With Horns

by The_Ravenous

Summary

At 29, a guy on acid is torn asunder and wakes up in chains in an Inquisition dungeon. And weirder still, he awakens to find he's now Vashoth. With no apparent means of returning home to his previous life, he's forced to start over and somehow survive.
It's a great expanse of empty plains, empty from the recent harvest, that makes up my family's land before it hit the wall of surrounding forest on the horizon. Wide open space. Sunny afternoon. Gentle breeze. Fresh cut grass. Clouds drifting on the periphery. It was a good day. Though it was Easter and we aren't religious, it was an excuse to get together and feast.

*Rural nowhere.*

On my back in the empty field, my arms are shoved under my head and taking in a short breath, I whisper “This is good. Necessary.” to the sky as it bubbles and shimmers. A rainbow gradient dances at the edge of each cloud.

*Five hours into this twelve hour voyage.*

“Acid in my blood, a universe to witness” I utter slowly while twisting an arm out from under my head to pull at my shirt – despite all the good, the grass is annoyingly pointed today. Flowers though, they're soft and probably more friendly.

“And what of you? Are you in high spirits, Princess Goldenbloom” I jokingly question the dandelion next to me. When she doesn't answer, I tilt my neck to look down at her and I'm met only with screams overlapping screams – my stomach shimmies up into my throat, its momentary home, before I remember that she only ever screams. It's her way – her tongue.

*I do drugs and flowers scream.*

I pull a double take and get the same results. She looks like your average flower but her collected and frankly stagnant appearance is but a ruse. “Princess, is existence so painful for you that…” the sentence lazily drifts when dad yells “dinner” from inside the main house. Muffled, certainly, but what else would he be yelling at this hour?

*Concentrate.*

I focus on all my other family clambering through the house, each audibly heading for the kitchen. It's helping block out the dandelion screams. Growling “let the feast begin,” I try to push myself to my feet, only to spy purple ripples of gravity defying liquid trying to feast, in turn, on my boots.

*Inklings, my leather isn't your dinner. We've been over this.*

“Maybe the neon'll give way and I'll walk again” I mumble, unaware of the storm gathering. Shadows rising and falling, a damp seeps into the air as the winds whip about. The ambient sounds of life go silent and within seconds, the sun vanishes and the incoming front swallows the whole horizon.

Eyes wide, my gold and greens staring skyward, “storrrrrrrrrrrrrrt. Yessssssss” comes unsummoned through my teeth. Childhood memories of solace in storms flash at the sight of this glorious front, summoned from nothing. Nostalgia, thrill, and comfort knit a blanket around me.

A poignant memory flits before me -- I'm scared and upset. I wander into a sea of wheat and huddle down, raining pelting me, while the sky crackles and roils overhead. As electricity excites the very air, the scent of damp crops rises, filling my lungs. Warm.
Shaking off the memory, I lift my hand to the oncoming storm, attempting to feel it out.

*Powerful.*

Staggering into an upright position, I start walking towards the aberrant weather, every step exuding a neon purple ripple in the landscape. The ground is breathing, the trees are flinching, and the flowers, they’re still screaming. But on I go, marching into the storm.

“Minyuh” echoes behind, though it was probably “dinner” and I just wasn't listening. Glancing back over my shoulder, I roar “SOON” over the din of thunder.

“Everything is getting loud. Painfully loud. Storm or acid?” I mutter as a flash fires off far to the right – lightning struck a tree and I stare in awe of it. A green flash and half the tree was gone. Not broken or shattered, but just gone.

Dismay stains my vision – we used to race to that tree to pick honeysuckle at the base of it back when we were all kids.

A dead bird at my feet though, unmoving, chirps up at me and whistles “it’s okay. Everything dies.”

'Agh the fuck?!,’ I mentally yell, my mouth not cooperating.

This puzzling corpse-bird statement catches me offguard as chain lightning roils through the sky and explodes over my head.

A flash of green breaks me.

My spine is snapping; every vertebra twisting unnaturally in protest to the raw power that surges into me from the angry sky.

My body shudders at the crackling and splitting that tears through my bones.

And the screams return – the screams on scream on bloodcurdling screams.

I start searing and flaking off and every sense blazes.

I gag, trying not to swallow my own tongue even as electric daggers destroy me and my own frothing spit threatens to drown me.

Convulsions. And as swiftly as it struck, it stops. And I feel my body drop, it's no longer my own, I'm just a passenger. It's crumpling and striking hard against an obstacle unseen. The fade to black is agonizingly slow but I sink into that abyss willingly.

*Just let me end*
Eyelids heavy, I'm painfully aware that I'm face down on dark, cool rock. “Ma fass is numb” I mumble before cracking open my eyes. I'm kneeling, face to a cobblestone floor, and gingerly, I pull myself back until I'm sitting on my heels. My back cracks as I lean back – I groggily try to will my tense muscles relaxed.

It's then I feel the weight on my wrists.

Chains?

And I notice the guards. And their armor. And their swords.

’Swords. Swords?,’ I note before muttering lazily "Diggin’ the cosplay though."

A heavy door slams open and two shadows step swiftly toward me, one stopping just at the torch light’s edge and the other shadow circling me like a shark. “Tell me why we shouldn't kill you,” vitriol radiating from the circling shadow. “The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead” she continues, stepping into the light “except for you.”

She is stunning. Fuming, but stunning.

Confusion twisting my face, I realize and whisper “I….I know these words.” The woman lunges forward, grabbing at my wrist and spits “EXPLAIN THIS,” indicating a glowing mark.

“Ahh what the shit?!” I hiss at my own hand, ears getting hot from the panic. Drooling a bit, my jaw still stiff, I gape out “What is happening?!”

The dark haired woman in armor dives for my throat while screaming “YOU’RE LYING!” and it feels like my head is going to explode from the weight her glare. Fortunately, the woman behind her steps forward and pulls her companion off me, uttering “we need him, Cassandra” in a resigned tone.

The two turn to stare at me with discerning eyes while whispering in hushed tones to each other.

At the mention of ”Cassandra,” my eyes go wide in recognition, boring into her form.

The scar running along her jaw...the short cut hair..the dark eyes. Dragon Age. What? What?! I've snapped. I...I've cracked.

But it’s all too real — the damp stone flooring under my knees, the ache in my bones, the pungent stench of soot and oils, the discomfort is palpable.

NOPE! This is too real!

How DID I GET HERE? Shit. HOW DID I GET THE MARK?! How did the inquisitor get it? Why can't I remember that part?! What is WRONG with me? Am I ... dead? I was home. Dinner was getting’ cooked and then...

Some of my rambling slips out as “There was field. Acid. Then.... Then there was a woman? ...Who?”

“A woman?” Leliana questions, weighing my words, before whispering “witnesses claim there was a woman behind him in the rift, Cassandra.” As she leaves to walk out, Leliana looks over her
shoulder and says “I will meet you at the forward camp.” The armored Seeker nods to her as she leaves, though with brows furrowed and a sturdy frown having found its home on her face. At her command, the guards undo my shackles and chains. As the iron restraints hit the floor, she offers her hand, which I graciously accept, and she pulls me up.

My knees feel like hell, buzzing as fresh blood floods my veins.

‘How long had I been kneeling’ I ponder, reaching down to rub at my likely bruised knees.

“Prisoner. Follow me,” Cassandra barks.

Right, no chains but definitely not free.

Up we go, out into the main hall and through massive double doors. And the breath of winter punches through my skin. Hunching over, I attempt to will heat back into my core. ’Right, I was in that cold dungeon for days. Surely that sapped me of my hot blood.’


Breathing hard, a flicker of fire sputters to life within me. But then, raising my head to meet Cassandra’s steely glare, I end up looking past her to see a horde.

‘that is a ...aww shit, that's way more people than I saw in my playthroughs.’ fires off through my head, rattling my grey matter. They look like they want my head. On a pike. As bear food.

Cassandra ignores them, whether purposely or not, I can’t say. Instead, she launches into her explanation of the Breach. Hesitantly, I pull my eyes from the crowd and there, in all its terrible, vacuous glory, gapes The Breach. Guess The Breach isn't the exhibitionist type cause as soon as I lock eyes to it, it pulses and slaps my body with waves of pain. All I can do is grit my teeth in protest and try to keep my knees from buckling.

“The Breach is killing you. Each time it grows.” she says dryly, clearly prepared for my death.

Through clenched teeth, trying to force a grin, I growl “shit.. yep. Okay. I'll help. Let's do this.”

Cassandra exhales softly, perhaps in relief at my eagerness to help.

That’s right, that option always grants you a plus favor bonus with her. Get on her good side so she doesn't execute you.

...ya know, assuming we aren’t dead already.

She spins me and marches us through the crowd with her hand on my shoulder. To steady or restrain, her intent doesn’t exactly matter to me, it’s still a small comfort all the same. Just the idea that she feels more real than anything else here, even the pain, well that puts my mind at some ease.

Some, not a lot.

As we're walking though the crowd, I try to ignore everyone else and sneak glances at this woman cast from iron and steel.

She’ll get me through this. She's a seeker. She's a powerhouse. She's good. She is Cassandra, god damn it. She may hate me now, but she'll see me through this.

Cassandra looks like she's about to mention how the people “needed someone to blame,” that
dialogue, so I make a point to beat her to it. After several play throughs, you just wanna skip some cutscenes. And this, even if you saw it only once, you'd get the gist of it.

“I get it – they need someone to blame for this tragedy and I'm the easiest target. Makes sense” I wince and gesture to my glowing palm before continuing “How about you and I try to close that big bastard?” I say, inexplicably filling with confidence, while nodding toward the breach. She’s intimidating but I can tell, Cassandra can be a rallying force.

And then the Breach responds, hearing my insult, and knocks me to my knees with a second nerve-igniting pulse. As the pain rips through my arm, Cassandra grips at my shoulder tighter, bracing me, and with a look of reservation, utters “as The Breach grows, so does your mark.”

Breathing hard, trying to ignore the pain as best I can, and to Cassandra’s clear surprise, I huff out “then let's get up there fast and see about closing it” and take off in a light jog. I do remember the Trespasser DLC and I don't want this thing any bigger than it has to be.

‘Maybe we can make it over the bridge before…’ my thoughts are cut short by the bridge crumbling under our feet. Stone. Hard edges. I hit hard against ice with Cassandra rallying hard nearby. “Of course that’d still happen” I crow sarcastically just before my blood chills – a screech akin to nails on a chalkboard rings out and lingers.

“DEMONS” the Seeker cries before sprinting forward, sword drawn, ready to engage the scourge. Her words light a fire in my eyes.

Demons!

Nervous laughter escapes me at the sight of these horrors and my stomach lurches. Their dark, ragged masses trigger something in me, but I can't quite define it – whatever it is, it slithers through me, gripping hard at my insides – all I do know is that I need to act fast. I whip toward the crumbled bridge to see what weapon will be waiting for me.

And there are none. Not a single weapon. Of course there are none.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Damn. Shit! No! Shit!” I spit out as worry takes root, before pivoting just as a mass of rags and claws swipe at me.

‘JUST HIT IT’ a voice in the back of my head yells.

Madness bubbling, I throw a punch and feel it connect with the creature’s lone eye, frost forming where my knuckles impact. It reels back, screaming, and I shoot forward, driving another series of blows into the thing’s head – the demon goes to slash but I manage to catch it by the wrist, twist and roll the demon over my hip, smashing it into the ice.

My knuckles feel heavy, weighted from within.

Am I cold or am I the cold? No, wait, that's dumb. You're dumb.

From behind, I hear Cassandra let out a pained growl before yelling something ‘Maker’ related. This fight desperately needs to end.

Now.

Crazy bubbles skin deep and staggered laughter bursts from my mouth, fueling me as I drive my fist down, crunching the should-be-skull of the demon. And like a water balloon reaching capacity, its head bursts – black ichor sprays everywhere. And I gag just the slightest at the hard boiled egg
smell as tiny snowflakes form on the black.

“Ta da” I shakily whisper through a mad grin as the adrenaline dwindles.

...*My cardio is normally shit. And catching its wrist? I'm good in a fight but ...where is this coming from?*

Metal grinding against bone followed by a slick squish – her sword must've found its home in the demon’s chest.

With that, Cassandra storms up to my crouched form, barking “drop your weapons!” I slowly rise, my hands extended at my sides as my face goes blank. Her eyes sharpen, noticing the black dripping off my bare fists and tightens her guard. “You... don't need weapons?” she drawls, eyes narrowing.

My heart beats through my ribcage, forcing the air out of my lungs and I stand there, frozen. I know she's supposed to be my reticent ally as this moment but I am not willing to test her.

Sighing, Cassandra utters “perhaps it is for the best, I cannot protect you.”

Convinced that she's not going to kill me, today at least, I start grinning again and rather joyfully say “we'd best get up going. We've got people to save, demons to crush and breaches to.. reverse breach.” My grin twists to a grimace at how my rallying words ended; A sour look screws my face but I start jogging onward all the same.

*Good job ya dummy. True inspiration there.*

From behind, Cassandra scoffs again.

She’s all scoffs today.

She follows with an audible “Maker protect us.” While pressing forward, I reflect on the demon I'd just struck down...

‘Why wasn’t I scared of the demon? It was awful to look at, sure, but more thrilling an awful than straight up repulsive. Assuming this is all real, and...no! No existential questions. Not right now. No,’ I shove the thoughts down deep. No time for those. Instead I resign myself to staring at my hands.

No scrapes or bruising. Still feel heavy though. And what about that cold back there?

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Between my fists and her blade, we make short work of every demon in along our path.

“It is odd,” Cassandra says in low tones, “you are odd.” After a brief pause, she asks loudly “What is your background in terms of training? You appear to be quite proficient in a fight, even against demons” while making our way up the mountainous terrain.

I simply reply “Freelancer.” It’s the truth – most of my career had been freelancing. She slightly frowns at that so I go on on to say “Do a bit of everything. You do enough jobs, you learn how to take care of yourself.”
Cassandra seems to mull over that answer for the moment, pursing her lips, just as the sound of yelling, screeching, and fighting reach our ears.

She yells “up ahead!” and hurtles forward to meet the fray and I just follow suit, quick on her heels.

Entering the fight, Cassandra charges for the nearest demon taking it head on. I however spot a soldier about to get eviscerated and I spring forward, jab and clock a demon in the side of its face – its head detonates in a shower of black – and breaks down into nothing. The soldier, fear still tethering him, simply stands in shock. I leap away, dash to the other side of the small area and throw a solid uppercut to a demon that took notice of me.

‘Too late for you’ I mock. Again, black showers and demon viscera.

Knowing what’s supposed to happen next, I run, open palm, at the rift while kicking a demon out of the way. A sharp whizz and a thud – a bolt lodged itself firmly in the eye socket of that same demon and I can't help but genuinely smile, assuming who had fired it. The mark ignites and connects with the rift, chaining me to it, pain and adrenaline intermingling in my hand

It’s like a swarm of bees dancing in my skin.

Visualizing the rift as a giant lock, I can feel the pins – popping and twisting my fingers, I feel something click.

“There!” I laugh out, tugging backwards and slamming the rift closed.

‘No help from Solas this time,’ I half-smirk at the thought, ‘I don't need him to tell me everything this time around.’

Snow continues falling, slowly masking the signs of our fight as the remaining soldiers run off to regroup with the main force. The clanging of their armor slowly fades into the distance as we, remaining, catch our breath. And at this lull, Varric holsters his crossbow and chuckles in no one direction. Guess the whole situation is fairly amusing now that I think about it, despite having played it so many times over.

Solas briskly approaches and exclaims “whatever magic opened the breach in the sky also placed that mark upon your hand. I theorized the mark might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake – and it seems I was correct.”

“Meaning it could close the Breach itself?” Cassandra pointedly asked.

Solas looks lost in thought before saying “possibly.” Exchanging looks with me, he utters “it seems you hold the key to our salvation” with a relaxed smile.

Varric finally chimes in, saying “Good to know! Here I thought we’d be ass-deep in demons forever.” He continues on to say what I already know, “Varric Tethras: Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong,” the last bit he says while winking at the Seeker, a sound of disgust falling from her mouth.

Arms out, I bow low, and proudly say “it is a pleasure to meet ya Varric...” but before I can continue, Solas states “and my name is Solas, if there are to be introductions. I am please to see you still live.”

“He means, he kept the mark from killing you while you slept” Varric slides in.
Cocking my head at Solas, I say “thanks for my life, Solas.”

At this he nods and a threat of a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. He hovers a hand towards me, as if reading me and says “Seeker, though your prisoner is a mage, I find it difficult that anyone would have the power necessary to create The Breach” Solas talks past me to Cassandra.

‘NOT DUMB! It wasn't a dumb thought! That cold was me. I'm a mage? I'm a mage. And here I thought I was playing on casual mode.’ tumbles around in my skull. ‘Wait, why'd he have to hover? He’s been studying me for 3 days.’

“I'm a mage. Yup,” I blurt out.

Solas nods with the hint of a smirk while I hear Cassandra groaning – I am going to have to try really hard to stay on her good side, I know her feelings regarding magic, but I quickly snap from this and state aloud “Look, if the mark is connected to the Breach, we need to get up there. Nowish. I have a bounty of questions but I'll have to ask em afterwards – assuming I survive. Sound good?”

Solas perks up at this and says “Yes, when framed like that, it is the practical approach. Shall we?”

Cassandra is about to protest but I cut her off with a wave and say “attack in numbers, don't turn away allies, lets close the Breach.” Though she seems exasperated by the notion of traveling with these two, she’s already dealing with me, she relents and gives a single nod of consent before stomping off through the snow.

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Our party fought through several more groups of demons and while stumbling past a burning cabin, Varric smoothly states “guess it's safe to say you're Tal Vashoth.” Brow furrowed, I pale at that comment and quickly glance at my shadow.

Horns! whoa shit. what? My shadow has fucking horns. What?!

Good news, I'm quick to recover by growling “Fuck the Qun. Fuck Koslun. Fuck the slave nation.” I can't hear Cassandra’s response but both Solas and Varric simultaneously breathe out a light chuckle.

I keep sneaking glances at my shadow as it glides over the snow and stone.

Horns.

“So are you innocent?” Varric asks. I pull myself back together, saying “pretty sure I am. Don't remember much though.”

He chimes in, clearly the expert, “Ahh, that'll get you every time. You should've…”

I start tuning them all out – I’m not in the mood for the bickering Varric and Cassandra are about to get into. This is all just so bizarre. Sure, I may have wished I could explore Thedas from the comfort of my couch but this is all so impossible.

‘I'm Vashoth. I'm magic. I've got the mark.’
I’m having difficulty wrapping my head around all of this.

Just then, invisible threads tug at my left hand, or rather the mark, and I know what’s coming – there’s a rift just outside the Inquisition camp. With a wicked smile perched on my face I yell “Meet ya there!” to the others and take off sprinting.

‘Whatever else is going on, I am the storm; Bringer of black rain,’ the dark thought pushes through me. I’m a flurry of fists, each punch a harbinger of death to my foes, the demons, and these at least are more akin to papermache and jelly against my knuckles. Thuds, cracks and pops echo off the mountainside and the gate doors as I commit to the massacre. The hairs on my neck raise as I twist a demon skull from its shoulders – something reacts and shimmers over my skin just as a bolt of spirit energy strikes my shoulder. My flesh is unharmed but it’s hot and some steam trails from the spot.

“A barrier?! Excellent,” I say, cackling.

I don’t know how long this barrier will last and I certainly don’t know the first thing about summoning another so I charge headfirst into the wraiths and after weaving past their attacks, I plunge my hands through their membranes deep into their torsos. At my touch, the spirits are cut in half and utter a silent scream, faces contorted.

Just as the others make it to the hilltop, I’m already slamming shut the rift with a thundering clap – I’d already broken the demons.

As predicted, I’m yet again, left standing in pools of black.

Strange it doesn’t vanish when they do. Their blood is more permanent than they are… might make for a good dye.

...if it didn’t smell so awful.

Varric whistles in admiration, muttering “but no one will believe it” while rubbing a hand over Bianca.. Solas simply says “impressive” while wearing a mask of calm. Meanwhile, pinching the bridge of her nose, Cassandra abrasively exclaims “you are reckless.” Dropping her hand from her face, she continues with “but I commend your skill,” only a bit less irritation in her tone.

Looking down at myself, I'm about 90% sure that my skin is gonna be stained black for weeks to come. I only gag from the noxious aroma of it all a few times. It’d be great if the slick didn’t smell like dog farts and corpses.

The other three are taking in the devastation, while some shouting from behind the gate has people drawing it open for our small party.

And maybe I can finally get a staff.
Stepping inside the camp is a depressing sight – cots littered about holding the wounded, the pungent scent of rot cutting through the cold mountain air punches me in the nose and my nostrils wrinkle. Somehow, its worse than the demon viscera coating me. Varric mentions picking up some health potions but I'm not interested – I just need two things: to find a staff and to get this over with. But I'm not seeing any staves or mages.

‘I’m gonna drown in this black’ I ruefully note, as the gag reflex tries to kick in again.

While stifling that sensation, I glance about and from what I can see, near the war camp’s far edge, Roderick and Leliana are in the middle of a heated argument.

Well, he’s heated. Leliana on the other hand, she's composed and trying to act as a grounding influence to his outrage. The chancellor raises his gaze to the our small party at our approach and opens his mouth, readying to make demands us – but before a single word could fly past his lips, I belt out “NOPE. WE’LL TALK AFTER THAT,” pointing to the Breach.

Leliana seems amused, her blue eyes glinting in dark surprise from beneath her cowl. The chancellor though, he huffs and fumes after us. But I’m already dashing forward to where I know Cullen will be – on the quickest path to The Breach.

Behind me, I can feel Cassandra actually smirking. She seems to appreciate a no nonsense sort of attitude in moments like these. Regardless, I know I had spared her a headache.

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As we rush the field, a grating crunch and scream ring out past our ears – a soldier of Cullen's had been ripped apart by demons. Metal versus demon, they were barely holding the monsters at bay and even from afar I can see his men are losing ground.

He’s losing ground.

He looks to a blue vial on his belt…

‘Lyrium? No Cullen. Don't do it! You're one of the good ones. None of that for you’ jolts through my head, spurring me to rush.

“Commander!” The seeker roars over the din of fighting – clearly ripping Cullen from his thoughts of addiction, giving him the willpower to fight on. He spins, shield and sword in the traditional Templar stance just as an ice shard hurtles toward him from a despair demon. Embracing his battle calm, he easily lifts his shield to take the hit.

I bolt forward, flanking the despair demon and drop my fists over the ice demon’s head, breaking the thing’s apparent neck with a sharp crack.

Cullen blurts out “Maker,” audible even over the fighting – coincidentally as a lesser demon worms its way underneath my feet and flips me into the air...

...And I soar, flailing like a damn rag doll before striking stone, a blocky remnant of the Temple.

I try to will myself to my feet but I'm denied by pain – my left hand flaring with green. The lesser demon advances on me, wailing an otherworldly screech while ignoring all others. My hand, and I
by extension, are obviously its sole target.

Bearing down on me, it raises both sets of claws to slice me to ribbons only to have a long sword jut out of it torso, gleaming in ichor. The creature shudders and wails before evaporating, leaving Cullen standing before me. He offers a gloved hand, which I gratuitously accept, and pulls me to my feet, all the while the battle rages on around us … though the sounds of spells whizzing by, bolts being let loose, and blades cleaving beasts in half signals that the ending nears.

Walking past Cullen, it was apparent that the tide had been turned and with the demons slaughtered, now was as good a time as any. Reaching out, feeling the nearby rift react to me, I feel again for the turn pins and as the click sounds in my head, I slam the fucking rift shut.

‘I thought pain was something you get used to’ I winced, shaking my hand in a lame attempt to displace the pain electrifying my arm.

The field is pitch black and if not for the monochromatic way about it, it could've been a Pollock painting.

Meanwhile, Cullen had shakily returned his sword to its sheath and rested his hand on the pommel, for support, before marching over to Cassandra. “You have my thanks.” He tells her but she stops him with a raise of her hand. “This … is the prisoner’s doing. Thank him” she gestures to me.

“That's right, you were the one that fell from the rift,” Cullen awkwardly murmurs, looking at his feet. He was visibly doing better after his near relapse.

He raised his head to actually thank me but instead I blurt out "YOURWELCOMEBYE!" and sprint away. I zero time, and I dash away through what remains of the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Cassandra, wearing her famous scowl, gives chase, all the while cursing me. Meanwhile, Solas and Varric take a more leisurely pace.

I give little notice to the conclave corpses littering the path, despite the charred bones and loose stone crunching underfoot. I was more worried by what fade memories we'd see – I know exactly what has to happen – I should after all, I've completed every dragon age game about 30 times each. I was always fascinated by the differences in tone, background, and dialogue that arose when playing as each different race, gender, and battle type. But these visions, would they show human me or a Tal Vashoth? And would they show how I'd actually gotten here … or would I have to wait for Adamant?

’and what the fuck is at Adamant? Wardens are there, yeah … but why?’

‘and did I steal someone’s skin?’ my expression twists at the thought. I'm not exactly vain but my body is mine; my eyes, blood, ink, scars, all mine. I am my own. A slight pang of nausea tremors through me but quickly stills as I take a quick look at my arms.

They look like mine. Except for the huge scar running down your arm. You have to look for all my earth scars after this. Damnit, get your head in the game. You've got shit to kill and worse shit to also kill.

My checklist was the following: enter the explosion site, cue the spectral voices, walk past the red lyrium, stand before the first rift to see visions, open the rift and slay the subsequent pride demon. And everything was happening verbatim, from Solas maintaining our need to properly shut the first rift to Varric hissing over how the red lyrium was pure evil. Cassandra seemed truly unnerved by the echoing voices, worry knitting her brows. But when the visions started, I paled again at a memory playing of a horned mercenary bashing a door open and roaring “Not today asshole!”
That guy has my face. Why does he have my face?! And he said what I'd say and how I'd... WHAT IS HAPPENING?!

‘remember how you got here! REMEMBER,’ I demand of my thoughts before a glimmer of hope slides through the mental cracks. ‘All shit aside though, this could be good – proves my innocence at least. Calm yourself, asshole. Calm. Maybe that was just a trick of the fade. Maybe it was just filling in where I needed to be here before the blast. A default. Maybe... maybe.’ I am not very confident with that answer – it feels like a desperate bullshit one but its all I’ve got right now.

A towering shadow, eyes scorching with hellfire, commands others unseen to “slay the qunari.”

‘The Dopple-Hunter. The not me.’

This ephemeral play comes to a close with the orb in my hand.

_Horns aside, am I still me?_’ I ponder while outwardly muttering “I don’t remember” to Cassandra’s excited questions and remarks. I know what had happened but I cannot get how I don't remember any of that happening. And more immediately, I wasn't thrilled over my soon to be unconscious state – after the battle with Pride and sealing the rift – I'd black out.

“Or maybe, I know what can happen and this is all some rough template, subject to change.” I cough out under my breath. While mired in my own thoughts, Cassandra and Leliana had been getting the troops in position, preparing to assault whatever demons would descend from the rift. Several more minutes of preparation and Cassandra approaches, places her hand on my shoulder. In that instant, I remember I’m shirtless – her gauntlet is brisk against my skin – it draws me back to the matter at hand.

Like a judge, definitive, she proclaims “it is time.”

Looking over my shoulder to her hand, I whisper “get ready for a pride demon” before looking into her eyes. I exchange a sullen look with her concerned one before I turn my gaze to the First Rift.

Three options here...

‘...live, die, or return. Stay tuned to find out,’ drones on repeat through my skull.

Cassandra draws her sword while praying to Andraste for strength and victory. Everyone has their rituals – I can't disparage her for that.

I raise my hand to the rift, green flaring up between my fingers. Tendrils of green danced from the rift as a Pride demon, colossal in height, instantly materializes in the air before us and drops the few feet separating it from physical earth. She shoves me away just a scaled fist slams down to where I’d been standing and I’m left scrabbling at debris to stand and fight. Despite its size though, Pride is quick and backhands me across the ruins, my backside striking hard at dirt and stone.

Flexing and drawing from the rift, Pride cackles and ignores volley after volley of arrows. A few embed themselves in its scaled hide but clearly they have no effect. Cassandra is slashing at its ankles to no avail – it was protected. Solas sees all though from his stone perch and casts a barrier, enveloping her just as the beast swats her to the side, a dragon against a fly. Cassandra shoots a thankful glance toward Solas who only yells “you're quite welcome, Seeker” and continues casting several ice spells in an attempt to slow the monstrosity. Ice was veining and sheathing over its joints but it was but a minor inconvenience to a thing that size.

Crawling back to my feet, I notice Varric on my right, no jokes or whimsy in his eyes as he honed in on the demonic assault. He has his Bianca ready to fire but keeps a calm finger on her trigger,
clearly watching Pride shrug off most attacks. Without warning, he pivots and a bolt whizzes past my face. Flinching backwards, I whips toward Varric, my eyes wide with shock.

“You're welcome,” Varric yells out over the fighting.

“What?!” I utter defensively.

Varric nods past me, drawing my attention to the ragged mass with a bolt lodged deep in its skull.

*Oh. Close one.*

“Andraste’s ass, will you close that damn thing already?! Bianca's getting tired.” Varric growls out. He's running low on ammunition.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge as a lightning orb soars between us, tearing my attention back to Pride as it belts out abysmal, staggered laughter.

Solas and Cassandra, however, appear to refuse to let it focus on anyone but them and fight on all the harder. Solas, though, he looks as if he's beginning to feel how taxing this assault is – his movements are slowing, he's drenched in sweat, and there's a longer delay between each casting. And the Seeker, she looks the same but isn't letting that fatigue reach her face.

Despite his apparently low reserves, Solas plants barrier after barrier over the Seeker as she slashes and thrusts at Pride’s unarmored ankles. In this fight, she's more than that demon is; The beast stumbles and falls to its knees courtesy of Cassandra's unrelenting attacks. And for a moment, I catch Solas’ gaze from across the field and I'm certain I see a look of relief on his face. The tides have turned, I'm not broken or dead and that evidently pleases him. At least, until I start charging at Pride – then it all sours into a frown.

I charge Pride – no roars, just my raspy breathing and a small hope of not alerting the colossus.

So of course it shifts its weight towards me.

“Shit” falls from my mouth as Pride locks all nine of its eyes on me.

Too late.

It can only bear witness as I slide into melee range and drive a fist into its knee with a sickening crunch – it grates like a tree being twisted in half. Pride drops both claws to the ground, digging into the charred earth, screeching in hatred and pain. No more laughter for this fucker.

Lunging at its now lowered head, I grab ahold of the spines on its face and let lose a volley of right hooks into its skull. At that moment, heat pours into my knuckles and my fist erupts in purple flame. And with the final vestiges of my adrenaline surging through me, I force my hand through Pride’s skull and roar as my fingers penetrate brain. Its eyes go dark as its head slides down my forearm, sinking me further in and with a wet “shmmm,” the back of Pride’s head bursts as grey, black, and bone fragments jettison outward.

Finally, Pride is dead. But my hand isn't on fire anymore. Strange that it just happened.

*FUCK THIS*

It's fading into nothing.

“Right. The rift,” I remind myself.
With black viscera dripping off me and heavy eyelids, I shuffle under the first rift and snap my hand skyward. I'm fading fast but I again imagine lockpicking the rift with the mark. ‘There’ the thought weakly flickers as I slam the rift shut. The mark flares and my eyes seal up against the brightness. And into darkness I go. I'm fairly certain I'm falling but someone catches me just before I hit ground.

“There it is” I whisper in an exhale as the Breach thunders and protests against what I've done.

It's stable now.

Well...stable enough.
Eyes opening, I realize I'm in a wide open field, everything a magnificent burst of magentas and violets. Purple bees are flitting about, seeking out each yellow dandelion standing out from the tall purple grass. Every so often, one comes over to investigate me, buzzing in my face.

"Hey friendlebee" I joke to the bee.

It doesn't respond. Of course it doesn't. It's a bee. It doesn't care about my wit. It's merely observing me.

Beyond my buzzing observer, the air is sweet with hints of rose, definitely dandelion, fresh cut grass, and dusty wheat. Inhaling deep, I gather as much of that bouquet into my lungs as I can.

An exhale.

A deep inhale.

And another deep exhale.

Then, looking away from the bee, I glance about to all corners of this land – it all feels familiar, but like it's trying too hard. It's all stretched out. Curved perspectives, the trees are too tall and the horizon is somewhat slanted. That's when I see it – my parents’ house on the horizon – too far away to be my fields, my home. It's a mimicry of home, painted while looking through a fish eyed lens.

"Nice try, dreamland. This isn't home." I boom out, criticizing the fade work, followed quickly by my somewhat bleak question “Wait. Shit. Can I even get home?”

Guilt churns my stomach at the thought of all I've left behind.

“If I'd just gone in for dinner, would I be there now?” I ask aloud which evidently interests a bumblebee since he buzzes back up and bellows “YES” in a deep rumbling baritone. Despite the gut wrenching questions and potential for despair, that bumblebee’s unexpected response transforms my guilt churn into a breathy snicker.

Depressed but at least smirking, I give the bee a thumbs up.

Friendlebee, seemingly content with my response, returns to collecting pollen while I turn my eyes back to this purple tinted memory of home. Forcing out a sigh, I pat my thighs, and leap up to my feet. Wiping dust from my backside and with sarcasm creeping into my tone, I yell “alright, dream bees! What do I do now?”

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing some more.

Then the entirety of the swarm gathers, consuming the sky; the purple bees are legion. The beat of their collective wings shake the air and with a deafening roar, they answer “REMEMBER AND WAKE UP.”
My eyes tear open, I'm cut from the fade, forced to by the bees. “What do you meeeean? Remember what?!,” I groggily complain.

The backs of my hands flick up to my eyes to rub sleep from them. Blinking the blurred edges away, I try to orient myself while lying still.

‘Home? No. that's a thatched roof.’ I think, annoyed as straw pokes me through the mattress cover.

“But at least you're not deeeead,” I sing low.

Crash.

Clattering of ceramic on hard wood.

A gasp.

And a slam of the door.

“Must've been the skittish elf lady from the intro. Great impression ya jus made” I utter sarcastically.

I roll off the bed, land squarely on my ass and wincing, I look around the small cabin. Cobwebs lace the corners of the room and the floor has clearly been swept with a stiff bristled broom – I can spy the grooves in the remnant dust. It must be an older cabin, the floor has a worn look to it, grooves from years of pacing. And a few candles have been lit casting a dim glow to the place. Not much sunlight filters through the window.


I reach up to the bedpost and pull myself back to my feet. And then a brisk draft sneaks in from under the door and slaps my nether parts.

“Naked.” I grumble out, eyes narrowing, not even looking down at myself. Looking around the room for clothes, I spot a heavily patched pair of my charcoal denim jeans draped on a chair by the door. Going commando, I grab the pair and shimmy into them, zipping me up and plant my bare feet back to the cold wood floor.

