna had downed the first so-called ale, Manny had gained quite the following. Varric came in first. He passed along the information that Leliana had calmed down and Hanna could probably trust that none of her drinks would be poisoned tonight.

“Intentionally.” Hanna corrected. “This swill you call ale wouldn’t pass for dog piss where I come from.”

“Maybe if you sweet talk the Ambassador she can have something more appealing brought in from Ostwick, Lady Hanna.” Flissa called her Lady Hanna still.

“Ah, Flissa, after the third I can’t even remember Ostwick.” Hanna winked at Manny and Varric.

“Smooth Sunshine. The Iron Lady was right in the Chantry. You can’t lie worth nugshit.”

“With any luck, I’ll forget Vivienne too.” Barty walked in at that particular moment and sat down next to his charge.

“I see that you have found multiple distractions from your training, My Lady.” Barty spoke with such a distinguished old man’s accent that Hanna sat up and saluted with her right hand half-heartedly.

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“I wish you didn’t do such strange things in public, My Lady.” Barty drawled out.

“Sir, you know you like it deep down, sir.” Hanna startled when Blackwall and Sera pulled up a chair almost simultaneously.

“Sounds like the life of the party is over here.” Blackwall situated himself beside Varric and Hanna laughed.

“What, this lot? I thought you said it was a party.” Sera smirked and pulled on Blackwall’s beard.

Hanna learned a lot she didn’t know about Thedas at that table. There was a card game sort of like poker with bullshit extra rules called ‘Wicked Grace’. She promised to let Varric teach it to her on the road. Sera, and most elves, couldn’t hold their liquor worth anything. Manny was a stubborn
exception to the rule. Blackwall was a mopy drunk.

Varric liked telling stories, especially with embellishments. He also had a memory like a whip and asked questions about Cullen and a night in a cave. Hanna decided to try and distract him with a song from home. It was a song she enjoyed before it had been played to death on the radio all summer. Somehow it fit the recent events of Thedas well enough she couldn’t ignore it.

“Sing the song with the cups!” Came a cheer from behind her.

“Please do the ‘Some Nights’ one!” Shit they were making requests.

“I will sing a new song. But I need to borrow your lute and practice some chords first.” Hanna announced before turning to the bard. Maryden was kind enough to help Hanna find the notes she needed. In the end, it wasn’t too different from the cello or violin. The song she wanted just varied back and forth between chord progressions and it would feel feeble without it. Finally she turned to face the now packed tavern.

Hanna swallowed nervously. She hadn’t drawn such a crowd since the first night. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Solas standing by the door that led to his cabin. Cullen was sitting with Rylen who was razing him something awful. Vivienne was sitting where Hanna had been at the table with Mahanon. Undoubtedly, someone was going to notice the way the fade twisted and warped with her song. It was too late to back out. She would either have an awkward conversation about magic or Cullen. Without delay, she chose the former.

She strummed the lute carefully once and all conversation ceased. She was used to the chanting introduction of the song and thought to imitate it much slower in time with the initial lyrics.

I was left to my own devices
Many days fell away with nothing to show

And the walls kept tumbling down
In the city that we love
Great clouds roll over the hills
Bringing darkness from above

She strummed the lute in a facsimile of the song she knew from home. The lyrics clashing with the bright optimism of the accompaniment. For a moment, Hanna could picture herself singing along with the radio. As she had every road trip since she was six, she closed her eyes and let her voice shine.

But if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
Nothing changed at all?
And if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like
You’ve been here before?
How am I gonna be an optimist about this?
How am I gonna be an optimist about this?

Hanna opened her eyes and made the transition from fervent strumming back to the chord progression she was now more proficient at hitting. Solas had pushed through the crowd and was standing less than a yard away from her. His eyes were full of surprised delight. She wondered if that meant he would be the one to give her a lecture.
We were caught up and lost in all of our vices  
In your pose as the dust settled around us

And the walls kept tumbling down  
In the city that we love  
Great clouds roll over the hills  
Bringing darkness from above

Hanna repeated the chorus and felt the magic grow stronger with her acknowledgement. She could almost touch the fade through the ripples her voice created in the veil. She wondered if anyone else could see it. No one else seemed to be as intune as Solas was. His eyes followed the ripples of air she saw around her.  
Oh where do we begin?  
The rubble or our sins?  
Oh oh where do we begin?  
The rubble or our sins?

Hanna ended the song with the bridge. She felt the final repeated chorus was lost in translation without a more full accompaniment. It also felt in line with the ending of several of Maryden’s songs and sounded more natural in the moment.

The tavern roared in applause and cheers. Hanna thanked Maryden for letting her use her lute. She returned to the Herald’s table with Solas in tow.

“How did you do that?” He asked. “I haven’t seen a mage use such magics since my journeys to the furthest reaches of the fade.”

“I don’t know. I guess the veil seems thinner easier to manipulate when I sing. I didn’t even realize it was magic at first.”

“Why didn’t you tell someone?” Manny asked. “You can use your magic like this.”

“Oh yeah, here’s me running out to the field of battle singing Shakira like a Hip-Hop Valkyrie.” Hanna’s sarcasm knew no limits.

“Sure, why not?” He answered seemingly unphased.

“Because it’s stupid that’s why.”

“Never stopped you before.” Solas interjected. Hanna deadpanned. Today was give Hanna shit day. Check local listings.

The topic was shelved temporarily, mostly due to Hanna’s refusal to answer anymore questions about it until the morning. Instead, she told stories from home. Anything that came to mind, Star Wars, Superman, Batman. Slightly amended for localization purposes. After her vision became woozy and her steps faltered when walking to the outhouse or glorified shit pit, Hanna walked back to her cabin with Barty.

Only to find it occupied by another family as Frodin was no longer renting it for himself and therefore her.

“Fuck!” She shouted to no one in particular. Barty mentioned there was free lodging in the Chantry. Begrudgingly they walked in that direction only to be turned away at the door. No Vacancy. “If we have to sleep piss drunk in the stables, I am going to…” Her threat was empty.
She wanted to make a joke about being visited by Gabriel with the news that she was to bear the Son of Man for this world. Not only would Barty not get the humor from her being a woman of enormous sin, he would probably dislike her crying like a baby after reminding herself she would never have one. Which she just did. Her drunk mind couldn’t handle the sudden emotion and she started crying.

“Hey,” a voice interrupted the silence. “Are you alright?” A voice she knew full well had a deeper and more heady meaning to her less than 24 hours ago.

“I’m drunk and homeless, I’ve never been better.” She spat and vocally relived her mental journey. “I am so fucking lost and lonely. I don’t know how to get home. I want to wake up tomorrow and tell Jack about this place like it was a crazy fucking dream. I want to see my family and pet a God damned cat. I want everything to go back to being easy, Cullen.” Hanna hiccuped in her drunken rage crying.

“I wish I trusted a single person here to do what is best for me. I wish I could just tell all of my secrets.” She looked at Cullen accusingly. “Most of all, I wish I knew that I couldn’t go back for sure so that I could stop feeling so guilty for thinking your ass is fine. For thinking that you lips are soft and the way your scar is pulled when you smirk is sexy. For thinking your heart is pure and you are a delightful man.”

Barty put a consoling hand on Hanna’s back and turned her away from Cullen. He looked back over his shoulder. “It’s best everyone forgets the things she just said Commander. She’s not in the right mind.”

“No!” Hanna shouted. “This is the first time I have been in the right mind in almost a month. I will not have you covering this up for me like a messy child, Barty. I…I’m supposed to be better than that. I’m sorry Cullen. I’m sorry for lying before at the meeting. I’m sorry for saying that it didn’t happen. I don’t know how to convince you that I am worthwhile and perhaps I’m not, but I had to at least apologize for what I said.” With that she turned and was led away by Barty. They found an open room in a family’s cabin and rented it for the remainder of the night.

“Thank you, Barty for helping me find a place to lay my head.”

“Think nothing of it, My Lady.” He patted her brusquely on the head before laying down on the floor beside her bed.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know when, but very soon I will be getting very busy and my once or twice a week updates will become less common. I am trying to get as much writing done as I can, and I promise I will try to keep up. Thank you to everyone who comments and leaves kudos. It warms my heart so very much.
Hanna woke up groggy in an unfamiliar house. Her hangover pounded like hell and she could hardly stand to open her eyes when she sat up. She looked beside her to the elder sleeping man. He reminded her of a buff Ian McKellen. In plain clothes, you could tell he was a warrior. Lightly tanned skin hewn with pink, white and angry red scars. He snored like her American grandfather, sawing logs through an inescapably large nose.

“Okay, Bart. You sleep off the night. I’m going to go find us a real place to stay.” Hanna whispered, silently cursing her inability to leave a note. She decided to ask the family to share her message with him when he awoke.

Hanna was not surprised that she had slept in her clothing. It was only with a grimace that she withstood the horrible stench of sweat, booze, and disgust that enveloped her. She was shocked to see a mop of blonde hair inexplicably attached to a giggling child at the doorway to their room of the cabin.

“You’re drunk.” the little demon of spite spoke in that childish voice kids put on in innocence. It was too loud for Hanna’s addled brain.

“No,” Hanna corrected. “I’m hungover.”

“Whatsat?”

“It means I was drunk yesterday.” Hanna chuckled at her attempt at a reference to School of Rock. No one in Thedas had a concept of what a movie was. Much less a Jack Black ‘comedy’.

Still the girl laughed and turned to lead a regretful Hanna down the hallway.

Surprise filled Hanna when she saw the main entryway held several children sitting facing the owner of the house at the back of the room. She couldn’t shake the surprise and confusion that came from seeing a classic schoolhouse in action. Upon seeing Hanna’s jaw on the floor, the teaching woman finished her lesson and approached Hanna.

“You look like you slept on a sack of potatoes.”

“I feel like it too. Thank you for letting us stay here last minute.” Hanna meant to thank the woman and leave, but she couldn’t alay her curiosity. “Is this type of thing normal?” She gestured vaguely to the group of twelve children in various states of attention to the task assigned to them.

The woman shook her head. “Most of these kids are displaced, orphaned, or abandoned. I teach them for the chantry. To teach is to glorify the Maker.” She looked at Hanna. “I have heard that you are illiterate, my lady.”
Hanna choked on her breath. “Not quite, I just learned in another language is all.”

“Another language, yet unable to write or read common. Might as well be the same.”

“Perhaps I will find time to learn, thank you for your hospitality again.” Hanna left quickly unable to swallow down her embarrassment. The woman was right. She may as well be illiterate here. How ignoble of her.

Hanna walked with her head down to the chantry. She had been pretty damn drunk last night, but not too drunk to know that she had shouted some nonsense at Cullen and walked away. She really hoped to avoid another confrontation with him before leaving with Mahanon.

“Going somewhere?”

“Speak of the devil…”

“You weren’t talking out loud.”

“It’s a saying. If you speak of the devil then he shall appear.”

“Who’s the devil? Sounds like he has some solid timing.”

“The emperor of all evil in my world.”

“You allow people like that to hold power.” Manny said with a way too suave grin on his face. Hanna sighed in defeat.

“I’m going to ask Josie about finding new quarters.”

“Nonsense, my cabin is far too large for me to stay in alone. You and Bartolomé will have to stay with me.”

“You only have one bed.”

“Then I will request that two be placed in one of the rooms.”

“You want me to sleep in the same room with Barty.” Hanna felt affronted. She and Barty had shared a room in Frodin’s cabin and the old fart generally assured that he wasn’t far from her whenever possible. Hanna predicted that the old man would be upset with her for leaving his side even to go to the chantry...wait. She hadn’t told the teacher to let Barty know where she had gone.

“I only have two rooms.”

“#1 on reasons I should just get inquisition appointed quarters.” Hanna swallowed. The real reason was she still hadn’t parsed out Manny’s intentions for their relationship.

“We’re leaving in the morning anyway. I’ll get the beds sorted out. You go and enjoy the sights or something. I hear that you are nearly brought to distraction at the sight of a certain templar.”

“What…” She didn’t finish her statement before Manny turned her away from the chantry doors and patted her on the butt.

“Shoo.”
“How dare you?!”

“If you want to see Cullen so bad, fine walk in there.” Manny said with a sly expression. How he knew about her embarrassing drunken confession, and why he wasn’t angry about the lying part, she didn’t ask. She just turned and walked away without another sound.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a little girl with blonde hair. She followed the flash without much thought for why. Then the girl started running through the crowds of people. Of course, Hanna had to follow now. Finally the girl stopped running when they came to a large group of kids. Ages ranging from teenagers to toddlers.

“What are we doing out here?” Hanna tutted.

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Cullen spent the night too excited to sleep much. The confession of her feelings. The reasoning behind her conflicting behavior. The apology for lying. It was everything he had wanted from Hanna. The suspicious part of his brain told him that it was a game. However, for the first time since he met Hanna, Cullen ignored the feeling.

She wanted to kiss him. She thought he was handsome. Hanna.

It was a satisfying thought on its own.

The idea that she was conflicted about starting a deeper relationship with him because of her previous relationship. It meant only that he would have to win her over. Simple. Inexplicably, something about him attracted her, so he was already some of the way there.

He finally left his cot after a not very restful sleep. Donning his armor and mantle, he trained the fresh recruits before leaving them to Rylen sometime after he saw Blackwall leave his quarters by the blacksmith’s cabin. Hanna would likely rise with a headache and head to the chantry for a free meal. Cullen would inconspicuously wait for her there. He would go to discuss the correspondence from the king of Fereldan about the situation in Redcliffe with Josephine. Then watch for Hanna to come through the broth line. Perfect plan.

He even saw Hanna outside the chantry doors. Halfway through the door, a familiar shiny green hand halted her progress. Cullen clenched his fist. This wasn’t the first time Manhanon had stepped between Hanna and Cullen since they came back from the cave.

The herald was a frustrating elf.

“Do you think the king would see an alliance with the mages as an act of war?”

“Maybe.” Cullen spoke blatantly watching the interaction between Hanna and the Herald. Hanna pointed into the chantry and tried to walk forward before Mahanon turned her around and spanked her. Cullen didn’t know how he contained himself.

“Would it be acceptable if we changed the inquisition’s motto to ‘Death to Alistair’?”

“What?” Cullen’s eyes drew sharply to the Antivan woman before he realized his rude behavior. “I apologize, I would hope that the King would acknowledge that our mission is to set the world right.”

“I will confer with Leliana, she travelled with King Alistair for a year, she may know how he would react in such a situation.” Cullen hoped he hadn’t upset the Ambassador. She probably knew how to
Cullen walked to exit the chantry and was similarly halted by one shiteating grin and Dalish accented voice.

“Going somewhere, Commander?” the elf asked lightly.

“I don’t report to you, Herald.” Cullen replied smoothly. Mahanon chuckled.

“Yes, but you are chasing my favorite person. You don’t have the best history, and I’m worried about what you might do when you find her.” Mahanon’s expression was serious, but his tone was still light and casual.

“You’ve spent too much time with Leliana. I do not play games, Herald.”

“You can deny the game exists, Commander.” Mahanon said cryptically. “All the better, for you will lose.”

Cullen was taken aback by the clear challenge. Was Mahanon also looking for Hanna’s affection? “What is your goal?”

“For her to win and you to lose.” Mahanon smiled and walked away leaving a fuming Cullen behind. He had to catch up to Hanna and confess his desire to court her. Mahanon was younger and had obvious appeal, but Cullen was sure that he still held the advantage.

Cullen asked as casually as he could if anyone had seen Hanna go by. He ran into a very distressed Bartolomé. The man told Cullen when he awoke Hanna had disappeared. He was concerned that another charge had been taken from him. Cullen promised the older warrior that he would find Hanna and assured him that he had seen her only moments ago outside the chantry.

“Hey, Curly. You look distressed, you should really get some rest.”

“We are looking for Hanna. Have you seen her?”

Varric looked at Cullen with a very distinct what did that girl do now?

“Sure, I’ve seen her. Actually, I was going to fetch Mahanon, because it’s just too damn cute.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, follow me. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Cullen looked at Bartolomé. Bartolomé looked at Cullen. Both men shrugged and followed the dwarf.

First, he saw a group of kids up on the hill behind the trebuchets. As they got closer he recognized one of the sitting children was in fact Hanna. Two little girls were playing with her hair and she held a lute in her lap and strung a song and the children clapped along.

“I’m gonna be a mighty king, so enemies beware.” She sang in a slightly nasal/child voice. And then changed to a more proper tone Cullen had heard from various nobles.

“Well, I’ve never seen a king of beasts with quite so little hair.”

It was then that Cullen realized she was putting on a performance. Strumming along happily and singing about a lion king. He thought about his lion helm and the last time he had worn it. As the song wore one, she encouraged the kids to sing along the repetitive ‘I just can’t wait to be king’ line. She stood up as the song came to a climax strumming as the kids voices became obnoxious.
She sat down abruptly and tapped the body of the lute. It was a signal the kids respected. Children and teenagers alike sat as she continued telling the story.

“So after ditching the bird, Simba and Nala go to the elephant graveyard. Elephants are these large animals with huge bones that come out from their mouths like this.” She demonstrated bodily. “But they didn’t know that it’s where the hyena’s lived. Vicious wild dogs, Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed threatened the lion cubs.”

At that moment, Hanna’s eyes rose to meet Cullen’s. She didn’t blush, but she did look away quickly and lose her place.

“Where was I oh yes. They taunted Simba that while his father was terrifying he wasn’t. Just as they were about to eat the cubs, Mufasa jumps between the dogs and the cubs.” Cullen couldn’t help it, he was just as interested in the story as the toddler that sat at Hanna’s feet.

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Hanna couldn’t remember how she had talked herself into telling the story of the lion king. The emotional roller coaster of a story drew a crowd of adults as well as children shortly after Cullen arrived with Varric and Bartolomé.

She made sure to make Mufasa’s death as sad and solemn as possible so that when she sang Hakuna Matata it would be awe inspiring. She did her best with voices and to explain the strange creatures of Earth’s savannahs. When Scar finally died at the end, she had adults cheering and clapping with the children.

As she spoke and sang, Hanna tried to watch Cullen out of the corner of her eye. She didn’t want to chance full on eye contact. He didn’t seem upset by her previous night’s confession. He was rapt in the story and soon found a box to sit on and spoke quietly with Barty and Varric. Eventually more companions joined and the Herald stopped with the group before scooting in next to the blonde girl who was repeatedly braiding and unbraiding her hair.

When she did finish with the happy ending of Simba and Nala reigning, Hanna stood and bowed to the cheers and claps. It was satisfying to tell a great disney story and she would have to do it again sometime.

“Oh, I can not wait for this trip with you Hanna. Do you think Maryden will let you borrow the lute?” Varric spoke up and Hanna shook her head.

“I’m not even that good with it. If I could ever get this phone to work I could play the real music…” She looked around at the slowly dispersing crowd. They chattered happily. Her voice ‘magic’ made the air feel electric. Hanna realized this was the first time she didn’t feel open tension or animosity in the air. Her singing and playing, as basic and unpracticed as it had been, had made a positive impact.

Then a thought hit her, if her voice had magic to it when she sang. Maybe she could sing battery life back into her phone. Not now, but it was worth a shot.

Hanna was so excited by the prospect that she didn’t notice a certain blonde commanding presence until she had backed into him. She turned to apologize, and when she saw his distinct chestplate, she backed away slowly. Hanna fought the urge to blush.

“Are you alright?” Cullen asked.

Hanna tried to choke out a ‘yes’ but it came out as a high pitched “Uh-huh.”
“That was a very interesting story. You had me entranced.” Cullen complimented her as gracefully as if he always spoke to crazy stalker women like they were actually people.

Hanna laughed nervously. “In a good way right? Not in a throw the scary mage woman in the dungeons, right?”

Cullen laughed and it eased the tension in Hanna’s chest. Maybe she hadn’t completely ruined everything with Cullen. “No, of course not.” He assured Hanna. “Hanna, I wanted to speak with you.”

So much for easing tension. Hanna felt herself pale. “Oh, right, about that…”

“Hanna.” He interrupted, “Just, let me say this, then you can explain yourself.”

Cullen took a step back and stood up straight. He used his left hand to adjust his armor and his right gripped the back of his neck. He looked adorable. Hanna steeled herself for the worst, but a little part deep inside hoped he would say that he liked her back.

Varric’s eyes were rapt on the drama before him. He whispered something under his breath about wanting to take notes for later. When Mahanon stepped forward to talk to Hanna, Varric put a hand out stopping the elf.

“Hanna Cooper, I would like to ask your permission to court your affections. You are a beautiful woman, a steadfast, talented warrior…” His voice trailed off, but he brought himself back with a shake of his head. “I understand that you will travel with the herald, but when you return, I would hope that you might give me a chance to win you over.”

A clash of armor followed Cullen’s pronouncement, as a certain Seeker of Truth swooned. Bartolomé, who just happened to be standing beside Cassandra steadied the woman. Cassandra explained quite loudly that her armor was too bulky and she overheated.

Suddenly.

Sure, Cassandra.

Uh-huh.

“Hold the phone, er… pardon my Earth phrase.” Hanna recovered. “Are you publicly announcing that you want to…” Hanna could no longer restrain her blush. “You want to court me. Like dating.” The tiny little part of her waiting for Cullen to say that bloomed with his confirming nod. “Like talking and doing things together and kissing.”

“Among other things.” Cullen said with a devilish smirk that he had just learned less than 24 hours ago drove her insides crazy. Hanna smiled back.

“I think I would like that.” She answered. Cullen turned to look at Mahanon. The elf was currently fighting with Varric to interrupt the confession session. The commander gave the herald the most triumphant look. Mahanon let out a frustrated sound of anger. Varric pushed the elf back further.

“Now kiss!” Varric shouted chuckling at the struggle.

“I’m afraid there are some matters to discuss between my lady and I.” Bartolomé intervened. “Besides courting can wait until after Redcliffe. The commander said so himself.”

Bartolomé escorted Hanna to an empty training field.
“My Lady…” He began.

“She corrected. Barty gestured with a wave that he would address her as it pleased.

“Hanna, before we go I must ask you some questions.”

“Fire.” She acquiesced.

“Excuse me?”

Hanna rolled her eyes. This was becoming exhausting. “It's a phrase, meaning in this circumstance I will answer any question you ask. Like fire away. Do as you will.”

“Ah..” The old man grumbled. “My Lady…” He cleared his throat. “Hanna, have you taken a life before.” Hanna didn’t answer at first. She felt a glaze coat her eyes as she stared past Bartolomé.

“I have.”

“Not to be boorish or belabor the fact, but you have made it quite clear that your day to day life before coming here, was more cushioned. When we go out on this journey with the Herald...it is likely that you will have to kill again.” His gaze was hard, but Hanna felt that he was coming from a good place.

“Barty, it is kind of you to worry. I admit, killing people is not my favorite activity.” Hanna thought of her phrasing very carefully. “Where I came from, weapons were more advanced. They put distance between you and the person you killed. At the end of the day, the people we kill are people. The guilt sucks. But I also realize that the people I protect are infinitely more important to me.” She looked at him, then back to the gates of Haven. “I will do anything in my power to keep these people safe.”

“Then we should quickly train and retire early. We will leave first thing in the morning.”

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Mahanon was steaming in his cabin. On one of the beds he’d had Josephine place in his extra room sat the equipment he had ordered from Harrit. A light armor coat and pants he ordered in a pattern to remind Hanna of her home. The dye cost extra and looked atrocious. However, the way Hanna’s eyes lit up when she talked about cloths from home. Clothes from her time in the military. It was worth the expense.

Clipped to the belt of the pants were two sheathed daggers enchanted with poison and life stealing enchantments. The bow he requisitioned lay on the bed beside the armor. It was built to improve accuracy and rate of fire it glowed orange with a flame enchantment.

He couldn’t name the emotion he felt. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Hanna to be happy, and if it had to be with Cullen…Mahanon reasoned that there were worse men for her. It was hard to justify his mission to block Cullen, when Hanna had looked so damn happy for his confession.

He didn’t really understand. Cullen had been so cold towards Hanna. When he returned from the Hinterlands and Val Royeaux, she had been pissed at Cullen. Mahanon felt protective of her. Plain and simple he wanted to save her from the heartache that would come from being with Cullen.

Mahanon reasoned himself in circles. If Hanna was happy with Cullen, he shouldn’t step in between them. She would probably end up hurt by Cullen and that might cause issues. Mahanon decided in the end to set her up with someone else and continue to block Cullen’s advances from the shadows.
“Manny? Can we come in?” She knocked and called through the door.

“Of course. My house is yours.” He opened the door.

“Mi casa, su casa.” She spoke. Then studied his reaction. “You know…no, you don’t.”

“My La…” Bartolomé cleared his throat and started again at a glare from Hanna. “Hanna it really isn’t proper for us to share a room.”

“Didn’t stop us last night.” She retorted. “Can’t stop, won’t stop. If you don’t like it go pitch a tent.”

“As you wish.”

Mahanon looked to Hanna and took her hand leading her to the bed.

“Woah, there wonder boy, what are you…” She gasped. “Are those fatigues? Aw man that’s so cool. And these daggers” She unsheathed one and tested the balance. “It’s enchanted!”

“The bow too.” Mahanon nodded.

“Oh man, you are the best. No lie you are my best friend in the entire world. This must have cost a fortune.”

“If you’re gonna ride with the best, you gotta have the best equipment.”

Hanna turned and hugged Mahanon close. “Thank you. So much.”

Mahanon patted her back. “Just stay alive and use it well. I don’t want to have to answer to anyone about why I got our ‘oracle’ killed.” He gave her a solemn smile and dismissed himself to his own room.

Mahanon slept and dreamt of the aravels and his keeper singing the young elves to sleep.
Wow time got away from me. I think the rest of this story is going to be very long chapters very spread out. With school starting up again, I lose all of my free time. That's the teacher life. I apologize for long waits between chapters, but ce la vie.

It took over a week to travel to the Storm Coast to meet up with the mercenary group Krem had advertised in Haven.

Hanna was...irritated.

It took one week of stopping constantly to help every refugee find a safe place to stay. Every. God forsaken. Refugee.

Hanna suddenly understood that Manny may literally be savior incarnate, but that didn’t mean every refugee was in need of complete protection. Vivienne tended to share Hanna’s impatience to keep moving.

One week of awkward conversations around a campfire. Varric would laugh and tell bawdy jokes to Vivienne’s dismay. Cassandra would make scoffing sounds when addressed, and would pull Mahanon away to discuss the planned route. Solas would wander away from the camp, only to return and meditate on the things he had seen in the fade. With Hanna’s propensity for pop culture and general Earth culture references, it felt like a year.

Barty was helpful in that he would listen to her ramble at night in the tent. She would just talk about home to remind herself of things on Earth. Things like waking up in the morning and using indoor plumbing or going to a grocery store and all of the convenience of a single store for all needs. Her family and friends, what they were like. How she met Risa. The longer she stayed the further and further away all those things seemed. After several months in Thedas, Hanna wondered if she would be able to walk out of this back into her old life.

Not that she was living a particularly successful life here.

Varric laughed at her flailing attempts to learn to ride horseback solo. Manny assured her that he didn’t mind sharing the saddle and Beauty didn’t mind the extra load. For about an hour every night, while she nursed her saddle worn thighs, Varric would attempt to teach her to read and write the common tongue. He would then test her choice pieces from his smutty manuscript for a project he swore he would never work on again. Cassandra was either eternally delighted, or infernally disgusted. Hanna couldn’t tell. The woman exuded an air of fuck-off that discouraged her from asking. Regardless, Hanna would read the words aloud, or worse sound it out like a first grader…

“Then, he hilted his sword in her qu-i, qu-iver” Hanna turned beet red. “I am not reading this.”

“Go on, you’ve almost got it.”
“Varric, I am not broadcasting your boudoir porn. Manny’s basically a child. And I am only so gullible.”

“Damn, there goes tonight’s entertainment.” He smiled a wicked smile. “Anyone up for a little Wicked Grace.”

Varric knew he could win Hanna over with Wicked Grace. Only because she was able to channel her tells into codes only she could understand. ‘Homerun, boondoggle, Jimminy Cricket!’ These words don’t exist and Thedas and had no context outside of her head. Well, that and the Hero of Fereldan wherever she was off to.

In the end, the only people who wanted to play with her were Varric and Solas, because they were so intrigued by her habit of looking at her hand and nonchalantly stating nonsense. Which was lucky for Hanna, because playing cards was becoming one of only two things she enjoyed about travel in Thedas.

The other was the violin that Varric had somehow bartered from an old man at an inn. He may have seen her unshielded shock and amazement that an instrument she actually learned how to play on Earth was here in nonsense medieval land. She was able to safely strap the instrument to her back without blocking her access to her quiver if the need for battle may ever strike by surprise.

And strike it did.

Bandits, mercenaries, weird Tevinter mages with even stranger missives for Redcliffe. What were vints doing in Redcliffe? Lord knows. Did it have something to do with the Tevinter Mage that fucked up space and time to bring her here? She was dying to find out.

When they finally arrived at the Storm Coast, Harding was already there. She provided Manny with instructions to make an amulet to challenge the ‘Blades of Hessarian’, directions to the coast to immediately see what the ‘Bull’s Chargers’ might have to offer the Inquisition, and a sarcastic weather report.

“Sounds like the party has already started.” Varric quipped when an explosion clapped through the camp.

“I hope The Iron Bull doesn’t mind, but I forgot a gift basket.” Manny jumped at the opportunity for action and kicked his horse into a gallop. Hanna had to wonder where the dude kept all that energy.

Mahanon kept secrets poorly. It was no secret that the mark was painful. He had nightmares, so he probably didn’t sleep all that well. Add to that the fact that the elf was often the last to sleep and the first to rise...Hanna predicted another conversation in the future. She hoped to catch it before it could reach ‘avalanche level’.

Mahanon leapt from his horse with Beauty still slowing to a stop. Hanna watched him fly through the air and land in the chaotic battlefield. Sword slashing to take advantage of the momentum from his fall, his shield slid from his back and into his hand naturally. Hanna pushed off of the horse with two hands on the saddle. Beauty quickly retreated towards the camp. Hanna watched the battlefield to push the numbers advantage they had with the mercenary group. She and Solas had found an easy partnership in battle as she would stay back with him firing arrows and using her daggers when enemies get too close. For his part, Solas would cast protective barriers when she entered close combat and would shout warnings if someone sneak up on her weaker left side.

Vivienne worked well with Varric, though she used her enchanted sword for close quarters combat. Varric was very control oriented he liked to lay traps and turn the tide of a battle from the
background his partnership with Vivienne gave him time to set up in the heat of battle.

Mahanon, Barty, Cassandra, and the Iron Bull were in the center of the fray. They took the brunt of the hits and needed almost constant barriers from Solas. Mahanon and Cassandra had a smooth system of teaming up to quickly dispatch heavily armored enemies. Barty did not work with anyone, he moved across the battlefield mopping up stragglers and being a badass old man. Similarly the Iron Bull spun around the enemies as a tornado of destruction. He worked alone, but would attempt to set up allies with weakened and bloodied foes.

The battle was a blur to Hanna, she fell into the rhythm of her beating heart as adrenaline worked it’s way through her veins. The fight was short, most of the blood spilt was on the other side. Hanna avoided looking around at the mess. Dead bodies littered the beach. Blood ran thin over weather flattened rocks. The scene was visceral and almost painful for her to view. Hanna tried to fight the unease that bit a her senses, as she walked over to join Mahanon, Cassandra, and the Iron Bull. This was going to be her new normal, she had to bite the bullet and suck it up.

“So you’re with the inquisition, huh? Glad you could make it.” Hanna listened in on the conversation, and watched the tall, horned man talk. She didn’t really listen, but focused on the look of this other strange race of humanoid person talked like he didn’t have very prominent bull horns on his head.

“You’re the Iron Bull, I presume.” Manny responded to whatever the man had said.

“Yeah, the horns usually give it away.” Iron Bull gestured with a swing of his head for Manny to walk with him. Cassandra stayed back, but Hanna followed. Something about the large man didn’t feel safe. Like he knew more about Manny than he let on.

After reintroducing and taking a report from Krem, Bull gave Manny an offer and Manny accepted blindly. No questions asked. Bull turned to address Hanna.

“Do you always hover like this or is it me?” There was something he wanted to tell Manny without her hovering. Fat chance.

“Oh, it’s you. Got to watch out for the Herald.” She gave him the CO glare that she had perfected years ago. She seen lesser men shrink beneath it. Iron Bull gave her a dismissive wave.

“Ah, so you’re one of those religious types, didn’t peg you for that.” He laughed.

“Hanna, I’m sure it’s fine.” Mahanon looked like a 7th grader at the mall with his mom.

“And I’m sure he has an ulterior motive for joining the Inquisition. Which you didn’t even investigate. Ask questions dammit.” Hanna grumbled. Mahanon was about to respond with some similar snarky young adult sass.

“She’s got a point,”Bull interrupted “ I have another reason to join. Might be helpful, might piss you off. Ever hear of the Ben-Hassrath?”

Manny looked at her with a shrug. He shook his head to the negative. Bull looked at her. Hanna gave him a grumpy look. She didn’t know much about qunari. Other than the vague description Leliana had given her when she asked how the qunari were different from the other races of Thedas.

“It’s a qunari order. They handle information, loyalty, security, all of it. Spies basically.” He smirked.

“Or well, we’re spies. We concerned about the breach. Magic out of control like that could cause chaos everywhere. I’ve been ordered to join the inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and report back.”
Manny looked at her. She saw the look on his face. He empathized with Iron Bull’s mission. Hanna still felt distrusting.

“But I also get reports from Ben-Hassrath all over Orlais. If you hire me, I will share those reports with your people.”

And Hanna was sold. Leliana would love the additional information. On one condition.

“Fine, you win.” She told Mahanon, then turned to Bull and gave her condition. “You run all of your reports passed Leliana before you send them. I don’t want you giving out just any information.” Hanna huffed and walked back to camp just up the hill, cleaning her daggers on her leg on the way up. As she passed bodies she reclaimed her arrows, but somehow kept a very quick pace.

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“She is something else.” Bull let out a low whistle.

“She is...intensely protective of me. She has been since we fell out of the breach.” Manny crossed his arms. “I’m Mahanon, by the way. Some people call me the Herald of Andraste, but I’d prefer Mahanon.”

“It’s good to meet you Mahanon, I look forward to working with you.” Bull turned away and shouted. “Alright, Chargers let's pack it up.”

“But we’ve only just opened the kegs, with axes.”

Mahanon walked back to camp giggling.

He reflected on Hanna’s sentiments regarding his trust in Iron Bull. It was almost automatic that the large man made him feel at ease. Maybe it was the foreignness of him being a qunari. Mahanon acknowledged that he still didn’t feel at ease surrounded by humans. Reflecting on the differences that made Bull seem trustworthy, Mahanon realized that he hadn’t trusted Hanna from the get go. Maybe she was jealous.

He caught up to Hanna on the outskirts of the fairly large main Storm Coast Camp. Several tents lined the western side of the camp. The eastern side was made up of various crafting benches and workspaces for scouts to write reports back to Cullen, Josephine, and Leliana. The center of the camp was open with three separate open fire pits to stave off the cold of the never ending rain.

“Hanna, wait.”

Hanna jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. She didn’t turn around to face him. Instead, she kept walking and put her head down.

“Hanna, what’s wrong?” Mahanon reached out for her hand and held it tightly. He smoothed reassuring circles in between her thumb and forefinger as she had done to soothe him in the past. “If you don’t want to talk to me about it, fine.” His voice came out accusatory, but he deflated. “It hurts that you wouldn’t want to share your burdens with me like I have with you.”

Hanna hiccuped. He looked at her face it was stained red from crying. Her eyes were glassy and red.

“Oh, Hanna.” Mahanon pulled her close to him. With his arm over her shoulder, he walked her to his tent. He handed her a coarse blanket to dry off and warm up. She held it close to her, but didn’t make any move to do so. “Let’s get you dry.” He took the blanket from her and tried to mop up the rainwater that chilled her.
“How do you do it?” She asked with a scratchy voice.


“You care for all of those refugees, you trusted Bull right out the gate. Manny don’t you know how to take care of you? You have dark circles around your eyes that you didn’t have when we met. You shout out in your nightmares. I know I caused some of them, by trading places with you that time.”

“That may be true, but I’m asking about you. What do you need?”

Hanna paused, then took a deep breath. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this. I can’t…” She sat down on his cot. “I can’t keep killing people like this.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Mahanon sat next to her. “You are a great fighter.”

“I’m good at following orders.” His mind flashed back to when they first met and he teased her for the quickness with which she complied to Cassandra’s orders.

“That’s not what I meant. You are good at keeping people safe. You are good at reading the battlefield.”

“I never had to be so close to it before. I used a gun. It wasn’t nearly as bloody. I was so detached from that aspect of my job…I never had to watch as the blood shoot out from a slashed throat. I never had to touch the people I killed to retrieve arrows.” Tears flooded her eyes again. “I feel so nervous about it, Manny. I don’t want to hurt the wrong people.”

“You won’t.”

“You can’t guarantee that. You don’t know about me. You don’t know what I’ve done. What I failed to do. I lost my team once Manny, I don’t know if I can do it again. What if I…” Hanna stopped talking abruptly. Her expression changed and her voice turned to steel. “I will disappoint you. Hell I probably already have.” She stood up from the cot and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I need to go and be alone for a minute. We can talk more later.” She opened the flap and looked over her shoulder. “Next time, we need to talk about you too though.”

Mahanon swallowed. His tongue felt heavy, and he had a terrible feeling. He had already given himself over to trusting Hanna. He wanted to protect her. To help her get home. He hadn’t considered whether she trusted him. He knew she was protective, but what if that meant she was hiding things from him. Like a mother shielding a child from the horrors of the world.

He let her walk away, but now he would have to ask her. What did she mean by ‘I probably already have.’? What hadn’t she told him? What would she feel guilty about?

Mahanon went out to enjoy some fireside time with the rest of his companions. The rain had let up and a chill hung in the air where it had once been. Iron Bull and Krem joined the fireside chat with Varric, Vivienne, and Solas. About two hours later Hanna came back to join them. She didn’t speak when she joined the group, even when Varric asked why she’d missed their normal lesson time.

Hanna took out her violin. She had been so ecstatic when Varric gave it to her. She would often take it out and test the strings or fix a peg. Mahanon wondered why she hadn’t actually played the instrument. He had heard Eiren the clan craftsman play the sour/sweet instrument before he died of old age and his son Yewen, who replaced him, didn’t know how to play. Mahanon hadn’t heard someone play in well over 8 years.

“Hey, Hanna.” Bull addressed her over the fire. Mahanon hadn’t notice how quiet it was until Bull
broke the silence. “Do you know how to play, or are you just keeping it clean?”

Hanna stopped buffing the wood and raised her eyes to Bull. She sighed deeply and put the instrument down gently to her side. She stood up and walked away without saying a word.

“You shouldn’t ruffle her feathers Tiny. Sunshine’s been in a bad mood all day.”

“That so…” Bull growled low, not a sound of anger, but one that Mahanon took to mean he was thinking. Before Mahanon could ask what he was thinking about, Bull barked out a laugh. “Tiny huh? A little on the nose don’t you think?”

“That’s how I like it.” Varric and Bull sparred over a discussion of nicknames, but Mahanon wasn’t paying much attention. Instead, he turned his head to see where Hanna had gone. She was near the workbenches talking with a tall elf. Mahanon tried to remember what his name was. In the end, he was glad to remember the elf was the quartermaster for the camp.

Hanna asked him a question. He knew even from the distance because she always quirked her head to the left when she was asking someone for something. The quartermaster nodded his head and turned to a chest in his tent. He retrieved something and handed it to Hanna. It was very small.

Hanna returned to the fire pit and sat back down by her instrument.

“Glad, I didn’t scare you off.” Bull commented which was once again ignored.

Hanna pulled out the bow for the first time since she got the instrument from Varric. She took out her dagger and gently removed stray broken hairs. She blew on the bow to check for missed hairs before sheathing the dagger and pulling a little white block out of her pocket. She pulled off the lid and inside was an amber material. Hanna very carefully rubbed it on her bow. Mahanon thought about Eiren again. The man used a resin on his bow before playing as well. Hanna picked up the violin and plucked the strings and adjusted the pegs.

“I used to use a tuning fork, and I don’t have perfect pitch. I think I’m pretty close, but this might sound a little naughty.” She warned before standing and running the bow over the strings. She played the highest string down to the lowest string. Then in reverse. Flinching she flipped the violin and lightly flicked a peg. Continuing in a practiced fashion until she no longer flinched when playing the open strings.

“Being so close to the sea makes me think of pirates. This is... well about a pirate.”

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Hanna had been working on cleaning the violin for about a week. It needed a new G string so she had to find someone with that specific string. Then after threading the new string she noticed the bridge was falling apart. She thought that Varric’s thoughtful gift was more trouble than it was worth. Before Bull asked her if she could play, she had intended on playing something tonight. Probably just a few scales, so she wouldn’t need resin for the bow. When he stated it like a challenge….oh, boy. She found the quartermaster quick.

Hanna played the main theme from Pirates of the Caribbean. It was weird without the background arrangement, especially the drums. However, it was easy enough and was a song that could be carried by melody alone. When she repeated the melody the finally time, her audience applauded.

“It sounds better with a band.”
“Nonsense, it was great I bet Isabella would love it.” Varric said. Hanna didn’t know who that was. “Ah, you’ll be able to read The Tale of the Champion in no time if you don’t skip lessons.” He waved off her confused expression.

“Aww, but the Boss said that you can sing too.” Bull seemed disappointed.

“Guess you’ll have to wait, Bull.” Hanna carefully packed her violin in it’s case, found Barty and went to their tent to sleep.

The next morning they left on their way to Redcliffe. Bull joined them and they sent the chargers back through the Hinterlands with Vivienne to take care of inquisition business regarding the crossroads and horses.

The trip to the castle of Redcliffe was only supposed to take two days riding hard. With Mahanon’s many side questing ways, they slogged through in six.

First, they faced down the leader of the Blades of Hessarian, and by they, Mahanon took him on mano y mano. The Blades swore fealty to Mahanon, which only served to piss him off. He declared that they would do as they liked, but would report to Leliana about the Storm Coast for now.

Then, they tracked down several veins of Red Lyrium for Varric. Hanna had to grit her teeth to stand near it. The way it sang to her sent shivers down her spine, but at the same time, she wanted to touch it. Like itching at a mosquito bite, it seemed futile to resist.

Every time there was a fight, Mahanon came to check on her. Making sure that she wasn’t taking it as hard as she had on the Storm Coast. Every morning Hanna tried to wake up before Manny and get his breakfast ready or his horse groomed and tacked for the day’s journey. They were careful around each other.

They cared for each other like two childhood friends. Hanna knew he just wanted to be as much help as he could be. Manny knew that she was trying very hard to make it work.

Hanna asked Solas about remedies for sleep that might help Mahanon. Asked Varric to tell stories about his journey with Hawke and Co. Told Bull to take him out for drinks when they passed a tavern. She and Barty would turn the witty banter on when they passed him just to make him feel at home.

Mahanon would enlist Varric and Bull to coax Hanna out of her mood swings. He would ask Solas to monitor her for signs of visions. He would ask Cassandra to tell her about the Chantry and the Chant of Light. Manny noticed that she liked discussing the similarities with her home religion. With Barty’s help he made time to visit a chantry once a week so she could pray to her savior at Andraste’s statue.

The quiet way they cared for each other was so small it might seem insignificant.

It was the only reason they were functioning at all.

Hanna had four short visions in the six days. It was the most she had ever had consecutively and it left her a husk of herself. After each she felt drained, and refused to discuss what she saw. They were visions of the future, she assumed. It was a horrible place. The Breach had grown. Mahanon was gone. Cullen was eaten away with red lyrium. Josephine beheaded. Leliana tortured. Haven had been destroyed. Something had gone horribly wrong in the past few days. Hanna didn’t know if discussing the contents of her dreams would make things better or worse.

Her deterioration and silence increased the tensions between Cassandra and herself. When they
finally approached the gates to Redcliffe, Cassandra hadn’t spoken to her in two days.

The strangeness of the rift by the gates threw the group off.

Hanna would be standing by Solas then would zoom through a glyph on the ground. Cassandra mid swing against a rage demon would fall into slow motion only to get razed by the demons fire.

“Stay off the glyphs!” Hanna shouted. “They are messing with time.”

“Hey, maybe the trick to get you home is in Redcliffe!” Mahanon announced gleefully after recovering from closing the rift.

“Home?” Bull asked.

“Yeah, to Ostwick.” Hanna covered clearing her throat. “I’m supposed to bring home research on time magic.”

“Right.” Bull responded with clear disbelief. “I’m a spy. I lie for a living.”

“Fine. I’m an alien from another planet.” Hanna said without the slightest trace of sarcasm.

“If you don’t want to tell the truth just say so.”

“As you wish.” Hanna bowed to Bull like the dread pirate Roberts himself.

“If you two are done, we have a scout waiting to report.” Varric said pointedly.

Mahanon was visibly upset when the scout informed him that they weren’t expected. He was nearly in tears of embarrassment when Fiona told him that she had never spoken to him. When the tevinter guard told them Alexius would meet them in the Inn, Hanna worried that he would flip his lid.

“I don’t want to make a deal with anyone from Tevinter.” He spoke to the group in a hushed voice outside of the Inn.

“Well, we’ve come this far. We might as well see what this is about.” Varric offered.

Hanna had a bad feeling about all of it. Tevinter mages brought her to Thedas. What might they do to Manny if he fell into a trap. What if the Inn was a trap. Hanna was on her guard and Iron Bull watched her tense and put his hands behind his back as if he were relaxing to get into position to draw his battle axe quickly if necessary. Solas cast a mild nearly invisible barrier onto Mahanon.

When the Magister walked into the Inn and disregarded Fiona, Hanna felt Manny’s hackles rise. It was lucky the man’s son fell ill because the tension was at a boiling point. After the man escorted his son away, Hanna went to Manny and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Are you okay?”

“Take a look at this.” Hanna picked up the piece of paper and she read it successfully.

“It says meet me in the Chantry at sundown.” Varric clapped her on the back like a proud father.

“Good job, Sunshine!”

“Does this scream trap to anyone else? It’s screaming trap to me.” Hanna looked around.

“I guess we’ll find out. We have a few bells until sundown. Set your affairs in order, I need to write
to the advisors.” Mahanon took charge of the situation. He left quickly to a secluded spot to write to Leliana and send it with a scout to the nearest raven.

Hanna went to the center of town and pulled out her violin.

She wasn’t as sure about this song as she had been about the pirate’s song so she played over the notes slowly at first. The beginning of the song was a set of quickly repeated notes set in stair stepping chords. She played it slowly, then sped up as her fingers woke up to the familiar feel of the strings. The chorus line was easy enough long strokes following the melody on the right beats. Hanna closed her eyes. It was going to sound hollow without backup. She practiced a couple more rounds on her own and returned to the tavern.

The tavern bard was taking a break and Hanna asked her if she wanted to have a jam session. After explaining what she meant the bard agreed. They went out the back door of the tavern to practice notes for a while before sunset.

“I have to go and do something, but we’re staying here tonight so...I’ll be back. I am so excited.”

“Have at it.” The woman said and shooed her and promised to practice so that they could each have a turn on the melody.

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“Great you’re here. Would you mind helping me close this?” Mahanon couldn’t stop himself.

“Who...are you?” Mahanon asked unabashed as the man and his team fought the demon horde. Dorian humored him. Mahanon wiped the stars out of his eyes when Hanna cleared her throat.

Mahanon seriously reconsidered his historical dislike for Tevinter. Dorian Pavus most recently of Minrathous was a dream boat. Mahanon watched the man throw magic at demons like he was taking a leisure stroll through the gardens of a palace. The pure confidence the man flaunted was difficult for Mahanon to ignore. After sealing the rift, Mahanon turned to Dorian.

“Fascinating. How does that work, exactly?” Mahanon was speechless. No one had ever really asked him how it worked. Not after he temporarily sealed the breach. Mahanon hoped that the faint candle light and his darker complexion hid the color that surely followed the heat on his face.

“You don’t know do you. You just wiggle your fingers and BOOM! Rift closes.” Mahanon nodded slowly at his accusation.

“Watch yourself. The pretty ones are always the worst.” Bull spoke. Mahanon looked at him. Then at Hanna. Hanna’s face was pale as if she’d seen a ghost. Had she seen Dorian in one of the visions she refused to talk about? Hmm…Interesting.

“Suspicious friends you have here.” Dorian moved on. “Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance should be valuable, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

Mahanon was imagining things alright.

Alexius’s son, Felix confirmed that his father had joined a cult that was messing with time magic.

“Your father, he uses this magic, right?” Felix nodded. Hanna moved closer and whispered in Mahanon’s ear. “Manny, they are right we have to stop him. If you were right when we got here...We have to see if this magic can send me back.”
To his disappointment, Cassandra stopped the discussion after that. “We have to discuss this with the Inquisition advisors.”

“Do what you must but hurry.” Oh that face and that voice were going to haunt Mahanon the whole ride home.

As they left the chantry, Hanna announced that they should all come back to the tavern/inn. She tapped the bard on the shoulder and started prepping her violin. At first they played an instrumental song it was very fast paced and exciting. Hannn shouted that they should repeat and cut the melody. She was going to sing.

I was caught
In the middle of a railroad track
I looked round
And I knew there was no turning back

Mahanon listened to the words and knew he was missing something. Specifically what is a railroad.

My mind raced
And I thought what could I do
And I knew
There was no help, no help from you
Sound of the drums, beating in my heart
The thunder of guns, tore me apart
You’ve been
Thunderstruck

Hanna went back to playing the violin with a new part that she hadn’t played the first time through. The thing that Mahanon noticed the most was the smile on her face. It had been two days at least since he saw it last. He was just glad to see it again.

Thinking back to the chilling look on her face after her visions, he hoped it wouldn’t go away anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

The two songs were:
He's a Pirate
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGOCBm_QzHs

and

Thunderstruck AC/DC
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdshdAJkpc0
Darkest Timeline (part 1)

Chapter Notes

Oh, I am so terribly awful. I hit a brick wall of writer's block and I'm just working my way out a little bit. I thought I would throw this down as an apology. It's absolutely not the quality I wanted, but I think I need to let it go. It's just fanfiction.

Anyway, I'll just set this here and run away. Please don't hate me.

Mahanon landed on something cushy.

Something warm.

Something wet and cursing in Tevene.

Oh, someone who was exactly his type, but a shem from Tevinter.

He rolled off of the Tevinter mage and face first into nasty sewer water. He felt disgusted and worse, when he lifted his head, he saw Dorian was already holding off a Venatori attacker.

Because of course there were fucking Venatori to fight.

Mahanon drew his sword and tried to focus on the matter at hand, but he found it hard to think as confusing sights surrounded him. How had he ended up knee deep in dungeon water? Why were the walls broken with crystals tinged red?

He saw only one solution. He had to mentally retrace his steps here.

Mahanon tried to come to terms with what had happened in the time since they left Redcliffe to get permission from the advisors to liberate the mages of Venatori control.

Hanna had numerous visions on the three day return ride. During the impromptu meeting Mahanon worried that she would blow away in the drafty main hall. Hanna steadied herself against the large wooden table in the center of the war room and listened rarely offering input on the report from Redcliffe or the strategy for infiltrating the castle.

Mahanon tried to get her to come to the Tavern, to play a song, anything. Hanna couldn’t look him in the face. It was obviously something in her visions. He needed to know what she saw that had her so distressed. He followed her to their cabin and knocked on the door separating their rooms.

“Hanna, can we talk?” He heard her crying through the wood. Her sobs shook something deep inside of him. It was like hearing his mother cry. It made his heart stutter like the disappointment in Alrain’s voice.

“Quite a mess we’ve fallen into.” Dorian broke the silence and Mahanon’s memory slipped between his fingers.

“That’s the understatement of the century. Where are we?” Mahanon asked.
Dorian gave him a look that screamed ‘How the fuck should I know?’ but instead of saying as much the Tevinter stroked his facial hair. The motion drew the Herald’s eyes and left him wondering what it would feel like to kiss a man with facial hair….

“I believe that the more appropriate question, my dear, is when are we?” the elf blushed at the endearment, but Dorian kept speaking turning away from Manny. “I believe that the portal Alexius summoned sent us forward in time.”

“Well, if it’s anything like the magic used on Hanna. We’re in for a wild ride.”

Dorian turned quickly as if hearing Hanna’s name peaked his interest. “Hanna?” He paused. “That’s the pretty one who doesn’t like me, right?” Mahanon heard the subtext ‘None of your friends really do.’

“She’ll warm up to you.” Mahanon was quick to defend Hanna. “I promise.” he added a little less hastily. Dorian, who communicated as much through facial expression as he did through any other means, rolled his eyes.

“At any rate, what do you mean by magic used on her?”

“Oh, right! You wouldn’t know she was…” Mahanon stopped short, he was blowing Hanna’s cover story out of the water if he told Dorian the truth. He didn’t have her permission or that of the inner circle who knew. He came to the conclusion he couldn’t tell Dorian that nugget of information just yet. “You know what? It’s really not that similar. Let’s find a way home.”

Dorian did not seem pleased with the tone shift in the conversation. He did turn to lead the way out of the dungeon sewer with a mage light spell.

Mahanon could only agree with Dorian’s hypothesis that meant it was crucial to find Alexius and his medallion.

The first civilian they encountered was an elf in chantry robes. As they approached, it became clear that the poor bastard was chanting and smelled strongly of piss. Mahanon asked the elf if he was okay. He looked hauntingly familiar to Mahanon. Like he had seen him recently in Redcliffe village. As he reached out to the shaking elf, the elf pitched into the ground dead.

Mahanon surveyed the dead body and it’s tinged red condition. What was all of the red shit about?

“Red Lyrium, can you not hear it’s siren song?”

Mahanon cursed under his breath he hadn’t meant to speak his question aloud. Dorian must think him a drooling buffoon. Or whatever Tevinter mages call dumb elves.

“Oh right, red lyrium. Nasty stuff back in our time, but this decoration scheme is excessive.”

“I can imagine that it is function over form. Not many people can pull off this much red.” Dorian quipped. “I do admit that you are not what I expected of a Southern elf.”

“My apologies, not all elves have an innate ability to sense the magical.”

“I was expecting more naked moonlit orgies personally.”

“I’ll have to invite you to the next one.” Mahanon smirked. Dorian did not seem too offended by the offer, but he didn’t respond in any way verbal or non verbal.
Fighting through the dungeon, the pair found grand enchanter Fiona, Iron Bull, Varric, Cassandra and Solas. Mahanon’s pulse was racing at the new found knowledge that they were a year in the future.

No Hanna. Mahanon wished he hadn’t asked what happened to her.