The cold floor…

And my boots? Ah, foot of the bed.

I pick my black boots up, and turn them about, inspecting them -- they're as beat up as ever. Sticking my nose to the leather, I sniff gingerly and to my surprise, there's no sulphuric rot smell. Smells like saddle soap.

Good.

I tilt them again and find a pair of wool socks stuffed inside. Picking the socks free, I drop the boots to the floor and dance in place as I put my socks on while standing. I'm groggy still but I
manage the mundane and slide my feet into my boots one at a time. As I stomp to test them, the buckles jingle, and a modicum of familiarity takes hold.

‘Still got that jingle jangle.’ I think as a genuine smile slips across my face.

Glancing about, I finally see what I need most – a god damn mirror. And even better, it's a sizable one affixed to a dresser. My smile twinges, perhaps in panic at what I'm gonna see.

I saunter over and standing before the looking glass, a sharp inhale shakes me at the sight. My face, it's mostly the same – dark eyebrows, furrow lines where those brows meet. Eyes are still grass green with a golden sunburst around the pupils. Full lips. Somewhat square jawline, and medium height cheekbones. Same straight angled nose, same laugh lines, same spattering of freckles. And I'm still tall; still about 6’6”.

Maybe that's why I'm vashoth – my height?

The notable differences? The horns are the obvious one – they're faded black and fit perfectly to my high peaked hairline. They curve out, up, and over my scalp but they've been cut back, trimmed.

My skin tone is also a touch more gray as well.


And then there's the scarring…

To say that my eyes were still the same was a lie; one eye is still gold and green. The other, however, my left eye...

I'm blankly staring at my reflection with fingers loosely probing the damage. And now that I'm paying too much attention, it feels like my vision is slightly blurred in that eye. A hand flies up to cover an eye and then the other, swapping out to test the two. It's blurred. And the left eye is seeing less red. Guess the cones were just as damaged as the rest of me.

My left eye, what should be green is stark white with the faintest hint of gold around the pupil. And just under that, starting at my lower eyelid, is scar tissue that runs diagonally from my eye to my jaw and down my neck. It continues over my shoulder and down my arm, wrapping about my arm twice before reaching the mark in the palm of my hand.

“What the fuck happened’ I question softly as I trace my fingers down the length of fractal scarring. The mark pulses slowly – it's almost like scratching a dog’s ear. It feels content.

Tearing my eyes from my reflection, I shake my head remembering the crowd I'm about to walk into. Pulling open several drawers, I fail to find the final piece I require – a shirt. A low growl escapes my throat and I say “Ya know what? Fuck it. Let em see me. I don't care anymore.” My mood has definitely soured and the scars are to blame for that.

“Fuck it” I growl once more and say “shit, I gotta clean up my language. Hunter, just pretend everyone has toddler ears.” I saunter up to cabin door, inhale, and yank it open with a loud creak.

’BRIGHT’ shoots through me and I'm left blinking in the threshold. Through the sunlight, I see the throngs of people, more people than the game tried to portray. Grumbling, I whisper “You're amazing. You can do this” in an effort to rally my confidence. With that, I strut out into the crowd and it parts for me -- they make way for me while simultaneously herding me toward the chantry. It's a sea of murmurs and whispers and cries, I hear people praying and clambering to get a
good look at me over the others. And amidst all that, a couple insults, a few “ox man” comments find my ears. But overall, the walk isn't as terrible as I imagined it would be.

’Wear your confidence like a costume, be the alter ego.’ I remind myself every few feet. Crowds don't bother me, even people staring doesn’t bother me. I typically just stare back. But here, it was genuinely just the idea that they believe me to be something holy.

And Holy things are NOT my style.

And I hate that.

Know me for weird.

know me for the dark.

know me for my sarcasm.

Know me for my mind.

But don't know me to be what I'm not.

************

Upon reaching the chantry steps, several guards step aside and usher me in and even from this side of the Chantry, I can very clearly hear Cassandra, Leliana, and Roderick in heated debate. I cross the expanse and stepping up, my fist hovers over the wooden door for but a moment and then knuckles strike.

Knock

Knock

Knock

I push it open with a creak; my knock didn't do anything to slow the argument between Cassandra and the Chancellor though. And tilting my head down, I clear the doorway and enter. She dismisses his attempt to call the guards on me and he threatens her with all the power of a neutered pup. And even though I knew it'd play out like this, it's still a relief to hear Cassandra voice support for me.

The two quarrel a bit a more before Leliana interjects and suggests threatening implications that visibly pale the chancellor.

Oh? He doesn't enjoy being a suspect? How peculiar.

And I can't help but smirk as the tables turn on him.

The Seeker pulls out a leather bound tome, the tome, the one with the hairy eyeball. And from where, I'm not entirely certain, but she slams it to the war table, displacing dust from the surface in a thin cloud. The acoustics in this room suck because it's loud enough to make me flinch.

Or maybe you're still a broken wuss? Yeah, that could be it.
A few choice words regarding the late Divine and the chancellor is scurrying past me and out the door. The asshole didn't even look at me as he left but I felt his rage radiating off him.

I've gotta hand it to her, Cassandra is way more impressive close up than the game gave her credit for – she has a presence that commands the room, and the way she carries herself, she was … is a reckoning force.

*And then there were three.*

Silence falls and stays a beat. “This is the Divine’s directive: rebuild the inquisition of old. Find those who will stand against the chaos. We aren't ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no chantry support.” Leliana states factually as Cassandra chimes in “but we have no choice: we must act now. With you at our side.”

Looking to the dusty book, then to the ceiling, which I'm ridiculously close to, I draw in a slow breath through my nostrils. I pause for dramatic flair and let them think I'm truly weighing their words. I mean, I am, but I already know I'll be accepting. There’s no running from this. Not truly. On the exhale, I look back to the women and say “Shit. Ya put it like that and I gotta say, ya make an excellent sales pitch. But know this – my name is Hunter. It's not prisoner, not qunari, not ox, not herald. It is *Hunter.*”

Cassandra, a curious look tightening her face, she says to me ”Hera…ughh, Hunter. Help us fix this before it's too late,” while offering her hand. At this, I swing mine forward and meet her grasp.

“No, if ya don't mind, I'd like to stretch my legs,” I smirk before turning back to the door and casually walking out.

“Just a moment. I would walk you out” Leliana says through a hint of a smile. It isn't a soothing smile – she looks like she'll smile and pour you a cup of tea while eviscerating you with her free hand.

*Oh geez. You know most of her secrets, hell you know her life story so why is she still. So. Terrifying?! Just play it cool, man. Coooooooool.*

Walking down the grand hall, the Spymaster says nothing but I can feel her observing my every motion down to how I blink. She’s gorgeous, intimidating, and a damn enigma all at the same time. And I can't actually hear her steps, now that I think about it. The hall is all echoes from my boots. Well, my steps and a few clerics whispering. I want to say something, anything but as we exit the main doors, I feel I'm too late.

And then she surprises me by smiling, arching an eyebrow, and saying “I suppose you aren't one for clothing?”

*Tension, cut. God damn.*

Relief hits me and I smile wide. I just shake my head. “Couldn't find a shirt. Admittedly, I didn't look too hard.” She nods ever so slightly before turning on her heel and making way back to her tent. “Spooky to enchanting in 10 seconds, a lesson in the bardic ways by Leliana.” I comment to myself, now out of her earshot.

‘*Hopefully out of her earshot*’ I think suddenly as my shoulder muscles tense up.

She is good – I know she's furious about Divine Justinia’s death but I likely won't be witness to that unless I enter her tent.

...Which, at present, I am not prepared to do..
Glancing out over Haven, it looks like most of the landmarks are the same, just more cabins in between. So it's somewhat easy to find the cabin I'm looking for – the person I'm looking for, he's standing outside, feet exposed to the cold dirt while gazing up at the Breach with his hands clasped behind his back.

Knowing Solas’ true identity is both a boon and a curse. On one hand, knowledge is power and knowing is half the battle. On the other, he's The Dread Wolf and can probably spot a bullshitter.

‘Forge a friendship, befriend a god, maybe don't lose my arm?’ are just some of the thoughts flitting about inside me like panicked moths as I walk up the weathered stone steps toward the elf. The crunching of snow underfoot betrays me and Solas turns.

“The chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all.” He quips.

“Riding in on a shining griffon, right?” I reply.

Solas’ expression drops as he reflects and says “sadly, they're extinct. Joke as you will, posturing is necessary” and stepping away, says “I've journeyed deep into the fade in ancient ruins and battlefields to see the dreams of lost civilizations. I've watched as hosts of spirits clash to reenact the bloody past in ancient wars both famous and forgotten.” Turning back to me, he cautiously mentions “every Great War has its heroes. I'm just curious what kind you'll be.”

“Preferably, I'm the type that survives against all odds and... I don't know, explores a bunch of places. Maybe reads a good book?”

With the corner of Solas’ mouth threatening to pull into a smirk, he breathes out a “heh” before stating “I will stay then, at least until the Breach has been closed.” I just raise an eyebrow at the elf but he elaborates “I am an apostate surrounded by chantry forces in the middle of a mage rebellion. Cassandra has been accommodating, but you understand my caution.”

“Solas, it’s pretty clear she trusts ya – I doubt she'd let anyone throw you in a circle.”

Solas, clearly trying to read my face, pauses a moment before uttering “thank you. I...appreciate the thought. But now let us hope either the Mages or the Templars have the power to seal the breach.”

“Yeah, lets hope.” I say dryly, peering off to face the rest of Haven, knowing damn well that both sides have said power. I truly despise both sides – Fiona for being a coward and joining Alexius, and the Templars for blind faith and never questioning their superiors.

This is all gonna be a grand old affair.

Looking back and forth between where Varric should be and the Chantry, I know I have yet to officially meet Josephine and Cullen but Varric, he's someone that can answer a great many of my questions before I get too deep in all this.

‘Right, like you're not deep enough as is’ slaps me as I remember that I'm wholly emerged in Thedas now.
Varric it is then.

Without saying “goodbye” or “so long” or any other sort of polite society farewell, I start walking off towards the tavern.

From behind me, Solas asks “Herald, a moment?” The name “Herald” grates at me, but I turn to face him with a neutral look. Collecting himself, Solas says “…it’s obvious that you’re a mage but I’ve never seen magic used in such a way, converting mana into raw strength. While it bears some similarity to that of arcane warriors, I must ask, is it a Qunari technique?”

Sucking in air while the smallest hint of a frown tugs at my expression at his mention of “Qunari,” I raise my hands disarmingly and reply “nah, not a Qunari thing – just a me thing. Mostly self taught. Were it a Qunari thing, I’d prolly be missing a tongue…”

I make a scissor gesture at my tongue and chuckle some, and Solas, who seems intrigued with my answer, simply nods.

“That would make sense. The Qunari are not kind to their mages.”

“No, they are not.” I draw out, nodding, and finally heading off towards the tavern while Solas goes back to his staring contest with The Breach.

Walking down the frozen steps, I yell over my shoulder “and Solas!”

”Yes?”

”the name is Hunter. Not Herald.”

I don’t even look back to see his reaction.
I push open the tavern door, stomp filthy grey snow from my boots and saunter in the main room and I'm met with the scent of cheap beer, stale sweat, and some sort of stewed cabbage and meat medley.

*A dive is a dive. A constant. That's good.*

Over the clash of pints to tables and people yelling over one another, I can hear that bard plucking her strings in the corner. Can't make out her words but the tune is just present enough to sell this as a bar.

And I guess there'd been a few other Vashoth mercenaries out and about cause no one bats an eye at me as I weave past people and tables, making my way to the bar. I've got no coin but I wait for Flissa to emerge. And when she peeps over the bar at me, it is worth it.

With panic and excitement lacing her every word, she squeaks “Oh! You're him! The Herald of Andraste! You've...you've come to show that the Maker loves ... um, loves everyone and that we shoul...” I cut her off with a wave. She immediately goes stone silent and I say “it's fine Flissa, no need to explain. I'm just here to ask if I can have two ales and if you can point me to Varric.” Her wide eyes soften as she whispers “you know my name” and she quickly gets to filling some mugs. She seems warmed by the notion. The littlest things can make the difference.

“I'll pay ya for these the minute I get paid... if that's okay... I lost all my coin during the explosion.”

*Then again, I don't think I actually had my wallet on me when I was still home.*

She looks taken aback and for a second, I'm sure I've judged this whole situation incorrectly – but she shoves the mugs into my hands and says “I'll have no such thing. Just ... just close the Breach the rest of the way and I'll consider us even” with a shy smile creeping into her expression.

A deep laugh escapes me and all I can say in response is “oh, that’s all?” Smile still stretched across my face, I whisper “thank you, Flissa. Truly” and steer the conversation back to Varric’s whereabouts. He must’ve been a regular because without looking, she points to a darkened corner very near the door I entered through.

Both mugs in hand and avoiding the bustle of other patrons, I make way to the corner and sure enough, there's the dwarf -- he's propped up on a stool, quill and ink in hand, and hunched over some parchment. I place one drink to the table and noisily slide it to the side of his papers, drawing his look. He leans back, snatches up the offer, drinks, and wipes the froth from his upper lip. “So you, you go from Thedas’ most wanted to Herald of Andraste, and now you're giving drinks to those in need.” He winks, taking another sip before joking “already living up to the holy model.” Fluidly, his tone goes sarcastic as he adds “Most would've spaced that out more. How're you doing with all this?”

Planting myself in a low chair, I toss back half my drink before answering “I'm just glad to be alive. That’s...that’s kinda the important part.”

Varric smirks at that and his shoulders relax some – guess he realizes I'm just another person. “So what can I do for the mighty Herald?” he asks me.
“One: please don't call me Herald. Two: I'm just tryin’ to get my head back on straight – if ya don't mind, I've got some history questions that need answering. I'd ask Leliana but she kind of uh terrifies me.”

Varric openly guffaws at that and finally settles on “yes and yes. But we'll need more drinks.” He waves at Flissa across the room and raises a few fingers. I assume she saw his request because he turns his attention back to me. “Ask away.”

_Time to see if this syncs up with my playthroughs. And if so, which ones._

“Alright, the Hero of Ferelden … what's their gender, background and status?” Varric’s face screws up at that and he finally says “Wan? Uh, way I've heard, he's an elf mage from the circle of Ferelden. Very much alive. What's this about?”

“I know of people and stuff, but I don't remember key details. I mean, shit, my head still stings from the Pride fight – imagine what damage the actual conclave explosion did to me” I say, drawing a more sympathetic look from Varric.

“Alright, what of Loghain and Alistair?”

Again, the dwarf looks baffled by my line of questions but plays along saying “Loghain, he's a warden. Conscripted just before the fight with the archdemon of the 5th blight. King Alistair, well, that’s obvious. Unhappily married to Queen Anora if I recall correctly. He granted the circle more freedoms as a favor to Wan.”

Through our conversation and many ales, I learn that Morrigan and my warden had been a couple, Bhelan had been crowned king, Zathrian had broken the werewolf curse through sacrifice, the Ashes had been used to help the Arl of Redcliffe with the aid of the remaining mages from the circle. It sounded like my favored playthrough. Any other specifics, I'd definitely have to get from Leliana.

_And now for Dragon Age 2_

Hawke had been a roguish female, and Varric claims it's why she got along so well with him and Isabella. Bethany had lived. Hawke had loved Merrill and the two had destroyed her Eluvian. The Arishok had been put down and the qunari threat expelled from Kirkwall. Fenris had killed his former master. Anders was alive and had helped to defend the mages when all shit had broken loose because of his actions. In the end, Hawke had sided with the mages and executed the bastard Orsino and the red monster Meredith. Cullen had even been present at that final fight and helped combat his rampaging superior. It all ended with Hawke fleeing Kirkwall with Merrill to avoid an exalted march and Aveline was left to pick up the pieces. Varric says he would've stayed behind to help however, “Cassandra clearly had other plans.”

As the buzz works into me, a good groggy, I thank Varric and he just chuckles while waving me off so he can return to his paperwork.

Flush, it feels spectacular to walk back out into that mountain cold. I close my eyes and just stand to the side of the doorway so as not to block others access.

Exhaling slow, I start walking down towards the cabin in the woods, knowing full well that alchemy notes are hidden there. A few people recognize me along the way but most others are caught up in their chores or tasks, and I keep almost tripping over children skirting past my knees. I make way through the gates and to the right. The clanging of hammers and swords is louder than
I'm willing to deal with so I pick up the pace. Snow crunching underfoot, I make way to the abandoned cabin.

*Any other scenario and I'd say this was the perfect set up for a haunting. Fortunately…*

Knowing full well there aren't any ghosts, I kick the weathered door in, step to the far desk, grab the notes, pocket them and head back outside, pulling the door shut behind me. Instead of heading back to the crowds and throngs of people, I find a patch of grass untouched by snow and frost. I tentatively lay down, trying to give my bare back time to adjust to the persistent cold radiating through the mountain ground. After a mere few minutes, it could be the alcohol talking but it doesn't feel all that cold out anymore – I fold my arms up and under my head and lock my eyes to the Breach from my prone position.

*Let the staring match begin.*
Woken by Bees

I must've fallen asleep staring at the giant tear because cause I'm roused from my nap by the pronounced “Ahem” of someone clearing their throat.

I tilt my head back some and sure enough, there's Cassandra staring down at me, standing a few paces away. I catch her staring at my chest and she flicks her gaze up to surrounding mountains. It could be the cool air but I'm certain I'm spy a blush creep into her cheeks.

...hello angry gorgeous.

“Are you not concerned with catching cold?!” she scoffs at me.

“Hmmm, nope. Got a pretty healthy immune system.”

After a sigh, she says “Well regardless, we require your presence in the war room. If you would, please follow me,” while avoiding my upward gaze. I flex a bit, stirring my sluggish blood, roll and push myself up. And together, we walk back to the Chantry.

I'm embarrassed to say that I zone out during our walk and continue to be absent minded all throughout my first meeting with the leaders of the Inquisition. Shameful. Guess that despite my brief nap, I'm more inebriated that I thought. From what I can recall, they did the usual talking points – how I'm the Herald of Andraste, how I'm tall, how we need to meet Mother Giselle, etc.

I blink back in sobering consciousness and I'm still in the war room, leaning against the map table. The candles look to be burning low – it must be well after dark. I stretch my arms, swaying to and fro as I walk out into the main hall of the chantry.

Silence

Well, there are a few crickets chirping.

I walk back out in the town and down the winding streets to my cabin. Once inside, I shimmy out of my boots and pants, leaving them on the floor where they fall and walk over to the dresser where a note has been left. It reads:

Herald, come morning, be sure to visit Harritt in the forge before you set out for the Hinterlands. He has a select few items for you such as armor and a staff. Maker be with you.

-Josephine

I crease the note and drop it to the floor before falling into bed.

Shit. Josephine and Cullen are good people...and they're gonna think I'm weird. I mean, I know I'm weird but I didn't want that to be my first impression. Smooth. Absolutely smooth. Here's hoping I came off as reserved...

I pull the low thread count sheets over me and mash my face to the pillow. I'd roll over but I don't want my horns to hook the headboard. Face down, I'm less likely to break my own neck. In just a few short moments, sleep overcomes me and I drift off into the void.
I open my eyes and I’ve clearly entered the fade – I'm crouching in a field of magenta fur, knuckles white, clenching tufts nearest me. Wind is whipping past me, threatening to pull me off to oblivion.

“More purple tints?! And where are the bees, dreamland?!” I yell over the roar of the wind.

Squinting against the wind, eyes watering, I try to look around. There's a blur to the air above, vibrating – Transparent, carrying my world. Paper thin veining, I can see it fanning out across the sky.

“Those?” I question before I'm struck by the realization ‘THOSE ARE WINGS!’

I'm floored by the idea that I'm not on the ground, I'm on an immense creature. But what is furry and has wings of glass? Still squinting and holding on for sweet life, I steal glances and notice striation on the furred plains. Black and purple and black and...

Dumbfounded, I squeak “I'm riding a giant bee.” and more loudly “Why is it always bees?!”

The world shudders and quakes as “YOU WILL KNOW” tears through me and I'm not given time to recover. “REMEMBER.”

************

The world voice hits hard enough that I would've flipped out of bed … had I not rolled in my sleep and gotten my horns hooked around the bed post. “Seriously. What the fuck?! How the hell do qunari get any damn sleep?!” I hiss at everything and nothing.

“Fine! Forget sleep. Forget the bees. Forget these!” I growl, grabbing at my horns and detaching them from their trapping. More mad than annoyed and less than enraged, I shove my legs into my pants and force my boots on.

“AND WHAT THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO REMEMBER?!” I yell at the room, seething in confusion.

Hopefully I haven't woken any of my neighbors. A few bad attempts at calming breaths later, I notice a shirt that's folded on the chair. And another note is peeking out from a fold.

Herald, safe travels.

-Josephine

“Did I seriously forget to tell her to call me by name?,” I mumble, annoyed with myself now as I unfurl the shirt – It's a deep magenta, long-sleeved piece; a heavy fabric with a pewter buttons.

“Okay, this is beautiful. Thank you, Josie – I'm sure I owe you an apology somehow…”

Pulling it over my long arms and torso, I figure they must've measured me in my sleep. Perhaps during my imprisonment. It fits well – not too baggy, I can bend my arms without stressing the sleeves, and it feels just durable enough. And the best part, the color looks bold against my grayish skin.

I cast a final look around my room before heading out into the night, making sure im not forgetting anything and I notice a handful of items on the bedside table.
Rummaging through the pieces, I find the pile is mostly scraps of burnt leather but amid these, there's a black and grey honeybee pendant about 2” in diameter. Guess this was in my pockets when I made my appearance. I hold the pendant by a thin strand of cord, watching it dangle and slowly turn, drawn into it, hypnotic. My vision blurs at the edges, eyes locked to the insect carving and I experience the sensation of something scratching its fingernails on the base of my skull from within, while a whispered “remember” edges in from the shadows.

Fear squirms through me and I immediately drop the piece to the floor. It seems to be undamaged.

“Ahh what the fuck is with this remember shit?! And WHY. IS. IT. ALWAYS. BEES?!” I voice, incredibly irate. I kick the pendant under the bed, not prepped to deal with it. It could actually be cursed. I live in a world where curses are real. This is my world now. My life.

I stomp off through my door and into the night towards the frozen lake.

I need to sort through all this … this shit.

Outside in the brisk air, the sky is a dark blue – looks like it'll be another couple hours before the sun rises over the mountains. For this, I'm pleased – I'm not ready to deal with the strangers and crowds that make up Haven. Not yet. Walking along the dirt path, a few soldiers elbow each other and bow to me. I tilt my head down in their direction, acknowledging them. They seem happy. Maybe it's me, maybe it's the Breach being stabilized, maybe it's drink they've had. I walk through the main gate and out into the training grounds. Soon enough, Cullen will probably have his soldiers up and clashing. But not yet. This is my reprieve – from my dreams; from this world; from myself.

Walking past Harritt’s forge, I note the heat still radiating from within. Guess he has apprentices that stoke the flames throughout the night. No hammer, no clanging, just warmth. It's too hot for my blood, I can already feel sweat beads trying to form on my forehead, so I turn to keep walking to the lake.

“kff,” a tiny sneeze sounds out.

I pivot back to the forge and lean over the outer railing to the works – and there's a small child huddled up next to a barrel of longswords. She can't be any older than 10 but even hidden under her mop of black hair, her eyes look like they've seen too much.

Resting my elbows on the railing, hands loosely hanging over the edge, I speak in a low even tone “hey. You okay?”

No panic at the stranger voice, she looks up at me and slowly, through haunted eyes, appears to recognize me. With a weary voice, she states “You have horns. You are the Herald everyone is talking about?” Her voice tiny and cold.

“Yeah, that’s me. M’name is Hunter. What about you?”

She looks so guarded, and goes quiet. But I can wait.

Minutes pass as the mountain air whistles through the trees.

Finally, the small one answers “Rasa.”

“Rasa,” I repeat, making sure I've said it right, "Ya don't need to tell me why you’re here – no need
to fret over that. But listen, I'm gonna be gone a while. If ya want, you can have my cabin until I get back. Sound good?"

She just stares at me with those big dark eyes, fatigued but clearly considering my offer.

“You know the one? Right through the main gate, left and then it's the last one.”

She softly shakes her head, “I know the one.”

I push off the railing and start walking away – I'm not gonna stare her down; if she wants my cabin, she can have it at her own pace.

Finally, no longer basking in the remnants of the forge warmth, I hit frozen shore, cold sand crunching under boot heel and step out. The lake was always frozen in game – I just hope it'll be the same here. Step after step, testing my footing and not a crack forms.

No give, no crunch.

I reach the center and just stand in place, slightly swaying from my own fatigue. Closing my eyes, I breathe deep. Exhale – I can feel the cool condensation, the fog exiting my mouth, and I inhale again and hold. A calm washes over – It's not a storm, but the cold will do. In through my nose, out through my mouth. Monotonous. Repeating. I'm not ready for sleep though, not ready for the fade, not ready to be yelled at by bees.

But I drift.

I drift into a dreamless sleep.
I feel the cold in my lungs. I'm aware of my breathing, the gentle stretch of my chest. My eyelids fold, only to witness that the sun has risen, illuminating the valley surrounding Haven. Slowly, the noise of swordplay and shouts come into focus, all sound returns from the nothing I had just been in. Reaching up to brace my skull, I twist it just so.

*cra-crack-pop*

My neck, now loose, swivels freely.

*Alright, good meditation into the void but no more sleep standing.*

I go to walk back towards Haven but instead I shoulder check a human.

While still stumbling for balance, he blurts “Herald, my apologies! I'm, uh, just here to make certain that you're fine. Which you are. Yes. Also…” he looks hesitant “…I must thank you for my life.”

I look the soldier over – the man, he's very nondescript, especially in uniform with his helmet on. “Your life? Whadya mean?,” I ask groggily.

“In the mountains, ser, you killed a demon with your bare hands…you saved me.”

“Oh! Yeah, no problem,” I crookedly smile, then looking past the soldier and over his head, I notice Cullen standing in the shoreline. “Cullen need me?”

“The Commander? Ah, yes! I think he means to see your party off,” the man fidgets, clearly anxious. I pat the man in his shoulder and press past and approach the former Templar.

“Howdy,” I say smirking.

Concern twists to relief in Cullen's face, his shoulders relaxing some. “Ahh, Herald. Good morning. Uh, Seeker Cassandra and the others, they're awaiting you near the pass. We looked for you in your cabin this morning but there was a child?”

“Yeah. Saw her huddled up by the forge when I was walking around – told her she could have it until we get back. Why I was out on the lake; was meditating. Didn't need my bed.”

Cullen relaxes entirely, shoulders slumping, and decidedly less awkward, says “ah, that makes more sense. She told us as much but … we had ignored her and told her to leave. I…” and sighing, “I will see to it that she is granted access back into the lodging. My apologies, Herald.” At that, he marches back over to his men by the tents. “Cullen! Stop calling me that, please!” No response from him though, he just keeps marching into his array of troops.
‘Hate that nickname,’ I fume over, defeated, while making my way to Harritt’s forge.

I don’t even say his name and the forge master shoves a pile into my arms, places a leather bound staff on top, and rushes back to his work. “…and hello to you too,” I sarcastically whisper in his absence while rolling my eyes. I go to make my way towards my party but something tugs on my sleeve – I see Rasa, who looks as stone-faced as the night before. Unblinking, she absently stares up at me and wedges an apple into the crook of my elbow. “I ate the other food. That’s what’s left.” And she leaves.

“Thanks Raasaaaaaaaa” I drawl out. She also ignores me and keeps on walking.

Fine, I'm a damn ghost. Well . . . Let's get this shitshow on the road.

*************

“So how long till we get to The Hinterlands?”

Flicking twigs into the fire, Varric answers “ohh, ya know. About another day of sore feet and all … this,” gesturing to the nature around us. “Maybe a half day’s walk if we're quick about it.”

“Well, I can tell you're enjoying it. You've only complained about it 20 times today. That’s significantly better than yesterday’s 100,” I joke at him.

A grin flashes across his face and he says, “dirt, fresh air, bandits, wildlife -- what's not to love?” Chagrined, I say “well when ya put it like that...”

Solas approaches the fire, hands clasped behind him, and utters “surely, master Tethras, a change in scenery can inspire you. So it's not all bad.”

“Aw, Chuckles, ya know how to raise my spirits. And I know how to raise some as well.” He winks at the two of us and pulls a flask from inside his coat, raises it high and takes a shot. I just shake my head in embarrassment -- I love terrible puns but I can't let him know just yet; he'll say them too often and I'll somehow get sick of them, I'm sure. Instead of commenting, I stand up, and snatch my bundled staff. “Alright, anyone needs me, I'll be practicin’ over there,” I announce, pointing towards a few downed pines at the edge of our campsite, some 50 feet away.

“Herald. May I join you?,” Solas inquires to which I sternly raise my brow. Sighing, quickly realizing his error, he says “Ah, Hunter. My apologies. May I join you?”

“Yeah, s’fine. And no need to apologize – just call me by my name.”

Solas looks a bit embarrassed but nods, pulls his staff from his back, and walking along beside me, says “I will try to be better about calling you by your actual name.”

“It’s all good.”

Ha, embarrassed a god.

"Say, think you could teach me how to fadestep?" I utter while some excitement creeps into my
“Possibly. In what schools of magic are you most adept?”

I pause a moment, looking at nothing in particular in the night sky. Finding no clues or hints above, I start rambling “I guess … fire, entropy maybe. I don't think gravity… definitely not blood or blight. Don't know anything about spirit. Maybe I” but Solas interjects with small chuckles and a hand wave before saying “what if instead, you brandish your staff and we proceed from there?”

“Yeah, that makes more sense,” I mutter as a shimmer rolls over Solas. I grab the leather folds and whip it out and away from me, loosing my staff to the grass below -- it looks to be twisted wrought iron with various leather bindings and a small piece of blue vitriol driven into the staff’s tip.

Finally. Could've really used one these bad boys in the intro – wouldn’t have had to smell sooooo bad.

Smirking, I grab my new staff with my right hand, feeling out its weight and balance. I can feel whatever core it has react to my touch -- it's like breathing.

“Oh, this, this is nice….wait, what?”

The iron goes red hot, electricity erupts from all over; Solas throws his hand forward and I feel a barrier envelop me just in time -- the staff explodes, an eruption of molten metal and a shockwave splinters those trees nearest us while Varric curses out “ANDRASTE’S FLAMING ASS” and dives behind a nearby ruined wall. Bathed in an orange glow from the burning tree tops, I can see the shock registered on Solas’s face – fortunately for us both, he had had the foresight to shield us. The earth around us is pocked with shards of hot iron, the pieces hissing against the cold ground, and the grass is nearly nonexistent, scorched to the roots and still smoldering. I turn to our camp to see Cassandra, having leapt from her tent, unarmored but with her sword and shield raised, eyes narrowed and ready to attack… instead, with eyes widening, her mouth drops when she sees that I'm to blame. “Maker help us” crosses her lips.

Dropping the smoking chunk that remains in my clenched hand, I urgently proclaim “No more staff. I'm done with staves. No more. Nope. I'm done. That was terrible. I am sorry!” and staring hard at the ground, I can feel all eyes boring into me as I swiftly march back to my tent to hide inside. After that stunt, I am definitely not prepared to talk to people.

Or be berated by them.

******

Nearly an hour since my incident. Breathing hard and shallow, I know I can't fall asleep. I can't even blink – My eyes burn as I stare at the crease in my small tent's top. And to make matters worse, my feet are sticking out my tent flaps.

‘Irony: A mage that can't wield a staff; Man that can't fit in his tent. What a terrifying joke,’ I try uselessly to lighten my situation. But to no avail. A hollow attempt at a smile. No true smirk. Just tight guts.

And now the darker thoughts worm their way in. ‘…And now they'll fear me. Bad. They'll hate you. Chain you again. Fear. Don't want people to fear me…don't even want my enemies to fear me.'
Just to underestimate,’ these thoughts race through me. ‘And does the wolf know more than he’s lettin’ on?’ A shiver rolls down my spine – during gameplay, I'd usually come to count him as a friend and ally. But here, would Solas be as forthcoming? As amenable?

…would he tell me if he did know?

From outside my tent, I realize Varric is whispering “…so…what the hell was that?” Cassandra, a sliver of worry entering her voice, “I… I do not know. I only saw the aftermath. Solas, what did you witness?”

Solas, more quiet than the other two, utters, pensively “the staff reacted violently to his touch. Why? I can only theorize. Perhaps the mark…”

‘Wrong, the mark has been purring like a kitten all evening,’ I think as I eye my left hand, it’s glow raised just above my face.

I tune back in to Solas as he finishes saying “…has left him unstable or perhaps has upset his own natural connection to the fade. Without further observation, I feel we are simply speculating.”

Cassandra pushes “HE CANNOT.”

“…And I agree, Seeker. For now, he should keep from wielding a staff. Until at least, after we’ve returned to Haven and performed tests.”

Satisfied somewhat by his response, Cassandra says “yes, that would be best. But what do we do in the meantime?” Fortunately Varric is a cooler head and blurts “what do mean? He can fight just fine without a staff – or have you forgotten how he handled that big ass demon back at the temple?”

Cassandra mutters in resignation, “yes. You are correct.” She sighs and stands, “I will keep first watch tonight.” Solas hums as if to say something else but a voice in the back of my mind whispers “sleep” and I feel the ground drop from below me and I fall into darkness.

**************

Standing in pitch black, no, not quite. My fist is blazing with it’s trademark green light, and upon opening my hand, my surroundings are bathed in its glow. Black trees. Black sky. Black earth, all with an emerald tint shining upon them. “So, back in the fade huh?! Anyone out there?”

The silence is heavy in this dark world – no wind to stir the leaves or grass. No birds. Nothing. This place feels devoid of life. A long enough stay here and one would surely go mad.

“HELLO?” I haven't moved from my initial spot. “…you called me here?!”

A droning buzzes deep from within the trees, and only increases in volume as the forest around me loses its shape and every mass reveals itself to be a swarm.

My mouth goes dry and my eyes go wide at the sight of this swirling blackness, this world swarm. Looking in every direction at this buzzing everything, I scream “I'm not scared of you! I'm not even allergic to you! SO WHAT. THE FUCK. DO. YOU. WANT?!” while clapping my hands at it all in
emphasis.

In reaction to my words, the swarm slows, and hundreds are pulled to one point just a scant few feet away.

And they loosely take the form of…

“Me?” I whisper, convinced my eyes are lying. Empty patches keep appearing on this new body, spots without bees, like the hive mind can't concentrate enough on what to be.

The deep voice from within my head rumbles like a landslide “do not feel fear. Do not let it take more from us than it already has. Remember” as the swarm form’s mouth attempts to mimic the words.

It actually feels sad, I can feel the pain and worry radiating from this impersonation. “What am I supposed to remember?! And why can't I hold a staff? Is it every staff?! What are you? Why is it always bees?!”

I'm struck by a force unseen and violently ripped from my waking dream.

********************

My eyes fly open, and I feel the whiplash, as if the pull had happened in real life. My whole body aches. Gingerly, I raise myself from my bedding, careful not to clip the tent with my horns, and shimmy out the tent flaps into the morning light. I spot Solas sitting on a log by the dying embers of last night’s fire, eyes half closed, perhaps from lack of sleep or perhaps in meditation.

“Difficulty sleeping?” Solas asks without focusing on me.

“Uh, yeah. Something keeps tryin’ to talk to me in the fade but last night, I was ejected before we could actually have a conversation,” I reply while pressing my hand to my neck, attempting to work out the kinks. Solas turns to me with concern etched into his brow and holds my gaze, saying “and this entity, can you discern it’s alignment – whether it is friend or foe?”

Looking to the ground, I shake my head and mumble “nah.”

'But what the hell pulled me out? That thing felt…,' a shiver runs down my spine as I think about whatever could've torn me from the fade.

“But the spirit that wanted to talk, it keeps telling me to remember. That, and …pfft, right, it also said something about not having fear?”

Lost in thought, Solas simply whispers “interesting” under his breath.

“Well, that sounds thoroughly weird,” Varric lazily says while rubbing sleep from his eyes with the back of his gloved hand. And speaking of weird, I've decided to call you K.O.” I quirk an eyebrow at him but he's quick to defend “oh, please. That’s a good nickname. From demons to inanimate objects, you take em all down in one hit,” in an all too theatrical manner. He seems almost ready to bow and perform an encore.
“...sooo, bad nickname aside, you're not scared of me?,” I question to which he says “just don't touch any magical items around me and you and I, we'll be good.” Reaching into his jacket for his flask yet again, he takes a sip, winces a bit and continues “see, last thing I need is to have my ass on fire -- because I happen to like my ass.” Chuckling at his own joke, he walks off into the woods, I suspect to relieve himself. Somewhere past the tree line, Varric chimes “I don't need another Blondie in my life.”

‘Funny,’ I think, deadpan, ‘that's an unfortunate comparison…’

But speaking of relief, I'm actually feeling somewhat better after the events of last night. At least until I turn around and catch Cassandra staring me down.

**Staring. Not glaring...that’s...good?**

“Cassandra! I'm so sorry about last night! I've never held a staff before, I had no clue tha” I try to hurry out but she marches up, firmly grasps the sides of my shoulders, and looking up at me, silences me with her intense eyes before saying “Stop. It is true that it was a terrifying event – however, we are unharmed. We will just have to be more cautious going forward.”

I audibly sigh in relief, and I can feel the tension fade. “Thanks, Cassandra.”

In the background, I hear Solas question low “...never used a staff?” but I pretend to not have heard.

Cassandra adds “For now, you should move quickly. We will depart within the hour.

Looking into her dark eyes, I tell her “With you, I'll go anywhere,” ushering any charm I might have into my tone. Blush creeps into her cheeks but she deflects with an exaggerated shrug and scoffs before storming off. And all I can do is watch her.

‘She is...enchanting?’ I think, somewhat incredulous at my own thought.

“GO PACK” she yells at me from somewhere behind her tent, pulling me back to reality.

*Right...and then off to the hinterlands we go.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Thanks for reading so far -- I've got a few chapters I'm editing right now for my next update. Again, any constructive criticism is appreciated.
The Hinterlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Surprisingly, Scout Harding wasn't there to greet and brief us on the grassy knoll – I suppose she was out on reconnaissance but still…

Hmm…Minor change..

Instead, we were left to ourselves on the camp edge with Cassandra flipping through a handful of documents. Early afternoon in the Hinterlands, it's idyllic – rolling hills, lush greenery, jutting peaks and plateaus, rams roaming in the distance and fennics scurrying about. Just a touch of humidity, perhaps a rain storm will show later this evening.

Meanwhile, right this moment, asshats are committing atrocities. Spec-fucking-tacular, I muse.

Without looking up from her heap of papers, Cassandra announces to our group “Mother Giselle was reportedly last seen at the crossroads. It is also reported that there is heavy fighting between the mage and Templar factions in this region. Additionally, there has been bandit activity. We will have to be careful.”

“Alright. So let's go knock some sense into these idiots,” I remark. Cassandra shoots me a stern glance while Varric just nods, agreeing with me.

“Can we skip right to the objective?” I groan out and immediately regret it; Cassandra looks ready to berate me for my “lack of planning.”

‘Let’s increase the tempo,’ I think and before words can be exchanged from anyone, I leap forward off our ledge, drop to the path below and start my mad dash to the Crossroads. Behind me, I can hear their cries, of concern, of agitation, but that won't matter when they see the fray up ahead. I'll be…somewhat…justified.

I pass the lone cabin on the stony hill. I sprint through the pass, expertly stepping between the clusters of iron and loose stone. And I sprint to edge of the small town and planting my feet, grind to a halt.

‘Shit, wait. Will my fists even work against templars and mages?,’ I worry, gritting my teeth. “Damn it. She was right. Need to plan better.’

The frenzied screams of the townspeople whip me back to the matter at hand and I spit “fuck it,” throwing myself into the ring before my doubts can gnaw at my resolve. Right out of the gate, I barrel towards some ill equipped mercenaries and a mage who have their sights aimed on the innocent. The man closest me swings his sword, cleaving a mother’s head from her shoulders; thick arterial blood erupts like a geyser from her neck stump, splashing both her killer and her child she sought to protect. My insides rage at this terrible visage – just a few yards more and I could've saved her, saved a family. Instead, I'll have to settle for vengeance. The killer pulls back his sword, ready to thrust through the child still clutching to her mother’s corpse but I grab the fucker by his throat. My marked hand tears at his sword arm, as “death!” rings through my head.

His skin starts blistering and putrefying under my grip and before he can even finish gurgling out a chunky sob, his skin ruptures and he pours out of himself
like rotten fruit; everything he was, splashing to the ground while his gear and blade hit the ground with a thick, wet clatter. Glancing at the child, I see she has her face buried in her dead mother’s dress.

*Good. She didn’t see....that.*

Mid-thought, a fireball screams through the air toward my head but I swat it back at the mage. Clearly she didn't expect that; it hits her dead on, detonating her barrier, and throwing her backwards into a tree with a sickening crunch, her head bending unnaturally. Turning, I spot the final mercenary scurrying away back up the hill, terrified, dropping his sword and screaming. Instead, I turn my attention to my right hand and whisper “god daaaaamn.” A fine black mist is bleeding out from my pores, dispersing as it drifts from my hand. “…pure entropy. A death touch.”

‘And now this, this can be a gift for the templars,’ I sinisterly muse.

I grab the child with my mark hand and hoist her over my shoulder, her protesting cries deafening so close to my ear. Leaving the mother's corpse where it lay, I haul the child to a nearby cabin and toss her inside, slamming the door shut behind her. I don't know if I can take on a Templar but I'd much rather not have to protect anyone while dealing with them.

After jamming the door behind me , I spy Cassandra locking shields with a huge thug of the order – a bastard nearly as tall as me. Varric and Solas are laying down cover fire but it's not a fair fight. Five templars to their three.

“And I'll make it less fair,” I growl to myself as I jog over to join the fight. I see a body drop from behind a tree off to the left, armor clanging as it strikes earth – a bolt sticking out of their throat. Good shot; clearly Varric’s. Solas changes strategy, goes from throwing ice to casting barriers over the seeker as she clashes against the brute. Cassandra is playing powerhouse and not budging an inch despite her foe’s weight and height advantage. Although she's holding her own, she can't seem to get her sword into any vulnerable spots. Two of the Templars charge Solas while roaring prayers, invoking the maker’s wrath against our elves mage – and while Solas is undaunted, Varric appears panicked and let's loose a volley of bolts from Bianca in rapid fire – no luck, the Templars just hide behind their shields while pushing forward.

‘Shit, Solas needs to focus on his own enemies. Gotta expedite this!,’ I mentally roar while charging the brute clashing with Cassandra. The two are locked but I grab the neckline of his armor from behind, kick out the back of his knees and twist him to the ground. As he falls, Cassandra disengages and thrusts her sword’s length just under the brute’s helm and right into his tender neck meat – but not willing to take chances, I grab the sides of his helm and violently jerk his head 90 degrees, cleanly snapping his neck and ending him. Cassandra looks to approve and the two of us bear down on the remaining two Templars.

Surrounded, the two launch into a more feral assault like cornered animals, wildly brandishing their blades and drunk on lurium – the two stand back to back, ensuring they won't be flanked. Cassandra, with eyes narrowed, merely walks a perimeter around them, momentarily drawing the attention of the Templar closest. Taking advantage of her distraction, I lunge forward as Solas freezes the enemy ankles to the ground – I grab the shield edge, rip it away and snatch the templar by the throat, invoking my death touch. The remaining Templar twists to aid his ally but it's much too late – his former ally is a heap of armor with bubbling rot oozing from the cracks and openings. The final one’s eyes go wide and he screams “ABOMINATION,” bringing his sword down at me with all his crazed might. I skirt to his side, evading his blade but he drives his armored knee up into my stomach – instant pain and nausea rack me despite my adrenaline rush.

In that split second, I can only look as he drops his shield, pulls a dagger from his belt and thrusts it
toward my eyes.

I’m dead.

But a bolt pierces his leg and Cassandra shield bashes him from the side, planting the rebel on his ass. Madness in his eyes, he only screams “abominationABOMINATIONABOMINATION” before a final ice shard tears through his skull, ending the battle. The corpse slumps forward, landing face down, shoving the ice back through its exit wound into the recess of what was his brain as cold steam wafts from the entry wound.

My blood is pumping too hard – Cassandra is talking to me but I can’t make out her words just yet. I just stare. As Varric and Solas climb down from their ledge, Cassandra helps me stand upright, looking into my eyes and places her gloved hands on both sides of my face, forcing me to lock eyes. Adrenaline slows and I can hear the world around me again, even though the Crossroads now hangs in eerie silence. “You are unharmed” she says to me, still holding my face and looking up to me. Though it could’ve been a question.

“Yeah” I huff out, nodding against her hands. “Good. Take a moment to collect yourself. I will tell the townspeople that the fight is finished.” I just whisper “okay” as she releases my face and turns to alert the town but not before demanding “Varric, stay nearby. And Solas, see to the Herald and confirm whether or not he is fine.” Solas nods while Varric mocks offense, waving his arms.

“Seeker, I’ll be here, just nowhere near that Templar...puddle. These are new boots,” Varric chuckles out in his typical gravel toned levity.

“I locked a child in a cabin over there” I blurt out, suddenly remembering the little girl, and pointing to where she’d be. She understands and marches off. Meanwhile, Solas stands next to me, simply looking me over without poking or prodding. “You continue to exhibit interesting power. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen it’s like. Yet again, you surprise me.”

I look to my right hand, the black fog now nonexistent, and reply “that was a new one for me too... jus...jus focused on absolute death. And ... tada. Death touch.” My voice sounds a bit hollow and sarcastic but Solas appears to understand I don’t mean anything by it. Instead, he takes my right arm, and looking closely at my hand, for what I can’t discern, says “it would appear entropy is indeed a school in which you naturally excel,” a curious look crossing his face.

The absence of adrenaline has taken its toll – I just feel empty. But pulling away from Solas and Varric, I whisper “gotta...gotta see about a cleric,” and head toward the town center. The people have already come out of hiding and returned to their tasks, some having already doused the fires and smoldering remains scattered about. Me, I’m just stunned that a handful of Templars and mages could do so much damage. Fortunately I don’t have to linger on that; I locate my objective rather quickly. Mother Giselle is merely talking to a wounded soldier about the potential of magic to “be good or bad. There is no absolute.”

*********

My talk with the Mother went as expected – same bullshit about talking to the revered mothers in Val Royeux, blah blah blah. We talked to the Captain, and various others around the hamlet and agreed to their demands or needs. And it’s not long before we’ve restocked and left the small village, heading North.

Having thrown back a few elfroot potions, my energy restored, I’m back to full status and thinking of a plan. ‘Okay. We get to the elf artifact sphere..thing -- I’ll touch it to activate it – with my left
hand. Pretend to have a seizure or something, claim my left eye saw “bits of future” and then I'm golden. Can finally tell what I know without suspicion. This …this should hopefully … please work.’

Surprising though, as we approach the cave with collapsed pillars in front of it, we find not only the scorched remnants of a lesser demon . . .but also the corpse of an elven mage – her throat slashed out. “Mutually assured destruction” I whisper.

So stuff actually can change.

Ignoring the rest of my party and their various comments on the scene, I step to the cave and willing additional strength into my legs, throw forward a kick and crack the pillar. I know I can't will it back upright – I cant seem to do distance spells. A few more kicks to the debris and I manage to make an opening wide enough for us to squeeze through.

‘Curious. No other demons yet’ I ponder as we enter the darkened ruins. Solas ignites a nearby torch and teal light burns from the oily rags. “Veilfire” both Solas and I say simultaneously, earning me a curious look from everyone. Ignoring it, I push on further.

“And no demons?” I whisper, staring at the empty ruins to which Varric says “what, hoping for some? I will never understand you mages.” I quickly recover, saying “huh? No, I meant there was some demon gunk outside – figured there might be more in here.” Varric looks incredulous and blurs “Then WHY would you want to come in here?!”

I just mutter “I don't know. Curiousity? Treasure?” This earns a small scoff from Solas.

Shit. Of course he'd be offended by us snagging ancient elven treasure.

“Bandits might've stashed something in here” I say, trying to save face. But as we descend the stairs, I find myself caring significantly less about our conversation.

There it is! The artifact.

Walking right up to it, I crouch down and pretend to study it. “What is this?” I mumble. Solas begins to say something about it and its purpose but I cut him off by planting my mark hand to the piece and it instantly reacts – green shimmers and swirls over its surface.

NOW!

Keeping my hand on the artifact, I lurch forward onto it and start convulsing, drooling and rolling my eyes back into my skull. All three of my companions yell out to me and I forcibly collapse, blinking slothfully several times at the cavernous ceiling while breathing hard. They all bolt to my sides to see to my health.

A moment of silence and I finally whisper “how curious” to everyone's relief -- I'm not catatonic or dead. Solas leans forward and presses the question “what? What is it?!?” Ignoring his inquiry, I ask for paper and ink. Varric quickly snatches some from his pack and thrusts them into my grip; rolling onto my side, I start writing down what I know of the region.

‘…and..why can't people have ballpoint pens here?!,’ I question, irritated at the inefficiency of quill and ink.

Finally, I finish my map of the Hinterlands and all corresponding points of interest, from corpses with notes to bandit hideouts to rift locations to the whereabouts of the mage and Templar strongholds. “…I saw where things are.” I whisper dreamily.
Oh geez, please buy this shit. I don't know how else I'm supposed to sell this.

*******

They were hard pressed to believe me at first but after several hours of prowling the region and finding everything I’d noted to be true, they couldn't find fault or just say I was sick in the head. We'd managed to close all the rifts in the East and Far South areas. We'd saved Ritts from Templars, recruited the cult, found all points of interest for the people of the Crossroads. We found the occularum and associated shards, slew the bandits to the South West and North East, placed camp markers, destroyed the red lyrium veins and even executed the bastards that killed the farm elf’s husband. We had made tremendous progress. The only thing we actively avoided was the Dragon — I’m not interested in killing one of of them unless we absolutely have to.

Tomorrow we'd make our way to the Templar and mage strongholds and then onward to Dennet’s Farm.

However, now it’s well after dark and we’re forced to make camp. I don't even bother setting up my tent tonight, instead opting to just sleep against a tree on a cliff overlooking the razed landscape outside of Fort Connor. A campfire burns nearby, Varric occasionally kicking a log to stoke the flames. The grinding of stone on steel periodically cuts the air – Cassandra slides a whetstone against the oiled blade resting in her lap. Solas has vanished, perhaps off to pick herbs.

Despite being so exhausted from our excursion, Varric manages to breathe out “still weird. You know that, right? I mean…you actually saw the future.”

“He truly has been sent by the Maker. The Hera….Hunter will see to it that our path is a righteous one,” Cassandra chimes in response.

Too tired to shoot her a look, I think ‘Shit. Of course she’d take this as a religious affirmation…. Maybe if I’d…no. This was the best plan.’ Then again, doubt she'd even see my face from shadows. She's as close to the fire as Varric is.

“Andraste’s ass -- it's still weird,” Varric mutters.

“Gotta agree with ya, Varric.” I say, weary.

“And will it happen more or was this a one off?” Varric questions.

“I have no idea. And really, I don't care enough right now. I'm going to sleep” I reply as I shimmy against my tree, adjusting for sleep, and close my eyes. I can feel their stares on me so I say “tent isn't worth the setup – I just snag it with my horns.”

No responses from either.

Guess that's that. And now…I'm ready to have a real talk with shadow me. SLEEP MODE ACTIVATE!

Of course it didn't just happen – it's another half hour's wait or so before I slip into sleep.
Chapter End Notes

So they're finally in the Hinterlands and making progress. I hope you all enjoy the pacing and that everything is grammatically correct -- I'm working from a tablet and it wants to Autocorrect everything.
I open my eyes to a snowy mountain pass and a frozen waterway underfoot. Snowflakes hang in the air, refusing to fall and further and looking up, I see the Breach -- it's flashes and pulses without actually moving. But no yearning, no urgency to swallow the world. And floating behind that, flickering in and out of existence – the so called “Black City,” supposed home of the Maker.

“Probably Elven though, in all actuality.”

Spinning, I spot the smoldering remains of the bridge that crumbled under Cassandra and I, sending us tumbling to the ice below only to be met with demons.

And there's me.

I see our bodies, frozen in time with the rest of this introductory scene, this still. Cassandra has her shield raised, it would appear she deflected a blow from the demon before her. Her sword hangs in the air, her sword thrust perpetual. And me, my body is crouched over the ragged mass of a lesser demon, my fist smashing downward toward its skull. But that action also looms and hangs perpetual.

“Interesting that the spirits would find this moment interesting…” I mumble. “Then again, why wouldn't they be – look at this sucker, he's sooooo handsome,” I joke, walking around my frozen form.

Kinda trippy to see yourself in the 3rd person. hmm, that's what the horns and scars look like from the sides...not bad. Not great. But not bad.

“Why wouldn't it be interesting? This was the moment you truly dedicated yourself to the Inquisition,” a familiar voice says from the scene’s edge. Without looking I reply “Hey Solas. I don’t know, aren't there better memories? Like the pride demon fight. Or me closing my first rift. Or me falling uselessly from a rift?”

“Those are just as important – but perhaps this one was more important to you. After all, you were drawn here as well,” Solas says with a hint of a knowing smile.

I try not to tighten up while furiously questioning “shit! I didn't say anything revealing right? Right?! No? Okay, alright. I'm good.

“Maybe. It is when I found out I could pop demons. Don't think I'd ever done that before,” I admit and pause, “and besides, I came here to talk to that other me – the shadow one that keeps popping up in my dreams. Wanted to find that one – not this version of me. Ahh, got any advice?”

Solas’ brow is raised, a look of… wonder on his face “you are aware that this is the fade? Interesting. Have you always had such control over your dreams?”

“You say interesting a lot. But yeah, kind of – I couldn't control what the dream would form as, but I could act independently of it once inside. Lucid. Ya know?,” I reply to Solas before amending my statement “Definitely not this controlled...side effect of the mark?” I say. I'm truly tempted to study Cassandra’s face but now that Solas is here, I'd probably look like a pervert.

“Eh, just wanted to solve the mystery of What keeps telling me to remember.”

“Since we have a moment of privacy, may I ask you a question?”
Tilting my head, I look at Solas from across the ice and nod. No words.

“I've noticed that you don't use spells in a way that other mages do – you don’t use incantations nor do you take the time to build the spell. What I mean to ask is…” Solas pauses and finishes bluntly with “what is your method?”

Standing there in the still, next to this remembered me, I ponder over his question in silence for a time.

_How do you answer this one…_ 

I look away from him and say “so far, I just imagine it. And it happens.”

“And what of your visions? I've seen countless people play at knowing the future but you…you actually appear to know. How far did you see into the future? Have you always had such a gift? Or is this all a result of your touching the artifact?”

_Hmmm, tricky. Uh…_

“Mmm, think that was the first time I’ve seen the future,” I lie, talking low and still looking away from him. “And I only saw details about where we are now.”

_Sounds convincing… I hope. Please be convincing._

Now it's Solas’ turn to sit in silence. Minutes pass and he whispers, still locked in thought, “I have never met someone like you.”

_That has to be a lie – What about those evanuris elf creator god people?_

Continuing, Solas says “thank you for your time. But perhaps now would be a good time to…

_No. No, you asshole! Don't say it!_

“Wake up!”

_***********************_

Annoyed, my eyes creak open – dawn is a few hours still from breaking and I growl out “You're an asshole, Solas! Why the hell did you make me 'wake up' when I still had to find that other me… not the other other me but the other me. Ughhh!” Groggily, I shimmy my shoulder blades up the pine supporting me and position myself more upright.

“Wait…where the hell am I?,” I breathe out, panic edging my voice. I'm on a cliff overlooking Dennet’s farm. And it isn't a tree behind me, but one of the three astrariums. I don't know what to make of this -- I've slept walked before, yeah, but never so far….or though enemy territory. Frantically looking around, convinced it's some awful prank, I don't spy any of the members of my party. No Varric. No Solas. No Cassandra.
Calming myself down, I whisper repeatedly “you're fine. You're good. You know this area. You're…”

No enemies nearby, aside from the rift down the cliff, but that's it. No real reason to panic.

*But how'd I get here? How ... did I ... get here?*

Something flits past the back of my neck, soft as lace and just as immaterial. Slapping my palm to the spot, I whip about but see nothing out of the ordinary. But my heartbeat, it's racing. I grapple and climb over and down the rocks, putting myself back on a walkable path but my eyes are wide, and head on a swivel.

*Nothing... still though...*

The vision in my left eye twitches, in time with my heartbeat – but the twitching is less severe when I find myself staring at the mouth of a cave; a cave that several vagrants are lurking outside of, peering inside hesitantly. I feel compelled to approach the cave and as I do, I overhear their frantic whispers.

“That was an evil spirit, it was!”

The other replies “I don't doubt that! A black ghost screaming at us from the wall – gotta be evil.”

The third chimes in, worry etched in the lines of his face “what ef it cursed us?! Oh Maker help us, we're cursed.”

The first interrupts the third’s cries and yells “WE’RE NOT CURSED. IT’S JUST A DEMON AND WE. GOT. AWAY.” He takes a breath and continues with “we're fine.”

The second though, he retorts with “not fine enough. That was our home. Great. Now we’s homeless again.”

The men are so wrapped up in their distress, they don't hear me walk up behind them. And they don't look particularly dangerous so I blurt out “you see somethin’ down there?”

All three nearly jumped out of their own small clothes at that – tears and snot running down their face. “You said a spirit is down there?”

“Oy Oxman! You nearly gave us a heart attack!”

I reiterate pointedly “you. Said. a spirt. Is down there?”

*Whatever is down there, it feels familiar?*

“More like a demon!,” the third man cries. Without giving them a second glance, I start walking forward into the cave opening and down the staircase. They're not going to follow me; if they're smart, they'll leave the area and make a dash for the farm. Can't have more innocent people getting slaughtered.

I pass a few extinguished braziers as I make my descent, cautiously checking my footing on each step in the dark -- I'm careful not to slip and crack my head open but I'm doubly cautious in the event that this supposed demon attacks from the shadows.

“Aside from the eventual rift down here, there shouldn't be any demons….so what's this about?” I whisper in the dark as I will the killing black back into my right hand. Perhaps it's foolish a move
but entropy should still work against spirits.

*Should*

Reaching the stairs’ end, I’m left standing in a cavernous room, decrepit but well preserved – all smooth stone walls and banisters. There’s even a surprising lack of damp in the air. Just cold. My left eye starts twitching erratically, out of nowhere, and my heart races again. I slap my left hand to my eye, trying to balance my vision, and raise my right hand in front of me, rife with death.

“Where are you” I hiss at the dark just as a silhouette drops from the ceiling and dangles at its hips – I leap backwards, fear and adrenaline pushing me.

“FUCK YOU!” I roar at the specter. It shudders and reverses, as if being pulled backwards brought its own timeline before phasing through a wall on my right – again it’s left dangling from the wall by its hips and its face contorts, silently screaming in pain. Despite every one of my senses telling me to slay the shade, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve met it before. I warily approach, poised to attack as it uselessly hangs from its wall, flailing about.

Mere inches from the thing and I still can’t shake the familiarity. “What are you?” I utter in disbelief at this immaterial being. No contours, no textures. Shaking my emotions from me, I utter “Sorry. I’ll make it quick,” and push my right hand into the shade’s torso.

But it doesn’t die. It stops lolling about and locks what should be its eyes to mine and darts it’s hand to mine and grips tight. My eyes roll back in my head and suddenly I’m back home and standing above me. The me in the grass, with pupils dilated to the size of nickels, he looks up at me and slurs out “ya found me. Tag, we’re it.”

My eyes refocus and the blurred edges are gone; I’m still in the ruins, my hand up against the cool stone where the specter has just been. My ears are burning and in a hush, I whisper to no one “what. The hell. Was that?” while looking around the room. This place is now empty. And no spirit – the bizarre familiarity is gone as well. But I feel…


Stomach anxious to the near point of vomiting, I whip around and shakily climb up through the darkness to fresh air and upon reaching the exit, I drop to all fours and breathe deep of the cool Hinterlands air. The sweat beads on my neck are now clammy and through heavy gasps, I ask in panic “was that a *huff* demon? Possessed?! No. I'm still me! *gasp* Why’d it feel like me? *gasp* the fuck was that?!” Slowing my breathing, I whisper in question “…and what did it mean by tag. We’re it?”

In the midst of this existential crisis, I didn’t hear the bear pacing up to me. It bellows and swipes at me.

‘MOVE!,’ I think just as its claws bear down on me and I roll under the bear with it lurching forward. The beast whips back on its hind legs and, towering over me, snarls at me in hungry rage. But that’s the last sound from its mouth as I throw a fist upward from my unstable crouch. I know it’s useless – it’s face is several feet out of reach. But even still, even with that distance, I inexplicably feel my knuckles connect with the bear’s lower jaw.

A pop, and a shower of red rains down on everything in a 6 foot radius. The bear starts slumping and I scramble to clear its drop path, darting out from under it just as its crushing weight makes impact with the ground. Staring back and forth between the bear and my fist, I ask “wha..I felt it. But I never touched it?”
With the adrenaline left over from my bear scare and the shade panic, I stand and go to test this invisible strike against a nearby coniferous tree – I flex my hand and crunch my knuckles; ball up my fist and lunge.

Thick gnarled bark explodes off the tree, sticky pine resin spraying out with it. From five feet away. “Today is a weird day, wouldn't ya say Hunter? Why yes, Hunter, it certainly is,” I mock to myself in differing tones before finishing simply with “…a weird day,” while collecting the claws from the bear corpse. “And these are for some quest or another.” Unfortunately, I'm without a pouch or my pack so I unbutton my blood stained shirt, all purples and reds, and wrap it around the claws – an impromptu bindle and stuff it down my back pocket.

Shirtless again, I head down the grassy hill, making my way to Dennet's farm.

*****

First things first, I obliterate the demons falling from the rift at the farmstead edge, making short work of even the lesser terrors as they burst from the ground. And upon sealing the rift, I marvel at my cleanliness for once.

“Sure, I'm covered in bear blood but not a speck of black sludge. This far reach thing is GREAT!”

Making my way across the farms, I take to whistling a free form melody, panic long behind me and replaced with an actual pleasant disposition -- whatever that shade was back there was, I'm satisfied with the trade off. "Get scared by a ghost and get a power amplifier? Worth it!...I think" I mutter after activating another elven artifact in the rotting cabin. Fortunately, with no one around, I've no need to feign another seizure and continue on my merry way.

_Unfortunately...still gotta take out the Templar camp to rejoin the others...but you can cross that bridge when you get there,’_ I think while whistling some high notes.

*****

About a mile’s walk more and I'm standing alone on a ruined wooden bridge – I suspect smashed by the Templars to slow trade caravans. Easy pickings and all that. “But I'm no easy picking,” I laugh out derisively.

_These armored fucks are done for... and no getting’ the drop on us this time._

It's high noon and brazenly walking off the bridge and into the clearing, I whistle once and belt out “Heeey boys! I've got gold and or drugs!”

This catches the attention of the two Templars guarding the pass to their main camp and, changing their stance to once of offense, they approach me slowly with heavy shields raised.

_Wait... okay, in game, there were like ...what, ten Templars over here? So...realistically. Shit, probably thirty here. Oh uhhhh. Just pick em off one at a time, slow and steady and get better at planning in the future._
Standing my ground, I start winding my fists around like I’m prepping for an good old fashioned match of fisticuffs, and throw a few air jabs. They two give each other a side glance and start laughing low, muttering something about how “this'll be easy.”

Gentlemen, let's get weird.

As soon as the further of the two is within 10 feet of me, I throw a right hook and without making physical contact, his head does a 180 degree twist – his body collapses in a clanging heap. I yell out “Thank you Varric for the arrow assist!” He's obviously not present but the Templar doesn't know this and whips around to see his dead ally and scans the area behind him for my supposed support – to which, I leap forward and punch the back of of his helmet, crushing the metal plate like a soda can. With that, he staggers forward three steps and drops face first to the ground, a pool of dark red forming under his concealed face. His leg keeps twitching like a sleeping dog though.

“Eesh, hope you're actually dead! Alright, 2 down…. Possible 28…to go,” I say with lackluster enthusiasm while dragging the corpses back to the tree line. Can't have an alert sounding. Not with just little ol’ me around.

With the sun beating down overhead, no lengthy shadows forming, I sneak up the hill and creep to the cliff edge. From there, I quietly make my way over rocks and around tall, wooden fencing until I find the apparent leader of this rag tag group of murders standing at his own war table, compass in hand, mapping out where the mage stronghold may be. No one else around…

I slink out of my boots, creep up behind the boss while thinking ‘OHMAGOD. SNEAK ATTACK!’, and mentally whisper death into my hand. The entropic mist bleeds from more than just my hand, it wafts from my entire upper body, and seizing upon this, I bear hug the man from behind, grabbing at any of his exposed flesh. And my hands find purchase on his yielding face and neck. He goes rigid in shock but afterwards, he goes limp in my arms. No gurgles. No whimpers. I slowly crouch as he melts and oozes in his own armor, attempting to muffle any sounds of armor. Before he's soup, I manage to position him on his back.

SUCCESS

A big menacing smile adorns my face at this disgusting sight, silently reveling in my kill while also admiring that I didn't get any human soup on me from the splits in his armor. Still in a crouch, I crawl just past the leader’s tent and peek out just the slightest bit and spy five Templars sitting around a fire, charring something over the flames. Even from here, I can smell that whatever meat it is, is burnt.

‘Bad cooks. Or food prep is still archaic. Ohhh shiiiiit. No more cheeseburgers. No more BBQ.’ Im suddenly reminded. I've had several issues since arriving, from changing up my basic hygiene practices to lamenting the loss of metal, rock, and rap music but this, this food crisis hits hard.

And of course it does so when I'm trying to kill a whole camp.

Trying to stifle these depressing thoughts of delicious foods, I give a long hard look at the “Can of Soup” a few feet away and that quickly shuts down my appetite. Hell, the formerly human is still bubbling. A small gag hangs in my throat before I return to my task and peer past the edge another time.

A symphony of screams and yells echo in the distance back over near the main entrance — the knights at the fire jump to their feet, grab weapons, and run off toward the sounds of fighting. I dart back, shimmy into my boots, and take off after the Templars.
“Guess I don't havta worry about bootstraps anymore.”

Halfway down the winding hill, I spot Cassandra locked in battle with two Templars, a volley of bolts flying overhead catching three of her nearest enemies unaware. Two of those struck, those she was holding off, drop dread, while the third presses his palm to the wound in his collar line – he must've been caught off guard, he's in nothing but his small clothes with a sword in hand. Before he can fall back for cover, his wound tears open, freezing blood expanding swiftly as Solas’s Winter’s Grasp hits. Classic liquid versus cold. His head nearly falls from his neck, but a few stray tendons go taut over the blood ice formation, holding it in place as he stumbles to the ground – he attempts to say something, possibly a prayer, but with his vocal cords severed and his brain denied precious blood and oxygen, he passes just seconds later.

My party hasn't seen me yet, or if they have, they've not announced it. And my every step down the path reveals more and more corpses littering the ground behind my companions -- they've struck hard and fast, a cohesive unit taking a tactical advantage on the enclosed pathway. The Templars can't smite Solas for fear of leaving themselves open to arrows or the Seeker’s blade but neither can they ignore a mage getting such clean shots at them – and panic is setting in fast. Cassandra lunges forward, grabs around one’s shield and clutches at his neck. Cassandra’s face goes serene, she mouths something and next thing, the Templar she's attached herself to is screaming and writhing in agony. The knight falls to their back, convulsing and twitching, screaming in pain as Cassandra steps over him and turns her attention to the remaining six.

Eyes wide at that sight, I think ‘she just ignited the lyrium in their veins!!! Oh, that is spectacular! And may I never experience it.’

Volley. Spells. Blades. The Templars are hesitantly backing up.

‘Towards me,’ I think with a smile on my red stained face, my eyes still wide with a certain gleeful madness.

SSSSSNEAK ATTACK, THE SEQUEL

I cock back my arm and gear up to punch, willing the black into my fist once more and, leaping forward, I drive a solid blow into the back of one knight – her armor instantly evaporates in a cloud of rust where I make contact and as my dark miasma pierces her, her upper body explodes outward onto her allies, who in turn, evaporate entirely. I see the shock on Cassandra's face and I look from her to my steaming fist. And I smile while hearing Varric yell out “I knew K.O. was an apt nickname” to which Solas replies with but mild surprise registered on his face, “evidently so, Master Tethras.”

Cassandra, her shock melting into relief, allows the faintest of smirks to cross her face and she exclaims “Hunter! We assum..” I don't hear the rest of her words though. My mana well is bone dry and that last punch took everything remaining. I blackout immediately.

********

Night has fallen and I'm on a makeshift cot under a woolen blanket surrounded by Inquisition scouts – lifting my head up some, I see we're all near Dennet’s farm. Cassandra turns from her talk with a scout and hurries over to my side.
Her steps – is that agitation or excitement?