Iron Bull mentioned that the light had gone out of her eyes a year ago when he and Dorian had disappeared through the portal. She cried out in fear and pain, and in a brilliant display of magic the candles throughout the castle extinguished. She threw herself at Alexius, but was stopped by his guards. She was the first to be taken to the dungeon and the first to be taken from the dungeon.

No one had seen her or heard from her since.

Dorian held him as he cried for his lost friend. Had she foreseen her own death? Is that why she had refused to talk to him? If they were able to pull this off, go back to their rightful place in time... Alexius would pay. He would close the breach. Most importantly, he would put an end to Hanna’s silence. She would tell him the truth about everything or he would exile her from the inquisition.

With that thought, Mahanon was able to wipe his tears and move on. Finding Leliana was heart wrenching. Learning that Josephine had been beheaded was mortifying. When he asked about Cullen, Leliana was able to draw more light to Hanna’s story. Apparently, she was seen moving eastward with a band of Venatori to Therinfall Redoubt. When Cullen heard she was in danger, he assembled a band of warriors to follow the reports and possibly save Hanna. Based on the lack of her triumphant return to Redcliffe, it seems as though the Commander must have failed.

Leliana was very vague with the happenings in this awful future. She fought valiantly through the castle to the confrontation with Alexius. Mahanon was impressed with her strength and drive.

Small details were filled in by interrogating Venatori agents or reading correspondence. The fall of Orlais. The demon army. Corypheus. His four lieutenants: Calpernia, Samson, Marcus, and a mysterious one known as the other worlder.

Dorian did not seem to recognize any of the lieutenants of the Elder One. Mahanon feared that the otherworlder would be Hanna. Leliana pushed Mahanon ever forward. Find the keys to the door. Get home so none of this ever happens. Make Alexius Pay.

And so he did. It was heartbreaking to watch the future versions of his friends fight for a chance to restore the world they once knew. Dorian took his hand and dragged him through the portal.

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Hanna sobbed in her lonely cage. Watching Mahanon leave was painful. Feeling the eyes on her as his inner circle passed judgment was too much. She rushed Alexius half with the hope that he would kill her on the spot.

Instead he imprisoned her, pending a transfer to Samson. It was all just as she had foreseen.

She held her silence. She damned her friends. She ruined this world.

For the chance to see Jack one more time, she damned them all.

She was a monster.
Darkest Timeline (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

Playing with time is pretty confusing to write. So it totally makes sense if you get lost. This is basically everything from Part 1 from Hanna's POV. It explains a little bit of the confusing bits from part 1.

After the performance at the Inn in Redcliffe, Hanna hoped things would take a turn for the better. Hanna tried not to think about the fade trips she had taken on the way into Redcliffe. It broke her heart to keep what she saw inside. She hoped that the visions of villages burning would end. Lothering, Denerim, Kirkwall, Haven. The screams of the victims and refugees tore her soul to shreds. There was no discreet way for her to ask if these places had burned, were burning, or were about to be burned. The only one she knew for sure hadn’t happened yet was Haven.

Suddenly, Hanna’s visions changed. After her AC/DC concert, Hanna went outside to catch some fresh air. She had a quick flash of a vision. It was impossible to mistake what she saw in that vision. It gave her hope.

She rode with Barty on his horse for the return trip. She asked him to cover for her as much as he could. For once, she was trying to force herself to have visions. Just to see what she saw one more time.

After a few hours she found an almost fool proof method. She stood inexplicably close to Dorian who followed the group from Redcliffe. Hanna wanted to intimidate him as well as bask in the remnants of his expended magic. It was perfect because, unlike Solas, Dorian wouldn’t know what she was doing. Despite her initial mistrust, Hanna had to admit stumbling across another mage was pure luck.

Eventually, the unexpended magic would build enough to trigger a fade trip.

The future seemed to take on several layers at once. It was something like watching what her fade visions would show her through tinted glasses. Hanna knew which timeline she was watching based on the tint of the vision. She liked to give them nicknames, rose-tinted, boy scout, and darkest. The rose-tinted seemed to be the best overall. Maybe things didn’t work out at first, but in the end they all got home safe to Haven. In the boy scout timeline, Mahanon decided to go and save the templars instead of the mages. In the darkest timeline, everything fell apart. Mahanon disappeared. The inquisition fell apart. Corypheus rose to power.

From her estimation, choices made by Mahanon were the turning points for all three timelines. It was almost completely out of her power to do anything to influence which timeline they actually lived through. Between the rose-tinted and the darkest, she still couldn’t see what the difference was.

Up to this point she had seen a lot of the darkest timeline.

They arrived in Redcliffe after Mahanon convinced the advisors that walking into a trap was a
brilliant plan. Alexius targeted Mahanon with a spell. Dorian jumped in the way. Both of them were taken by the magic portal.

Hanna watched her future self stare in shock at the space left behind by Mahanon. Future Hanna didn’t stop to think, she attacked Alexius and was stopped by his many Venatori guardsmen. She was taken to the dungeon and followed shortly by the party Mahanon had taken to the castle. Varric and Cassandra were withdrawn. Rage stormed behind the Iron Bull’s eyes. Solas walked to his cell with that air of superiority that he always had.

Future Hanna was not okay. It felt weird to watch herself go through panic attacks. She was muttering to herself and rocking back and forth.

“I’m a monster.” She whimpered. “I did this.” She was shaking and blaming herself and coughing.

“I knew this would happen.”

“I didn’t prevent this.”

“Hey, stand up.” A guard opened her cage door and kicked her as she lay in the fetal position. Future Hanna reluctantly stood. “You’re the one with foresight. The Elder One requested you be moved to a more secure location.” She was lifted on each side by her arms and carried out. With her arms out to her sides, she was leaned forward and kept off balance by the pace of the carry. Future Hanna tried to fight, to twist and turn out of the unforgiving hands of the guards.

She was unceremoniously blindfolded, tied, and her mouth was bound. She was moved across the saddle of a horse on her stomach. Hanna watched as the Venatori rode with a purpose for the north east. They were heading towards Therinfall Redoubt. From the vision’s vantage point Hanna could see that there was a spy following them. The inquisition agent accessed whom they had in their possession, where they were heading, and sent a report back to Leliana. Now Hanna was torn. She could only follow one: the raven back to Haven or the Venatori to the templar castle.

Vowing to try to come back and see what would happen next, Hanna followed the group transporting future Hanna.

The guardsmen handed her off to a group of fresh Venatori and red templars about three quarters of the day into her trip. She changed hands two more times. The final group on the approach to Therinfall Redoubt included none other than Samson. She was moved to his horse and he rubbed her back in a gentle soothing way for the remainder of the trip. When they arrived he removed her blindfold, and carried her bridal style into the courtyard of the castle.

Future Hanna looked exhausted. Sleeping would not have been possible on the rough ride in. Hanna was aghast to see that this translated into her laying her head against the crazy horrible templar’s chest plate. He spoke softly to her and Vision Hanna couldn’t hear what he had said, but Future Hanna relaxed further in his arms.

His affection would be cute if he wasn’t a mass murdering, kidnapper. Harvesting the bodies of his living victims for red lyrium production and refinement.

Evidently in the Darkest Timeline, she could overlook that.

“Hanna!”

A shout rang out over the courtyard. Samson walked more quickly towards the inner castle door. Hanna looked to the three men in inquisition armor who barged in the door Samson had just carried Future Hanna through. None other than Cullen Rutherford, burst out from behind them shouting,
Vision Hanna’s heart dropped, her stomach pitched. She didn’t have to see the future to tell that four men would not be able to deter an entire stronghold.

“Kill them.” Samson gave the order before carrying his charge further into the castle. Hanna wished them the best of luck, but she couldn’t stop herself from following Samson rather than cheer on Cullen’s brave attempted rescue.

Samson brought future her into a suite with a steaming bath prepared. He laid her down on the bed and told her that some ladies would be in to prepare her for an audience with The Elder One. He emphasized the importance of her compliance and threatened make her regret any mistakes in judgement upon his return.

Samson left the room and three ladies carefully undressed her around her bindings. They had to cut off her armor that Manny had purchased for her. Hanna turned her head away in shame.

Trusting her future self to comply with Samson as she had up to this point. Hanna decided to follow Samson instead.

After leaving future Hanna in the care of attendants, Samson returned to the courtyard where Cullen and his men were still fighting a losing battle. When Cullen saw Samson’s return, he blindly charged at the ex-templar.

“Where is she?” He shouted over the clash of swords.

“I’m afraid I have many female charges in this castle. Is there one in particular you are referring to?” Samson’s voice was full of condescension. The kind of voice that you expect from a movie villain. Cullen’s response was a frustrated shout. “Ah...I think I see it now.” Samson seemed unfazed by the charging Commander. “Could it be that you are referring to the seer?” When his question went unanswered, Samson continued. “When our spies reported that the seer had a more than friendly relationship with Ser Cullen Rutherford... I dismissed it as speculation. Now I see it in your eyes, you must really love her.”

Cullen raised his sword to strike the bemused villain, only to be held in place by magic. Cullen’s eyes widened and he grunted with exertion trying to get out of the spell’s grasp. A woman, a mage, walked passed him towards Samson.

“Samson, I trust you are are not wasting the time of our Lord.”

“Why Calpernia, not at all, I think that this man will be very helpful when Hanna is no longer as compliant.” Samson tried to hide the tension in his bones that came from years of templar training. “I think it best we send dear Commander Cullen to the dungeons for now.”

Calpernia seemed unamused, but surrendered her control of Cullen to Samson’s red templars. “I’m sure she is prepared for the audience by now.” She turned and her robes swished as she left the courtyard.

Samson patted Cullen on the cheek. “Don’t worry we’ll keep you very safe until Hanna needs a reminder of her loyalties.”

“You’re a monster.” Cullen spat and was pushed down to his knees. Samson’s gauntleted hand came down hard on Cullen’s cheek. The guards escorted an unconscious Commander to the dungeon.

It didn’t really phase her. Until, it did.
At this point Hanna was disgusted with the darkest timeline. Mahanon was gone. She had been kidnapped. Corypheus asked nicely, then demanded then threatened that Hanna join his cause. Future Hanna refused and her punishment was to watch Samson take out his horrible brutish torture fantasies on Cullen. The red templar general broke Cullen’s bones, smashed his joints, and tormented Cullen with threats of turning the violence on Hanna.

The final straw for future Hanna was when Samson was going to force Cullen to ingest red lyrium. Cullen hadn’t broken until that point. The Commander was valiant and admirable in his endurance of pain. When he was lucid he told Hanna to be strong, never to give in. He promised he could endure anything. When Samson started grinding down the red lyrium into ingestible power, Cullen begged for him not to. Samson turned to her and she shook her head. Cullen pleaded. Samson turned to her. Future Hanna was stuck. There Cullen was fighting for her freedom, but she couldn’t watch him turn into a red templar.

She surrendered. Cullen apologized profusely. She cooed and soothed him.

As weeks passed in the future, Hanna worked for the Dark Lord Ugly as she took to calling him. She forced her visions. She trained with mages to unlock her connection to the fade. Every night she would return to her quarters where Cullen was kept at her insistence recuperating as much as possible from the torture.

On the night before they arrived home in Haven, Hanna had a long vision. It was the darkest timeline again judging by the tint of her vision.

* Cullen lay recuperating still. It had to have been months. His skin was sallow and pale. His breathing came in ragged wheezes. From Hanna’s vision perspective, she could feel that he was on his deathbed. Cullen seemed to know it too. Future Hanna powered by guilt, tended to him as if he would definitely come back from this. She used what healing magic she had learned. She sang him songs from home like she always did. When Cullen fell back asleep, future Hanna held his hand and cried.

> “I’m so sorry. I did this. I chose this. You had to suffer for my choice.”

> From her perspective, vision Hanna couldn’t determine what she had done to choose this. Future Hanna turned and stared into the nothing where vision Hanna hovered.

> “I was you once. I had to make a horrible choice. I had to choose between saving Thedas and seeing Jack again. I hope you understand. Follow me and you will understand everything.” Vision Hanna felt sick. Future Hanna had done something. But what?

Wait did she say Jack?

* Future Hanna explained that she had orchestrated this very moment almost a year ago by meeting with Alexius in private to suggest that he change the destination of his ‘disrupted’ spell. Without her interference Jack would arrive to the center of red templar control. He would most likely be killed without the combat experience that kept her alive in her first months in Thedas. Maybe they wouldn’t live happily ever after, but with the veil losing strength. She might be able to learn how to return to Earth.

Vision Hanna followed Future Hanna like she was watching a train wreck.

* Future Hanna knew the lay out of Therinfall by heart and walked with a very steady pace. She passed Samson who saluted her as a fellow general. She waved to Calpernia who stood on a balcony watching the scene as it had been foretold.
In the center of the courtyard, two portals opened.

Out of one fell Dorain and Mahanon. Hanna murdered Dorian. Mahanon was taken into custody to be used by Dark Lord Ugly.

Out of the other walked first Magister Marcus Aurelius then none other than Jack Walker. Hanna didn’t care that she was covered in Altus Dorian Pavus’s blood. She didn’t care that she had turned over her friend and cohort Herald Mahanon Lavellan. Hanna ran into her fiance’s arms.

Hanna returned from her vision with the familiar snap. She now had a decision to make. When they arrived in Haven, she didn’t know how to manage her emotions. She attended the meeting in the War Room. She spoke only when spoken to. Resigning herself to her fate she walked quickly to her room in Manny’s house.

In order to save Jack she needed to betray everyone. That was the opinion of the future Hanna in the darkest timeline. How could the future Hanna in the other timelines be so calm about this decision?

Hanna was sobbing when Manny knocked on the door. She couldn’t answer his questions right now. At this point, Hanna didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know who she was.

She penned a letter to Alexius and attached it to a raven. If the raven arrived and told him when and where to meet her. She would damn them all. If the raven was lost, she would abandon Jack and set out keep Haven safe.

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It was just as she had foreseen.

She met with the devil and damned her friends. She ruined this world.

For the chance to see Jack one more time, she damned them all to Hell.

She was a monster. She didn't deserve any of the luck she had up to this point. She didn't deserve to call herself Catholic. There was a special place in Hell just for her.

“Hanna!” Hanna heard the voice that she would never hear again. She betrayed Manny, no Mahanon. She didn’t deserve to give him a nickname. “Hey! I’m right here take my hand.” Hanna looked up through her tears.

“What?” Confusion painted her face.

“Dorian and I were able to reverse the spell and come back.” Mahanon grabbed her by the arm and lifted her to her feet. He hugged her tight to him. “Whatever great betrayal you think you did. You didn’t. But.” Mahanon rubbed her back. “You and I are going to have a long chat about these visions of yours. You can’t get out of it this time.”

Hanna nodded into his neck. “I'll tell you.” She sobbed. “Everything.” Mahanon held her as she cried. He shushed her apologies.

“I’ve formed a full alliance with the mages. I’ve got things to tell you too.” He looked at her, “The most important is I think that Jack is coming here in the future. I think that we better get to him before
Corypheus does.”
Mahanon didn’t know how to look at Hanna now. Part of him wanted to just kick her out of his inner circle and be done with it…

When he returned triumphant from the future with Dorian at his side, Mahanon immediately dealt with the chaos upon landing. Iron Bull, Cassandra, Solas, and Varric didn’t have time to tell him what had happened in his short absence. Hanna was noticeably absent.

The team Leliana sent through the hidden passage into the castle successfully eliminated the Venatori guards in the chamber. Cassandra subdued the downtrodden Alexius. The magister admitted to colluding with Hanna to send Mahanon elsewhere in the future rather than out of existence as he had planned. Alexius was unable to deliver on his end of the bargain.

Rage flashed through Mahanon’s veins. His heart beat in his ears and his hands quaked with the feeling of betrayal.

He didn’t have time to act because a mass of troops burst in and lined the hallway. A human in fine noble clothes spoke harshly to Grand Enchanter Fiona.

“Grand Enchanter, imagine how surprised I was to learn you had given Redcliffe Castle away to a Tevinter Magister.”

“King Alistair!” Fiona’s voice warbled begging for the chance to explain her actions.

Mahanon listened to the back and forth, but he was distracted by the fact that the King of Fereldan had barged into the already confusing jumble of motivations. It was clear that the king’s anger was directed at Fiona, not the inquisition. Mahanon had to interject before the king ordered the rebel mages to leave Fereldan.

“We still need mages.” Mahanon kept his voice level. “To close the breach, it is why we came to Redcliffe.”

“And what are the terms of this arrangement?” Fiona asked. As if she had much say in whatever terms Mahanon might set. It was obvious that the inquisition could set what ever expectations they wanted. King Alistair would be pleased just to exile the mages. Mahanon knew that Cassandra would want strings attached to this deal. Solas looked pensive, hopeful maybe that Mahanon would ally with the mages. Iron Bull was as unreadable as ever.


“Certainly, we can do better than what Alexius offered. The inquisition is better than that, surely.” Dorian spoke with certainty, but his body language told another story. He was nervous Mahanon would offer a similar shackle to the rebel mages.

“You would be allies to the inquisition. With the rights and responsibilities, therein.” Mahanon paused. He looked to his companions to gauge their responses. Cassandra seemed set to go off. Iron Bull was still guarded but visibly unhappy. Varric seemed a little relieved. Solas, well Mahanon questioned his judgement when he saw the elder elf approve of his judgment with a silent nod and smile. Dorian was a splendid sight, his face lit up with a brilliant smile.
Mahanon only wished he could see how Hanna felt. Just thinking of the woman set his anger off again. He needed to get some fresh air and find her in the dungeon.

“That is a generous offer, but I wonder will the rest of the inquisition honor it?”

Mahanon was about to respond angrily, but instead cooled his head. “They will have to, the breach threatens us all. We can not afford to be divided now.”

“I’d take that offer if I were you. One way or another, you’re leaving my kingdom.” Alistair’s anger had cooled considerably.

Fiona’s stare became misty as she looked at the king. She bowed her head accepting her turn of luck. “We accept. It would be madness not to…” Fiona promised Mahanon that the breach would be closed. She left after swearing the inquisition would not regret this mercy.

“King Alistair,” Mahanon asked, “I have a friend who would be remiss not to make your acquaintance. Alexius confined her to the dungeon, but I must ask. Can she have an audience with you when we recover her?” Mahanon’s speech was stilted and clumsy in his attempt at polite conversation.

“Please,” Alistair looked concerned at the elf. “Speak comfortably. I am not one to stand on ceremony. I will be here to aid my uncle. Perhaps we can have a proper meal together this afternoon.”

With the arrangements in place, Mahanon left to find Hanna. Three inquisition agents led him to the dungeon. He asked his companions to hang back and assist with mobilizing the rebel mages. He really just wanted the chance to talk to Hanna and clear the air without killing her.

He wanted to give her the chance to tell him it wasn’t true. At least explain herself. How could have possibly thrown away their friendship? What was her real intent?

She had always been so protective and brave. Something had to have happened.

From the hallway leading to the dungeon, Mahanon could hear a woman sobbing. It wasn’t hard to locate Hanna.

When he found her, Mahanon shouted her name and ran to the end of the hall to recover the keys to her cell. He opened the door, but Hanna didn’t respond to him. She murmured under her breath about how he couldn’t be there.

Exasperated, Mahanon reached out to her. “It’s alright. I’m right here.” His hand hovered in the air untouched. Hanna started shuddering. She continued to speak under her breath. Mahanon spoke very loudly. “Hey, I’m right here take my hand.”

That got her attention. She looked up at him. Confusion. It was hard to continue to be angry when she was so obviously remorseful. Mahanon looked to his hand and back to her.

“Dorian and I were able to reverse the spell and come back.” Mahanon grabbed her by the arm and lifted her to her feet. He hugged her tight to him. “Whatever great betrayal you think you did. You didn’t. But.” Mahanon rubbed her back. “You and I are going to have a long chat about these visions of yours. You can’t get out of it this time.” He felt the shaking catharsis spread through his body. He was holding her tightly for her comfort as well as his.
Hanna nodded into his neck. “I’ll tell you.” She sobbed. “Everything.” Mahanon held her as she cried. He tried his best not to cry with her. He had to stay level headed for her. She dissolved into repeated apologies and nonsensical combinations of words. Mahanon did his best to work her through the pain. It made him wonder exactly what she must have been holding back all this time.

With time her tears stopped and she was back to a coherent state of mind. He wanted to bring her back to speed as quickly as possible.

“I’ve formed a full alliance with the mages. I’ve got things to tell you too.” He looked at her, “The most important is I think that Jack is coming here in the future. I think that we better get to him before Corypheus does.” That got Hanna’s complete attention.

“What do you mean? My Jack is coming here? What makes you think that?” Mahanon didn’t know what to expect, but the storm of questions was not it.

“I’ll tell you everything I know when we get back to Haven and I can tell everyone at once, but when we were in the future...there was a general only known as the otherworlder. I figured that if it had been you, you would have known to come and find Dorian and I.” Mahanon added solemnly. Hanna’s face fell.

“I wouldn…” Her denial fell flat. “I will earn your trust. I am loyal to your cause now and forever more.”

“You were going to kill us in the future.” Mahanon probed. Hanna flinched and Mahanon knew he hit close to the mark. “Alexius told us that you had contacted him when we arrested him.”

Hanna nodded uncomfortably. “I will explain exactly what I was thinking, but I think it would be better if we were somewhere more private to discuss these things.” She indicated the inquisition agents who followed him down into the dungeon.

“No,” Mahanon turned and waved them away. “We talk about this here and now. I don’t know how I’m going to convince Cassandra not to kill you. Everyone heard about your meeting Alexius. Start from the beginning. Have you told the truth one time since you’ve been here.”

Hanna nodded. “I only really started lying after Solas and Leliana started conspiring to force a vision. I didn’t want to be used. I didn’t know what I saw. It was disturbing.” Hanna cleared her throat. “The first one I didn’t tell you about was in a castle somewhere. The templars had set up a camp at some sort of shrine to a dragon. The camp was run by a templar named Samson.”
Mahanon shook his head. He had no recognition of that name. “Okay, that is something that you will need to talk to Cullen and Cassandra about. They know templars. Someone might know where shrine to the Tevinter Old Gods are. I think I heard somewhere that the Old Gods were dragons.”

Hanna continued. “The next vision was there was an attack on Haven. A massive army of red templars marched on Haven and we survived. Barely.”

“When we get back to Haven we will have to make preparations…”

“Manny what if making preparations makes it worse? What if word gets out that we know about the attack and the army changes course and destroys Redcliffe. This is exactly why I couldn’t tell you. We can’t go around pretending we know the future. I don’t know the whole story. I have a glimpse into a possible future event.”

“We can’t just do nothing.” Mahanon’s tone grew cold. “That’s how we ended up in this situation. That’s why I don’t know if I can really trust you to ever have my back again.”

“We can make standard preparations. Tell the War Counsel that the Elder One mounted an attack against Haven in the Future. Tell them to prepare more trebuchets. Tell them to have more supplies stocked in the chantry. Don’t lay down your cards when you don’t know what the opponent are really holding.” Hanna’s eyes were filling with tears again.

Mahanon looked at Hanna, then back to his hands. “We will try it, but you still haven’t told me what happened with Alexius.”

Hanna swallowed. “It’s a long story.”

Mahanon shook his head. “I’ve got all day.”

Hanna told him about the three different timelines. She told him about her decision to follow the darkest timeline. That the Hanna in the future spoke directly to her about how to make it happen. She told him how she wrote a letter to Alexius when they got back to Haven.

“We met before you led us into the castle.” Hanna admitted. “He came to meet me at the windmill the night before. I told him the truth. I told him that in order see my husband again I had to betray
you. I told him the exact time and location to send you and Dorian.”

Mahanon looked at Hanna. “So why didn’t it work?”

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“That’s the question I’ve been asking myself.” Hanna swung her hands out to wave away the way that sounded. “Not because I wish it had worked. I think I must have done something incorrectly. Maybe contacting Alexius wasn’t what caused that future to come to pass.” Hanna’s voice continued by her mind trailed off elsewhere.

Hanna gasped. “You know what. I had a feeling when the visions about these three different futures started that it was a decision you would make that would change the outcome. Maybe it was my fault for thinking that I could influence the future.”

Hanna didn’t know how to explain how horrible this new thought made her previous actions. “It didn’t matter. No matter what I would meet with Alexius because I would always think it was the way to get to Jack. To save Jack from Corypheus I betrayed you. Now he’s going to become one of the Elder One’s Generals.”

“So, you didn’t really betray me then. Nothing you could have done would have led you down that path.” Hanna hadn’t thought of that either. Mahanon was taking this very well. Too well. Hanna felt her protective streak come back full force.

“Manny, you can’t forgive me this quickly.” Mahanon shook his head at her. “I thought I knew what I was doing.”

“I know that now and I can accept it. You were trying to protect Jack. Jack is your family. I can’t tell you what I would do if it had been my mother or my sister.” Hanna was shocked. “This is what we will tell everyone. I told you to meet with Alexius to trick him. You acted secretly under my orders.”

“You...You’ll still try to protect me after all of this.” Hanna started to cry again.

“We’re a team. We’ve got a bond ever since we both walked out of the breach alive. Our fates are one in the same. We have to look after each other.” Mahanon got serious again. “No. More. Secrets. You have to promise me. We will talk about each vision privately after it happens and we will come up with a plan together.”
“I promise.” Hanna looked down at the ground. “I have to apologize again though. I have to tell you this too. Mahanon, I seriously didn’t know if this place was really real. I didn’t think that you were a real person. I thought if I could get to Jack we could go home and I would never have to think about Thedas ever again.” Hanna felt like the biggest of all shit stains. “I don’t think that I’ll ever get to go back. Alyiah is still here, she’s been here over a decade. If there’s a way back I bet she would have found it.”

Manny jumped up. “Oh yeah, I made us a dinner date with the King of Fereldan. Be sure to have all of your questions about Alyiah ready.”

Hanna couldn’t help but think that things were going to be okay. Mahanon had forgiven her. The darkest timeline was in the past never to happen, or at least it wasn’t starting now.

And she got to meet with someone who had seen someone else from Earth.

“Shit, did you say King Alistair.” Manny nodded. “I should probably get cleaned up and changed.”
Alistair.

Hanna whispered the king’s name as she experienced the strange déjà vu of meeting someone she had seen before in her visions. The man was dressed in fine garb, not that strong, steel armor he used to wear. His physique had changed somewhat, not flabby, just less hungry. His face did not bear the shadow it had in Denerim some ten years ago.

Alistair turned away from his advisor and looked at Hanna. His skin was road worn and suntanned from the long ride in. His eyes were a warm brown and his hair was a dark dirty blonde.

“Do we know each other?” He smiled warmly. It was clearly an attempt to cover up his mind trying to place her features.

“No,” Hanna shook her head. “We’ve never had the opportunity.”

“Is it an opportunity then? A blessing to meet you?” His voice was warm and full of snark.

Mahanon coughed. Hanna thought he meant, ‘If you don’t tell him why you’re here I will.’

“My name is Hanna Cooper. I was born in a... distant land, and I was unsure...That is...Alyiah was from Georgia right? I got here from Michigan. We’re both from the same country.”

Alistair coughed uncomfortably. Arl Teagan stiffened in his seat at the table. Hanna felt like she should have worked up to the big news. Mahanon intervened, stepping ahead of her.

“My friend, Hanna, is an advisor to the inquisition. Due to her contact with the breach, she has the ability to see through the fade. It is in one of these visions that she saw Alyiah admitting her homeland to you.”

“You can see through the fade.” Alistair spoke gently. His face took on a wistful expression. When Hanna nodded he continued, “Are you a mage?” Alistair wistfulness melted into a guarded tone.

Hanna was tempted to ask what difference it made.

“The jury is still out” Hanna answered. Once again, Mahanon coughed in a manner that screamed, ‘you used one of your weird phases, stop it.’ Rolling her eyes at Mahanon, Hanna corrected herself. “It is difficult to call myself a mage, when I have barely an intermittent connection to the fade.”

“You don’t have control of this ability?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no.”
“I couldn’t command you, as king, to find any one person.”

Hanna was confused. “You aren’t my king.” Hanna’s eyes softened at the desperation in his eyes. She felt that. She damned her friends for that. “I can try.”

“Can you seen Alyiah’s current whereabouts?”
Hanna’s eyebrows rose in surprise. She looked to Mahanon and mouthed ‘The fucking queen is missing and you couldn’t tell me.’

Mahanon shrugged and responded, ‘Not my queen.’

Hanna thought of at least three things she wanted to do with Mahanon at that point.
Maim, Murder, Maul.

“I can read lips you know.” Alistair interrupted.

Hanna startled. “I don’t….Well...I can try. It isn’t fun, and I can’t guarantee that I will see your wife.”

“Story of my life.”

Hanna sighed. She turned to Manny, “I need a mage, preferably Dorian, I don’t want to show this to Solas.”

Manny exited and Alistair dismissed the table before speaking to her again. “So, seance was it?”

“I have to have someone to channel the fade. I can’t force the connection, but I can ride on the expended magic.” Her quick response stalled the conversation.

Alistair was quick to recover it.

“Do you miss home? Alyiah did a decade ago, she talked about home like crazy after she told me. It’s hard to be so far away.”

“I was going to be married. I got in a fight with my fiance and I ran away. I literally fell into this world. It wasn’t a planned trip. I think of home often with the hope of returning someday.”

“Alyiah was young when she got here. She said she was a student graduating high school.”

Hanna gasped. “What kind of hell that must have been...at least I was in the military once. So young…”

“She’s not anymore, she’s been here over a decade.” Alistair’s focus drifted. “I haven’t seen her in over a year.”

The door to the dining area opened and Dorian walked in as if expecting applause. “Oh, nothing to fear my dear, your favorite Tevinter mage at your service.”

Hanna flinched.

“Am I to assume your opinion of me hasn’t risen? What a shame. I have to say my opinion of you has fallen on some poor fortune.”
Hanna doubled in her flinch.

“Dorian, down boy, Hanna and I will reveal our charade to you later. Now the King of Fereldan has requested Hanna attempt a parlor trick.”

Dorian rolled his eyes, and popped his hip out. Hanna swore he wouldn’t be out of place in New York. “What do you need?” He held his ‘e’ longer than necessary.

Hanna concentrated on her mental picture of Alyiah. “Okay, I need you to pull on the fade as much as you can. If you can do it without casting anything, that’d be pretty chill.”

“One waste of time and energy coming up.”

“It won’t be a waste.”

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Alyiah was walking, in the woods, somewhere. It was hard to recognize her for sure. Her skin was once soft dark brown. Her complexion was now marred with hash marks of scars and her skin was dry and wind worn. The armor she wore was more simple than what she had previously had. The silver griffon of the wardens was emblazoned on her chest. She walked with her head held high at the edge of the road.

Hanna was surprised when she stopped suddenly. There was a rustling in the bushes beside her. Alyiah tensed. Her hand gravitated toward her sword. Hanna worried she was about to see the only hope she ever had to wax historical about Earth, fall to an ambush.

A large dog popped out of the bush. His head was large like a mastiff. His muscles were corded and he wagged his tail like a puppy. Alyiah laughed.

“Superman, you old rascal.” She knelt down beside the large dog and patted him heartily. “I didn’t expect you back so soon, did you find anything good?”

Hanna thought about the interaction she was watching, committing as many details to memory as she could. Alyiah was on a poorly maintained stone road. The destroyed infrastructure surrounding her looked familiar to Hanna, like she had seen it in another vision. The dog had old greying hairs around his muzzle. His eyes held a sort of intelligence that Hanna didn’t generally associate with dogs on Earth.

As she followed Alyiah, Hanna wracked her brain. Where were they? Alyiah approached three wooden crosses which accompanied three stacks of stones. Alyiah knelt once again and pulled dried flowers from her pack.

“Nicole, I came back to see you again. I’m so sorry.”

****

Dorian called upon the fade. The distinct taste of magic and lyrium was always a little disorienting to Mahanon. Hanna’s face was scrunched in concentration. Her marked face began to glow. Then her legs wobbled and Manny couldn’t stop himself from catching her.
“Wait, that actually worked?” Dorian asked, but it sounded more like a statement. Manny shrugged in response. Manhanon laid her down on a rug near the hearth. He pulled the prepared blanket from the table and laid it over Hanna’s shivering body.

“I guess we have to wait to find out.” Mahanon placed a hand on her forehead. Her temperature was stabilizing. He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Do you love her?” Alistair asked suddenly. It was the first thing the king had said in many minutes. It startled the herald. He didn’t know how to answer the question. “I only ask because you seem to care for her a great deal.”

Mahanon turned and evaluated the faces of the two human men. Alistair was purely curious. Dorian was desperately trying to hide his interest behind his general debonair facade. The elf couldn’t help but sigh. He understood enough about humans that they tended not to value the relationships between two men as they did the relationship between a woman and man. He couldn’t very well come out as gay to these two relative strangers.

“I have no romantic feelings for her. I do love her a great deal. More than I care to admit some days.” Manhanon left her side and sat at the table with Alistair.

“No romantic feelings.” Dorian repeated as he stepped to the opposite side of the table from Mahanon. Dorian sat gracefully. Mahanon wanted to tell him exactly who he had hidden romantic feelings for...

“That doesn’t sound like no romantic feelings. Why don’t you tell her how you feel?” Alistair spoke. Mahanon tried not to get angry at the man for his assumption.

“We tell each other in other ways. Look after each other. It’s enough most days.” Mahanon spoke with a fondness that he realized didn’t quite shut down this line of talk. “At any rate, she’s already in the eyes of another. Two others...it’s complicated. A love triangle… of sorts.”

“You are the Herald of Andraste, I’m sure that you could win her affections.” Dorian suggested. The king nodded in agreement.

“I do believe that she obviously likes you a great deal.”

“Creators!” Mahanon lost his temper. “This is meaningless. I’m not... I prefer the company of men. I have no desire to win her affections.”

“Oh,” the king deflated. Alistair had been taking great enjoyment from Mahanon’s discomfort. Maybe the king had felt some kinship with Mahanon over his similar relationship with an otherworlder. Whatever it had been, Mahanon had crushed his feelings with his admission.

“Oh,” Dorian made an attempt to hide his sudden interest in Mahanon’s statement. Mahanon could read into that raise in pitch. The motion of the mage’s eyebrows before the return to careful ambivalence He wasn’t sure enough to act on it, but one day Mahanon would be talking to Dorian about his interests.

“As interesting as all of this is, I have to interrupt. I have a question for the king.” All three men jumped at Hanna’s voice. “Who the Hell is Nicole?”

“Nicole?”

“I can’t say that what I saw just happened, has happened or will happen, but Alyiah was visiting some ruins. There was a gravesite three wooden crosses...”
“Ostagar.” Alistair didn’t speak again for several beats. “Oh, now I remember, Nicole was Alyiah’s friend, they both came here from Georgia...Nicole sacrificed herself at the Battle of Ostagar.”

“Where is that? It’s where she was.” Hanna spoke with hope. Then something crossed her face. It was the shadow of guilt for something Mahanon was almost sure.

“We couldn’t hope to catch her before she moved on.” Alistair said. “Alyiah is on a quest to remove the Taint from our blood.”

“Hold on. Remove the what now?”

“Oh, Alyiah had that reaction too. In order to become Grey Warden’s we must take on the darkspawn taint, Alyiah’s chasing a cure.”

“Oh,” Hanna blushed. “I thought...Well it doesn’t matter.”

The king promised to send a small unit to intercept Alyiah and inform her that a woman from Michigan would enjoy an audience with the Queen and Hero of Fereldan. Hanna thanked the king and the king thanked her. At least Hanna had earned the inquisition a budding relationship with the King of Fereldan.

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Manny had a hard time convincing his inner circle of companions that he knew of her deception the entire time. Cassandra had cooled from his offering an alliance to the mages only to choose not to speak to him. Iron Bull watched her with suspicion and attempted to put distance between Hanna and Manny at all times. Varric seemed unconvinced. Solas didn’t share his opinion, but Hanna could assume.

It didn’t matter. Manny trusts her again.

She told herself it didn’t matter as long as she had him.

But it did matter to her. These people were her friends. She pledged her fealty to Mahanon, but what did it matter when no one believed her. Bartomé refused to look at her. Hanna couldn’t blame him for feeling used. She felt like the dirt in the latrine. Lower than shit. She thought at least she couldn’t feel any lower.

She was wrong.

The meeting in the war council was enough to destroy her. Cullen had obviously heard the rumor of what happened. He couldn’t even get angry at Mahanon for offering the alliance in light of what she had done. Hanna forgot her promise to Manny.

“There has been a development in Hanna’s ability to see through the fade.” Hanna cursed inwardly as the elf spoke. Not only did no one trust her for what she had done in Redcliffe. Now, she had to tell them of the coming invasion. She didn’t really know when it would happen and she didn’t really know how to prepare. “We think that she saw a vision of the future.”

“Right, yes, I did see an attack on Haven. The Elder One that Mahanon heard about in the future. He’s not very happy with us and he is mounting a surprise attack with thousands of corrupted templars.”

“With all due respect, Herald.” Cullen’s seething reached its end point. When the Commander spoke, it cemented the cold feeling in Hanna’s chest. She lost even the Commander’s respect. “It is very
suspect that Hanna suddenly had a vision of a future impending attack when we are unsure of whether to trust the witch herself.”

Hanna’s eyes left the table for the first time of the meeting when Cullen called her a witch. She looked up to his molten amber eyes and saw the fury he held there. She stood up to the challenge.

“Call my allegiance into question if you must. I told Manny without more detail, I shouldn’t tell you about the foreseen attack. I don’t know when it will happen. I know it will happen. Even with preparations, many will die. Without preparations so many more.” Her voice wavered. Hanna pushed on with her recommendation. “We need to store extra dry tack and travel rations in the back of the chantry. There is a pathway behind the chantry that is only visible during the summer months, find a former pilgrim, perhaps they can help clear the way. Trebuchets will hold back the initial force. It may be a good plan to calibrate those we have and construct another if we can.”

“You speak as if we will be overrun.” Cullen interrupted with a chiding tone. “This is absurd. Are we going to believe the ravings of this mad woman?” Hanna felt a chill chase down her spine. “She told me in confidence that she is considered too mad to return to the military at home. Without medical intervention at home she has a history of turning on her loved ones and killing them.”

“Is this true?” Cassandra sputtered. Leliana and Josephine looked on shocked. Manny’s expression moved through several stages of emotions varying from shock to anger to fear. All eyes looked from Cullen to Hanna. Waiting.

“I…” Hanna’s face may as well have burst into flames. She was horrified that Cullen brought up their heartfelt conversation from the cave here.

“No…” Hanna didn’t want to stutter. She didn’t want to lie. From Cullen’s prospective hearing the rumors of her betrayal, it must have caused him a great deal of concern for her mental stability. Cullen’s hands not so subtly landed on the pommel of his sword as he waited for her response. “I never killed anyone I loved. I was discharged due to injuries sustained in battle.” Hanna quickly, skillfully opened the clasps and belts securing her armor. “Since my transgressions require a show of proof.” She removed her clothes down to her most prized possession. Her earth bra was ratty from near constant wear, but the support it provided was far superior to it’s Thedosian counterparts.

Hanna had never been shy, but this was not in her plans. In the heat of the moment, she didn’t know how else to prove that she wasn’t lying.

“It’s fucking awful, I know. It took months to return to semi-normal. If the damage hadn’t been so extensive, I probably would have returned to active duty.” Hanna knew the scars well. Gnarly twists of skin and mottled flesh covered her abdomen. “It’s true that I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It’s true that the symptoms were made better by medicine. I was never considered crazy or ‘mad’. I never killed anyone close to me.”

Hanna stared Cullen down with a frustrated glint in her eyes. How insensitive he was. How cruel he was. “I thought that the Commander understood these things were said in private and were intended to remain there. Not only because I was worried what you all would think, but because it is incredibly painful to describe the torture and suffering that lead me to have these scars.” Hanna redressed quickly. She felt righteous in her indignation. Before storming out of the room she put a hand on Mahanon’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, I wasn’t ready to relive that particular time in my past...At any rate, close the breach. I need to go cool off.” Hanna walked around the side of the table that let her slam her shoulder into Cullen’s. It hurt because of his armor, but she knew that it hurt him just as well.
“I hope I’m not too late to the party.” Dorian stepped into the war room to share his experience from the future. Hanna pushed past him gruffly. Dorian watched her as she slammed the door behind him. “What did I miss?”

Cullen’s anger fled after Hanna’s display. He wanted to chase after her and apologize. He looked at Mahanon, who shook his head. Dorian and Mahanon pushed the meeting ahead and the plan to seal the breach took over the conversation. Solas prepared the mages to support Mahanon’s effort.

Cullen and Cassandra prepared a support unit of templars to prevent abominations and stabilize the sheer amount of magic to be used.

Josephine and Leliana took to preparations for the coming attack. Mahanon had specified that in his previous discussion with Hanna, she had mentioned the attack would happen some time after Mahanon closed the Breach. They worked with the timeline in mind, but attempted to make all actions seem unrelated.

Josephine announced that civilians were asked to leave to neighboring towns in case of the fallout if the Herald failed to seal the breach. Leliana asked several of her agents to clear a path behind the chantry as a secret escape route. It was not to be mentioned to the lay folk of Haven. Josephine called on several of her trade deals to stock the inquisition for at least a week of travel by foot with the remaining population. Horsemaster Dennet was sent with the best horses back to his stables for a planned training exercise.

Cullen wanted to ask Hanna if these preparations would be enough. If everyone would make it out. He approached her a few times only to be turned away by Mahanon. The herald’s inner circle quickly came around to Mahanon’s insistence that Hanna was innocent. By the night before the breach was to be sealed, Cullen was the only one Hanna had not spoken to.

Bartomé took pity on the Commander and let him know that she still training. Bartomé told Cullen that Mahanon had asked her if it would be enough and Hanna hadn’t had an answer. She hadn’t had a vision to know of any changes.

Cullen worried. The sound of the devastation from what Mahanon described was incredible. When Cullen worried, he prayed. It was late, long after the final bells, when he entered the chantry. The main hall was empty other than a figure kneeling at the end of the dark hall at the feet of Andraste. There were two candles lit in front of her. Cullen stepped quietly through the corridor. He didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but he also didn’t want to spook the woman either.

The Commander knew every person who remained in Haven tonight. It was only possible that it was Hanna praying at the foot of the Maker’s Bride.

As Cullen got closer, he could hear that Hanna was singing quietly. He could feel the magic pool around her as it always did when she sang. The song was somber. The tone was different than the songs she sang in the tavern. He had never heard her sing in such a private setting.

Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,
 beyond my fears, from death into life.

God is my shepherd, so nothing shall I want,
I rest in the meadows of faithfulness and love,
 I walk by the quiet waters of peace.
Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,
beyond my fears, from death into life.

Gently you raise me and heal my weary soul,
you lead me by pathways of righteousness and truth,
my spirit shall sing the music of your Name.

Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,
beyond my fears, from death into life.

You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred,
crowning me with love beyond my pow'r to hold.

As Hanna sang the refrain a final time, Cullen realized she was crying. It was hard to turn away when the tears ran down her face in rivers. He wanted to hold her. Pat her back in the soothing way he had seen Mahanon do so many times now. Now in front of the Maker’s Bride he could admit that he had broken her confidence and trust in him.

“Andraste forgive me.” He spoke solemnly. Hanna turned to face him surprised. She didn’t move at first, and Cullen hoped that she would hear him out. “I have hurt my dear friend with my quick anger and judgement. I have demolished that trusting bond we once forged through time and effort.”

Hanna looked at him in the dim light of the candles. She had stopped crying and wiped her eyes furiously to eliminate the proof that she had ever cried at all.

It didn’t work.

“Maker help her. I should have been a shoulder for her to cry on when she returned from Redcliffe Castle.” Cullen felt his throat close around his admission. The guilt to finish spurred him on. “Maker help me. I still love her.”

“Cullen.” She whispered, her voice still tinged by her sobs.

“I’m sorry.” He answered not sure what to say.

“No, I’m sorry.” Her eyes erupted in tears again. She tried to speak without hiccuping. “I made so many mistakes too. I can’t stop the attack. People are going to die.”

Cullen shook his head. “Hanna, no. Hanna think of all of the people you saved. Children and civilians are safe tonight because no matter who attacks us, you gave us fair warning.”

Hanna’s sobs increased. Cullen reached down and pulled her to her feet. He placed her hands around his shoulders and lifted her in his arms. Cullen carried her out of the chantry down to Mahanon’s cabin.

“You need to prepare for tomorrow. We have no idea how sealing the breach will affect you.” He set her on her feet in front of the door. Cullen felt better than he had in the week of preparations. Hanna looked beautiful despite her swollen features from time spent crying. Her blue eyes sparkled in the twilight calling out to a part of his mind that had missed her for weeks since she left for the storm coast. Before he knew what he was doing, Cullen kissed her. Cullen was ashamed of how forward he was. This was not how he intended their first real kiss.

Hanna was not ashamed. Her lips felt hungry against his. She bit her lip and smiled when he tried to regain control of his faculties and pull away. Instead, Hanna pulled him with her arms still around his
neck until he was pinning her against Mahanon’s cabin with his hips. Hanna wrapped a stealthy leg around his and pulled him down for a second kiss. Using the leverage of her leg she ground into him, Cullen inhaled sharply. Hanna took advantage and her adventurous tongue reached out to meet his. The connection was sweet and maddeningly quick.

Cullen’s hands left the wooden wall of the cabin to find a home on her waist. One hand explored the curve of her ass. The other, he slid up her side to her throat. Cullen could feel her pulse singing there and stroked her chin. Hanna moaned and Cullen’s mouth left Hanna’s to follow his hand to her sensitive neck.

“Commander, Hanna, I think that’s quite enough for tonight.” The gruff voice of Bartomé came from the now open door. The old man was obviously still half asleep.

Hanna cleared her throat, and Cullen nipped her neck playfully as he pulled away. Her body shuddered at the attention and Cullen hastened his retreat before he took her there, Bartomé be damned.

“Tomorrow then,” He dismissed himself from their doorstep and nearly ran to his tent. Cullen groaned looking at the state of his tented pants. Tonight he would take himself in hand thinking of Hanna’s quick, skilled tongue, sensitive neck and soft moans. Tomorrow he would… Cullen stopped his thoughts. For all he knew the attack on Haven would happen tomorrow.

If the attack came tomorrow… Cullen didn’t know how he would contain his lust much longer.

Chapter End Notes

So, I know I don't update this as often as I should, but writing this chapter really reminded me of how fun Warden Alyiah's adventure with Alistair is. The thing is that I don't have as much time to write as I wish I did, so I would end up updating more slowly. So let me know in a comment if you would be interested in reading my Warden's adventure starting now or if you would prefer to wait until around Christmas when I plan on finishing up R&R. I'll probably end up doing whatever feels right, but I'd like to know your opinion.
Thank you for reading. I decided not to post the Warden's story yet. I'll sit on it and add to it, but it's better to focus on one project at a time.

I think Hanna's starting to fit in now that she's more open.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The week leading up to Mahanon sealing the breach was tense. Hanna was tense. She talked to Mahanon a lot, but it turned out that there was nothing either of them could do to improve her situation.

Hanna worried that the preparations wouldn’t be enough. Or that by preparing somehow, the oncoming army would hear about the escape plan and attack the evacuating civilians, or worse the people escaping from Haven after the attack. Hanna worried that she was telling too much, or too little to be of any use.

This was supposed to be her forte. She was a strategist first and foremost in her previous life. She couldn’t help the feelings of inadequacy that ran rampant through her thoughts. If anyone could use foresight to their advantage, it would be her.

What did she do with her months of seeing the future?

She ran from it. Hid it away. Then, when she couldn’t run anymore, she used it in the most selfish way possible.

It reminded her that she really wasn’t the hero that was so honorably discharged back home. In her heart, to her core she was broken, a sinner. Somehow she had forgotten that in this strange medieval world.

Hanna focused all of her energy on convincing Mahanon’s crew that she was wholly present for the inquisition. Things fell into place like lucky dominoes.

Hanna apologized to Cassandra with an excerpt from the smutty story Varric had been using to teach her how to write. Hanna got that excerpt from Varric by trading the story behind the movie Inception. She got the idea to share a story from home from Iron Bull who trusted her more after she went shot for shot with him one night at the tavern. Vivienne, Blackwall, and Sera were all similarly impressed with help from Iron Bull. However the person who got her into a drinking contest, and supported her return to good faith the most was Dorian Pavus.

Hanna stormed out of the chantry after her confrontation with Cullen in the War Room. She pulled Barty out of a conversation with Threnn about where to best hunt for supplies for the inquisition’s horses. Barty regretfully followed her to the sparring field.

“You know, Hanna.” The old man spoke as he adjusted his armor. “I’ve seen a lot of fuck-ups in my time. I’ve never seen a woman so determined to piss on her own good fortune.” Bartolomé had never been so course in his language with her. Hanna sneered and dropped into her battle stance.
“Barty, you think I don’t know that? Shit, you must think maggots above me.”

“I’ve seen dog shit with higher morals.”

As much as it hurt, Hanna was grateful for the shit talk. In a way, Barty must have already forgiven her.

“Nut up or shut up, buttercup. Let’s go!” Hanna lunged low anticipating a parry from the cranky cobblepot. She was surprised when her dull blade met empty air. Either Barty was much faster than he had ever been or her anger was slowing her down. Barty brought down an elbow on her extended arm, disarming her. Hanna gasped in pain and retracted into the old man’s waiting outstretched foot. She tripped and landed on her ass.

“Sloppy. No wonder you aren’t worth shit.” The old man flipped her dagger off the ground and handed it back to her handle first.

“Fuck off.” Hanna accepted the handle and returned to her standing position. She didn’t relax for long instead unleashing a flurry of swipes from her dual daggers. Barty didn’t seemed to notice the attacks that landed. He deftly dodged and parried what he could. His blasé attitude was infuriating. Hanna was dying to make him work for a win.

Hanna disengaged and left her injured arm open in an attempt to fake the old loafer out. Barty swung his sword out high on the opposite side. Hanna dodged down and away only to see his practice shield inches from slicing into her face. Hanna twisted in an instant and turned to see Barty had left his back open. Hanna used her momentum to slam the handle of her dagger into his kidney. Barty was caught off guard for a moment and Hanna took the opportunity to kick him in the back of the knee.

“That’s better. Fight like that and you might actually be worth something.”

In the third round of their spar, Hanna hated to admit that the old man had her beat in terms of endurance. When she finally conceded the fight, Barty clapped her on the back.

“Looks like you’ve got some work to do, I’ll leave you to it. See you at home.” It was a temporary relief that Barty had forgiven her so quickly. But Hanna wasn’t sure what he meant by work to do until she turned around and saw one Tevinter mage waiting for an audience.

“Hanna, let’s go for a walk.”

“Why would you want to go on a walk alone with me, Dorian?” Hanna shook her head, and wiped her brow. “Never mind, don’t answer that. I’m kind of pissed off right now. I don’t think it’s a good time.”

“I think now is precisely the time.” His eyes held no mischievous glint. If Hanna read anything in Dorian’s all too readable face it was sincerity. “Shall we?” He indicated a direction with his arm and Hanna begrudgingly followed.

Several minutes passed of silence outside of the snow crunching beneath their boots.

“You and the Commander got into a bit of a tiff if I was reading the room right.” Dorian had a habit of forming questions like statements and statements like questions.

“How very astute of you.” Hanna answered.
“I’m not here to say that you’re wrong to be upset. I don’t even know what was said. I do want you to know that he looked absolutely heartbroken as you left the room.” Hanna tried to gauge Dorian’s honesty. She stopped walking and he turned to look at her. After several beats of staring too long, Hanna decided to believe him.

“If he was going to regret it, he shouldn’t have said it. I don’t regret a thing I said to him.” Hanna said with a content smile, she did not feel content.

“He was giving Mahanon some puppy dog eyes. I think he meant to come apologize immediately.” Dorian smirked when Hanna’s bravado fueled smile fell into a frown.

“I couldn’t care less how that asshole feels. Is there a point to this walk or did you just bring me out here to gossip about the Commander?”

“Ooohh” Dorian drawled. “The Commander now is it? How quickly this one forgets her own wrongdoing. Well, so be it. I was going to try to help you get back into the group, but....”Dorian smiled mischievously. Hanna realized suddenly that Dorian thought this whole carrot and stick routine was hilarious.

“Fine, what do you want?”

“Nothing, my dear. Mahanon asked me to look out for you that’s all.” Hanna rolled her eyes at his insistence. “Iron Bull thinks he can drink me under the table. Come and join the festivities for a price.”

“Name it.”

“I’ll get you in for free, but you’ve got to make up with the Commander before the Herald seals the breach.” The mage held out his hand. He wanted her to shake on it. Hanna deflated. How could she forgive that jerk so quickly. When it took her too long to think, Dorian spoke again. “Deal goes off the table in...3...2..”

“For the love of all that is good and holy, I get it.” Hanna shook Dorian’s hand.

“Let’s go see a Qunari about a drink.”

By the end of the week, everyone seemed satisfied with her reconciliatory activities. Hanna felt like as she took on one part of her new life, the pieces fell out elsewhere. It hurt the worst when she considered the implications of her actions. She tried to push the thought out of her mind, but it didn’t change the fact that she didn’t think any of them were really people until Manny forgave her. She may have regained their trust, but she didn’t trust herself anymore.

The night before the big day, Mahanon was out like a light. Barty seemed contented when Hanna lay in bed for a few minutes and fell asleep himself. Lucky for Hanna Barty was an old fart who slept like the dead. Hanna walked the empty streets alone, but her mind still could not find peace. Finally, Hanna decided to go to the Chantry and find her peace in prayer.

She didn’t expect anyone to be up this late before the big day. When she heard the door open, she assumed the wind had blown it open. The footsteps she attributed to her mind trying to fill the silence with noise. It wasn’t comforting, so she decided to sing. ‘Shepherd me, Oh God’, was one of her favorite songs once. She loved to hear the church choir break into parts and sing to her soul.

The memory of attending church brought her to memories of her mother. The song became an ode to all that she had lost and all that she could gain. Hanna mourned the idea that she would never see home ever again. There was no point in hoping for a pathway home. As she finished out the final
refrain, she felt like she was saying goodbye.

“Andraste, forgive me.”

The suddenness of the intrusion into this private moment terrified her. Part of Hanna, the timid part that was useless in Thedas, wished that if she stayed completely still, the person wouldn’t see her. She turned to look at him despite her entire body telling her to leave. She heard out his prayer. When he admitted his feelings for her, she whispered his name like one of her own.

Time blurred in apologies and tears. She didn’t expect Cullen to pick her up so gently and huddle her in his arms. Hanna peacefully laid her head against his shoulder and relaxed in his arms. There was something special about this moment.

Hanna didn’t feel guilty for letting Cullen carry her. She felt awestruck at his forgiveness. Heat rose inside her as a side effect of the intimate nature of being held. Hanna still hadn’t admitted to returning his feelings, but when he put her down, she funneled all of her feelings into an open moment. She opened her eyes wide and hoped he would receive the message.

It was so sudden that his lips came down on hers. She never anticipated a kiss. Cullen began to pull away, but Hanna refused to let him get away so easily. She threw all of her bodily strength into pulling him close and holding him there. For just a few seconds, Cullen was everything to her. She wanted too much. Cullen seemed to want it all the same.

Barty wanted her to go to sleep.

Much to her sexual frustration, Barty’s desire won out. Cullen retreated hastily. Hanna regretted that she shared a room with the cruel bodyguard. She was resigned to wait until this was all over.

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The following morning, Hanna followed the Herald’s retinue up the mountain which held the ruins of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Cullen kept his distance from her, but brief glances they were able to share sent shivers down her spine. If all went well, she would make a big move tonight.

Luck it would seem was on her side. The morning went smoothly. The afternoon trip was similarly quiet.

After all the preparation, even the big act was a bit of a let down. Mahanon seemed to struggle with the connection. The mark on her cheek burned and itched. Cullen commanded the men to be ready for a wave of demons or the mages turning abomination. Then all at once it was over. Mahanon fell to his knees beneath a calm sky.

Cassandra clapped her on the back. Varric gave Hanna a hug. The air tasted like a celebration.

Hanna helped Mahanon walk away from the ruins to a wagon reserved to carry the Herald back to Haven. This time Hanna was able to ride down beside him as an ally and friend. Dorian elbowed Hanna in the ribs.

“After all I’ve done for you, you couldn’t even try to talk to our stoic Commander.”

“Just because you didn’t see us talk, doesn’t mean we didn’t.” Hanna cleared her throat. “It just so happens the Commander and I more than made it up to each other last night.”
Manny’s face soured. “Ach, seriously I would prefer not to know what you and the esteemed Commander get up to in the dead of night.” Then he turned to look at her. “Wait you slept at home last night, don’t tell me that you got it on with Bartolomé in the room.”

“Woah, Manny...It wasn’t... we didn’t...” Manny and Dorian gave each other a knowing glance. “Oh Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, we kissed alright. It was just a kiss.”

“From what I saw, it was going to be more than just a kiss, Lady Hanna.” Barty just so happened to be riding his horse near the wagon. Hanna blushed and coughed uncomfortable. It was amazing how much Hanna Cooper could be reduced from a grown woman to a high school girl in just a few words. She hated it.

“Not if you had anything to do with it.”

“So you were going to fuck Cullen in the same room as your poor bodyguard. He just woke up and stopped you.” Mahanon gave Hanna a mock look of exasperation. Scandalized, he turned to the mounted warrior. With all the makings of an Oscar worthy performance. “I am so sorry Bartolomé. My advisor’s behavior was unbecoming of her position in the inquisition. She will be severely reprimanded. I’m sure that Commander Cullen will have the proper punishment in mind.”

“One man’s punishment is another’s pleasure. I’m afraid, she’ll never learn at this rate.” Dorian chimed in.

“Oh come off it all of you. Don’t encourage Manny, you’ll spoil him.” Hanna laughed in spite of herself. There was a comfort in the ease of just existing with her new friends.

When they finally did arrive back in Haven, Manny stood by the central fire. Hanna stayed near him. While the atmosphere in Haven was celebratory, Hanna felt fear settle into the pit of her stomach. The attack would come soon. Maybe not today, but soon. She hoped they were ready. She startled when the Seeker grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from the crowd at the fire.

“Have you seen a more clarifying vision as to when we can expect this threat?”

“I have not. I imagine someone would have noticed by now if I went down with a vision.” It had been strange that after weeks of having visions nearly daily, Hanna hadn’t had one in a week. She assumed it was because she now knew better how to avoid the circumstances that forced her connection to the fade. The seeker grumbled her disappointment, but didn’t push the conversation further. Hanna walked away from the disgruntled woman when she began to talk to Manny about their success and something about luck.

Hanna didn’t make it very far before she felt something in the air. It wasn’t a smell or sight. Just a feeling in the pit of her stomach. The air whooshed out of her lungs and Hanna felt the hairs on the bottom of her neck prickle. Panic settled like a stone on her chest. Hanna laid a hand gently on her chest and patted out a steady rhythm to slow her breathing.

“You alright, Sunshine?” Varric sounded very far away. Hanna shook her head. “Hey! Seeker! Shiny! Something’s up with Sunshine.” His voice echoed in her mind.

Manny came first and pulled her close.

“Hanna, what is it?” Hanna suddenly felt like Lassie. ‘What is it girl, did the Herald fall down a well?’

“I...The attack, it’s going to happen. Now.”
“I didn’t see you get another vision. You’d think I’d notice the glowing eyes.” Varric tried to make light.

“No, we have to… Leliana’s scouts we need to pull them in… start the evacuation.” Hanna’s words broke through her panic. Hanna sprung out of Manny’s arms. She saw Cullen by the gate and waved him down. Manny, Cassandra and Varric followed her.

The ex-templar surveyed her expression and her entourage with a silent question in his eyes.

“Cullen we need to call back the….” Bells started ringing. Hanna looked around with fear in her eyes. She was too late. Civilians ran for the safety of the chantry as they had during drills. Dorian, Solas, Blackwall, and Sera came from the direction of the tavern. Iron Bull pulled the large gate closed himself after everyone had passed through.

“An enemy army is amassing.” A watchguard shouted coming down from the gate tower.

“How large?” Hanna could help but be in awe of Cullen’s control. Inside she was panicking, outside she was a stuttering mess. Regardless of how Cullen felt, here he was. In charge, asking the important questions.

“It’s a massive force, though the bulk must be over the mountain.” Cullen dismissed the guard to his emergency post.

Cassandra interrupted, “Under what banner?”

“None.” The guard shouted as he left.

A knocking at the gate shocked Hanna, that hadn’t happened before. While the others reviewed the strategy, Hanna ran to pull open the smaller gate within the gate. In front of her two large red templars stood, they began to charge and fell simultaneously.

“I’m Cole, I came to warn you, to help.” Cullen pulled on her shoulder. Hanna stood firm. “People are coming to hurt you.” He looked at Hanna with wide, surprised eyes. “You already know.”

“Friend or Foe? Hanna?” Manny pushed passed her. Hanna could only shake her head.

“I don’t remember this. This didn’t happen last time. At least I didn’t see him.” Frantically Hanna searched. She remembered that she had gone up into the mountains to see who was leading the army. Cole could have come while she was gone.

“The templars turned to the Elder One. He made them his own, and now they come to kill you.” He looked at Hanna and Manny. “You know him? He knows you. You took his mages.” Cole pointed up into the mountains where Samson was surveying the oncoming forces. “There.”

“I know that man, but this Elder One.” Cullen spoke as if he could clearly see Samson from this distance. Hanna wondered if he had some sort of Templar super sight.

Hanna had forgotten about Samson. “Samson.” The name slipped from her lips and Cullen turned with an unreadable expression. Before he could questions her, Cole finished. “He’s very angry that you took his mages.” Cole spoke ominously.

“We proceed with the plan. Herald take your party to ready the trebuchets!” Cullen shouted. He returned to his assigned task, but not before giving Hanna a look. They were going to talk later. About Samson. Great.
Hanna ran out with Manny, Iron Bull, Dorian, and Solas. As the boys fought off waves of red templars, she worked with the soldiers to aim the trebuchets. They successfully fired several volleys. Hanna looked to the right.

“The far trebuchet isn’t firing! They need back up I’m going.” Hanna shouted over the fighting. Manny growled at her.

“You can’t just run off course, stick to the plan.”

“It won’t work if we don’t trigger the avalanche!” Hanna left without another word. Dorian sighed as Manny ordered his party to follow him. “You know your lovers quarrels need to happen when fewer lives are at risk.”

Iron Bull laughed. At least someone thought the mage was funny.

Hanna grunted as she tightened her core to spin the axis wheel. She had to aim the trebuchet for operation Mulan to succeed. The muscles in her abdomen squealed as she did the three person job alone. Cranking the pulley mechanism back to get it ready to fire was painful, before she finished Manny was on the other side of the wheel helping her push.

She cut the rope and the catapult’s payload flew and exploded on the mountain side. The vast majority of the templar forces were buried, but Haven was still overrun. Hanna sighed in relief. She jumped down from the platform and celebrated for a moment with Manny. That was until she remembered that she hadn’t really warned them about the motherfucking dragon either.

“Run!” She ordered. The Herald of Andraste, ever the pain in her ass insisted on checking the outer buildings for people. After saving Harret, he was insufferable. He insisted on checking throughout Haven before going to the chantry to give them a green light to escape. Hanna admitted that she would rather save the people trapped in the wake of the attack that she had described vaguely.

After closing the chantry doors behind them, Mahanon turned on her. “You couldn’t mention that our enemy had a fucking dragon.” Hanna shrugged. Inside the chantry was completely different than in her vision. No one was mortally wounded. Chancellor Roderick was in perfect health. Cole was standing by his side telling him that the Herald didn’t hold his prior disbelief against him. Hanna wanted to tell the professional prick how lucky he had come out in all of this.

In fact everyone was very organized and prepared for a long wintery walk away from Haven. No children were huddled afraid because they had been sent away. No mothers were clutching their cold, dead children. It gave Hanna peace to know that she was the reason that these people were relatively safe. Cullen announced that with the Herald’s arrival they could finally leave.

Hanna hadn’t told anyone he would have to stay. She didn’t know how to bring it up now. Lucky for her, she had a very helpful new friend. Cullen and Manny were arguing about the possibility that they would be followed by the dragon. Cole had corrected that the dragon was more like an archdemon.

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village, he only wants the Herald.” Hanna tried to hide her relief that she didn’t have to be the one to say it.

Mahanon closed his eyes and looked away. “If it will save these people, then he can have me.”

“If we don’t go out there and stall him, he will hunt down the rest of you like dogs. Manny, I hate to say it, but you have to go. We have to go.” Hanna looked around to everyone. “Let out a signal flare when you are clear of the mountain. Manny and I are going to bury Haven with that last trebuchet.”
Cullen looked torn. It was the first time she saw and emotion out of him other than supreme confidence. He nodded acknowledging the situation, but a lump in his throat seemed to stop him short of talking. He cleared it. “Perhaps, you will surprise it. Find a way…”

Hanna knew what he was thinking, she was going to go out there and die. “Cullen, I’ll come back. We will both make it out alive. I swear to you.” Hanna told the lie like she had foreseen it was the truth. She had no idea if they would, but it sounded pretty to promise they would. “Let’s show this Elder One what we can do.”

As they approached the final fight, Manny became more of a conversationalist than he normally was. “Did you really see us surviving this?”

Hanna shook her head. “I’m not 100% sure what happens next. It’s a little blurry and in my vision, we brought along Solas, Dorian, and Bull.” When Mahanon gave her a glare she answered the unspoken challenge. “We don’t need to put them in danger to win this.”

Knight-Captain Denam in his hideously misshapen form was not one to be dismissed so readily. Manny was the tank and Hanna did everything in her power to sap the behemoth of its strength. When his back was turned, she would try to pry out shards of lyrium with her daggers. This would give Manny time to run away and drink down a potion and build up his stamina for a charge. Hanna had to admit it felt good to fight this fight alone with Manny.

After taking him down, they worked together to aim the trebuchet. Manny had to do most of the work, because Hanna was exhausted from the effort of all the fighting they’d done. They were almost ready to fire the trebuchet when the Elder One came down upon them. With a blast of magic Hanna and Manny were thrown from the trebuchet and Hanna was almost sure she had passed out. She only woke up because of the significant amount of pain in her now very much so glowing cheek. She looked for Manny and tried to hear beyond the ringing in her ears. She saw the Elder One throw him against the trebuchet, he seemed to be in pain and his anchored hand was pulsing with green and red magic.

“You’ve spoilt it with your stumbling.” Hanna heard over the din in her ears and blindly walked towards the trebuchet. “I can not suffer even an unknowing rival. You. Must. Die.”

“Your arrogance blinds you. Good to know. If I’m dying it’s not today. A little birdy told me.” Manny slammed something down and the trebuchet unloaded into the mountain side. Hanna ran around the Elder One and Dragon, pulled Manny down and ran for the hidden cave. She hadn’t really checked to make sure it was there. She had hidden an extra pack of emergency supplies near where she thought the hidden entrance might be. As the snow and rock came down, Hanna grabbed the pack and slide down the icy, near vertical incline. Manny was significantly heavier than her in his armor. He slid passed her faster and she heard him hit the ground. She followed suit and blacked out.

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Hanna awoke to magic crackling in her sensitive ears. Manny was groaning in pain. He shouted when she stirred. Hanna looked at their position in the dim light of his shimmering fade hand and her glimmering fade marked face. Manny was underneath her. It was hard to know for sure, but it looked suspiciously like his arm was bent in a rather unnatural way. He was fever stricken when she checked his temperature with her bare arm.

Hanna lifted her arm and surveyed her own situation, she was in tattered clothing missing significant
portions of her armor. She had skid burns and gashes covering her body. When Hanna tried to stand she knew the extent of the damage was immense. It hurt to stand on her own. Hanna moved her hands through the dark hoping to find her pack of emergency supplies. She retrieved the pack and downed the first potion.

Hanna lay back down trying to wait until the more severe wounds were closed. She felt a pain of guilt for not checking on Manny’s full condition, but she couldn’t do much for him if she couldn’t move herself.

As long as he was groaning, she had time. ‘Ah, the benefits of magic.’

Hanna knew through her personal experience with the healing potions, that they didn’t make the healing happen out of nowhere. Instead it seemed as though the magic of the potion would speed up the natural process of healing, and would increase the demanded energy from the body of the person being healed. In other words, it drained your stamina and strength to drink the potion, but increased vitality. What a trade.

After a few minutes, Hanna felt well enough to stand. She wasn’t well off, but Manny needed immediate medical attention.

The elf seemed so small to her as he lay before her sweating in the dead cold of the cave. They needed fire she didn’t have. Hanna gently moved Manny into a position where she could see most of him. She hovered her face inches from him to check for more immediate dangers. He had a nasty gash across his back and around to his chest. His left arm was broken high between the elbow and shoulder, the jagged bone pushed out passed his elbow. The magic in his arm cackled like a disney villain. Laughing at her inexperience with such wounds. Hanna turned and ran to the furthest corner of the cave she could before vomiting.

After she was done, Hanna returned. First she removed his armor carefully and cut off his clothing with her dagger. Then, Hanna focused on sterilizing and stitching the large gash closed then wrapping her friend in all of the bandages she had packed. Hanna sincerely regretted doing this work in the dark with nothing more than the sickly green of the anchor and dim blue of her face to see. She had to stabilize Manny before she could even think about moving him.

Hanna looked at the broken arm. If she fucked this up, he wouldn’t be able to use his arm again. Hanna tried to remember back to her emergency medical training. The first thing she remembered was the importance of not moving the injured arm more than necessary. She had to try to move it back into place and splint it. She had to hope that after splinting it she could give him a healing potion and carry him to the rest of the group.

Of course in that scenario the healing potion could still overtax his body with all that it was trying to heal. She just had to hope that it was enough.

Hanna’s hands were shaking as she stabilized his shoulder to apply traction to reset the bone. She hoped to do so without causing more damage to his nerves, muscles, and blood vessels. As the fracture was open, she knew it was a shitty idea. She moved carefully and Manny screamed until he passed out. She used the stick she intended to use as a walking stick to splint his arm. She tied it down using his tattered shirt. Hanna laid the rough blanket she had packed over him and slipped the potion through his lips and prayed he didn’t choke on it.

While Hanna waited for the potion to do him justice, she set to sewing herself more appropriate weather attire from the remaining fabric she had. Manny would have to manage with his pants, boots, and blanket. Hanna was going to have to walk in the snow. After about twenty more minutes she had pieced together enough to cover the holes in her jacket and pants. Hanna set to picking up
Manny on his right side. She balanced the splinted arm in between his legs. His temperature was still running hot. But his feverish form was almost comforting to carry.

“Woah, Manny, you’re going to have to lay off the sweet rolls.” She grunted as she tried to balance him carefully and stepped with carefully grace rolling her toes like she was in marching band to prevent jostling her precious cargo. Hanna realized if they were attacked they were fucked.

She stuck to the shadows of the cave and passed several spiders and a despair demon or three. She forced herself to find the most silent pathway Hanna prayed that Manny wouldn’t stir because she knew the dangers of being injured behind enemy lines.

After she exited the cave, Hanna realized she had no fucking clue where the others would have gone. She closed her eyes and picked a direction. At least she could blame fate for fucking her over if she died an icy death walking away from the only help for miles.

The progress was slow, and her legs dug into the snow with her weight compounded with Manny’s. She slid slowly closer to complete delirium. Hanna thought of warm things. A hot beach in Miami, where she’d gotten drunk once on a break from AIT. Afghanistan. Hot tubs. Saunas. It worked for a few minutes until it didn’t. Hanna thought to sing almost too late.

Her voice could channel her magic in a way she couldn’t hope to on her own. Manny stirred and murmured about the chill.

‘He must not feel very feverish anymore.’ She thought. She opened her mouth only to hear her voice crack. She wouldn’t sound very pretty. “What song should I sing Manny?”

Ever taking cues from her environment Hanna remembered a music video one of her music school buddies sent her well into her second tour. It was dark and snowy. ‘Perfect,’ she agreed with the part of her brain already thinking of the lyrics.

_Slow heart dark wait down love black canvas_  
_Revolving within, you understand_  
_Fragile earth where cracks in the temperature_  
_Keep it cool to give, you understand_  
_Keep it cool to give, you understand_  
_Slow heart dark wait down love black canvas_  
_Revolving within, you understand_  
_Fragile earth where cracks in the temperature_  
_Keep it cool to give, you understand_

The words gave her a tempo to step to. Her throat ached with the cold air. She croaked the words thinking of her warm thoughts. Eventually, she passed what remained of a camp. The coals in the fire were still hot. With renewed vigor she continued.

_Cause I just can't find the strength to pull you up and keep you taut_  
_No I just can't find the strength to hold you up and keep you taut_  
_Hijacked lost track light fades another day left_  
_Long shadows lure you in_  
_The more you look the less you see_  
_So close your eyes and start to breathe_  
_Oh, suit yourself, this wasn't easy_  
_Mm, suit yourself this wasn't easy_
Hanna fought the urge to stop and bask in the heat that she felt deep in her bones as she sang. Her magic was working her thoughts were coming into reality. The fade was responding to her thoughts without the sharp pull that came with her visions.

Oh, I just can't find the strength to pull you up and keep you taut  
No, I just can't find the strength to hold you up and keep you taut

A second camp!  
More recent!  
Exhausted. Too hard to think.

'Cause I just can't find the strength  
To keep you taut.

Just one more step.  
And another.  
One more.  
Don’t collapse.  
So close.

Hanna heard voices calling out to her. They sounded so far away. She passed Mahanon to someone carefully. She tried to tell them about his arm. When he was taken from her, she collapsed into the snow. She could die now, happily. He was safe.

The last thing she thought was ‘Is that sandalwood? Does heaven smell like a beach in the hamptons? That’s weird.’

Chapter End Notes

The song during her walk is Black Canvas by Imogen Heap. I always think of it on snowy days in the winter on my way to work.
Well, this was really last minute. I meant to work on it, but this weekend was really busy, so it's coming to you late. It's completely unedited and unfiltered, so prepare yourself for that. At any rate, enjoy.

Cullen trudged onwards with the survivors of the attack on Haven. The path Hanna had described from her vision led high into the mountains. Which meant they had to come back down the mountains at some point. They had prepared for the walk down the mountain, but not the blizzard that chased them. All their supplies meant they had to stop often to water the Druffalo and other beasts of burden. Cullen and Leliana argued bitterly about how long to stop each time.

“If Hanna knows where to look for us, it is better we stop and wait for her and the Herald.” He felt as if he was losing the battle to keep a confident mask. Cullen could not stand to think Hanna and Mahanon would be lost in the storm after surviving Haven.

“Cullen, if we wait on this mountain in this storm any longer, all of these people will die.” Lelliana’s words had a hard tone. She was talking down to him. It hurt worse because she was right.

And so they marched on. After leaving the second temporary camp, Cullen was losing hope.

“I know that it is hard, Cullen.” Josephine soothed from behind him as he watched the snow drift over the empty mountain pass behind them. The black curtain of night hollowed his stomach with thoughts of Hanna frozen in a snow drift. Unable to see the path of footprints and caravan wheels in the blinding snow. “She will make it if it is the Maker’s will.”

Cullen turned and shook his head. “She lied. There’s no way either of them can make it in this.” He tried not to let the tears fall from his wind burned eyes. Cullen knew if he started he may not be able to stop.

Josephine huffed, but Cullen couldn’t tell if it was in indignance or pain. He knew he should be more reassuring. Trusting. It’s what a leader does. However, Cullen felt responsible for her death. He had approved their final mission. He had chosen the many over the few, and now he felt bitter.

When Leliana’s few remaining scouts cleared a valley for them to camp for the night, Cassandra came to him to lead a search party. Truthfully, Cullen had lost hope. He only agreed after much harrumphing from the Seeker. Bartolomé and Cole faithfully volunteered. Blackwall grumbled at the soldiers until a few joined him. Cullen lead the way, but it was Cole who spotted them first. It didn’t look like two people walking. More like a very heavyset dwarf trudging through the snow. A mirage of sleep deprivation and emotional pain.

“Her song keeps them warm. She doesn’t know how much further she can make it.” The eerie childlike man spoke. “One more step...another...one more...she made a promise.” Cole had run
ahead, but looked back to Cullen. “She intends to keep it.”

Cassandra was fleet of foot even in the deep snow. She arrived ahead of the group and gently removed the Herald from Hanna’s arms. Hanna tried to speak to the Seeker, but her voice came out in shallow empty wheezes. Cullen caught Hanna as she crumpled to the ground. In the torchlight, Cullen couldn’t be sure of her injuries, but her face looked pale in the dim light of her still glowing cheek. Cullen noted that Mahanon’s mark had been more active as well.

*What happened out there?*  He thought impotently. Both the Herald and the ‘Oracle’ needed immediate medical intervention if they were to survive the night.

Cullen was caught off guard by the sudden heat when he touched her. It started in his arms and traveled along his limbs until he was almost comfortably warm. It was magical in nature and his first instinct was to silence it. Hanna was no longer conscious, but she was still casting magic. It raised his hackles and his instincts cried foul.

All of Solas’s attempts to open her connection to the fade had failed. She had never cast a spell in months of trying. She had given up and refused to try again. Other than the weak magic that lilted from her voice as she sang, she was as mundane as Cullen. Ignoring his bad feeling, Cullen removed his mantle and draped it over her before arranging her in his arms and running for a healer’s tent.

Several mages had set up healing tents to combat the frostbite and other cold related injuries. Cullen burst through the closed flaps of the closest canvas tent and announced his presence urgently. A soft faced mage calmly directed others out of the tent and cleared a cot for him to lay Hanna down. The mage looked young and inexperienced and Cullen regretted his thoughtless rush to choose a tent. Cullen bit his tongue and let her start to work.

The young woman checked over Hanna limp body. When she touched Hanna, she gasped in surprise. Cullen can only suspect she wasn’t expecting the wave of magical heat either. The healer pressed gently over Hanna’s clothes methodically. When the healer pressed on Hanna’s upper abdomen, she pursed her lips. The woman gently removed the ill-repaired overcoat only to choke. Deep black blood seeped through Hanna’s under clothing. The cloth adhered to her skin so the healer cut her shirt off of her. A group of more experienced mages including Solas entered the tent, and Cullen was shooed from the tent. As Cullen was turned away, he could see the red lyrium imbedded in Hanna’s ribs.

His throat went dry and he bit his fist. The original healer soon followed him out of the tent. She walked with her head held high outside the line of tents only to lose her dinner in the snow. Cullen had to admit a younger weaker stomach and he would be doing the same. Red Lyrium poisoned the mind just as much as the body. It was hard to imagine that Hanna might survive with her loss of blood, exhaustion, and wounds. Even so, her mind may have been changed by the lyrium. He had saved her only to lose her again.

At least it explained the magic.

“She is in the hands of the people who can do her the most good Commander.” An unfamiliar voice spoke to him. Cullen turned to see the young healing mage had returned to the tent. “I have learned a lot about healing since the war started, sir.” She continued when he didn’t respond. “No one has come back whole from direct exposure to red lyrium. I’m sorry.”

Cullen wanted to yell at the woman, but she ducked back into the tent. Of course, he knew that. He was the Commander of the Inquisition. He was also at Kirkwall. He had seen first hand the devastation even a small red lyrium idol could do. To hear something so obvious from the young
mage was infuriating, Cullen swallowed back an unbecoming emotional outburst. Instead, he returned to the impromptu meeting space Josephine had set up. He silently mourned Hanna as he waited for the other advisers to arrive. When they did, it was straight to business. Everyone wanted to avoid the frayed nerves and heated emotions.

Leliana and Josephine updated him on the Herald’s miraculous recovery. Cullen felt the bitterness bulge against his emotional barrier. He half hoped that neither survived. That whatever took Hanna down like this wasn’t survivable. Even if it would negate her sacrifice. Her promise to return.

Cassandra came even later and with her everything unraveled. The team of mages left Hanna’s tent, looking neither jubilant nor dejected. Cullen was distracted when Cassandra began by announcing her plan to direct the travelling survivors to a new base. Josephine pointed out that they were not exactly welcome in either Fereldan or Orlais. Leliana chimed in hopelessly that they’ve lost their purpose, and might as well disband. At least the breach had been closed. Cassandra scoffed at that. Cullen lost his temper with the situation and mostly the Seeker.

“What would you have them do? This isn’t what they signed up for.” As he spoke, Cullen recognized that now was not the time to have this conversation. All emotions were running high, especially his. This conversation was exactly what he, Leliana, and Josephine had successfully avoided without Cassandra.

“We cannot simply ignore this! We must find a way.” Cassandra sounded so righteous he had to respond.

“And who put you in charge? We need a consensus or we have nothing.”

“Please, we must use reason! Without the infrastructure of the inquisition we are hobbled. Our forces, though safe,” the ambassador paused as she looked to Hanna’s tent as if to thank her, “have been spread to the wind. We must regroup before we plan.” Josephine’s words sounded pleasant, but were meaningless. These decisions couldn’t wait.

“That can’t come from nowhere.” This is pointless. He thought as he spoke.

“She didn’t say it could” Leliana defended Josephine predictably.

“Enough! This is getting us nowhere.” Cassandra complained.

“Well at least we agree on that much.” Cullen threw his arms down in frustration and turned away from the group only to catch Mother Giselle’s approach from the healers’ tents. The Herald leaning on a tent post behind her. Mahanon must have read Hanna’s fate in Cullen’s expression, because he looked down at the ground. Cullen had to look away from him.

Hanna as good as died saving you. I hope it was worth it.

Cullen wasn’t being fair and he knew it. He kicked his boots at the snow until Mother Giselle’s voice broke the silence and he had to turn back around.

“Shadow’s fall,

And hope has fled…”

Cullen joined in with the hymn after Leliana. They would have to make a plan come morning, but for now it seemed the storm had calmed.
Hanna drifted aimlessly hovering above the ground in a green hellish landscape. When she realized that she hadn’t woken up in the snow, Hanna worried that she might be dead. In the distance, a black cityscape drifted.

Hanna thought to approach it, but she couldn’t really move from wherever she was floating. Pain registered fuzzily in her abdomen like she had broken a few ribs. She put her hand over the pain only to hear the sharp echo of a familiar song.

*Red Lyrium.*

It burned through her, and she called out for help.

A figure appeared before her, black smoke twirled about it until Risa stepped out.

“Hanna, I’m here.” Her friend took several steps forward and pulled Hanna to the ground.

When Risa hugged her close, Hanna felt momentary relief from the song of the Lyrium. It was enough to let her speak.

“Risa, how did you get here?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can help. Just let me in.” Risa spoke hurriedly. Hanna looked to her friend confused.

“Let you in?” Hanna looked around at their surroundings. The ground looked warped and wet. The sky was a mass of green clouds the color of the breach. There was no door to open, nothing to do to let Risa come in anywhere. “Where exactly are we?”

“Where do you want us to be?” Risa spoke, but she looked through Hanna, as if she was reading something. “What about this place? Seems comfortable.” Hanna couldn’t believe her eyes, the hellish green faded and in it’s place was Risa’s dad’s boat, the sea, and a perfect blue sky.

Hanna looked at herself and noticed she was wearing a swimming suit she had owned in high school. Risa was in her signature purple bikini. Sweat formed on Hanna’s brow, and the sounds of the sea erased her concern about the sudden changes. It was every trip she’d ever taken to Risa’s dad’s house in North Carolina.

“Yes, very comfortable. Now, it must hurt a lot Hanna Banana. Let me in. So I can help.” Hanna scrunched her nose in disapproval at the use of the old nickname. Risa giggled.

Hanna felt shock, Risa was never this demanding. She had a great sense of humor, but she never giggled. She only had one soft laugh. Hanna knew it well.

“I’m sorry, I just want to be there for you. I know this has all been very difficult for you.” Risa frowned when Hanna still didn’t answer her. Hanna coughed. This situation was unsettling. Whatever was happening, she wasn’t speaking to her friend.

“Okay, then.” The black smoke came back and the boat faded away. Hanna looked at the shifting form, then away to her surroundings. This wasn’t real. She wasn’t in Hell. This was the fade.

The form settled and a new voice spoke again. “Will you surrender to this form?” Her heart pounded. Cullen knelt and kissed her hand.
“You’re not real. You’re a demon.” Hanna concluded snatching her hand away from the Not-Cullen. When their contact broke, Hanna doubled over in pain.

“You are weak. You will be mine.”

Hanna thought back to everything she had learned about the fade from the books Solas had offered on the subject. There had to be something she could do.

Demons sought a bridge into the waking world. They fed off of people’s feelings. This demon seemed to focus on her desires. She had no way to fight off the newly changing form. It seemed the demon gave up on wearing others’ faces and wore its own purple horned face. Hanna crossed her arms in front of her face to protect from a blow that never came.

When she was brave enough to open her eyes, a kid stood between her and the demon. “It’s not safe here. You should leave.” His floppy hat still covered him from her view.

“You’re that Cole kid.”

“You remember?” He seemed surprised. The demon took advantage of his confusion and swiped at Hanna passed him. Cole blocked the attack at the last second. “Go!”

“Right, not the time for reacquainting ourselves.” Hanna nodded as if he could see her, and ran away. Her side still hurt, and it was difficult to keep any sort of pace. This was the first time she had been in the open world of the fade, and she wasn’t even really sure she could run away from someone.

Eventually an arm reached out to her from behind a stalagmite and pulled her in. Cole smiled almost pleasantly in a “I’m trying and failing not to give kids the heebee jeebees” kind of way. He put a finger to his lips to prevent her from asking a question. Hanna looked passed him to see the dark void of smoke waft by as the formless demon searched for them in her realm. It was like every scary movie where the protagonist hid in the bathroom or garage. Only the demon was stupid enough not to check behind this particular rock.

Only when Cole released her did she think to speak again. “Hey, so you’re a mage then.”

“No.”

Hanna cocked her head to the right. “I thought mages were the only ones who could enter the fade.”

“I’m not a mage.”

“Alright then, how do we ditch this pig sty?” Hanna brushed her hands on her legs only to find she was still in her swimsuit. It was a two-piece contraption that Risa insisted she wear. It looked fine on her in high school, but now...she hadn’t exposed her abdomen so brazenly since…

“It doesn’t look bad.” Hanna deadpanned at the kid, he didn’t seem like a perve, but really who seemed like they were? Not this kid. “No, that didn’t work. Can I try again?”

“I’d rather just leave it there. How do I change?” Hanna gave the kid some slack.

“This place swirls around and sings of what is and what could be.”

“Oh, not this bullshit again. I have tried that embrace your imagination and…” Hanna shut up as she felt the soft brush of her favorite pair of pajama pants on her legs, a tan tank top covered her top half. “Woah…It worked!”
“Good.” The ghost boy intoned. “Now think of elsewhere.”

Hanna considered it. She thought of home and nothing happened. Maybe it had to be a place in the fade. Only she had never found a place in the fade before. Her first viable thought was of Solas. That elf fucking loved the fade. He had to have a bachelor pad here or something. Hanna’s stomach lurched and she was zooming through space like the Starship Enterprise. Her cheek lit up and she flew faster. Somehow she’d left Cole behind, and she regretted it because evidently she just figured out how to have a fade-trip 2.o.

*How did I do this?* She thought and the man she was standing behind shifted and looked around. He had long black hair and a very familiar wardrobe. *Holy shit, is this baby Solas? Look at that hair. Man his genetic lottery ticket for male pattern baldness must have been really unlucky.*

Manbaby Solas, was standing in what appeared to be an elvhen temple. There were several dudes in strange armor standing around like guards of someone very important. Regardless of who they were there to protect, someone needed it. MB Solas was pissed. He tapped his foot as he waited for someone. It seemed as though he had been waiting for some time.

When some smug son-of-a-bitch walked up with a smirk on her face, Hanna thought she was going to watch MB Solas drop her like a UFC match. When Solas bristled and asked a question, Hanna felt the confusion drip over her. They weren’t speaking any language she recognized.

Hanna tried to piece together the puzzle this presented. The woman was an archer, sleek in build and her armor was adorned in various archery imagery. If Hanna had to guess, she would say the woman had a damn fetish. As the guards around the room wore armor of a similar color and style and the woman carried herself like a queen, Hanna guessed that this chick was the head honcho. She had long brown hair and green almost glowing eyes. Her skin was bronze and covered in tattoos. She could have been a model.

Not to say that Solas was unappealing, in fact, the dark hair gave him something of a bad boy vibe. Exactly the kind of dude Mahanon would be into.

*Shit, I should totally bring this up with Manny. He would be mortified that the eggy man was once actually attractive. Even if he still didn’t have any fashion sense.*

It occurred more than once to Hanna that the language sounded vaguely familiar. In that way that you pick up little things about languages like how to say no, or where is the bathroom. It wasn’t a language she knew, but she knew someone who spoke it often enough to put it in her ear. Hanna facepalmed. They were obviously speaking Elvhen. The language Solas often told Manny the Dalish butchered. Hanna tried to think back to her history lessons with Josephine. Where did they speak Elvhen fluently if the Dalish butchered it?

She didn’t have long to contemplate the implications of what Solas’s mother tongue was. Solas stomped his ass out of the meeting place and Hanna was quick to follow.

Solas walked straight towards a mirror like a storm about to drop a tornado. Hanna covered her face instinctively to protect herself from flying glass. Instead the mirror lit up and Solas stepped through. Hanna followed entirely expecting not to be able to pass through a mirror. Inside was a maze of interconnected pathways each extending to another mirror. Elves walked along the pathways, many wearing similar facial tattoos to Mahanon’s wandering branches. It was noticeable that the poorer looking elves wore these tattoos on their faces. Elves who wore shabby clothing similar to that of Solas. The more finely dressed elves like the archery woman, could have had tattoos, just not on their faces.
Solas weaved his way through the busy intersections. He was almost running towards something. When he moved through a mirror, Hanna nearly gasped. It was the Black City she had seen in the distance. Only it was colorful, and glittering. The fade was electric with it’s depiction like the memory she was seeing was well loved and over much seen. Solas walked into the center most building. Majestic spires rose from golden steps. The inside was a meeting place with several seats arranged like those of a council or board meeting. The hall was empty, but Solas was setting up for something.

He was cold in his anger now. Snapping shamelessly at passersby to get them to leave as he brought forth a portal. From the portal stepped several shady looking almost demonic fellows. Solas spoke to them giving orders like a general on a battlefield. Together the elves weaved magic into existence. Solas protected them like a mother hen. He was the leader and the look out. When one of the elves shouted to him, Solas responded with a hurried tone. Archery woman blasted Solas back when his back was turned to the doorway. Solas reached in his robe to produce the orb Corypheus had used to try to take back the anchor.

Hanna gasped. The proceeding battle never had the chance to take place. Several elves stormed into the room with Archery Woman, Solas magicked the doors closed and used his orb to produce such a powerful blast that the spell the shady elves were weaving reacted negatively. The room imploded and Solas floated away in a sphere of protection from his orb.

Hanna stayed and watched as the spell sucked in on itself and distorted time and space. The elves at the center were not destroyed, but mutated and covered in black ichor eventually the spelled turned on the once beautiful city and it wilted black and dim. It seemed that this was an origin story. One Hanna couldn’t afford to miss. Hanna wanted to see what would happen, but she also needed to see what else Solas would do.

He was floating above the city casting a massive spell. The world seemed to spin around him and through his orb, the magic spun around him. Wind pitched in her ears and the sound of too much magic filled her. Solas might actually destroy the world, everything with this spell. When he released the spell, shockwave after shockwave rolled out and destroyed all of the immense beauty of the landscape surrounding the black city. He was effectively sealing the city and all of its inhabitants to the black decay.

A separation grew from around him, almost a wall. On one side the city and the completely destroyed landscape, on the other Thedas. Hanna had just seen Solas effectively commit wide scale genocide. He formed the veil. He owned the orb that Corypheus wielded.

Hanna felt a pull not too unlike when she was returning from a vision in the waking world. The pull yanked her out of the fade and back into her own body.

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Hanna’s eyes remained carefully shut. The world around her smelled of ozone like an extensive amount of healing magic had been used on her. She felt the coarse fabric of her cot and regretted the loss of her fade magicked pajamas. She had been stripped of her clothing and left naked beneath a cover. Hanna lifted her right hand and felt over her face, down her neck to the first bandage that latticed over her left shoulder and upper body. Her ribs ached. After a moment of slight pain, the numbness caused by her disorientation wore off. It was a struggle not to scream.

Down her chest to a particularly tender spot on the bottom three ribs on her left side, her hand touched the spot and the song of lyrium played in her head again. The thrum of uncontrolled mana settled at the base of her skull and her cheek lit up in a flash of electric pain.
“If this is what being connected to the fade feels like, kill me.” Hanna whispered unintentionally. She meant to say it aloud, but her lung must have collapsed when pierced. She couldn’t muster much more than a hoarse whisper.

“I don’t do that anymore. Rhys taught me, it was wrong.” Hanna jumped and pulled up her blanket until she realized it was Cole. Cole had seen much more of her in the fade. It wasn’t worth the effort.

The quickness of the movement made for another round of lightning pain to travel to all of her nerve endings. Hanna gingerly wrapped the blanket around her to escape the stuffy tent. “I want to help.” Cole announced carefully. Hanna eyed the weird man, ghost warily. She had to allow him to support her to be able to leave the tent. So she submitted to him.

Her hand was eager to open the sealed flap of the canvas, but she was surprised to hear voices singing a hymn. Hanna limped and jumped from Cole’s supportive shoulder to a crate, to a tent pole. She was determined to get to Manny’s side as he supported himself on a tent pole. As she did, the song continued.

“Bare your blade and raise it high,

Stand your ground, the dawn will come.” People started to bow as she neared Manny’s left side. If she didn’t align the break herself, she would have never known his left arm had ever been broken. The elf himself startled at her sudden appearance at his side. Cole stood off to her left in the shadows of the tents, Hanna imagined he didn’t like the spotlight. Solas was similarly out of the center of camp. Hanna knew she would have to tell Mahanon immediately what she had seen in the fade.

How exactly does one bring that sort of thing up?

*Oh, you know, the weird bald elf mage. He’s really an ancient genocidal maniac. No big deal. Just keep him away from the damn orb of destruction and doom.*

Yeah that would go over real well.

“The night is long, and the path is dark, look to the sky,” Hanna found Cullen standing not six feet away from her. When he sang the words, 'look to the sky’ he opened his eyes and gasped in surprise. He nearly lost his place in the song. Emotions warred in the expressions that crossed the ex-templar’s face. “for one day soon, the dawn will come.” He looked at her like he’d seen a ghost. She must have looked really bad on arrival if it broke his composure to see her walking. Still he had trouble settling on one emotion.

Relief won out and he moved swiftly to her side. He hugged her close enough to pinch her injured left arm in his armor. The cold metal of his chestplate made her shiver. Her bare feet shifted unable to support herself unprotected in the snow. Cullen held her close and sniffed her crown. She pulled away to give him a confused look, only to see that he wasn't sniffing he was sniffling, tears ran unbidden down his face.

“Thank the Maker,” He stretched her out at arm's length to assess her condition. His brow furrowed when he noted her state of undress. He removed the ugly ass mantle from his armor and secured it around her shoulders.

“You’re alive.” He crushed her to him once more.
Shortly after Hanna’s reunion with Cullen, Solas pulled Mahanon to the side with a quiet word. Hanna watched them walk into the shadows with panic settling in her chest. Cullen ushered Hanna in the opposite direction to find her tent. Hanna tried to push back.

“No, I need to talk to Manny.”

Cullen gave her a level stare. “I have not been blessed with a miracle tonight only to watch you die of exhaustion.” Hanna knew she was weary and looked like she’d been hit by a truck. “Whatever it is, it can wait until morning.”

“He’s in danger!” She mustered, but her lungs couldn’t let her forget that one of them had collapsed not an hour ago. Her shout came out as a loud whisper. Cullen’s brow furrowed. He spun his head around to find Mahanon’s silhouette just outside camp backlit by a veilfire torch with Solas.

“He’s managed so far, and Solas is with him… Worst comes to worst they can hold off until help arrives.” Cullen smiled cheekily. Hanna wanted to punch him. Instead, she gave him a hard look. By his reaction, it just further cemented his point that she needed to rest.

*Solas is the danger, ya big dick.* Hanna thought, but studiously refused to reveal what she had seen to the actual fucking templar. Cullen would shit hellfire if he knew what Solas really was. Or at least had been.

She released the tension in her shoulders and tried to ease the anxiety that made it hard to breathe. Hanna had to give in to Cullen’s mothering and logic. If Solas hadn’t shown his hand yet, who’s to say he would do it right now. The best thing she could do for Manny was to lay down and take a God forsaken nap.

“Fine, but I really need to talk to him in the morning.” She grumbled as she allowed Cullen to walk her to a cot and help her find more suitable clothing for the weather. The last thing she saw as she closed her eyes was Cullen sitting at a desk in the tent he had taken her to.

He was working through paperwork. Every few minutes he would turn to her and sigh. “You need to sleep.” then “If it bothers you I can work elsewhere.” and when she started crying at that. “I’m sorry, I won’t leave.”

Eventually peaceful sleep found her, and she travelled into the fade for a hopefully less adventurous dream.

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Mahanon was shocked by the support of the weary refugees of Haven. He thought that they would be more upset by the sudden turn of events. Mother Giselle’s words of wisdom hit home. They saw him as a hero. The messenger of their god or his wife. He had gone against terrible odds and survived. Somehow.

No.
Not Somehow.

He knew.

Hanna had saved him.

Again.

Mahanon thought overmuch about how much Hanna knew coming up to the attack. She didn’t know when exactly it would happen, but she knew enough to get a solid preparation in order. He knew she thought it wasn’t enough. She thought she wasn’t enough.

As Mahanon looked at the crowd, he recognized that many were haggard and unprepared for whatever the current journey would bring. However, they were whole. Their families were safe in small towns and taverns waiting for the Inquisition to announce where it may have placed its new headquarters. In fact, the elf imagined there were so many people here alive, who hadn’t been in Hanna’s original vision that she may not have prepared for them all.

For example, Chancellor Roderick was standing in the crowd. Hanna had told them about the path recommended by Chancellor Roderick in her dream. Hanna was still holding things back. She accidentally slipped that the Chancellor had provided the escape route in his dying breath. Mahanon glanced briefly at the Chantry Asshole. Not only was he still breathing, he was humbled by the successful escape. Or at least he ought to be.

He ought to be humbled by the fate of the one who saved them. The woman who saved them all was either dead or near it. Judging by the fact that when he approached the war council with the revered mother, Cullen wouldn’t meet his eyes. What’s worse, the commander blamed him for whatever had transpired. Mahanon’s memory was so very fuzzy. Corypheus activated the anchor and tried to take it from him. Hanna screamed out in pain. Mahanon vaguely remembered firing the trebuchet. He remembered Hanna pulling him down, almost throwing him down. He remembered falling, darkness, and pain.

How had they survived? He remembered flashes of things. Hanna looking down at him her face beaded with sweat illuminated by her glowing mark. The sound of retching that immediately followed. The white hot sear of pain that ran through his arm when she pulled or pushed at it. The heat of the healing potion down his throat. His mind showed him stuttering images. The last thing he remembered the sound of Hanna mumbling to herself, then the song she sang. And heat. He hadn’t felt the bite of the wind as much when she sang.

The healer told him that he was lucky his broken arm had been set quickly and expertly. She commented on his lack of clothing. Her voice mused about frostbite. He responded with a mumble, “It was warm because she sang.”

The healer’s brow furrowed. It wasn’t normal, he realized too late. No one sang to use magic. Hanna wasn’t particularly known for feats of magic. He may have accidentally outed Hanna as a mage. The look disappeared from her face, and the healer smiled as she let him know that Mother Giselle would check in on him. That was when the revered mother told him about being a hero.

He didn’t know what to expect from the chantry woman, but a camp wide singalong was not it. Mahanon had to fight back his feelings. Hanna was not present. It hurt too much to think about why.

He tried not to make eye contact with any of his companions. He couldn’t look at Cullen. Hell he couldn’t look at anyone, so he looked down at the ground.
Then, he heard a rustle, then a crash, suddenly she was there standing next to him. She briefly looked at him, but then to the rest of the camp. Her gaze stopped at Cullen. There was a palpable feeling of relief when their eyes met. Mahanon almost felt like he was intruding on an intensely personal conversation. It almost made him regret trying to keep them apart. Almost.

Hanna looked the textbook definition of rough. Her dark hair was singed and frizzed out of the braid she used to keep it tidy and out of the way. Her cheek was still glowing almost pulsing in time with his own mark. The branches of the scar had extended beyond her cheek, it seemed as though it might still be spreading with each pulse. Much larger and it would eclipse half of her face. Her blue eyes had an eerily familiar red tint that roiled the elf’s stomach. Hanna’s bare arms tightly secured a rough blanket to her chest. Wrapped bandages covered her shoulders. Her bare feet were balled up in the snow.

Cullen approached like a big cat. All muscle and feral energy. The commander pulled Hanna to him and whispered in her ear. All tension left her body, Hanna let the Commander wrap her in his mantle and usher her away.

Mahanon felt the familiar distrust of the commander seep into him. Hanna was deserving of the very best, Mahanon was not sure that was Cullen. Dorian insisted that the Herald should stop meddling in Hanna’s love life if he didn’t want to be a participant.

Mahanon only wished he had been bold enough to tell Dorian that he wanted to participate in his love life. The tevinter mage was currently preoccupied with Varric and an exchange of money. The Herald was so focused he nearly jumped out of his skin when Solas spoke.

“A word.” Solas turned as abruptly as he came and walked back outside of camp.

“For fuck’s sake, what could it be now?” Mahanon grumbled below his breath. Things with Solas had always been bumpy. Well, at least since Solas saw it necessary to criticize all things Dalish, at all times. Mahanon knew his people could be abrasive to outsiders at the best of times, and he understood Solas’s bias to an extent. Even worse, Solas thought him some sort of bumbling brute for his lack of magic. In the end, Solas seemed almost personally affronted by every hair on Mahanon’s head.

It was rare then that Mahanon would seek out the other elf’s company. Rarer still was Solas coming to him. Mahanon followed him to a torch just outside camp. When Solas lit the torch, Mahanon internally groaned. Solas had the look he always got when he was going to lecture the Dalish elf with tales from the fade. Creators save him.

“The humans have not lifted one our people so high for ages beyond counting. Their faith is hard won. Worthy of Pride, save one detail. The orb Corypheus carries and so the threat he wields, it is ours.” Shock could not account for the feeling Mahanon had at this moment. Solas describing anything, even something with an elven origin as belonging to Mahanon and himself on the same level….it was unpredictable. Mahanon barely managed not to sputter. Solas continued, “Corypheus used the orb to open the breach. His unlocking it must have caused the explosion at the Conclave. We must learn how he survived, and we must prepare for their reaction when they learn the orb is of our people.”

*Now they're our people. I see how it is.* Mahanon rolled his eyes.

“Allright, what is it and how do you know about it?” The younger elf strained himself to ask. He knew whatever explanation Solas had would be excruciating.

“I’ve seen such things in the fade.” Mahanon snorted. Of course the fade, where else. Whatever
Solas thought of Mahanon’s reaction he continued. “They were foci. Said to channel the power of our Gods. The were dedicated to specific members of our Pantheon.”

“Creators.” Ran his hand through his hair.

“Precisely. However Corypheus came to the orb, it is of elven origin. And he threatens the very heart of human faith with it.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not doing this for laurels. Even if we defeat Corypheus, they will still find a way to blame it on our people.” The words tasted sour in Mahanon’s mouth, but they were true. He wasn’t here for gold or land. The only reason he stayed was because Hanna talked him out of leaving once on a mountain, and then every day that followed she talked him into doing more. Being better.

It was her example that made him want to help every decent stranger and refugee on the road. Even though she grumbled and groaned, Mahanon knew she liked the idea that someone was helping. It’s the only reason he persisted when she complained. Well, and because Mahanon never tired of hearing the seeker scoff at ever insignificant task he achieved.

Solas told him that he saw a nearby abandoned fortress in the fade that would house the Inquisition. Based on the location in the fade, the elder elf was able to give vital directions as to scouting out a new base. Mahanon had so much going right for him that he didn’t think to question that Solas just happened to know about a building that would fit their needs in the perfect position to avoid land disputes with Fereldan and Orlais. Okay maybe he was a little curious, but Mahanon was learning not to look gift horses in the mouth.

The elder elf was suddenly miraculously less abrasive, and it chafed with Mahanon’s mental image of Solas. He was almost amicable. It was only when Solas moved to the campfire where the majority of the inner circle was celebrating surviving the attack that Solas dropped the bomb.

“It is unlikely that Hanna will survive her injuries.”

All eyes turned the the elder elf, then shifted to Mahanon as if to gage his reaction. Mahanon blinked owlishly. He hadn’t expected her to come out of the healer’s tent. Looking at her condition it was surprising that she was able to save anyone. Then there was the telltale red tinge to her eyes that meant only one thing.

“Red Lyrium.” he acknowledged solemnly.

“The shard was not buried deep, but it was lodged in her ribs. Punctured her lung. We were able to remove much, but I fear it may not be enough. What’s left is attached. Grown into her bone.” Solas paused, considering his words. “In my experience, in yours, red lyrium rots all that it touches… It will not take long.”

Mahanon stood to find her, but Dorian stopped him. “She’s in a tent with Cullen. It may be wise to let them have this time.”

“Yes, Shiny, after what that stuff did to my brother...She needs to find peace while she still has a mind to.” Varric seemed crushed. In their travels, he had been very close with the woman from another world. Tears threatened to fall and Mahanon’s throat squeezed uncomfortably. Mahanon clasped his hands in front of him and clenched his teeth against the coming wave of regret.

“Solas meet me at Cullen’s tent in the morning. I want to reevaluate her condition after she sleeps.” Mahanon stood and walked away, brushing past Iron Bull in the motion.
“Hey Boss,” the qunari looked around at all the sour faces around the campfire. “I left to take a piss and now you all look like you’ve come from a funeral. What’d I miss?”

Mahanon slept uneasily and woke early with no desire to return to his cot. He left his tent to walk the sleepy aisles between tents. He greeted other elves out in the morning to run messages or other similar menial tasks. Flat ear or no, it bothered him that elves were always expected to work like this. How many of these elves would have been sent away to a safer location if they had rounded ears? He bet almost all of them.

“She says she’s sorry.” The weird kid startled Mahanon this time. Shit what was his name again. “I’m Cole, you remember me?”

“I’m sorry Cole, a lot has happened since we met. I’ll remember eventually.” Mahanon gave him a signature ‘Herald of Andraste’ smile.

“You don’t have to do that for me.” Cole answered.

“Do what exactly?” Mahanon was confused.

“Wear the mask. I can see inside you. I see the pain.” Cole stumbled over his own words. “So many things left unsaid, will she ever hear me say them. I’m sorry too.”

Mahanon stumbled backwards. How did this weird human know what he was thinking. It was unnerving to hear his own thoughts repeated back to him.

“I’m sorry. I was trying to help, but now you hurt more. Can I try again?”

“Stay out of my head.” the herald shook his head and started to turn away. He stopped short. “Wait. What did you mean that she says she’s sorry? Why?” Mahanon tired and irritable and not at all prepared to speak in riddles to a half ghost, half human. However, he had to know. If that was one of Hanna’s final coherent thoughts, he had to know why she was sorry.

“It was hard to see you as real. It was hard for her to know. She wants you to know that she didn’t mean to hurt you. She still doesn’t feel worthy of your forgiveness.”

“I know that. We’ve talked about it.”

“She doesn’t believe you. How could you forgive her? She feels like she deserves this fate.”

Mahanon knew that too. “She doesn’t.”

“She’s awake and has something important she wants to tell you. She has to be the one to say it.”

Mahanon came to Cullen’s tent just as Solas did.

“Cole said she was awake,” Solas said blearily. It looked as if he had just rolled out of bed. It always looked like Solas had just rolled out of bed. He was about as fashionable as a hobo. Mahanon just nodded and patted the tent flap as a knock to signal his coming in more than asking permission to do so.

Mahanon pulled back the flap and stepped inside to see Cullen working at his desk. Dark circles under his eyes, it looked like he was afraid if he closed them she would disappear. Hanna was pulling a wide tooth comb through her hair. She smiled when she saw him and made as if to stand. In a flash of red, Cullen was setting his arms on her shoulders and giving her an all too clear nonverbal threat. ‘Sit and talk, or I will send them away.’
Hanna gave a good natured sigh to Cullen and blew a tuft of hair out of her face. Her hands set to braiding her untangled hair as she spoke. “You look like a dragon chewed you up and spit you out.” She laughed. “I suppose I shouldn’t be one to talk.” She winced and held her side in pain.

Mahanon tried to laugh with her, but it hurt too much. “I…” He started. “Hanna, you…” His throat started to dry and constrict. He coughed and tried to continue.

“How do you feel?” Solas stepped out from behind him and walked to her side. Hanna’s hands froze and she eyed Solas warily.

“I’d rather…” Her words trailed off. Would it be too suspicious for her to ask Solas to step out? It was probably better for the elf to think things were business as usual. “I’d rather go through special forces hell week again than feel like I do now.” Hanna lifted her loose fitting shirt and three pairs of eyes looked pointedly at her side. She chanced a light touch and her hand came away wet, sticky red. “Shit! Did you forget to stitch it closed what kind of bull shit is that.” She held her hand out for all three to see.