Kneeling down next to my cot, she looks me in the eye with a knitted brow and says “At first, we thought you captured by the Templars under the cover of darkness, however, we later heard rumor of a qunari…” I casually slide in “vashoth” and she huffs before continuing “a Vashoth that had been seen in this area sealing rifts and slaying demons. Why did you leave on your own? Can you not see how reckless and dangerous that was?,” clearly annoyed.

Pushing myself into a sitting position and still lightheaded, I gulp to wet my throat, look to her and say “Cass…I truly don't know how I got over here. Woke up on that cliff overlooking the farm. Sure, I sealed some rifts on the way back to you guys, but I got stuck on the wrong side of the Templar encampment so I snuck in and neutralized a few before seeing you all. And passing out.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrow and she tilts her head, looking at me like a predator. “What do you mean you woke up here?” She demands, clearly upset.

“I don’t know but look, sorry for worrying you,” I say, hanging my head.

She remains silent and now I'm fretting her response, thinking ‘weird shit happens to me – of course she's not gonna trust me, why would she?’

I must be akin to an open book because she reads my face and says flatly “I do trust you, however, you are an important part of the Inquisition. I am not saying that you cannot protect yourself but I do believe it to be in our best interest to stay together.”

Tension – cut.

I look back up after digesting her concern, and half heartedly joke “guess we outta tie my foot to a post or somethin' when we make camp.”

“Ughh, the Herald cannot be seen as a…” she pauses, watching me raise an eyebrow, and says instead “…oh, you were joking.” Shaking her head, she stands tall, and looking to the North West, says “I’ve already dispatched a raven to Leliana detailing our progress. While you slept we met with Dennet and established a deal. Also, instead of returning to Haven, I believe we should make way directly to Val Royeoux. Unless…” She turns back to me, awaiting my reaction, a sliver of doubt in her posture. Teeth baring though my grin, I nod and chuckle out “yeah, makes sense. Good choice.” My words seem to bolster her -- I'm aware she's been doubting herself ever since the Conclave -- even though she hasn't told me as much.

Continuing, I say “Cass, I'm good to leave as soon I can stand” and her expression softens as she lets out a slight sigh.

Wait…she okay with me callin’ her Cass?
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Hunter witnesses Val Royeoux...and the Lord Seeker.

Sera finally comes into play.

And our story's lead pays Vivienne a visit at her chateau.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delayed update -- had to finish up pieces for a few art shows first.

Before leaving the Hinterlands, we dispatch the demon possessing wolves that Dennet’s wife had told us about – even managed to do so with limited wolf casualties. From there, we storm the rogue mage stronghold and after slaying the more aggressive of those present, we actually recruit a few scared teens who are chomping at the bit to join up with us - they'd been strong armed into that group of rebels under threat of death – but now they all seem so relieved, mostly just to “not be on the run.” After these events, a scout sends out a raven for Cullen regarding watchtowers and how all rogue factions have been eliminated in the area. Eventually, we restock at the Crossroads and finally head out, beginning on our course for the capital of Orlais. And four mounts carry us – a reprieve for all of our feet.

*************

A solid week of riding on horseback. An entire week. I've got thick thighs, muscular, but damn if they don't act like putty and feel like hot sand after riding on a horse all day, everyday.

And the chafing...

But it’s all over for now – we leave our mounts with a stable at the city’s edge, pay the owner a few silver, and proceed across a rather ornate stone bridge into Orlais’s city limits. And we didn't exactly get a chance to bathe the past couple days so we're wearing a layer of dust from our ride.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!,” several Orlesian citizens cry out in unison as we march past and Varric sarcastically mutters “just a guess Seeker, but looks like they know who we are.”

Likely just cryin’ out at the horrible, shirtless Ox.

Cassandra responds sarcastically in kind, “your powers of observation never cease to impress, Varric.”

One poor woman outright faints into her companion's arms and he slumps despite trying his best to keep her on her feet. I haven't worn a shirt in days and I'm not about to start now, despite
Cassandra’s earlier protests, her arguments typically boiling down to "you represent the Inquisition – have some modesty.”

And I’ve just kept on with “not today.”

“Seeker! The Templars are here!,” a scout barks while running to meet us. Cassandra looks like she’s about to suffer an aneurysm but she spits “What?! They wish to protect themselves from us?!” Cooly, I spin to face the others and say “it's expected. Let's say hello.”

The others look warily at me but with a half smirk, I respond “what? We're already here. Be rude not to head in.” Varric mutters “…right into an executioner's axe…” under his breath. Ignoring his remark, we press forward.

From just outside the gates, I can see it's actually an impressive city – gold and white, statues and fountains and sconces adorning every possible space. Shrubberies and flowering vines grow rampant, creeping every which way over the walls and trellises. And oddly enough, in person I actually enjoy their mask fashion. Though, I wish they were more creative with the designs. *Be creepy. Be disturbing. Be odd. Be anything but uniform.*

And so we step, pressing through the crowd that has filled this spacious and extravagant Summer Bazaar taking place in the square.

And I have to pretend that I’m more in control of my legs than I actually am.

Meanwhile, all ears awaiting eagerly for what the revered mothers will say to their scared and trembling flock. How will they comfort them in these end times?

Even with all the people packed into the square, it’s all so surprisingly hushed – and they go all the more quiet whenever a group realizes I’m in their midst. The crowd, around us at least, starts distancing themselves enough to give us as wide a berth they can lest the despicable Inquisition taint them and sway them from their faith.

Finally the crowd opens up enough and the most vocal of the mothers spots me, jabs her finger in my direction and cries “GOOD PEOPLE OF VAL ROYEUX, HEAR ME. WE MOURN OUR DIVINE. HER NAÏVE AND BEAUTIFUL HEART DIED BY TREACHERY. YOU WONDER WHAT COULD BECOME OF HER MURDERER? WELL WONDER NO MORE – BEHOLD, THE SO CALLED HERALD OF ANDRASTE…CLAIMING TO RISE WHERE OUR BELOVED FELL. WE SAY, THIS IS A FALSE PROPHET, A WICKED QUNARI SENT TO SUBVERT THE MAKER’S WORD”

In a booming roar, I yell “FUCK WHAT YOU BELIEVE – IM HERE TO CLOSE THE BREACH. THAT’S IT. AND I CAN DO IT,” while raising my marked fist above the crowd. Somewhat taken aback by my profanity but backing me all the same, Cassandra steps to my side to meet the mother’s gaze and cries “It's true – the Inquisition seeks only to end this madness before it is too late.”

‘And here's to their bullshit,’ I think snidely.

“IT IS ALREADY TOO LATE!,” the revered mother finalizes and points off to her left. I lightly nudge Cassandra, drawing her attention and I wink at her with my nearly colorless left eye, whispering “just saw some new future bits. Stay here.” Leaving her behind to stare in confusion, I trample up to the stage and glide between the cleric and an approaching Templar, just as he swings his armored fist toward her head. Instead, his punch thuds against my bare chest and the Templar is
left staring daggers at me. I doubt the Revered Mother noticed what she'd avoided but the crowd certainly bore witness – they start pushing backwards against each other, a terrified school of fish eager to flee.

“LORD SEEKER LUCIUS,” I boom with a sarcastic edge while staring down the asshole who had hit me, “DO ALL THUGS UNDER YOUR COMMAND ATTACK THE INNOCENT?”

The demon masquerading as human responds with venom, “you are no one. Nor do you deserve an answer.”

Cassandra, clearly upset, stomps forward to beg his attention. “Lord Seeker Lucius, it is imperative that we speak wi” but she's cut off as he hisses “you will not address me.”

With both brows raised in shock, she whispers “lord seeker?,” and he responds, “creating a heretical movement. Raising up a puppet as Andraste’s prophet… you should be ashamed. You should all be ashamed. The Templars failed no one when they left the Chantry to purge the mages. You are the ones who have failed. You who leash our righteous swords with doubt and fear. If you came to appeal to the Chantry, you are too…”

“BLAH BLAH BLAH. You talk way too much,” I blurt out, annoyed by his obviously rehearsed monologue.

Furious, he spits “the only desti.…”

“I ny that demands respect is your own, blah blah. Predictable,” I interrupt again, now wearing a wicked grin.

*I know what you are. And I already know how you lose.*

Enraged beyond words, furious and dumbfounded that I know him when he knows so little of me -- he locks his eyes to mine, a palpable wave of his hatred and superiority swirling between us, and a vein throbs in his neck. Face twitching and inhaling sharply, he finally whips about and storms off and away from the Bazaar, the others of the Templar order rushing off behind him. Only a few of the knights cast questioning glances our way – among them Ser Barris. I slightly nod in his direction as he marches off with the others.

The square has emptied out – but a few others remain aside from us. And Cassandra, she looks to be mired in confusion.

Finally, willing her thoughts to words, she voices “…what…what is the Lord Seeker thinking?” Solas stays silent, for which I'm glad – I'm well versed on his thoughts regarding Templars. No need for him to further upset Cassandra. And perhaps he sees it the same way; she's distressed enough as is. Varric however, he shuffles over and while scraping a boot against the cobblestones, he mumbles “even for someone with lord in their name, he sure was an arrogant prick,” in a gravel tone. His words don't seem to register with Cassandra though.

‘Definitely for the best,’ I mentally note, while inwardly flinching in case she erupts. However, as we stand in relative silence, I take the opportunity to present my “new” piece of evidence.

“Hey,” I say in a hushed tone, casting a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is eavesdropping, “most of those knights have been taking red lyrium. Could see it in the veins around their eyes. Would've said somethin’ earlier but a lot of people here would've died. Keep this to yourselves. We'll talk about it again once we get back to Haven.”
I'll keep demon Lucius to myself for now – Cassandra'd never accept that on just my word.

Our resident Seeker, torn from her daze, harshly whispers “that?! That is what you meant when you spoke of the future earlier. And how you knew that the revered mother would be attacked.”

No words from me, I just shake my head, affirming hers.

“Shit…shit. Red Templars. Just what this war needs…does weird shit always happen around you?,” Varric pointedly mutters, pacing in place. Putting a half smile on, I reply “happens around you too if I recall correctly.” Varric, wearing a rueful smile, perhaps remembering “better” days, simply breathes out “yeaaah.” As usual, Solas seems lost in thought, I suspect he's weighing the potential threat posed by the Templars. Or perhaps he's simply enjoying what remains of the Summer Bazaar -- the dread wolf is a hard man to read.

‘Oh, right. Sera is looking down at us,’ I remind myself and cupping my hands around my mouth, I bellow “SERA” and spy a shadow stumble and freeze up on the rooftops.

Gotcha

Ignoring their collective confused stares, I turn and walk across the square to the main gates where a messenger hands me an invitation to Madame de Fer’s social gathering tonight before politely departing. But not before looking me up and down in judgment.

And perhaps I am. I mean, Sera? Do I actually want her as an ally? Yes. Yes, I do.

Half naked, scars, horns, and foreign magic – Just the recipe for high society.

Of course, now while the others are still out of earshot, Grand Enchanter Fiona slinks from the shadows and greets me with a small bow, looking past her brow and saying “if I might have a moment of your time.”

“Ah, Fiona, I was wondering when you'd finally approach me,” I say catching her off guard and I continue on to say “Yeah, I know you didn't kill the Divine. Neither did the Lord Seeker. But hey, I'll see ya soon,” and with a wink, I press on, walking back to the city limits. Flustered, she attempts to call me back.

And I ignore her. I'm sure she's confused. Hell, it's a confusing situation. But nothing I plan with her today will matter.

I'd talk with ya more, Mama Alistair, but by the time I get back to Haven, your timeline'll have been rewritten.

“But in the immediate, I've got a party and back alley meeting to prepare for…” I say while wincing at my every step now that everyone was off behind me, no one ahead to witness my pain.

Worse, the only high society practice I actually know is the old “hold your drink in your left hand so your greeting hand is always dry.” Outside that, me and fancy parties don't blend particularly well.
Twilight falls to darkness, and the lamps outside the inn ignite. And just for a change of pace, we've all arranged to have separate rooms – turns out familiarity breeds contempt.

I'm laying on my bed, one leg bent knee up, rocking to and fro. Not even ten minutes of solitude in and a courier arrives and gives me a suit evidently tailored to my proportions. Were this the panopticon of the world I'd been stolen from, I wouldn't be surprised by someone knowing such info. In a land without cameras, however, it's all the more unsettling. Everyone and no one is a spy. And for how long did Madame de Fer have her sights on me from afar?

My apparent outfit, a sleek satiny black thing, one I'd never have purchased myself, I've got it laid out on my bed and for now, I'm still my black jeans and boots. Frankly I'm surprised that they're still wearable. It'll be a sad day when I inevitably lose these to wear and tear. Or at this rate, more tear.

"Should probably hit up Sera before I go to the party. How long do parties here last? Can I just sneak in, have a drink, grab Vivienne and leave? No. They'll notice my every movement for sure. Ughhhhh."

I throw myself off my bed with a creak, and leaving the fine doublet and pants behind, I creep from the inn without my companions being all the wiser. Unless they were to ask the innkeeper of my whereabouts -- she sees me leaving and curtsies meekly. I raise a finger to my lips, hopefully she gets that I want my anonymity…

Errr, what little I still have…

...and I stroll out through the door into the torch lit night – out into a white city basking in the glows of orange under the veil of darkness.

I’d been quick and quiet enough finding the clues Sera had hidden. Didn't want to do it earlier, not when the others could see. Really, I just needed some time alone.

And now, courtesy of awful handwriting, just slightly more legible than 5 year ol’s signature, I'm wandering around in empty alleyways in the dark. In my previous life, I'd have still done something like this, but I would've been on edge.

‘Not now though… ’ I think while flexing my hands.

I hear voices muffled somewhere up ahead, and I crouch down, edging closer and closer to the mouth of the alley.

In the low light, two thugs are standing around behind some crates, joking about…

…sandwiches? Or they talkin’ euphemisms?
I spot a third thug, back against a bannister, leaning like he's trying to crack his back or scratch an itch.

And none of em know I'm here... Excellent.

Staying to the shadows in the corners, I creep along the edge at a painfully slow pace, and edge my way up the ascending stairs. No noise on my part, just the low chuckles of the idiots in the opposite corner and thug number three seems lost in thought – his arms braced against the marble railing, he's just leaning back and staring absently at the night sky.

I’m measuring my every breath -- can't let them know I'm here – my chest is starting to burn from such controlled breathing, but I make it all the way to the double doors, and they're already parted. I slide through the crack and once on the other side, I push back slowly, painfully slow, and close the doors. No clicks, no heavy thuds. Turning around, a wisp of a man is standing before me, hands on his hips, adorned in the same masked fashion of everyone else in this city.

Hissing, he says “Erald of Andraste, it must have weakened the inquisition considerably to f”

He's so caught up in his monologue, his big “I'm sooo important,” he didn't realize I've closed the distance between us and as he sashays to face me again, he squeaks in panic. Before he can cast a fireball, I snatch him up by the throat, lift his nothing of a mass, and whisper “I don't actually know who you are” and punch him once in the face, effectively knocking him unconscious.

I go to peel his mask off -- I'm admittedly curious to know who this is. Curious in the game, curious still.

SHUNK

An arrow sinks into his skull through his right temple.

“Ewhehehehew, squishy one. Nice tellin’ him off. Now, how bout you tell me why you know my name.”

I slowly put the corpse on the ground, better to err on the side of caution, and with my arms extended, I look to the blonde elf perched at the top of a staircase with her second arrow drawn. She's looking at me through her messy bangs but I know she's not the type to miss.


“Oi, git outta my head!,” she whispers harshly while pulling the bow string more taut. Lying, I whisper low “look. Easy. It's not magic, I've heard things – words. That’s it. Now let's get outta here.”

Pursing her lips to the side, her eyes never leaving me, she says “you're a strange one Herald. Fine,” but turning her head some, her ears move ever so slightly and says “oops, forgot about these idiots.” Her face reddens as she chokes off a giggle, and whispers louder “but they don't got their breeches.”

And five thugs pour in through the archways at the top of the staircase, each without pants, and bear down on us. Sera flashes me a lopsided smile and starts sinking arrows into the three closest her. Two drop as arrows pierce their skull with a slick thud.

The third, his sword hand is hit. “Ahhhhhh! BITCH!,“ he cries out as he drops his swords to the stone floor, blood pouring freely from his finger stumps. During this, I dash forward, grab at one’s wrist during his swing, grab ahold of his head with my freehand and hurtle him, face first, into a
stone bannister. A wet crunch, and I reel his head back – now toothless with a twisted nose, blood dribbling down his cheeks and chin, he sobs in pain before I fling him down the remaining stairs. He's broken and not likely to get up.

The fifth thug, not realizing his posse has been effectively decimated, charges down the stairs at me and I back peddle, stepping over “Broken mouth” quickly and putting the wall at my back. The fifth man, he lunges and I pivot – his sword jabs at stone as I grip his sword arm and twisting, drive my elbow down into his jaw.

Thud thud thud crunch crunch slosh

I relent and eyeball the man as he chokes on the thick blood pooling in his mouth – he bit through his tongue during my strikes.

‘Ughhh, not his tongue!,’ I wince at the thought as I curl my own tongue further into my mouth and away from my teeth.

I grab ahold of his neck, release his arm, hold his chin and with a quick jerk, I snap his neck and drop his limp corpse to my feet.

This is becoming too easy. Disgustingly easy.

I breathe through my nose, trying to stave off my gag reflex, a missing tongue still burned into my mind.

Through hushed breaths, I mutter "no tongue. That's. That's how... I will not. Be. A. Saarebas," to myself.

Glancing up between breaths, I watch as Sera kicks the thug with the missing fingers to his ass and sinks an arrow through his eye socket. I finally notice the beating on the other side of the door I'd closed.

Guess it locked? Lucky us. Lucky them.

Sera slides down the bannister and onto her feet, struts over and beaming, she laughs out “hehehehe, you saw em, right?! They had no breeches,” and doubles over. I just smile and nod until she pulls herself out of her laughing fit.

Trying not to trip on my own gag reflex, I manage “So..ya gonna go straight to.. Haven or d’ya wanna hang out with me and my friends?”

“Nah, meet ya there. And you'll havta tell me all about the lady qunaris when I git there.” With a wink, she dashes up the stairs and off into the night. “Alright. Sure,” I murmur in her absence before fear grips me and kicks my sore legs out from under me. On hands and knees, tears threaten the edges of my eyes and the acid taste of bile tastes closer.

'ughh, please. No more qunari talk...' I think as the panic grips at my esophagus. Gulping at my fear and nausea, anything to not vomit, I whisper "I..was...was wrong. Solas isn't the one...to be careful with. Bull is. If...if his people find out what I can do..."

My mark buzzes in concern.

"never a saarebas"

I vomit on the stone floor.
The lone thug still alive sobs from his spot at the bottom of the stairs.

*************

Its been hours and I've since stilled myself -- no more panic. No more cold sweat. No more bile burning a hole in my guts.

..For now..

The blue chateau doors pull open by servant hands and I step into a parlor room, my gait slightly off because I'm not entirely comfortable in this fancy black outfit. That, and I'm only now feeling like myself again.

“Your name?,” asks a masked man hiding behind his parchment. “You can call me Hunter, The Rift Sealer,” I say wearily, tired of the Herald moniker...and tired from the events of tonight. The man cocks his head curiously and asks “not Herald of Andraste?”

And there it is...

My response, “Prefer to be called what I do. I seal rifts, I'm a rift sealer. Good?,” and I momentarily flash my marked open palm to the gentleman.

“Of course, ser! Right this way,” he says as he ushers me towards the crowd..

The room goes quiet at my approach, save for a few oblivious or drunk voices. Still hiding behind his parchment, the man cries out “NOW PRESENTING HUNTER, RIFT SEALER OF THE INQUISITION,” sending the room whispering and murmuring amongst themselves. I take a crystal flute of some clear liquid offered me by the waitstaff and make my way across the patterned marble floor.

While most keep their distance, three of the masked elite sidle up – a male and two females in matching attire of blues and golds. “What a pleasure to meet you. Seeing the same faces at every event becomes tiresome” says the man as the woman on my right leans in and flirts through her ruffled collar “absolutely. Oh! And we've heard the most curious tales about you – I cannot imagine half of them are true!”

Give em the classic

Now, leaning in and with just enough of a dramatic head tilt, I say “Everything you've heard? Completely true.”

The flirtatious woman remarks “better and better! The Inquisition should attend more of these parties,” as her companions titter sycophantically.

“Puhh, the Inquisition? What a load of pig shit” growls a grating voice, its owner descending a flight stairs.

Right. The asshole marquis. Forgot about him

He continues on to say “Washed-up sisters and crazed seekers? No one can take them seriously.”

“Nor can we take you seriously. You're what, here to win back your supposed honor in some fool attempt at a duel?,” I retort. Clutching at his sheathed sword, he spits “if you were a man of honor,
you would step outside and answer f.” His words are choked off as sounds of glass cracking echo through the hall – the marquis is frozen in place, frost veining up and down his cold-hardened flesh.

“My dear Marquis, how unkind of you to use such language in my house… to my guests.” The words are honeyed in tone but barely coat the venom beneath. The room remains in silence, every ear awaiting in anticipation.

“You know such rudeness is… intolerable,” the beautiful white and gold serpent declares while gliding down the second staircase. With panicked shallow breaths, the frozen Marquis stutters out “Madame Viv…ienne. I humbly. Beg. Your pardon,” as the cobra of a first enchanter slithers about her prey. “Whatever am I going to do with you, my dear?,” she asks loudly so the room knows how precarious his situation is and looking over her shoulder to me, says “my lord, you're the wounded party in this unfortunate affair…what would you have me do with this foolish, foolish man?”

A cloying smirk lingers on her face.

For but a moment, I forget this isn't a grand cinematic cutscene and that I'm actually here; her words, the atmosphere she's created has chilled everyone including myself and it's difficult to respond.

But I manage to shrug out “your party, your rules.”

With the dangerous glint in her eyes fading, she turns her attention back to her prey and declares “Poor marquis, issuing threats and hurling insults like some Ferelden dog lord…” and at the snap of her fingers, the ice evaporates from his body and he's left coughing violently, desperate for air. “…and all dressed up in your aunt Solange’s doublet. Didn't she give you that to wear to the Grand Tourney? To think, all the brave chevaliers who will be competing left for Markham this morning…and you're still here.” But her fangs still have some venom left and she strikes again, saying “were you hoping to sate your damaged pride by defeating the Herald of Andraste?”

c’mon. I was introduced as Rift Sealer.

“…or did you think his blade could put an end to the misery of your failure? Run along, my dear. Do give my regards to your aunt.” The marquis stumbles out of the hall and out of sight as Vivienne turns to me, flashing a delicate smile, and says in a much friendlier tone, “I'm delighted you could attend this little gathering. I've so wanted to meet you.” Her venom is gone. The room warms and I say “it's a pleasure to meet you Vivienne – may we talk in a more private setting?”

With a hint of a smile, she spins on her toes and glides to a darkened alcove with a single window; her guests vacate the vicinity as she does so. They seem all too keen to be anywhere but near her after that display of control.

Standing alone, bathed in moonlight, she says “you already know my name but allow me a proper introduction.” I take her hand and bowing slightly, I peck at her gloved digits and whisper “Vivienne, first enchanter of Montsimmard, and enchanter to the imperial court. And leader of the last loyal mages of Thedas.” Her eyebrows lift beneath her mask and a smirk graces her face. Continuing, I say “thank you for the outfit, and for the invite.”

I’m gonna burn this fashionable cage as soon as I get back to the inn.

“But I didn't invite you to the chateau for pleasantries… with Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is
in shambles. Only the Inquisition might restore sanity and order to our frightened people. As the leader of the last loyal mages, I feel it only right that I lend my assistance to your cause,” she proudly says. With a wink and a hint of smirk, I say “while I wish your interest in me was personal, I understand that it's purely professional.” Despite the dark, I actually spy a blush creep into her cheeks but she deflects, saying “aren't you charming. But of course it's professional.”

Going blunt, I firmly state “Vivienne, I welcome you to the Inquisition.”

“Great things are beginning, my Dear, I can promise you that.”

Yeah they are. But you don't know the scope just yet.

Vivienne tilts her head ever so and whispers "my Dear, please do enjoy the rest of the party," and glides off to join the rest of her guests.

Following her with my eyes as she departs, I raise my glass to finally take a sip...

"wait..what?! When did someone take my drink?!" I question while staring hard at my empty drinking hand.

Looking about the open hall and seeing zero drinks, in resignation, I mutter "I needed that though..."
Chapter 10

A week later, and we're finally back in Haven. It had been a somewhat uneventful trek – a few skirmishes here and there with rogue tempers and roving bandits, but nothing we couldn't handle.

And damn does it feel good to finally be back.

Vivienne had departed on her own time – whether we beat her here or not is yet to be seen. Sera, if I recall correctly, she tends to stake out any bar or tavern, so she's likely in Flissa’s, assuming she's even here.

As the bustling crowd about us diminishes, Cassandra turns to me at the front gates and says “we should head to the war room – the others need to know of what happened in Val Royeoux.” Varric waddles between us and declares “and when you're done with Curly, Nightingale, and Ruffles, join me for some Wicked Grace.” Slapping my leg with the back of his hand, he walks off into the crowd. Solas says “a word, when you have the chance,” glides past us with his hands clasped behind his back, and too disappears into the mass of people.

Wonder what he needs?

Clapping the dust from my hands and standing tall, I say “Well Cass, let's see about that debriefing,” and we begin our walk to the Chantry. Weaving and pushing through people, I notice Haven has a lot more people than when we left. It’s almost claustrophobic. Once inside the Chantry, and in the quiet, as I'm able to breathe easy again, she turns to me and staring at my hand, asks “does it bother you?”

Does a foci, that'll inevitably consume me, bother me?

My face goes stoney as I mutter “plenty about it bothers me but if you're talkin’ pain, that's gone for now.”

She doesn't say anything more, nor is she given the chance – Leliana slinks out from behind a column while Cullen and Josephine storm down the main hall from her office – the two of them bickering.

“No, it's not.” “But still we” “the templars!” “Could be just as bad as” “we know nothing about the mages at”

“Bark bark!,” I actually bark at them and they go silent, confusion lacing their faces – though Josephine looks on the verge of laughing; she isn't quite sure how to register what I did.

I follow up with “Anyway, Val Royeoux was a bust – Lucius is a prick. The chantry isn't a problem.

“The Lord Seeker has … changed. He is not himself,” Cassandra says ruefully. Clearly she remembers when the Lord Seeker was a decent man.

Though, you don't know the depths of his depravity just yet.

I grab at the three heads of the Inquisition, bring them in close and whisper “and the templars are
using red lyrium – but we have to keep that to ourselves. Can't let em know we know.” Josephine
doesn't seem to fully grasp the magnitude of the situation but Cullen most assuredly does and
hisses “Maker!” under his breath. Leliana, pressing her lips to her fist, stares at the floor,
calculating before turning to the others and calmly saying “this changes nothing. We act as we
have so far. Our Rift-Sealer is correct – we cannot tip our hand.” Cullen, panic undercoating his
anger, spits “we cannot abandon the order – not wh.” Interrupting, I say “From what I saw, it's
slow. We have time yet – we can't rush into.” Leliana cuts me off, “perhaps this is our reason for
approaching the mages instead.”

“No! We cannot let the order poison themselves!” Cullen whispers harshly, pacing In place,
uncertain where to turn. “Lucius, he has changed. We would need to make a display of power to get
him to even acknowledge us,” Cassandra says. Josephine, parchment board dropped to her side,
candle wax dripping to the stone floor but a moment before she straightens it, utters “we could
make an approach but only if we manage to convince the nobles to rally with us. And sadly, they
are still ignoring us.”

Silence falls in the grand hall of the Chantry as all of us exchange wary and concerned looks.

Leliana, brave enough to dispel the quiet, whispers “so we continue on as we have until we gain
notoriety or popularity. This is the only way to save them.” Cullen, his eyes haunted, grimaces and
pushing past us, storms from the Chantry.

_Likely gonna train his soldiers – likely the only thing that'll take his mind off this mess._

“…I…I will write all the nobles that I can…in hopes they will…” Josephine whispers as Leliana
places a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Josephine, she looks to Leliana, nods and holding the
hem of her elegant dress, tiptoes back to her office. Cassandra meanwhile, she's been looking at the
open doors, staring off after Cullen with concern etched into her stare.

_This is bad … but not bad enough to make him relapse. I…right?_

I step to console Cassandra but she hurriedly walks off, making her way out of the Chantry – her
path is clearly set on observing Cullen for signs of withdrawal.

A few moments longer of watching her walk off, and I feel a slight draft against my bare arm as
Leliana steps to my side. “Leliana, I have some words for ya – I'll be in the dungeon,” I say in
hushed resignation. Leliana tilts her head at me, curiosity dispelling any worry she might be
harboring.

And together we, make our way down to where I first woke. And of course, I have many a Low
hanging chandelier to avoid on the way. We enter my first cage, leaving the door open and she
turns to me, her face a mask of calm.

“What I say next, it can't be shared. You are the only one I trust not let it leak. Do you
understand?” Leliana nods once, whispering “you may count upon my discretion” and I continue
“it's more than just the Templars. The mages? They're in trouble too. A Tevinter cult called the
Venitori, led by Magister Alexius, has access to some sort of time magic…and they used it to get to
Redcliffe just before the Conclave. They swoop in and pluck up the rebelling mages. So what we
need… I need…is for you to somehow start snatching them up by any means necessary. And Fiona,
she's a priority. As much trouble as she's caused, she's still of great use. Be a ghost about it. Don't
let the Venitori know what we're up to. Meanwhile, we’ll make an attempt at stopping the Templar
corruption.”

A return to silence, Leliana looks to be digesting this new information; gears turning in that red
head of hers, calculating, solving, puzzling out the problems at hand. Finally, her gaze narrows, drawn back from whatever distant void she was staring off into, and looking to me with a smirk, says “this is very useful. And of course, it will stay between us. I'll tell my agents only what they need to know. And don't worry, I'll sort out a proper hideaway to stash our “freed” mages. Now, is that everything?”

‘LIE LIE LIE LIE OH GEEZ, DON'T SEE THROUGH ME,’ I scream internally while clench-tightening my lower abdomen to steady my breathing and say “if I learn more, I'll tell ya.”

“Then I’ll dispatch my agents.”

“Alright. Sounds good,” I mutter.

“Oh, another point of interest – the Wardens are disappearing. And it is suspicious timing.” Leliana says and as I shake my head in agreement, she further says “But one is still in the Hinterlands. I’d like for you to question him.”

“Sure thing. I'll bring everyone to the War Room shortly – discuss teams. Plans. Etcetera. This’ll be good”

We stagger our walks; she ends up outside the Chantry before me but as I step out into the brisk, I spot a soldier awkwardly looking about and half waving to every passerby. “Uh, excuse me. Got a message … no? Oh! I've got a messa...” he says, sighing before seeing me.

“Cremisius of the Bull’s Chargers mercenary group,” I say, knowing damn well why he’s here. He shirks off his awkward stance and straightening up at the recognition says “uh, a message sir! There's Tevinter activity on the Storm Coast and my boss has an offer for the Inquisition…” I hold my hand up, and say “thanks. We’ll get there shortly. Just gotta finish some last minute prep here and then we’re heading out. You can travel with us but know we gotta make a pit stop in the Hinterlands on the way. I get it of ya gotta run along.”

“Yeah, I should be getting back to the others,” Krem declares, nodding, and jogging back down the path.

Arms folded across my chest, I just stand in silence, biting the inside of my lip. ‘Leliana AND Bull AND Solas…gonna be tough to keep up the lies,’ I worry some.

“Let’s round em up”

**********

“Soos corpses. The Undead... And marshes. Marshes are always a good time,” Varric growls sarcastically, glowering at the map I've drawn up of the Fallow Mire and everything within it, as Cassandra laments “I do not see why I have be in the same party as the dwarf.” Varric mocks offense and exclaims "oh, Seeker, you wound me." Leaning on the table and breathing a pronounced sigh, I say to everyone “Look, it's a terrible place but we need to take it and save our soldiers. There's only two rifts there, I'll swing back through later. As for the Storm Coast, Sera and I are meeting the Bull’s Chargers and dealing with a rescue there. Two is plenty for that... Vivienne, Solas, Cassandra, Varric -- you're team one. Please don't kill each other.”
The room falls into an uncomfortable silence but clearing my throat, I mutter “let's just get this done. Divide and conquer and all that.” People start filing from the War Room at their own pace and Cassandra takes to rolling up the maps and lore. “I still don't see why I have to go with Varric,” she huffs before leaving – leaving just Sera and me remaining. “So wass that about? Why just us two?,” Sera says with a squirrelly look while standing arms out on a chair, balancing it on one leg. “We'll be meeting up with a grey warden on the way. Huge beard,” I say while pantomiming its length. “Besides, three of us should be enough for anything on the coast. Anymore questions?,” I ask, which prompts her to stick her tongue out at me. “So…?” I question.

Tongue still out, her eyes go saucer wide as the chair slides out from under her and she crashes as the chair grinds across the floor – luckily, she didn't chomp down on her tongue. “Stupid chair,” she cries out.

“Yeah..well, while you wait for the chair to apologize, I'm gonna grab my gear. I'll meet up with ya at the bar,” I laugh out while exiting. Sera's final retort is her jabbing two fingers up in the air while on her backside as I shut the door behind me.

It isn't long before I'm standing in front of my former cabin and I rap my knuckles against the door. “You were gone too long. It's mine now,” comes a tiny voice from above. Stepping back and gazing up, I see Rasa sitting up on the roof, knees tucked up under her chin. She's staring up at the Breach, it's distant glow giving just the slightest green highlights to her mess of black hair.

“Not big on sleep anyway,” I say dismissively.

Without looking away from the Breach, she replies off topic “why do you have an elven pendant?,” and fishes the bone carving from the folds of her grey shirt,, dangling it from two fingers over the roof edge.

“Howdy'a know it's elven?”

Finally, she looks down at me and dryly whispers “because. I'm an elf.” I quirk an eyebrow and she sweeps some of her black mop past her ears.

“Alright, cool. So what's the necklace thing mean?”

I guess she wasn't expecting me to make so little a fuss about her being an elf – mouth agape, she glares at me.

Avoiding her intense look, looking anywhere else that I can, I grumble out “Bit…uh, unsettling.” I click my tongue and say “Okay. I'll…uh, um…pfffff, see ya later Rasa.”

Lively banter. Fun talk… Guess... I ..should just..snag Sera and head out….

***********

With the horses that Dennet brought to the Inquisition, the two of us have made excellent time – we've tied our horses up outside the camp just North of where Blackwall should make his appearance. And so we wait, positioned on the small land but in the middle of the pond.

And we wait.

“Sera, tell me about hot peppers.”
“You tell me bout lady qunaris.”

“Tit for tat? Deal. Qunari women: like me but with female bits and a softer face.”

She seems dazed, lost in thought but mumbles “tits fer tits. woof.”

“And the hot stuff?,” I ask but Sera responds “bet yur lady kinds iz hot stuff, hehehehehe.”

My expression goes annoyed, stormy, and I just stare at the side of her head – guess she can feel that cause she shouts “fine! Yeah! Don't know the name but there's hot peppery stuff that'll blast your mouth – put a dragon in your belly. All good, big grumpy Herald?!?”

We sit in silence for another 5 or 6 minutes before I say “Hunter. Not Herald.”

“Whateva.”

We continue waiting.

And wait some more.

And we wait.

“Aghhh, this iz soooo booooring!,” Sera exclaims while laying on in the grass, and flicking a beetle away from her, says, “I bet this beardy warden izn’t even real.”

“Nah, he's real…” I murmur in concentration.

But this is where he's always introduc...

….but…..

….. he also wants Grey Warden shit…for a better cover.

Picking myself up off the ground, I say “I think I've got an idea about where he's gone. Ya know those ruins we passed by? The one with the broken bridge and open courtyard thing?” Sera rolls over so she can stare at me upside down and says “wat about it?”

“Heard he's into old Warden stuff – heard there may be old Warden stuff there….,” I pause as Sera gapes at me, the gears in her head turning.

Click. You can actually see the moment when it all pieces together in her head.

Her eyes narrow in excitement and, flipping over and rolling to her feet, says “so bearded would beard…beaaa..bearrrr? Can't think of a gud joke… but he’z in that ruin shite!”

Shrugging, I say “makes sense. Besides, gotta be better than hanging out here.”

"Right?!," she says beaming.

*******

We walk right through the huge break in the ruins, careful not to trip on the aging debris and rubble, and sure enough, sitting alone on the steps toward the back is an armor clad man, likely in his forties and with a stark black beard down to his chest. His sword is planted in the ground at his side and in his hands looks to be some moldering parchment. He appears to be lost in thought, puzzling over this warden information – so I yell “HEY BLACKWALL!”
Without even flinching, as expected of a hardened veteran, he calls back “I can see and hear you just fine. You were loud in your approach. Clearly you're not spies – spies wouldn't give away their position so easily.”

“Or maaaaybe, that's what makes the best spies?,” I respond sarcastically. Sera nudges me in the ribs and without taking her eyes off the warden, loudly whispers “you wur right! Huge beard,” while pantomiming it like it were in her face.

He scowls at us suspiciously.

Like any sane person

He rises to his feet and resting his right hand on his sword pommel, demands “so who are you and how do you know my name?”

Looking back and forth between Sera and Blackwell, I smirk big and yell “we're from the Inquisition and our spymaster is suspicious of grey wardens right now since they ALL disappeared immediately after the conclave. Well, all of em except you,” and snap my fingers into a finger gun, pointing at him.

And…. Sera isn't even next to me anymore, she's wandered off – investigating a wasp nest under a rotting beam – still within my line of sight though.

*Please say you'll make a wasp grenade.*

Blackwall takes a step forward and scanning my face, declares “…mmm, no. You're not accusing us for the Divine’s death. You're still figuring out what happened.”

With a sly smile, I say “And this is the part where you team up with us to hunt down the true villains”

The gruff man furrows his brow in concentration and mutters unintelligibly to himself – finally he stomps over to me, throws his hand into mine and starts shaking it while saying “Agent, I agree to your proposal.”

Sera giggles at “proposal.”

*Of course she does.*

“Yup. Let's get back to camp, snag some fresh mounts and tear our way on up to the storm coast,”

******

The rain comes in sheets and threatens to smother us, an hour on the coast and we may drown without ever having gone into the sea. We're miserable, oversaturated, and the rain is just chilled enough to be persistently uncomfortable. I at least had the foresight to shove my boots and shirt in my (supposedly) waterproof pack on my horse -- I've been walking barefoot along side my mare, in only my pants—pants so wet they cling to my skin. Sera, she looks like a drowned bunny, her choppy hair clinging to her head with her ears poking out, and every word out of her mouth since walking into the storm has been some variant of “shite, piss, or stupid.”

Blackwall though, he looks so defeated – his beard, beyond soggy, is plastered to his neck, it's
natural curls and waves temporarily destroyed. Because of his armor, every movement he makes is like pouring out a pitcher of water. And he warily sighs “no. This is worse than the Breach – I should've stayed in the hinterlands.”

Despite every inch of me being waterlogged, I smirk at the warden and say “heey! You made a joke!” Sera pipes in “it wusnt a joke! This place iz awful.” Still smirking, I yell back at her “heey! Ya managed to not say a terrible word!” Glaring through her soggy bangs, she spits “piss buckets!”

*Yep, there she is... 996 terrible things to say by Sera ...Sera no last name.*

Over the boom of thunder and the sheets of rain crashing into us, the sounds of fighting are just audible – a skirmish is happening over the rise. It must be. The other two climb off their horses and together, we tether the reins to a downed spruce and make our approach to the cliff edge.

A grand scene of mayhem and bloodshed is stretched out before us – crushing blows, arrows soaring, blades clashing, and a bit of magic surging. And there in the middle of it all, a massive Qunari freeing two foes of their legs in one brutal sweep. Blood jettisons from the two as they fall and with a fluid twist, he brings his massive axe down on both their chests.

**SHHHUNK**

Meanwhile, the battle rages on – Blackwall makes a step to rush into the fray but I snag him by his shoulder, holding him back and saying “they want to demonstrate their abilities. I say we honor that.” Blackwall looks to the fight, then tilting his head towards me without looking from the battle, sighs “ahh, you're right. Besides, we'd only add to the confusion. Good call”

Sera leans in, saying “wat?! They're all right there! Can't I shoot just one?,” her arrow pointed at a Tevinter mage on the shoreline.

“Pffft, fine just one. ONE OF THE TEVINTE” I yell as she looses an arrow and it plugs itself right in the bastard’s eye. Sure, he staggers in place for a bit but inevitably crumbles – all the while, Sera is beaming at me despite her earlier miserable and dampened disposition. Her kill however, it gets the attention of at least one fighter and she flips her “bow” in our direction. But then she spots me, horned like her boss, and twists her face in confusion.

“Dalish, behind you!,” I yell down to her and she flings herself into a roll and comes back up firing some sort of blue green light at a tevinter soldier rushing her with a sword. And down he goes with a fresh new crackling chest hole. Without giving us a second look, she goes back into the fray at hand.

Heads rolling, chests impaled, limbs torn asunder and skin cooked. It’s over. And sure enough, several of the Chargers go about slitting throats of the supposedly deceased. A couple rush back to camp to grab a cask. And the enormous Qunari, he props himself up against a tree sized piece of driftwood and waves us down.

Sera, staring hard at the Qunari, says “he's bigga than you. Hehehehe bigga”

“...And that's my cue. You two do whatever, I gotta have words with that guy,” I say and start sliding down the muddy cliff side to the beach. From behind, Sera calls out “right! Words. We all know wat that means.” Blackwall hides his face behind his gloved hand at that and just walks away. Possibly back to the horses.

Wet sand giving way under bare-feet, foot prints blurring into puddles as the storm rages overhead, I cross the distance and stop just a few feet shy of the massive Qunari mercenary leader.
Careful. Measure your every word. Because it'll get back to his masters in Par Vollen.

Titling his head to look me over with his one eye, he cackles out a throaty laugh, saying “hot damn, it's true! Oh, the Chantry must loooove you.” His voice lowering an octave, he chuckles out “a Qunari mercenary is the Herald of Andraste. Who’d a thought?”

“Not a Qunari and not a Herald. Let's make that clear right now. All I do is seal rifts,” I say coolly.

“Hmmm,” he grumbles, watching me, “well, I assume you remember Cremiscius Aclassi, my lieutenant,” as his number two joins us; Krem comments “good to see you again,” to me and turning back to his boss, “throat cutters are done, chief.”

“Already? Have em check again. I don't want any of those Tevinter bastards getting away…uh, no offense, Krem,” he jokes as Krem jokes back “none taken. Least a bastard knows who his mother was. Puts him one up on you Qunari, right?,” and marches off.

Looking back to me…

Or perhaps he never stopped looking

…Bull makes out his selling points, “so…you've seen us fight. We're expensive…but we're worth it. And I'm sure the Inquisition can afford us.”

I pause the conversation, stretching out the segue, pretending I'm weighing my options, and ultimately say “Guess ya seem useful.”

“We are. But you're not just getting the boys….you're getting me. You need a frontline bodyguard, I'm your man. Whatever it is – demons, dragons? The bigger the better,” and gestures a little farther from listening ears.

Walking alongside him, I realize he's a good 6 inches taller than me and it's odd to have to look up for once when talking with someone. Suddenly, I feel a pang of pity for Varric.

Even with the others out of earshot now, and rain sweeping across us, he whispers low “and there's one other thing. Might be useful, might piss you off…”

“You're Ben-Hassrath.,” I say, folding my arms in front of me as his lone eyebrow raises, revealing his surprise.

“Uh, yeeeeah,” he grumbles out. If he's on edge, he's hiding it well. “...the...we're concerned about the Breach. Magic...out of control could cause trouble everywhere…”

“Yeah, and you've been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the bosses, report back on it all. But you also get reports from agents and you'll share them. Well, guess what? You're hired, but on two conditions,” I say, preempting him again and staring him down hard with my color leeched eye.

“And uhhh, what would those be?,” he says a bit warily.

“First, every report goes through Leliana.”

Bull’s shoulders relax ever so slightly at that and he smirks, nodding at the condition, “the redhead, of course. And the second?”

“Second….Im not in your reports. Nothing about me whatsoever outside of me sealing rifts. That's
it. Got it?,” I threaten, unblinking eyes locked to his one.

**Fucking Qun.**

“Hmmm… it'll be tricky but I suppose I can work with that. I gotta say though, I'm impressed by what your Inquisition knows. This might actually be a good arrangement”

“Yeah, it'll be interesting. Now tell Krem and your boys to finish drinking on the road. I'll see you back at Haven,” and departing, I leave Bull, concern likely eating at him, and make way back to Sera and Blackwall.

*I like ya Bull, but I can't have your leash holders knowing too much.*

I'd feel pretty cool, were it not for the wind strewn sand and rain whipping against me.

********

True to its name, the rain never relents. It's our second day of being on this damnable coastline and not once has the storm slowed, but we've finally tracked the trail of corpses through mud and mountainous terrain back to a primarily wooden fort.

The Blades of Hessarian.

Earlier, digging through loose papers and corpses, I couldn't find jack all about Mercy’s Crest, the pendant supposedly necessary to invoke a duel with their boss, so now I'm just banking on the old fashioned “I wanna fight your boss” tactic. If it works, great. If not, let's just hope it doesn't get to that.

“So this group, they've kidnapped your soldiers?,” Blackwell says, as we three stare down the open path at the fort some fifty yards away. “It's shite iz wot it iz,” Sera angrily states from my other side, gripping tightly at her bow and a small flask with “fire” crudely scribbled on it.

*Oh shit, she's already a tempest?! Wait, does that mean…*

No. Hell, my magic is nothing like in game shit.

Real life, this is real life now ya big idiot.

My answer for Blackwall, I give it by bellowing “HEEEEEEY! I WANNA PUNCH YOUR BOSS’ DICK OFF. I CHALLENGE HIM TO A DUEL!” The two guards posted at the gate share a curious look, clearly murmuring to each and ultimately one yells back “we…uh, we accept your terms. Enter.”

At this rate, Blackwell is likely to die from embarrassment; he's been hiding his face since I yelled “punch your boss’ dick off.” Sera however, she's struggling not to crack up while attempting to maintain a threatening bravado, the corners of her mouth twitching in response.

Continuing in our approach, I ask “Blackwall, do you know why I say stuff like that?,” to which he lowly says “no. Why?”

Sera chimes in, “ya say it cuz itz funny!”
“I say it because they'll underestimate me.”

Sera shrugs but keeps holding her flask tightly, ready to smash it at a moments notice, while our Warden, he seems to be it mulling over, silent. "Still funny," she says.

The guards, despite being wary of us, allow us through the gate while whispering to themselves as we pass “a challenger…but the last one…but they lack the amulet……”

*Shit. Mean to tell me there's actually a crest? Oh, please don't go sour.*

Stepping into the fort, the walls are stacks upon stacks of sharpened logs, and there's but a single cabin and a stable. How this is their main base, it's beyond me. And there's the big guy, a giant of a man, their leader, feeding something red and slick to his war hounds.

...*If that red is my soldiers…*

So far, we've found nothing but the Inquisition dead, not single living soldier, and this asshole, whatever he's feeding his mutts, they certainly don't inspire positive thoughts on the hopes of finding a few survivors.

Blackwall doesn't seem at ease with this – if anything, I'd say this is dredging up a few memories of his tainted past, his time as a leader, and his failures as one. He keeps his cool though and readies his shield arm, just in case this all “puckers around us.” And speaking of Sera, clearly she sees what I'm seeing; her face has paled just enough to be noticeable and she's clutching that flask to her chest ever more tightly, whispering to herself “shit.shit.shit.”

“Easy, both of you. I'm gonna end him.”

Blackwall stares at me, incredulous and mutters low “with what? You don't even have a weapon.”

“Just watch,” I say back and crack my knuckles Just by tightening my fists, “I'm gonna punch your dick off!,” I yell at the Hessian leader.

It only goes towards infuriating that prick.

Bearing down on this giant of a man, one that towers over the likes of me and Bull, I force this bastard from my thoughts and draw deep into my memories of first fighting demons – the black explosions, the viscera, the spray. The man in front of me, I can't even hear his words despite his mouth flapping, teeth gnashing, as a somewhat new sensation slithers into my right hand. It feels heavier than before, and the typical black miasma isn't breathing from my pores, but I know something just as deadly is lying in wait.

This man, the giant, he yells and all I do is exhale slow.

I dart forward, delivering a left handed knuckle jab to his trachea, crippling his air supply. His fit of coughs is all the time I need to kick the bastard back against the wall, and stunned, he has no time to call his dogs, no time to cheat. He lashes out wildly, his axe soaring over head as I crouch low.

And the deadly force contained in my right hand, I give it to him.

*My gift for him.*

I throw myself forward from my crouch and with a devastating uppercut, I punch through his genitalia and up into his lower abdomen, skin and muscle almost fleeing from my hand, his entire
skeletal structure audibly cracking at the impact as a fountain of blood erupts from his mouth, nose, and eyes.

Thunder roars overhead and lightning cracks.

Our audience, they're graveyard silent.

From horror or awe, I can't tell.

The giant, he stands rigid. But he's dead.

And like a toppling tree, his ankles give way and he falls back against the wall. His axe drops from his hand with a heavy splash, the pooling rain slowly enveloping it. I tear my fist from his stomach and a whistling, hollow like a despair demon, it wails through trees, echoes from his wounds, nearly inaudible over the storm. His thick blood on my fist, it steams ever so in the cool rain, dripping clean. And only then does the man crumple down into the mud.

So that's what I was hitting demons with. Explosive force? And why do I instinctively know how to fight like this? I wasn't this good back home...

...I was okay before...but not this...

Then, despite the norm, the rain actually let's up and the twilight sun, cuts through the clouds.

But just a taste before being swallowed up again. I turn to the crowd and my allies, perhaps they'll see this as a sign of good, the rain giving way as I slay their monster of a leader.

No applause, none other than the thunder, but a lone Blade of Hessarian steps to me and says “Herald of Andraste, we follow you now.”

Drained, I just nod and pat the man on the shoulder, walking past him.

“Sir. Our orders?”

Right

Without turning back to him, I say “gather information that'll aid the Inquisition. The coast is yours.”

At this, all the Blades, everyone, they give me staggered salutes. And I just walk back to a stunned Blackwall, his eyes wide, no judgment. Sera, meanwhile, she's no longer clutching her flask, relieved perhaps that I righted this disgusting wrong.

People. She's about people. Remember this.

“C'mon, let's head home,” I say to those two at which Sera gladly turns to walk with me, and says “right! Anything to git outta this” gesturing to all the wet. Blackwall hasn't joined yet in our march back to the camp – he's still staring, back turned to us, at the carnage I'd wrought.

*****

Dusk of the following day, we're a few hours out still from making it back to Haven and we're setting up camp. We would've pushed the rest of the way home but the horses are in dire need of a rest.
The horses are tethered loosely next to a stream just some twenty feet away -- it's cool, the mountain air and water but it's clean and the horses don't seem to mind it.

I've been rubbing sticks together over tinder for the better part of the past hour and I still can't get a proper flame going – Sera has actually made a drinking game of it; every time I fail, she takes a swig. At this rate, she'll perish of liver failure.

Stepping from the trees, Blackwall returns with a handful of rabbits and grimaces at my poor attempts at he approaches. “Why isn't this fire going yet?”

“Cause I'm awful at this. And she's drunk,” I say, flicking a hand in Sera’s direction as she falls backwards off her log.

“Cuzzzyurr awful at it!,” Sera slurs.

‘C’mon fire. FIRE. Magic. FIRE NOW,’ I think, hoping to conjure some sparks at the least. But nothing happens. “Yeah, I'm awful at this,” I mutter, defeated, and dropping my ignition stick, I plop myself backwards against the very log Sera fell over. “Hey, if you get it going I'll buy you six drinks when we get back to Haven.”

“I accept, though you should learn how to do this yourself,” the bearded warden says, dropping his catch on a rock and stepping to take over the campfire.

“You've got to work your hands down the stick, generates more heat.

Sera drunkenly sniggers, still on her back with her legs over the log, and says “yeah right?! you work the stick,” carefully enunciating each word to land her joke.

“Hey, I'm trying to teach valuable skills here,” he jokingly shoots back at her. A small trail of smoke starts rising from the tinder and “Fire. There you have it.”

“I'll try to remember that. You though, you've earned six drinks.”

Blackwall brushes off his hands and sitting down, begins skinning the rabbits. “How about instead of six, you buy me one and tell me how in the Maker’s name you punched that man-giant dead”

Without hesitation, I say “Honestly...I just told my fist to kill him.”

“...What?,“ Blackwall and Sera sound in unison.

“I'm a mage -- can't cast spells though. Not in the normal way. Take magic and turn it into brute force.”

_Mostly_

Sera, jerks off the ground and yells “oi! Yoused no magic! Gunna light ourasseson fiya.”

“Guys, I can't even hold a staff. And Sera, I didn't use magic to know what you were thinking back in Val Royeoux. Second, I can't even light a fire. If I could, you wouldn't be drunk.”

“Gud point,” she pouts and flops back to the cold grass.

Blackwall was chuckling under his breath during our little back and forth and says “that's impressive, that level of control. Other mages could do well to learn from you.”

“Yeah, doubt I'm the right fit for that.”
“Huh, doesn't hurt to help,” he lets out with a frown before turning back to the task at hand, saying “enough of that. Well, let's get these cooking. I'm starving and anxious to see this Haven of the Inquisition.”

I resign myself to staring into the flames, feeling the heat reaching towards me from the crackling logs. Small embers float into the night sky, given wings by the heated air. And on one engulfed log, I watch as a translucent beetle, swallowed in flames, rubs its front two legs together and paces to and fro. I blink as the smoke path shifts towards me – and the insect is gone.

Real? No. Wait, are there fire proof bugs?

...probably not.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Part two to a double update for today. Hope you enjoy.

With the sun creeping over the mountains, we enter the borders of Haven and deliver our mounts to Dennet. As soon as she dismounts, Sera dashes off, yelling “sleep!,” and she vanishes past the main gate.

Blackwall however, I turn to see him staring down that angry colossus of the sky, the Breach. His face is expressionless but his tone, it's one of reverence as he says “…and you fell out of that. Maker. I've decided… I am going to stay on, help you find the Divine’s murderers.”

“Good to hear. Whatever our differences, all I know is we gotta close that big bastard,” I say, a warm smile clinging to my face as I stand there, happy to have another likeminded ally. “Anyway, I gotta go report to our Spymaster. I'll buy ya that drink shortly.”

Blackwall grunts in approval and I leave him behind. Walking back to the main gate, I spy the easily recognizable horns of Iron Bull over a hill near the water, he and his chargers appear to have set camp closer to the lake instead of planting themselves right at Haven’s entrance. And fortunately for the residents of Haven and Cullen's troops, they're keeping their banter volume to a minimum.

_The little changes. Interesting._

Walking along mostly empty dirt streets, the town will be alive soon enough but for now, I relish this.

That is, until a swarm of pill bugs flicker in and out of existence at my feet. Blinking hard, I will them away and upon opening my eyelids, they've vanished.

_How many hours has it been? 80? No…96?_

I know I'll have to sleep eventually but I've managed to go several days without. I'm just not ready to dream of swarms and voices. I know the last time, I was told not to fear, but how do you stop fearing? Even more so when they multiply? Admittedly, I know I need sleep – the lack of it…it's starting to take its toll. My mana pool drains faster, sure, but besides that, like just now, I see things skittering and squirming in my periphery.

Little things.

_Translucent things._

*If you smoke elfroot, what happens?*

Pushing these thoughts aside as I reach Leliana’s tent, I see she's with an agent – they're discussing a hit. In game, I'd have made a point to voice my opinion on the matter, changing its course…
But not now. There's too much going on for me to focus on every last detail.

*I hope that doesn't make me a shitty leader later on…*

Her agents go to take his leave and as he turns to pass me, his face is covered in a swarm of gnat things. But he doesn't notice them.

*They're not real…*

He leaves, taking his unreal swarm with him and we're alone. Well, as alone as two people can be in the middle of a town. Fortunately, Leliana’s a crafty one, never letting her guard down, and smiles while stressing “good morning, Herald.”

I narrow my eyes, concentrating – *she knows I hate that moniker. Wait! She wants me to listen.*

Never letting her smile fade, pacing slowly about her tent, eyes locked to mine, she says “we have quite the inventory. A surplus even. We will continue in our acquisitions though, don't you worry.”

‘*Inventory? Acquisitions…the mages!*,’ I think, my eyes lighting up in recognition.

She hums in approval, seeing my reaction, and continues to say through her smile “the main ingredient is proving difficult to come by but I have a good idea on where to locate it. It won't evade us for much longer.”

*Still no Fiona. Still though….*

I say in turn, “I hope ya can find it – it won't be a party without it.”

A wicked glint flashes in her eyes and she says “speaking of parties, Josephine has a word for you regarding the guest list. It would seem we're quite the popular ones.” And with a dismissive nod, returns to her paperwork at her desk.

*Guest list…nobles? To get into the Therinfal Redoubt..Excellent.*

Oddly enough, my mark buzzes at that thought. It feels pleased by this, if I could describe a buzz as such. Walking to the Chantry, I raise my left hand to face level and whisper “oh? You ready to have more power? You excited to close the Breach?” to the mark.

And it pulses excitedly.

*It's aliiiiiiiive.*

I slide through a small gathering of clerics, a few of which look at me curiously as I flick my hand back down to my side. I nod at each of them, trying to maintain some notion that I'm just a normal…Vashoth…Rift closing…battle mage…person. I groan inwardly all the way to Josephine's office and knock.

*Hope I'm not waking her…*

Inexplicably, a cheery voice answers through the wooden door, only somewhat muffled, saying “oh! Please do come in.”

And so I do, pushing the door open and closing it behind me. Mineave isn't in her corner – perhaps she has a different location or just isn't up yet, but sure enough, there's Josephine, as prim and proper as ever, and in her trademark golden dress -- it's a slightly different from the one I've seen her in. Makes sense, of course she'd have more than one dress and the gold theme is remarkably
complimentary to her.

‘wonder if all her dresses are gold...why are her lips moving? Oh! What is she saying!? Listen you asshole!,’ I think, and force myself from my own head.

“Herald? Are you alright?,” the lovely young Antivan asks, concerned for me.

Waving it off, I say “ah, yeah, I'm good. Didn't sleep well. Let's start over – good morning, Josephine. You're looking lovely as ever. I understand we have a guest list to review?”

Smiling coyly, she stands from her desk, saying “ahh, yes. A good morning to you as well, and I must thank you for such a compliment. We do indeed have the guests necessary for our soirée.”

“And when would be best to celebrate with them?”

A playful but serious edge enter her eyes and she whispers “in four days time. You depart in three.”

*Envy, I'm comin' for ya.*

I bow in thanks, and go to make my leave, but not before she can call my attention back, asking “may I ask a question of you? Of your background? I've...I've had to manufacture a few details about you to win over certain guests...I'd like to know...”

“Just ask.”

“Ahem, well, yes, so I'm admittedly at a loss when it comes to Qunari culture – it was a decided gap in my education. You say that you are Tal-Vashoth, and I've done my best to emphasize that... but what does that mean, exactly?,” she asks, hesitant but hungry for knowledge.

“Just Vashoth. Didn't grow up under the Qun, so I'm not rebelling against it. Were I doing that, then I'd be Tal-Vashoth. But that's not to say I don't despise the Qun – I know what it is. It's a choke collar.”

“And that answers my second question. Many are fearful that you, being Qunari, have come to convert the people, but hearing your views on the Qun... I dare say we will be able to work this to our favor.,” she states more confidently, while tapping her quill to parchment.

“I'll be honest, I'm not big on religion. That's not to say I don't believe in gods...”

Ceasing her penmanship to ink her quill, she casts me a curious glance and says “so you do believe in the Maker?”

*That's her takeaway?*

“Uh...Maybe? I mean, there's plenty of evidence for the other gods. With the Maker, the only evidence I know of is Andraste’s ashes. Ya know, that stuff that Wan used to heal the arl of Redclifffe on his deathbed.”

She hums in acknowledgment as she finishes penning our conversation and says, off the record, “you certainly possess an interesting perspective. I'm glad we had this talk. And of course, if there's ever anything you need, please, just ask and I'll see to it.”

I'm about to leave her office when it hits me, ‘she's Antivan. Antivans tend to know a bit about debauchery. And drugs may just count as such...’

A spider pops into existence on my arm and pops back out within two seconds.
It's getting worse

I shift awkwardly in place, half ready to leave if this conversation goes sour, but the words are falling from my lips before I can prepare — “actually…uh, are you aware of any….mmm, substances that when ingested…or smoked, causes hallucinations and calm?”

I don't even look back at Josephine to read her face but I can feel her staring at me.

“It’s uh, for medicinal purposes,” I grumble out, hopefully convincing her

She laughs sweetly, and continues “please, do have a pleasant day.”

“Oh, yeah. Will do..,” I whisper, uncertain if I should feel shame and confused by her answer, so I leave her office, making a beeline for the Chantry entrance, avoiding more of the clerics, and step out into the fresh air, breathing deep.

And blurry beetles fade in and out, drifting lazily in the air before my eyes.

‘Shit…. I really do need sleep...
...Maybe I can bribe Rasa into lending me my old bed,’ I think and mumble out loud simultaneously; my coherence is getting sloppy. And so I head towards the tavern in the hopes of snagging some breakfast.

Well, a bribe.

************

I'm standing in front of my former cabin balancing tray of porridge and cooked ram with a couple empty drinking mugs and a carafe of honey wine. With both hands occupied, I lean forward and bang my forehead against the door, curved horns knocking hard against the wood.

I hear tiny feet scurrying from within but no notice that the door will be opened for me so I go to bang my head against it a second time.

“It's open,” comes a raspy voice at my right, nearly giving me a heart attack and almost making me drop the tray. I whip my head about to find the source and sure enough, there's the tiny Rasa, footprints in the snow behind her leading around the cabin edge.

She climbed out the window just to mess with me? Aww, she does care.

I grumble “but as you can see, my hands are full.” Leaning past me, she twists the handle and with a light shove, the door opens inward. With a shrug that clearly reads “you shouldn't need my help,” she skirts past my knees and into the cabin, hopping up onto the only chair, wrapping her arms around her knees and giving me the hard stare as I stand in the threshold. With heavy steps, my boots drop loudly against the flooring, jingling with each step and I slide the carried tray down on the desk behind Rasa. She watches like an owl the entire time; head turning, body still, eyes focused but unrevealing.

Nothing spills.

I walk over to the bed, slowly turn to face Rasa, and fall backwards into the mattress. Despite it
being fabric on straw, it's the most comfortable thing I've felt since that the last bed I was in, back in Val Royeoux those couple weeks ago. With a heavy sigh, I say “would ya mind making sure I don't sleepwalk?,” and I drift before I can catch her response.

************

Shades of gray, that's this world. Fake light filters in through the cracks between the blinds on the windows – city lights with a hint of blue and red flashing in between. But the bedroom is all wrong. For one, I shouldn't be sitting on the ceiling. I'm sitting cross legged on the ceiling in the buff and a ring of alizarin oil paint is smeared on the ceiling around me. The second issue? It's too quiet. I should be hearing the sirens, or the passing trains, or the roar of the bar beneath my apartment. But there's nothing. It's all just a pale mockery of the world I was stolen from.

My head even feels wrong.

Reaching up with both hands, I sweep them up against my forehead and…

*No horns? Funny that this actually feels odd.*

I've still got my scars though. And my mark, it's buzzing; resonating. More so as my fingers approach the oil paint ring smeared about me, enclosing me. I mash my index finger to the ceiling beneath me and swipe forward, spreading the paint.

**POP**

I drop immediately from the ceiling onto the bed below and bounce off it and onto the floor. Heavy bass fills every corner of my apt, vibrating everything as the treble rings out, distorted.

*At least the sounds back…. This though? Gwar. Eighth Lock? Good song.*

I stand up and investigate my former apartment, mine, not my family home – it's empty except for that bed. And turning around, I see even the bed has vanished. It's all empty. Just drywall and concrete.

Over the cacophony of bass, I yell “SO MARK, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?"

It pulses in response, increasing in frequency and brightness as I aim it towards the bathroom down the hallway. As I go to follow its lead, a heavy strike ripples from somewhere outside.

Knock knock knock.

Ignoring it, I resume my slow walk and entering the bathroom, my mark is surging out rapid pulses of green light, illuminating the small gray tone room in highlights of emerald.

Knock knock knock. The dream shudders.

*Something is trying to get in?*

Again, I ignore it and turn to face my reflection in the green-lit mirror, the only item left in the apartment. Only, my reflection, it looks frail; missing pieces and flecks of itself. Aside from that difference, we're mimicking one another fluidly, until my reflection, from within the mirror, pounces forward and pounds at the glass barrier, screaming over the thundering bass

“WAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUP”
My eyes rip open, easily peeled and I can see my breath rising. And the open sky. And snowfall.

‘What?! Not again!’ I panic out, twisting off the snow covered ground and jerking about to gauge my surroundings. Again, I'm on a cliff, only this time, it's overlooking Haven from behind it, hundreds of feet above it. My skin goes...well, colder, at that. Snow aside, panic has control of my core temperature now.

“You're awake,” a familiar raspy voice says from behind me. I turn to look and sure enough, Rasa is simply standing in place, observing me. “I'm small and you're giant. I wouldn't be able to stop you. So I followed.”

I'm at a loss for words – everything behind her is an expanse of snow and frosted trees, ice daggers dangling from every branch.

*How did we get up here?*

As if reading my mind, she croaks out “you climbed up the mountain side from over there,” pointing to an area just past where the siege equipment is being built. “You almost walked over the edge, but something over there yelled at you,” she says, redirecting her point to a white smoke breathing in and out of existence just under the frozen patch of trees.

*The fuck...Why do I keep waking up near ghosts?*

Crawling back and away from the edge, I climb to my feet and walk, fresh snow crunching under my thick book heels as I follow Rasa to the tree line. She stops and rasps out “it's been waiting for you,” looking to the phasic form, flitting in and out of existence like warm breath in the winter air.

...*alright, let's get spooky.*

It looks like a human form made of cellophane filling with steam. But here it is, knee deep in mountain rock, unable to move from that spot. It looks up from its cold and unyielding prison and sees that we've moved closer – if something transparent could smile, that's what this thing looks like. Relief washes over me, but not my own; it belongs to the entity before us – that much is clear.

“What are you?”

“yooOOOUuuu...heEelp!,” it wails, sounding warbled and distant, almost like hot kettle screams through a cardboard tube.

“What?,” I sternly ask, stepping forward a pace to shield Rasa if need be.

In lieu of words, it throws itself to the snow, see-through fingers tearing at frozen earth, and clawing itself toward me, knees splintering from their locked position. I shove Rasa away as the cellophane specter climbs me and grapples at my face, latching on.

…and then in. Nausea roils within me as this thing shoves it hands through my forehead, trying to pry me open. No words; my vocal chords refuse to work. But there is a scream….it's just not mine.

‘Ra.....sa.run,’ is all I can think beyond this repulsion as the form slithers it's way inside my skull and brings its face to mine. Steam hisses up within it, filling every nook of its hollow form, giving it more definition, and slowly, its own glass flesh churns and I'm looking at my own face. Hornless; human. I feel my esophagus shortening rapidly, a purge is imminent.

But then it smiles and my sick, it breaks. I breathe deep and inhale all the steam, a “thank you”
hisses as the heat hits the brisk. A cooling embrace, the glass envelopes my skin before being absorbed. And at it's end, I'm standing alone in the snow and no longer is there a transparent invader. A hint of a whisper, just a touch, calls from the back of my mind, saying “I was nearly extinguished. You found me though. What a reunion…”

And all falls to silence.

Another me. Another piece. But they can perish? And what comes with this piece?

No response to my questions, so I'm left pondering, wondering. Casually, I turn to Rasa, her eyes are enormous and for the first time, I'm witnessing a genuine emotional response from her – unfortunately though, it's fear. Unblinking, eyes wide, she's watching, uncertain what to do. So I go first…

“Thanks for letting me sleepwalk, Rasa. If you hadn't, I'd never have found this piece of myself.”

Horrified and too quiet to even have her natural rasping, she whispers “what…what are you?”

“Broken. The explosion, it scattered me. And this was but a piece. And it was dying,” I calmly state, trying to keep my voice even toned and continue after the pause to say “though, I get it if ya never want to see me again.”

Without an answer, never taking her eyes off me, having regained her nerves, she slowly backs away, back the way we came, leaving a trail of tiny footprints in her wake.

“Shit,” I breathe out and drop to my knees in the snow and raising my marked hand, I whisper to it “do you want to leave me too?”

No answer; no change in energy level. Nothing.

“fine, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt,” I sigh out and looking up to the skies, I reflect, saying “Varric’s right. Weird shit happens around me…”

******

The sun is overhead and I've been sitting in snow for an hour or so – a cold damp of melting snow against my legs, even in jeans as they are, I'm thoroughly cold within and without. And it's only when my stomach growls that I realize how much I need to get out of the cold, out of the wind, and off this peak. I rise, legs stiff, and hold in place for a moment to regain balance and blood flow.

“What did that piece of me have?,” I ask of no one, remembering the other shade I'd happened upon and the curious power that came with it. Breathing out in resignation, tired of wondering, I head back the way Rasa had pointed out and after few steps, my heel slips on the ice and snow. My boots need a new heel, a new sole but I'm not getting anything like that material out here, likely not until Dagna appears. She's the only one I know of whose savvy enough to figure out rubber.