Solas knelt at her side and carefully removed as few bandages as he could to see the newly reopened wound. Out of the seeping wound poked newly grown red lyrium. Mahanon turned his head in an attempt to hide his disgust. Solas broke off the lyrium and looked at it in his hand. “It’s feeding off of you. Growing inside you. Do you not feel it? Hear it?”

Hanna went pale at the sight. “Of course I hear it. The sound like nails on a chalkboard and hollow chanting. It sounds like a horror movie.” She shook her head disgusted. “It whispers nonsense, no, lies about power. It’s insidious and painful. I ignore it because I made a promise. I made so many promises.”

She pointed at Mahanon. “I promised Manny that I would stay by his side.” To Solas, “I promised you that I would try to learn to forge a connection to the fade. This isn’t what you meant, but now I can channel the fade. I was able to cast some sort of heat spell to keep Manny alive. I can feel the energy at the base of my skull like a shot of Jager and redbull. Stupid and loose.” To Cullen. “I promised that Manny and I would come back safe. That we could try to be together after the breach closed.”

“Hanna, don’t…” Mahanon interrupted, but Hanna didn’t stop.

“I can face this. I know that you don’t think I can. I know you expect my conscious brain to give out. To have a mindless zombie in your midst. Instead, I will hold myself to my own standard like I always have. I’m a survivor. I won’t give up. I’ll keep on surviving.” Hanna almost sang the last few sentences.

Mahanon looked at her. He deflated. “We will do what we can to help, but Hanna.” She nodded like she knew what he would say. “If I have to, for the good of the inquisition, I will kill you.”

“I hope that day doesn’t come.” She agreed.

“As do I.” Cullen interjected.

“I will do what I can. There may yet be answers in the fade.” Hanna choked following Solas’s words. Mahanon made a mental note to ask her about it when Solas wasn’t present. Hanna laughed it off as pain from her side and Mahanon left.

****
When Mahanon left the tent, Cullen felt an almost tangible chill fill the air. He looked back from his page to where Solas was working on slowing the growth and repairing Hanna’s injury. He also taught her a self healing spell that would repair the damage done by the growing lyrium between Solas’s treatments. Hanna thanked Solas politely before he exited.

Cullen could feel the lyrium under her skin when he touched her. He sensed the magic she held carefully afraid of what it might mean. He acknowledged Mahanon's words as the truth, but he feared if it might one day be real. The fact that she had survived this long was a wonder. The fact was it wasn’t a question of if the red crystal would drive her crazy, but when. She might be able to ignore it now, but eventually she would fall to it. Cullen didn't want to see that day. She was already acting funny around Solas, and Solas was the person removing and preventing the lyrium from growing to his best ability. It wasn't hard to see the connection.

Cullen didn’t bring it up that morning. He thought that maybe it was just irritation with Solas touching her. Hanna was rarely physically affectionate with anyone other than the Herald. Hopefully, soon that would change. Cullen had to admit he was jealous of the herald’s easy relationship with Hanna. Though while Mahanon scouted ahead, Cullen stayed by Hanna’s side during the trip. Midnight was one of the few horses that had stayed behind in Haven during the sealing of the breach. Cullen used his horse as an excuse to hold Hanna close to him during the trip. She sat in front of him on the saddle and leaned into him. It was during one of these quiet quasi-private moments that he finally brought up his concern.

“Did something happen between you and Solas?” Hanna stiffened against him. Cullen brought up one of his hands to brush a strand of black hair behind her ear, and she relaxed.

“No.”

“We both know that your answer was yes. Are you going to admit it or do I have to die knowing you a liar?”

She responded after a long pause.

“It’s...not something between Solas and I.”

“But...he did do something…” Cullen prodded.

Hanna nodded. “It’s not my place to say. At least, not until he makes it my place.” There was a bitterness in her tone that Cullen could not ignore, but Hanna had clearly taken the path of ‘let’s discuss this later, if ever’. Instead of forcing her to talk about it, Cullen asked her questions about her home. It was a suggestion from that Tevinter mage. ‘Learn what she likes, then do that.’ he said as he tried to make Cullen talk to Hanna in the week leading up to the breach. He said it like Hanna ever talked about her past.

Cullen was pleasantly surprised.

“What did you do before you joined the military?” he whispered in her ear. His breath hot against her neck. Hanna shivered. Cullen suddenly didn't care about what her home was like. He wanted to make her shiver like that again.

“I was a student, I played music,” Her voice held a tint of desire, but she coughed uncomfortably. Waited until she was ready to continue in a serious tone. "I was just a kid you know. Then there was an attack not far from my hometown. My father died in one of the attacks that day. I enlisted not long after that.”
Cullen nodded. “I think I remember this. You said the attacks were carried out by people from Afghan Stand.” Hanna shook her head, but didn't really commit to correcting him. He could hear the smile in her voice when she continued.

“Well, that’s a...not exactly true, but some of the big players hid away there.” Hanna talked at length about her family. Her brother John, and how smart he was. Her mother and her traditions and culture. Her father’s mother who lived in Alabama and taught her about sweet tea and spicy chili. She told him about her best friend Risa who was a positive influence on Hanna always. Her voice wavered, "It's so hard to remember what it was like back on Earth. I haven't spoken a language other than English in months. I miss it sometimes. When this place is so savage and unfair. When I get a shard of crazy dust in my side, and i miss the marvels of modern medicine..." Cullen didn't know how to comfort her when it was so unlikely she would ever get home. He rubbed soft circles into her back.

It wasn’t a surprise when she turned the questions back on him the next day.

“You haven’t written to your sister in how long?!” She startled him and just about anyone nearby in the caravan. Hanna made him write a note to Mia that night in his tent. She refused to rest until he did. Then the new routine of Solas coming into check and attempt to slow the growth of red lyrium took effect, and she didn’t talk until Solas left.

On the third day, a scout came to report that Mahanon had found Skyhold. It would take some time before the entire caravan could make it through the mountain pass and across the bridge. Cullen pushed his horse to race passed the slow moving Bronto and Druffalo. He had to be at the head to organize the effort to make this new fortress livable. Hanna rode behind Cullen rather than in front as she had when she was too weak to hold on to him. Today and she held on to him for all her worth and laughed into the wind. She shouted to all as they passed that they found home at last.

Skyhold was a promise and a threat. Cullen had his work cut out for him. When he looked at Hanna, he couldn't wait to see what might happen next.

Chapter End Notes

Do you ever have those times when you hear a song, and think wow that was cheesy?
No? Just me? That's alright.

I promise you that things will heat up in the next chapter for sure. Cullen and Hanna have been separated by circumstances for too long.

Also what will happen if Solas gets to Hanna before Manny can get her alone to talk about his genocidal/ blight forming tendencies.

Find out next time on R&R.
“Ask and it shall be given to you, Seek and Ye shall find”

Chapter Notes

*Warning* This chapter does contain a sex scene. It is probably terrible. I would have had this chapter out Tuesday if I had been more comfortable with it, or if I had convinced myself to take it out. I put in a ****break before it with a warning to skip to the next break for the last bit of story important detail.

Eh, it's kind of cute and fluffy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After arriving at Skyhold, everyone took their places making room and cleaning up to prepare for the arrival of those sent away. When he wasn’t assigning quarters and guard duty, Cullen was making lists of the dead. They weren’t as long as they could have been, but they were still a reminder to Hanna that her power wasn’t everything. She couldn’t see everything. When Cullen finished he passed off the list and his own handwritten sympathy notes to Josephine. The ambassador would then find who was the next of kin. Leliana would track them down and send a bird or messenger. It was efficient.

The only reason Hanna knew all of this was because Cullen almost refused to let her out of his sight. She had recovered almost miraculously quickly, but he treated her like an invalid. He opened doors for her, held her hand when she walked down stairs for stability, she would think he was being romantic or chivalrous, but he didn’t look at her the way he had the night before sealing the breach. He looked at her with pity.

She hated it.

When they moved from tents in the courtyard into the cleared rooms of the castle major, Cullen had a couch placed in his office so that she could sit while he worked. When she got up to even go for a walk, Cullen would drop everything to walk with her. So, instead, she learned to sit alone with her thoughts.

She hated it.

It hurt even worse knowing that he was experiencing withdraw from the smaller, nicer blue cousin to what was eating away at her from the inside. She could see the strain in his face when he touched her. Even with the treatments from Solas, he could feel the lyrium under her skin.

She hated it.

At least for her the pain was lesser now than it had been, but she hadn’t been lying to Manny when she told him that the whispers were insidious. Sometimes it sent shivers down her spine to think of how it appealed to her.

You will be abandoned or you will abandon . And

Best to leave this place, yes you could do much better on your own.

When those word were repelled it would try new ones chipping away at her already frayed defenses.
You’re not worthy. You don’t deserve to be here.

The longer you stay the more Cullen has to endure. He says he can endure it. Can you?

It was difficult not to fall into a pit of despair. Hanna didn’t try to talk Cullen out of helping her. She knew why he was doing it so why bother. It was obviously his way of coping for when he couldn’t protect her. The lack of freedom in her daily life made the fade that much more enticing to explore. The freedom also came at a price. It was more than once that Solas had found her in the fade to ask questions. Hanna just ran away instead. Because that was always a solid and inconspicuous strategy.

Not.

It made Hanna feel worse. She needed to talk to Manny alone, but the herald was never alone these days. From what she heard from Cassandra and Josephine when they met with Cullen, it was only going to get worse. They were planning on making him their leader. The inquisitor as it were.

The ceremony was nothing short of inspirational. Nothing like being promoted back home. It had a certain amount of extended credibility. While the war council had voted to make Mahanon Lavellan inquisitor, the lay people of the inquisition cheering him on during his very public promotion made him irreplaceable. Morale was higher than ever. He was basically untouchable, but shortly thereafter Hanna saw her chance.

“Commander, if I may, as people arrive daily, I can only imagine that bandits will follow. We must keep the routes to skyhold clear if we are to be successful in ensuring anyone’s safety.” Cullen looked at her with a stunned expression. He hadn’t pressed Hanna to find work, but he didn’t expect her to listen in on his conversations and provide her own expertise. When she did, he took her words as gospel. He waved her closer to the table that he used for daily operations outside of his office as if hoping to include her more.

“Yes, I agree.” He turned and ordered an officer. “Scout out our surroundings, we have to know what’s out there and where to build watch towers. Skyhold must insure the pilgrims remain safe.” He made eye contact with her that she could imply meant ‘I must keep you safe.’ Hanna turned her head so he couldn’t see her roll her eyes only to see Manny on the approach.

“Manny or should I say…” Cullen interrupted Hanna’s friendly greeting.

“Inquisitor Lavellan.” They spoke at the same time. Hanna imitating Cullen’s stern tone. Cullen grumbling that she was making fun of him.

“Cullen’s, I mean, the Commander’s taking care of things, specifically he meets with people, and I sit bored in the corner. Could it be possible that I join you on your rounds?” Again Cullen grumbled. Now, that she was making it out that she was some kind of kept woman. It was unfair of her. Hanna had made a point of not complaining of her boredom to Cullen. To him, she was making a mountain out of a molehill. One she had taken care not to mention to him. Oops.

Cullen stopped mumbling to update Mahanon. “We set up at Haven the best we could, but we never would have had the foundation to stand against an archdemon, or whatever it was…” He sighed heavily. “We’ve begun preparations and we have room to spare, but we must be ready, we will not have the opportunity to run from this mountain… I wouldn’t want to.”

Manny’s eyes were discerning. He remained silent for a moment looking back and forth between the Commander and Hanna. If Hanna didn’t know any better, she might say that was his scheming face. What would he possibly be planning? The look vanished in an instant and Mahanon continued the conversation as if nothing had crossed his mind.
“How many were lost?” Hanna was always surprised by the care that Manny had for the people of the inquisition. In his place, as a Dalish elf, would she be asking the same question? She could only hope.

“Many of our people have made it to Skyhold. Our losses number in the dozen scouts we lost before the attack and the scores of brave soldiers who fought to ensure the escape of others. It could have been much worse. I believe we have you and our oracle to thank for that, Inquisitor.”

“Inquisitor Lavellan, was it? I’m not quite used to it yet.”

“I think it suits you.” Cullen responded.

“Is that the official response?” Mahanon may have been blushing it was difficult to tell with his skin tone. Cullen chuckled, Hanna’s heart rattled against her ribs.

“Even his chuckle is handsome, how does he do that?” The ghost boy was behind her. Mahanon and Cullen pretended to ignore it, but based on the clear red on Cullen’s cheeks, he had definitely heard Cole. She shushed the spirit boy man person, and Mahanon continued the conversation.

“I suppose I will get used to it in time. Thank you, Commander, for trusting an elf to be your leader.”

“You have more than proven yourself.”

“Our escape from Haven, it was close. I’m relieved that so many made it out.” Mahanon focused on Hanna as he spoke. Something in his tone, his phrasing was a little off. Either Mahanon was trying to tell Cullen something without telling her or he was distracted by her struggle to keep Cole hushed.

Shit they both heard. Hanna was less focused on the conversation and possible espionage and more concerned that Cole didn’t perceive her as much of a threat.

“As am I, thank you Inquisitor.” Cullen’s voice dropped, with added meaning that Hanna didn’t have time to consider as she smacked her hand over Cole’s mouth.

“Don’t you even…” She warned.

“You stayed behind, both of you. I will not allow the events at Haven to happen again. You have my word.” Hanna didn’t register Cullen’s words so much as the tone he said them with. It was enough to make her wish she was a squirrel.

“I agree. Ignoring the costs of our actions is punishment enough don’t you think.” Mahanon again focused explicitly on Hanna who was too focused on preventing Cole from embarrassing her further to acknowledge him. “Commander, I do think I will take Hanna up on her offer. There is something we need to discuss, and I think it is better done with fewer eyes on us.”

“As you may, Inquisitor, but for my sake, please stay by her side. She is not as well as she says she is.” A look passed between the two and Hanna groaned.

“I’m fine, maybe you can go take a nap while you’re not worried about me running away.” Hanna flipped her hair and let go of Cole.

“My stomach flips when he talks like that. Makes me want to climb him like a tree.” Cole cocked his head. “But you are not a tree Commander, why would she want to…” Hanna grabbed his hand and pulled waving goodbye to Cullen.

Mahanon cackled when they were out of Cullen’s earshot. “You know what Cole, when you were
doing it to me and Dorian on the way into Skyhold, it was dreadful, but now that I’ve seen Hanna turn into a tomato, I think I’ve underestimated you.” His stupid Dalish/irish lilt danced in his voice and made her smile despite herself.

Mahanon dismissed the kid. “I think you’ve done just the right amount for now, let me know if she threatens you. I’ll protect you.”

With that Cole just disappeared. What did he mean by ‘just the right amount’. Something fishy was happening, but Hanna couldn’t let Cole’s talent slip by the wayside.

“Wait. Is he an actual ghost?” Hanna jumped back from her now empty hand. “Like a freaky mind reading ghost.”

“No, some sort of spirit maybe, Solas doesn’t even know.” Mahanon shrugged all too easily accepting of the maybe spirit on his team. His mention of the elf, who should be pictured in the dictionary next to the phrase ‘skeletons in his closet’, brought Hanna back to what was really important.

“Oh, right, let’s go find a good place to talk.” She started walking towards the undercroft because now was about the time that Harret went on lunch break. She got about halfway up the stairs to the main hall before Manny pulled back on her hand. She couldn’t decide if he was intentionally slowing her down or not.

“Why do I get the feeling there’s something going on between you and Solas?” Hanna nodded and opened her mouth to say, but then a noble lady passed by suggestively waving her fan at Mahanon. Hanna started walking again.

“Because he’s a monumental shit head. That’s why.” She finally answered as she pushed open one of the doors to the main hall. The heat from the fireplaces and incense from the braziers made her remember why she didn’t come through the main hall very often. The smoke rose in the hall and reminded her of when her CO’s tent was on fire. It put her off balance. Made her mind dance on the razor edge of sanity. Mahanon stopped her short of her destination again in front of Varric and the hall to the library solar where Solas had set up shop.

“You'll hear no arguments from me, but you do realize that we both owe him our lives. Counting today, you owe him twice.”

“Do I owe him anything if everything is his fault?” Hanna tried not to remember the innocent people swallowed by the plague of the blackness.

*Wait, why twice?*

Solas stepped out of the door just as she spoke, and interjected into the conversation. Varric watched rapt in the shit storm Hanna had just brought down.

“Ah, Hanna, I was hoping to catch you. I think I may have found a solution to permanently preventing the Lyrium from growing further.” He looked from Mahanon who looked like he was sucking on a warhead candy, to Hanna whose face fell whenever he approached her. “Do you mind inquisitor?”

“Not at all, I was just walking my rounds.” Manny sounded relieved. “I’ll come back within the hour.” He announced as he headed up the stairs to talk to Dorian. Hanna knew it wasn’t, but it felt like a set up. Suddenly, she was longing for the safety and ease that Cullen provided.

When Solas turned and walked back through the door, Hanna didn’t follow. Varric, who had seen
the entire display and was smart enough to extrapolate that there was a story down that road, talked
to Hanna. “Hey, Sunshine, I thought you liked Chuckles.”

Hanna scowled and followed the elf rather than be interrogated by the insufferable dwarf. That
wasn’t fair. She liked Varric. She didn’t like how nosy he is.

Solas had taken to the small room with high walls well. His desk in the center was covered in papers
of varying ages based on their color. There was a small room off to the side where Solas slept and
kept his belongings. Hanna was more interested in looking at the sweeping murals that covered about
four of the panels of the wall. They hadn’t been here a few days ago and Hanna was wondering who
would have spent so much time painting when the walls were crumbling around them.

“Did you do these?” She asked impulsively. Solas looked at her as if she had smacked him.
Sheepishly, Hanna realized it was the first time in a long time that she had strung together more than
two words and sent them his way.

“I...yes, in my free time. Artistic expression is important for the soul.” He was calm, his voice was
calm. Which only served to unsettle Hanna more. How could she figure out his intentions while not
letting on that she saw him destroy an entire city and engulf it in darkness? He was very smart, and
she was not cut out for spy work.

“It’s well... they’re impressive you should paint more.” She suggested flatly. This was not the
conversation either of them were expecting to have.

“Perhaps, I will. It depends on inspiration really.” Solas cleared his throat and looked Hanna up and
down. “Speaking of, you are inspiring. The way that you have handled this world... Your successes
outnumber your failures many times over.”

Hanna didn’t know how to take that. Solas had been kind to her, like a mentor. He had been
manipulative with the Nightingale, like a dick. At times he treated her like a child, which was
annoying. However, the way he said those words. With wonder, almost admiration. He was
complimenting her.

“I...thanks, I think.” Hanna stepped closer to the elf, instead of standing at the opposite side of the
room, she moved to speak more conversationally. She looked over her shoulder at the balcony to
catch Mahanon taking a step back. He was watching her meeting with Solas. Trying to catch what
was amiss between them. He didn’t want her to know she was being watched. Maybe they had
planned this. She wouldn’t put it past Solas. She cleared her throat again. “I...you said that you think
you found a...solution to my” she indicated her side, “problem.”

“Yes, it is quite simple really. When I cut it down today, I will provide you with a rune amulet. A
medallion really. I heard of it in the fade, and Mahanon demanded that we find it as soon as
possible.” Solas looked her dead in the eye. “None of us want to lose you to this.”

This was a surprise to her. She hadn’t known the Mahanon had even left the castle yet. The
inquisition was still working so carefully to manage resources to restore Skyhold. How had they
found the time to do this? Why would they waste their time saving her? Hanna shook her head. “Us,
that means, you too…”

“You are invaluable, Hanna. An asset to any cause. Your connection to the orb, to the anchor. It
changed you.” Solas scowled. “I would be remiss to believe that you haven’t been told many times
how important you are. I can only choose to believe that you do not see the connections you have
forged as important, worthy of note. You are charismatic, a natural leader, by ignoring us you are
selling yourself short.” His fury would have made Cassandra jealous.
Wait. Why was he angry? Hanna raised an eyebrow, but it couldn’t hide her confusion. “I can’t be important. If all of this is real, this is not my world. I may well ruin everything by simply existing. For the love of God, I’ve seen myself do it.” Hanna stopped. The lyrium was whispering louder. She was supposed to be figuring him out, not the other way around. She had to slow down or get back some measure of control. “Besides...If this was my world, I don’t think I could talk to you about saving it. Small village in the mountains my ass.”

Abort mission. Shit stop talking, Hanna. She screamed at herself internally. A. He doesn’t need to know that you know. B. He hasn’t saved your life yet. Deflating she held up a hand as if to stop the words from reaching him. To pull them back into her mouth.

“What do you mean?” His eyes blew wide with comprehension. Then narrowed. “What did you see?” He closed the gap between them. He grasped her shoulders and suddenly Hanna was in the vice grip of an angry God.

This was the time to lie. She had done it so much that she should be good at it. Somehow, her mouth didn’t catch up that it was time to stop digging and start filling in the dirt. Instead of making something up she said. “What do you think I saw?” Hanna challenged him. She might as well sign her own death warrant.

Hanna heard a clatter on the stone behind her. Solas’s face went from furious to devoid of feeling. He was suddenly calm again. Mahanon was standing behind her. “We will speak of this another time. For now, I will save your life from what grows inside you.” His voice was clipped, bitter.

“Solas.” Mahanon’s voice wavered, but it was a warning.

“Think nothing of it, Inquisitor.” He waved off Mahanon’s concern his tone shifting for the audience. “It is a simple misunderstanding. Nothing more.” He moved Hanna to his tiny room for privacy. “I’m sure of it.” Solas’s voice had an edge just for her. Hanna never wanted to hear again.

The way he changes characters from professor to medic to devious serial killer...Give this man an oscar.

Mahanon followed them as Hanna stripped off her shirt and held her breast band away like she had done a thousand times. Solas used a sterile knife and cut through the too often healed skin and gently chiselled away the new growth of red crystal until he hit bone. Hanna chewed on the leather of her gloves to keep from biting off her tongue when he did. While Solas worked, Mahanon retrieved the amulet/medallion/magic bullshit necklace.

When Solas signaled his work was complete, Manny slipped the necklace around Hanna’s neck. Solas turned away to clean and package the red lyrium for Varric’s associates to study. Hanna felt the rush of magic wash over her, and suddenly silence. It was scary how normal the whispers had become. Now that they were gone, she imagined that she could sleep forever.

“That good huh?” Manny asked. She must have sighed in relief, so she nodded to agree. “Okay, let’s talk.” he said and Solas dropped the box of crystals. It clattered to the floor the clasp holding firm. He put a hand on Hanna’s shoulder opposite to where Manny sat beside her.

“It is likely that, Hanna has had a vision of a time in my life I deeply regret.” Solas admitted. “I do not believe that it is relevant to the mission of the Inquisition. While my actions were reprehensible, it has been a long time and I have changed. I’m sure you needn’t trouble yourselves.”

“How long ago are we talking?” Mahanon sounded suspicious. He looked between Hanna and Solas for an answer. Solas didn’t respond, so Hanna took a chance.
“He had long hair, but the same terrible fashion sense.” She paused when a loud guffaw sounded from the balcony above them. Mahanon told Dorian to stop eavesdropping and the mage moved away. “I couldn’t understand a thing being said…” She swallowed. “They were speaking Elvhen. Like fluently, every word.”

Solas asked, “Yes, then it was long ago. What did you see?” Everything inside of Hanna screamed that Solas was being too inviting to this conversation. It had to be a trap.

“Wait are you telling me that my apostate hobo is actually an ancient apostate hobo.” Mahanon must have majored in shit eating grins in college because damn he rocked the look. Hanna couldn’t help herself she laughed.

“He was impatiently waiting for someone. An elf. She had arrows and bows everywhere. She must have had an uncontrollable urge to hunt because her place was covered in furs and other trophies.” Hanna closed her eyes and tried to describe it in detail. “When the woman finally got there, Solas verbally exploded on her.” Hanna told Manny of her following him to the city and the spells he cast locking away all of the powerful elves in a building before sealing it away and creating the veil. It was Manny’s turn to laugh.

“Wait...I know this story. Are you trying to tell me that Solas is Fen’Harel?” Manny looked at Solas. Judging him. “No offense, but you don’t look very much like the Dread Wolf to me.”

Solas seemed as though he was going to respond one way, perhaps defensibly, then he stopped. He smiled, Manny hadn’t taken her at her word. Now, Solas had the opportunity to make it like she hadn’t seen him murder thousands of elves in cold blood. “Ah, see it is a simple misunderstanding. I may have been there, but I did not cast the spell. I am not Fen’Harel. How could I be an Elvhen God of legend?”

“Yes, this has been very enlightening. I’m glad we could clear this up.” Manny stood and helped Hanna stand. “It’s about time to get you back to the Commander.”

“If he’s not this Dread Wolf, then I’m a monkey’s uncle.” Hanna muttered under her breath. Manny held out his hand and Hanna nodded. Of course Manny believed Solas’s explanation. Would she believe Risa if she told her that Jack was the boogeyman in disguise? Probably not. Hanna would just have to be more careful in her suspicion until she had physical evidence.

“So exactly how much of this did you plan and how much was just happy coincidence?” Hanna asked as Manny took her over the bridge that was a short cut from Solas’s place of residence to Cullen’s.

“Well, it was really helpful that you asked to come with me. Cullen and I thought we might have to pry you away from his handsome face.” He read Hanna’s expression and answered the childish glare with a laugh. “Oh don’t look at me like that. We talked when you fell asleep, or were too busy going off into your own little world. It was helpful to learn that you didn’t like spending all of your time with the Commander. He was waiting for you to complain to give you space when you asked for it. He didn’t want to be the one to step away when you needed him.”

“Oh.” Hanna tried to keep her head high, but the revelation was embarrassing. “I thought it would be rude to complain. I was bored to tears, but he seemed so worried...I thought I was helping him.”

“Hanna...he was trying to find ways to keep you safe away from him so that he could have time to plan.”

“Plan what exactly.”
“You’ll see.” Mahanon stopped just outside the Commanders door and knocked five times in some sort of signal. Someone knocked back twice. “Of course he isn’t ready. Creators. I am willing to step aside and let you two do what you do, but seriously…” Mahanon looked out into the distance. From their position, Hanna could see that the sun had gone down not long ago. One of the moons was full and large. It was almost like the moon in Bruce Almighty. The other smaller moon was waning Gibbous, the smaller one was Satanalia or something like that. There was an entire festival centered around it like Christmas.

“Where I’m from, we only have one moon. Seeing the two moons was my first clue I wasn’t home anymore.” She offered to fill the silence.

“It’s hard to imagine the night sky without them both.”

“It makes me wonder how much you don’t know about the stars. It makes me wonder how far this solar system is from my own. I wish I had a telescope, not that I have the star charts memorized. I just wish I could tell where I was in the Universe.”

“I only know Dalish constellations, but I could tell you about them sometime.”

“That would be nice.” The door opened and Cullen stepped out.

“Thank you, Lavellan.” Hanna raised an eyebrow for the thirteenth time today. Since it was after hours, Cullen wasn’t calling him by his title? Scandalous.

“Keep your promise, Shem.” Mahanon didn’t say the word with malice, but Hanna thought it was out of order to not call Cullen by one of his given names if not by his title. She knew that Cullen was below Solas on Mahanon’s shit list for some reason. Even still Hanna was curious about these conversations she obviously missed between people she thought she spent all of her time around.

“Maker’s breath, Hanna. Is this it?” He closed the distance between them and lifted the amulet from her chest. It was deceptively small and round. There was some sort of runic writing around the outside of the tiny metal medallion with a larger design in the middle. It glowed faintly after it started working. Hanna started to think of it as her own Tony Stark Arc Reactor. In away it was protecting her from shrapnel in a similar way. She barely restrained the ‘I am Iron Man.’ and instead said it to an internal audience. They loved it.

Hanna swallowed and nodded. “It all quiet now for the first time in a long time. No whispers. No pain.”

“Thank the Maker.”Cullen’s hands slipped from the amulet to the sides of her face. He just held her there. He looked at her like she was the prettiest girl in the world. She knew she wasn’t. It wasn’t humble it was demonstrable. Her pants were soaked in her own blood from a magically sealed wound that scared pink over the already angry red burn scars in her sides. Her clothing over all was shabby and not in her size. Her black hair once well cared for was stringy and frizzy. Her face was scarred and not in the all too attractive way his was.

Cullen’s lip scar was sexy and did not at all detract from his overall appearance. His blond hair curled when it got wet or before he put whatever in it to make it slick back like a 50’s housewife’s version of a bad boy. His build was muscular and thick. His voice was sinful.

Hanna was suddenly dying to kiss him. As if he had read her thoughts, Cullen leaned down as if to kiss her. He took a detour and spoke directly into her ear in that deep tone that had her melting into his arms. “Close your eyes. I’ve got you.”
Graciously, Hanna closed her eyes and let him guide her into his office. She tried to picture the furniture as it normally was to gauge her location in the room. She took several steps forward only to bump into a chair that was not normally there. Cullen pulled the chair back against the stone floor and helped Hanna sit down.

He then took three loud steps to the other side of his desk and sat down himself. “Open your eyes.”

His office had been rearranged to fit a new desk smaller than his own beside his library. Above it on the wall was a nameplate that said ‘Oracle Hanna Cooper’, he had gifted her her own workspace. Her desk had three gifts stacked from smallest on top to largest on bottom. In front of her, Cullen’s desk had been cleared of paperwork and set with a fine dinner of baked spinach chicken and cheesy noodles. The two most edible meals served by Skyhold cooks. With an apple pie for dessert. Cullen had set out a ridiculous amount of candles to provide mood lighting rather than his normal Candelabras.

“You remember what you promise everyone else. Do you remember what I promised you?” Hanna had taken in all of the surroundings studiously avoiding meeting Cullen’s eyes until he spoke. The candle light lit a fire behind Cullen’s amber eyes that made them glow like midnight coals. His face was grizzled by stubble. When their eyes met, Cullen’s mouth twitched into that insufferable smirk that made it hard to think.

“You promised me?” Hanna was still processing his words more than asking what he had promised. Cullen chuckled.

“Before you left for Redcliffe. You gave me your permission to court you. Now neither of us are the type to dance at a ball, or otherwise impress our courtship like a noble might. I had hoped that you would give me the opportunity to woo you over a decent meal and a heartfelt gesture.” Cullen waved his hand over the table to indicate the meal and towards her new desk to specify the gesture.

Hanna’s lips felt suddenly dry and chapped. She didn’t feel hungry anymore, but her stomach growled angrily in protest. Hanna didn’t trust her voice, so instead she nodded emphatically.

“You promised me?” Hanna was still processing his words more than asking what he had promised. Cullen chuckled.

“Geez, Hanna wipe the drool, he might think you're a neanderthal.

“You said that.” He smiled and set to serving her dinner from the dishes in the center of the table. Hanna made to stand to pour the wine from the carafe on the table. She was unused to being served and worried that he was outdoing himself. “Let me do this for you.” His voice pitched down and she shivered in anticipation.

“Yes, sir.” She smiled and mock saluted. Cullen gave her a hungry look that told her, if they took this much further, he would like being called Commander in the bedroom.

When they moved on to dessert, Hanna decided to change conversation from comfortably polite to precoitus questions she never thought to ask prior to this moment like:

“So,” She cleared her throat carefully and waited for Cullen to finish his bite. “I hope this isn’t too forward, but based on how I want this night to go...I need to know. Is sex on the table tonight or are you more of a wait until marriage kind of guy?” Cullen’s expression moved from relaxed to shocked, and Hanna thought she must have stepped in it. This was their first date. He wasn’t some late night hook-up in a bar. He definitely wasn’t a 21st century man. Saying what she did wasn’t just forward for Thedas, she was probably reaching harlot status. She looked down then away, anywhere but his face. Of course, she fucked it up already. When Cullen cleared his throat to reply, Hanna looked into his eyes and saw curiosity.
“You want to have sex...on the table?” His deadpan reply sent a wave of heat through her stomach. Suddenly a flash of fantasy about Cullen claiming her on the war table flashed into her mind. And she blushed intensely.

“I, well, er that is, I would, no.” Hanna covered her face as she sputtered. And Cullen looked like he was enjoying every second of it. “It’s a figure of speech. I meant ‘Would it be uncouth of me to suggest that we skip the rest of dessert and me opening my gifts for some unrepentant premarital sex upstairs in your bed?’”

“Uncouth, perhaps...” He stood to his full height leaning forward over the desk into her personal space. He opened his mouth to say something, possibly something sexy. Before he could, Hanna closed the distance between their faces and kissed him hungrily. Cullen leaned further into the kiss and the desk moved towards her. Hanna pushed her chair back and nipped Cullen’s lower lip before running to the ladder. Her heart pounding. Assuming he would chase her she took the two or three rungs at a time until she realized Cullen had to clean up the romantic dinner. He was hanging a flag out of his window, to request someone to take away the uneaten food. Then, he began blowing out candles. Slowly. Too slowly.

Suddenly, Hanna wished she had been studying magic. If she tried something poorly, it would ruin the mood. If Cullen didn’t climb up the ladder with her right now, it would ruin the mood.

“Ah, damn it all.” She thought back to her first lesson with Solas, will what you want into existence. Hanna imagined a light wind moving through the room. She willed it into existence, and felt the gentle tug of mana at the back of her neck. Her first instinct was the clamp down on the exiting mana. It felt like it might rush out too fast. When she did, every candle in the room flared and flickered out at once. She winked at Cullen. He finally followed her.

Slowly, almost agonizingly.

Hanna reached the top several heartbeats before Cullen and took the opportunity to survey his room for the first time. He had an actual bed. It may have been the first time she saw an actual four post wooden frame bed in Thedas. It was made to regulation. Ever the military man, that Commander. The loft was furnished sparsely. His armor hung on a rack near a barebones bureau with a cracked mirror on top. Finally a small bedside table held a copy of the chant of light and a single candle. The moonlight lit the room enough for Hanna to see her reflection in the cracked mirror. She walked towards it staring at her reflection, Hanna was surprised. Her skin was pale, the mark on her face had extended from the last time she had looked in a mirror. In the moonlight, it reflected a darker tone than the rest of her face. It looked like an overlapping pattern of branches. It looked like a bullet hole in resistant glass. It looked shattered. Tears came to her eyes and she covered her face with one hand just as Cullen’s head crested the landing.

His expression was dark, ready for the Hanna that had run up the ladder. When their eyes met in the reflection, his softened. When he walked up behind her, she didn’t run. His arms engulfed her. He rested his chin on her shoulder, and took a deep breath. He turned her in his embrace and thumbed the tears away. He regarded her gently and spoke. “Beautiful.” It was a gasp. A prayer. Reverent. Sincere.

The breath caught in her throat.

He smiled and kissed her on the lips. It was chaste and short.

She smiled.
He kissed a trail from her mouth to her jaw. From her jaw his tongue trailed a line to her pulse. Her
breath returned only to be stolen by a gentle nip. He lifted his mouth to her ear. “Perfect.” His voice
was assertive. The heat of his breath sent a shiver down her spine and his hands followed it. Down
from her shoulders, to her hips. He pulled her shirt over her head. His hands massaged their way
back down to her hips, and he waited for her response.

Hanna used the interruption to get a hold of herself. Her hands came down to frame his face. She
shook her head. “Perfect.” She copied his tone and kissed him passionately. Her tongue traced his
lips and paused at the dip of his scar. He smirked at the attention and she chuckled lightly.

Cullen deepened the kiss, lifting a hand to her chin to angle her head. Hanna naturally wrapped a leg
around his. She fumbled her hands down to the edge of his shirt and used them to explore the planes
of his stomach and chest. His skin danced under her touch and she tugged on the shirt gently to
signal she was ready to be done with it. Cullen pulled the shirt over his head breaking the kiss at the
last possible second.

Hanna bit her lip as she took in the sight before her. She took two steps back to get a fuller picture.
He looked like Adonis standing there waiting for her to give him more.

“Are you sure?” Hanna shook her head and started again when her voice sounded to thin. “I don’t
want you to regret this in the morning.”
“I’ve never been more sure…” another soft look crossed his face. “If you’re uncomfortable we can
stop here.” Hanna shook her head.
“N..n..no.” She steadied herself on the edge of the bureau. “I just don’t want to pressure you into
anything. I don’t think I could live with myself if I hurt you like that.” Cullen looked at her with eyes
full of mirth. He held out a hand and twisted her from the edge of the bureau to the bed. When he
spoke, he leaned down to whisper into her ear.

“Between you and me, you’re the one sounding more nervous.” He changed back to a serious tone
pulling away one last time. “Let me know if you change your mind, but I think we’ve fully
established what we want.” Hanna nodded. “Now, let me show you.”

**** (If you want to skip over the sexy stuff skip to the next break.)

Cullen pushed her into a seated position on the bed and knelt before her. Gently, he removed her
pants one inch at a time, kissing each inch of skin as it was revealed. Hanna deftly removed the
straps securing her breast band and lifted it over her head. When the last of her legs was revealed to
him, Cullen kissed each of her toes. When he finally looked up to make eye contact, and found her
completely nude, he growled.

“Temptress.” he called her as he pounced from his position to press her back into the mattress. His
mouth found hers and he pressed a skilled calloused finger to the hardening nub of a nipple. His
tongue took advantage of her gasp and glided through her lips to battle with hers. He trailed his
previously unoccupied hand down her stomach sending butterflies and fireworks in it’s wake. When
his hand passed over her superheated mound to caress and squeeze her thighs, Hanna groaned in
frustration. She grabbed his hand with both hands and pulled it to where she needed it to be.

“Patience is a virtue.” He tutted breaking the kiss.
“Tease.” She accused. Hanna’s eyes rolled back when he took her advice and dipped a finger inside
her lower lips and rubbed too pointedly over her clit. She squealed and squirmed, lifting her hips into
the pleasure and slamming them back down to get away. Cullen watched her body move, and stopped as suddenly as he started. His hand found it’s way to her hip and the other cradled her head.

“Too much?” He chuckled as Hanna was breathing too hard to respond. He teased her neglected nipple with a too short lick.

“Ass.” She managed as she grabbed his through his pants. “You’re wearing far too much.” Hanna pushed him over from his position on his side to one where she was straddling him. His bulge nestled easily against her and she bucked a few times as payback. It was Cullen’s turn to groan as his hands tried to lift her off of him and reassert dominance. Hanna slid through his fingers and pulled with some difficulty to remove his final pieces of clothing.

When she pushed back up, she paused with her mouth over the tip of his cock. Close enough for him to feel the heat and moisture of her breath, but not enough for him to feel her soft lips on him. Cullen bucked his hips predictably and she stayed just out of reach until his eyes searched for hers. When he looked her in the eyes, she took his cock as deeply as she could manage and covered the remaining rod with her right hand. Cullen’s eyes rolled back and she released him. His hand slid into her hair and tried to guide her back to him. Hanna shook her head.

“Patience is a virtue. If you want me to continue, I need you to watch.”

“Witch.” He cursed her and returned his gaze to hers. It was all the encouragement she needed. While her mouth worked him her hands explored fondling his balls, scratching and groping his ass, eventually a hand snaked it’s way between her legs to rub her clit. Cullen moaned when he saw her hand disappear between her thighs. His cock started to twitch, and he used his hand to pull her back.

“I need…” Hanna didn’t make him wait another minute. She lifted her hips and guided him into her. It had been months since the last time she had fucked anything that wasn’t her own hand. The pressure. The heat. It was too much. She worked her way down letting her body adjust to him. It felt so good to just sit with him seated inside. She began rocking slowly as she became more comfortable. Cullen tried to let her lead. His hands pinched and pulled at her sides her ass, trying to managed her speed with little cues. When Hanna felt herself getting close she leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“If you wanted to lead, you just had to ask.” She had intended to say more, but Cullen grunted and pulled her off of him to flip her onto the bed on her back. She hit the bed roughly and his hands guided her legs apart. He lifted behind her knees and slid home. Hanna had not time to get her thoughts in order before he was fucking her at his own pace. It was faster, deeper. “Ffffuck.” She moaned. “Cullen.”

“Yes?” He responded like she had said his name in passing, not while he was balls deep inside of her.

“You...ugh...I’m...Jesus…” A string of meaningless nonsense fell from her mouth.

“I’m...ah...sorry. I didn’t quite catch that.”

Hanna groaned. His cock was twitching. If he was as close as she was…

“Cullen, I’m so close. I’m..”

“Yes, Hanna…Look at me.” When icy blue met fiery amber, fireworks exploded behind her eyes. Hanna felt a blinding hot wave pass over her tensing and relaxing overused muscles. It was like no orgasm she’d ever had before. Cullen’s eyes widened and his mouth was a surprised circle. He
collapsed to her side and rubbed soothing circles in her back as they both fought to catch their breath.

“Wow, Cullen, I suddenly wish we had done that sooner.” Hanna grinned.

“It…” He looked down at her with affection and concern. “It definitely bears repeating.”

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“I…” Cullen suddenly thought better of whatever he was going to say. “It can wait.”

Hanna shrugged and snuggled against him. Falling asleep in the arms of a lover was a feeling she could admit missing.

****

As Hanna fell asleep in his arms, Cullen pulled her close. It was so much easier to be with Hanna when her connection to the fade had been blocked. She had no idea that she had released a jolt of magical energy. If he hadn’t been a Templar in a previous life, they both would have been in danger. For now it was okay, but when she got stronger….

It was crucial that she receive training starting tomorrow.

For now, holding her like this. Her liking him back. It was enough.

Chapter End Notes

If you made it to the end of this chapter then you probably read it. Ah! Don’t look at me. It’s pretty embarrassing to be an actual adult that was afraid to write about sex. Catholic guilt and all.

Anyway, kudos and comments are always appreciated. You are pretty cool for just checking out my story though.

I hope to have another chapter ready by Sunday or Monday. We’ll see!
Cullen slept for maybe two hours. He awoke with a start and had to place himself and think about what he had been doing before falling asleep. His arm was stinging with pins and needles under Hanna’s head, her black hair a mess over her face. Cullen lifted the offending strands and led them behind her ear and slid his fingers gently through her hair to push it back. Hanna sighed and rolled away in her sleep destroying all of his progress in taming her hair.

With their new position, it was much easier for Cullen to slip away without disturbing Hanna. Cullen knew he couldn’t fall back asleep. He also knew that he had spent so much time putting together a date for Hanna, his workload would double in the next few days to make up for it.

The pleased surprise on her face when she opened her eyes was payment enough. It was so unexpected that she would offer to finish the perfect date with sex. Cullen had gotten the impression that her culture and perspective was more puritan than that of a majority of Thedas. That impression went out the window when she so readily went down on him... He would have little success concentrating on work if he thought about it much more than that.

Cullen quietly dressed and crept down the ladder to his office. He wondered how quickly the kitchen staff had come to retrieve the remains of their meal. Part of him hoped they had come quickly and overheard their performance. That there would be whisperings throughout the castle. The smarter part of him knew that Hanna would be embarrassed by that and the staff probably came long after they had fallen asleep.

Either way, his desk was clear. He found himself staring at the gifts he had prepared for Hanna. He wondered when she would have the opportunity to open them. It would be a matter for the morning. As it was, the moons still hung above the horizon and the night was wearing into the early hours of the morning. Cullen retrieved the oldest pile of correspondence from the cabinet behind his desk. Initial reports from the exalted plains and emerald graves described more clues to the red lyrium transport operations carried out by ‘S.’ Who they now knew must be Samson.

It made him think of the attack on Haven. When Hanna saw Samson, she had a flash of recognition. Cullen hadn’t found the opportunity to ask her about it, yet.

She had been so frail during the trip to Skyhold. She cried out in pain nightly when she slept in his tent as he worked. The red lyrium tainted her skin and left her brilliant eyes dull, glowing red. The lyrium sang loudly in his ears when he touched her to wake her and give her a potion for the pain.

His withdrawal worsened every time they touched. The way Hanna looked at him when he tried to steel his expression. She knew it was hurting him. He thought back to her words to the Inquisitor when his plan started rolling. ‘While I sit bored in the corner.’ Had she really stayed near him out of courtesy? It seemed far fetched, but he feared that he was misreading her. It wouldn’t be the first time
he had been blinded by his feelings, not even the first time he had misread her for them.

He admitted to himself he hadn’t even considered that she might not want his protection. Cullen was fearful when they arrived in Skyhold that she wouldn’t be vigilant in keeping herself safe. He worried that she might step on an unreinforced stone and fall to her death on a walk. He was terrified that she would slip on a icy staircase and break her neck. Most of all, he never wanted her to be alone with her thoughts. The way she talked about the escape from Haven was condemning. She expected the impossible of herself. How could she possibly save everyone? She was overly anxious about the death toll.

When he started planning the date night, Cullen just wanted to take the pain away from the front of her mind. When the Inquisitor told him that Solas had a plan to stop the growth, Cullen’s mind started to fantasize. Hanna freshly healed, he could only imagine what they might get up to with her renewed energy.

Mahanon had recently become more accepting of the apostate elf and hoped Hanna might forgive Solas for whatever he had done to make her bristle around him if he was responsible for saving her. Cullen got a distinctly different feel. The way she acted around Solas wasn’t strictly anger. The way she flinched away from his touch, cast her eyes down and away, refused to speak to him… Her reaction seemed more and more fearful as time went on.

Cullen worried it was her disorder. That night in the cave, she had told him that it was made worse by stress. Marked by mood swings and paranoia. The way she avoided discussing how she and Mahanon survived… He couldn’t think of a situation more stressful than hours knowing that your consciousness is the only thing keeping you and another alive.

Cullen let out a deep sigh, but it might have been a gasp for the strain he felt. He already had a headache coming on and sleep deprivation might not cut it to describe his exhaustion. While the date had been a delightful distraction, it was distracting all the same. He regretfully started thumbing through his pile of paperwork.

Sometime before dawn, Rylen pushed open the door from the western battlements and slammed it against the wall. The clatter nearly destroyed Cullen’s heart. “So, dear Commander, I never saw our Oracle return to her room last night.” The dark haired captain eyebrows wagged suggestively. When Cullen didn’t answer his provocation, Rylen took the time to look around the room. “Oh, woah, ho, oh.” He smirked when his eyes fell on her unopened gifts. “Got straight to it then. I told you she wanted in your pants just as badly as you wanted in hers.”

“Captain,” Cullen tried to level his temper to reinstate civility between himself and his second-in-command. “Do you have a report, or are you only here to make reaching implications about the success of my love life?”

“Why not both, Commander?”

Hanna chose that moment. Of. All. Moments. To slide down his ladder recklessly. The sound of her impact echoed in his mind. Her hair was thankfully somewhat tamed, and she had a slight scowl on her face. Cullen tried not to imagine her waking up alone in his bed. She was wearing her own shoes, leggings and coat. But. Unmistakably. His shirt.

“Good Morning Captain. Commander.” She addressed them separately. By the sly smile on her face as she passed Rylen to sit at her desk, Cullen guessed that she was planning something.
“Uh-” Rylen looked from the Hanna to Cullen and back. “Huh” Hanna had effectively caused Rylen to fall speechless. It was such an occasion that Cullen may have to mark it in his calendar. Perhaps it called for a diary entry.

“Oh, please, by all means continue your discussion. You were just here to report in, right?” Hanna’s voice had a nonchalance that her expression did not. “Captain Rylen, you are here to talk about your watch right?” Rylen’s mouth was agape. When he did not speak for several beats, Hanna ventured in a new direction. “So, tell me Rylen, would you like to hear how the Commander and I got on last night?” Cullen wasn’t sure how he wanted this to go.

Hanna stood and walked over to the captain and whispered in his ear.

“No.” The man’s accent twisted the syllable. “Why would you tell me if that were true?”

Hanna barked out a laugh. “Easy. Because no matter who you tell. They will never believe you.”

Rylen glared a hole in the floor. Cullen was suddenly extremely curious. The captain snapped out of it, and saluted Cullen. His voice was disheartened when he gave his report and he left with his shoulders deflated.

Hanna’s laugh followed him out like rain beating the poor man down.

“No that I disapprove, but what did you tell him?”

“It’s probably better that you don’t know.” Hanna said flatly. “Bastard better never wake me up by slamming a door ever again. I may have crushed his dreams, but next time I will eat his heart.” Cullen’s look of concern only grew. Hanna smiled sweetly. “Don’t worry it’s a figure of speech.”

“Right.”

“Now, may I open my gifts or…” Cullen had trouble reading her expression. He stood and met her at her new workspace.

“Of course.” Suddenly he was nervous again. What if she didn’t like what he had done? His hand felt magnetized attracted to the back of his neck.

Hanna unstacked the three parcels. She tapped each one “Eenie meenie miney mo…”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m almost done.” She returned to her rhyme. “My mother told me to pick the best one and you are…” Her hand fell on the larger gift first. “It.” Hanna looked at him. Cullen was most sure of that gift. He had commissioned new armor for her. It was considerably heavier than the armor she previously wore before it was shredded at Haven. He ordered it to have the weight offset by enchantments as well as enchantments in the greaves for speed, and in the arms for balance. “It’s like a nursery rhyme. Well, that makes it sound embarrassing. It makes it easier to choose a course of action when all ways forward are equally rewarding or crappy. I never would have done it out loud at home because...it’s a childish method. Wow. It is embarrassing.” Hanna covered her mouth with her hand. “Just pretend that I picked this one because I could tell it was the one you wanted me to open first.”

Her hands worked the knot in the cloth that he had wrapped it in. When the cloth fell away, her eyes widened and she looked at him then back down to the armor. It was modeled after his own, but black and with an inlaid silver design and maroon and burgundy cloth. Hanna exhaled deeply. She didn’t breath as she traced the simple design on the chestplate. Two arrows crossed with a dagger above
them. Tears fell from her eyes.

“How...no you couldn’t. Why? This is...The distinctive unit insignia of the green beret. I mean it’s just missing ‘De oppresso liber’…” Hanna was openly sobbing. This was... not quite the reaction he expected.

“Do you? I mean. Would you prefer a different design?” Cullen felt like he was trying to catch sand falling between his fingertips. “I chose the design because you’re a rogue. You use daggers, arrows, and a bow. I didn’t know it had any real significance to you.” Yet. He finished in his head.

“I….” She started, but upon meeting his eyes she changed her mind. “Thank you for the thought you put into this gift. I don’t know if I can bring myself to wear it. I’m no longer a green beret, but I will always be one. It would feel hollow. I know you don’t understand the significance. I have nothing to compare it to in this world.”

Cullen let the conversation drop with a nod. “I will understand either way. I can change it if you would like. Let me know what you decide.”

Hanna calmed down after a few moments. Cullen waited rubbing her back gently.

“I’m ready for the next one. Which should I choose?”

“It would be best to open the smallest one last.” He suggested. He was most nervous about her opening the smallest. However, Cullen wasn’t sure how she would react to any of the gifts any more.

“Oh, you look so nervous. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted so strongly. I just wasn’t expecting such a thoughtful gift.” Hanna pursed her lips. “I mean, not that I don’t think you’re thoughtful…”

“Hanna. It is fine.”

Hanna gently removed the second gift from its wrappings. It was a journal. Attached to the journal in a small satchel was an assortment of pencils in black, red, and green. Hanna removed a pencil and turned to the first page. She began to write, but how she was writing the shapes of the letters weren’t those of Common.

*Property of Hanna*

“The first, it’s how we write the language we’re speaking right now at home. The second, it’s my mother’s language. I was never quite as proficient as I wanted to be writing it.” Hanna kept writing. Three more times she wrote the words in different languages before she wrote them in a language he understood. “I want to keep these words in my memory. I worry that I will forget my home sometimes. I worry that Thedas will become my only reality. I’m not sure I’m ready for that day. This will help. Thank you.”

Cole had suggested Cullen gift Hanna a journal. The commander couldn’t deny that she seemed much happier with this gift. At the same time, it showed him how little he knew about Hanna. How different was her world from this one? Could he, would his love make her want to stay? Hanna gently closed the journal and moved it to a drawer in her desk.

She picked up the final gift and looked directly at him. He was worried that the size, shape, and weight of the gift would give it away. He had been working with Mahanon to find a way to ‘charge’ her cell phone with very little help from Solas. Solas claimed that it would be dangerous to channel electricity into the device as Hanna had vehemently refused to attempt it on her own with Solas’s
help.

Vivienne was unwilling to touch the cursed black box. She said it had a terrible aura to it. Cullen couldn’t disagree.

Finally, with Dorian’s aide, Mahanon believed they had restored the things power. It was the Tevinter idea to use the electricity indirectly on a flat conductive metal inserted into what Solas said Hanna had called the power port. With very little effort, Dorian had made a white outline appear with a bolt of lightning in the middle. He had ‘charged’ the ‘phone’ until the outline was filled with green instead.

Now, Hanna passed the small box back and forth in her hands still wrapped. She ran her fingers over the cloth wrapping. “No way! I thought I left this in Haven!” Cullen grimaced. Her excitement was loud.

“Mahanon and Dorian worked to return it to working order. I am but a messenger. I think Dorian was able to successfully power it.”

Hanna swallowed and gaped at him. “He didn’t. You didn’t. I can’t believe it. You realize what this means right? I can listen to music. Real music. Do you realize how quiet it is here? Music is everywhere on Earth. Agh the anticipation is killing me.” Hanna quickly pressed a button on the right hand side of the phone. White letters appeared on a black background. More words in her mysterious English. Whatever that may be. Then the surface changed to a brilliant red still with white letters. Hanna gasped.

“Is that bad?”

“No, it’s normal. My phone is starting up. I don’t even know how to feel right now.” The red faded and was replaced by the exact image of a cat.

“How did you? Is there a cat in that bo...your phone?”

“Huh?” She looked at him and shook her head. She laughed at him. “No it’s a picture. Well a digitally drawn illustration. That’s not very explanatory either. Look, this is my cat. Panda. I took it a couple of months ago. Well before I came here. It’s just like a moment in time captured to look back at. I have more.” Hanna moved her finger around on the screen and colors and lights flashed it did look a lot like magic, but he felt no mana discharge. Hanna started talking again. “See..” only to stop before showing him. Her body language changed. Cullen moved closer to see what she was looking at. It was another picture. In the picture, Hanna’s image was smiling. She was wearing a blue dress. Her face was clear and scar free as she had been that night before the conclave. Her teeth were white, he could tell because she was smiling so widely. Next to her stood a tall man. She had her hand across his chest with a ring with a large stone sparkling brightly.