But we're not even at Skyhold yet…

Tired of slipping, and jerking about, I sit on my ass and slide the rest of the way down the slope. A quicker and safer approach, certainly, however, it's leaving me significantly colder as snow bunches up about me in my descent.
And like an idiot, I butt slide down the slope and into the cold dirt, thumping against a stack of wooden crates. Gingerly touching at my shoulder, I glance about for witnesses and upon seeing none, I grab a crate corner and haul my ass up.

“Damn do I need a drink,” I hiss, wincing at my bruising shoulder, and head back in the direction of the tavern, doing my best to avoid any and all looks along the way.

I'm damp still from the snow but once I'm inside the tavern, I'm basking in the warmth of the fire and the collective body heat of those present. Varric’s spot is still empty – unsurprising; though according to snippets of conversation I'm hearing from my seat at the bar, they're already on their way back – and should be back sometime tonight assuming all goes well. Amidst this, Flissa pops into view carrying a dozen empty flagons so I lean over to lift countertop opening for her to slide through, and I leave it open.

“Ah, thank you, Herald,” she beams at me while dropping the empties into a wash basin and wipes the sweat from her brow. “What can I get you today?”

My gold already in hand, I slap 2 sovereigns to the counter and loudly say “something strong and an ale,” speaking over the din of the other patrons and lute strumming.

She pockets my coin and disappears, only to swiftly reappear with some cask ale in a tall mug and an equally tall glass of something phosphorus blue. “Aqua Magus,” she calls out before vanishing into a back room.

*Looks like lyrium…or Hpnotiq… can't be great for the guts.*

Ignoring my own trepidation, I take a swig of the warm blue liquor. Burning on the tongue, invigorating, a jolting warmth. Oddly, it tastes like burning ozone smells after a lightning strikes. My heartbeat quickens, blood hastened by the magic infused booze, and the room brightens.

*My pupils must've just dilated. This stuff tastes….just awful. But it feels…wonderful. Wonderful is the word I want.*

I switch drinks, toss back a gulp of ale – it tastes like dirt. Or clay. But as I scowl at the drink and lower my tin mug, I spot my blurred reflection in its surface. Eyes locked to the mug glint, I feel around my face with my free hand, realizing now just how unruly my facial hair is and just how much I need a shave.

And a haircut – It has been a few weeks since I first awoke here.

Upon Flissa’s return from the back room, she casts a curious glance my way, watching me watch myself and says offhandedly “you know, I've a girl here that can help with that” as she hurried off to refill a nearby table’s drinks.

*This needs to happen – look fine with a beard but if blood and guts are constantly flying our way, it'd be best to have it short.*

I knock back both awful tasting drinks and my vision stretches like a fisheye camera lens.

‘Ohhhhhhh shiiit. NO. Not a chuggin’ drink!,’ I mentally scold myself as nauseating liquid fire burns though my veins, my fade mark flaring in response so I shove it down in my lap, a meager but successful attempt at stifling the otherworldly glow. Under my breath, I actually say “sorry” towards my lap. “I forgot we're in this together.”

Balancing on the stool, trying to catch my breath and steady myself, an epiphany strikes – I lean
forward over the bar, resting my chin on my right hand and unballing my left, I gaze at the rift scar in the center of my palm and whisper so only it can hear “…you're broken too. Don't know why I didn't catch it before – a part of you is still in that foci, right?” And it slowly pulses twice in response. “Yes? Geez I'm a dope.” Again, it pulses slowly two times. Lips curling at the edges, I chuckle out “didn't have to agree so quickly.”

Wish we knew Morse code.

“How about this -- we find our missing pieces and keep one each other from getting dead. You don't consume me and I don't accidentally snuff you out.”
Nothing at first, just the steady smoldering green that typically flows across the fractal scarring, but after some 30 seconds, it responds with two pulses; a “yes.”

“Then we have an accord. I look forward to working with ya.”
Chapter 12

I didn’t catch her name, I’d been too caught up in drink and thinking about the mark to really pay any attention, but she’d made quick and easy work of my beard and hair and I’d paid well.

10 silver. I have no real idea of how much anything here is worth, but she seemed beside herself with gratitude when I paid her. So that’s good?

Now, with hair short like it’d been buzzed and a smooth face, I exit the tavern and relish the cool mountain air breezing over my skin. I glance at the sun and clock it’s placement – not long till sundown – hopefully the others will return soon. I know Solas never got the conversation he wished for and we still need to test out my reaction to more staves; Cassandra looked like she wanted to hit me when we last saw one another, so that’s worth looking forward to...

*What the hell can I do in the meantime?*

The mark buzzes.

“Oh, you think we should check on Rasa?,” I jokingly say aloud.

It pulses once, a negative.

“I’m not hearing a no,” I playfully say while jabbing at it lightly with my right hand, pretending to not understand it.

It buzzes low in annoyance. And as this happens, a massive shadow looms over me and grunts out “Boss. Who ya talking to?”

*Bull...shit.*

Whipping about, I casually deflect, asking “Bull, when you say boss, ya saying ‘boss’ or ‘bas?’ Just curious.”

Staring down his nose at me, he plants his enormous palm against the tavern and leaning against it, he enunciates “Boss,” takes a breath through his nostrils and asks again “so who were you talking to?”

*Shit. Prioritize. Which secrets are worth letting slip? Uhh oh no, I’m taking to long to think, he’s staring extra hard. Breathe. TALK.*

I exhale sharply and inhale again, no longer depriving my brain of precious oxygen, and swapping my slack expression for a grimace, I lowly mutter “I... pfft, was uh, talking to this,” and I raise my palm to Bull’s eye level. He purses his lips and looks slowly from the mark to me and back again before cracking a smirk himself and saying “ya know, you might just be crazy. But around here, that’s gotta be a good thing.” He lumbers past me and slaps me on the back, nearly knocking me off my feet. Walking away, he winks at a ginger elf barmaid just ending her shift – those two, the mountain and the waif, disappear around the corner, leaving me, again, alone with my thoughts.

Such thoughts whirling through my skull, to name a few, are “a wink is all it takes him?” and “how could she tell it wasn’t a blink?” and “do condoms exist” and “could I cast a barrier in lieu of using a condom.”

To the air about me, I mumble “barrier sex….that even work? Dumb question – not havin’ any
sex
dy fun any time soon…but how long would the barrier last? Don't want it vanishing….”

Little hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge, someone is watching me – I look up from the
ground and sure enough, four of Cullen’s soldiers, reeking of ale, are standing around the tavern
entrance, gawking in silence at me.

*I have gotta get better at this.*

Until one of the four drunkenly hiccups, then that breaks the silence.

Reeling back and shifting in place, I enthusiastically wave at the drunks and with dramatic
enunciation, I say “wellll, it certainly is a lovely night for us drunks, am I right?! No? Just gonna…
gonna” and I start walking backwards from the tavern as I finish with “be anywhere but riiiiight
here. GOODNIGHT!” With that, I jog away.

I make it through the main gate and stop just short of the frozen lake as the sun completely
disappears behind the mountain peaks, drowning Haven in shadow. Tiny snowflakes are drifting
down over the valley – it seems to create a hush over this place – even with the clanging of
blacksmiths at the forge nearby.

My mark, it pulses and raising my hand to face it, as as if knowing what it's trying to communicate,
I say “nah, we're not actually gonna visit Rasa. She's freaked out enough as is. We'll give her some
space,” and I drop into a squat on the lake edge, balancing on the balls of my feet.

It pulses twice at this, it feels… pleased.

'*I understand a glowing scar….’* I think, incredulous.

I hear snow crunching from my side – footsteps – and I turn just as Krem approaches. “Ah, your
Worship, didn't mean to interrupt your monologue. Was just patrolling Haven’s perimeter.”

Smirking, too tired to correct him on my name, I reply “nah, it's good. Hey, sit and chat a bit?”

He nods and plops down on the frozen shoreline next to me and says “it's an impressive thing you
lot have going on here. I mean, yeah, it's bad the Chantry is what it is, but this Inquisition has
pulled itself together. Like I said, impressive.”

Nodding in turn, “it really is. Cullen can rally like no other. Cassandra is too stubborn to fail.
Josephine could sweet talk a demon. Shit, I'm sure Leliana knows every secret there is...”

*Well, almost every secret*

“.they really are the best of the Inquisition. I'm just some idiot that got caught in an explosion.
And fell out of magic hole. Aaaaand nearly died twice. Aaaaaaaaaand got stuck with this,” I say,
flashing him my left palm. I feel it readying itself to pulse when I mentally attempt to soothe the
thing, thinking ‘easy, I know you're good. I'm just putting up a front for now. I have to pretend to
be somewhat confused by you.’

The power fades.

Krem goes on “uh, speaking of the conclave, your Worship…do you remember what happened?”

“Nope. Wish I did -- it'd answer a lot of questions. But speaking of questions, how're you settling in
here?”
“The chief just has us doing extra security for the time being, getting a lay of the land. You know how it is; heard you were a mercenary before all this.”

Couldn't have been.

“Maybe? I don't remember much before the explosion. Shit, I barely remember basic history,” I reply, staring at up at the Breach. A thought pops into my head, ‘history…right...this place’ll get attacked. Fix that…’ and I turn back to Krem, saying “wanna do some good for this place? Ask around the Chantry, maybe Roderick – he's old, probably knows the ins and outs – ask about secret passages, escapes. It'd suck to get cornered and we've got enough enemies as is. You get me?”

Krem hums in agreement, and pushing himself to his feet, says “that's a decent idea. I'll see about that. Your Worship,” and marches back to the Chargers camp over the hill. As I watch him leave, a horn sounds – people are yelling at each other from the main gate, not rushing though.

My other team is back. Gotta be.

I head back over to the gate to greet my teammates with a big tired grin as they march past. Vivienne, she doesn't march obviously – she glides, pristine as ever but menacingly says in passing “my Dear, never again. Not unless you are also dealing with such atrocities,” and leaves me behind. Varric saunters up shortly after with Solas at his side, and with gravel in his voice, says “you owe me all the drinks,” with a lopsided smirk and pushes past me, likely on his way to the tavern. Solas though, he merely nods and I reach out to stop him, uttering “hey, we never got a chance for that talk. If ya still want that, I'll be free around midnight – ya know the abandoned cabin?”

“Of course. Allow me a moment to collect myself and I'll be right with you,” Solas says with a blank expression.

“Yeah, that’s… why I said midnight. You got some time,” I say, squinting at the ancient elf. He huffs once and smirks before walking away to his cabin.

And where's Cassandra?

I look off toward the tents at the edge of Cullen's encampment and spot the Seeker slashing away at dummies – not even back an hour and already she's training. I head over toward her spot in the field, but stay just out of her attack range, saying “sorry about that mission – I'm sure it wasn't fun.”

Unceasing in her assault, and with heavy breaths, she grunts “on the…contrary. It was..a truly..enjoyable…experience.”

“A joke?”

She stops her attacks, and regaining her breath, turns to me and declares “yes. It was horrible. However, your map and notes greatly expedited our progress. Because of this, we were able to avoid most of the possessed dead and rescue our soldiers,” and planting her sword firmly in the ground, walks toward me and jabs me in the chest, saying “but going forward, I demand to be in your traveling party. You are much too important.”

In jest, I clutch at my chest and cry “awww, Cass, I didn't know ya cared,” while pouting my lips. Her nostrils flare and with a roll of her eyes, she pulls back, saying “never mind. You can be on your own.”
Wearing an exaggerated frown, I sidle up to her as she goes to pull her blade free of the earth and nudging her with my hip, I whine out “but Caaaaaaaass, we make such a good teeeeam.”

“Ugh, I had forgotten how frustrating you can be – you have reminded me.”

Dropping my mocking tone, my face goes neutral and I whisper “I'll try to refrain from annoying you when we go to meet the Templars,” and I await her reaction as she slowly turns back to me. She's stunned and asks with held breath “we are going to them for their aid with the Breach?..but what of Lord Seeker Lucius?”

“Josephine and Leliana have that plan in motion – we head out two mornings from now,” I say through a knowing smirk.

Contentment, that’s what she's exuding. Clearly, she favors the Templars; magic is still very much a concern of hers. “Sleep well tonight…and Cass?,” I say as she arches an eyebrow at me, “thanks for taking care of the Fallow Mire.”

The corners of her mouth curve and saying nothing, she returns to her moonlight training.

**********

Leaning back in a wooden chair against the outside of the cabin, I repetitively clack the tips of my horns against the siding as I murmur to my left hand, “after training with Solas, ya cool with us actually checking in on the girl? Scared her pretty badly.”

The mark flashes twice, a yes. I get it, it wants us to be prepared and spending too much time worrying about people doesn't get that done. But, we have to play the balancing act. Meanwhile, the moon is high, just past it's apex in the night sky as Solas appears from amidst the darkness and forestry surrounding the isolated cabin – were the weather warmer, I'd have been eaten alive by mosquitos before he could show.

“Good, you are here,” he says in his approach, arms wrapped around a leather bundle.

Ending my head banging, I swing forward and throw myself to my feet in one fluid motion – I reply “yup. So ya have something specific in mind ya wanted to talk about?,” all the while suppressing a yawn. I didn't get nearly as much sleep as I should've earlier. And I doubt I'd be trying for it again so soon.

Sleep = Sleepwalking. Then again, sleepwalking = ghost piece.

“Yes, I believe I have some ideas in regards to your using a staff. One possibility is you need better materials – something that better channels energy,” Solas lectures. In quick response, I say “what, like copper?”

He stares long and hard at me, quizzically, before asking “why copper?”

Right, science isn't as big here.

“Copper is a conductive metal – works well for heat and electromagneti...meh, never mind. Tell me more about your ideas,” I say, rubbing at my eyes.

Unfurling the leather bundle, he releases a dozen staves onto the ground between us and looking to me, he whispers “interesting. Perhaps we shall have to try copper if these others fail,” and picking
up a staff, he tosses it to me. Panic grips my heart, but I snatch the staff out of the air – wood, a sylvan branch with bands of veridium wrapping about it. Nothing happens, and nothing is good. I raise it before me, observing it in my grip – and then it audibly cracks under my touch, splinters run the length and the veridium ignites. Without hesitation, I hurl it as far from us as I can muster, and upon it striking against a small boulder, it detonates like a fragmentation grenade. My face twists in reaction as Solas merely grabs another and tosses it my way.

It lands at my feet – this one, iron again, but leather bound from end to end with duel shards of nevarrite wedged in. “Go on,” Solas encourages. Slowly breathing in and out, my panic dissipates – I hook my foot under it and kick it up to my extended palm. No delayed reaction this time, the leather bindings immediately start warping and crackling, the nevarrite pieces at the tip – the stones deplete of their purple luster – during this, a hissing sound tears through the bindings and again, I throw it far.

It erupts in fire, transforming into a rain of molten metal, and splashing against the snow at a distance, steam hisses in response.

“And you are only holding them...you're not willing magic into them,” Solas mumbles, locked in thought over what he's observed. “Please, try one more,” he urges, “this time, you choose. Let your energy guide you.”

Under my breath, I grumble “uh huh. Kay.”

I step to the array of staves in the snow and hold a hand out, hovering over them. I close my eyes and let my hand drift of its own accord. A few minutes pass in this, my arm is getting tired, and that muscle burning is weighing me down but then Solas says “stop. That one.”

Opening my eyes, I look down and see my hand is over a black metal staff shaped like a shepherd’s crook, purple leather bindings crisscross the length and in the curve of the head, a polished piece of obsidian has been affixed. I look to Solas and he nods, eyes hungry with curiosity.

With intention, conviction, I grab ahold of the staff and leap to my feet. I feel it mirroring my own magic deep in its core – a black miasma hangs about the obsidian piece. My magic. Death magic.

Then my mark pulses with panic of its own, I cast a quick glance to it and then back to my staff – the bindings are rotting, purple browning and turning to ash. I hear the muffled whistles and hisses that I heard when I killed he Hessarian leader, only now they're emanating from the stone piece. Without hesitation, I fling it far and away from us, from the cabin, and away from Haven. It lands in a thicket of trees and frosted foliage.

Nothing. The sounds have stopped.

Solas and I glance at one another; he opens his mouth to say something but is swiftly interrupted – the staff explodes, forming a black, shack sized bubble that instantly liquifies all the trees and life caught inside the sphere. Misshapen skulls form on the bubble’s exterior, the wailing commences, ear splitting. Solas and I both flinch from the scene but just moments after it begins, it ends, leaving a perfect circle of rot and black where the bubble once was. Trees have been perfectly displaced where the energy touched, grooves perfectly sheared from the landscape. The snow is melted and the water swirls in with the putrefaction.

“Uh, so.... how about those other ideas?”

Disbelief adorns his face as he replies “alternatively, your particular affinity for the school of entropy may be just what's causing your staff to break down....but for now, it is still an
uncertainty. A theory.” Breathing out a sigh, he drops down to gather up the remaining staves and as he's doing so, Cassandra storms out of the forest between us and Haven. “WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!” she demands, gloved fists shaking in anger.

Solas breathes heavily but I interject, saying “hey Cass! We were just running those tests we said we were gonna do.”

My attempt at diffusion fails as she declares “do not ‘hey Cass’ me! I should have been present! Soldiers should have been alerted – half of Haven is in a panic because of you!”

I slap my forehead and reeling backwards to face the night sky, I say “ahhhh, I'm a dummy. I totally forgot about scaring people. Shit. I'm sorry. Won't happen again.”

Resuming his typical collected stance, he states “our apologies, Seeker. Going forward, you will be alerted to any experiments that we entertain. I hope that is satisfactory.”

Fire still simmers in her eyes, but she manages to growl out “for now,” before pointing at me and declaring “you, return to Haven. You have caused enough trouble this night.”

I look warily from her to Solas, who nods in agreement with her, and I start my walk back to Haven’s gates, leaving those two behind.

*I just fucked up.*
Chapter 13

Once again, I'm standing outside my former cabin, and despite the time of night, I go to rap my knuckles on the door. But it yanks open before my fingers even touch the surface and there she is, Rasa, a tiny ball of defiance and a stare that cuts. I audibly gulp, anxious at what she'll say, but instead of yelling or cursing at me to leave, she jabs at my stomach and points me to the chair inside. Her eyes never leave my face as I sidle past her in the doorway and drop myself into the lone chair.

For a time, she says nothing, moves nowhere. And as I sit, anxiety building, sweat heads on my brow despite the cold outside, and winter air filtering in through the windows.

‘What is she gonna do to me?....’ I think in fear at this minuscule creature.

Finally, she marches up, jabs me in the forehead and hisses “you're just you! No one else in there?!”

Confusion laces over my face, and I reply “wha-wha-what? No! I'm just m-me!,” tripping over my own tongue. The little elf stares hard into my eyes and demands “what was the first thing I said to you?!”

My panic vanishes and I breathe easy, and with a warm smile, I say “you have horns. That's what you said to me.” Her fury and disbelief turn into a scowl but she relents and entirely to my surprise, she quickly paces to me and hugs the side of my torso. Without a word, just mere seconds later, she releases and hops up onto the bed.

“Sorry I scared ya. But I was tellin’ the truth – the conclave broke me. There's pieces of me all over the place.”

Scowling, more with worry than anger, she rasps out “you're weird.”

“Yup. I'm still sorry though”

She tosses a pillow at me from the bed and says “sleep on the floor,” and sliding off, she walks to the door and locks it. I stare at her with an arched eyebrow to which she says “so you can't sleepwalk.”

“Makes sense.”

She blows out the few candles around the room as I get settled and then she hops back up into bed. I can feel her staring at me in the dark but I keep mine closed. For once, I shouldn't have to fear waking up on a cliff side so I let sleep come for me and as I drift, I whisper “Thanks, Rasa.”

She rasps back “you too,” as the sands of sleep incapacitate me.

***********

It's definitely the Fade, no doubt about it. I'm sitting on a spire made of blackened animal bones, towering nearly a hundred feet high, tipping unnaturally and defying the physics of the mortal realm. The sky is a murky swirling green, the earth below a charred brown and black. From this vantage, I can see the flickers of others’ dreams around the land. One such dream, near the base of
the spire, is clearly Cullen's – even from this distance, I can see the ex Templar. He's having a good
dream it would seem – he's unarmored, unarmed, in casual garb and getting swarmed by a litter of
mabari pups. They're all trying to lick at his face and he's smiling wide while feigning disgust at
their puppy tongues.

I’ll leave him to it – he needs this.

Looking about, trying to pinpoint which glimmer belongs to whom, I spy Sera arguing with an
older woman.

Likely her adopted mom. Not about to intrude in that.

I step off the spire and the world turns to meet me, gravity shifting to keep my feet on the
“ground,” and down I walk towards the truer version of the ground. I walk past glimmer, sliding
between some, not wishing to interrupt the various personal scenes. Just past the final wave of
dreams, I approach a floating pillar of volcanic rock and step onto it. As I do so, it rises high up and
brings me to a previously inaccessible plateau. Up there, it's an abundance of forest and
inexplicably, it stretches out forever. The drop behind me has vanished and I'm deep in a lush
green forest, but the wood around me is silver. Silver and green, the color pallet of these woods.
Pushing through brush I enter a small clearing spy an abundance of bees and butterflies flitting
about. And then a rustle amid the greenery behind me. I whip about and to my surprise, I spot
Solas hiding behind a tree, outlined in violet, peering out at me.

“Solas? Sorry man, didn't mean to walk in on your dream.”

His face twists in confusion, anger?

His voice is deeper than it usual and he growls “how long have you known?,,” and paces out into
the clearing after me.

“What? I've known since you walked up. Who else would ya be?”

Again, he growls, saying “but you see me?”

Still confused, I reply “Solas, ya look like Solas. Are you not supposed to look like you? This is a
dumb conversation and now my head hurts.”

His tone turns more...natural – His typical voice returns and he says “interesting. My apologies; I
didn't mean to upset you,” and he steps as a man would, no longer hunched, and the outline fades.

Was he not Solas? WAS HE THE WOLF? Why couldn't I see that? And why was he highlighted?
So many fucking questions…

“Alright, I'm uh, gonna keep walking around. Haven't really explored the Fade before. Wanna tag
along?,” I ask of Solas.

He's himself again, and clasping his hands behind his back, he smirks with a glint in his eyes while
saying “but of course. Lead the way.”

He's studying me.

Together, we navigate the silver and emerald forest and for quite some time, we both remain silent
as pieces of spirits flicker past us, trapped in their own memories. After what feels like hours of
walking, a multitude of suns and moons having crisscrossed the skies, we reach the edge and walk
out into a desert, shimmering waves of heat radiating off its surface. And in that sea of white sand,
stands a fortress, a fortress of glass, perhaps cooked from the very sands surrounding it. No life is visible from within, no movement across or through its thick panes, but still something about the place beckons us toward it.

Solas, ever the knowledgeable one, darts in front of me to cut off my approach, and says all so calmly “we mustn't go any further – this place is a trap, an old demon lives here.”

’...pu...l...
...th...e...
Sea...m...s.....’ enters my head, a foreign thought.

Looking around for the source, I happen to glance at my hand and I instantly know the words came from it.

‘That was you? Alright. Let me try...’ I think while glancing at my scarred hand.

“Hold on a sec,” I say aloud under Solas’ curious stare. I take a step past him and brandish my left, willing it awake – the green erupts, its light bursting from even a length of the fractal scarring leading up my arm. ‘You manipulate the Fade. Let’s do that,’ I think as power surges through me and Solas stares at me in wonder. I feel the very air around me, and with my bleached eye, I catch glimpses of the bindings of this place, its stitching.

And finding a seam, I grab hold and twist, my mark and I willing energy deep into the scene before us. As everything ripples and shudders, a roar of defiance echoes deep within the fortress. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.”

With a final twist of my wrist, the desert sands race to its borders and rage at its edges, superheating. During this frenzy of the fade, we’re lifted by invisible tethers and dropped squarely on the top just as the sand glass cools; the barrier finished...

...and we’re left standing on a crystal floor that stretches out for miles in all directions, keeping us aloft in the night sky as nebulous clouds, cosmic dust, and stars lazily drift about us. It’s akin to standing on a universal snow globe, one so large you can’t even fathom it’s curves. But deep below, I spy the faintest view of that desert fortress, locked away amid a storm of green.

“Oooph. I. Am. Tired,” I mutter while dropping my hand to my side and breathing deep, as Solas whips about, studying our surroundings. Frantically, he asks “how?! How did you use the mark in that way?! Yes, it helps one dream with more clarity but for you to do this while dreaming....”

“Solas.....you need to wake up,” I tell him with a half grin. And he's gone; he’s forced from the Fade.

“Nice to be on the other side of that...” I mumble, looking at the galactic array around me, spotting the flickers of Fade sky beyond the dark of space. Then applause, clapping pulls me from my thoughts -- I'm surrounded by hundreds of bright orange wisps.

Spirits?

“Good jobthatwasamazing impressive yourescuedus I haventseen wowsurprising”

Their multitude of voices are jumbled, hard to make out over the spectral applause. Some of it doesn’t even sound like the common tongue, but the message is clear, they’re wowed by my use of the mark. But I've reached my end for this night, and sitting on the crystal floor below me, I cross my legs and to myself, I demand “wake up!”
I open my eyes, and find myself staring at the thatched roofing I woke up under those first days here – though, I'm on the floor this time. I sit upright and snag the bundled mess of my shirt off the floor – evidently I'd taken it off in my sleep to use as another pillow – and I pull it on, buttoning half the buttons and rolling the sleeves up as high as I can. Rasa, she's still asleep. So quietly, I rise, and snag my boots next to the door. With them in hand, I gently ease the door open, trying my best not to let it creak and stepping out into the snow, barefoot, I pull it closed behind me with a slight click. Now free of the cabin, I shove my feet into my beat up boots and begin my strut to the tavern.

Good sleep. Good dream. No fatigue. No ghost bugs. Scared Solas... ...Definitely a good dream

But I'm soon cut off by a tired looking Solas, hands hanging loosely at his sides. Cutting right to the quick of it, he asks in a hushed tone “how?,” weary eyes boring into mine for any hint, any clue.

“How what?”

“How did you close that part of the Fade? You trapped that demon, you've... you've made it temporarily inaccessible,” he continues and looks about, looks anywhere for an answer, much like a child would.

Strange to see him lose his composure.

“I saw the seams. Pinched it closed. That's all. Like ya said, it'll come undone eventually.”

Sighing, deflated, he asks “How do you have so much control over the mark after so short a time?,” revealing his true concern. My answer for this would also likely answer how I ejected him from the Fade.

Holding my left hand out between us, I bluntly say “we've got a rapport.”

Confused, Solas asks with caution creeping into his tone, “rapport with whom?”

“The mark, obviously.”

“Impossible,” he sharply whispers, incredulous.

Tired of the conversation already, I flatly state “That’s dumb. Spirits are people. Why can't the fade be sentient?”

As if the concept had never even crossed his mind, he goes silent, lips moving without words, and shaking his head, he comes back to and says “...you surprise me.” And with a calm returning to him, he walks away in the direction of his cabin.

“I surprise you often,” I call out after him, at which he slows, and looking over his shoulder, he answers “consistently.” To my surprise, the mark hums, pleased it would seem with how our conversation went.

He never considered you alive?

No response from the foci scar, now quieted in the waking world.
“Errrr-r-r-r” my stomach growls, interrupting me so, I turn my attention back to my intended path toward morning ale and ram.
Chapter 14

I hadn't spoken much to anyone since my talk with Solas, I'd spent a majority of my time meditating in preparation to have my mind crowbarred into by that damnable envy demon parading about in Therinfal Redoubt. Mostly, I'd been imagining atrocities and puzzles of my own to throw at the bastard, and now, on the day of our departure, I feel I'm finally ready.

Rather a fight on my home turf than a fight through time and space.

Earlier, it had taken some effort to convince Cullen to stay in Haven – it needs him most, not his former order’s shadow. As I'm packing up my mount, it's early morning, readying for departure, Leliana traipses past me and whispering so only can hear, she says “acquired,” with a knowing smile gracing her lips and continues onward, apparently needing a word with Cullen by the training grounds.

“Maker’s balls, you actually look pleased. Most mages wouldn't be happy to meet with the Templars,” Blackwall says, sauntering over with a water pouch in hand, rehydrating after a morning of practicing with Cullen's troops – a task that I'd asked of him yesterday.

“And I'm not most mages,” I say, still smiling about the spymaster’s new information. I continue on to say “but I'm glad – finally making progress. Next up, we're closing that monster,” while jabbing a finger towards the Breach. The mark buzzes in excitement. Perhaps at my excitement.

“That’s certainly worth it then. And good luck. Fists at the ready,” he says slyly, knowing damn well what my true skill set is. No words, I only wave at the man as he heads back to continue his training, and as he rejoins his group.

“So you're a mage? Hmm, wouldn't have pegged you as one,” rumbles Bull from off to my side, inexplicably inconspicuous for his size.

Damn it....fuck it, he'd find out anyway.

I tell him “Yup. But like we agreed…”

“Yeah yeah, you don't go in the reports. I know. But I gotta say, haven't seen you with a staff. It's surprising,” he muses.

“Use my fists,” I say dryly.

Laughing out, Bull says “Hot daaamn, that’s a thing?!?”

“Qunari, his is a unique skill – simply put, your masters aren’t capable of understanding,” Solas says to Bull with an air of superiority, apparent in his disdain.

Not one to be talked down to, Bull confidently retorts “what’s not to get? Magic goes in, makes for a stronger punch. See, not that difficult,” all the while, wearing a defiant grin and folding his arms. As if that settles the matter.

With a rapidly furrowing brow, disinterested in their philosophical pissing contest, I simply walk away before they can rope me in and step to Cassandra. She eyes me in my approach while finishing her own packing of her mount. Jaw firm and brow raised, she sternly declares “I am still upset with you.”
Two nights to cool off and she’s still aggravated by my impromptu training session with Solas. I shift awkwardly in place, chewing at my lower lip, trying to find the right words. And there never are any “right” words. So I speak from the gut, “you’re right to be. And…you should stick close to me. Like you’ve been doing since this all started.”

Only somewhat of a frown on her lips, she pulls the saddle straps taut and stares me down. “Yes, we cannot know what awaits us so I most certainly need to be near you.”

Arching an eyebrow, I lean in and repeat back “most certainly need to be near you.”

No blush, but she’s flustered and huffs quite audibly, then saying “not like! Aghhh”

At this scene, Varric struts on by, just sauntering and chuckling out “Your blush is showing, Seeker.”

Cassandra just yells “there is nothing, much less a blush,” and turns back to me, accusatory, and says “I blame you for this.”

Smiling, I simply say “I hope so.”

**********

Therinfal Redoubt, the former Seeker fortress looms overhead, formerly dedicated to righteousness and order, now a beacon of the sinister. But only I know just how much of one it truly is. And of course, the various nobility that agreed to …whatever it is that Josephine promised or implied. It’s precisely for them that I brought Vivienne along – she can flatter their sycophantic nature with the best of them, so as soon as our party of Solas, Varric, Cassandra, her and myself make our approach, she opts to glide on ahead to make first impressions; lasting ones. And to keep them distracted -- I’ve asked her to personally protect them and keep their watchful eyes off of me.

She can entertain Abernache. No need for him to die.

Varric slides past the others and rests next to me to say “ya know, even if we didn’t know what was happening here, this place would still look ominous. Then again, maybe all things “Seeker” are menacing,” that last bit he says with a wink Cassandra’s way.

“You, Varric, are the menace,” she snaps back at him. Then, reconsidering, she says “but in the case of Lord Seeker Lucius, you may be right.”

“You two always this cynical? We’re about an hour from owning the Templars,” I quip.

“I believe that the Seeker and Master Tethras are being practical,” Solas interjects, sliding past us to better observe the fortress with his staff in hand, its bladed end clicking against the cobblestones. “The menace truly resides within.”

We three glance at each other behind the elven mage’s back.

As if knowing, without looking, he says “would it not be more prudent to enter?”

He’s right. Let’s get this over with.

With a shrug, I head into the fortress, weaving through the useless nobility with my friends a step behind, trying desperately not to make eye contact with anyone in particular – I’d prefer to keep my
identity a secret from both them and the Templar guards posted outside. I hear murmurs and whispers regarding the Inquisition and “where is the Herald of Andraste?,” as we make our way to the secondary gate. It's there that Barris spots me, his eyes widening in recognition – he remembers me from the Orlesian market. Straightening up, he says “Herald! You’ve brought such…lofty company.”

“Eh, ignore them. And ignore Lucius. But you're not gonna, so let's head on in and do the stupid flag raising bullshit,” I tell him, in hushed tones so as not to alert the other guests. Somewhat taken aback, Barris and his company open the gate and escort us few inside and march us to a series of cranks and flags. Barris shifts uncomfortably, uncertain and says “I don't understand why, but the Lord Seeker is especially interested in you. He wishes to know your choices, who you are. I don’t understand why though… he’s…obsessed with you.”

Of course it does. And is.

No hesitation, I wheel about and crank the flag of the people up a rung. However, I don’t even touch the Chantry or Templar flags; I leave them be, the lowest possible. And turning back to Barris, I shrug and say “that's my choice.”

Barris, confused, intent on forcing me to continue the test, says “but Herald, you still have t…”

“Nope. That's my choice. Force me to, it won't be what I chose. Then your dumb test would be a lie. I'm done,” I say, cutting him off.

“Then please, explain your choice,” he says to which I shake my head and whisper “no.”

Surprisingly, Cassandra and Solas both look thoughtful at my decision – Varric though, he's too busy keeping an eye on the nearby Templars, keeping a look out for suspicious behavior. And Barris, he's stunned but continues on in his task, without a word, leading us into the keep through heavy doors into a darkened storage room of sorts, everything from crates to rafters, cast in the orange glow of torch light. And within, the fully armored smug fucker that can only be Knight Captain Denam is standing dead center in the room. At our entrance, he slowly raises his helmeted head to stare us down… to stare me down.

Hatred drips from his every word as he spits his question, “this is the herald of change? You are why everything must be moved ahead?”

“Yeah, and not every Templar is on your leash,” I whisper confidently as Barris timidly utters “knight captain?”

“You were all supposed to be changed!,” the maddened knight captain crows, his words echoing. And with an explosion of dust and smoke, a jagged blade tears through Barris’ throat, his eyes going dim all the while dying with the question of “why” at the forefront of his mind. His body hits the floor and Cassandra hacks at the Red rogue from behind – the bastard deftly evades but he’s struck by an ice brick to the face and hurtles backwards into the crates. Meanwhile, from across the table, I punch Denam squarely in the nose, my spirit bridging the gap between my fist and his skull.

Knock out.

The Knight Captain is out cold, collapsing backwards as I turn my attention to the bowman in the back of the room – fortunately, Varric had seen him first and fires an explosive bolt in the Red Templar’s face right as I engage.