“That’s Jack. This was our engagement photo.” Cullen vaguely remembered that Jack was her fiancé’s name. Suddenly, Cullen was evaluating the man. He had dark hair, and deep set dark eyes. He may have been taller than Cullen. Hanna in the image was several inches shorter than him. He did not have her distinctive facial features. It made him feel better that she had loved a man who didn’t look like her before. They both wore very odd clothing though. Hanna’s dress was very short and even looking at it had him remembering how her legs felt in his hands…

“You look...happy.” The words came out of his mouth, but he didn’t remember thinking them. Hanna nodded and swiped her hand across the screen. The next photo was of her holding her obscenely fat cat.
“Oh, look at him. He’s such a lump.” Hanna giggled. “Such a big lazy boy.” She spoke to the picture like it was a child. Or how Leliana spoke to nugs when she thought no one was looking. Hanna swiped again. “There’s my friend Risa and I in Chicago.” She swiped again, before he could get a clear image. It may have been purposeful. “This is my family.”

“Can I see?” He held out his hand and held the screen closer to his face to look at the three people gathered in front of a green landscape. Hanna looked very similar to her mother. The same wide smile and dark straight hair. Her brother was standing behind them with his hands on each of their shoulders like a hug. He seemed to be bent over to meet their height. He had the same piercing blue eyes as Hanna. “What about your father?”

Hanna winced. Cullen regretted the words, but he couldn’t take them back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” Hanna shook her head and took back the phone.

“I don’t think I have any pictures of him on my phone. He was tall like John. He had sandy brown hair that faded to grey as he got older. My brother and I, we have his eyes and his work ethic. That man never knew a day of rest.” Hanna carded a hand through her hair. “He was white and from America. He met my mom in a war and she moved back with him. He was a leader. A kind and generous man.”

The phone buzzed in her hand interrupting her. “What? That can’t be. It’s impossible.” Cullen braced himself ready for the intriguing device to explode or turn into a demon. “I’ve got voice messages. It doesn’t have service here. How could?” Hanna set the phone down. “I was really about to question the possibility of something when this world has magic. I was really going to do that.”

Cullen wasn’t sure what Hanna meant. Voice. Messages. That didn’t seem possible to him. Service. What did she mean by that?

Hanna picked up the phone and hit a button. “I have well over a hundred voicemails.” She swallowed and looked at him. Her eyes were brimming with uncertainty. “Should I listen to them?”

“How are the messages from?”

Hanna shrugged to answer his question. She picked up the phone and scrolled. “Jack, mom, John, Risa, The DJ from our wedding, some more friends…. ” Hanna closed her eyes. “I don’t know if I should listen, but…”

She tapped and a voice said “Recorded October 10th, at 10:30 pm:”

A man’s voice left the device. “Hanna, Princess, Sweetheart. We can talk about this. Turn your phone back on. I tried to follow you, but you’re too fast. I know you went into the woods...Look, just call me back and let me know that you’re okay.” Hanna tapped again, after the phone’s voice spoke the man started again.

“Hanna, I don’t know what my mom said to you. Is that why you had a panic attack? Oh, God… I love my mom, but she has been very cruel to you. Please, come back. I can’t call the police, but...I worried. Call me when you get this.”

“Hey, Hanna I found a drunk guy near where you disappeared. He was talking about magic like... Anyway, I called the cops and they took him into custody. There’s no way he had time to kidnap you, though, right? He was pretty weak too. Fuck, Hanna, I’m scared that something bad happened. Please, let me know you’re okay at least.” Several messages played with the same voice with the same message. Then an older woman’s voice came through.
“Hyun-Ae, what do I do? Where have you gone? Jack told us that you’d argued and run away. You could run home. Hyun-Ae, come home right now. You’re okay right? So come home now and I will scold you later.”

Another voice. “Hanna, it’s Risa. Jack said he tried your phone, but I told him I’d work some magic and make you answer. Don’t worry about the wedding. We can fix that later. Don’t worry about Jack. Fuck Jack and his beanstalk, especially if he hurt you to make you run away like this. All we need is you. So, come home safe okay? Let me know, when you get this.”

More voices, more messages. All of them said things like ‘Call me when you get this.’ or ‘I hope you’re okay.’ Hanna’s mother became more and more agitated until she left a long message just crying her name into the phone. It was at that point that Cullen had seen enough. Hanna’s eyes were red, puffy from tear long dried. Her breaths were coming in short gasps and sobbs. She clutched the phone for dear life. Tapping for the next message to play, until the phone voice repeated ‘no more messages, mailbox full.’

Cullen took the phone out of her hands and set it back on the desk. He pulled Hanna up from out of the seat into his arms and held her there tightly. He walked Hanna down to her room to find a change of clothes then to the main hall for breakfast. She kept her eyes downcast. Cullen tried to talk to her, but she looked right through him. When he sat her plate down in front of her, she didn’t touch it. It was like she was floating elsewhere while her body stayed here.

“Hey, Hanna, How was…” Mahanon stopped short when Cullen passed him a warning look. “What’s wrong?”

“My phone...it works a little better than...I have messages from Jack. It’s been a shock. He...Oh, God, I forgot about how he must feel. I’ve been gone for months.” Hanna finally let her walls drop. Cullen tried not to feel jealous. “He and my mom, and my friends, left messages until my phone couldn’t hold them anymore.” Hanna sunk her head to the table. Cullen could suddenly feel her mana bubbling beneath the surface. He readied to use Silence.

Hanna’s face flashed blue and she slumped into him. Cullen rushed her to the library so that Solas could make sure her condition was stable. Damning his responsibilities he decided to stay by her side until she returned from her vision.

Chapter End Notes

It hurt the worst thinking about what voice mails my mom would leave me if I up and disappeared. She is so terrible with phones. I cried.

Oh, btw... I may have made a sideblog on tumblr to dedicate to my inquisition thoughts and research for this project. brittlebonezz.tumblr.com

Check it out if you care too. It's mostly for me, but I thought I'd share.
Of every outcome Mahanon had imagined when he saw Hanna and Cullen that morning, this was not one of them. When he came to breakfast, he didn’t even expect to see the new couple. The inquisitor was hoping to find that the Commander had requested breakfast in his office. Mostly so that Mahanon wouldn’t have to suffer through the gloating looks Cullen would undoubtedly float his way. Hanna’s head down on the table, her breakfast pushed aside...Cullen looking pale and dazed. How could he have predicted that Cullen could fuck this up so masterfully?

Mahanon had gone out of his way to make it so that Hanna could have a magical evening free from the red lyrium in her side and the self doubt that ate away at her since they had arrived at skyhold. Cullen’s strained expression when he asked Hanna how the night had gone registered with Mahanon too late. All thoughts of deriding the commander fell by the way side when she explained.

Mahanon didn’t know how to take the news. If she could receive messages from home, who’s to say that she can’t send them back. Maybe he wouldn’t have to resign himself to seeing Hanna and Cullen together to get Hanna’s love life back on track. Before his thoughts could finish spinning a plan, Cullen had lifted Hanna and raced to take her to Solas’s room. She had another vision.

Mahanon followed right behind. Dorian who had been preparing to take a tray back to his work area left his tray on a table and scrambled to follow.

“What happened?” Solas’s tone was short. Mahanon thought he was still a little upset about how bumpy his part of the plan had gone the night before. Mahanon still had a few questions about how exactly an ancient elf ended up surviving so long. It made sense that Solas wouldn’t share his origin with anyone, but at this point Mahanon shouldn’t have had to find out second hand from Hanna...Even if she got some of the details wrong. Solas? The dread wolf? Creators, that would be the day.

Mahanon almost didn’t recognize Cullen’s voice. The normally stoic warrior was ashen, defeated. “That cursed phone...when she turned it on, she was able to listen to messages from her friends, family and fiance. From Earth.”

“The device would be obsolete here. She said it herself. Thedas has no satellites.” Solas didn’t completely disregard the commander’s story, he was doing that thing where he phrased his questions as statements.

“Hanna…” Cullen deflated completely and sat beside her on Solas’s couch. He held her hand. “She said it was ridiculous to question the phone working in a world with magic.”

“These people were able to send her messages over a considerable distance remotely?” Dorian’s suave voice piped up from behind the group of four. “Through that black box you had me oh so carefully charge. The more I think about it, the stranger it seems. You say she grew up in the Free Marches, but she doesn’t know the slightest thing about Andraste or the Chant. She doesn’t have the same accent as Varric or any other Marcher I’ve had the pleasure of meeting. Her story is obviously a sham, despite her selling it so well. Her origins you refuse to tell me have just gotten that much more interesting.”

Mahanon was shocked speechless. Somehow Dorian had found them out.
Solas raised a brow, but returned to assessing Hanna’s condition. Not that he was a proficient healer by any means. Mahanon knew it was fishy that they ran to him instead of a healer when Hanna fainted. Cullen rounded on Dorian.

“Those are her secrets to tell.”

“Oh, Commander, do tell me about keeping secrets.” Dorian was verbally rearing back for a blow that would result in the commander attempting to rearrange his face.

“Woah….woah,” Mahanon swiftly interrupted. “Let’s focus on what we can control and then we can argue about secrets when we’ve found a way to fix our mess.” Mahanon found himself taking charge of the situation. It was a strange feeling that washed over him in moments of tension, when eyes would float to him for direction. He was slowly becoming more accustomed to it. “Solas and Cullen can take care of Hanna while she’s doing her ‘weird fade thing’ Dorian, I want you to go find the Iron Bull, Leliana and Cassandra. We’ll meet up in my quarters before the next bell.”

“What about you?” Cullen asked. “I’m going to grab her phone from your office, and I’m going to grab Cole. We’ve got to figure out a way to fix this.”

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Hanna was watching a woman and two men work their way through a forest just south of the Storm Coast. The woman was eccentric and not accustomed to walking through the wilderness, if such things could be told so simply. She was short. Her clothing was in desperate need of repair. A large tattered red scarf covered her long neck, she had daggers all over her person that she threw in combat, but she didn’t have the grace that came from practiced skill.

The human was tall and a mage. He had an overly muscular build for a mage. More terrifying was the smear of blood he painted like a ritual over the bridge of his nose. The blood trailed over his cheeks just above his full beard. He had dark hair and dark blue eyes with deep circles beneath them. He was protective of his crew and visibly the leader of the group.

Finally, the elf was nearly as tall as the mage which would have to be a world record for height amongst elves. He had dark skin with glowing blue tattoos.

Varric’s voice echoed in her mind. ‘I knew someone with glowing tattoos once. Did you get them in tevinter?’

So this is Hawke and Fenris, but who is the woman?

The group settled around a campfire for the night and Hanna hoped desperately to eavesdrop on their conversation. The mysterious woman broke the silence first.

“Where did Varric say this place was again?”

“He said it’s a giant fortress in the frostbacks. North of Haven.” Hawke had a deep voice, but his tone was nowhere near the sarcastic hilarity of Hawke from The Tale of the Champion. Hanna wondered if he had been this way since his lover went crazy and blew up a chantry in Kirkwall. Varric said Hawke was very devout even with the loss of his siblings and tragic murder of his mother. Hawke couldn’t bring himself to forgive Anders.

“I imagine we can’t miss it.” Fenris smirked, but when he continued Hanna held her breath. “He wrote that there might be another person from your world there.”
“What!?” The short woman spoke loudly enough to scare every bird in the surrounding trees. “No, that wasn’t what I agreed to when I said I’d come with you.”

“Oh Calm Down Christina. It’s not like you could hit it off much worse than you did with the Hero of Fereldan.”

“She called me a coward.” The woman, Christina, huffed. “Just because I preferred to live in Kirkwall and make money off of music that no one here would make on their own.”

“She had a hard time in Fereldan…” Hawke tried to smooth over the situation while glaring at Fenris.

“At least I can sympathize there, this place is hell on Earth. Thedas. Fuck this world.” The group fell into less than companionable silence.

Hanna was surprised to find that Fenris shared a tent with Christina rather than with Hawke. That was until she heard the sounds of their obvious hate sex. Hanna felt really bad for Hawke.

It occurred to Hanna sometime later that this was the longest she had been in a vision since her vision of the worst timeline. Hanna knew that she was dropped in a single place, but she could nearly teleport to anywhere else if she thought about it hard enough. Hanna wanted to know when this night was happening. She thought of skyhold.

When she arrived, Cullen was stroking her hair out of her face. Her face was glowing she was watching herself having a vision. It could be today or a year from now for all she knew. Hanna searched the castle. She found that there was a gathering in Mahanon’s penthouse.

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“I bet you’re wondering why I’ve brought you all together here in my room. That’s because...Well, as some of you already know, Hanna is a special case. She is here in Thedas against her will. She is from another world. She calls where she is from Earth. There is no magic on Earth. Only technology. This cell phone is a kind of technology.”

Mahanon searched the faces gathered to see if he had lost anyone. Cassandra already knew as did Leliana. Dorian, Varric, and Iron Bull had been curious but unsure. The three of them looked ecstatic in their own way. Cole looked nervous up at the corner of the room. Like a cat seeing spirits in the shadows of candlelight.

“She is currently in a vision. The visions started after the conclave. She has been in this vision for most of the day. This is the longest one she has ever had. I wanted to have this meeting earlier, but was persuaded by Leliana to postpone it until now. She wanted to be sure that none of you would take what we have discussed out of this room. I assured her that each person here has earned my trust.”

“Aw, Shiny, you shouldn’t have.” Varric smiled suspiciously. “Since we’re letting cats out of bags, I should let you know something. I once wrote a very popular book about a very popular man. In that book, I wrote about all of his adventures except one thing. I took out a character. She was very forceful in her request that I completely erase her from the whole thing. Her name is Christina and she was a very skilled bard in Kirkwall. I sent a note with my suspicion that Hanna might have been from the same world as her. She may be arriving soon. More likely she burned my note and ran as far from Fereldan as she could.”
“Leliana? Would you like to share?” Mahanon said careful around the spymaster that knew at least seven different ways to kill him and make it look like an accident.

“The Hero of Fereldan as well. Alyiah came here from Earth with a friend. By the time I met them in Lothering, Alyiah’s friend had died. She was not very open about her origins either.”

“The reason I have brought you all here is because her visions are largely triggered by her emotions, negative more than positive. I have my best spies, my best magical/technological expert, and a seeker in case anything goes wrong. We have to piece together from this phone, which she states has everything about her home on it, anything we can to stabilize her mood and prevent more visions. Solas is afraid that the worse her mood is going into a vision the longer and more dangerous her vision. I need your help to save my friend.” He tried not to sound pleading. When the others agreed, Mahanon nodded and tapped a button on the side of the strange shiny black box. The screen lit up and displayed several strange letters. Dorian gasped dramatically. “That’s an ancient Tevinter script. Combined with some numbers. I know I’ve seen them before.”

“Those are Qunlat numerals.” Bull observed.

“The more I see the more intrigued I am.” Dorian supplied. He touched the glass of the screen and it rippled and opened to a new screen. All eyes averted for a moment from the unnerving unnatural light.

“What’s it say, Dorian?” Mahanon asked impatiently.

“Fasta Vass. Just because I can tell you the script is ancient, doesn’t mean I can read it.” Still the dark haired man leaned over the screen. “It looks less like Tevene and more like common written with tevinter characters. I would have to study and compare to be sure...Each of these icons appears to have a different purpose, but I couldn’t... be... sure.” Dorian tapped one of the icons gingerly. The screen changed to a purple with a list of items. He tapped another and an unholy sound poured into the room.

“My Anaconda Don’t!

My Anaconda...

My Anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns hun.”

Dorian quickly tapped the screen again and the noise stopped.

“What was that?” Cassandra seemed displeased with the purpose and direction of this meeting.

“I thought it said music. I was clearly very, very wrong.”

“Cullen said their were these photographs of people she knew and places she had been. Perhaps, we could do something to make her more at home.”

Dorian tapped the screen several more times liberally using the side button to go back and away from things when they became overwhelming. Finally he tapped a button and Hanna’s face appeared on the screen. It was more surprising when the image started moving.

“Look, Jack, he’s dancing. He loves the Backstreet Boys.” In the moving pictures on the screen,
Hanna held the arms of her black and white cat and moved them dramatically to the beat of a song. A hearty chuckle played through the device from an unseen person. The images replayed until Dorian swiped his hand across the screen.

“Use this video to calm down when you feel like slipping. Okay? Hanna, I want to listen to my voice and close your eyes. I want you to take deep breaths follow my count okay? In, one...two...three, hold it, out, two, three, four, five...” A man was up close in the image. His eyes closed while he talked Hanna through this exercise. Dorian paused the video.

“Could we use this?” He asked.

Mahanon shook his head. “I don’t know. She was upset because of the voice messages she heard, would this be better?”

“I could do it.” Iron Bull offered. “I’ve done this kind of thing before. Helped people work through trauma. She would have to agree to it, but I think it would be better than telling her to watch a video of someone she may never get to see again.”

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Hanna floated in the corner of Manny’s room watching him give all of her secrets away to just about half of his inner circle. So many emotions cycled through her. From laughing at the hilarity of Dorian accidentally choosing to play Anaconda by Nicki Minaj, to shear depression at hearing one of Jack’s calming videos. The whole time they were talking Cole watched where she hovered in the corner like he could see her. He didn’t say anything, but it was clear that he was worried about how she might react to seeing the contents of this meeting.

After Jack’s video, she left. She didn’t want to see anymore. Hanna didn’t want to know their big plans to make her feel better. As she floated away she finally felt the familiar pull back to her body.

“Welcome back, are you okay?”

“Hell no,” She tried to lift herself up, but struggled to move an inch. “Manny is so fucking lucky I’m dead tired because if not I would tar and feather him for talking about me to everyone.”

Cullen’s brow raised. He didn’t know what they were doing. “I told Dorian that it was your business.” He sighed. “Mahanon is just worried. Whoever he’s meeting with, they are coming up with a plan to help. I’m grateful. I wouldn’t let you tar and feather him. Here let me take you down to your room so you can get some peaceful sleep.”

Cullen carried her from Solas’s couch down to her room. “You like doing this.” She accused.

“I like helping you. Normally you seem so strong. I like it when you let me do something helpful.” He admitted. That was more honest than Hanna had expected. It effectively made her pout pathetically the rest of the way down the stairs to her room.

“Goodnight, Hanna.” Cullen kissed her forehead, her nose, and her lips after tucking her in. He gave her one last look before closing her door.

Chapter End Notes
Ah! What is wrong with me? This chapter is super late, but I had so much trouble writing it. Just a heads up, I'll probably update a little more infrequently for the next four weeks. Maybe biweekly, I hope not. I'll try to get out a new chapter by Monday each week. I'm sorry, but this time of year is really busy at work. You know how it goes.

Thank you for reading. If you ever want to check in I do have that tumblr for my writing. brittlebonezz.tumblr.com I don't mind answering questions there either.

I apologize again in advance for how slow the updates might be here on out.
Long time coming...

Chapter Notes

I rewrote this three times. I'm glad I didn't send it out originally. It just feels better this way. I am putting it out before I'm technically done, but I feel so bad for not posting in weeks. The next chapter should have some real movement in the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Needless to say Mahanon and crew were unprepared for Hanna’s wrath. Cullen could tell that much from all the time he and Hanna spent together. While Cullen let Hanna have more space, it was hard to miss her around skyhold. She sulked on the ramparts in the armor he had ordered. The design did improve her mood eventually as Cole suggested it might. She took her meals in the Herald’s Rest more often than the main eatery inside central castle.

She absolutely refused to speak to any of the people who had gone to meet with Mahanon in his quarters that night. After three days of her completely avoiding him, the Inquisitor barged into the office Cullen shared with Hanna. She ignored his presence for several minutes and eventually excused herself to go and train with Bartolome. Cullen nodded and attempted to prepare himself for the rant that followed from the ignored leader. Nothing could have prepared him, for the tears that fell from Mahanon’s eyes. The Commander found himself compelled to put an arm around Mahanon and walk him back to his quarters. The elf flinched from the contact at first, but then cried harder.

“I’m trying to help her.”

“She just needs space. She wants help, but she isn’t ready for it yet.” Cullen tried to be reassuring. Truthfully, he was just as dumbfounded by her completely shutting Mahanon out. If there was one thing Hanna had made absolutely clear in her time on Thedas, it was her intense protective nature, more specifically of Mahanon Lavellan. It was like watching a mother cat abandon her favorite kitten. Unimaginable.

The immediate aftershocks of the Inquisitor and Oracle’s falling out echoed through the halls nearly a month later. Every meeting in the War Room was tense. Cullen looked from Mahanon to Hanna and back. He wasn’t sure that Hanna could ever quite forgive him. She seemed to be prone to holding grudges. It hadn’t helped that Mahanon still hadn’t apologized to her for taking her cell phone and not returning it. Cullen wasn’t sure if he should get in between the quarrelling friends.

If he should, how? He felt completely blindsided. Before Haven, he wanted Hanna and Mahanon to have a more distant relationship. Now, it was like snowfall in summer, unwanted and distressing.

It had been almost a month since the wonderful night Cullen had shared with Hanna. She seemed less interested in pursuing a physical relationship than their first night together may have suggested. Cullen didn’t push it, but he did walk her to her quarters if possible. If he waited long enough at her door he could hear her crying. It was obvious that she was burying her feelings. The last person she would want to call her out would be Cullen. Sadly, they hadn’t had much time to meet freely. Somehow despite her sharing an office, the were never alone or free enough from work to look at each other.

Cullen’s duties constantly drew him away from his office. He oversaw training of the growing
inquisition forces. With Josephine he worked to secure housing for all new arrivals to Skyhold. While the fortress was massive enough to hold such a large population, only about 40% of the space had been cleared in the initial restoration. The logistics were becoming a job he would have to delegate to another person so he could sleep at night.

During the workday, Hanna spent a lot of time cataloguing the time she spent in her dreams. Cullen could tell in the way she threw herself into the job, it was possibly the only thing she felt proficient at in Thedas. According to Solas, her visions in the fade should be less taxing on her body. However, the deepset purple under her eyes proved that her sleep was often interrupted. Something robbed her of rest.

With renewed vigor, the elf apostate tried to teach her to control her magic daily, he was taking his few successes in hand. While Hanna had the mana and magic, it was unnatural to her very existence. She still had trouble thinking of herself as a mage, and so her magic only came out in small uncontrolled bursts. More likely to cause a vision than a fireball.

Mahanon had suggested that she try singing as it was the way she had first displayed magic. It was the method that would seem most natural to her. However, Hanna refused to sing anymore. She still hadn’t emotionally recovered from the messages she had heard of home on her phone. When Cullen pressed the importance of learning to control her magic, Hanna told him she couldn’t be that carefree with things from home. He could see her control fray just talking about it and let the idea drop.

Perhaps in time the Inquisitor would have more luck. However, at the moment, Mahanon was glaring at Hanna over the map of Ferelden. The atmosphere was always tense when Hanna and Mahanon were in the same room, but it seemed worse today. Hanna hadn’t greeted Mahanon and had explicitly taken the spot furthest from him at the table. When at last the ambassador and spymaster arrived, Hanna went first to update what she had seen in her visions.

“Samson has started to redirect his trade lines from the Emerald Graves to Emprise du Lion. It is still very difficult to spy on him directly because he always has correspondence written down on notes, which he burns after reading. Instead, I have had to find and follow his lieutenants. I have not been able to locate Corypheus. He has likely gone into hiding until they are ready to make their next move.” Leliana took Hanna’s more specific notes to update her field agents on the changes in red templar movements. Cullen still hadn’t asked Hanna where she had seen Samson before the fall of Haven. He wondered what reason she might have to hide that information. In all that had happened since Haven...Cullen was hoping that perhaps it had just slipped her mind.

“Duke Gaspard is looking forward to hearing from us regarding attending the peace talks at Halamshiral. Empress Celene is hesitant to let us come, but she knows if Gaspard invites us she will have no choice but to graciously accept our presence at the ball.”

“It is very important that we prevent the Empress from being assassinated at that ball. When Dorian and I were in the future that was one of the things that tipped the scale for chaos.” Mahanon spoke professionally. It was a trait he had only just recently perfected with the direct instruction of Josephine. It became evident that Mahanon would need that direct intervention after brusquely dismissing a dignitary from Orlais. Cullen could still see the steam behind his ears, but only because Mahanon had directed his frustration at the Commander more than his fair share of times.

Hanna nodded and turned the page in her notes. Her expression changed, became grim. “I know we will be receiving news shortly from Clan Lavellan.” Mahanon’s ears twitched. “It is not a serious situation yet, but we should come down very hard in their defense. I think it would be most effective to send Leliana’s scouts and skirmishers to defend and investigate. Any other course of action will end in disaster.”
“It will be done.” Leliana responded. From what Cullen could tell, Leliana was pleased with the turn of events that landed with Hanna complicity feeding the inquisition information previously withheld. The Nightingale was no longer as cold to Hanna as she had been prior to her breakdown at breakfast.

“What is the news? Is my clan in danger?” Mahanon’s eyes flashed in fear. He never spoke this much during Hanna’s report. Cullen felt only slightly affronted that his initial reaction of sending soldiers to protect the clan was shot down before he could voice it.

“Your clan and your family are safe. For now. Someone is funding mercenaries to attack them under the guise of bandits.” Mahanon looked at Hanna in dumbfounded shock. “Before you ask why I don’t tell you who is doing it….” She huffed at Mahanon’s raised hands. They elf was able to finish her sentence in unison with her,

“I don’t know.”

“Oh come the fuck on Hanna!” Mahanon lost his professionalism.

“Inquisitor.” Josephine corrected lightly.

“Pardon me, Ambassador, but…” Josephine leveled the elf with a ‘try me’ look. Mahanon continued albeit more calmly. “Hanna we will talk about this later. You can’t hold back from us. We have to use all of our cards to stop Corypheus.”

“I am doing the best I can with my skill.”

“And we are thankful for your effort, Oracle.” She emphasized the word as the unspoken rule of the war room was to use titles to instill immediate respect and emotion distance from the topics discussed. While Hanna normally followed the rule subconsciously, both Hanna and Mahanon were guilty of breaking the rule today. Any word on the arrival of Varric’s secretive source?” Josephine interrupted Mahanon’s effort to continue to push.

“Hawke and his associates were less than a week away last I saw. We should be expecting them within the next three days.” Hanna answered curtly. Cullen nodded when she signaled that her report was complete and took his cue.

“Inquisitor, shortly after Hawke arrives you will leave on an excursion through the planned route, the Hinterlands, Fallow Mire, then off to Orllais to investigate the Exalted Plains with the secondary group. Unless Hawke has any additional suggestions, which if I remember the man correctly, he always has suggestions.” Cullen leaned into the innuendo of Hawke’s notorious promiscuity hoping someone might humor him. Hanna blushed, which told him more than he might want to know about what she might have seen. Leliana and Josephine chuckled lightly. Mahanon still seemed upset.

Leliana and Josephine had very little new to report, so the meeting ended sooner than usual with Josephine announcing that they would reconvene on Hawke’s arrival if not sooner.

Cullen followed Hanna through the courtyard back to their office. A young blond girl jumped up and down waving Hanna down. She looked oddly familiar. When the girl spoke her desire, it came back to Cullen. She was the girl braiding Hanna’s hair when she told the Lion story before Redcliffe.

“Miss. Please.” The child was unnaturally cute, and putting on puppy dog eyes. “We just want to hear another one of your stories.”

Hanna had first shaken her head. When the girl didn’t relent, she finally spoke. “I...I can’t do that anymore.”
“You’re talkin’ right now ain’t cha miss. If you can talk, you can tell a story. You don’t even have ta sing.” She bounced from her toes to her heels bashfully. This girl could con the hair off a dwarf. For many moments, Hanna only glared fiercely at the girl.

In the end, she sighed in defeat. “Let me think about which story to tell. Gather all your little friends in front of the stable after the midday bell. Don’t be late or you’ll miss it.”

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Something pinged in Hanna’s brain that it was obviously an elaborate trap set by Varric or the Iron Bull. Perhaps even Leliana. Hanna thought it was funniest to imagine Bull getting down to the girl’s level and laying out the plan. All while the child swung from the qunari’s horns. Hanna really didn’t want to sing the Lion King again. It was too naïve and she felt too bitter. Instead she considered Mulan or Pocahontas, something with betrayal by a friend. Or Wicked. The only problem was she didn’t remember all of the words to the songs or exactly what happened in between major plot points.

It hurt so much to think about home, Hanna had chosen not to think about home at all. She would derail herself with training with Barty or Solas. She would throw herself into writing notes upon notes about all of the visions she had in the fade. Leaning into her natural tendency to work too hard to think about anything helped.

After the girl left she stood there for some time thinking. She waved to Cullen dismissing him to his daily work out with the men. She went to the Herald’s rest for some lunch and maybe a quick chat with Sera or Cole. Someone who wouldn’t be Iron Bull. The large qunari had been playing a patient game of ‘I’m not going to talk to you first, you should come to me to ask what the plan is.’ Far too patient for Hanna’s blood. It had been nearly a month since the meeting in Manny’s quarters. The one where he still hadn’t returned her phone to her. Luckily the large horned man was nowhere to be seen. It was more suspicious than anything. Sera and Cole were both conspicuously absent as well. She went back to thinking about Cullen.

Cullen’s constant presence didn’t help her get over things. His hovering and puppy dog looks were a constant reminder that she had made the mistake of falling for him. What would her mother say? What would Jack think? Jesus, she felt like shit for loving the ex-templar. For a wonderful moment, she had forgotten about earth. She left her homeworld behind and imagined a future with Cullen instead. The blissful ignorance had passed as soon as she turned on her phone. In the time since, Hanna tried to keep their relationship professional, which was very difficult now that she knew him biblically.

Even though she felt guilty, shamed for her feelings for Cullen, that didn’t mean they fizzled out. Sometimes she would walk through the courtyard only to find Cullen sparring with his men, shirtless. Sweat glistening over his muscles, mud and grit smeared over his back, that deadly smirk on his face as he wrestled his opponent to the ground. She would quickly scurry away and chastise herself for staring.

Today for the first time, she had not scurried away quite quickly enough. Cullen called her over and had her demonstrate takedowns based on center of gravity, not that he knew that was what she did. He said something along the lines of ‘Show them how you take me down’ to the approving hoots and hollers of the gathered soldiers. Her cheeks flushed through at least ten new shades of red, before she was ushered into the makeshift arena with none other than the barechested dreamboat Commander. You know, the one she had completely forced herself to ignore for as long as possible.
Not ignoring him now.

She had promised after taking him down that first day to show him how, but never really had the chance to do so. Now, in front of everyone and their Maker, she was supposed to tackle and/or grapple him. All the while, telling others how to do the same. Taking a deep breath, she squared up with him.

*Pretend you’re back home training someone in CQC, not that that was ever your job, or you ever had to demonstrate it with someone you had banged. Okay this isn’t working. Just Pretend.*

Hanna started the lesson by stating the obvious. Cullen had her in height by quite a bit and he had more body weight. In some ways he was the person she would bet on in a fight.

“Normally I would have to contend with his armor on top of that. That’s the trick this works regardless of his size. I just have to be aware and know how I want to take him down.” She turned to address Cullen specifically. “Now, when I took you down the first time, you were actively ignoring me. I put myself in a position that would be easily dodged if you had an eye on me. Since that isn’t very helpful on a battlefield let me show you some more practical takedowns.”

Hanna lowered her body into a more ready position and held her hands in front of Cullen. She spoke loudly and told them that the point of this was to control her opponent and finish as quickly as possible. Maybe she was disarmed and her dagger was a few feet away. She could move Cullen, push him to the ground and finish the fight while he was still trying to figure out how he got to the ground. Now explaining and demonstrating were two different bears.

The first takedown depended on her wrapping around his leg and using her position to force him to hyperextend his knee or fall backwards. Even though the mountain air was crisp, Cullen had been mid workout when he invited her over to demonstrate. He was a slippery as a greased pig. And this takedown put her eye level with his waist. He wasn’t letting her simply demonstrate either, he was actively trying to pull himself out of the grapple. Still she managed to get him down to the ground and retrieve an imaginary weapon.

The second and third she demonstrated required much more body contact, and with the way he was dressed that became skin to skin. When in her final maneuver she flipped Cullen using momentum and her legs, a hushed quiet fell over the crowd and she heard Sera’s voice.

“That was hot. I mean. Woof.”

A murmur of assent passed through the crowd. Hanna tried to sit up, maybe to tell everyone it wasn’t like that. She didn’t have a plan, but Cullen did. He flipped the position so he was on top. His eyes looked for hers and when she met his gaze he leaned forward. She felt such an excellent rush of adrenaline as she thought he might kiss her. Instead he leaned down and whispered into her ear. “Pinned you.”

The struggle that ensued was the combination of her utter embarrassment that the thought of him kissing her was ridiculously attractive to her and her competitive nature that didn’t want to let him win so easily. She turned her hips and leveraged her leg against his knee to flip him only for him to use the self-same momentum to roll her over on her back again. She grunted in frustration and fought against him leaning down to say the words. “Pinned you again.”

She headbutted him when he did and kneed him in the groin before running away from the crowd that had watched with interest. When she got to her door, she opened it and slammed it closed to lock it before looking in her room.
“Hey, I don’t want to scare you, but I was going to swing by for a visit today. See how things were going. The boss is worried about you.” Iron Bull’s deep voice filled her room like a gas.

“Don’t play me you know how things are going.”

“Fine, no playing. How was it?” when Hanna raised an eyebrow. “Training with Cullen. Rolling around in the dirt with a shirtless…” Hanna cleared her throat.

“It was fine. He asked me to demonstrate some takedowns so I did.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nope.”

The huge man leaned back on her poor bed. The frame protested but held firm. “Hmm...I’m going to have to teach that man a thing or two about wooing beautiful women. The chantry really ruins a man, that templar training.” The eye of the Bull followed her as she edged her room to a drawer in her bureau. He shook his head as if warning a child. “See I told him that you secretly walked that route everyday just to watch him practice because you missed the feel of his...Now, Hanna. Both you and I know that I searched your room for concealed weapons and had them removed before I came here. Well, if you didn’t now you do.”

“What the fuck are you actually doing here?” He had her. He had intentionally ignored her for weeks to bait this trap. What was the point?

“Ah...Now you’re curious.” He scanned her face again. “And angry. I’m sorry I don’t make a habit of messing in people’s personal lives, but this is special. You are off your rocker if you think you can keep this up forever. I’ve seen your type before. On Seheron, guys like you were a dime a dozen. They would either work themselves to death, kill their unit either personally or through their exhaustion, or wander off into the fog.”

Hanna swallowed. He knew. The only real person she had told the extent of her mental health was Cullen. She didn’t think Cullen told Bull. Bull could see through everybody. His skill had been helpful on the road. The more time he spent with someone the better he got to know how they worked. Mahanon had asked Bull to fix her. To look deep into what made her not work anymore, and fix whatever it was.

“Oh, look at that. You’re a quick one. That makes this harder. You knew you were working yourself down to nothing.” He was somehow able to convey two eyes worth of emotion with just one. Hanna wrung her hands, he had her pinned just as completely as Cullen had. “Look, all of this is bullshit. That’s life you oughta know that by now. It sucks that you can’t go home. If I lost everything, became Tal-Vashoth or the Charger’s died. I think I’d get a little fucked up too, but this hiding everything thing that you do is dangerous. Not to mention not helping.”

Hanna knew that too. She told Bull not to sell her bullshit. She knew he wouldn’t buy hers either. She didn’t know what to say or to do. Part of her told her to unlock the door and run away again.

Bull’s voice came again and broke her from her thoughts, “This is what will happen. You will tell me what’s going on in that crazy rat's nest of a knot in your brain, and we’ll unknot it little by little until you’re ready to find another person to do it with. Don’t sell me Bullshit I’ve got enough of my own.” He smiled at his own joke and stood. Directing Hanna to get comfortable on her bed. She sat and gripped the edge of her mattress in her hands.

Somehow talking through her problems with Bull would help. She would make it work.
Christina was a stone cold bitch. Hawke watched as she doted on Fenris. He wondered how she had managed to snag onto one of the quiet elf’s heartstrings and pull until he relaxed like this around her. She was so abrasive to everyone else. She often chose her words not with tact, but with the explicit intent of pissing someone off. Somehow that worked for Fenris. He just wondered how and why. Not that Hawke wanted into Fenris’s pants, he was quite done with relationships after his last soured quite spectacularly.

He hadn’t quite handled the breakup well, but Anders had blow up the damn Chantry. With his anger Hawke’s mana rose to bash against his control. He wanted to go hunt Anders down, but not today. Today they were traveling double time to get to Skyhold ahead of schedule. Mostly so that Christina couldn’t find a way to do something else.

When they came to Skyhold, it was obvious no one was expecting them quite yet. In fact, a gathering of people just inside the gates drew Hawke’s attention. In front of the closed stable doors a peculiar looking woman wove her mana into song, she was singing about wanting to be a part of that world or something. It wasn’t very easy to understand at first.

“That bitch, that’s the little mermaid.” The fiery woman pushed through the crowd, but Fenris gripped the back of her shirt and pulled her to stand with them. “At least her voice is nice, but really the little mermaid. Is she twelve? Fucking Asians.”

Hawke flinched. People were starting to take notice of Christina who was ranting at full volume despite to hush of the crowd. Instead of staying to watch the woman sing, he decided it would be prudent to help Fenris remove her to an alternative location where she wouldn’t get beaten by an angry mob.

After they had found food and rooms had been assigned, a messenger for this Inquisitor Varric had written to him about told him he would be around shortly. Varric came first Hawke happily clapped the dwarf on the back. Christina even smiled at the dwarf and thanked him for leaving her out of the book. Fenris cracked a smile for the first time that day.

While they were talking the Inquisitor came with the woman who had been singing in tow.

“Hello, you are the friend Varric mentioned. Hawke, the Champion of Kirkwall.” Hawke somehow managed not to flinch at the mention of his title in that familiar dalish lilt. “I am Mahanon Lavellan, Inquisitor of the well...Inquisition. Not nearly as catchy. And this is our Oracle Hanna Cooper.” He leaned in. “She can see the future.”

“And I’m Michael Jackson.” Christina spoke up before they could stop her. “More appropriately for the audience, I am not Michael Jackson and you can’t see shit. What did you play Inquisition? Do you think you can guide these assholes? Fuck, you’re stupid.” The Oracle took a step towards Mahanon as if to put herself between him and a threat. Fenris took more desperate measures of holding Christina back by her waist.

“I am Hawke. That is Christina and the big guy holding her back in Fenris. She gets this way around new people. Don’t worry it’s temporary.” That seemed to help everyone relax. Hawke relayed the information he had gotten from Stroud in Crestwood.

After Hawke and Mahanon were finished talking, Hawke noticed that Hanna was looking at Christina with a curious look.
“They said that we could be from the same world. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to believe them, but you know who Michael Jackson is right? So I’m Hanna I was born in New York, but more recently I was living in Michigan after I got back from Afghanistan.”

“I’m Christina. I was born in California. More recently I was a dancer in Reno. For the past ten years I’ve been living it up in Kirkwall. You know after I was chewed up and spit out by Fereldan the first time.”

“Ten years…” Hanna’s eyes drifted away looking out over the distant mountains.

“Fuck you’re new here aren’t you.”

“It may have been a year.” Hanna admitted. She was bashful. She had the build of a warrior. Her muscles were well defined and she had a bow, arrows and at least two daggers on her person. Her armor was beautifully designed and light. Hawke pegged her for a rogue. Light on her feet, just like Christina, but possibly better trained. He might pay to see a head to head fight between the two just to see who would win. Christina with her raw rage and sense of injustice or Hanna and her calm collected manner. She looked like someone at home planning a strategy and ruthlessly following it. Christina was never thought through things like that.

“Pfft…” Christina was sizing her up, if someone didn’t do something he may see that fight before they left for Crestwood. “Whatever, I bet you fucked Cullen.” When Hanna didn’t react, Christina dug in again. “Anyway, you shouldn’t sell your knowledge of the games like you’re actually some sort of Oracle. This place is unpredictable, and while some things are the same you can fuck people over by expecting things to happen like they did in those stories.”

“What in the… what are you talking about? What games? I was at the conclave with Mahanon, something happened when he touched that orb Corypheus had...Did you think I came here with tattoos on my face.” She sobered completely. “If I could stop it I would, I hate these visions. If I could just play a game or read a book I would. I don’t get you at all. Who hurt you like this?”

“Oh, Hell no, Princess Perfect. You don’t get to go there. You don’t know me. You don’t know what ten years of this fucking place does to a person. If you haven’t played the games, you’re just as fucking guilty. Look at you, a major advisor to the inquisitor…” Christina was steaming. She made a face then walked away.

“Welcome to the Inquisition, Hawke.” Varric sighed. “Mahanon’s book will be titled ‘You’ll never believe this actually happened’.”

Hawke nodded. “I think it’s an apt title Varric. You’re still quite the author.”

With that Hanna and the Inquisitor walked away and Varric invited Hawke down to the Herald’s Rest for a few drinks.

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After spending time talking through her feelings with the Iron Bull, Hanna decided that the best Disney story to share would be the Little Mermaid. It was full of fun little moments as well as the underlying theme of being a fish out of water. When Hanna arrived at the barn at noon, it was almost like all of skyhold heard that she would be putting on a performance. Of course, Cullen was there. Josephine had gathered nobles in a tent to watch and drink tea. Mahanon watched with Iron Bull and Varric. Cassandra watched intently, but pretended not to care all that much whenever Hanna turned her head. The little blonde girl was there with a chair for Hanna to sit in as she told the story. Hanna set a sack of supplies and props to the side and sat.
She began the story with Prince Eric being tossed out of his ship during a storm. Then she introduced the daughters of Tritan the god of the sea. Ariel’s desire to return to the land and meet with the man she had saved. Perhaps marry him. It was only when singing “Part of Your World” that she felt that loneliness of being in another world set in.

In the distance she could hear a commotion in the back of the crowd. She didn’t want to ruin the performance, her only assumption could be that Christina and Hawke and Fenris had arrived. She was assuming that the loud boisterous one of the group was coming up here to fight her over song rights.

Hanna finished the story by telling how they battled the sea witch and all ended well. When she finished an applause spread through the crowd. Somehow she assumed that this meant she would be putting on more of these shows as the weeks passed. From where she stood, Hanna could see the nobles fanning themselves fawning over Josephine in their approval.

When Mahanon came to the front to see her, she knew it was time to meet the other girl from her world. Varric warned Hanna that Christina was abrasive at the best of times. And these were not the best of times. Hanna promised not to punch Christina even if she said something unforgivable. That seemed to appease Varric.

At the last minute, Varric ran ahead and offered to try to soften the blow. When Mahanon introduced Hanna as the Oracle, that seemed to set Christina off. Something about games and Inquisition was one of them?

In the end, Christina was frustrated by Hanna and stomped off. Hawke and Fenris promised to meet Mahanon at Crestwood. Before Manny separated from Hanna, he told her they needed to talk.

“I know that I went about all of this the wrong way, but I’m glad you agreed to talk to Bull. I’m leaving him here so you can continue talking with him. I’m glad you were able to perform today. It was hilarious watching Cullen hand you your ass yesterday.” He laughed. “Keep working at it Hanna. You can have this back, but you have to promise me that you won’t use it to get stuck in the past. You have to keep moving.”

“I promise to be good. Thanks for helping me even when I didn’t want it.” She hugged him and slipped the phone from his hand. Bouncing back to her quarters to listen to “Hips Don’t Lie” by Shakira and “Anaconda” by Nicki Minaj and any other silly song that she had saved to her phone.

Chapter End Notes

Well there's a lot of cursing in this one. I think it was brought about by my absolute frustration trying to get this chapter to come out of me. I hope it was good. I enjoyed writing the part about sparring with Cullen. I hope to have some time at some point over the holiday weekend to write. With any luck I'll be back in action.
Hi guys, I promise I didn't die. This was supposed to come out around Thanksgiving. December hit me like a runaway dumptruck though. Anyway, shit is about to get real in the next chapter. I hope to have it out by this weekend.

Jack stared unbelieving at the swirl of green and black in front of him. If you had told him a year ago, before Hanna disappeared, Hell even when Hanna disappeared, he would be staring at undeniable proof of magic, he would have referred you for treatment.

In the month following Hanna’s disappearance, the crazed man in robes had been released from police custody and immediately, forcefully taken to an inpatient treatment facility. Jack called in every favor he had to be the man’s primary physician. It was crazy. He was crazy to think that the man was connected to Hanna disappearing.

The man was clearly in a delusional state. He wore robes and claimed to be a mage from a land or city called Tevinter. He said his name was Marcus Aurelius. Yeah, like the Roman emperor. Marcus did not understand any reference to his namesake. He asked Jack what exactly a Rome might be. He asked if it might be located in one of the Southern states. He was similarly confused by mentions of Georgia, Alabama, and Texas. Marcus told him he meant Fereldan or Orlais.

If Marcus was in a delusional state then, Jack couldn’t even begin to describe how crazy it was that he believed what the strange man said. It all came to a head when an intern overheard Jack describing Mr. Aurelius’s psychosis.

“Wait, so that guy thinks he’s from a game then?” The intern proceeded to tell Jack and his colleagues about the Dragon Age series and that the man in their ward was claiming to be from a country in the game. It was a remarkable breakthrough in talking to the patient. By researching and playing the games, Jack was able to carry on detailed conversations with Mr. Aurelius. Who regardless of his best effort could not be broken of the notion that he was indeed from Thedas.

Eventually, Jack put the puzzle pieces together the only way that a grieving man with no support could. Hanna had fallen through the same portal that had brought this man from his world. Jack knew that it was impossible. He was letting himself fall into a folie a deux with his patient. However, that didn’t stop him from asking the most important question. Can you go back?

Jack spent the following year purchasing odd ingredients and close analogues to whatever Marcus claimed to need to repair his magical instrument that would open his portal home. He researched and found an isolated shack in Montana to move Marcus to after he falsified medical charts to dismiss Marcus from inpatient treatment. Regardless of if this worked he would be ruined professionally, Jack didn’t care.

Now staring at that portal holding Hanna’s go bag and his own supplies, Jack hugged Marcus and clapped him on the back.
“Let’s get you home.” Jack said as he stepped into the floating magic that would take him to where he could gallantly save his fiance.

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Early in the morning, Alyiah finally saw the towers of the so called Skyhold. The new base of operations for the Inquisition. Superman hated the cold, and at his age, ancient for a Mabari, Alyiah couldn’t blame him. Even Alyiah’s bones creaked in the cold now. In the beginning she hadn’t really counted the years as they passed, she had been grateful for every day that passed that she woke up in the morning. She had to be nearly thirty by now.

Time flies when everything sucks.

When the warden finally crossed the bridge and was asked her business entering Skyhold, Alyiah saw it for what it was. Hope. She hadn’t been so hopeful in coming here. The news she had to share was upsetting. Luckily, she found the Inquisitor checking the packs of his horse.

“Leaving so soon? I just got here.” Alyiah didn’t bother introducing herself. The griffon crest said all it had to. “Where’s your Oracle?” A clatter rose from behind Alyiah. A strangely tall Asian woman was helping a man in Warden armor, without the distinct taint of a warden, pack his saddlebags. Maybe she wasn’t strangely tall for an Asian, maybe Alyiah just hadn’t seen any Asians in so long she just fell prey to preconceived notions.

“Ah, there you are.” Alyiah turned and clapped Hanna on the back as she pulled her away from the dropped equipment. “I hear that you can see the future, and you’re from Michigan. How delightful?” Superman heard the excitement in Alyiah’s voice and barked enthusiastically.

“Oh, hi, I didn’t expect to see you Alyiah.”

“Come now, it’s not every day I hear about a visitor from home. Or near enough home,” Alyiah let her face fall. She wasn’t here to make nice. There was news to deliver and a quest to be given.

“Aren’t you the queen, should I bow? I’m really not sure about all the pleasantries. Oh! I met your husband. He said he was going to send…”

“A small unit of soldiers to intercept me and pass along a message. Message received. You have your audience.”

It was at that moment that Alyiah caught a glimpse of someone she hoped never to meet again. Nearly everyone in Thedas was shorter than Alyiah, but Christina was tiny. It was surprising to see how clean she looked, so Alyiah was assuming that Hawke and crew had stayed the night and the Inquisitor was going off on an excursion with that group.

“Oh I know I don’t see this bitch staring at me like we don’t have history.” Christina’s posture changed and became more aggressive. Fenris shifted to catch her and pull her back whenever she might choose to pounce.

Alyiah looked around at the crowd of companions and lay-folk. Christina was as hot-headed and annoying as she had been the last time they had been unfortunate enough to see each other. She didn’t want to fight right now. “Oh, how charming, it’s like our very own Earth reunion.” Alyiah’s eyes drifted back to Hanna. “I have something very important to tell you. Jack, who I understood to be your betrothed, has been taken by Red Templars.”

“What...wait, WHAT?!” Hanna glanced at Mahanon. “Jack is here. Jack is in Thedas. Why didn’t I see that? I didn’t even see you coming.” Cackling came from Christina’s direction.
Mocking Hanna she spoke pinching her nose like an evil toddler, “Oh, I’m an all mighty Oracle, I see visions of things to come. Except the really important things to come. My fiance is in Thedas and he’s going to die.” With her hands on her hips and a sneer on her lips Christina guffawed, “You know if he dies, it’s all your fault. He probably came here looking for you.” No, glares could quiet the woman’s mirth.

Alyiah shook her head and cast her imposing shadow over Christina simultaneously putting herself between the other earthlings. “Hanna, I offer my arm to help you rescue him. In exchange, I need to come on a quest with me.”

Alyiah hated being cryptic. When she got here, just a stupid kid that graduated high school with barely passable grades to maintain her basketball scholarship, that cryptic witch in the woods was nearly the death of her. Now here she was offering help under a rouse as well. At least, it was a similarly harmless rouse.

“Okay” Hanna looked petrified, but nodded along all the same.

“Okay, I’ll go on a potentially dangerous quest to save a man. Girl, you know there are men in Thedas. You don’t have to put your ass on the line for this one.” Christina added with a moderate amount of concern. “You were going to marry him on Earth, but honey, we ain’t on Earth no more. You have to be more concerned with saving your own ass. No one else here gives a shit.”

Silence passed over the group. The inquisitor looked hard at Hanna, like he was waiting for something. When Hanna looked up at him something passed between them silently, Alyiah remembered those moments with Alistair. She wondered if there was more to their relationship. It was none of her business, and she got what she came here for. Luckily, she had done so, so far, without encountering Leliana.

“You can’t go alone.” A commanding voice announced from the stairs leading down into the courtyard.

“You can’t just walk in and steal a major advisor to the Inquisition.” A sweet Antivan accent floated shortly following it.

“You can’t even stop in to say hello to an old friend,” Alyiah tensed thinking speak of the devil. Leliana continued. “I agree with Christina. It is ridiculous for you to go on this quest just the two of you.”

“Are you telling me that Hanna can’t fight? I learned to slash and thrust on my first day in Thedas.” Alyiah sighed. “No worries, you can learn as we go.”

Alyiah took in Hanna’s person again. She was obviously very athletic, muscles were well defined on her arms where Alyiah could see through her well built armor. Emblazoned on her chest plate was one of the army insignias. She carried daggers, a bow and a quiver of arrows. It was unlikely that she would be allowed to wear all of that inside the castle proper if she didn’t know how to use it. 

“That’s not why.” Hanna spoke quietly indicating the strange branching tattoo that covered a significant portion of her face. “I have visions. If my body isn’t monitored during those visions I could die. I also have some difficulty controlling when they happen.” Hanna cleared her throat. “I am unconcerned, it is as you said, we can learn as we go…. You look like you have something to say, Manny.”

“Take a complete party, Dorian. I want you to go with them….” Manny was clearly concerned, but
for whatever reason was allowing Hanna to go with Alyiah. He was going to suggest another person when he was interrupted.

“You said he was taken by red templars. I will want to go with you as well. I will disperse my duties to Rylen and Cassandra.” Alyiah suddenly recognized Cullen Rutherford. She heard he was the commander of the inquisition’s forces. She was not convinced he would be the same man she had found terrified at the top of the mages tower on lake Calenhad.

Alyiah turned to face him and the other advisors. His curly hair had been slicked back. His lion’s mane of a mantle exaggerated his broad shoulders. He looked so remarkably similar to Alistair, they could be brothers. Or she hadn’t seen her husband in nearly a year and all similarly built men were sending her into a tizzy. With an affirmative acknowledgement from Mahannon, Cullen walked off to delegate his duties and prepare for the journey ahead.

“Alyiah, you will finish making arrangements and report back to Leliana consistently. We must be off on our way to make it to Crestwood by early evening. I expect you to be back from this excursion with my boyfriend and commander intact before the ball at Halamshiral.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Hanna smiled. Alyiah hoped that she wasn’t taking Hanna on this quest to die, but she needed the military minded otherworlder to prevent the end of the world. She hated the Witch of the Wilds just as much as Morrigan, but the bitter old woman had never given her a quest that wasn’t in her best interest. In the end, Alyiah couldn’t hope to complete the quest without Hanna.

It wasn’t like Thedas for everything to fall in place so easily. She was given a horse by Josephine. Leliana promised to assault her when she returned in the interest of saving Jack. Dorian seemed a pleasant traveling companion and it was nice to talk to him about the inquisitor. Cullen and Hanna shared a horse. The way the commander gripped Hanna around the waist told Alyiah all she needed to know about how awkward it was going to be to save Jack.

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When they stepped through the portal, the first thought that crossed Jack’s mind was about how green the scenery was. It was like when he’d gone to Yellowstone in college. There was a serenity in being surrounded by so much nature. When the portal closed behind him, Marcus began walking towards the afternoon sun which was heading west if directions worked the same on Thedas.

“So, how will we find Hanna now that we’re here?” Jack voiced the only concern on his mind.

“First, we must find my countrymen and I must report the success of my experiment. Undoubtedly, they will at least know where to start looking her.”

Jack trusted Marcus to have his best interest at heart, which in hindsight, was a mistake. They did find Marcus’s country men. The countrymen he was speaking of were working with red templars. When Marcus explained why Jack was looking for the otherworlder Hanna, he was immediately apprehended. They didn’t explain why, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out that he was going to be used to bait a trap to capture Hanna. From what he gathered, Hanna was helping the Inquisition. Marcus was not one of the Tevinter mages on the right side of history. When he recognized where he had been taken, The Shrine of Dumat, Jack felt sick. This is where Samson commissioned Maddox to make his armor.

This is where Samson was for the time being.

Something about the red templar commander always rubbed him the wrong way in the game. Jack hated that he could sympathize with Samson. He hated that Samson had done nothing wrong to lead
him on his path to support an evil, ancient magister. It made it harder for him to see him as an enemy which he was no doubt.