BOOOOM
The Templar and the door behind him are torn apart by the fragmentation; guts and wood are blasted about that corner.

“Solas, if ya would, freeze that scumbag to the floor,” I request while gesturing to the unconscious Denam. As Solas takes to icing over the knight captain, the keep’s bells start clanging, sounding off that trouble has arrived.

“I’m sprinting straight through this – keep up or don’t,” I yell to my team as my mark flares to life, casting a fade green barrier over me of its own volition. “Thanks,” I whisper to it and I begin my mad dash with Cassandra quick on my heels. Right away we encounter two templars, both prepared to fight. Without slowing, I backhanded swat at them through empty air and as if struck by my physical knuckles, they crash into the wall behind them and crumble. Dead or unconscious, at this point I can’t be certain.

No time to unlock all these doors – we’ll do that when we take control.

We hustle up the stairs and out into a second courtyard where Templar infighting is taking place. “Varric! Solas! Keep the casualties here to a minimum, Cassandra and I are going after the Lord Seeker!”

“So long as I don’t have to run up any more stairs,” Varric laughs out and Solas takes a battle stance as he says “be careful you two.”

As we sprint rush through the battle and up the battlements, I shove a few Reds off and over the edge, likely to crack their skulls open on the hard stone below. It’s a frenzy – arrows whizzing, swords and shields clashing, but even still, Cassandra and I slip through – our fight is up ahead.

God damn Envy.

We reach the final landing before my inevitable meeting with the Lord Seeker and Cassandra runs her blade through the first of the corrupted she sees – down the collar plate and into his torso, stopping him dead in his attack. His corrupted comrade screams at us from atop some wooden scaffolding and attempts to kill us with arrows.

Useless.

Between my fade shield and her own sturdy iron one, the arrows bounce off us with nary a scratch. Unceasing in his attack, he keeps firing arrow after arrow at me, maddened by the red lyrium in his veins.

...and having forgotten the pure Templars in hiding behind crates and walls. All of whom are yelling at me to hide – but I march up to the scaffolding and grappling one support beam, I throw my weight and tear it down – the corrupted bowman falls from on high and actually belts out a cry that can only be the Wilhelm Scream. But it’s cut short as he strikes the floor.

It appears he’s unconscious.

Cassandra yells to the clean Templars remaining “tie him up and then go off to help the others.” At her command, they salute and hurry to complete the task – a task we leave them to as we climb that final set of stairs. And the bastard, Envy as Lucius, is standing at the very top, simply awaiting me.

“Come. Show me what kind of man you really are,” the Lord Seeker’s taunt echoes off the stonework. His words, there’s more than an echo, it’s as if he’s speaking through several mouths simultaneously. Cassandra, her eyes narrowing, no longer hoping for his redemption, yells out “Lucius! You have failed the order. Explain yourself!”
“I will explain. But only to hiiiiim,” he hisses with his back to us, his words implying me. Raising my hands in mock surrender, I whisper to Cassandra “it’s fine. Stay close obviously.” She weighs my words but concedes and stays a scant few feet behind me as I reach the top.

‘I’m ready to get weird. Are you?,’ I think at the bastard. He spins and grabs me by the scruff of my neck – but he’s misjudged my size – we don’t glide back toward the main hall. He struggles, grappling at me, and I can only smirk.

“This happen often?,” I joke. Enraged, he mashes his hands against the side of my head and the world blurs…

*****

…It refocuses and I’m in a fogged over dungeon, the smell of char and rot lingering heavy.

Corpses are strewn about, locked in poses of pain and anguish with their eye sockets still smoldering from the conclave blast. I test the ground with my boot, pressing against the soft earth and slick fauna. More confident, I step forward and walk to the room’s edge. Laughter from the darkness draws my attention and out of the fog walk the heads of the Inquisition. In unison, they say “is this shape useful? Will it let me know you?”

“Everything tells me about you,” the Envy three utter snidely.

I clap Envy Josephine on the face and whisper “enjoy, aren’t you adorable.” Envy Cullen’s mouth snarls in frustration and with a smirk, I lightly slap Envy’s Cullen’s ass and repeat “adorable,” and then, I step past the three fakes. They begin slitting their own throats, that oiled steel on flesh, from behind me in an attempt to rattle me – no go, and I open the door to the next room.

Cassandra and Roderick. Arguing while my glowing eyed corpse lies upon a table between them with rows of jail cells lining the background. And I walk right by.

Ignored, Envy roars it’s annoyance.

I step into the next room and the door vanishes behind me, leaving me with three others in yet another fog strewn room.

“…The Inquisition’s strength rivals any kingdom in Thedas,” two guardsman report.

“Our reach begins to match my ambition – but we will strive for more,” Envy Hunter proclaims with arms crossed. I wiggle my eyebrows and laughing at the imposter, I skirt past it into an enormous room littered with columns, each lined with gargoyle faces breathing wicked green flames.

“Boring,” I murmur as I imagine the Storm Coast, fires swiftly drowning as flood waters rise to my knees In the torrential downpour.

“You’re doing well. But you have to keep going,” a voice from above softly utters. I look to the ceiling and standing upside down, neck craned to watch me, is a boy wearing a wide brim hat and patchwork clothing. From somewhere deep in this illusionary trap, Envy screams out “NOT FAIR.”

“Hey Cole,” I say with a knowing glint in my eye.
Arching his young face, he states “you know me. You watched me? You…”

“Not the time, Cole,” I smirk as I press ahead, walking ahead as the hallway stretches onward until finally a crack in the wall stretches open enough to form a doorway.

As if sifting through what I am, what I’ve seen and done, Envy demands “How?! you have… already seen all of this? NO MATTER. I will dig deeper”

“Do it, ya jealous prick. I’ve killed you a hundred times already and this isn’t the one you win,” I state in defiance of the imminent change in attack. I step through the castle doorway and the edges blur, fog creeps past me and I step out into...

..a corn field. Deep night and green fog. I stand tall amidst the even taller husks and turned earth, what should typically be a dry and dusty crop at this height, is slick and off color. Dark; more wet than it should be. With every graze of the crops against me, I feel a sharp pain, a razor edge cutting my skin.

And the dark slick, it’s all blood.

“I…found…your…family,” the voice maliciously pants through the darkness, “you only...need…look down.”

Against my better judgement, I do just that and my esophagus twists up my throat, I nearly choke as I look down at the damp earth beneath my feet and see the unmoving faces of my loved ones, flayed from their bodies, eyeless, staring back. I choke back my own gag reflex as my heartbeat picks up. My brother. Sister. Mom. Dad. Tears burn at the edges of my eyes and I’m forced to shut them lest they threaten to blind me. “Where are you son?! We loved you. Brother, why?! How could you leave us behind?!,” their distorted voices howl through the air.

Squash it. Push it down. Breathe…not real. All bullshit.

...bullshit
...bullshit...
..illuminate it

I open my eyes and a thin chain is dangling in front of me, stretching upward into the night sky, lost to the darkness. I pinch it between my forefinger and thumb and pull slightly downward.

Click

It’s bright and sunny; high noon – the chain runs up to the sun, a five million watt cosmic lamp. In the daylight, the blood looks fake – more akin to corn syrup. And the faces in the mud, they’re clearly cheap latex masks.

“Ya know what? If ya want to be convincing, there really should be a grass lane here,” I whisper as I clap my hands together and slowly inch them apart – the expanse of corn divides, and I’m left standing in a backroad leading to my family farmhouse.

“Should be a …grass… aaghhhhhhhh!!,,” the demon roars in fury from nowhere, upset at its failing attempts to be me.

“The farther you push…,” Cole appears at my side to say.

“Yeah yeah, the more Envy has to stretch to accommodate. Got it,” I reply and keep walking up the lane.
I step onto the front porch and gripping tightly at the door handle, I hold a moment. Steeling myself for what’s to come. And I turn and pull – I’m inside. But the hardwood floors turn to rot and give away, sending me falling through darkness.

Down.

Down.

I splash down into a deep pool of black sludge – it fills my nostrils and mouth, rank like demon viscera. Thrashing and splashing, it sucks at me, trying to pull me down into its depths and I choke.

Sputtering against the thick viscous liquid, I will ‘a drain’ into this world and am caught in a whirlpool as the sludge takes me down.

‘NO, NOT HERE, NOT NOW,’ I think in a panic as I go under, unable to find purchase on anything.

Under and down. Oxygen bubbles spill from my lungs.

I’m sure I’ve lost but my feet finally hit a bottom. Coughing, choking out the vile sludge, I attempt to rise. Regaining my balance, I stand firm against the grate, the sludge still at chest height but down it drains. But as it does, humanoid forms rise from the sludge, unearthed by its depletion – and at the last slurping sounds of the liquid circling the drain, I find myself staring in horror at the slick sludge covered forms of family and friends standing in a circle around me in a dungeon. And at its center are another Hunter and Envy Hunter. On a table, untethered, lies one iteration of me sans horns, his mouth open in offering. Envy Hunter, it’s sitting on the on the other’s chest, ripping the tabled Hunter’s tongue from his mouth.

Over and over.

And every time Envy Hunter drops a torn tongue to the floor, the audience claps and cheers.

I can only stare in horror. Frozen.

Upon throwing his 17th tongue to the crowd, it hisses “give yourself to me or give yourself to the Qunari. Become powerful or become a slave.”

Dropping to my knees, my tears flow freely amidst the twisted mockeries of my loved ones, their smiles stretched too wide. My chest tightens and I sob “I can’t.. can’t.. not a saarebas. Can’t.” I hear Envy step off the table and approach my trembling form – my eyes are on fire with salt.

“Not a saarebas. Yes. Not…a. Saarebas,” the monster repeats, mimicking me, perfecting its impersonation. It tugs at my shoulder, and hisses “let me see your face.”

Eyes still burning, blinded and blurred, I spot Cole in the corner of the room but a look of panic comes over him. Instead of rushing to help, he hides behind my father.

Fury.

I twist and lunge at Envy, tearing at the sides of its face and scream “GETOUTOFMYHEAD,” my voice echoing like a thunder clap. The edges blur as Envy screams in kind, but its own screams are drowned in the storm of mine.

A pinch, an intense pressure in my forehead and I blink – we’ve returned.
As soon as the demon is ejected from my brain, I latch onto its wrists, now in its demon form. Just enough of a glimpse for the templars to witness the truth. And for Cassandra behind me to see as well.

My fury and salt manifest as violet fire – it pours from my mouth like water, cascading to the floor and and down my arms in streams, scorching the demon flesh and my own. Envy screams and wrenches backwards away from me, dislocating its arms in the process.

Alert, awake anew.

**FIRE**

I press forward, forcing the creature back until it trips on a corpse of someone it deceived and drops to the castle floor, and even as its claws grapple and tear at me, I huddle down over its face, pinning it. With gleeful malice in my eyes, I part my mouth once more and vomit liquid fire on this devil – the entire time its eyeless face sizzles and burns. Through gasps, I rage “IS THIS - THE DESTINY- YOU - IMAGINED?! IS THIS YOUR - RESPECT, YOUR AUTHORITY?!!”

“your auth…ority. respect,” it parrots weakly through gnashing teeth.

Each of my screams release a superheated inferno – The stone boils beneath it's head.

All of orange and purple.

Envy continues scrabbling and striking at me but at this point, there is no point – only death awaits this monster. “My gift for you,” I hiss, as napalm pours from me.

Silence falls except for the sounds of flesh sizzling.

I’m kneeling over a pool of magma, burned into the stone of Therinfal.

It isn’t until Envy is beyond dead, it’s head cooked from it’s shoulders, a smoldering stump, that I feel a gauntlet on my shoulder, gently, pulling me back from the brink of fury.

In that moment, my mana drains and breathing deep despite the burning stench, I go to lift off of the demon – Cassandra whispers “no. Do not move,” in my ear.

*She’s scared.*

“You are wounded, the demon’s claws pierced you and you’ve lost quite a bit of blood.”

*Not scared. Worried.*

...I’m bleeding?

Too much adrenaline still, I can’t feel the pain yet but I do feel a tugging at my back in several places. She’s plucking Envy’s talons from my flesh. As a calm overtakes me, I feel all the more repulsed – my marred flesh, burns running the length of my arms and chest. I’m certain I’ve burned my mouth as well – inside and out, it feels raw, angry.

“The Herald’s purifying fire destroyed the demon,” whispers a Templar amidst the others. Another says in hushed tones “a truly terrifying display.”

“Get Solas!,” Cassandra cries out to persons unknown. Everyone is going grey, I’m fading fast – I have to make this count.
“TEMPLARS!,” I beckon hoarsely, and within seconds, I’m surrounded by those remaining. “The Order is broken. You allowed this…but there is redemption. Rebuild under the Inquisition, without stain. Help us fight the Breach.”

A number of the Templars salute, at least that’s how it appears out of my periphery. “Thank you.” Upon saying that, I fade fast. The world goes dark
“I do not know if you can hear me...,” Cassandra whispers as a damp cloth touches my forehead. Cool, chill. Eyes closed, I whisper back “hey Cass,” though cracked lips.

“Shhh, do not talk – you are still recovering. I...I am sorry but I had to drain your mana; you were hurting yourself,” she whispers, almost guiltily. I can hear it in her voice. Feeling about blind, I find her hand with my bandaged one and give it a gentle squeeze. I breathe out sharply at the pain and release.

Footsteps, someone new has entered the room.

“Ah, he is awake?,” asks what can only be Solas. “Hunter, you are fortunate that you had your barrier active – without it, you would have burned yourself alive. The others and I are tending to you – you are healing quite well. But it will be some time until you are back on your feet.”

Cassandra asks “Solas, will the burns remain?”

“Seeker, I will see to his recovery. Beyond that, perhaps we…”

I don’t think the burns went deep enough to ruin nerve endings because the pain of seared flesh comes in waves and I fade again…

***********

I’m sitting on a shoreline in the black sands – waves crash and roll at my bare feet, misting at my soles.

The scent of sea salt fills my nose.

Calming.

Gulls cry as the sun makes its descent into twilight.

“Not yet sun, rewind to midday,” I say and just as I said it, the sun rewinds itself through the sky, shadows growing shorter as it stops high above. “Thanks.”

I’ve been on this beach for days – off to my left is an adequate sandcastle, fit for a crab. Fragments of shells line its exterior, it’s own stonework. A twig juts from atop it with a bit of seaweed wrapped about it – their standard. I glance over and it would appear that tiny orange spirits have taken to living within its gritty fortifications.

Cute

But I turn my gaze back across the waters. On the distant shores, the landscape keeps changing. What started as my farm, grew into the Manhattan skyline – buildings pressed up against buildings, reaching high. But that was days ago. The buildings have since folded in on themselves and twisted downward until only Haven remained. Even from my low and distant vantage, I can see its people.
scurrying about.

“I preferred the tall ones, myself,” a voice from nearby smoothly states.

I say “rewind back to New York” and at that, Haven unfolds and juts high into the skies upon those distant shores, glass and mirrored surfaces growing like moss to cover their metal and concrete bones

“Beautiful,” says that same voice in a rich smoky tone.

“Well feast your eyes on it, Desire. Then I’m gonna have to ask ya to leave.”

The demon softly steps across the sand, talons leaving grooves, and kneeling next to me, it asks “oh? You don’t desire my company?,” all the while feeling itself up, rubbing its hands over its skin.

“No offense, I’m not in the mood for company.”

“You’ve been here soooo long. I could get you in the mood,” it says coyly.

My eyes flash and the sky goes black immediately – My head turns to meet its gaze and Desire pulls back pleading “My mistake! I’ll…I’ll leave you be! Sorry!,” and vanishes like dust. I breathe deep and daylight returns.

Calm.

“Sorry about that, little ghosts,” I say to the sandcastle residents before raising my left hand and asking it “how we doing out there?”

It buzzes but flashes neither yes or no.

"Uhh, okay. How many days now?"

It begins flashing slowly and I count out seventeen.

“Thanks for keeping track”

It pulses several times more before going back to sleep.

I drag myself across the sand, scooting until I’m sitting in the waters, just deep enough for it to wash over my legs. “Sun, rewind to morning. City, go back to Haven.” The sun curves back to the East, rising out over the waters and Haven returns when the city finishes crushing itself back down.

I lean back on my elbows and lazily stare up at the morning sky and zone out…

Gulls cry in the distance.

***********

“Hey! He’s waking up. Get the elf,” a gruff voice yells from nearby. “Welcome back to the land of the living,” says Adan.

“Wasn’t dead,” I groan in response. Adan grunts and says “sure looked it. Now, have a sip of of
this elfroot potion.” I do just that with his guidance – my eyes are still shut, stinging against even the low light of the cabin. I choke down the tingling sweet concoction; invigorating.

The door opens and a few others enter.

“Oh, please do tell us that he’s okay,” cries the sweet voice of Joesephine.

Blinking, the room comes into focus – Cullen, Solas, Leliana, Josephine, Varric, and Cassandra – they’re surrounding my bedding.

“Now be honest – am I still pretty?,” I croak; my vocal chords are raw from disuse and fire. Breathing in sharp bursts, stifling a laugh, Cullen says “see, I told you he’d be fine” and claps his hand to my leg, igniting my leg in pain.

"Aughhhfuckgodamnit!,” I hiss out as Cullen panics and jumps back, hiding his hands behind his back, and yelps "MY APOLOGIES!" before awkwardly slinking out the door.

"Ahhhh, Curly...." Varric chuckles and sliding into the empty spot at the foot of my bed, he gravels out “Look, glad you’re alive and all but if ya wouldn’t mind, I’d love to know how you did that fire mouth thing….You know, for the readers,” and winks. “But obviously, tell me later over drinks. I’m buying,” he says, taking his leave.

From my other side, Solas says “The injuries you sustained while fighting the Envy demon weren’t limited to only the physical. You should know that you…”

Wooosh

“He hurt you in here. Cuts that can’t be seen,” says a boy perched on my bedside table, gingerly poking at my head as everyone in the room reels backwards. Cassandra goes for her sword but pauses when I say “Hey Cole. Glad you got out alive.”

“You know this thing?,” the Seeker demands with narrowed eyes, sword half pulled from its sheath.

Cole replies “He knew me before I knew he knew mpfff fffmp mmmmfuh” – I mush my hand over his mouth, muffling his speech. “Caught a glimpse of him – he can be annoying. Good though. Tried to help me fight the demon,” I blurt out, hand still on Cole’s mouth.

Cole nods and says “daffffs rffffff. Hm faw mmm” through my hand.

“Yup. Now go vanish – I’ll talk to ya later?” I tell Cole and he does just that, as if he never even existed.

“Interesting trick – I’ll be certain to have my spies study him,” says the Spymaster with a smile as Josephine, puzzled, asks her “study who?”

*She doesn’t even remember him? Wow.*

Cassandra looks concerned as well as she sheathes her sword, looking about the room. She knows something was wrong but can’t seem to identify what that was. “You are well. That is what matters. When you are able, you will seal the Breach,” she says and marches out as Leliana looks to me and says “when you have a moment…” With that and a smile, she follows Cassandra out the door.

Josephine says, awestruck and staring at my skin “it’s as if you were never burned. It’s a bit shiny
in the right light but you look just as good as you did before.”

“I looked good?”

With the slightest of blushes, she tip toes around the bed and leaning in close, whispers “ahem, as for our earlier conversation, you’ll find what we discussed in your cabin.”

If Solas heard her, he makes no indication of it

And then raising her voice, she says “Oh, and please, do be careful.” She pecks me on the cheek and skirts out the door, leaving Solas, Adan and myself. Well, gruff apothecary, he excuses himself to the corner to mix his poultices and what have you. Solas stretches out in a nearby chair and whispers, just low enough to keep Adan in the dark, “Hunter. I just wanted to say that what you managed to do with Envy was impressive, though reckless. But I must put emphasis on how impressive it was. I only saw the aftermath but regardless of your intention, you made one element as another. In this case, fire as water. And the coloration…how did you come to that if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Hate to disappoint ya but I don’t remember much outside of how pissed I was,” I reply, staring at the backs of my hands.

“Please, try to remember. If it’s a power you can harness….”

“Solas…”

“I know it’s difficult, but please, this is for your benefit.”

I sit in silence, my fingers twitching under Solas’ intense stare. Small clangs come from the corner as Adan mixes a potion with a metal spoon.

“…Envy, it showed me one of my worst fears,” I whisper.

Solas readjusts in his chair and leans in, urging me to go on with his calm expression.


“I believe that is a rational fear for mages – Being persecuted simply for having been born. You aren’t alone in this,” Solas says, in an attempt at reassurance.

“But how many mages can fuck with the veil?,” I utter, brandishing my marked hand, bathing us in its glow. “How many break the rules of magic? How many are within a force called The Inquisition? How many are looked to as fucking religious icon?”

Solas’ face matches mine, storm for storm.

“…and how many mages are in the crosshairs of multiple nations? Face it, if ever there was a candidate for ‘most likely to be kidnapped and burned at the stake,’ you’re lookin’ at him.”

“All the more reason to remember – to become stronger,” Solas attempts to rally.

*Remember…*

...I’m supposed to remember.
“You're right...and I gotta get stronger.”

Solas nods in agreement as Adan growls “alright, get out. You’re done healing. Go back to your own damn hut,” shooing at me, his eyes never leaving his work table.

I toss my sheets back and Solas gives me a hand, aiding in my stand. My legs feel weak. Granted, nearly three weeks in bed will do that to a person. We exit the critical care unit of a cabin and out into the mountain air.

Brisk. Cold air invigorating against my skin, blowing through my thin robes.

And as I take it in, a great many people of Haven take notice and, dropping what they’re doing, begin hooting and cheering and clapping.

Their applause stings with Envy’s last scene still seared into my mind, but I force a smile and wave to them as Solas and I descend the small stairs.

‘Up top woulda been a good spot to say something inspirational…. Crap. Too late now, I’ll do it here,’ I think, annoyed at my poor timing. So stopping at the bottom of the stairs, shaking off the cobwebs of inactivity, I boom out “PEOPLE OF HAVEN – INQUISITION. WE HAVE WHAT WE NEED TO CLOSE THE BREACH. AND SOON. WE. WILL."

Cheers erupt, but soon quiet as I raise my fist.

Looking out over those residents closest me, gauging the crowd, I roar “LOOK FORWARD TO TOMORROW – WE’LL HAVE US ONE LESS HOLE IN THE SKY.”

The people go wild, cheers, applause, hoots and hollers. And during this, as we walk onward, the good people of Haven clear a path, but just enough to let us through. There’s too many people now to give too much leeway – and pushing forward, women and men of all races, they’re reaching out to me, brushing their fingers against me as I pass – others more bold and shake my hand. Plenty of Cullen’s rank and file caught my delivery and salute.

These are good people.

And tomorrow night… many are going to die.

...can I stop that?

..........should I stop that?....

I’ve already changed a lot of stuff...

how will this blow up in my face?

Leaving the writhing crowd, we approach my former cabin, and with a pat on my shoulder, Solas vanishes into the crowd. Before I even knock my knuckles against its surface, the door opens and a child’s hand darts out, grabs ahold of mine and pulls me inside. The door slams behind me and Rasa murmurs “bout time you woke.”

She’s actually smirking. A shy one, but one all the same. Dropping to my knees on the hard floor, my patient’s gown bunching and catching awkwardly, and staring her down, I flippantly say “would’ve been hard to bug ya if I died.” She casually walks to me with her eyes cast downward, and again, surprising me, she tosses her arms around my neck and whispers “don’t actually die. You’re…,” she pauses to dramatically sigh, “okay, I guess.”
“I can work with that,” I chuckle, “now if ya don’t mind, I’m gonna need a few minutes of privacy to put on some real clothes. I feel like an idiot in this.” She pulls back, gives me a once over and rasps out “you were always an idiot,” and slinks out the door.

You’re not wrong.

Turning, I spot a bevy of “gifts” on the dresser and floor – a number of the food items have already been torn into – pilfered by Rasa. The others though, one includes new pants – as close to my denim as they could -- it’s a thick material. There’s steel toed black leather boots with steel heels. A few new button up shirts are draped over the back of the chair – and alongside those shirts, there’s a black leather cuirass and some leather pauldrons

Nice.

No cards though, no idea whom to thank. All except one package – on the dresser, its bright yellow wrapping torn open but the insides left alone; a vial of dried red leaves?

A piece of parchment is looped around the vial and slipping it off, it reads

H,

this is blood lotus – do enjoy in moderation. If anyone has earned an indulgence, it would be you.

Sincerely,

J

Blood lotus…guess it counts as drugs.

Hurriedly, I shimmy into my new pants, a dark grey button up, my new boots – I do a few squats to break it all in – and then I slip the vial into a side pocket. Right as I do so, Rasa, annoyed, storms back in, reclaiming her territory. Standing in the middle of the room, she glares at me and says “time is up. Leave.”

With a shrug, I do just that but as I saunter past her, she says “you can come back later though.”

“Thanks.” I don’t look at her as I exit.

*************

My conversation with Leliana had been short, the sum of her words consisting of “our soldiers will keep.” I’d puzzled and ruminated upon it all afternoon and well into my 6th ale at Flissa’s.

Keep what? Our soldiers will keep..wha... *gulp* what do they.....

Fingers wiggle in front of my face. “Anyone alive in there? The lights are on but….”

As I lightly slap his hand away, I spill the remainder of my ale and growl “yeah, yeah. I’m alive” as my lap soaks up the spill. Dabbing my shirt edge at it, trying to keep it from looking like I’d pissed myself, I say “just got stuff on my mind. What’s going down tomorrow, what’ll happen with
the Inquisition afterwards, and puzzling on something someone said.”

He flicks a finger in the air and as if through brewery magic, another ale appears on the table. With a low knowing laugh, he says “oh, so the usual shit? Well, wait – what does your future seeing eye see in this sea of weird?”

“Fire. A lot of fire. And then ice,” I say, not quite lying but certainly withholding the full truth. “if I can figure it out, I’ll fill ya in.”

Varric hums into his beer, taking a deep swig. Slamming his empty to the table, he wipes the foam from his stubbled face with the back of his arm. “We talking quaint little fire in the hearth and a light dusting of snow or...?”

“The exact opposite.”

“Oh,” varric says grimly but ever the one to see the silver lining, he picks up a new glass and urges “all the more reason to drink.”

What the hell did she mean, our soldiers will keep? And how the fuck am I supposed to get these people out of....out of...
....get em out by not doing anything!

I leap from my stool, eyes wide, and several of the empty glasses topple, some spilling their swill across the table and some getting on Varric. He grumbles "Oh shit!," while hastily wiping at his shirt. “Oi! Waz gottim so jumpy?” Sera asks from the bar, deep in her cups as well.

Ignoring everyone, I rush outside – the angles are off but my feet still land in their intended spots. Darkness and snowfall greet me. Torches crackle away and hiss as snowflakes make contact. Blurry, I walk out into the street and loudly whisper to the empty night “COLE!”

“Hello” he says meekly.

He must’ve been shadowing me since I left the healer’s cabin. He looks so small. And my head doesn’t want to swivel correctly so he looks lopsided. “Cole! You’ve already been in my head.”

Confused like a dog, he tilts his head to the side, but responds “yes? When Envy was trying to..”

“Yes!,” I say with a clap, my breath steaming in the night air. With a big excited drunken grin, I say “You’ve been in my head so you know what I know’ll end up going down and we can’t change that but we can change the means.” I swallow hard after that, convincing my esophagus to stay in place.

‘Listen to me!!! AfterweclosetheBreach...’ I blink tiredly at my own thought process, my drinks catching back up, ‘after... the Breach close, go around Haven and...’

“Tell people to head to the Chantry. They’ll think it’s their idea. Yes. But why not just? Oh, you’ve seen this the other way, from far away,” Cole whispers, piecing my own thoughts together.

“Exactly. And...*burp*...and make sure Krem and Roderick are there – they’ll show people the escape route. And ...make sure it’s just me and a few soldiers manning the trebuchets. Everyone else has to leave. I have to fight. I don’t know why, I can’t fucking remember but this battle is important.”

His sad little face, blank as ever, replies “Two holes ahead, in the sky and in the Herald’s head.”
“…w..what? Fuckit, look, can you get people to safety?”

Looking to the night sky, torchlight dances on his pale skin and paler eyes as he says “Yes. That would help keep the hurt away. I can do that.”

I’m too many deep and my eyes burn – I rub my forearm against them and upon dropping it, little Cole’s gone. Where to? Unknown.

‘Something bad is coming. But why... can’t I remember it?’ I question while pantomiming holding a controller in front of me, trying to mentally place myself back in front of that television screen from all those weeks ago. ‘Yeah, it’s a battle. Dorian will show up. Venitori. Then what? Why the gap? I know it ends with an avalanche though...but why?’

It’s maddening knowing most of the future but not all of it. A crucial bit. It all feels like I should know...but it’s akin to staring at heat rising from hot sands. There’s but a glimmer – an outline. And of course it makes no fucking sense. Looking about, I realize Haven is pretty empty – most are likely in bed – as I should be, but I slept for weeks. I’m not going back to that void anytime soon. But closing my eyes, I see the impending battle – courtesy of my choices, the thousand strong of Venatori have been dropped to a scant few hundred. I can see their numbers marching through the snowy mountain pass, a eerie blood red glow emanating from that enslaved horde, from their red lyrium corruption. Mindless, they throw their twisted forms at us. But up on high, there stands Calpernia and an empty space. Empty yes, but I can see the edges weren’t so seamlessly patched up. Someone or something is supposed to stand atop that peak...

But what will be there?

With a sigh, I open my eyes and head over to the Chantry steps. Planting my rear to the cold stone, I lean back and fish the more illicit items from my pocket. Uncorking the vial, I tumble a pinch of the blood lotus into my pipe and reseal it, sliding the remainder back in my pocket.

“No lighter…ughhhh,” I groan, and spot the torch blazing off to the side of the stairs. I lean over and carefully...

...carefully...

...carefully I light the small pipe on the flames, all without burning my face. Though it felt like getting too close to a bonfire. With dry eyes, I reposition myself and take an inhale. I hold it in my lungs and then breathe out through my nostrils sending muted pink trailers of smoke puffing out into the air.

‘Roar. I’m a dragon,’ I snicker a bit at the thought.

It’s slow, but I can feel that familiar sensation creeping down my spine, like marionette strings finding purchase as the torchlight and stars only seem to increase in brightness and a faint shimmer highlights all I can see.

And the air goes grey. And Haven goes gray. And the world goes gray.

All gray but for the specks of orange flitting about, never quite touching the ground. Whispers, the periphery sort, unintelligible and barely out of earshot. Paranoia? No, just the overstimulated mind. Good.
Except my left eye won’t stop twitching.
It’s more noticeable now.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d assume those whispers are coming from the orange. Maybe they’re
fireflies? Wrong, they’re wisps. But the few people, the drunks stumbling home, around Haven don’t seem to see the little lights.


Inhale.

Exhale.

Smoke.

Little vascular systems stem and vein off from the lights giving them more form, more substance. It would seem that hallucinogens and a fade marked eye allow you to see more than you should.

Off on the horizon, mountains float over mountains. And the sky, the sky phases inconsistently from murky green to starlit night. I hold a hand over my right eye and I’m left sitting awestruck – with but a bit of chemical persuasion, my lightning’d left eye can actually see through the mortal folds, through slivers of the veil and into the beyond. The wisps, they’re that no longer, but full fledged forms ghosting about, mimicking the people of Haven. This place…this place has drawn more than demons. It’s drawn the denizens of the fade – the wanderers, the wonderers, the curious. I know the town to be asleep but through this eye, it’s as alive as ever and bursting with light.

This is important – and they know it.

I know it.

Soon, the true inhabitants of Haven will know it.

I close my left to open my right and the world of the fade is gone, replaced by the physical, the mundane…well, as mundane as the waking world can be with drugs in your bloodstream. The ground is still breathing and everything has that shimmering outline. I blink in rapid succession and my head goes reeling. Bad choice. My esophagus constricts and next thing I know, I’m vomiting my earlier ales all over the Chantry steps. Dizzy, I close both eyes and lean back against the steps, pressing my head to the cool stone.

*********

Birds chirping, carts wheeling by, the murmuring of revered mothers….

That’s what I wake to. That flock is but a scant few feet from me.

With my eyes closed, I grumble out “my apologies. Had one too many last night. Came here to pray to the Maker.”

It wasn’t my best idea ever to sleep on stone steps – my body feels like it lost a fight with a bus. Through aches and pains, I prop myself up and force my eyes open against the late morning sunlight.

“Ow”

A gentle hand touches my arm – blinded, I try to see whom it belongs to.

“I doubt you were praying but I won’t tell,” says a warm voice
Mother Giselle. My vision focuses and there she is, helping me to my feet. Trying to keep my hangover to a minimum, I whisper diplomatically “I sure appreciate that. And this. And what you’ll likely say next.”

She smiles at me as we walk, her arms looped through mine, to a spot to the side of the Chantry where an old stone slab bench sits in the shade of a pine. I plop down onto the seat and resting my elbows on my knees, I brace my face in my hands. “Today will go well. You will seal the Breach. I have faith.”

With a half covered face and a slight grimace, I whisper “not worried about that. Definitely gonna close that sucker. Just had a few too many. A pre-celebration if ya will.”

She hums with a scolding look in her eye before taking her leave. She’s got good instincts and she clearly knows I wasn’t doing that – I was medicating.

Aaaaand another person to be careful around. I’ve gotta stop discounting and underestimating people.

I grab a handful of snow off the bench and mash it into my face, rubbing vigorously and waking myself up and then stare at my left hand. “Ya ready for this?”

It pulses twice, a yes”

“If I die later today, what happens to you?”

No response. No pulse – just the steady glow of green.

“Right, only yes or no…. Are you fine if I die?”

It pulses once, heavy.

“Alright. Well, try not to fret. Got no intention of dying.”

‘...says everyone before they do,’ I twist my mouth at the thought and bracing myself, rise to my feet – time to get back home and throw whatever leather bits on that I can.

And eat.

And…maybe a last smoke.

***********

It’s odd being the center of attention.

More odd still when you’re standing under a massive angry hole in the sky and people are still focused on you – like you’re the weird one.

You’re the atypical one.

And more so when you’re surrounded on all sides in the crater of the Conclave explosion.

Cassandra and Solas are commanding everyone on where to stand – the ranks are still filing in to fill out this horrible stadium. My leather armor is tight around my chest; I should’ve been wearing
it all yesterday to at least get used to it. The boots, unworn, are digging into the lower parts of my calves.

The sound of heavy boots marching thunders off the walls – it’s deafening. And the Breach looks all the more ravenous from this spot – dead center, staring at The hellmouth. Because of the depths of this hole, the Breach edges stretch beyond the rises and it looks as if the waking world and fade have become one.

And right before me is the world tear – the first rift breathing and fluctuating like a sleeping beast.