Jack was kept in the same wheeled carts as the other victims of the red templars. He was force fed red lyrium like the others to grow it within him. The only thing that was different for him was the interrogation. He was taken out of the cart every few days, and asked questions about Hanna. They were trying to ascertain any weaknesses they may be able exploit when she fell into their trap. Luckily, he had never told Marcus about Hanna’s condition. They went through their go bags in front of him. Asking him to identify the different equipment there in. He hadn’t really checked inside of Hanna’s bag. Now he was regretting it. Inside was a gun, albeit disassembled and wrapped in clothes. He had no idea if there was ammo for it as well. He had to think quickly and being deceitful with the ringing of red lyrium in his ears was difficult. He told them that each piece was like a gem very valuable. The shine of the metal was enough to convince them the gun pieces were precious jewelry to Hanna, not a deadly weapon if unleashed upon Thedas might very well break the world.

When he was taken back to the cage, he fell asleep fairly easily. In his sleep an elderly woman came to him in a dream. She asked very similar questions to the ones he had been asked in the interrogation. Since it was a dream, it wasn’t until he woke up that he realized that he had spoken to none other than Flemeth.

It was too late to tell her to make Hanna stay far away from the Shrine. His days became monotonous torture in the morning, praying that Flemeth would find him again at night. He had to tell the damn witch to keep Hanna far away from this trap. Instead, all he had was the memory of telling Flemeth where he was and why that was a bad thing. She was going to make sure that Hanna came to get her gun.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, if I disappear for a few weeks again feel free to give me a shout at brittlebonezz.tumblr.com I will try not to disappear for weeks on end again.

Next Chapter Title Preview "Hannie, Get Your Gun"
“So, how does a sweet girl from Georgia end up in a hellscape like this?” Hanna considered her words carefully for a moment. Alyiah looked up from the fire she was stoking to life. She didn’t make a sound in answer, so Hanna added. “I heard you were young.”

Several beats passed with not the slightest of sounds. Cullen and Dorian stopped moving as they were setting up the tents, but also wanted to know the story of how the Hero of Fereldan came to be in Fereldan. Varric had just finished settling the horses and turned to the newly kindled fire with rapt attention.

“A story for a story, it’s how I’ve always treated my traveling companions. I tell you how I got here, you tell me how you got those marks on your face.” Hanna looked away, she knew only secondhand what had happened that night. Smoothly, she nodded to the taller woman. “After dinner then, it is better to tell tales like these with full bellies. That’s what my father would always say, when he was going to try to convince my mom to let me do something she didn’t want me to do.”

Hanna nodded accepting the terms completely. She retrieved her bow and quiver to improve said dinner. Superman, the Hero’s mabari, had brought a couple of nugs for stew. Hanna announced that she hoped to be able to add to the pot before the sun set. Otherwise they would be digging into their packed rations a little too heavily. It was a necessity during the two days in the mountains. Now that the land had thawed and trees and critters were becoming more plentiful, there was no reason to stress their supplies.

Hunting was not a skill Hanna was particularly proficient at. Her father had enjoyed the sport of it and taught both John and Hanna hoping that it might catch. It hadn’t. Now though, Hanna enjoyed the silence. The immediacy of the need for food helped some as well. She wandered away from camp, notching trees every so often like breadcrumbs to lead her home. Moving silently avoiding stepping on leaves or grinding her boots in the dirt was a challenge. When she finally slowed and listened, she found three nugs snuggled up near each other. She might be able to get two instead of the one she thought they would need to adequately provide for the five of them.

Gently, Hanna lined up the shot. Carefully she caught her breath and focused on hitting the largest of the nugs. She loosed the arrow and it flew true. As she moved to retrieve the rabbit/pig hybrid, Superman jumped out of the brush to grab it for her. The large dog spooked her and she jumped back with a shriek. Her cry was quieted all too soon by a gloved hand over her mouth and a hand on her back steadying her. She nearly lashed out if not for Cullen announcing himself.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to startle you earlier.” He looked around Hanna and turned her to allow her to lean on a nearby tree. “Superman! How’d she do? Oh, look at that, boy. We get to have four nug stew.” Fresh nug blood dribbled down Superman’s jowls, as he barked with excitement at Cullen’s tone.

Hanna had noticed the Commander’s fondness for the hound their first day adventuring with the Warden Commander. He got this boyish glint in his eyes when he spoke to the mabari. The worst part about it was everyone spoke about mabaris like they were superdogs that could really understand you. Hanna didn’t want to break the illusion and tell Cullen that the dog was just excited
because he was speaking in an excited tone.

Hanna was grateful for the distance leaning on the tree gave her. Ever since Cullen pinned her on the practice field in that flashy display of dominance, Hanna’s knees got even weaker than normal around him. She had severely undersold Cullen’s performance to Iron Bull. In fact, just being this close and so isolated from the camp was making her shiver. It had been quite some time since their first night together. For the first time in nearly two months, well second if you count the practice field, Cullen was pushing his advantage in the making her quake with quivering need department.

She finally dared to look up at him. Alarm bells went off in her head.

*Why would you look him in the eyes? Oh good, lord.*

He placed a hand on her shoulder and his eyes grew in concern. “You’re cold.” Cullen said it like he was telling her she had cancer. It was a little chilly, but that wasn’t why she was shaking. He took a step forward and gathered their cloaks together at his side to close her in with his heat. His breastplate had been removed and left at the camp, so all that came between them was a warm wooly shirt and her leather armor. The contact only served to make her heart beat faster. The heat only served to show her how cold she really was. She shivered more thoroughly.

“It’s really not that cold.”

“You’re shivering like you caught your death.”

“That… I may have, but it’s not my body temperature...It’s more than that, Cullen.” Hanna couldn’t stand beating around the bush.

“Because he’s here, you want to end this.” His arms were wrapped around her so he indicated between them with his chin.

“Yes…no”

“Hanna, I refuse to accept that if you aren’t sure yourself that’s what you want. You need to ask yourself, what is it that you want. Not what you think is best what you want.” He gave her a stern look. His voice was commanding, but not forceful. It really wasn’t a fair question considering all her body wanted right now was a piece of his ass.

“I want…” She bit her lip and lost her thoughts in his eyes. He could see through it if she lied, but in all honesty she didn’t know the truth. “I want to kiss you at least one more time.”

“That is the first sensible thing I’ve heard you say in quite some time.” He smirked and leaned down to meet her lips. The kiss lasted but a minute before Dorian came trudging through the leaves.

“If you don’t quit smooching in the woods, while the rest of us are away from our lovers I will gut you myself.” He threatened in a manner most undignified.

Cullen raised his hand out of their joined cloaks, and waved him off placing another short kiss on Hanna’s lips.

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“You asked how I ended up here, Hanna. Pull up your bedroll and get comfy it’s a short story.” Hanna startled out of her daze when Alyiah addressed her. They had taken first watch. “That is unless you’d like to fantasize about a night with Cullen while staring at the fire, I wouldn’t blame you.”
“My Mama’s one of those work yourself until your fingers bleed, then work a little harder types. She has a Ph.D. and won’t let you forget it. She worked at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Pops, he works hard too, but he was raised in Louisiana. He’s got a real slow way about him, like nothing ever needed to be done in a rush. That is outside of the kitchen.” As Alyiah spoke of home, her accent, which had nearly disappeared after years spent in Fereldan, came back. She had a gentle laugh in her everyday conversation, but here it became a hearty guffaw.

“It was the last weekend before my...best friend moved to Chicago to go to art school. Nicole was sweet as could be, a real nerd too. We were going camping with some friends, but got separated from the group. We were having this heart-to-heart when it started to rain. We saw this cave appear where it hadn’t been before, but it was raining so we thought beggars can’t be choosers. When we got in the cave, our cells went out of service. When we tried to leave, the entrance disappeared and a mirror appeared. Turns out it was an eluvian. We were brought to Denerim just in time to meet Duncan, Alistair and an elf named Elena Tabris.” Alyiah hung her head, “Duncan, Nicole, and Elena all died at Ostagar. Nicole told me as much as she could about Thedas from the games when we were on the road, but I was far too concerned with getting home. There ain’t no going home for me anymore.”

Hanna absorbed the information carefully. “What if Jack has a way to go back?” Alyiah gave her a withering look. “He got here somehow. I was just thinking he may have a route home.” Hanna shrugged.

“Your turn.”

“Huh, oh, right. I got here a little before the Conclave. I have PTSD and I was a little concerned about not having my meds. You’re not supposed to quit that shit cold turkey. Something about this tattoo ties me to the fade, allows me to use magic, manages my symptoms somehow. I went up with this asshole dwarf, that was going to sell me out to Corypheus. I didn’t know it at the time. At any rate, I’m walking through the Temple of Sacred Ashes looking for Frodin. I stumbled upon Mahannon. He’s looking for the Divine. Corypheus was having a tea party with the Divine trying to sacrifice her to bring about the end of the world. He had this orb, that Manny touched while he was touching my face. It was like lightning. Fucked me up big time.”

“Oh, well that sucks. How old are you? If I had to guess I’d say twenty-three.”

“You guess very generously. When I left I was thirty-two, I’ve probably turned thirty-three by now. You’re probably what twenty-eight.”

“Yeah, something like that, didn’t keep track that well once I got here. No matter how old you are on earth you come here and they treat you like a child because everyone’s got scars.” Alyiah pulled her cup from beside the fire where it was melting down the collected snow and took a long swig.

“Snow-melt makes for some clean water. When you travel around here there’s no purifier and they look at you funny when you want to boil water before drinking it.”

“Don’t I know it. Bathing is not a mandatory thing either. Even if people did bathe everyday they’d still end up smelling like hog’s ass by the end of the day. I have to sneak into the baths at Skyhold because everyone thinks I’m crazy if I’m seen bathing everyday.”

“Honey, you are preaching to the choir.”

Hanna looked at Alyiah and nearly broke down crying. To hear someone else use an idiom from home was just so gut wrenchingly unexpected. They got lost talking about home and using phrases and talking with different terrible accents. Hours passed and they still hadn’t roused Varric and Cullen for the second watch.

“So, you’re technically the queen right?” In a rare moment of silence, Hanna spoke out changing the
“Technically, literally, actually, and any other words. I am the Queen of Fereldan.” The word rolled out of her mouth like she was Queen of the Universe.

“Do you miss Alistair?” Hanna asked and at that Alyiah stopped short.

With a huff she spoke, “I miss him when it rains and I can’t find him to snuggle. I miss him when I attend fine parties and eat special cheeses. I miss him when I come across a rose bush, he gave me a rose you know. When we were adventuring, when he still didn’t know why I couldn’t just give up and go home. He told me he thought I was like that rose blooming even with the darkspawn tainting the land. Oh, sweet baby Jesus, I miss him when I go to sleep at night with Superman for my only company.”

“He misses you too. He said you were out here looking for a cure for the taint.” Hanna couldn’t resist a snicker even in the newly sombered mood.

“Isn’t it the most ridiculous thing you ever heard, that they call it the taint?” Alyiah caught herself and came back to the topic at hand. “The thing that makes us Wardens will one day kill us. To become a warden you have to partake in this ritual that includes drinking special darkspawn blood. It either kills you instantly or very slowly over the course of many years.” Alyiah whispered close to her ear. “I’m not supposed to tell you that’s how we do it. It’s some big ass secret/not so secret in Thedas. In the end, I want to save Alistair and myself from The Calling. When the poison becomes so severe you go to the deep roads to take as many of those fuckers with you when you go.”

“Sounds dreadful.”

“It is dreadful.”

“Is that why you can’t go back?” Alyiah nodded and lifted her head to ease the tears back in her eyes. “I don’t know if I would want to go back either. Once Cullen asked me if I wanted to stay with him or if I would go home if the opportunity arose. I’m thinking more and more my answer would be to stay here as bassackwards as this place is.”

“I need to come clean, Hanna. The reason we’re going to Dumat, isn’t to save Jack. The real quest is to get your gun. Flemeth, this witch that helps sometimes and sometimes doesn’t, she told me that Jack was here some time after the king’s men let me know that you wanted to meet with me. He said that he’s already begun ingesting red lyrium.”

Hanna clutched the amulet at her neck the one preventing the red lyrium embedded within her from driving her insane. “No…”

“He told Flemeth that he was worried that he had just delivered your gun and go bag to the bag guys.”

“He can’t come back from red lyrium. He’s going to die here.”

“Duncan told me when Nicole died, that there is a balance to the world. It is in that balance that we must live. We don’t get to choose who lives and who dies, but it is in that balance that the Maker guides us. I don’t know if there really is a Maker guiding me, but I have lived everyday with that in mind.”

“Jack came here to save me and now he’s going to die. Probably before I can even get there to say goodbye.” Hanna stood and paced a few times. “I’m not mad. Thank you for not telling me before. I think we should both turn in before we miss a whole night’s sleep.”
Hanna was a shitty liar. Her fury was clearly written on her face.

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The Shrine of Dumat lay before them. When they came upon it, Hanna pulled Cullen to the side. “You remember when you asked me how I knew about Samson?” Cullen nodded. “I had a vision of him. You know where he was in that vision?” Hanna asked rhetorically this time. “He was here. We are going into the literal lion’s den here. We need a plan to fit.”

Alyiah’s plan was to sneak in and take out as many red templars as possible without being seen, then when that went to shit. She wanted to wing it. Hanna knew that between Cullen, Varric and her they could put together a much more solid plan.

“Can we choose the plan that isn’t lay siege to a fortified enemy base without reinforcements of any kind?” Varric and Dorian nodded along with Cullen’s logic.

“We have no choice. Imagine for a second a device ten thousand times faster, quieter, and more accurate than varric’s crossbow. Now imagine Samson figuring out that he had that device and using it to wipe out everyone.”

“Sounds really familiar, like Earth only we didn’t stop with guns on Earth. We’ve seen this slippery slope, and it is not pretty.” Alyiah chimed in helpfully. “On second thought, why do you have guns? Why do you have a go bag?”

“I was in the army. I was injured. I gave up on getting back in 6 months ago. I procrastinated taking my go bag apart.”

“You were in the army? But you’re so small.”

“Alyiah,” Hanna sighed as she thought through her plan. “Everyone is small to you.” Hanna layed out her plan. She would sneak in with Alyiah and Varric. They would sneak, sneak, sneak and kill as many red templars as possible. Hanna would let herself get captured if they were sniffed out. The others would regroup and attack the distracted forces when she made her move. Cullen was extremely against it, but as he had no better alternative than waiting for inquisition forces to move up from a training exercise being conducted in a nearby city to freak out a noble for Sera. He was excused to write a letter and send it in, on one of Leliana’s ravens that always was following and watching, to said forces captain. Hopefully if all went to shit, the captain could retrieve their flayed corpses.

****

Jack could sense a change in himself. He felt less sure by the day whether or not he was a person much less a person from a world separate from the place he currently found himself. His finger bones had been broken one at a time, a rat had been allowed to feast upon the soft flesh of his cheeks and the hollows behind his ear. The torture grew more brutal by the hour, and he knew it was because she’d been spotted. She was coming to save him. He couldn’t quite remember above the drone of the red lyrium who she was. He only knew that he didn’t want her to come here. Not if she would be hurt too.

They took him back to his cage that had once been full to bursting with captured elves and humans. All had been fed the Lyrium all had lost their minds to it completely, all but him. He didn’t mind laying on the cold wooden bed of the cage. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was camping with his grandpa in Oregon. He could picture the strong old man starting a fire in his cabin oven. He loved eating fresh fish with his grandpa as a kid. When he met Hanna, something they bonded over
was fishing. Oh, Hanna, she shouldn’t come here. Jack nodded off slowly.

There were temporary bursts of noise that could have been a door shutting or the wheels on a cage creaking the camp was quieter than usual, and perhaps that was why he could hear the strange noises that could have been something else, but they weren’t. It was someone killing the templar guards quietly. Someone was systematically going through the camp and silently freeing captives from cages. He couldn’t be sure if he was just hallucinating the sound. He couldn’t tell if he wanted to hear the noise or not. He tried to focus on the thought he had before he fell asleep. Hanna. When she came he would tell her that he remembered her name. Hanna. He just wanted to see her smile one more time. Hanna. Hanna. Hanna.

The cage door opened and Jack lifted his head weakly to see who disturbed him. He hoped beyond hope that it was the pokey man. Not Hanna. He didn’t want her to come. The pokey man poked him to make sure that he didn’t die in the middle of the night. He was very disappointed. It was Hanna, and she was crying. It was Hanna, and the pokey man was right behind her. It was Hanna. And she didn’t see him. She fell very heavily on his legs when the pokey man hit her with his stick.

Jack wanted to shout her name, but all that came out were soft croaks.

*****

Hanna woke up tied to a pillar with her arms uncomfortably cuffed above her head. She tried to call upon her magic, by tugging at her mark. She couldn’t feel the tether, and knew at once it must be what Solas and Dorian called Magebane. She couldn’t feel the fade for the first time in a long time. Hanna took in her surroundings. In the front of the room, there was a large table like an alter. On it were all kinds of implements of torture, different blades and spindly contraptions that made her feel sick. Movement drew her eyes to the right where a man in mage robes was tending to a very beaten and bruised Jack. He had a faint red glow about him, and though his eyes were open, she knew her Jack was far away from this room.

She wanted to scream at the man to get away from him. When she finally noticed it was Maddox who just so happened to be the one tending to Jack’s tortured body, tears threatened at the corners of her eyes. “Maddox, how is he?”

“He is gravely wounded. He will die soon.” Hanna wanted so badly to go to him. As if on cue, Jack groaned in pain. “I do not know you, and yet you know me.” Maddox added unheard to Hanna.

“No, Jack, no.” Hanna gave up the ghost and the tears fell freely down her face with her hands restrained too high to wipe them away. She used her sleeve to little avail. “You didn’t have to come here. Look at you, Sweetie. Oh dear God, Jack. I…”

“Welcome, my dear. I’m afraid you got here earlier than we intended. I’m afraid we haven’t finished with our prior guest.” Samson came into the room from a door she couldn’t see. “I see that you have made introductions with Maddox, though I agree it is strange that you would know his face. Oracle indeed. Your visions will be of great use to the Elder One. You would already know me perhaps.”

“Samson” Hanna’s voice seethed with rage. She mostly wanted to hide her fear of the ex-templar. His armor sang to her when he was in close enough proximity. The sound alone threatened to send her into an anxiety attack.

At that Jack snapped back to life, he was still obviously in pain, but he was lucid. “Ah, I see you have decided to join us. Here, I thought this lucky reunion would be nothing of the sort. Maddox, we should step to the side to let the love birds talk.”
“How did you get here?”

“Marcus, he appeared in the woods where you disappeared and I was just this side of crazy enough to trust him. We got his magic gauntlet to work creating another portal similar to the one he used to bring you here.”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. My beautiful princess.”

“You’re going to die soon.”

“I know, and I only regret that I brought you here. I only hope that you can do what you’re known for. You’re a Survivor, Hanna. I want you to find someone here and make the best of it. That gauntlet he used, it will only work one more time. So I figured you could destroy it…” Even in his state, Jack was thinking forward. He wanted her to stay here. He wanted her to end this. Knowing that was somewhat calming.

“Okay, lovebirds that’s enough, Maddox.” Samson interrupted her thoughts and Jack's final words. The evil templar indicated for Maddox to follow through with the next step of the plan. Maddox stepped forward and tilted Jack’s head back. He poured a vial down this throat. Jack seized in his bindings and soon stopped breathing. Samson watched Hanna and gauged her reaction. Hanna forced herself to think of something else. Tears still fell down her cheeks, but she let the shock wash over her emotions. Samson wanted to see her wail in pain. He would have to work harder than that.

“Oh that is just, precious.” Samson smiled he placed a guiding hand on her chin. “You have hope. Hope that you will be saved perhaps.” Hanna forcefully turned her face back to Jack’s. “Ah, that man just thought the sun rose and fell with you Hanna Cooper. Marcus told me that Jack helped him when he had given up on coming back to Thedas. What a helpful young man. Have you no words to say on his behalf.”

“Jack, I pray that the Lord keeps your soul. We were supposed to be married a year ago and by a cruel twist of fate this is where we end.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

When she was finished two men came and assisted Maddox in removing Jack from the room. “That was a stirring prayer and it bares some resemblance to the chant of light. Did you know that?”

“It may have been mentioned to me once or twice before.” Hanna wanted to be smarter. She wanted her responses to have more bite, but she also wanted to survive this long enough to survive until Cullen and the others came to save her. She wondered if she should consider bringing up the gun. Lucky for her Samson beat her to it.

“You may be relieved to hear that the bag of safely stored gems has made it to Thedas. Though I have to wonder why Jack would have thought to bring you, a soldier, jewelry to handle a place Marcus told him was brimming with danger. If it had been me, I would have brought something useful. A weapon perhaps.” Hanna just had to shrug. She wasn’t 100% sure what Samson was going on about. She figured it had to do with her gun, but he hadn’t figured out it was a gun yet. And
somehow Jack had convinced the slimy bastard that he thought she had hidden the components as gems like a 1930’s housewife sewing money into her mattress.

“Oh, my go bag, my jewels. Yes. I would sell them in the case I ended up somewhere without any money. Very useful. Because then I could buy whatever I might need not just a weapon.” Hanna sold it like she was going for an Oscar. Samson, hemmed and hawed for a few minutes taking in her performance. Suddenly she was back in that speech and debate class in high school. The one she only passed because the teacher felt bad about how terrible her general social skills had been. Then again what teenager was really good at Speech and Debate?

Finally, Samson settled on fury. Either he knew she was lying and was expecting her to go along with his interrogation rather than lying out her ass, or he was just mad that her bag had nothing useful to him in it. He couldn’t sell her weird Earth metal here. She was of course hoping for the latter, but it didn’t stop him from ploughing into the very tender flesh of her stomach with reckless abandon. He slammed a shoulder in first, but as his rage grew his fists flew to where ever he could make contact. Hanna was surprised at the ferocity of his attack and nearly lost her lunch all over him.

Eventually with his energy, his anger abated. Samson didn’t save any words for her as he left the room.

*Congratulations! Hanna you’ve survived your first face to face meeting with Baddie McBadderSamson. Though he doesn’t seem quite so rough at first he sure is one maniacal asshole.*

Her thoughts were sarcastic, but she was compartmentalizing the shock and trauma of watching Jack die right in front of her. If she had checked her six before going into Jack’s holding cell, she would have been fine. She never would have been caught so quickly and Jack would have made it at least the trip to the nearest village where they could have had their final moments in peace.

Correction, she was no longer compartmentalizing the shock without the motivation of spiting Samson. Red hot tears fell down her face. She needed to get air, but her chest refused to expand which caused her to wheeze and cough heartily. Her inability to get enough air was the only thing preventing her from shouting out her pain. Her arms ached and her shoulders complained and stiffened in their forced position. She closed her eyes and prayed that the others would come soon.

Hours or minutes later, she really had no reference in the room where the torches still burned brightly at the tips of wood as it had when she had awoken in the room. Samson finally returned. He had collected the pieces of her AR. She hadn’t remembered having more than her side arm in her go bag. Jack must have literally grabbed a gun bag and stuffed it with guns wrapped in clothing from her go bag. The rifle was obviously not meant to be worn around or on any body part. Samson was intelligent enough to ask for a demonstration.

Suddenly it was clear that Jack was lying about all or part of his coming to Thedas. And that she really needed someone to save her ass.

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Cullen beamed beneath his helm. His captain had gotten back to him remarkably fast. It turned out that he had taken his unit to investigate reports of red templars kidnapping people in the forests. They were close. Close enough that when Alyiah and Varric slipped out of the camp to meet at their designated hiding place, Cullen said that he would wait for reinforcements to raid the camp. The red templars were swarming the camp like hornets, there was no way a group of five was going to bust through the sheer number of enemies awaiting them. Hanna would just have to survive the night in the red templar camp.
When twilight broke to dawn Captain Harvey brought a small contingent of his force to meet with Cullen and carve out the camp for capture. The plan would be to find as much correspondence as they could so that Leliana and Josephine could have work to do to find out who was funding such an expensive venture. Hopefully, they would capture Samson and weaken Corypheus's forces significantly.

When dawn broke and the horizon favored the invading force because defending forces would have to shield their eyes from the sun, Cullen led the charge into the red templar camp at the Shrine of Dumat.

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Hanna decided after enough time had passed and Samson untied her for cooperating, her best course of action would be to assemble the weapons as Samson brought them hoping that one would be loaded, or if she thought she could bluff perhaps pumping the shotgun once to inspire a little fear. Luckily, she was still able to assemble the ‘otherworldly’ weapons and act like they were bedazzled sashes, and other types of decorated attire because Samson wasn’t completely sold one way or the other. When he finally brought her sidearm, it did have a single bullet to manually load. Hanna decided to save it for if the initial plan of gun jewelry didn’t work until the camp was raided.

Bells began ringing and Samson threw down his hands and knocked the ‘useless jewelry’ to the ground from the table alter. As if falling to the ground might render them any more inert than the lack of proper ammunition. Like a coward, he ran out of the room not bothering to tie her hands in his haste to escape. Hanna gathered her weapons and thought about what to do with such a possibly helpful or harmful collection. If she could find gunpowder and make molds of bullets that may be hiding in the shrine with her packs, she could have a relative arsenal. If she ever lost one of these weapons, she would always know that she was the one who changed Thedosian warfare forever.

Could she live with that?

Chapter End Notes

Woo! That was fun. And the story is over halfway done. What an adventure writing my first fanfiction has been so far! I’ve already had to take a month long hiatus because I got stuck in work. I will make it my new years resolution to not go more than a month without updating. We’ll see how it goes.
I finished this chapter a while ago and it deals with some pretty heavy stuff. This is an intense chapter and I wanted to convey the emotions as carefully as I could. Warning, this chapter does include: references to attempted suicide, gun violence, and intense emotions.

How long had she been standing there? Staring blankly at the weapons. This wasn’t a decision she could make right now. Her brain was a mess of pain and shock. She hadn’t the time to process Jack dying. Her eyes floated over the guns. She snapped herself into action. Hanna slung her rifle over her shoulder and loaded the single bullet into her handgun and shoved it in her belt with no better holster. The rest she disassembled and planned to toss the parts into the flames of the first brazier she crossed. It was too late to try to chase after Samson. She had wasted precious moments just trying to come back to a normal she may never reach again.

Hanna had tried to compartmentalize the shock. In the moment, she couldn’t think she had to just do. Doing was easy. Living with your action or more simply inaction was another matter. Panic pumped blood through her veins and her heart screamed in an undying wail for that which she had lost. Again, she had been brought down by her own stupidity. Again she had been tortured. Physically and emotionally battered.

It was hard to get the picture of Jack’s final moments out of her head. He was so helpless in a way she had hoped never to see him. Broken, bloody, tied down. The worst part is that she could have prevented it by just maintaining her cool. By clearing the area before she let her emotions get the best of her. Blaming herself was as natural as breathing at this point.

Even so, some of the blame surely lay on Samson. He was a power hungry coward. As horrifying and evil as he was, Samson picked on only the weakest to prey upon. The prisoners taken to this shrine had all experienced some level of red lyrium poisoning. Men, women, and children alike sickened, weakened left for dead to grow more of the evil gem. Starved, emaciated bodies greeted the stealthy group when they arrived in the night. Hanna insisted upon risking their cover to free any willing and able to escape. Granting a peaceful quick death to those unable to move. Granting a peaceful quick death to those unable to move.

Things had gone too smoothly when she reached Jack’s prostrate form. She should have checked behind her, but Hanna’s haste to reach Jack overrode her sense of self preservation. He was mumbling her name, and it broke her heart. She ran out of the shadows to break the lock to his cage. She hushed him and cooed to him like a mother soothing an infant. His body was broken and tortured. He had tears in his eyes. When she finally knelt at his side, she didn’t have time to react to the presence behind her.

Hanna hated all of this. She hated Samson, she hated Thedas, but most of all she hated herself. She was supposed to be better at this. Smarter. Hanna had to try to get revenge. She had to try to find Jack’s body and bury him. She had to survive. Jack’s memory demanded it.

Stairs lead up from the makeshift torture chamber. At their crest, Hanna tried to think of her next
step. To her left were three rooms, to her right another staircase leading down. Hanna decided it would be most efficient to see if any other supplies were hidden in those rooms before she might run into anyone to use her single bullet. At the very least her chestplate, daggers, and bow had to be somewhere.

It sounded as though the shrine was being stormed by a veritable army. So, either Cullen waited until his reinforcements from the next town over arrived (if so, ahead of schedule), or there was some dissent in the ranks of Samson’s army. Hanna seriously hoped for the former, but had to be prepared regardless. She worked as efficiently as her state allowed, moving counterclockwise through the rooms and found that they were all filled with research notes made by Samson’s cronies on the various personal effects transported from earth. And there possible uses once Hanna came to save Jack and was tortured into revealing their true purpose. The notes stated that Samson knew Jack was lying due to the testimony of this Marcus character. The man had been arrested at gunpoint. Luckily seeing a gun and knowing how to properly assemble and shoot it were two different things at least in Thedas.

The largest room in the center seemed to belong to Samson. Jack’s packed supplies from home were laid along tables with notes detailing the study of each of the artifacts of Earth a compilation of the tests being performed in the other rooms.

They table looked like a Wal-Mart had thrown up. Strange that things that seemed so important back on Earth were foreign to her now. Fragrant soaps, finely woven fabric of just ordinary clothing, and a veritable armory of various weapons and equipment. Okay, maybe not Wal-Mart, maybe a gun show instead.

A shudder ran down her spine as she quickly took inventory. There was too much ammunition. She had only packed her side arm in her go bag because when she was discharged, she had to surrender her rifle. How did Jack manage to secure any of these weapons, much less the ammunition? Her brain hurt. Her body hurt. What was she supposed to do with any of this information?

Jack had brought far more than would be packed in a simple go bag. He had to have stolen a munitions crate. Hanna picked up a grenade and twisted it in her fingers like she was examining a gem. Did Jack somehow know what kind of place he was coming to rescue her from. Did he know about Thedas somehow?

Suddenly memories of various conversations with the other women from Earth made a deeper connection. It was Christina’s words that finally struck true.

“*What did you play the games?*” The words echoed in her mind. She had disregarded the words at the time as Christina being Christina.

Then Alyiah’s words came in a wave. “Nicole had played the games and loved the idea of being a Grey Warden like in Origins.”

This wasn’t just any strange otherworld. This was the setting of a game. She didn't have to ask what kind of game. For her, it was now a survival horror.

If Jack had brought all of this here it told her one of two things: 1. Jack didn’t care if he destroyed Thedas to bring her back. 2. Jack had been tricked into destroying everything on accident.

It was an overwhelming implication and devastated her composure. Sobs threatened, but she swallowed them down to hiccups. Taking deep breaths, Hanna tried to ground herself. She heard the fighting getting closer and her Thedosian equipment was nowhere to be found. She loaded her rifle and handgun with the waiting magazines. Hanna packed the weapons she had disassembled into a
duffle bag with as much of the ammo and periphery she could.

She wished that her Thedosian equipment could have been more easy to find. Without her chest plate she felt naked, she couldn’t necessarily confront anyone head-on without any armor. Without her daggers and her bow, she felt defenseless. Her guns felt so fake in her hands, she didn’t know if she could still use the damn things accurately.

The cold metal in her hands whispered to her of her failures, both here and on Earth. She felt as close to her breaking point as she had that first week in Haven. Fear tinged the memory, and her heart sank. Would she make it until her rescuers found her? What if she had a break and didn’t recognize them? The feelings intensified. Her magic flared in an aura around her. Almost tangible and furious.

As the adrenaline pounded in her ears, Hanna’s panic was overwhelmed by an insane calm. She changed into the clean clothes from her long lost home and was finally ready to leave. As she turned to go she saw her go bag, fully packed with a phone charger, change of clothes, hygiene items. She threw the backpack over her back, picked up the duffle bag of weaponry, and lit the room on fire with her magic as she left. Destroying whatever research she could.

At the end of the hallway near the stairway leading to the torture chamber a single red templar stood as if waiting for something. Hanna didn’t give him a chance to come at her unarmored. She fired a single shot into his torso. The bullet pierced his armor. She had some concern that the bullet would have ricocheted. Luckily medieval armor was nothing to her M4 Carbine. The sound of the gunfire gave her a sense of security she hadn’t felt in months maybe years. The man turned at the sound but was distracted by the wound. The man felt the hole in his armor and pulled away a bloody hand. When he looked at her through the opening in his helmet, Hanna fired again without fear.

A shout came from the rounded staircase leading to the floors below. Hanna waited at the landing of the staircase behind a crate. While she waited, the fire from the rooms spread to the hallway. Hanna could feel the flames inside of her. She felt all at once distant and too close. A quiet thrum began inside her, it vibrated as if breaking her soul down to its base components. A separation of everything she was, all that she had become. It was the calm before the storm.

Her heart pounded like a war drum. The beat was loud and piercing and intune with the thrumming she wasn’t sure anyone else could hear. Out of the clamour, she heard a soothing voice. It sounded like a siren singing in the distance. She stood to follow the direction of the noise. Down the stairs to the second floor. Hanna decimated enemies with her superior fire power. Many before they even realized she was there. She searched the rooms for the source of the pleasant hum that quieted the beating and thrumming noise that threatened to overwhelm her on the staircase.

“I can bring him back.” The voice whispered seductively. Hanna jumped and reexamined the room she was leaving. The voice laughed almost maliciously. “Or do you really even want him back.”

“He’s dead. You can’t bring back the dead.” Her brain was telling her not to listen. This was obviously a demon. Hanna had trained with Solas and Dorian for this particular sequence of events.

“Would you prefer I take you to your favorite templar?” The voice was louder, mischievous. “Perhaps, I can arrange for some... privacy.” It laughed, and Hanna’s stomach twisted. “Oh, your desire is delicious.” It threatened.

“I’m doing alright on my own, thanks.” Hanna proudly denied the demon. “I don’t need or want what you’re pedalling.”

“My dear, you question my ability. I...no, we could do a great many things to improve your situation.” An apparition appeared before Hanna. A sweet faerie like body hovered, purple-pink skin
that stank of wretched desire. The temptation to agree to any charge asked settled over her like a geas. “You could do it. You could bring Jack back to life. I can help you to go back and live in peace on Earth.”

An overwhelming sense of longing settled in her heart. The demon sensed her reduced inhibition and pressed further. “Oh, my sweet, It would be so simple. So easy to solve this problem. Your desire to return to where you were before. A trifle compared to what I can do for you.”

“I…. I...”

“You want for so much, child. Come. Let me relieve you of your burdens.”

Hanna knew this feeling. Though, she hadn't met many fade demons or any desire demons. The draw was extraordinary. Her mouth watered involuntarily salivating at the prospect of returning to her home in Michigan, devoid of purpose though it may have been. She slammed a cold door in her mind and quietly told the demon “No.”

The demon didn't react to her quiet refusal at first. Patience was not the reaction she expected. Hanna counted on the demon to fly off the handle. Anything to make it easier to resist. Instead, the apparition faded then her mother phased into existence in front of her.

“Hun-ae,” The demon wore her mother's face and touched her cheek gently like her mother used to do when she was chiding her as a child.

“Mom?” Hanna hated that she sounded so fragile.

“Hun-ae, come home. Right now. I’ll forgive you for leaving. Just come home.”

Hanna squeezed her eyes shut. She hated that she wanted so keenly for her mother to be here to tell her that everything would be alright. “No, my mother is home safe on Earth.”

“My, you are a keen one, aren’t you?” Her mother faded away and the demon reappeared. “What form shall I take to entice you, dear?” It hovered to her side and whispered in her ear.

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Things were moving smoothly. Just as Hanna predicted, she had been caught trying to infiltrate the red templar base. Alyiah wondered what type of person so readily took the bait in a clear trap. She thought back to all of the trials of her own journey upon arriving in Thedas and couldn’t remember backing down even when her enemies laid traps for her.

Dorian was impossible after she had been taken. The Tevinter mage was more defensive than Cullen, and Cullen obviously had a thing for Hanna. Varric seemed to have a similar soft-spot for his so called ‘Sunshine’. Alyiah remembered her own companions and suddenly regretted going out for her mission to cure the taint with only Superman to keep her company.

As soon as Cullen gave the go ahead, Alyiah lead a small group of Dorian, Varric and two scouts from the reinforcements. They let the initial crossing of blades distract from their bum rush for the doors to the shrine. When they arrived inside, they found utter chaos. Red Lyrium seemed to grow from any and all available surfaces. The group laid low and tried to move through to find and get Hanna out of trouble before fighting their way back out of the shrine.

As they came through the first hallway, Samson was seen rushing with a group of lieutenants down a corridor leading to an underground tunnel. The group of four men in templar armor hustled passed so quickly it was difficult to determine who they were. Alyiah dispatched the two scouts to follow them.
With minimal resistance.

“You mean, you want the two of us,” The short one, Alec or some other A-name, said. He was bright red and sputtering like the mere act of talking to the “Hero of Ferelden” would make him burst into flames.

“No, she meant the other two tag along scouts, Maker’s balls boy. Let’s go!” The taller, more senior scout ordered as he scooted the boy away.

“You’re quite intimidating, you know.” The Tevinter mage pointed out at Alyiah’s bemused expression.

“I always have been. On account of my height.”

“I think I know a great nickname for you.”

“Hit me.” The banter with Varric was worth fighting any additional enemies. When Varric looked at her funny, Alyiah began to try to explain. “It’s an…”

“Earth phrase. Hanna’s used that one on me before.” He explained before she had the chance. “I think I’ll call you Shorty.”

“Oh child, I know you did not just call me Shorty.” Varric obviously didn’t know the alternative connotation.

“So, you like it then. Great. We’ll go with that one. Right Sparkler?”

“Ugh, again with the nickname.” Dorian spoke out in disgust.

“See?” Varric said with a shit-eating grin. He had to be getting something out of this whole nickname business.

“Would the two of you be quiet?” Dorian interrupted. “I would like to find our Hanna alive. Which is more likely to happen the sooner we find her.”

She wasn’t surprised at Dorian’s tone. Everyone seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for the Asian wonder girl. Alyiah had to admit she feared for Hanna, too. She felt a sort of bastardized kinship for Hanna. They both came from the same planet. Through some kind of cosmic joke they were sent here at different times. Alyiah knew very well that she could have just as easily stepped out of that cave into another time. A time that neither she nor Nicole would have easily known about. It was hard to handle Thedas knowing at least a little story from the game. Alyiah could not imagine coming here and not having the base of knowledge she gained from just having Nicole to explain things those first few weeks, before she…

“Hanna?” Alyiah called as she rounded the corner on the second floor of the shrine and came upon the room where Hanna stood dumbstruck. Her body was very much so here, but her eyes were locked in a thousand-yard stare. “Hanna, are you alright?” Alyiah held out a hand to tell Varric and Dorian to stand back. Her body swayed and her mouth moved though no words came out.

When Alyiah got within arm’s reach of Hanna, she heard the words coming out of her mouth. They were clearly in some other language. Alyiah clapped loudly in Hanna’s face and the deranged woman smiled. Alyiah reached out and shook her by the shoulders. Hanna’s body shook, but the light was gone from her eyes. All at once, it came back, and Hanna jumped like she’d seen a ghost.

Soon after she tensed as she realized where she was and what she was doing. “Have you seen
Samson?” Her voice was raspy, as if she had been screaming. Alyiah shook her head and relaxed her hand.

“Are you alright, Sunshine?” Varric tried. Again, Hanna pointedly avoided answering the question.

“He had research on Earth upstairs.” she sighed. “I’m not sure much of it survived my wrath…” She paused and went away for another moment. Just as quickly she was lucid again and spoke as if she hadn’t stopped for a moment. “I’m guessing by your timing the cavalry’s arrived.”

There was a clear fear etched upon her face and Alyiah wondered what must have happened last night. The woman before her was no longer the confident former soldier. She was in a printed t-shirt with the words, ‘Crazy Cat Lady’ and three tiny cute cats underneath playing with the writing like it was yarn. Her jeans were covered in a thin layer of grime and soot. Under the collar of her shirt bruises were obscured, but undeniably there. Alyiah tried to picture her from a Thedosian’s point of view. Hanna was obviously out of her mind. A mage. Wielding strange weapons, bruised, soot covered and enraged.

“Hanna, dear.” Hanna flinched as if Dorian’s voice was a slap. “We’re asking if you’re okay. To be honest, we weren’t sure what we might find and we’re concerned.” Dorian spoke frankly.

“I’m deliberately ignoring a stupid ass question.” Her seething rage overtook her honest tone covering the depthless grief and regret that shrouded her. “I don’t know what part of this.” She indicated herself. “Looks okay to you. But no. I. am. not. okay. I don’t remember the last time I was okay, and honestly I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again. So instead of wasting all of our time on pointless questions with obvious answers. I’m going to kill some assholes and then get the everloving fuck out of this particular hole of Hell.”

“Well, shit, Sunshine. Sorry we asked.” Varric’s tone stung, and Hanna regretted the brashness of her own. She felt abrasive and it was difficult to control what she said and how she said it. So, she decided on less talk more action and walked passed them to the stairway, only stopping short when Alyiah spoke.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to talk about the serious firepower you have?” Alyiah’s words had a sarcastic bite. “I thought you only had a pistol.”

“Yeah, me too.” Hanna let the three words hang in the air for a moment then continued walking. As she walked, Hanna felt the clawing fear that at any moment she might burst into flames or become an abomination. Where had the desire demon gone? It didn’t seem like she had seen the last of the damn thing. She had lost track of time again, like her brain had just shut off or restarted like a faulty computer.

The ever present fear of possession somehow seemed more real now that she had actually conversed with a demon. Greater still was the fear that anyone might be the desire demon in disguise, until she got rid of it she could trust no one. The paranoia tweaked a nerve deep inside that hadn’t been touched in months. Hanna felt more acutely like a ticking time bomb.

Two red templars came running up the stairs, reflexively Hanna shot both before they could have recognized her as a threat. Varric whistled appreciatively from behind her.

“What Bianca have competition for you heart now Varric?” Dorian smirked.

“Never, but it doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a masterpiece at work.” The dwarf laughed.
“Surely that weapon is of magical design.” The Tevinter mage probed. Hanna shook her head and continued to say as little as possible.

“Don’t need magic to design a weapon. It’s a gun, it kills people that’s what it does.” Hanna pulled her rifle to her chest and lifted the duffle bag. “If I was a better person, I would have chucked this into the first fire I came across and never looked back. Instead, I am wagering the whole damn world on not losing a single one.”

“I don’t think that should be your decision, Hanna.” Alyiah said angrily from the back of the group. “Oh, so it should be yours then? No...I figured we could bring them back to Skyhold and figure it out there. At the very least, I can use some of them, put the rest to the fire and magically boobytrap them to explode if someone tries to take it apart to figure out how it works.” Hanna hadn’t really thought that far ahead, but she didn’t want to admit that Alyiah was right. Every second these weapons were in existence was a second closer to Thedas being destroyed. Instead, she kept walking. Hoping that she was doing a sufficient job of keeping her breathing under control.

Hanna fought through the shrine ahead of the small group. She was terrified if she stopped, they would start asking questions again. Questions she wouldn’t have the answers to. Maybe there was a way to tell that she had been talking to the desire demon. Maybe she had already been possessed and this is what being possessed feels like. Hanna couldn’t remember the rest of her conversation with the desire demon, but she knew it happened.

On the first floor, they came to Maddox’s laboratory. As Hanna put her hand on the door handle, Cullen and his men arrived. They shared that the shrine had been cleared of enemies, but there was a rift that they had marked to be closed at a later time by Mahanon. Samson and several of his men had escaped through a tunnel leading out of the basement. Men had pursued him, but they were unable to catch him.

Hanna didn’t know if she was upset that he hadn’t been caught or that she had let him get away, but she couldn’t look at anyone. Much less Cullen. Instead, she faced the door while Alyiah and Varric shared what little they knew about Hanna’s stay here. When they finished speaking, she pushed through the door. Hanna could feel Cullen behind her as she moved through the room. It had been overtaken by spires of red lyrium and the stone sang its sickly sweet tune. In the center on the floor, Maddox lay propped up against the table. Hanna ran to the tranquil side.

“Something’s not right. I’ll send for a healer.”

“That would be a waste, Knight-Captain Cullen.” He said in his distinct monotone. “I drank my entire supply of blightcap essence. It won’t be long now.” Hanna balled her hands into fists, her nails cutting crescents into her palm.

“You bastard.” Her voice wavered. Cullen closed his eyes with a pained expression.

“I trust that Samson has had enough time to escape. We all agreed it was for the best.” His voice held no relief, no anguish over his own demise. Hanna’s anger flared white hot. She held it down with no small force of will. Hurting a dying man would not bring Jack back.

“You threw your lives away. For what? For Samson? Why?” Cullen asked every question but the one she needed to know the answer too. Somewhere deep inside she felt a calling. She had to know what had happened to the body. What had they done with Jack?

“Samson saved me before he needed me. He gave me purpose again. I….wanted to help.” The man’s head slumped forward. The motion wrested Hanna’s anger from her control. He couldn’t die before she had her turn to ask. She had to know where they put him.
“No.” Hanna finally spoke again. “No, No, NO!” She pulled the man forward and his eyes lulled and a weak noise came from his throat. “You can die you slimy bastard. You can rot, but you need to tell me before you do. WHERE IS JACK? Where is he?” Maddox’s eyes started to lose focus. Hanna slapped him. “What did you do with his body? Where did you put him?” Maddox squeaked in pain. Hanna screamed in frustration.

A voice from behind her she didn’t recognize spoke. “Samson’s men were seen carrying the body of a man. We thought it was an injured lieutenant, but he was wearing odd clothing. Like what you’re wearing now, my lady.” She turned to see a short scout with a bright red face of embarrassment. Again her ire turned to Maddox.

“I is true? Did that monster take him?” Maddox nodded weakly in response to her question. Hanna wanted to destroy him. Turn him into a pile of ash or better yet a puddle. Hanna huffed and threw the dying tranquil back against the table. The feeling of desire to know what had happened to Jack’s body faded and in its place grew a deep despair. Hanna deflated and walked away without grabbing her bags.

She left the room, and all the eyes that followed her. She walked out of the shrine passed the burning cages and destroyed tents. Bodies of inquisition soldiers and red templars littered the ground and blood pools gathered loose dirt to form nasty puddles. The grime stuck to her bare feet, but Hanna couldn’t feel it. She couldn’t feel anything.

Hanna walked away into the woods to the temporary camp that they had used as a vantage point to make plans. It seemed like it had happened far before the night before. It wasn’t her life. That life belonged to someone else. Hanna was a stranger to herself.

Her heart felt so heavy that her body seemed light. As if the tether that tied her soul to her body was so thin a gentle breeze could loosen the bond and let her fly free. Her knees landed on the soft grass and the freely flowing tears soaked her shirt. Hanna dropped her rifle and the strap caught it holding it steady at her waist. Her side arm burned into the small of her back. It fell into her hand as if by some power beyond her comprehension. She knew what it meant and there was peace in the promise behind her action.

Hopelessness and despair wracked her. If this world belonged to a game, how very evil a game it seemed to be. Hanna no longer felt the desperate desire to return her life to the way it had once been. She no longer hoped to retrieve Jack’s soul. She didn’t desire the life that Cullen could promise. Emptiness and apathy were easier to handle than the myriad of feelings swimming through her thoughts. It would be so simple. The solution was so obvious she wondered how she hadn’t seen it all along.

If she had never existed, this world would have been none the wiser. If she had never existed, Jack would still be alive. Happy, at home. Probably with some prim and proper woman that his mother would approve of. Hanna knew all about killing other people. When they died, their family grieved, but eventually, in time, moved on.

Now she could see it. Ultimately, she had been the biggest single threat to everyone she had ever loved. She eliminated threats. It’s who she was.

Hanna lifted her handgun, and turned it on herself. Her hand was shaking. Her hand never shook like this. She tried to imagine the soft, gentle breeze tugging, tugging, pulling at the tether between her soul and her body.

Her finger twitched on the trigger.
Relief.

It was the only word that described his feeling when he saw Hanna with Alyiah, Varric, and Dorian. She was safe. She had changed her clothing and was not wearing any armor. There was a strange bulge in the small of her back that must have been a weapon beneath her shirt. In her hands was a strange device, no doubt the weapon she came to retrieve. She had a bag slung over her shoulder and another larger bag in her hand. She seemed calm and collected. If a little angry. He wondered if that was why she hadn’t said anything to him when their groups came together. Why her head was so low as she waited against the door to move on.

He moved up behind her to better protect her unarmored form. She dropped the larger bag and opened the door. The sheer sound of the red lyrium in the room was too much for him. He involuntarily winced against the auditory onslaught. When Hanna ran to Maddox’s side, Cullen wondered what had transpired during her time in the shrine. By all accounts, she was tight lipped about it for now. He hoped she would tell someone. Her magic was nearly tangible in her anger. He worried that she would beat the dying tranquil to a pulp and was prepared to pull her away from him if necessary.

Cullen was surprised by her outburst. Jack had very little probability of survival and they had discussed the prospect of her finding his dead body. She seemed to have been prepared for that outcome at the time. Now her eyes were wild, wide, and empty. He followed behind her as quickly as he could. After giving orders to check the shrine for any documentation Maddox hadn’t destroyed, Cullen ran after her.

Hanna had moved quickly for someone who was reported to be stumbling barefoot through the camp. He followed her distinct footprints in the bloody mud. He climbed the hill after her and recognized the area as the vantage point above the shrine where they had made their plans to attack nearly a day ago. Hanna was on her knees looking away from the newly risen sun. Her hand held a smaller version of the larger weapon that dangled at her waist to her temple. Her hands were shaking and her sobs were loud and ugly.

She was going to… “Maker, no.” he huffed.

He approached carefully hoping that he could catch her off guard and pull the weapon away from her. She was whispering to herself. An uninterrupted line of consciousness that let him know that she blamed herself for Jack’s death. She was intending to kill herself to protect everyone else. Cullen forced himself not to speak. He pushed her elbow up holding her hand as a shot rang out from the weapon into the sky. Hanna dropped her gun into his hand, and Cullen sat it on the ground out of her reach.

Hanna screamed as he turned her by her shoulders into his chest. She slammed her hands onto his chest plate and tried to push him away. At this new distance, Cullen could see every bruise and scratch. Hanna’s face was bruised and the bruising extended beneath her clothes. She was shaking, and her attempts to push him off were weak. Her magic was out of control.

“Hanna.” He tried to soothe. Hanna smacked him in the face and fought harder.

“Go away.” She said forcefully. “Leave me be.”

“I can’t do that,” He spoke calmly. “I’m here to help you, Hanna.”

“I don’t need your help. I told you before, you can’t trick me, demon. Leave me be.”
“A demon?” Cullen turned to look, but he knew better. It had happened to him before. “I’m not a demon, Hanna.”

“Bullshit.”

“Hanna, I’m going to let you go, but if you run away, I’ll have to use a smite to quell your magic. Then we can talk about this.” Hanna nodded against him. When he let go, she sank back down to the ground. With her hair down over her eyes, Cullen remembered when he had found her after she had been kidnapped by the templars. She had hunkered down and thrown dirt in his face. He had to help her remember that her life held meaning. To the Inquisition. To Mahanon. To the Inner Circle. To Him.

He knelt down beside her, and kept his hands free and close to his sword. He tried to look as relaxed as possible. Deliberately, he waited. In his experience, demons are relentless. “How do I know, Cullen? Oh, God.” Hanna’s eyes were red with tears. “How did I come so far without meeting a demon like this? I didn’t know.”

Her voice was so broken, it hurt to listen, but she had to reason her way back to him. Cullen forced himself to remain quiet, but look as understanding as he could manage. Hanna cleared her throat. She had a plan.

“If you were Cullen, you’d want to know what happened. I was captured. Samson order Maddox to kill Jack. There was nothing I could do. I was tied against some pillar. I said a prayer for him. He allowed that at least. He beat the shit out of me when I didn’t answer his questions. I probably have a few broken ribs. It feels like it.”

Cullen winced as she lifted her shirt. The skin of her stomach was an explosion of purple, blue, and yellow. She dropped the fabric and the damage was once again removed from sight. Hanna read the look on his face and looked away from him.

“I came here because I wanted to die, Cullen. I wanted to die alone. I ruined Jack’s life. His mother was so right when she said, I would, that I….I would kill him by loving him.” She swallowed. “I fucked up so much. I fucked up so badly. I thought that maybe I could fix him if I had his body. I thought that I could trade everything to that demon that came for me. I could trade my life...to give him what he had back. I was ready to betray everything for that.”

“Hanna.” Anger broke through his carefully crafted expression. He spoke without thinking and her eyes returned to his. A hint of excitement behind them.

“I didn’t care what would happen to everyone here. I didn’t care what would happen to me. I wanted to save him. And when I couldn’t...I wanted to die for the guilt and shame of it all.” She looked down and back to him. “I still want to die for the guilt and shame of it all.”

At first, what she said made him angry. In the next second, a realization dawned on him. A desire demon would prey on what she was saying. She was telling him what happened. She was telling him the truth. She was telling him so that he would get mad at her. If he was actually a demon, the demon would offer to fix everything. Cullen decided he had a third option.

“Hanna, he’s gone. You knew what would happen. You knew he would be dead. You never fell for anything a demon told you.” Cullen held his fist in front of his chest. “I know this despite what you’ve said because I know you. I love you, Hanna. We can’t fix what happened in the past, but with help you can learn to live again. You promised me that we would work on this together. I haven’t given up on you yet.”
Her eyes lit with confusion. “I don’t understand. I can’t...think...” Hanna spoke softly. “You aren’t a
demon then.” She looked up to him her eyes were a different shade of blue than normal. It could
have been the early morning light or the sleep deprivation tinting his vision. Cullen just nodded and
held out his arms. Her eyes closed. She fell forward into his arms.

“I swear to you. Samson will pay.” Cullen swore as he moved Hanna and her guns back to camp.
I am so sorry. I have had this typed out since early April. I've become too hard on this story for not going in a direction I was ready for. As such, I had to put it away so I could look at it with fresh eyes. I can't guarantee that I will update regularly. My personal life has kind of exploded. I lost my job suddenly. I don't know what the future holds, but I'm as close to rock bottom as I've ever been, so that's a thing.

Anyway, here's a chapter.

Alyiah waited outside the makeshift healer’s tent with the others. The makeshift camp just outside the shrine buzzed quietly with activity. Alyiah sat on a box with the duffle bag filled with weaponry and Hanna’s backpack she had dropped outside of Maddox’s laboratory. The duffle bag felt heavier than the mood. The others eyed the bags warily. Alyiah felt just as uncertain about the weapons as she did the other bag. The bag containing perfectly preserved remnants of a life she could never live again. It changed everything and nothing.

Just like Hanna.

It had been two days since Cullen had carried the limp woman into camp. Alyiah had to admit Hanna was tough as hell, but that didn’t excuse her behavior. The hard set to Alyiah’s face was barely enough to hide her disappointment. Cullen had difficulty managing to describe how he found the other Earthling ready to kill herself.

The story reminded Alyiah of home. Mental health for people in the military was seriously lacking. On Earth, she couldn’t remember how many times she had heard the story of a soldier that committed suicide. There was always a campaign on social media to get people to recognize that a major cause of death for soldiers was suicide. Alyiah had to admit it wasn’t necessarily as bad in Thedas. She attributed it to the increased combat fatalities and that lyrium seemed to kill templars just as much as the atrocities they witnessed.

The trio of men that knew Hanna better were dumbstruck by the possibility that she would want to die. Alyiah knew better. She could remember those first terrible weeks. Following the death of Nicole and the joining that took other Grey Warden hopefuls and the battle at Ostagar...She couldn’t honestly say that she hadn’t considered the ease at which she could have ended everything. Perhaps it was just more of an Earth thing to die at your own hand.

Varric seemed the most surprised out of all of them. “Did you see those bruises, Curly? What happened in there?” Cullen didn’t respond. The man seemed broken by the questioning, he looked away instead.

When Cullen told them, he hadn’t told them how he convinced her to stop. Alyiah wondered if Hanna had any words of wisdom that might have helped him understand her decision. Would help everyone understand. After a few moments, the tired ex-templar clenched his jaw and released a huff of air.

“She said that Samson had asked her for more information about her home. When she refused to
answer, he beat her, and he… This whole trip was a mistake. The plan a disaster. We, no, I never should have let her get captured.”

“No, it was her plan. She chose to put herself in that position.” Alyiah couldn’t stand how every single person seemed so ready to blame themselves for everything. It was really getting out of hand. “We can’t change what happened. We can only choose how to handle her when she does wake up.”

“What do you mean by ‘handle’ her? She’s not an animal.” Dorian reacted almost instantly. Why so defensive? Hanna seemed nice enough, but it was clear to any logical person that she was not okay.

“She is very clearly dangerous and unstable. I have nothing against Hanna personally, even if she wasn’t a mage, and she is, I would be concerned about just letting her go back to the way things were before…” Alyiah realized this was going nowhere productive.

“Before… I had a gun?” The aforementioned woman appeared in the entrance to the healer’s tent and interjected. Hanna looked much better than she had prior to her two days of rest. Her eyes were still sunken and dark, but the bruises had healed nicely and she no longer looked as if she would blow away with a gust of wind.

“Hanna!” The word wasn’t so much a name as a chorus of emotion. Wordless reassurances and hearty pats on the back were shared. Hanna stopped the celebration and spoke again before anyone had the chance to change the subject.

“I agree.” The wounded party spoke solemnly. Hanna’s hands grasped at the fabric of her dirty t-shirt. Her fingers twisted as she walked with heavy steps away from the support of the tent pole. “I’m dangerous. Too many unknowns. Maybe I need to be disconnected.” She sighed as her eyes moved from person to person, searching. Alyiah thought it was obvious, but with a cursory glance to the rest of the party she recognized what Hanna was looking for. Understanding. Hanna’s eyes fell with her voice as she spelled out her idea. “Maybe I should be made Tranquil.”

The shorter earthling looked wearily from face to face as she finished. Alyiah nodded in agreement and waited for the shit-storm to erupt.

“Hanna, you can’t possibly…” Cullen shook his head when Hanna cut him off.

“I can and I will. My connection to the fade is volatile. My emotions are out of control. If I were you, I would be having the exact same conversation about the person in my position.” Her voice was even, logical. Detached. “In my experience, it’s better to be proactive in cases like this. I was medically discharged, kicked out of the army, on Earth for the same thing. I would gladly accept being put out of the guard rotation and being barred from participating in excursions such as this. However, with my magic, the only decision may be, no, is the Right of Tranquility.”

Again the chorus sounded with a various array of disagreements. Dorian spoke the loudest. “Over my dead body.”

“Sunshine, let’s not be so hasty.”

Cullen listened but continued shaking his head. His reaction surprised Alyiah the most. She would have thought with her previous experience with the former templar that he would most easily see the reason in Hanna’s argument.

“No.” It seemed that Alyiah was not the only one surprised as everyone waited for Cullen to clarify his point. “This is not a decision to be had in the moment. You are in service to the inquisition as an advisor, and so any change to that will have to come down from the War Council and more
specifically the Inquisitor. In addition, we do not know the effect that Tranquility might have due to your tenuous connection to the fade.”

Hanna huffed in irritation or disappointment. It seemed as though she had expected for Cullen to be on her side. If the reaction from Varric and Dorian was anything to judge, the Inquisitor was unlikely to sentence Hanna to become Tranquil.

The soldiers started packing up boxes of materials retrieved from the ruins of Samson’s operation at the Shrine of Dumat. They had known the group would return once Hanna was awake. Now, it wouldn’t be long before they made for a return trip to Skyhold.

Cullen seemed to have everything in hand as for making the final preparations. He threw himself into the work naturally. Alyiah could see a little bit of Alistair in Cullen. They were not all that similar, but if she squinted both men had similar quirks. Alistair would all but actively avoid Alyiah in camp until he knew exactly what he wanted to say, then when he finally talked to her he would lose all sense and still look like a fool. Alyiah shook her head and set to prepare her horse for the journey.

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Cullen had spent hours thinking about what he might say to Hanna when she awoke from her magically induced rest. He had considered bringing up her last words to him. The idea of demons tormenting her was not an unlikely one, but it hadn’t been an issue in the past. He didn’t want to dredge up the memories on the road. But he had to know.

Cullen was on the edge of so many reactions to Hanna. First, he cursed himself for letting her get captured. He had trusted her strength to see her through, without thinking about any of the consequences of the things that happened. His primary reaction was compassion. He wanted Hanna to heal and come back to him.

His second reaction was still powerful. A blind rage would overtake him as he looked over reports and preparations for the return to Skyhold. How could Hanna hurt herself like that? Why didn’t she ask for help after Maddox fell lifeless to the ground? It burned at him that she didn’t think to ask him for help.

Instead she walked off alone and injured to kill herself in the woods. Cullen tried to bury the feeling, but he was so incredibly angry at Hanna for trying to run away from everything. He had done many things after Kinloch, but he could never have tried to kill himself. It was an aberration of the Maker’s plan. Then her first words upon waking were...Tranquility. It was just another method of running away from her problems. It was unthinkable. A betrayal of all he thought he knew about her.

When the caravan left, Cullen did not share his horse with Hanna. Leaving her to ride with Dorian and Varric in turns to spare their horses the burden of carrying so much. The atmosphere was tense. Hanna remained silent through the trip and was not given a guard rotation so that when she slept she could continue to recover. Cullen missed hearing her joke with Varric or quibble with Dorian over some magical property. He missed the way her hands would grasp tightly around his waist when the horse shifted speeds. The return trip dragged on for two days. In those two days, he couldn’t find the words he wanted to say to her. He couldn’t find it in his heart to just forgive her actions either.

When, finally, the towers of Skyhold appeared over the horizon, Cullen cursed himself for missing the opportunities the road had afforded him. When they returned within those walls, it would be much easier for Hanna to avoid him completely.
Hanna could swear she heard whispers in the wind. Shadows seemed larger and more forbodeing than ever before. Even within the confines of Skyhold, she would not be free from her fear. Any person she spoke to alone could be the demon in disguise. Her self imposed exile during the return trip hadn’t made anyone trust her. Cullen detested her. Aliyah could barely veil her disappointment. Varric was awkward and silent. Dorian attempted to motivate her to speak, but couldn’t. The raven’s carried news that of course Mahanon had detoured from his original path and would be at least another week in the field. Leliana and Josephine had agreed with Cullen that no decisions could be made before the Inquisitor’s return.

Hanna knew that Skyhold would be nothing if not some kind of purgatory waiting for judgement. In the end, it would be much easier to find a wandering party of templars willing to give a discerning mage a hand. If only she could some distance between herself and the group, the plan arrived to little personal fanfare. It was almost too easy to escape. During the lunch break, she just waited. Alyiah purposefully ate away from the camp with Superman. Dorian and Varric had cowed to her self-imposed silence and left her to eat on her own.

Cullen approached her unexpectedly. She let her stoic mask slip, and felt her fear bounce back from him like a twisted reflection. He growled in frustration and moved with more purpose towards her, then as if by the will of God himself, he lost steam and stopped. He shuffled in place for a moment, but then turned awkwardly away with a quick scratch to the back of his neck. She finished eating and excused herself for a piss to the guy on watch. As Hanna moved through the camp, she grabbed what little equipment she could find lying around a shitty bow and about 12 arrows in a quiver. It would have to do. Carefully, nonchalantly she walked away from camp. Never to return.
I wanted to put out another chapter before the end of the week, but I didn't want to end on another cliffhanger because that always irritates me when I read fanfiction. So, I kept writing and found another cliffhanger instead. Isn’t that just the pits?

Oh well. Enjoy.

Initially, the group left without noticing Hanna had disappeared. She had been so quiet in the previous days of travel that everyone thought she was with someone else. Alyiah noticed that Superman was jumping back and forth in front of her horse, something he only did when he wanted her to stop. When she pulled her horse to the side and turned to survey the group, she didn’t see what the big deal was.

However, Cullen turned to see what had stopped the Hero. He was the first one to notice.

“Varric, where’s Hanna?”

Varric immediately perked up and looked around. He shrugged in response to Cullen’s question. “I swear she was just there. It’s hard to miss her.”

Cullen grumbled in response and set to sending out search parties of two or three soldiers in every direction.

Cullen, Varric, and Dorian were beside themselves looking for her. Men had been dispatched in parties to search the nearby forest. Hours of searching had led to only dead ends. Hanna wanted to disappear. She had left the more dangerous implements of destruction with the group. Her well crafted armor was in one of the carts waiting to be repaired upon their return. Instead, she was wearing ill-fitting leather armor procured from the pieces carried by the soldiers. In Alyiah’s opinion, Hanna had made a clear choice to abandon her friends. She didn’t want help. Alyiah understood the dangers of the wilderness as well as everyone else. As well as Hanna would have. You can lead a horse to water…

No one else seemed to accept that Hanna didn’t want to be found. It was with enormous effort that Alyiah convinced the party to regroup at Skyhold. Their return was met with cheers throughout the castle. Cullen handed over Midnight to a stable hand and immediately called a meeting at the War Table. Alyiah followed his lead.

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As soon as the meeting had been called Leliana sent out several groups of scouts to search for clues as to Hanna’s whereabouts. She reasoned with Cullen that her scouts could report back and give a more clear search area for a larger operation later. Then came the update on how the trip had gone.

“After the situation at the Shrine of Dumat, Hanna was inconsolable. She was convinced that she should be made tranquil. I assume that she left to find a templar more willing to functionally lobotomize her.” Somehow, in the absence of Mahanon, Alyiah was made some sort of defacto
“Lobotomies are... It was a medical procedure on Earth a long time ago. They stopped doing them, I think. It’s inhumane, wrong to do that to a person.” Alyiah thought for a moment. “I don’t know a lot of of the science behind it, but basically the surgeon would remove part of your brain. The part of the brain that makes you a person. It was considered successful because people would stop acting crazy. Instead they would kind of revert to being a child of sorts. Emotionally and intellectually broken, but calm.”

The room was quiet. It did sound a lot like tranquility. “If it was successful, why did they stop?” Leliana’s voice was colder than Alyiah remembered. It was hard to look at the purple clad woman and see the chantry sister she had once been. When had she become so calculating? Ten years had changed everyone.

“It was considered morally bankrupt. To trade everything that someone was for a little peace and quiet. That was considered a poor trade on Earth. Better treatments were made available instead. Here though it seems as though it is acceptable.” Alyiah indicated toward the library where several Tranquil mages were working. “At least the Tranquil seem to keep a little of their intelligence. I’ll have to admit I was pretty horrified the first time I saw one.”

“Why then, did you speak in favor of Hanna’s idea?” Cullen seemed beside himself.

“In her case, it seemed like the better of two evils.” Alyiah realized how broken that initial assessment was. She’d been in Thedas too long. What was once horrifying to her naive first impression, she had not argued against. She didn't particularly argue for it, but that was splitting too fine a hair.

“Not so poor a trade, then?” The former templar’s tone was biting and worse it was painfully righteous. He was right, Hanna needed to be rehabilitated not tranquilized. Alyiah hated being in the wrong and even more to have a templar tell her it was so.

“How many Rites of Tranquility did you sit through and say nothing then Commander?” Alyiah couldn’t control her anger, so she held her breath to compose herself. “You know, Cullen, of all people I didn’t think I would get this push back from you.”

“I've changed, Warden. I am not the man broken by demons you remember.” His fist clenched about the pommel of his sword, but his body language was otherwise relaxed. “I was wrong, but through my time in Kirkwall, I learned I have been working towards redeeming that part of myself and leaving the hate and fear of magic that once defined me behind.” Spit flew from his mouth as the last word hit Alyiah like a ton of bricks.

“We should leave all discussion on the merits and failures of the Rite of Tranquility for another day. Right now we have much to decide and not a lot of time to talk about it. The Inquisitor has decided to return ahead of schedule due to the immediate nature of this problem. He should be arriving with in the next two days. Until then we must decide how much of our efforts we will put towards finding Hanna, how best to prepare for the ball at Halamshiral, and discuss the implications of the Inquisitor’s findings at Crestwood.” Cassandra took the reigns before Alyiah and Cullen duked it out in the War Room.

“When we receive a report from my scouts, we must be prepared to take the next steps.” Leliana looked down at her reports. “I have a limited number of resources as my network has been stretched in preparation for Halamshiral and investigating the rumors of Venatori and Grey Wardens in the
Hissing Wastes and the Western Approach.”

Josephine spoke next, “I have written to the nearby gentry as to placing a bounty for Hanna to be found alive. I did not describe her as our Oracle as to avoid the less savory as wanting to keep her for themselves, it is as much as I can do for now.”

Cullen and Cassandra traded glances as she updated the movements of the Inquisition’s forces. Some had been sent to the storm coast to defend against a new encampment of Red Templars, another unit was sent to the Hinterlands for fade/creature research at the insistence of Helisma. The inquisition’s trained forces were scattered as they should be to maintain the inquisition’s presence as a peacekeeper.

“Is there no one we can send?” Cullen’s hands slammed onto the map, shaking markers and startling everyone including himself. When his outburst, was met with only silence. Cullen dismissed himself to his office.

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Hanna was afraid to approach anyone on the road. She had barely managed to remain hidden in the hours since leaving camp. Hiding in small caves and outcroppings until soldier’s of the Inquisition passed, she heard them talking about how out of sorts the Commander was. If she could manage to stay away long enough, he would forget about her out of necessity. She couldn’t return because she felt guilt for leaving him. Hell, she couldn’t face him after what he’d seen her do. Shame won out and she continued on her journey alone.

The day and night left her sore and exhausted. She shunned sleep for fear of demons. The second day of her journey faded as her footsteps met with more mud, she realized that she was heading farther south than she had managed before with the Inquisitor. Hanna tried to push her memory to what lay south of the Hinterlands and the Kocari Wilds. Over the edge of a hill, she could see what looked like the ruins of a tower and a fort. The overall appearance was eerily familiar to her. She had definitely seen this location before. The broken Imperial Highway bridge was what it took to remind Hanna. She had seen Alyiah visiting the grave of her friend here. This was Ostagar. She followed the path she had seen Alyiah take to the gravesite.

Three wooden crosses lay at the side of the Imperial Highway in forgotten ruins. One of the graves belonged to the late King Cailan Theirin, the next to Alistair’s mentor Duncan, then finally Alyiah’s friend Nicole. As Hanna knelt at the gravesite, a strong breeze blew through the trees that had slowly grown back in the wake of the taint. Suddenly, Hanna was overwhelmed with a pull to the fade.

When she opened her eyes, Hanna was face to face with a short woman. Hanna was disoriented for several moments, she couldn’t seem to remember what she had been doing up to this point, but it was jarring to see this person suddenly. Her hair was short and thick pulled into two staccato buns at the top of her heart shaped head. Her skin was several shades darker than Alyiah’s.

“Stand up! Silly goose.” Her voice was energetic, inspiring. Hanna hadn’t even noticed she was laying down. “This isn’t a good place to take a nap, you know?” Hanna couldn’t even think to respond.

“Who?”

“Oh, that’s not such a big deal. What’s more important is what are you doing here?” As Hanna stood, she noticed that the woman’s voice had an echo-y quality. She sounded like a denizen of the
fade. Which was enough to make Hanna take notice of her surroundings finally. Many different layers of different colored interpretations of battles lay layered over each other. She was still at the ruins of Ostagar, but instead of solemn, empty fields, the world around her was alive. A charging warrior ran right through her into an enemy blurred by the overlapping layers of history.

Hanna shouted out reacting to the blow from the warrior’s shield without feeling it. The fade woman laughed at her. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I’m sure all of this is really funny to you.”

“It is.” She nodded in earnest agreement. Hanna looked at the girl again. Harder. There had to be a clue somewhere as to who this mystery person was. Something about her demeanor was familiar.

“Do I know you?” Hanna asked when her memory failed her on all accounts. The ghostly woman shook her head.

“I’m not from around here, but by looks of it, neither are you.”

That jogged her memory, “No, that’s not possible. Solas said that ghosts don’t exist here. You can’t be? Nicole?”

“I am. In the...well...I know I am Nicole at the very least. I’ve been trapped here for an eternity with nothing to keep me company but the spirits reliving battle after battle.” She paused for a moment. “Well, once about two years ago this elf came and slept here. I didn’t want him to see me though, so I hid.” Then another thought hit her. “Oh, and I’ve seen Alyiah come by. She always comes back to tell me what she’s been up to. I don’t think she knows I can hear her, but I think it helps her heal. To, ya’ know, talk to someone from home.”

“Why didn’t you go to the ‘Beyond’ or Heaven or somewhere else?” Hanna didn’t want to think of the implications of Nicole’s Hellish Purgatory.

Nicole’s ghostly form wavered for several seconds then formed solidly again. “I don’t know. It’s not like I haven’t tried. Something must be tying my spirit here. Maybe I was destined to deliver a message.”

Hanna perked up at that. “What message?!” Maybe there was a reason for all of this. Why else would she have this power to talk to Nicole if not for this very purpose?

“I don’t know. Don’t do drugs. Stay in School. I knew I should have spent the last eternity coming up with something witty. I just didn’t think I’d ever have the opportunity for one last joke.” Unfortunately, it seemed as though Nicole’s spirit was just as lost as Hanna was. Hanna felt a prick of pain on the back of her neck. The spirit woman spoke again urgently. “Hey, you might already know this, but I think someone has taken notice of your body in the real world.”

Hanna tried to pull herself into her body, only to snap suddenly back and find herself eye to eye with one very annoyed mage.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

No words. This was a doozy to write.

Please, enjoy! If you feel the motion of the ocean leave a comment, if not I still love you!

Peace!

An elder woman was lifting Hanna from her prone position on the ground as she came too. Hanna maneuvered her hands behind the woman and flipped herself from the woman's grasp. "What in the Sam Hill are you doing?"

"It is you I should be asking that question." The woman seemed amused. "Do you often sleep in tainted graveyards? Would you prefer it if I had just left you for a far less discerning Hurlock?" Hanna couldn't help but feel as if she'd been slapped.

"It’s not like I chose this. I wasn’t even intending on tripping. Stray magic just tends to do that to me." The woman seemed displeased with Hanna, in the most bizarre grandmotherly way.

"What did you see here?" The crone asked. Hanna almost spoke, but felt a bizarre chill down her spine. Hanna knew in that moment that whatever this woman was, Nicole was less than interested in her knowing that there was a ghost in this field. "Was it that young girl? Poor thing. Truly a being out of her time and space, but you would understand that well wouldn’t you Hanna?"

The cold chill spread from her spine through her arms.

"How did you know my name?" Hanna tried to hide a shiver. In her dozens of trips through the fade she had never seen this woman, but something about her seemed familiar and not all that hospitable. Like seeing a relative possessed by a demon, real horror movie shit.

"My dear, the how is not important. There are a great many things that I know, and if I spent all of my time explaining how I know them, I would never get anything done."

Hanna wasn’t taking that bullshit for an answer. She leveled the crone with a glare. Then turned to walk away.

"I do believe it was your dear fiance. He was delirious in pain, but he told me a great deal about you. I have to say I was curious." The woman smile deviously when Hanna turned at the mention of Jack. "So, I may have tracked down an old friend to help you rescue him. It really is too bad that you were unsuccessful. Poor boy."

Grief and anger flashed red behind Hanna’s eyes. It was unlikely that she would be able to do much of anything to the witch, but she was a mistake away from trying. "So, you’re Flemeth." Hanna growled.

"My, how adorable you are! You think that you could fight me. And here I was going to help you. Don’t you need to be stronger to face this world? I’ve helped far too many ungrateful pawns in my
life. Perhaps I will just leave you here. You’re right maybe the Inquisitor will prevail without you. Maybe Cullen will find the love of his life elsewhere. There is no reason for you to exist in this world” The woman looked down her nose at the Earthling. In that moment, Hanna felt as small as an ant under a shoe. Then Flemeth’s expression changed. A quirk of the lips, “It is only as true as you believe it to be. If you want to see your true purpose through, follow me.”

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If Cullen was difficult, Mahanon was impossible. Inconsolable. Alyiah was at her wits end. She only wondered if the damn Witch of the Wilds could see the absolute desolation she had wrecked on the Inquisition with that ridiculous quest to retrieve Hanna’s weapons.

In further inspection of Samson and the red templar’s research notes, it was obvious that they were no closer to understanding how to put the guns together in a working order, much less using them for their intended purpose than they were to casting blood magic as mundane people. Jack had done an admirable job, under duress no less, convincing the bastards that the metal contraptions were a sort of useless jewelry. The templars seemed only days from giving up and melting the damn things down for ‘useful’ metals. It was funny really.

Only if you forgot the whole Inquisition seemed to be dependant on the presence of a woman who came from another world entirely. Alyiah couldn’t say it was all that different in her time. Especially because the intended Tabris Hero of Fereldan was felled at the Battle at Ostagar.

The strange thing was that Josephine and Leliana seemed rather unaffected by the loss of Hanna. Disappointed maybe, but they carried on with their duties uninhibited by the emotions that everyone else seemed to be feeling. Alyiah wondered if Hanna had cast some sort of spell on the inner circle of the Inquisition.

Mahanon and his team had arrived early this morning having run their horses hard through the night to arrive as quickly as possible. Iron Bull lept from his horse followed by Mahanon to receive a report from the advisors. Sera and Blackwall walked the horses to the stable.

“Where’s Solas?” Cullen asked, and Mahanon shook his head with a pained look in his eyes.

“IT’s hard to explain and I don’t really understand, but in the exalted plains he lost a very close friend. He asked for some alone time and promised to meet us back at Skyhold.” Mahanon sighed and patted Cullen’s shoulder. “It was before we got the raven. I’m sorry Cullen. I should never have authorized the trip.”

“Nonsense. None of us could have predicted this. It is just bad luck.” Cassandra tried to soothe. Mahanon had tears in his eyes and his eyelids were swollen. It was obvious he was not taking Hanna’s departure well. Cassandra made notice of this and continued. “We should let you wash up and recover from the hard trip. We have done all we can for now. Leliana should have reports back soon, we will reconvene in the war room in three bells.”

Now Alyiah had time to walk through Skyhold and take inventory of herself and the companions of the Inquisitor. Always the procrastinator, Alyiah did not want to take on the deep introspection that was required to question her acceptance of Hanna’s plan to lobotomize herself in the name of some ‘Goddamn Peace and Quiet™’ Instead she judged the coping mechanisms around her.

Vivienne had taken to spending as much time with Josephine as possible, they were in the throes of planning the plays the Inquisition would make at the Empress’s ball. Thoroughly designing dresses and uniforms to befit an organization of worthwhile repute, determining what dances would be most in vogue and thus most important to teach the core of their group. It was nauseating at the best of
times, but Vivienne gave new life to the calm and calculating. Even when she visited the chantry and prayed for Hanna’s safe return.

Varric through himself into writing letters to various people across Thedas, perhaps in an attempt to flex his own spy network to find Hanna. He would chat amicably with Alyiah if she asked to sit in the chair across from him. He told her the story of how Hawke had gone on similar benders to Hanna when he lost his family members horrifically. Alyiah didn’t ask and Varric didn’t continue after he had very clearly reminded himself of a pretty low point in his life. He began to write with new vigor and excused himself from further conversation.

Dorian and Mahanon were found in the library. Mahanon sat across Dorian’s lap and laid his head against the mage’s shoulder. Dorian’s fingers carded through the elf’s long brown hair as they talked about how they would skin Hanna alive when she returned. The moment was entirely too private for Alyiah to stick around to investigate.

Cole and Solas were nowhere to be found. Impossible to determine what one or the other would be thinking elsewise. Sera was similarly indecipherable. The ragtag elf seemed very attracted to Alyiah’s many charms. Alyiah couldn’t sit and puzzle over her thoughts when she was constantly being barraged by the not-wholly unwelcome flirty one-liners. Alyiah had sealed her fate by returning the favor in a moment of frivolity. It was easy enough to remind Sera that she was in fact married and a queen and thus the nobility that Sera disliked. But why ruin the moment. Fun was in pretty short supply.

Downstairs, Bull and his chargers were singing drinking songs and plotting something that involved Manny and Dorian getting very drunk and talking about their sordid nightly affairs. When Alyiah declined to participate in said plan, the group moved their brainstorming session away from prying ears. It was hard to miss that Bull was just as interested in maintaining some sort of equilibrium amongst his comrades as he shared a long meaningful glance with Alyiah, before she walked away. It felt like he had read all he needed to know about what Alyiah had seen in seconds, then turned her away before she could ask to share.

In her final stop before returning to the war room, Alyiah followed the ramparts to Cullen’s office. The door was cracked open and the heated voice of Cassandra and the deep baritone of Cullen’s voice drifted into the crisp mountain air.

“You can not continue to ignore these symptoms. I will have to remove you from your post until you start taking care of yourself.”

“I am fine, Cassandra. I will endure it.”

“And what of this infatuation with Hanna? What will you do if there is nothing to be found? Or worse. What if she returns more broken than when she left?”

“We will find her before...We must.”

“And if we don’t, Cullen. I am only looking out for what is best for you in this moment.” Cassandra made that huff deep in her chest. Signature Seeker Huff. “Even when she was here, you were not taking care of yourself. You can not continue to face the withdraws alone. When she returns I will tell her what you have been doing just to remain with her.”

“Seeker, please. It has not...I have not fallen so far as to need…”
At that precise second, a strong wind blew the door open and revealed Alyiah’s form in the doorway. Both the seeker and the former templar turned to greet their unexpected guest. Cassandra shook her head and addressed Cullen one last time before leaving. “You should consider what I have
said as friendly concern, Cullen. However, if I have to use my superiority to see that you don’t face the future a completely broken man, I will.”

Cullen nodded his head and waved for Alyiah to enter at her will.

“That was a check yourself before you wreck yourself speech if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Have you come to gloat, Hero? I’m afraid I have no patience for it.”

“No, in fact, I think I should apologize. I was mistaken in my thoughts and in my actions. I should have done better. I hate to apologize, Commander. It’s not my forte, but here I am.” Alyiah swallowed the shame of it down. Cullen’s lips began to move to speak, but Alyiah held out a hand.

“Let me finish. I think it is important for you to know that I took on that quest at the behest of a very specific person. You may know her as the Witch of the Wilds, I was given the quest to go after Hanna’s weaponry by Flemeth. I may be someone of some clout now, but when I started out here in Thedas, I was a child. Flemeth gave me direction, tools to complete my task. She sees potential in a different way. I believe she may have seen this potential in Hanna. If I am right, I believe Hanna may be safe, well under her protection.”

“Maker.” His response was about what Alyiah had anticipated. So she nodded.

“I have no proof. I don’t even have anyway of knowing what Flemeth plans to do with Hanna. In the end, I have a gut feeling that Hanna will be safe. Please, take it as you will. In the meantime, take care of yourself for her sake.” Alyiah left before Cullen could say anything. As she walked across the bridge to Solas’s room, Alyiah hoped she wouldn’t regret telling Cullen her suspicions.

Deep in her gut Alyiah heard her father’s voice singing her praises and telling her she should always trust her instincts. For the first time in a long time, she let herself miss home.

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Flemeth was a very quiet person. She seemed to thrive in her solitude. It gave Hanna an uncomfortable feeling of intruding. Hanna followed Flemeth against her better judgement. Now that she was here, it seemed even more rude to leave without hearing the woman out. Hanna had little to go on as far as what to expect from the witch. Alyiah hadn’t gone out of her way to explain how Flemeth helped her when she first came to Thedas. It hardly seemed like Flemeth was some benevolent force dispensing free advice and training to unwitting travelers. She must be pursuing some end game.

Her hut in the Kocari Wilds was supposedly destroyed years ago according to Leliana’s brief history of Fereldan. However, in time, they came upon her cozy cabin. Flemeth indicated for Hanna to sit at the dinner table. Hanna tried to get a feeling for what made the witch of the wilds tick. Try as she might the decor of her cabin screamed hermit grandma more than evil witch.

“Surprised, I take it?” Flemeth chuckled. “I am very sorry that I didn’t decorate so crudely for the occasion, but I must admit...I did not expect you so soon.” The older woman returned to the table with two cups of steaming hot tea. Hanna eyed the tea suspiciously. “It’s not going to bite you, girl. I bear you no ill will. Drink.”

“That’s not...I only want to know what it is that you want from me.” Hanna gently picked up the fine ceramic and held it to her lips. The tea was soothing with a minty finish. It wasn’t sweetened, but it had no bitter or acidic notes. It reminded Hanna of home.

“It has never been about what I have wanted. It has always been about what you are to do, to know.
What is it that you would like to know, really.” Flemeth’s voice held a grating quality that Hanna could not quite place. It was too regal for that of a backwoods hermit. She spoke like someone who knew everything that might ever come to pace. Sagelike. Irritating

“I only seek the truth. You seem as able to give me that as all I have come across.”

“Oh, but the truth is not an end to your journey. It is the beginning. When you know the truth, there will be no where else for you to go.” It seemed as though Flemeth was aware of the effect her voice had on Hanna. It was difficult for Hanna to resist getting up and walking away in reaction Flemeth’s evasive tone. “You remind me of my daughter. She never did hide her feelings of animosity towards my manner of speaking. She said it was far too obtuse. Perhaps she was correct.”

“Then tell me the truth. Set me on my path so I can achieve my purpose.”

“Foolish child. Your quarrel is with a higher power than mine. I can not give you what you seek. I am merely a step on the path you walk.” Flemeth tutted Hanna into silence. “I nudge history, when it’s required. Other times, a shove is needed. Things have happened here that were never meant to happen. I was betrayed. The world was betrayed and for what…” Flemeth chuckled mirthlessly. “All of that happened long ago, however, and I know you will take part in the reckoning. My revenge.”

“Wait...Are you talking about...Solas?”

Flemeth’s expression changed to one of curiosity. Silence settled lightly between them. A glimmer of some unreadable emotion appeared in Flemeth’s eyes and she spoke, “What must you have seen with that power of yours? Well, don’t stop on my account speak!”

“I saw… I don’t know what I saw, but whatever it was it was not good. Solas destroyed an entire city thousands maybe millions of people. He created the veil between us and the fade. When I confronted him, he acted like it was all some big misunderstanding.”

Flemeth nodded. “I agree it was a mistake. He was always one to act rashly, emotionally. However, he was also once my dear friend long, long ago. It is unfortunate.”

“A mistake?! He murdered those people all of those people.” Thedas was full of people whose motivations seemed centuries in the making. Of course this woman would have known Solas in some bygone era. Who the fuck wasn’t secretly an ancient being inhabiting a hobo?

“He acted without thinking of the consequences. More accurately the consequences for such a thing were unknown. I do not fault him for his actions, however I do believe that he is wrong and must be stopped.”

“I can’t believe you...wait what?” Hanna had already planned her response before Flemeth finished. “You intend to stop him.”

“I don’t intend to let him continue to rip apart the fabric of this world.” Flemeth seemed amused again. “And neither should you.” Flemeth stood and took away the drained tea glasses. She returned with dried meat, fruit and a small bun. “You must eat. For what I have set in motion will leave you drained.” When Hanna made no move to touch the food, Flemeth implored her. “Quickly now girl, we haven’t much time.” Hanna begrudgingly ate the food set before her. After the first bite, she realized how hungry she had been not eating for so long. It was enough to make her forget why she might need to hurry at all.

A few minutes later, Hanna felt bone deep exhaustion. She was unprepared for how quickly the feeling settled over her and when Flemeth offered to let her sleep in a warm bed, Hanna didn’t argue.
It was only in the moments before she fell asleep that she realized that the tea must have been spiked with something.

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It was a regular Sunday. Everything was normal, everything but the fact that she had fallen asleep in church. That was particularly abnormal for her. Hanna enjoyed the simple routine that she had done for Sundays unknown in number. It was never boring to her.

When she took time to look around she noticed that it was also strange that she was alone in her pew. No family, no friends. The church was moderately full. Enough space for every family to sit without having to share space. The priest had his head bowed in prayer over the Lectionary. It was hard to tell if he had finished reading from the gospel or not. Everyone was still, silent. Hanna bowed her head to pray.

After a few minutes, she heard a shuffling to her left and to her right. Someone had decided to join her over halfway through the mass. When she peeked beside her, she didn’t know how to respond. The priest began his sermon and Hanna couldn’t hear him. To her left was Jack, his head lulled to the side lifeless. He looked as he had when she saw him last emaciated and emitting a strange red glow. To her right was Cullen, his head bowed in prayer. The memorized words of the chant fell from his lips. Hanna stood and looked around. How could no one have noticed these men? Cullen’s sword hung from his belt. Jack was basically dead. The only one to take notice was the priest. He stopped mid-sentence and approached Hanna.

“For what do you you abandon our Lord?”

“I would never abandon…” The priest looked angry when Hanna denied his accusation.

“I have seen that you have abandoned the Lord, Our God. I did not ask if you would betray him. I asked why. Why would you betray your God?” Then all eyes in the church turned to her. Many looked as angry as the priest. Some looked like they pitied her for her weakness. Jack lay still motionless beside her. Cullen looked up from his clasped hands. She could feel the pain and anger and compassion and fear. Suddenly she remembered why she abandoned her beliefs.

“I wanted to die. I wanted to go home. I was out of control. I betrayed what I knew was right because I am weak. I betrayed Him because I was so broken that dying felt like the only way to survive.” It felt like she had been stripped bare in public. She felt vulnerable.

At her words the priest smiled and nodded knowingly. He turned to the congregation thoughtfully and announced, “One of the flock has returned and our Lord rejoices. Shout with joy with me for the children of God for he says ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ Those who fail through their frailty and still seek to return are worthy, for ours is a God of forgiveness.”

For decades, Hanna had found solace in the teachings of Christ. At this moment these were to words her soul needed to hear to heal. She had been sent on a journey of healing. This was a world within her. This was her perception of the world, she had a choice now. She could change her perceptions.

So now without fear or guilt she turned to the limp body of Jack and changed her perception. Instead she decided to remember him as he had been on Earth, whole and happy and ready for the next step in his life. She closed her eyes and pictured him as the man standing next to her in those photos on her phone. When she opened her eyes, she was no longer sitting in a church. Jack sat across from her at a table.
It was her favorite restaurant. A rundown family diner with terrible service, worse food, and even worse decor. She’d never actually taken Jack here at any point during their whirlwind romance. It was in the town where she grew up and probably went out of business sometime after she had left and gone into the service.

“Woah, check out this run down gem.” Jack smiled at her. “What’s good to eat here?” Hanna shook her head. She was a little starstruck. She was always starstruck by him. He was just, Jack.

“Absolutely none of it. If you don’t want indigestion don’t order anything.”

Jack laughed heartily. “If that’s the case, sweetheart. Let’s just talk then.” His serious tone shift was sudden. “I came to save you and I failed. I failed too, Hanna. That’s important for you to know. I told you what I knew. A man named Marcus is in the service of Corypheus. He has a glove that is a one way trip back home. It is unlikely that he will attempt to use it again, but he may try to lure you away from safety with it. Don’t fall for the trap. Stay here. You can live a productive life here.” He winked. “Plus, Cullen is quite the catch. He needs support and love. And you can give that to him.”

Hanna was speechless. “I’m so sorry, Jack. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t been so insecure. I should have known what I had while I had it. I should never have run away that night.” Jack shook his head and reached across the table to cradle her head in his hand. “I never deserved you. You’re right. I can’t make the same mistake twice. I can’t lose Cullen too.”

An eternity passed between them, Hanna leaning into Jack’s hand. Jack humming a soothing tune. Hanna never wanted it to end, but as all things it had to. A shadow fell over their table in the dim fluorescent light of the diner. Cullen gave Jack a respectful pat on the back and something unspoken passed between the two men.

“I love you.” Jack said as he stood to leave.

Hanna stood and hugged him close before he could get too far away. “I’ll miss you. You were everything I ever needed. I love you, too.”

When Jack left, Cullen indicated that he would rather have whatever conversation they were about to have elsewhere. Hanna agreed to show him around her childhood neighborhood. They left the diner, and Hanna looked both ways down the street and saw that Jack had disappeared.

“You finally made your choice.” Cullen started awkwardly.

“Is this real or a dream?” Hanna mused avoiding the conversation momentarily. Cullen began a sentence, but Hanna waved a finger at him signalling for him to wait his turn. “Would I believe you either way? In some way it must be a dream, I was able to mold it by changing my perception. In other ways, I don’t feel like it is. Like why would a dream version of my dead fiance and my current suitor share such a heartfelt moment without me knowing exactly what was exchanged.” Hanna continued and Cullen didn’t stop her. “It doesn’t make sense. If you’re dreaming you have full control. No part of your mind is shielded. So if that’s the case this must be the fade.”

“Now that you’re quite settled, can we speak?” Cullen reached for the back of his neck. His expression was pained. Hanna stopped walking and pulled his hand away. She investigated his face. The dark circles around his eyes. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. It had grown worse in her absence. “I guess not.” He said indignantly.

“I did this.” Hanna’s words hung heavily in the air. Cullen looked at her expressionless. He didn’t rebut her words. He didn’t speak. She watched his Adam’s apple bob twice before she spoke again. “Cullen, I should never have hurt you like this.”
“Come home, Hanna. The Inquisition needs you.” He swallowed again harder and pitched his voice down. “I need you.” His words were heartfelt. Painful to hear. “Do you know what Mahanon is doing right now? It’s worse than it was after the phone incident. His decision making is muddled. He can’t run the Inquisition this way.” Cullen’s hands came to rest just under Hanna’s shoulders as he held her to him. She let her hands lace behind his neck. “Please, come back to us.”

“I was so worried.” Hanna was surprised that Cullen didn’t turn her away. “I thought I could never face you again. I thought I had ruined everything. I was sure that you would never look at me again.” Her words were muffled by the fact that she was speaking directly into his chestplate. Hot tears that she didn’t remember falling were flowing in rivulets down her face. She hiccuped a few times trying to recover some semblance of sanity. “I couldn’t stand to think of a life back in Skyhold. I would either be free to wander never knowing if I might hurt someone or I would become Tranquil and live unaware of how broken I’d become.”

Cullen let her words settle before pushing her back to look deep into her eyes. “I am so angry. I am frustrated with you. I hated you. For moments on our returning trip, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to look at you again.” Cullen’s face was red and his eyes were flush with tears. His grip tightened when she looked away and Hanna squirmed uncomfortably. There was a ferocity to his demeanor that was terrifying. “However, I am not some child with affections as weak as a summer breeze. I love you so, that it is terrifying to admit how deeply I have fallen for you. I love you. I have known it for some time that I loved you and I will say it again and again until you cannot find it in your heart to ask anymore.”

“I...I love...I mean.. I do.” Hanna stuttered in shock. Cullen pulled her close again and laughed.

“Let’s leave the I do’s for when we get married.” Hanna shivered at his mention of nuptials. “We can discuss all of that later as well. For now, just come back home.”

“I can’t yet. There is something I must do. If I get the opportunity, I will write Mahanon and tell him where I am going and when to expect me. I know the ball at Halamshiral is fast approaching. I do not intend to miss it.”

“That makes one of us.”

Hanna closed her eyes and when she opened them again she felt well rested for the first time in an age.

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The meeting of the War Council on the day Mahanon arrived had gone about as poorly as could be anticipated. Mahanon was constantly second guessing his own decisions. He had little interest in any of the urgent matters pertaining to troop assignments and spy intelligence. The only time he seemed focused was when Leliana made her report from her network. Her spies had been able to track Hanna as far south as the Kocari Wilds, but soon lost the scent in the dense foliage. It seemed as though a supernatural force was shielding her. Alyiah and Cullen decided silently that it was better not to offer false hope until they had more information. The meeting was adjourned with more to do when they left the War Table than when they approached it.

Cullen returned to quarters on Cassandra’s assistance and used some of the herbs recommended by Hanna and Solas to brew a satisfactory tea. He hoped it would lead him to a dreamless sleep. When he woke up in a building far different than any he had ever seen before, Cullen looked for Hanna. It didn’t take him long to realize that he had fallen into her dream somehow. When he came to her, it
was obvious that her head was bowed in silent prayer. On her other side, Cullen saw a shadow of the man he believed to be Jack. He was obviously as broken as he had been the last time Hanna saw him.

Cullen decided not to interrupt Hanna in her personal moment, that what he had to say was momentarily less important. So instead he knelt and said his prayers in a temple to her God. The reverse of her situation in reality. When Hanna stood, Cullen felt his heart begin to race. How would he face her? The last time he had tried, he had lost his voice and had to turn away. When the man in some kind of ritual vestments came down from the alter, Cullen was confused. Unsure. He was speaking to Hanna. At her. But the language was unfamiliar to him. The man was obviously angry.

Hanna looked to Jack first and that stung Cullen more than he wanted to admit. Then she turned and Cullen refused to look away. He did not attempt to mask his feelings. Hanna then spoke to the man again. His expression changed and the tension in the crowded church dissolved. In a sudden flurry, the setting shifted. He was standing outside of a strange glass building. Inside, he could see Hanna sitting across from Jack. Her body language had changed. She was more relaxed. He watched their reunion feeling a little dirty, voyeuristic. He wondered if someday Hanna would be that open and relaxed with him in Thedas. He was instantly jealous of the relationship. When they had finished talking, Cullen tried to find his way into the building. He reasoned that there had to be a door. When he found the door, he spent several minutes trying to pull open the door. It was a kind woman in strange clothes similar to Hanna’s clothes when she first arrived that opened the door.

He pushed passed her to find Hanna and Jack. Cullen gently interrupted the moment by placing a hand on Jack’s back. Jack locked eyes with him for a moment before he finally moved to leave. Cullen was able to read a lot about Jack from the promise and the threat he held in his eyes.

Cullen woke up the following morning at peace with himself and with Hanna. He was relieved that he could let the others know that Hanna had found a safe place, she intended to return, and hoped to update everyone soon. It was enough that he dressed quickly to run through drills with his men. His change in mood eluded no one. It helped to ease some of the stresses of the prior week. When Cullen came to the meeting following a bath and breakfast, nothing could have dampened his spirits.

Mahanon, Cassandra, Josephine and Alyiah had arrived ahead of him. A soft smile came to his lips when he realized how relieved everyone would be to hear the news.

“I know I should wait until our Spymaster arrives, but I have to share that I met with Hanna last night in the fade. She had pulled me to her somehow to let me know she is safe. From what I could tell, she was in a much better state of mind than she had been when she ran. The only thing is she was very cryptic about where she was and when she would return.” Cullen shared his experience with the entire council when Alyiah and Leliana arrived after obviously enjoying a night together. Their eyes were hooded and they winced at even the slightest sound.

Alyiah spoke first. “The spies lost her trail in the Kocari Wilds.”

Then Leliana added, “And Flemeth has taken an interest in her.”

“It’s only reasonable to believe that Flemeth has something to do with this. She seems to be everywhere when something big is going on.” Alyiah finished.

“I will make preparations and take a party south with haste. We need to check on the men in the Fallow Mire anyway.” Mahanon spoke decisively.

The meeting proceeded naturally as if nothing had happened prior to this week. It was enough to know that Hanna was safe. Cullen groaned as he left the war room. With the resolution to Hanna’s
disappearance on the horizon, he now had to be a part of the preparations for the ball and Halamshiral. Suddenly he was hoping for a threat to appear so that he might avoid the trouble of learning to play the Game.
Sunlight floated and glimmered in the air above Hanna as she lazily opened her eyes. The hut was still as warm and inviting as it had been before she fell into the most restful sleep she had in years. For several heartbeats, Hanna felt as if everything was suddenly okay. It was as if she had come home and all of her insecurities and fears had melted in the journey. Then a barely perceptible tension tugged at her. It was her connection to the fade. The recognition was like a lightning strike that snapped her awake and alert.

Flemeth was already awake when Hanna sat up in bed. The old woman was still a mystery to her. Hanna couldn’t help but feel like she was being tricked somehow. The good old Hansel and Gretel finding a witch in the woods story came to mind. All she was missing was breadcrumbs to lead her home. However, Hanna couldn’t shake the feeling that it was possible that she was being tricked in a net positive way. The woman hadn’t taken notice of Hanna, so she had plenty of time to peek around. Her eyes were drawn to the difference between the Flemeth she put on as a mask outside of her hut and the one she saw now.

This woman was almost the exact opposite of the majestic or at least royal woman she met yesterday. Her gray hair was worn ragged, unkempt about her face. Her clothing had taken a considerable downgrade from the absolutely ridiculous feathered armor. Where her armor was immaculately polished, her dress had been patched numerous times. Her movements seemed less fluid. Yesterday Flemeth had the air of a spunky Grandma in her prime. Today, the woman just looked old. Old and Tired.

Flemeth’s eyes finally floated across the room to meet Hanna’s. She leveled Hanna with a look of ‘I’m too old for this shit’. Flemeth drained the remnants of her cup, and stood. She walked toward Hanna, cane in hand. Silently. She stopped a foot short of the side of the bed.

“I take it you have recovered?” Flemeth said. Her eyes narrowed, scrutinizing Hanna for something. Hanna found her scrutiny more unnerving than anything about Flemeth. In the end, she seemed to have found what she was expecting and nodded. Hanna wondered what would have happened if she had been found wanting. “You are uniquely capable of this task, aren’t you?” Flemeth’s hand reached out for Hanna’s cheek. Her touch was motherly and soothing. Her voice was almost reverent.

Something in her tone made Hanna’s stomach flip over and die somewhere around the base of her pelvis. It was a forlorn tone. An apology. Hanna wanted to be anywhere but here. Talking about anything but whatever Flemeth wanted to discuss. She floundered for an alternative course of conversation.

“I, uh...I need to let the Inquisitor know what I’m doing. Can I, I mean, do you have a method of contacting him?” Flemeth responded to Hanna with an exasperated sigh. A perfect facsimile of her
own mother when she told Hanna that she made her bed and now she must sleep in it.

“What happened to you while I was...away?” Hanna didn’t quite want to call what happened sleep, even if that’s all it was.

“Whatever do you mean, child?” The witch responded nonchalantly. It was starting to really grate on her that Flemeth continually called her ‘dear’ or ‘child’ or even worse ‘girl’.

“I don’t intend to offend, but you got wrecked.” Hanna indicated noncommittally to Flemeth’s hair and clothes. “I mean, where did all that hair go? And your armor?”

Anger flashed through Flemeth’s features. Just long enough for Hanna to see it before it was buried in the expression of sincerity that Hanna was avoiding.

“We all must make sacrifices in times such as these. That is the price of a future worth having.” Flemeth spoke solemnly.

Understanding came in waves. Flemeth had done something to Hanna. Something to heal her mental state. Something that gave her mind exactly what it needed. She had done this at some personal cost. Hanna would feel much worse if it wasn’t clear that this was a tit-for-tat situation. Flemeth healed her so that she would be capable of … something

as foreboding as that was.

Hanna let her mind wander on the possibilities and didn’t even notice that Flemeth had spoken again until she heard a final syllable that made very little sense. “-dy?” It was clear she had asked a question. Perhaps ‘Are you ready?’ To which Hanna’s almost perpetual answer would always be a resounding ‘No’.

Instead of waiting for her to respond, Flemeth pulled an orb from within herself and pressed it into Hanna’s cheek. The orb was surrounded by a terrifying magical aura. The blue and black smoke of the orb was the last of her concerns. The moment orb met her fade-scarred face felt shattered in a storm of fire and pain.

Hanna felt like she was everywhere all at once. Through one eye, she could see the fade and through the other she could see the world as it was. As she was. Hanna was frozen in place, however, she could see that Flemeth was not. The witch did not stay to survey the plan she had brought to fruition. Hanna watched the crone stand and summon some kind of portal. As soon as she stepped through it, the cabin changed around her. It became empty and run down. Abandoned. The initial shock of what happened settled and panic set in.

Time slowed to a crawl and it felt like all there had ever been and would ever be was pain. She could see so much, but she was blinded by the volume of it. Every nerve ending was rewritten by the pain of what was happening. She felt every twitch of her muscles and every crack in her bones like a tsunami following the vibrations of an earthquake.

All at once, Hanna could see the other side. A bright light beckoned her near and she mindlessly obeyed praying for relief. When she reached the light, she started hearing whispers. Aged, wizened, numerous, comforting. Moments later she passed out. Still magically held in place.

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It soon became clear to Mahanon that the horses could not manage the knotted terrain of the Kocari
Wilds. He signalled for his party to stop and dismounted his horse. In addition to the Iron Bull and Dorian, his favorite traveling companions, Manny had brought Blackwall and Cole. He sent Solas, Cassandra, Varric, and Sera to scout ahead in the Western Approach. Mahanon wondered if sending that composition together was a great idea. Alyiah wanted to check-in with some Grey Warden contacts she had to see if she could uncover more information on where to find the Wardens.

When Cullen mentioned that Flemeth had taken an interest in Hanna, Leliana had reacted with strong concern. While she did not mention what was concerning, Leliana insisted on coming herself with a small party of scouts and soldiers. Manny remembered asking Leliana to join them from Haven once, she told him at that time to do so would leave her functionally blinded. It caught Mahanon off guard to see her with them. It was like the end of the world was coming.

A small group of soldiers were left behind to walk the horses around the dense foliage. Leliana led the group to the ruins of Ostagar. In all of his travels, Mahanon had never seen such a haunted place. Leliana led the way through the blighted ruins solemnly. When they reached the graves, Leliana touched the soil around one of the graves and pulled back a long black hair. It didn’t mean that Hanna had been there, but it was indicative of someone having been there.

Leliana turned to ask Dorian if he could use the hair to track Hanna down. Mahanon turned to see his lover wide-eyed and staring straight through her. It was difficult to determine if he was scared or just surprised. Then Mahanon remembered, Dorian was a necromancer.

“What is it?”

“There is a strange young woman hovering over that grave?”

“Is she...Did she see Hanna? Can you ask her?”

“Can I ask her?” Dorian sounded exasperated. “Have you never heard of ghosts, dear? They are always out of their minds unable to pass on to the Beyond.” It was as if Mahanon had asked him to kiss a frog from Seheron. Bull backed away several steps before speaking.

“Have you ever gone somewhere and not experienced weird fade shit?”

“Wait.” Dorian said. “I think she reacted when you asked about Hanna. Have you seen our friend?” Dorian waited several heartbeats. “You have then? If you don’t mind, can we make a deal then? I would need to borrow your skull. I assume one of these is yours?” Dorian turned to the others. “She seems pretty excited to come along. Don’t worry loves, this will only take a moment.”

Dorian knelt to the ground and summoned magic that moved the earth settled over one of the graves. He retrieved the skull from the woman’s skeleton. Using several stones from a pouch on his belt he adorned the skull very carefully and wove some dark green magic around it. With a crack of lightning, the ghost’s incorporeal form became visible.

“So, tell me. What do you know about Hanna?”

“On one condition.” The ghost paused and Dorian nodded. “You make this permanent. I come around with you. You would be surprised how helpful I can be.”

Dorian’s nose scrunched. “No offense, dear. I believe the collection I have is more than enough.” He indicated two more pouches on his belt. Mahanon was kind of grossed out to know that his boyfriend made a habit of carrying exhumed human skulls on his person.

“That’s too bad. Then I fear we are at an impasse.” The ghost looked at her nails and scrunched her lips sucking her barely-existent teeth. “No way around it. Poor Hanna’s left to her own defenses in
this situation. Oh well, let me go then. I just stay here and wait for Hanna to come meet me.”

“She’s got you there, Vint.” The ghost smiled at Iron Bull and then winked. The Iron Bull flinched away.

“Ma Vhenan, please.” Mahanon was surprised at himself. He hadn’t thought of his relationship with Dorian in terms of love or future. Dorian had no concept, no way to understand Mahanon’s sudden confession. Mahanon was surprised by it himself, however the more surprised party was the ghost.

“What?! No, I always shipped Doribull.” When her outburst was met with only confused looks, the ghost started mumbling under her breath in a way that reminded Mahanon of Hanna. Dorian looked from the ghost to Mahanon with mild amusement.

“Oh the things I do for love.” Dorian grumbled before beginning another ritual of some sort. Mahanon had to admit he was grateful that he had sent Cassandra with the other party. The Seeker never would have approved of this. At the end of the ritual, the ghost woman jumped for joy before running to Mahanon and hugging him.

“I will forever be grateful to you, Inquisitor.” Mahanon was surprised when the ghost referred to him by title. “I might even start shipping you with Dorian. Maybe even a three way.” Nicole waggled her eyebrows suggestively. Mahanon chose to ignore her strange earth phrases and their implications.

“You know of me? I suppose Hanna must have mentioned me, uh...I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

“My name is Nicole, and boy do I know a lot more where that came from. I have wallowed away for ten years nearly driven crazy by the constant isolation. No longer. We will go to the crone’s cabin and find your girl. After that, I’ve got plans.” Nicole spoke faster with every word. Her voice held a similar accent to that of the Hero of Fereldan, but it was a lot lighter the way she bounced off of syllables and rolled over others, was like a feather floating on a gentle breeze.

“You are another then? Woman from Earth.” Cole’s manner of speech was something Mahanon was still getting used to. While he was grateful to Cole for finding Hanna and him after Haven, he still struggled to remember he was there even at the best of times.

“Oh! Cole too! What a great party you have here your Inquisitorialness.” Nicole waved a direction for them to go. While they walked, the ghostly woman talked nearly non-stop. It was clearly her reaction to the isolation of her previous predicament. The way through the woods was twisted and full of wolves and spiders. A few of the trees still held the stench of the blight, Mahanon only hoped they wouldn’t run into Darkspawn. While the group walked, Nicole lead them to several points of interest. Spots where campers had fallen prey to the Wilds, journals long abandoned detailing the daily lives of refugees, and other various nearly pointless information.

“I didn’t see them go in, but I know the witch was here for several weeks wandering the wilds. I think she comes here to get away and build strength for various spells.” Nicole pointed at the open door to the worn down and visibly abandoned shack. Mahanon became very wary and wondered if they had all been duped. Leliana drew her daggers and stealthily moved ahead to check for danger. After she had moved towards the cabin Dorian perked up.

“Wait. I do sense that a very large spell was cast here recently. It is almost certain that what we find in that cabin, may not be what we are hoping to find.” Dorian spoke seriously. It was doubly terrifying to Mahanon. “Let me dispel whatever wards I can.”

Blackwall put his hand on Mahanon’s shoulder and Iron Bull gently clapped him on the other side a
few times. Almost as if to say everything would be fine. Cole watched Dorian move towards the shack.

“Pain, shock, panic. It’s all too much. What did that witch do to me? That bitch. I never got to tell Manny where I was. He’ll be so worried. I never got to apologize for leaving. Am I going to die here? After everything?”

Mahanon was never more thankful for Cole’s prying and invasive nature. His ears perked and he made eye contact with each of his companions before rushing passed Dorian into the cabin. He turned to the right and saw her. Frozen still sitting up in bed like she had just awoken. Her mouth was slightly agape in an expression of shock. Her hands were in front of her as if she had tried to push someone away before becoming a statue. Her eyes were wide open, staring blankly ahead.

Mahanon ran to her side and hugged her to him. Her body was cold to the touch and as solid as stone. He raised his hand and waved it back and forth in front of her eyes. “Cole, does she know we’re here. Can she see us?” Before Cole could answer in the affirmative, Mahanon got his answer in a tear running down her face. When he focused on the droplet, Mahanon could tell that something was different. Everything

Hanna’s left eye had changed color to a dark green highlighted with sparkling bronze. Some magic had been used on Hanna’s face and her fade marked cheek was no longer only blue in hue. There was black twisted in with the blue. Worse the mark looked alive. Some of the smoky aura of the spell remained frozen in time around her face. “What happened to you?” His voice cracked even as he tried to hold in his fears.

Dorian came to her side and observed the changes. Though he was no healer, Dorian seemed to know his way around a magical ritual or two. He touched the skin of her cheek only to pull away with a string of Tevinter curses. He instead touched the skin of her wrists and closed his eyes. Soon a purple glow of expended mana started to drift from the connection. Dorian dropped her wrist with a disappointed sigh. Then as he stared at the dissipating mana, an idea almost visibly hit him.

He turned to the spymaster, who was investigating the ruins of the cottage. Mahanon didn’t dare to believe he could read Leliana, however, it didn’t take a scholar to tell that she was upset.

“Leliana, if I might ask. Do any of our esteemed inquisition soldiers have a templar background?” Dorian rubbed his chin adorably. Mahanon very nearly swooned despite the situation and himself. “I believe that our dear friend is in need of what you southerners call a silence. My attempts to dispel the magic have been ineffective, but a silence may if not stop the spell slow it to where she is able to function despite the continuing effects.”

Leliana seemed lost in thought, but she paused long enough to nod. Mahanon made a note to ask the spymaster why she was so determined to come on this particular mission. He wondered what her history was with the Witch of the Wilds. The Nightingale called for one of the soldiers to come in and perform a silence. He was a young recruit fresh from the chantry. It was common knowledge that Hanna was dating the Commander, and the young man had the look of someone who would idolize the Commander for taking a shit. Needless to say Mahanon was not sure that this man was the one he wanted trying out a silence on his best friend.

Dorian quite admirably explained his theory to the templar, and the young man seemed only a little nervous at the prospect of silencing the Commander’s girlfriend. To his credit, he only trembled in the task when, after drawing his sword as his focus for the silence, Mahanon gripped his own hilt in warning.

“Steady on, we need it to drain the mana of the spell that is cast slightly. Too much and you will end
the spell, which may well kill her.” Dorian added as the soldier began to focus.

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Hanna couldn’t tell for sure what they were doing standing at her bedside. She could hear voices but they sounded distant. There was no way for her to know how long she had been there. How long the spell had gone on. How much longer it would continue. The voices were moderately helpful in letting her know that she wasn’t dying so much as becoming a fusion of existences. The orb that had been deposited into her was a spirit or something along those lines. The pain she felt was the spell solidifying her connection to the fade in such way that she could now see through the veil in her eye above the mark. She could see into the fade, which guided her to the realization that the fade was less a separate plain and more overlapping than she had known.

When she realized that the young soldier at her bedside was charging up for a silence, Hanna could see the fade bend and twist around him it was like seeing his reflection in a funhouse mirror. When he released the silence, the fade rushed away from her in a way that felt like he pulled the rug from beneath her. She gasped as the air rushed from her lungs and her body fell limp into the moth-eaten cushion beneath her.
Who isn’t secretly an ancient being inhabiting a hobo?

Chapter Notes

Working through writers block here. Just riding the wave to the next stop.

Hanna hated being right.

To be completely truthful, Hanna wasn’t ‘right’ because she never predicted her current predicament. Hanna never could have predicted exactly where all of Flemeth’s plotting was going to land her. Every fiber of her being felt drained. She wasn’t sure when the pain stopped, or if perhaps her nerves had just given up on translating the feeling adequately to her brain. She felt raw like a burn victim whose flesh had been seared and scarred. The memory of her pain felt sealed permanently in her skin.

The feeling was amplified by the embarrassment of the massive party accompanying Mahanon to save her. In the moments after the silence, Hanna listened to the young recruit. She could almost feel his heartbeat quicken. His breathing hitch. She wanted to assuage his fears. If something had put the nail in her coffin it surely wasn’t his bending of the fade. Instead, she mustered something between a groan and a weak cry.

Her rescue party fell upon her like so many locusts on wheat. Mahanon was the quickest, the closest to her. He crushed her to his chest and whispered heated prayers and curses against her crown. She melted into him and let the tears she had been holding back fall.

A mass of arms descended behind him, if not to hold then just to touch. Hands whispering over her skin in soothing motions. A temperamental sound clung in her throat as her newly enhanced perception washed over her senses. Everyone was too close, too emotional. She was unready for the attentions layered upon her. She was only too thankful when Dorian shooed everyone away to check her over again. When Dorian deemed her safe for travel, Bull scooped her into his arms and cradled her like a small child to his chest with only the mildest grunt of inconvenience.

Hanna fell gracelessly into a deep slumber, rocked by Bull’s soothing cadence and the knowledge she was safe with Mahanon and crew.

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Leliana was disappointed. It seemed to Mahanon that there was something very specific she was looking to gain from a confrontation with Flemeth. Now with Hanna on the road to recovery from whatever the infamous Witch of the Wilds had thrust upon her, Mahanon attempted the futility that was trying to read the Spymaster’s opinion about it all.

Leliana startled when she noticed his pointed gaze. He never would have noticed the way her eyes widened and her spine stiffened, if he hadn’t been staring so intently. She spoke first.

“I apologize, Inquisitor.” Her expression changed to one of almost sheepish guilt. “I can’t explain why I came. It was a matter deeply personal to myself and those who traveled with Alyiah all those
years ago. Flemeth holds power and will just as often make herself an enemy as a friend.” Mahanon thought that maybe he could see the cloistered woman that Leliana had once aspired to be. “I should never have abandoned my post. It was a moment of weakness. One I will not repeat.” She admitted calmly.

Mahanon studied her carefully before responding. Her eyes were downcast. She seemed defeated, deflated. Not in the way she had been after the Temple of Sacred Ashes. That had been fresh survivor's guilt. Anger and grief. This was something more removed. Years of anguish over a decision made, a mistake involving Flemeth then.

“You lose perspective cooped up in your tower with your birds.” He began in the leader voice he had developed and used over the duration of his stay in the Inquisition. He modeled it after his Keeper’s even tone, and it worked well to calm those he used it on. However, Leliana’s brow only furrowed and he realized she could read his attempt to ‘handle’ her. He relented and tried for a more comfortable approach. “What I mean to say is, you need to get out every once in a while if a ghost from the past is what motivates you...well to each his own.” Mahanon winced. Leliana did not appreciate his understanding either. “Alright. Go home, make up for lost time. We will head to the Western Approach following recovering our men from the Fallow Mire.”

Leliana nodded and accepted the order. “At your word, Inquisitor.” The acknowledgement and his title felt like a slap in the face. He had definitely read the situation incorrectly. Leliana felt as distant from him as always, maybe even more so now. She was the most difficult advisor to reach and he was never quite sure how to handle her moods. None of the other advisors could make him feel less competent in his role as Inquisitor.

By the time Mahanon felt settled again, everyone had settled into their nightly routine. Mahanon always took first and last watch. He stared out into the night trying to reflect on how to mend his relationship with Leliana, how to address Hanna when she woke up, what exactly they could do if the entire Warden army of Orlais was AWOL or worse. Thinking about what to do next only made him want to discuss it with Hanna. He longed for the ease of their relationship before the attack on Haven. Before he had formally become Inquisitor and had the fate of the world thrust upon him by the Inquisition.

“I felt a bit of animosity between you and the Nightingale over there earlier.” Nicole appeared behind him while he was deep in thought. “Don’t take it too personally. She’s lived a long time and has been betrayed by many different people, generally people she trusted who had power. You remind her of them. Don’t worry though, she is the best. But, you don’t get her level of skill without taking a few L’s if you catch my drift.”

Mahanon tried to play down his startled yelp as a hiccup. Ineffectively. The ghost giggled at him. “Wh…” He swallowed and tried again. “How do you know these things? Haven’t you been dead for over a decade.”

“Oh you poor sweet thing.” The ethereal form’s accent was a thick honey covering her words. “I come from another world. Like your dearest Hanna. However, I have an advantage. I have more foreknowledge than she could ever gather in one of her little fade trips in my pinkie finger. I know this story, I sank hundreds of hours into studying every detail of this world. I know your history. I know your future. I know what happens at every twist of fate.” Just as her words began to settle in that deep and fearful place in his heart, she spoke again. “Lucky for you, you chose a useful ghost to haunt the most divine ass Tevinter has ever produced.”

“Dorian does have some very fine qualities.” Mahanon tried not to think of the possible consequences of releasing Nicole to find Hanna. Maybe there wouldn’t be any consequences. Yeah,
none of his actions had any consequences.

“See Lavellan, I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship.” Nicole plopped down on the log beside Mahanon. “Now, tell me again where you’re headed…”

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Sleep didn’t suit Hanna at all. She was in the fade the instant she fell asleep. Something inside her told her that it was unavoidable. Whatever had happened to her, it changed her inside and out. It was obvious that it had changed her perception of the fade and of reality as a whole. Movement in the corner of her eye brought her into the present away from her thoughts.

“I’m warning you, whoever you are, I’ve had a pretty shitty day and I am not in the mood for a possession.” But when Hanna turned to look there was nothing. No one.

“I’m afraid it’s a little late for that,” A woman or the wisp of one made of the same blue/black fog that had tainted her fade mark stepped away from inside Hanna like a shadow gained sentience. Hanna could not contain a scream as she backed away in fear. The shadow had very little in terms of distinguishing facial features other than two glowing green eyes. Eyes that emoted more humor than the moment truly deserved.

“What?” The deadpan tone of Hanna’s voice shocked even her.

“You are dimwitted then? I thought mother said that you were uniquely suited for this task. I guess she was mistaken.” The eyes narrowed and sized Hanna up. She had never felt so naked. “No matter.”

“What?!” Thoughts raced faster than Hanna could give them words. Who the fuck did this thing think it was? Who did it think she was? Regardless, it was obviously mistaken. “You are...No, I’m being possessed by you? Who the fuck are you supposed to be?” Hanna’s rage and fear bubbled over the surface.

“To be fair possession does not quite describe our arrangement. I am as much a part of you as you are a part of me. This is why I say it is no matter. What has been done is complete. It cannot be reversed. We are one in the same no different than two toes on the same foot. One body, one spirit. Were we to be divided you will die as will I without proper preparation.” The wisp woman spoke with the same mindless abandon a cat owner might discuss worldly affairs with a cat. She patted Hanna’s cheek in a manner that may have been meant to comfort before simply slipping back into Hanna’s body. Hearing the woman’s voice inside her head was not any more comforting than the moment truly deserved.

“Do not worry. It is not as if I could make you do anything you are not more than capable of doing. I have spent considerable time and energy getting to know you. Truthfully, think nothing of it.”

“Who are you?”

“I think the tension of not knowing is better than the shattering despair that is the truth. I am a woman betrayed in her own time. I am a memory of a shattered being kept safe for a day of reckoning. My mother saved me from myself and cradled me near her breast even when she was slain recklessly, meaninglessly.”

“Your mother is Flemeth…” The wheels ground in the mush of what was left of Hanna’s brain. When the light bulb finally went off connecting Flemeth with Elven Gods of Destruction Hanna face palmed. “For the love of Christ, you’re another one of these God Forsaken Elven Gods. Do you
have no sense of basic decency or decorum? Just going about possessing human women, for Christ’s sake.”

“Oh, we are going to have fun together.” The woman’s voice was gratingly placating. “I have gone through your memories and I must say this new world is truly more fascinating than I gave the Dread Wolf credit for, but what I would like to know more about is this home of yours. Earth. It’s sounds positively charming. Tell me more.”

“Fun? Are all of your thoughts this loaded or will I get a break eventually.” Hanna had a choice. She realized she could interrogate this presence. Grill every word the woman said, or she could patiently catalogue this being’s knowledge and use it. No one said she couldn’t get something for giving something else. If she thought of this ‘arrangement’ as a simple tit for tat, it didn’t make her mind want to explode so much. Of course, the cohabitation of her body was a pretty big ‘tit’ and the ‘tat’ wasn’t quite so guaranteed. “Fine. I’ll tell you all about it, but you have to promise something.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I need to to help me come up with a cover story for all of this. I can’t very well just go home to Skyhold, where Solas is and….Do you understand that? I will become a very large threat to him. No one can know that you are in me.”

“Simple. Flemeth, found you nearly dead by a graveyard surrounded by darkspawn and demons. She decided to give you the training and power you needed to aid the Inquisition and destroy Corypheus.”

“How do I explain you? If someone sees me here they will know you are with me.”

“Dearest, you are the only one who can see me.” She was exasperated. “I am a part of you now.”

“I am obviously talking to you.” Hanna announced in annoyance.

“As you might speak to your heart or your conscience, you can speak to me internally. The only one who can reveal this secret is you.” It was difficult to argue with the woman. Especially when Hanna had no name for her.

“I need to give you a name if this is going to work for me. Unless you’re going to relent and tell me your name.” Hanna took the silence as an answer and pondered an appropriate nickname. “I really have nothing to go on here. You’re wispy, made of mist. Misty?” She let the name hang in the air and then repeated it. “Misty.”

“No.”

“I could just go with ghost.” Hanna snickered. “Spirit.”

“Never. I’d rather you just continued to call me you than refer to me in such a way.”

“Something adequately spooky, maybe something that wouldn’t seem strange if I mumbled it. I wish I knew enough about Elven Gods to just guess your name.” Hanna gasped. “Perfect. You’ll be Ellie.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Absolutely so, trust me it’s better to just go with it. What was it you said. It is no matter, it has already been done.” Ellie sighed and Hanna smiled. “Now that we have solved my problems. My life on Earth was like this…”
“Mahanon,” Dorian’s voice while always a welcome interruption was strained. “I think that Hanna may have been possessed. Her connection to the fade has changed. And her potential energy! She has always had a latent power, but this is...more than any mage I have ever met. And I’m from Tevinter.”

Mahanon had turned to face Dorian with a smile, but it fell as the mage finished his thoughts. The elf turned to Nicole with wide questioning eyes. Nicole just shrugged. “Didn’t happen in the story. Anyone here from Earth isn’t supposed to be here. We just change the story when we get here. Like the Warden that was supposed to become the Hero of Fereldan was actually a Dalish Elf called Tabris.” Nicole paused. “I can’t help but think she died because Alyiah and I were here.”

“How do we know for certain? Let’s ask her when she wakes up.”

“If she’s an abomination, you know what will have to happen.”

“Now wait a second.” Nicole interrupted. “She was away with Flemeth. That witch would not have…” Nicole stopped, froze. It was almost possible for Mahanon to see her mind hard at work thinking through possibilities. “Mythal.”

“Mythal?” Dorian chirped.

“What does Mythal have to do with Flemeth and Hanna?” Mahanon asked with more understanding.

“Nothing. I’m sure that Hanna is safe.” Nicole turned to Dorian. “Holding this form is exhausting, please let me rest.” She held up a finger and looked at Mahanon. “Be sure to call on me before you make any big decisions.” She saluted and Dorian called her back into her skull before gently placing her skull in one of his belt pouches.

“How bizarre. Mahanon, did you notice that you are a magnet for the strangest goings on.” Dorian daintily indicated the tent where Hanna slept, the pouch on his belt, and the Inquisitor’s hand. “Not only have you met four women from Earth now. One of those Earthlings is a ghost you asked your Tevinter boyfriend to bind to find another. Not to mention everything we have seen about your mark.” Mahanon sighed and began to agree, when Iron Bull came out to relieve his watch.

“Don’t stay up on my count.” The qunari’s voice rumbled still partially growling the sleep out of his voice. Dorian stood and took Mahanon’s arm. The Inquisitor did not protest following his boyfriend to bed. It had been a long day after a long week and an even longer month.
Early morning bird songs were Mahanon’s first hint that something was not as it should be. He was supposed to replace Blackwall in the final round of watch. He gently lifted Dorian’s hand from his waist and resettled the blanket over the sleeping man. Mahannon silently prayed these last few moments of beauty sleep would help his love deal with the wicked cold and damp of the Fallow Mire.

The sun was even higher above the horizon than he anticipated. While the forest seemed more peaceful in its light, the camp was not at peace. There was a gathering around the tent where they had left Hanna to sleep the night before. Halfway there, Iron Bull matched Mahanon’s pace with a mumble that sounded like “G’morning, Boss.”

As he pushed his way through the small crowd of inquisition scouts and companions, he could hear Cole and Blackwell sharing some less than amiable words. When Cole noticed Mahanon, he quickly turned to him. Cole seemed very upset, but his voice was so low and moving so fast that Mahanon struggled to comprehend what he said. The elf looked to Blackwall for clarity, but the gruff warrior seemed all the more confused.

“The boy, er, spirit came to me near the end of my watch. He said that I needed to come quickly to help Hanna.” Blackwall indicated Hanna’s still sleeping form on the bedroll in the center of the tent. “It, well, he led me here only to see Hanna’s eye, the one that’s not normal, less normal... was open and her mouth was moving. It seemed like she was having a nightmare and I rolled her back onto the bedroll and tucked her back in, but Cole was not satisfied. He kept on and on about how her voice has changed and he can’t understand her anymore.” Deep bags darkened Blackwall’s eyes, but he didn’t seem concerned about Hanna. More frustrated with Cole.

“Cole,” Mahanon addressed the spirit. “I understand that something is happening, but we can’t help Hanna if you can’t tell us.” He closed his hands on the spirit’s shoulders only to flinch when Cole shrank away. “Slow down, put it in words we can understand. What’s wrong?”

“She’s not the same, she’s not Hanna.”

“What do you mean?” Mahanon asked. At this point, Dorian had joined the group still unkempt from a night of sleeping.

“I fear I must agree with Cole. Something is different about Hanna. I’m not sure how to proceed.” Dorian said reminding Mahanon about the possible possession he had discussed last night without mentioning it to the others.
“Well, if this is... There’s no better time than the present.” Mahanon touched Hanna’s shoulder to shake her awake. She stirred, the sat up abruptly with a gasp. Hanna grabbed his arm just above his hand with a strength he hadn’t know she had. She was startled her eyes were wide and scared.

“Is this real? Am I really awake?” She pulled Mahanon down beside her and looked at him. She touched his face gently. “Oh my God. Oh my sweet Jesus. I am so glad it’s you Manny.” Mahanon flinched involuntarily. He had missed her so much, that it was a blessing to hear her voice, hear her call him Manny one more time.

“What do you mean is this real? What happened to you Hanna? First, you try to kill yourself. Then you run away. You contact Cullen in the fade of all things. Then when we finally find you...Creators, Hanna.”

“I know,” tears of relief came to her eyes. “I know I have so much to explain. I have so much to make up for. I swear on all that is good and holy that I will tell you everything.” She choked on a sob. “But right now, Manny I’m just so glad that I didn’t die. I’m glad I have this chance. I am so sorry. I messed up. I fucked everyone over. Again.” Hanna stood and ruffled his hair. “So, I know I’m holding everyone up. Let’s talk on the road. Okay?”

Mahanon took his time trying to figure out exactly how he wanted to react. He knew that his reaction set up every interaction between Hanna and the rest of the Inquisition from now on. If he came down too hard, she would be ostracized again. If he was too lenient, they would say that she was casting some spell on him. He had to be true to his feelings, but he didn’t want to rip into her so publically.

“No, Hanna.” He put his hand on hers and dropped it by her side as he stood up. “We can’t keep doing this. You will come with us only when I know it is safe. Dorian, Cole, and I will question you. You will answer our questions honestly. If any of us notice something off. You are dead. to. me. I am done with your games. I am done with trusting you to have anyone’s interest but your own in mind.”

With that he walked out and made sure that the soldiers were beginning to pack up camp. With new orders the crowd dispersed, and left the tent empty for Hanna to consider his harsh words and reevaluate her position. He left Bull and Blackwall to supervise and came back to Hanna’s tent after taking a few laps to calm down and think about how to do any of this. Deep down he was just tired. He had been running nonstop for over a month and a large part of his headaches were due to his friend being ultimately selfish or otherwise ignorant of how her actions affected everyone they encountered.

When he knew he couldn’t put it off any longer, Mahanon gathered Dorian and Cole and returned to Hanna’s tent. When he entered, Hanna was on her knees praying. He had seen her do it several times in his time travelling with her, but it had been some time since Redcliffe.

“ Oh my Jesus,

Forgive us our sins,

Save us from the fires of Hell,

Lead all souls to Heaven,

Especially those most in need of thine Mercy,

Amen .”

She drew her hand across her chest in the practiced way she did to begin and end her prayers. She
had told him once that it was “the sign of the cross”, but didn’t explain the significance of it. She opened her eyes and glanced sheepishly over her clasped hands at him.

“Where I come from, in my religion. There are so many prayers. Prayers for mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. I chose to pray a group of prayers until you came back, it’s called the rosary. It’s a prayer to meant to bring peace and God’s mercy. When you do it right.” Hanna’s eyes rolled and she shifted to sitting on the bedroll. “But you didn’t come here to ask me about that. You came to ask about what happened.”

“I didn’t come for you to reframe this to suit yourself. I will ask you questions. Dorian and Cole will evaluate your condition. You will answer honestly. And I will decide what to do next. I don’t know how to forgive you anymore, Hanna. I love you. I know you think you love me...at this point, just be honest.”

Hanna’s eyes watered and she lowered her gaze to his shoes. She nodded her understanding.

“Why did you leave?” Mahanon wanted to add more he wanted to ask if she was scared. He wanted to ask why she didn’t trust him to take care of her the way they had done before. He wanted to let her know how devastating it was every time she proved untrustworthy.

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“I was half out of my mind. Seeing Jack die...what happened after. I was afraid I would be possessed. I was afraid of becoming an abomination that crippled the Inquisition from the inside.” Hanna shook her head and paused. Then moved her fingers as if to count her reasons. “Cullen couldn’t look at me. I was convinced if I made it back to Skyhold something terrible was going to happen. I saw the shadows of my failures all around me. I have a mental illness for Christ sake. One that had gone untreated for so long, I couldn’t even recognize how far I’d gone.”

Hanna sighed. “So instead, I snuck out of camp hoping to make it to some rogue templars, who might just be discerning enough to give me a sunburst rather than death though at the time both were acceptable to me.”

This answer was true, painfully so. Hanna’s heart beat faster. She knew she was going to have to lie smoothly about her new cohabitation with a spirit. She had to make it the work like Ockham’s Razor. Her answers had to be the simplest answers. One down. Mahanon looked to Dorian and Cole. Both the mage and the spirit nodded for him to continue.

“Alright, so how did that lead you here to the Kocari Wilds?”

Hanna didn’t honestly know. “I walked in a haze. I think Flemeth may have led me here. She was anticipating my arrival. I collapsed and ran into this ghost of Alyiah’s friend from Earth…” She paused. That wasn’t exactly necessary information. When Mahanon’s eyes lit up in surprise, she wondered what she might have missed. “While I was talking to Nicole, Flemeth came and carried me away. When I came to, she told me that I needed to be stronger to face the trials ahead of me. She healed me and somehow restored my sanity. Then she cast some sort of fog spell and froze me in place. I think it was to unlock my connection to the fade. I can feel the magic, I can see the fade. In a way I never could before. At first it hurt so much, but now I feel like I could do anything, I think that’s worse.”

Dorian listened to her intently. Mahanon didn’t look at Hanna again until Dorian shrugged. “It sounds just as possible. It would explain the surge in power I sensed.”

Both men looked to Cole. Cole was staring at Hanna. He looked past her for a moment the took a
step toward her. “Your mark is bright, glowing green with magic and fade. A string pulled too tightly
wound and broken. Dark and foreboding, can you really control what has been unleashed?”

Hanna knew Cole well enough to know that he was just repeating what he felt from her. The
question was a good one, and one she couldn’t answer honestly. She stayed silent instead electing to
hear Mahanon’s input.


“I...can’t be sure.” Hanna admitted. She had promised honesty. While her answer felt more like
omission than truth, she continued. “I just woke up and to be honest, it still hurts a lot. Like exposure
to the desert sun after too long underground. I never expected this. It was never my intent to become
a mage, I never knew how to strengthen my connection to the fade. And now. I’m not sure that I
would have chosen it.”

Suddenly indignant, Hanna glared into Mahanon’s eyes. “I didn’t choose any of this, Manny. If I
hurt you these last few weeks...I know I hurt you. But you have to know. My world was crashing
down on me in larger and larger waves...and in my broken state, I was unequipped to handle it. I
know I promised you more. I promised to do more. And I failed. I’m sorry, Manny.” Her words
came as a rush of fear and anger.

Mahanon deflated. He turned to Dorian and Cole and asked them to leave him alone with her.
Dorian left without much complaint satisfied that she was not a danger at present. Cole stayed much
longer staring at Hanna like a puzzle with a few pieces misplaced. Mahanon cleared his throat
encouragingly and the spirit boy left.

Hanna wasn’t sure if she had convinced him. His face remained a stone wall. As closed off from her
as he had ever been. Despite herself she had to marvel at him. He had grown so much just in the time
that she had known him. He was no longer the soft kid that left his clan to spy on the conclave. He
wasn’t as open and trusting. He didn’t use humor to cope like he had once. He had grown into a
strong leader when she wasn’t looking. He’d taken on the end of the world without her.

In that moment, Hanna realized exactly how badly she had hurt him. She could clearly see his
loneliness and isolation. She had promised to be a good friend and confidant. She told him to come
to her for help, but when he needed her, she was off losing herself. When she looked at him in that
light, she knew that she didn’t deserve this. He was being more than accommodating in allowing her
to explain herself, but nothing that she said right now could fix the rift that she built. The only thing
that could fix a fuck up of this magnitude was time.

Seconds turned to minutes, and still Mahanon hadn’t met her eye. When Hanna finally decided she
had to break the silence, his voice squeaked through a dry throat. Tears welled in his eyes. “I’m sorry
too.”

Hanna couldn’t stop herself from rushing to hug him. Time seemed to stand still and move
impossibly fast. Tears melted against the skin of her neck and heavy sobs wracked the Inquisitor.
When Bull came to let Mahanon know they would be ready to go as soon as the last tent was down,
Hanna regretfully release Mahanon. They separated with a promise to share a horse and discuss all
that had happened in the time they had been apart.

The Iron Bull stayed behind after Mahanon left. He leveled Hanna with a look that made her feel
naked. “Welcome back, you look a lot better than the stories would have me believe.”

Hanna felt mortified. No doubt Bull was also disappointed in her failure to return to Skyhold.
“I have told you this before, but a lot of the Inquisition’s stability relies on your well being. If you run away again, I will lead the charge to chain you in the dungeons.” The Iron Bull dropped his guard low enough for Hanna to see the relief that he felt. “But, in the end. I’m glad to have you back. Weird shit happens more when you’re gone.”

Bull turned to leave, but suddenly stopped short. “Oh, right. The Commander sends these and his regards.” He set a box on the ground containing the newly fixed armor she had left behind. As well as the weapons designed specifically for her. Hanna quickly changed from the weak leather armor she had been wearing before. Underneath the material was a note.

“I love you. No matter what the future holds.”

-Cullen

‘If brevity was the soul of wit, then Cullen is too clever by far.’ Hanna thought cautiously.

‘Checking to see if I’m here huh?’ Ellie responded.

‘I will admit I hoped that you were a product of an overactive imagination.’ Hanna answered carefully not to speak out loud. ‘Now, I regret it. Please let me go about my day to day without interruption.’

‘You’re the one who asked me.’

Hanna huffed. How was she going to just ignore Ellie’s presence during the day? It was a weighted question and not one she was ready to answer. In a practiced fashion Hanna chose to ignore it instead.
Out of the Bog, into the Fryer.

Chapter Notes

I am wrestling with cannon plot versus my plot. I really don't want to type every last thing that happens in the game, mostly because if you're here reading fanfiction about DA:I you probably know the game...Anyway, this follows way too closely in a kind of boring way and I'm sick of reworking it.

Since it's such a slog I will have a bonus chapter posted by the end of the weekend. It's just a short view of what Cullen is doing after his dream about Hanna and before preparing for Adamant...and it's really unnecessary to the story, but the smut kind of died for story reasons and I want to throw a bone out to you all.

Love and Peace.

-Bonez

The ride to the Fallow Mire was as pleasant as it had any right to be. Mahanon shared a saddle with Hanna and shared the strange happenings since his departure to Crestwood. Mahanon had to reschedule and push back his trip to the Fallow Mire, but Leliana reported that they had lost contact from the scouts in the region two weeks ago. The reports from before the lack of correspondence detailed that the local Avvar tribe was putting up some resistance to inquisition expeditions in the area. Luckily, rifts and points of interest had been mapped ahead of time.

As the caravan of Inquisition scouts and Mahanon’s escort drew near the Fallow Mire, the rain and mud became more daunting to traverse en masse. At the forward camp, the bulk of their group stayed behind to set up tents and investigate. Blackwall stayed behind to organize the scouts and logistics.

Mahanon led his group to investigate the burned out village on the border of the Fallow Mire and beyond. The wooden shacks had been burnt to deal with an epidemic, then the relentless rain had waterlogged the what remained of the wooden skeletons. Journals detailing the horrific details of whole families burned alive were all that remained. While the Inquisitor vowed to have more people come to investigate the illness and the eradication of the village, time necessitated that they continue on.

Progress proved not only difficult, but also messy as flooded pathways led onward. Dorian grimaced, but so far had managed not to complain for fear of Bull’s jibes. Cole and Hanna brought up the rear of the group and took turns placing Inquisition guideposts every 500 meters or so. It was when placing one of these that Hanna unintentionally disturbed the water and a piercing shriek echoed through the marsh.

“Oh that’s cute.” Bull pointed across the water at a single shambling skeleton warrior. It seemed to be so weak that it was hardly able to raise its rusted sword out of the water as it stumbled forward charging at whomsoever dared to disturb its rest.

“Whatever it is, cute is not the word I would use.” Hanna commented as five battle hardened Inquisition agents stared down a single undead warrior. “Horrifying, maybe?”

“Ghastly?” Dorian chimed in.
“Demonic.” Mahanon finished and motioned for his associates to leave the shambling corpse to its devices.

“Awake.” Cole added unhelpfully.

“Ah, you are all too concerned about it. I’ll take care of it.” Bull took off towards the skeleton through the bog. He must have realized his mistake about halfway through his battle cry as the relatively small shriek caused by Hanna’s small disturbance was put to shame by the deafening cry of tens of corpses in varying states of decay which arose from the depths. With the skeleton’s newfound companions, his pace seemed to increase exponentially from shambling to a disordered run.

“Stay out of the water!” Mahanon shouted stunned by the sudden army amassing around them. He braced behind his shield and looked around for an escape.

“We can’t stand and fight, we will be overrun. Move! We’ll find cover in the buildings in the center of the bog.” Hanna called out. Mahanon acknowledged his agreement with her assessment. The five battle hardened inquisition warriors took off in a hasty retreat.

As they ran, they followed the rickety remains of what was once a shoddy system of bridges and connecting islands. Now that they were careful to avoid any contact with the water, the path became an obstacle course. Eventually, they managed to outrun the shambling corpses and silently apologized to any future scouts that would have to follow their path. When they finally reached the wooden shacks, they found a large Avvar staring at a rift that had been either partially sealed or only partially opened.

The mountain of a man was very forthcoming with information about his cousin who was responsible for the missing scouts and about the puzzling rift. The lady of the skies had sent them to help him heal her scars. Or something to that tune. When Dorian suggested opening the rift so Mahanon could seal it properly, he agreed. Then the whole party turned to look at Hanna.

“Your mark and my mark haven’t had the best history you know.” Mahanon answered her questioning look. He nodded his head to indicate that she should probably move back.

Hanna shook her head. “I want to know, if I am actually stronger now. I promise if I react poorly I will book it to safety.” Hanna tried her best to look determined. The situation interested Ellie immensely.

‘What is this history between the marks?’ Her voice echoed in Hanna’s mind. Hanna had to do everything in her power to ignore Ellie and focus. Hanna drew her daggers and nodded to Mahanon.

‘You really haven’t grasped the depths of our power have you? We are far more together than you were alone.’

“Huh?” A streak of lightning ignited from Mahanon’s hand and there was no pain. A slight glow came from Hanna’s cheek, but no pain lanced through her when the connection was made. Instead a magic barrier formed around her and she began to fight. A rage demon slunk from the rift to her side and she found that her daggers were suddenly frozen in her hands. As she struck out at the demon in the practiced way she had before, ice burst from the wounds she inflicted and the demons bright red goo-like skin dulled and turned to black beneath the ice that formed over its body. When it was fully immobilized, Bull called out to her and swung his axe through the demon. Hanna backed away but was still showered by the splintered shards of frozen demonic ooze. She was only somewhat thankful when she said, “Thanks, Bull.”

A terror demon had knocked Mahanon off of his feet as he fought a shade. Hanna ran to his aide, and as she did she stepped through the fade and transported to his side in seconds. She tried to take all of this in stride, but it was clear that she and Ellie would have to talk about magic in battle.
Hanna nodded unconsciously. Noting for crazy elven spirits that reading her thoughts was extremely unnerving, but commenting on those thoughts was nearly the stroke-inducing.

Hanna swung her arms around for a spinning dagger strike as she pushed the terror demon back, time seemed to slow for everyone except for her. Hanna ran behind the demon taking advantage of the extra time to strike the demon in the back tearing her dagger’s through the moss colored skin. Suddenly, the flow of time returned to normal before Hanna could withdraw and the demon screamed and bucked her off. She managed to keep one of her daggers, while the other was still buried deep in the demon’s shoulder hindering its movement. In a rage the monster swung its tail through the air catching Hanna across the chest and throwing her into a shade. The terror demon tore through the party to reach Hanna, leaving it vulnerable to a freezing barrage of spells from Dorian and another shattering swing from Bull.

The shade Hanna had fallen onto recovered much more quickly than Hanna had despite the beating it had taken from Cole. Hanna held out a hand to deflect a blow from the shade only to unleash a burst of fire from her palm melting through the flesh of the monster and causing it to fall.

The second wave went more cleanly than the first as Hanna was becoming accustomed to the fade bending to her will. Another benefit was her left eye, had been modified by whatever spell bound her soul to Ellie’s. She could clearly see the fade around her and the magic that manifested from it. As terror demons would pull open a curtain of fade she could clearly see where they would exit and warn her companions of the danger which resulted in many parries of confused demons. She was able to manage her distance from her opponents with fade step and carefully timed swings.

Mahanon sealed the rift swiftly after the final demon fell. Then came the questions. “What? How?”

“I told you my connection to the fade was cleared. I can see through the veil.” Hanna pointed to her eye. “Flemeth, did this and now I can just...do things.” Hanna gestured vaguely with her hands.

“That’s unprecedented.” Dorian interjected. He then came closer and touched Hanna’s arm. He looked Hanna in the eyes curiously. “Unless.” He took a step back and asked. “My dear I’m afraid I must ask. Are you harboring any dark secrets?”

“Uh…” Hanna’s eyes fell beneath his inspection. Before continuing she focused her efforts on looking him in the eyes, “No?”

“Real creative. I bet you’re known for your sharp wit.” Ellie laughed.

“I don’t see you coming up with anything better.” Hanna scolded.

“I’m just sharing what I know.” Hanna tried to manage the fumble. “Aren’t you supposed to be an expert? You can study this another time.” Hanna nodded to Sky Watcher who was placidly waiting his turn in the conversation following the rift being sealed.

The large Avvar thanked the Inquisitor and offered to join the Inquisition on the condition that he continued to heal the Lady of the Skies ills. Mahanon accepted his pledge and his advice on taming the region. Sky Watcher mentioned sealing several beacons to calm the spirits in the bog, and he shared that the leader of the Avvar in the keep was the Hand of Korth. He asked the Inquisitor to make it a quick death as the Hand had brought shame by cowardly kidnapping scouts to bring the Inquisitor to him rather than fighting him in an honor match.

After backtracking and setting new guideposts through the path protected by the beacons and sealing
the beacons they missed while running away from the horde, Mahanon and crew were finally able to move onward to the keep. He stopped them for the night in a cabin that seemed to have been largely abandoned rather than burned. Inside was a diary of an elf who had escaped from an alienage only to die alone when his fellow escapees died of whatever plague had ravaged this area and a wraith which was no match for the might of the five person band.

Dorian started a fire and everyone waited until the wood had warmed and dried before laying out bedrolls for the night. It wasn’t until everyone was comfortable and huddled around the fire that Dorian said. “So, where were we? Ah, yes. I was asking you about your sudden and profound use of mana.” Hanna choked on the dry tack she was eating politely to soothe her roiling stomach. “Do you not even realize the immensity of the task it is believing such an audacious lie?”

Hanna didn’t bat an eyelash. “I don’t. Mostly because, I’m not lying. Mythal did her bipity bopity boo magic and here I am. If you want to know what she did to me ask her yourself, but I warn you that woman has built up a great many questions in her life and you’ll most likely be waiting in line for a long time.”

Dorian twisted his mouth in a dissatisfied grimace. He reached into one of his pouches and released his new ghost friend. Nicole promptly came into incorporeal existence and accosted Mahanon.

“It’s been hours Inquisitor! I’m not a pokemon that you can just catch and leave dormant for days at a time. I came with you to see the world not to hide away even more.” Mahanon scooted back in surprise as Nicole took in her surroundings. “Okay, on second thought this place is gross and full of ghoulies even scarier than me.” She turned to Dorian and pointed to the pouch. “I changed my mind put me back.”

Dorian shook his head. “I was hoping to ask you what you, in your infinitely superior wisdom, might make of Hanna’s newfound firepower.”

“Hanna’s...newfound...firepower.” Nicole nodded as if gearing up for a long explanation, but then shrugged. “She went off with the Witch of the Wilds and came back changed. What else is new?”

“That’s not very helpful.” Bull commented.

“It doesn’t have to be. Flemeth is a powerful witch who has survived ages of the worst this world could throw at her. She is a magnet for those in need and she barely asks a trifle for what her help is worth.”

“So what did Hanna trade for this power?” Mahanon asked.

“I traded a flimsy connection to the fade for power to protect those closest to me. I traded a broken heart for a second chance.” Hanna bit her lip anxiously. “I think that I agreed to help her with something. Kind of like a favor to the devil.”

“You got what you wanted in exchange for some unknown favor to be collected upon at some unknown time.” Nicole explained for the Thedosians in the room.

“Exactly.”

“Doesn’t that scare you?”

Hanna curled up on herself pulling her knees to her chest and spoke slowly. “Nothing scares me as much as the deaths of those I wasn’t able to protect. Or the friendships I’ve neglected.” Hanna looked everywhere but at Mahanon. “I knew in order to survive in a meaningful way I had to be stronger. Flemeth offered me more. She helped me find my purpose.”
Nicole nodded. “Makes sense to me.”

“Madness, all of you Earthlings are absolutely mad.” Dorian said dismissively.

“We ought to sleep, tomorrow is going to be difficult.” Iron Bull announced. “The Avvar have never been easy to kill.”

“You will have to kill the Hand of Korth.” Nicole nodded. “He is convinced that you are false prophet and the time that it has taken for you to arrive will only solidify his belief that you are not worthy of your position.” Nicole went on to describe the best way to infiltrate the keep. She laughed out loud when Hanna told her what happened with the Iron Bull and the water.

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Hanna and Bull slept. Cole spoke quietly to Nicole as neither had need of sleep, but neither were particularly suited to night watch. Mahanon lazily played with Dorian’s hair on his lap. They had decided on only one rotation of watch tonight, and Mahanon would wake Bull when the larger of the moons reached its peak from below the horizon. Dorian had spent much of the time complaining about the extent of the damage done to his previously stylish, now drenched boots.

Now he had quieted for several moments, and Mahanon assumed he had fallen asleep and began to stare out the window for movement on the road.

“I don’t believe a thing she says.” The Tevinter mage spoke and Mahanon’s hand caught in his hair. “Ow, watch the hair it’s one of my finer qualities.”

Mahanon patted his hair gently to apologize and nodded. “I agree. There has to be something she isn’t telling us. Honestly, thinking about it is exhausting.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath inhaling the wonderful musk that was the mixture of sweat, rain, and Dorian’s carefully curated scent. “For now, I think we are safe. I think Hanna is safe. I would rather spend time talking about your finer qualities.” Mahanon added suggestively.

“Yes, that reminds me. What did you say, Mah Vanehn?” Dorian asked carefully stumbling through a mispronunciation. “Nicole seemed pretty shocked to hear you call me it, so I’m going to assume it means something significant.”

Mahanon blushed pink when Dorian asked the unexpected question. In the din of the cabin and soft firelight, he was sure that Dorian couldn’t see the embarrassment on his face. His voice however…

“Oh, yes, that.” Mahanon stumbled over his tongue and heart which had unceremoniously decided to jump into his throat. “Well, you see. It’s actually ‘Ma Vhenan’ and it means well, we hadn’t talked about it.” Mahanon rambled on incoherently and as he spoke Dorian’s grin grew into an immensely self-satisfied smirk. Shuting himself up, Mahanon leaned down to kiss Dorian’s forehead.

“Are you finished, then? Aw, I was enjoying the show.” Dorian’s voice was in that low register that made Mahanon’s stomach flip and his heart flutter. The elf nodded his head and looked away attempting to salvage what little was left of his pride. “Fine then, keep your secrets. Someday you will tell me what you meant when you called me ‘Ma Vhenan’.”

Hearing the word fall so seamlessly from Dorian’s lips nearly melted Mahanon into a puddle right then and there. His blush intensified and Dorian barked out a laugh. More time had passed than Mahanon had known and Bull interrupted his shameless drooling after his Tevinter boyfriend. “I’ll save you, Boss. Go ahead and hit the hay. But remember, you’re sharing a small shack with all of us and I don’t want to be the one that has to explain your amorous pursuits to Cole.”
Nicole hiccuped to suppress a laugh, proving the complete lack of privacy. Mahanon was suddenly thankful that Dorian let him drop the subject, even though the reprieve was only temporary.

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Blackwall wasn’t worried when nightfall fell on the swamp a second time without the triumphant return of Mahanon and crew. He wasn’t pacing a trench into the border of the camp searching for any sign of the Inquisitor’s return. Why would he do that? It isn’t like Mahanon has never gone off of the book when completing a mission. In fact, you might say Mahanon’s goal in life was to make those of us who depend on structured excursions break down and cry. He had gone off on some detour and would be returning any moment now. Being only a day or two behind was so out of character for Mahanon that Blackwall should have expected that he would return late.

At any rate, Blackwall was a well trained soldier. He trusted in orders, at least those coming from men with more scruples than he himself had demonstrated in a previous life.

The warrior growled at his own feelings, memories of the past. His past. The never ending rainfall did nothing to improve his mood. He no longer had work to occupy his time. The scouts and soldiers accompanying the Inquisitor’s caravan were accustomed to setting up outposts quickly and preparing for the next journey. The horses were tacked and cared for, the tents were repaired and set up. Supplies unloaded for those that stayed behind with the scouts assigned to this Maker Forsaken Bog.

Suddenly, a flash of magical light struck through the camp to the medical tent. When the light came to its destination, it stopped and Hanna was left in its wake. She was holding a bloodied Mahanon, and shouted frantically for the surgeon to help. Behind her by only a few steps were Cole and Dorian and bringing up the rear were Bull and the rescued scouts.

As it turned out, when fighting the Hand of Korth, Mahanon’s shield crunched around his left hand and burst a wave of magical rift energy from the inflamed mark. While the Hand of Korth was an unintentional victim of consequence, another Avvar took it as the right moment to attack the distracted Inquisitor and nearly gutted him. Bull and Hanna dismembered the attacker swiftly, but the return trip had little time for detours as Dorian did his best to patch the wound and Hanna single handedly lifted Mahanon into her arms and fade stepped through the swamp to bring him to aid.

Blackwall whistled as Dorian and Bull recounted storming the Avvar stronghold on the advice of the ghost woman. While the Warden in him hated that he hadn’t been there especially to find the Grey Warden artifacts in the fort, he was glad that he had stayed behind to set up the camp. The surgeon was properly outfitted to take care of both Mahanon’s wounds and the strain Hanna had suffered from repeated using mana to carry Mahanon back to safety.

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With no time to spare before catching up with Hawke and the companions in the Western Approach, Mahanon and Hanna sat in an empty supply cart as the company departed the Fallow Mire.

During the journey, Hanna hardly left the Inquisitor’s side. She spent as much time as possible practicing her own healing spells to bring him to fighting shape more quickly. The journey was meant to take four days, saving as much time as possible trading out horses and equipment at Inquisition camps on the route. In that time, Mahanon recovered from his injuries with reservations according to the caravan surgeon. He was to take as many precautions as possible in battle and have someone at his back at all times.

In the Western Approach, Mahanon chose a new party to address the needs of the landscape. Bull, Cole, Sera, Vivienne, and Blackwall were sent back to Skyhold to rest. Solas left on his own before
the group from the Fallow Mire had arrived, much to Hanna’s relief, to investigate the ruins of an ancient elven temple in the Forbidden Oasis. Mahanon kept Hanna and Dorian for his own emotional wellbeing. He brought Cassandra and Varric for Hawke. Mahanon’s forward party had requested several expeditions to make the Approach safer to navigate. They had managed to construct a walkway over the sulfur pits, and to establish a base in the local fort. From the camp on the outskirts, Mahanon and his new crew forged ahead to meet up with Hawke and his merry friends.

When they arrived at the ritual site, a blood sacrifice was in progress. Hawke was unsuccessful in convincing the Grey Wardens to stop, it was obvious by the glint in their eyes that they had been possessed by demons. Each mage was a leashed abomination. Erimond was so kind as to demonstrate his ability to control and attempted to disrupt Mahanon’s mark unsuccessfully. After sealing another rift the way forward was clear. The Warden’s stronghold at Adamant had to be taken care of one way or another. Mahanon sent a Raven to Skyhold calling for an all out assault on the fortress. The group moved on from the ritual tower to Griffon Wing Keep. Where another familiar face surprised Hanna.

“Knight-Captain Rylen!”

“Hanna!”

The two ran at each other and managed a chest bump that knocked both of them back on their asses. “Rylen, you scoundrel, how could you leave Cullen behind to his own devices?”

“Oh! The Commander is fine, lass.” The playful captain winked. “Especially when he found you were safe.” Then as if really seeing her for the first time he pointed and said. “Lass, what happened to your face?”

“Rylen, I’ve never drawn attention to you facial tattoos.”

“When my tattoos take over half of my face and change my eye color, you can comment all you like.” His words were just as playful, but his eyes held a certain amount of fear that she imagine she would see from every trained templar from now on. Just an edgier expression that demonstrated how important it was that she find a way to explain the changes that came with being a person cohabitating a body with the spirit of a vengeful elven god.

Hanna swallowed and shrugged good-naturedly in return. She imagined that she probably wasn’t as good at hiding how she felt about all of this either. “You know the stories about the Witch of the Wilds? Turns out she really exists and this awful scar was all I had to do to control my connection to the fade. Comes with cool side effects too.” Hanna cleared her throat and put on a spooky affect “I can see into the fade.”

Only after she spoke did she realize that it didn’t sound all that different from her previous fade tripping ability. So she amended “Like all the time. I can see a lot of weird shit.”

Rylene just snorted and nodded. When Mahanon came up the stairs after surveying the fort, Rylen’s demeanor completely changed. He saluted and gave his report on how things had progressed as the Inquisition worked to bring peace to the area. Mahanon in return informed Rylen that the major undertaking that would be the siege on the Fortress at Adamant would likely use Griffon Wing Keep as a staging point.

The preparations would take weeks and in that time, Mahanon planned to explore the Western Approach and remove threats before the bulk of their forces and siege equipment arrived.
When the Inquisitor asked Nicole for help in planning the attack, she nodded and spoke enthusiastically. “Side Quests are my specialty.”
Deep inside Cullen knew what he was doing was wrong. First, it was an invasion of privacy. Second, he couldn't even read the words on the screen. Third, it only took about three presses on the clear screen to blast out terrible noises that took several moments of pressing to stop. In the few days that Mahanon had been gone, Cullen had discovered where to press in what order to see the pictures Hanna kept on her ‘phone’. At first, he told himself he would just look at pictures of Hanna. Then he found pictures of her friends, and he told himself that he wanted to know what kind of life she had led before.

Eventually, he found that he had seen all of the photos in the first group, but noticed that there were other ‘icons’ indicating more pictures. He saw pictures of Hanna and her father, family pictures from Hanna growing up and more.

It became an addiction. In his few moments of spare time between approving and allocating resources for the growing presence of Inquisition forces in Fereldan and beyond, Cullen would stop and pull out the ‘phone’ to take stolen glances at the world and life Hanna had left behind. The happiness she had in her younger years with an instrument at her hands. He was enraptured by the videos of her performances. Her picture in a military setting a video of her company marching through an open field some kind of graduation ritual he assumed. He was able to see her entire life story mapped out in still and moving images.

Near the end of the next group were pictures of friends visiting her in some kind of medical setting. She was dressed in a gown with numerous stitches covering the skin left exposed. Hanna smiled for the images, but her eyes always looked sad. He remembered how lost she had been when she had first arrived. He remembered the conversations about how she felt having lost the ability to continue using the skills she had honed over her entire adult life. It was one thing hearing her tell him. It was another to see a distinct shift in the photos she took and received on her phone. Videos stopped featuring her. Instead she focused on the cats she kept as pets. Food that she ate. Then Jack and Hanna out in various strange settings. Cullen felt a pain of sympathy and jealousy, and he decided to put the phone away.

On the fifth night, he clicked on the final icon. Strangely inside this ‘grouping’ were just more blank icons. Curious, he clicked on one after the other only to find empty space. Finally, one of the icons led to another group of pictures and videos. Cullen in his glee clicked on the first and was surprised to hear Hanna’s voice.

“Hey, I know you’re on your phone at work you naughty boy. How about this? You go to your office. Lock the door and open this back up. I’ll give you a little show and a countdown.” Hanna’s voice was husky as she winked and stepped away from the phone. In the video, she started stripping off her clothing and dangling the garments in front of the camera before flinging them haphazardly across the room as she counted down from ten to one.

As she got to one and took off the last bit of clothing shielding her from view, Cullen heard a noise
from the other side of his office door and slammed the phone down on his desk. He got up to check the door and found only the wind. Cullen rubbed his eyes and groaned looking at the phone. The temptation was all too great and he was only a man. He reached for the phone and only pulled back at the last moment. “Maker, save me from myself.”

The Commander cleared his throat and shuffled reports on his desk. He was trying his best to pretend that his dick wasn’t in control. He felt such a strong urge to lock the door and start the video again. His hand reached out and caressed the black box, but he pulled back and sat up straight. Swallowing the saliva gathering at the front of his mouth he barely prevented himself from drooling. This was ridiculous. He shouldn’t have been looking at the phone in the first place. Cullen closed his eyes and focused on the chant to distract himself like a fresh Templar recruit.

After he had calmed down, Cullen steeled himself to focus first on one report and then the next. As his candle waned, so did his resolve. Swiftly, he moved to each of the three doors, and locked each one. Then returning to his desk he blew out his candle, removed his belt and sat down at his desk again. Returning to the video, he smirked. Hanna was a sight to behold naked and open before the camera.

“Oh..my.. sexy man.” Hanna was obviously trying not to laugh at herself. It made her all the more beautiful. “Do you realize what you do to me? This morning you turned me on. Left me so hot and bothered, then you just left.” Hanna sucked her bottom lip and bit it embarrassed. Her hands smoothly glided over her skin stopping only for a second to flick her nipples before reaching down between her legs. “I’ve been waiting for you to come home and all I can think about is.” She moaned softly as her fingers probed her pussy. “How much I wish this was your cock.”

Cullen groaned loudly as he pulled himself out of his pants. He bent over the desk watching Hanna’s hands as one massaged her sex and the other caressed and kneaded her breast. Her soft moans and pink skin were so deeply alluring to him. Their hands worked in tandem, each one bringing themselves to the edge.

While just the image of Hanna working herself to orgasm would have been enough for him. Hanna began speaking again with a breathy hint to her voice and gasps interrupting her words. “Ah, fuck, I’m so close from just this.” Her eyes rose to look right into the camera and it was like she was staring directly at Cullen. “I’m coming for you.” Her voice was waver between a whine and a whimper. Cullen’s hand stuttered over his cock as he came watching her muscles ripple in the wake of her orgasm. Then the video cut out and he found several pictures of a strictly pornographic nature.

Embarrassed at his lack of self control, Cullen quickly cleaned up and returned Hanna’s phone to her desk. He quietly climbed the ladder to his bed and tried not to succumb to the shame of his illicit masturbation session.

Cullen buried the shame like so many feelings before it in work. When Mahanon’s raven arrived and Leliana called the advisors together to plan the mobilization of Inquisition forces. Cullen became so engrossed in his duties that he had no time to reflect on his indiscretion other than to swear that the next time he saw Hanna he would throw himself at her feet begging for forgiveness.

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