The mark buzzes anxiously as I stare at that rip.

Beyond that, the earth isn’t soft like it’d been pulverized by the blast – it’s rigid like pumice long after a volcanic eruption and with these new boots, I can’t risk shuffling in place lest I lose my footing...although I’ve heavy steel heels to keep me grounded. It’s all slick – damp with mountain air. And damp as it may be, it all still reeks of crisp ozone.

“It is time” jolts me back to the now as Cassandra touches my arm. I nod in response.

She turns away from me and cries out “TEMPLARS!” The masses of the order stand at attention, swords drawn, and all stare at me. Our resident magic expert steps forward with his staff extended; he commands “FOCUS PAST THE HERALD; LET HIS WILL DRAW FROM YOU!”

In unison, the Templars raise their swords, then kneeling, drive the tips into the stone and on many, a blue shimmer – the lyrium consumed – envelopes them.

Focusing on each and everyone of them, new power surges into me, through me, and into the mark – it burns and blazes with light, taking on a new aura, long reaching like a solar flare. The green blazes and pulses in response to the first rift’s energy and stepping to the mound, I breathe deep and throw my fist forward. Tendrils snap together, energy binding, and my mark’s light ignites all the way up my arm, shoulder, neck and into my eye. Flesh sizzles, not meant to be a conduit for such power. It feels like someone is clawing at my teeth from the inside and my gums bleed. The roar of energy only grows, thundering. Or it’s the blood rushing in my ears. My head is in a vice grip, a crushing squeeze presses at me from all sides – the hopes and fears made manifest of all that followed me here today.

The eyes of all worlds are on me this day.

Click.

The rift breaks before I can. Waves of light burst forth, disintegrating the red lyrium growths and blowing people off their feet like dominos.

Click.

Then a secondary burst, and I’m forced to my knees as the first rift detonates, exploding upward in a chain reaction.

Up.

Up.

And up into the Breach.

The big bastard starts swallowing itself, lips pulling closed and with a mighty roar, it slams shut.
Silence.

The whole world waits with baited breath, unable to believe what they’ve seen.

And the quiet breaks.

So many cheers, it’s all a cacophony to me – can’t make out one word. Tearing my eyes from the absence of the Breach, I spot Cassandra and a tired smile passes between us. I go to rise but my legs give out. Teeth gritting, my eyes wide in disbelief. She sees this and approaches but my mark hums and gives me just enough strength to jump to my feet, reinvigorated. “Thanks for the boost,” I say under my breath while waving a hand at Cassandra who throws her arm around my waist to keep me standing.

Looking out over the people, she yells “you have done it. This..this is all thanks to you” so I can hear over the din of cheers and applause and general merriment.

‘Get out of my head, Envy,’ I think with gritted teeth and crack my neck with a slow twist, and push myself back to reality. Looking down at the top of her head, I say back “you started it. I just helped a little.”

Taking a second to process what I said, making sure she didn’t hear incorrectly, she looks up at me and with arched eyebrows, says “you discount your role in this…but thank you.”

“You’re blushing,” I say with a smirk.

“Ugh, I am not,” she scoffs.

Looking out and away, I whisper “no joke. You’re beautiful,” dropping the tease.

She goes quiet but her posture changes – she’s slightly more relaxed as she helps me walk past the throngs of exuberant people, all smiling and cheering at us. Solas arrives at our side as we push through the crowd and he too claps me on the arm. I look to him and he’s actually smiling as he says “congratulations are in order.”

“Let’s get a drink and talk magic! Sound good?,” I yell back at which he nods and replies "Of course" through a huge grin and falls back a step to ease his way through the crowd in my wake...

****

The return is arduous but pleasant – I’m thankful to the mark for it giving me that little bit extra I needed to walk. Were it not for what I know about tonight, my mood might actually be infected by those around me. Most of these faces I’ve never even seen. But they’ve all seen mine.

Or heard of mine. Then again, can’t be too hard to notice me anymore – half horns, scars, faded left eye. Or the green mark. Probably that.

Finally, we get to the main gates and people are already dancing and partying – still hours to go till sunset. Cassandra releases me and speaks up at my ear, over the roar of celebration “take the evening off – I will see you in the war room tomorrow. We’ll decide then what to do next.”

I nod in agreement while ‘tomorrow won’t come for Haven’ fires through my head; she departs and
enters the camp, quickly disappearing amongst the masses. And so, I push onward and up to the cabin, opening the door with no hesitation and closing it shut behind me. Kinda hard to be in a good mood when anxiety is chewing away at you regarding the survival odds for everyone tonight.

“It’s closed? I heard thunder and the house shook,” Rasa asks from a darkened corner, not looking up from a book.

“Yep,” slips from my mouth while thinking ‘how can she be so blasé about this shit?’

“Don’t seem happy about it,” she rasps bluntly.

“Worried about what’s next. That’s it. Whatcha reading?”

Ignoring my question about her reading material, she responds with “that’s why a pale boy told me to leave? Got something to do with what’s next?”

*She remembers him? Guess he wants her to.*

“Yep,” I sigh out and my shoulders sag. She’d just been getting used to this place – unfair she has to lose it so soon.

“So where are we heading?,” she asks while planting a finger on a spot on the page and looks to me; she’s trying to read me now.

“Can’t say. It’s bigger though. Know that.”

Seemingly content with my answer, she bobs her head, snags a bag from underneath the messy bedsheets, and heads to the door. “Fine. I’ll head over now. It’s in the Chantry though?”

“Yep. Keep it to yourself for now?”

No goodbye, she exits and leaves me in this darkened cabin, once my own. But she had made it into her home – to see her dismiss it all so easily, it was stunning to see her leave like that. That’s all.
Night has fallen. Standing on a rise and sipping at my ale, it’s apparent that the partying has diminished but not stopped entirely. It would seem that Cole’s whispers weren’t enough for some thick-headed people.

I’m only drinking to waste time, to have anything to do in this calm before the storm. And truly, I feel hollow inside, like the GAME OVER is flashing, hammering at my attention to tell me I lose.

And I can’t stop scanning that pass for any sort of light.

Nothing.
Nothing.
More Nothing.
Nothing.

_Wait_

A flicker.

It floats in the night off on the horizon.

Then ten.

Then fifty. I pound the remainder of my drink and toss the glass as I drop off the ledge and head towards the main gates.

CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG the bells ring out in alert and people stop in stunned silence. This was their victory, their celebration. Surely any dismissal or extinguishing of that can’t be a truth.

But it is.

And while it may not have sunken in yet, everyone scatters as silence turns to yells. Over a hundred flames now float down those hills. Orders are barked and the garrison readies themselves. Josephine and Cullen are arguing over what banner the invaders march under.

Fire explodes outside the gates and the doors buckle. “IF SOMEONE COULD OPEN THIS, I’D APPRECIATE IT!,” a voice yells in annoyance from the other side. Without a care, I knock the bar off the gates and haul one door open – there stands Dorian Pavus, a mage most snarky, encircled by the remains of those he’d just destroyed.

“Dorian, head to the Chantry. All of you, head to the Chantry,” I loudly, but slowly, command.

“You know my name? Im flattered,” Dorian says and bows low with an upward tilt of his chin, maintaining eye contact.

“I repeat – everyone head for the Chantry,” and then dropping volume, I say “just saw this part.” Cassandra, within earshot, shoots me a look of anger. “No, we cannot abandon this fight. We must
Dorian flashes a look at all of us and shuffles past to join us on the inside.

“Can’t. it’s just me and the people already at the Trebuchets. Do a final sweep and get to the Chantry. Krem and Roderick will know more,” I say wearily, the reality of this hitting me.

“Hunter?,” Cullen asks in a low tone, his eyebrows knit together.

Lying, I mutter “stay? You die. You leave, you live. Saw this. It’s the only way,” while staring out through the gates at the growing enemy horde. Cullen, Leliana, Josephine, Cassandra, Blackwall, Varric, Solas, they doubt me, it’s written on their faces – but they hurry off to minimize damage. With a tweak of his mustache, Dorian says “I came all this way – be a shame if we all died,” and struts off to help.

Varric, Solas, Cassandra, and Blackwall remain; the latter of which strokes at his beard and grumbles out “I’ve seen you pull off some downright strange things. You tell me that you can do this – By the Maker, I’ll believe it.” He sniffs and steps away, unsheathing his sword at he stumps off to do his protective sweep. Cassandra glares at me, her eyes narrowed in defiance and she orders “you cannot do this alone. I will ensure the people get to the Chantry but I will return. Wait. Here,” putting extra emphasis on the last of her words.

Solas and Varric exchange a look as she runs off and then, the dwarf asks “….you sure about this? Historically speaking, the one doesn’t get very far against the thousand,” as he nervously eyes Bianca and tests her line slack with a pluck.

“With the exception of Hawke.”

“Sure, Hawke was an exception,” he says, no longer fiddling with Bianca.

Solas, with concern twisting his expression, questions “I must agree with the dwarf. Are you absolutely...”


Varric, ever the keen listener, looks from Bianca to me with a concerned tilt of his neck, his eyes telling me all he needs to – ‘those who stay?’

“What if we?...you could tell us exactly where we need to be on the battlefield to” Solas tries to get out before I place my a hand on his shoulder and nudge him, saying “I don't know why, but this chapter is about me. Ya gotta get going.”

Hesitant, they stay a beat, certain I’ll change my mind – but shaking my head, I turn away and head out the gates. Yelling back over my shoulder, I tell them “don’t let Cassandra...don’t let anyone come after me.”

The corrupted horde is still marching on Haven, a mile out now. And remembering a final person I’m meant to save, I walk to the forge and yell “Harritt – grab your shit and get to the Chantry. Now.” He comes flying out of his forge-adjacent cabin, arms wrapped about anything he could grab worth keeping and jogs through the gates.

That was easier. No timer.

The forge is still hot, molten metal boils within.
An idea?

My rage, my fury – I won’t go gently into my grave – I breathe heavy and will my heart beat faster; I’ve gotta get my blood racing.

“I. Can’t. DIE. Not now. NOT AFTER ALL THIS. Not here,” I hiss in hate. I channel that hate into my veins – the circulation races – sweat drips from my skin – and then, the acidity, my insides burn. The violet awakens and my veins ignite beneath my flesh – everything exposed burgeons with light.

FIRE.

Only now I know.

And I’ll do this right.

Reaching out, with invisible fingers, my grasp extended, I tear into the forge and crack it open like an egg, molten metal spilling through the breaks – but with my ghostly reach, I hold the blazing liquid aloft. And willing my violet into the hold, it burns all the hotter. My fury, my anticipated death, my fire – they’re all the more empowering as I turn to face the masses. My body blazes with heat and the steel of my boots hisses at the snow as steam gusts about me.

Shadows move among the trees.

The first wave arrives, some twenty invaders.

“Welcome,” fear and fury discolor my words turning them metallic and grating.

Mindless, these mages, they rush magic attacks with spell books in one hand and and staves brandished in the other – in unison, they cast their red corruption bolts.

Adrenaline flows freely, the scene slows, the incoming attack seems to hold still – I breathe deep, and whisper “now.”

With a sweeping arc of my fists, I hurl the hovering liquid metal at the enemy group, snuffing out their fire spells as it tears past, breaking their concentration – faster than they can truly react – and with a twist of my hand, it detonates and washes over them, ensnaring all in web of molten metal. Flesh sears and boils and all too soon, these foes are down, screaming and gurgling in pain.

Ignoring their cries of anguish and suffering, I step over them and await the next wave. All but one, I kick his book from his grip and heel stomp him in the mouth.

But then, looking up to ready for the next attack, I spy a woman in distance. On a high rise, a human woman stands in charge of the forces.

“Calpernia.”

I know her.

But beside her stands a towering form – its mottled skin a canvas stretched over bone and red lyrium.

Everything skips -- a migraine pierces my skull, threatening to split me in two. The air is punched from my lungs.

He’s nothing, he’s negative space.
He’s back, his eyes bore into mine even at that distance. My vision fades in and out, I can’t concentrate. Static seeps in.

Remember

My gums bleed from the pressure in my skull. I clutch at my head to keep it from detonating while screaming. I catch myself from falling.

‘….Coryp….phee….’

Gritting my teeth together, I finish the thought.

‘Corypheussss.’

The imagined stitches burst loose and reality unfolds – the splitting migraine dulls and my vision returns. I’m surrounded by corpses, each stripped of flesh, their bloodied masses still steaming against the snow and cold.

Strewn about my feet is the pile of the stolen skins.

And I have dozens of cuts and bruises crisscrossing my arms.

“How?!”

Genuine panic roots itself in my chest – “when did they…no? What? How did I?..”

Both hands are radiating the black miasma – and within it on my left, the mark’s glow cuts through the dark fog like a lighthouse. The fog spills down and spreads along the ground, tendrils reaching, hunting for a toy.

This isn’t me – this is unbound.

“No! I need control… need control,” I angrily hiss but the miasma pours from my pores, an unending tap. Outward, the black spreads, pooling and breathing.

Living death.

More foes break the rise and they hurl themselves at me with red lyrium jutting from their flesh. But they move like insects to the Venus fly trap – my magic lies in waiting, and as soon as they cross its shade, flesh liquifies from their bones as it snaps closed around them, leaving naught but lyrium skeletons with mouths agape in terror. No screams. No time.

Static, my brain fragments again, only this time, coming to, I remember….

…I remember what’s next – I’m supposed to reposition a trebuchet and fire it at the mountain behind Haven, burying us.

I’m supposed to meet that old Tevinter monstrosity?

Have to hurry – mana fading fast.

With staggered steps, I retreat back within the gates and make my way through the fenced in path. And therein lies the beauty – my very own siege engine.

“Forgot…I’d have..to..use you..on us,” I huff out while furiously cranking at its turning mechanism. The wood heaves and groans as the weight shifts.

“Come on! C’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon!” I yell faster and faster at the war machine, anything to
hurry it along. And my impatience pays off – the 180 is fast enough and the machine sits, ready to launch. I go to reach for the release lever but a world-shattering roar akin to metal on metal from overhead forces me to my knees and I clutch to protect my precious eardrums.

*PLEASE LET THERE BE A SAVE FILE!*

The ground shakes.

An alizarin inferno lights up the area up around us.

My insides knot – my breath goes still.

Eyes go wide.

Behind me stands the rotting, winged behemoth – his personal blighted dragon. Its snarl splinters the air between us.

“ENOUGH,” demands the ancient Magister, deep and reverberating, as he glides into the ring of fire with deadened eyes – his dragon goes silent immediately as sinister magic looses itself from its master.

“Pretender. You toy with forces beyond your ken no more.”

*Have to keep him distracted…*  
*…stick to the script.*

Feigning confidence and trying to ignore the pain wracking my body, I defiantly spit “ya don’t scare me. You’re just one more thing I have to break. Close enough to the script.”

*Words mortals often hurl at the darkness. Once they were mine. They are always lies. Know me; know what you have pretended to be.* With a tilt of his jagged head, he states “Exalt the Elder One, the will that is Corypheus.”

With an ugly sneer, he demands “You will kneel,” and jabs a taloned finger at me. Wincing, “Hahahahahehe,” slips from me; I can’t help it. ”You're...hahaha, you will always fail!”

“You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not.” Holding his Foci aloft, it pulses with red magics and lashes out. “I am here for your anchor. The process of removing it begins…now,” he states and throws his hand forward yet again, magics erupting. He draws upon my mark; the anchor vibrates my entire arm, shaking me to my core with pain, and begins dragging me across the scorched earth – my heels scrape and dig in but to no avail. It feels like my hand is gonna shake right off my wrist.

Both pieces of our Elven magic flares wildly – my green against his red.

“It is your fault, Herald. You interrupted a ritual years in the planning and instead of dying, you stole its purpose. I do not know how you survived but what marks you as touched, what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens,” and slamming his fist closed, his magic crushes over mine and slams me to my knees.

His magic slithers through me.
“And you used the anchor to undo my work. The gall,” he says, malice dripping from his every word as his dragon paces and hisses behind me.

Angry and in pain, clutching at my mark, I hiss back “You stole from the graves of elves and claim superiority? You. Know. Nothing.”

A spark of rage ignites in his milky eyes and he lunges at me, hoisting me off the ground by my wrist, “I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the Old Gods of the empire in person. I found only chaos and corruption, dead whispers. For a thousand years I was confused – no more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own, to champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world. Beg that I succeed for I’ve seen the throne of the gods and…it…was…empty.”

“I DON’T FUCKING CARE!”

At this, he twists and hurls me through the air, smashing me against my trebuchet – my head strikes hard against the woodwork and I taste more blood.

And my mark won’t calm, it’s screaming with green.

In apparent frustration, Corypheus exclaims “The anchor is permanent! You have spoiled it with your stumbling…” Instead of reaching for a weapon, I swing wide and punch the release lever. I can’t handle anymore of his talk.

*I can’t wait for some signal that may never come.*

*I have to act.*

*I have to survive.*

The pins release, the weight drops and chains whip their haul; the machine shudders as it sends its cargo soaring – hundreds of pounds of explosives fly trough air. For but a moment, we three all stare at the flying mass and thunder cracks as it strikes the peak. Ice and snow roar out in angry awakening. I stagger to my feet and limp away – behind me the dragon screams its rage and sweeps Corypheus into its folds before the crushing white wave swallows them both.

*I’m not moving fast enough.*

*I’m gonna die.*

*Gonna die.*

The wall of ice railroads me from behind and drives me forward and down. I twist beneath the white, suffocating, crushing, and my head strikes rock.
Shallow breathing.

Everything hurts.

And throbs.

Dehydrated.

My joints creak and pop as I reach to gingerly touch at my scalp.

Pain flares.

“Ahhhh!,” I wince and pull my hand back with brightly bloodied fingertips – there’s an enormous welt just behind my horns, bruising and swelling. Likely have a concussion.

I open my eyes, barely – might have two black eyes – and from what I can see in this abysmal lighting, there’s a darkened hole with broken wooden slats up above with snow tightly packed in from the avalanche.

I swallow a few times, and roll to my side and grabbing at a stalagmite, I pull myself up.

Shakily.

I’m covered in splinters, bruises, and cuts. Fortunately, my cuirass took the brunt of several stabs.

“That’s just the outside…” I groan out.

Shallow breaths, I hold myself up and hesitantly pull my left hand from the rock – staring at the anchor, I ask “ya good?”

It’s an unending torrent of green but it manages to pulse brighter just twice, blinding me some.

“Cool. Let’s…keep on…not dying.” I slur some while rubbing my eyes and inch forward, one step at a time, bracing myself with every step. The anchor lights my way – bright green illuminates all.

Further into the mine.

Water drips and my steps echo through these dusty shafts.

Cold cuts through everything.

Drip.
Shuffle.
Drip.
Step.
Drip drip.
Step.

I think I’ve got the hang of this walking thing.

I’m still wincing with every step but I’m not nearly passing out anymore.

Screams and wails echo through the caves.
Demons lie ahead. In too much pain to feel true concern, I keep slow stepping until I’m in the cavernous intersection.

The demons, they don’t notice me, not yet.

Even with my fadelight torch.

Like they’re still confused from the shutting of the Breach.

Bracing against the threshold, I stick my left hand out and snap my fingers – a rift snaps open and devours the demons, slamming shut the second they evaporate. It’s an attack avoided. This is good. But that was the last vestiges of my mana – I’m gonna have to weather the storm as….

…Just myself.

Onward I shuffle.

And further on.

****

The howls of winter reach my ears, I’m nearing the entrance.

Step.

Another step.

Further and more.

Bleak blizzard light filters in through the mine’s opening – but in that opening stands another shadow. Unlike the other two before it, this one is calm; it simply stands and watches.

I know the drill now – I press forward and walk right into the shade, absorbing it as I pass through.

‘Remember,’ is all that flashes through my mind and then it’s gone.

“you mean Corypheus wasn’t all of it?,” I shout in disbelief and clutch at my throbbing skull.

“Fuuuuuuuck!,” I groan, dismayed.

With that, I huff, steeling myself as I march out into that white.

The hell else am I supposed to remember?

Snow pelts me at high speeds and wolves howl from afar. In the distance, I spot tiny fires and begin my trek to those.

Fuck it’s cold.

So..cold...

With hunched shoulders and arms crossed, I march onward. While the ice stings, the cold does feel good against my bruised face and welts.
The cold is no longer soothing nor is it enjoyable.
It's a miserable thief.
Passing trees, following the distant embers, I keep up my march against the blizzard.
My breath is cold – I’m losing heat.

****

My grey skin is going paler and I can’t keep track of how long I’ve been shivering. The blizzard let up about an hour ago and I’m trudging through knee deep snow, every step growing heavier than the last.
My lids are heavy.
My head is heavy.
My chest is heavy.
My feet drag.
No more fires to follow.
Shallow breaths.
Higher I push.
My teeth can’t stop chattering.
Can’t breathe. Tears flow freely but freeze against my face.
My vision fades.
Step.
Step.
Step.
Step.
I stumble and hit stone, sliding down it to my knees.

*Here it ends.*

A blurred form rushes to my side, it’s all shades of black and grey to me.

“Hel-hell…lo……de..death,” I stutter out against the cold.

“HE’S OVER HERE!!!” barks the blur. Something wraps around me.

I’m just going to close my eyes.

Just for a moment.

They’re so heavy…

***************

Winds whip about, slapping at tent flaps. I can actually feel my extremities again.

My eyes creak open. Fortunately the swelling has gone down some. I’m in a tent on an impromptu cot bundled in blankets and furs and I stir lightly to adjust the weight.

“The Commander was keeping watch in the pass. He’s the one who found you,” whispers Mother Giselle at my side, sitting with her hands folded in her lap.

From beyond the tent, an argument ensues amongst the small council.

“What would you have me tell them. This isn’t what we asked them to do. We need a consensus or we have nothing.” “Please, we must use reason. Without the infrastructure of the Inquisition, we’re hobbled.” “That can’t come from nowhere!” “She didn’t say it could!” “Enough! This is getting us nowhere.” “Well we agree on that much!” argue each of the heads of the Inquisition.


“Shhhh, you need rest,” whispers Giselle.

“But could they shut up?,” I ask.
“They have the luxury to panic, thanks to you. The enemy could not follow and with time to doubt, we turn to blame. Infighting may threaten as much as this Corypheus,” the revered mother elaborates. With verbal groans and twinges of pain, I push myself into an upright position on the cot.

Stone faced, I flatly say “I’m not immortal. Pretty sure I didn’t die. Corypheus is an idiot. Just... just go sing your song and rally the people.”

Mother Giselle looks shocked, as if I read her thoughts but she then smiles another of her knowing smiles. “I believe I have just the thing.” Standing straight, she slips from the tent and begins her chorus.

“Shadows faaaaaall...”

”And hope has flehhhhhd.”

“Steel your heeeearth. The dawn will come…”

Ignoring the song, I throw a blanket around my shoulders and slip out the back of my tent while I can, limping out into the cold and around the outside of the camp. Quietly, I move from tent to tent as best I can and make my way to the camp's edge, the drop. A long dead torch stands at the precipice, a lone would-be beacon against the cold and bleak.

Snow crunches from behind – approaching light footsteps.

“A word?,” Solas asks, his voice tired and stressed. At my nod, he moves to my side to stare out over the frozen teeth of the surrounding mountains. Planting his staff in the snow, he flicks his wrist and ignites the memory of flame in the lonesome torch – pale aqua light licks at the darkness. “A wise woman, worth heeding. Her kind understands the moments that unite a cause. Or fracture it.”

Another breath, a pause, and Solas changes topic, saying “the orb Corypheus carries, the power he used against you...it is Elven.”

To tired for anything else, I shrug and nod.

“Corypheus used the orb to open the Breach. Unlocking it must have caused the explosion that destroyed the Conclave,” he continues on to say “I do not yet know how Corypheus survived... nor am I certain how people will react when they learn of the orb’s origin.”

Monotonous, I state “Poorly would be my guess.....people are scared and frantic creatures. So we unite them against a common enemy – the undying magister seems good enough. That should keep their attention off the elves.”

Looking sternly at the horizon, with his hands clasped firmly behind his back, Solas says “yes.....and there are steps we can take to see to such...by attacking the Inquisition, Corypheus has changed it. Changed you. Scout to the North, be their guide...there is a place that waits for a force to hold it. There is a place where the Inquisition can build...grow...”

I whisper “Skyhold” under my breath and I catch Solas flash me a look from his periphery.
Home on High

The pilgrimage was long and the stores grew low. They rallied behind me and followed deep into the mountains – the pitfalls and peaks, dangerous and frigid. Some didn’t make the journey – Roderick among them. I’m told he didn’t die of a stabbing this time, instead he caught pneumonia and passed in his sleep, peacefully. But Cole had told me that Roderick apologized while feverish, apologized for not believing in me. Guess no matter the changes, the path for some stays the same. For Roderick, he was always destined to die while leading people to safety. I may not have liked the man but I’m glad it was relatively painless for him in the end.

But with the passing of days, doubt began to take root – to chew at some.

Fortunately for most, their faith, whatever that means, sees them through.

Cresting that final peak, witnessing Skyhold in person, my eyes water up. Not from pain, nor the biting winds – they do so from awe. The fortress is enormous; Haven in its entirety could’ve fit several times over inside it. Weathered walls and towers jut from the mountaintop – it stands taller than the birds dare to fly – a marvel of engineering from ages past with waterfalls flowing freely down a of couple sides.

*Magic and Engineering. Absolutely gorgeous.*

****

From that frozen peak, it had taken another several hours to reach Skyhold’s gates.

But that was days ago – now I’m nestled on the inside, resting against a railing on an upper walkway overlooking the courtyards, just taking it all in. There’s breaks and collapses, this palatial space in in need of serious repair but that doesn’t detract from its wonder, it’s glory.

The influx of people seems unending.

*Where the hell are we fitting them all?*

It’s been a week since awakening in the camp after fighting Corypheus, since the sing along, since we marched blindly into the mountains and for Skyhold. I’m still feeling the bruises and contusions of the attack and escape. So it doesn’t help me any when a tiny fist punches me in the thigh.

Groaning in minor pain, I brace against the railing and hiss “ahhwhatthefuck?!” I glare at my small attacker and she glares back and shouts “stop dying.”

While gritting my teeth, I tussle her hair and she squirms to avoid it – too late though, her black mop is even more of a mess now, actually revealing her pointed ears. Frantically, she pats her hair back down and covers them up.

“Gotta ask, why do ya cover up your ears?.” I ask, trying to change the subject from my deaths.

Anger phasing out to annoyance, she rasps out “don’t want elf-hunters to take em.”
A flicker of rage, my eyebrows knit together and I clutch at the bridge of my nose.

“We always hid our ears. Even when we got to the Conclave,” she whispers, her face going grim. A pang of guilt stabs through my anger and into my gut – she clearly lost someone in the blast and I just reminded her of that.

You’re an asshole, Hunter.

“Well, someone tries to get your ears… I’ll rip theirs off.”

She perks up at that and furrowing her eyebrows, she exclaims “because we’re family now,” and driving another punch to my bruised leg, bites “so STOP dying!” and storms off.

I’m left standing there, gritting my teeth.

“I actually agree with the child,” Cassandra voices from behind, "You should stop dying. You're much too valuable."

Always one to seize the opportunity to flirt back, I reply "you're valuable" through a bruised grin.

Smooth

After a pause, nonreactive to my response, she says “please, walk with me.”

“You’ll have to go slow if ya want me to keep up.”

“You are still in pain?,” she asks at which point, I bare my arms, showing off the watercolor patterns of purples, greens, and browns. The discoloration is enough to make even the Seeker grimace but even still, she stresses “please. Join me.”

With her help, we walk the walls, slowly descending back to the courtyard. Gesturing out to the crowds, she says “Skyhold is becoming a pilgrimage. If word has reached the people, it will have reached the Elder One.”

We take winding paths and sidestep the crowds. We reach a staircase and she offers her arm, which I gladly accept and helping me up the steps, she explains “we have the walls and numbers to put up a fight here, but…this threat is beyond what we anticipated. But we now know what allowed you to stand against Corypheus, what drew him to you.”

Glancing at my left, the anchor, my mark, it hums peacefully and I say “yup. With what I’ve got, I’d say we have his attention.”

“There is more,” she adds and we continue walking the paths and through brush, “your decisions let us heal the sky. Your determination brought us out of Haven. You are the creature’s rival because of what you did…and we know it………all of us.”

Still we climb the steps and she says “the Inquisition requires a leader – the one who has already been leading it,” finishing right as we reach the top where Leliana stands with a great sword with dragon wings and a serpentine guard held across both hands.

The walk had taken my mind off of what was supposed to happen and I’m left stunned, standing in shock of what she means. A hush falls over the crowd below and the people all look to me, to listen.

“You,” she says softly.
My heartbeat stutters.

“Uh...Vashoth. Mage. Stranger. Ya sure you want me for that?,” I whisper the question.

“I would be terrified giving this power to anyone but I believe it is the only way. They’ll follow you; to them, being so different shows how far you’ve risen. How it must have been by Andraste’s hand. What it means to you, how you lead us, that is for you alone to determine,” she finishes and Leliana smirks beneath her hood.

“Still though, ya sure?”

With a sigh of exasperation, our Seeker says “I believe this is the only path before us. There would be no Inquisition without you. Again, how you serve, how you lead, that must be yours to decide.”

Nodding slightly and I narrow my eyes in consternation but Leliana whispers “take it already.”

Cassandra releases me and I take the sword up with one hand.

‘Nope! Too heavy,’ flashes through my head as a vein bulges in my neck and my wrist twinges with pain. Quickly, I shift to holding it with two hands and drive it point first into the ledge, yelling with all the energy I have remaining “Corypheus seeks to destroy this world and all who live in it. Let’s show the darkness that we fight back!”

“Wherever you lead us,”Cassandra says from behind me before yelling out “HAVE THE PEOPLE BEEN TOLD?!”

I spot Josephine, her golden dress a bright splash amongst the crowd – Cullen stands at her side as she cries out “THEY HAVE. AND SOON THE WORLD.”

“COMMANDER, WILL THEY FOLLOW?,” our Seeker demands the question.

At this, Cullen whips about and shaking his fists to crowd, demands “INQUISITION! WILL YOU FOLLOW?!?”

The people erupt in cheers and screams, raising their fists to the sky. Cullen roars over them “WILL. YOU. FIGHT?!”

The people yell harder and press even more into the courtyard.

“WILL. WE. TRIUMPH?!,” our Commander booms, and unsheathing his sword, thrusts it into the air, whipping about to face me once more, roaring “YOUR LEADER. YOUR HERALD. YOUR INQUISITOR!”

Drawing the sword from the stone, I sweep it wide and heft it overhead, using both hands to hold it pointing to the heavens. The crowd erupts...

..Envy flashes through my mind for just a second. My eye twitches and my tongue retreats but I force that sensation down.

You’re more than Envy could ever be. Remember that.
The throne room is in serious disrepair – half the balcony has collapsed and a thick coat of dust sits on everything in the room. The ceiling looks like one big spiderweb. Pillars have cracked and chunks of stone litter the floor while ancient curtains hang in perpetual rot; light trickles through the copious tears and holes.

And with nowhere better, I’m propped up along the wall near the main door, legs stretched out over the stone floor.

“Inquisitor? Sounds weird right?,” I ask my anchor, “and Inquisitor Hunter sounds worse.”

No response, it just consistently buzzes.

Interrupting my one sided conversation, the Inquisition council-turned-advisors file into the room past me and look about at the general disarray of it all.

Cullen, somewhat irate, says “so this is where it begins” to which Leliana responds “it began in the courtyard. This is where we turn that promise into action.”

Sweet Josephine chimes in “but what do we do? We know nothing about this corypheus except that he wanted your mark,” and all eyes fall on me.

Refusing to stand, still weary from my numerous injuries, I say “so…anyone know where he got a dragon?” It’s grating at me, this apparent gap in my knowledge – every time I mull it over, ‘remember’ flashes in my skull like a warning light.

But I can’t grasp it.

I know who Corypheus is now.

I already knew about the Foci… it was just him and his dragon that were erased from my memories…

I hope that was all.

Why didn’t I remember Corypheus – why did I remember him but nothing about him?

What else is missing? What do I need to remember?

And the fucking dragon….why is the dragon...

Cullen and Josephine share a look but Leliana cuts in, saying “so far as we can tell, it’s not an archdemon. There has been no darkspawn movement.”

Cullen states the obvious “whatever it is, it’s dangerous. Commanding such a creature gives corypheus an advantage we can’t ignore.”

“Okay…hmmm. Tevinter allying with him?,” I ask with a shrug.

Cullen says “I get the feeling that we’re dealing with extremists; not the true vanguard of an invasion.”

Josephine bobs while reading from her parchment “it would make no sense for the Archon to back this Corypheus, though he would likely shed no tears if the South fell to chaos. I’m certain,” she
finishes with the flick of her quill and an eye roll.

“What we do know, is the plot our scouts uncovered in Therinfall after your fight with the Lord Seeker imposter – there’s to be an assassination attempt on Empress Celine,” our Spymaster explains to which Josephine whispers “imagine the chaos her death would cause…with his army…”

Glaring hard at a hole in the ceiling, Cullen adds on “…an army he’s growing. Envy’s plans boasted of a massive force of demons.”

With a trickle of reverence entering her voice, Jo says “god or no god, corypheus could conquer the entire south of Thedas.”

With a heavy sigh, Leliana says what we’re all thinking, “I’d feel better if we knew more about what we were dealing with.”

Clearing his throat in the doorway to get our attention, Varric edges in “Sooo, Inquisitor…got someone here who might be able to help....you should meet...just...meet me out on the battlements. Just you. Yeah,” and fidgeting a little, wary of Cassandra overhearing somehow, he slips back out into the courtyard.

With arms crossed and a smirk, our Spymaster glibly says “if he has brought who I think he has, Cassandra is going to kill him.”

Josephine quirks an eyebrow, asking “who?”

In unison, Leliana, Cullen, and I say “Hawke,” at which Josephine’s eyes go wide, and with an unintelligible whisper to herself, she frantically jots at her parchment board and rushes from the room.

“Guess I should go see about a legend”

Looking after our Ambassador, Leliana says “I suppose you should.”

I slide up the wall until I’m standing and go to head out into the garden – the path should be more isolated – but as I cross the threshold, Leliana chimes in “oh and Inquisitor, do tell her I said hello.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, waving back at her over my shoulder.

Leaving those two in the moldering throne room behind, I step out into the neglected garden – vines run rampant up the columns and walls, trying what they can to choke life from the stone. Grass stands tall – were it not for the cold, creatures would be lurking within. Besides that, there is a somewhat ominous tone to this garden – arrows and bolts are embedded in the stones at random. Some great fight happened here once upon a time.

‘Can’t wait for this to be thriving again, for Skyhold to live again,’ I mentally check off while climbing the stairs to the ramparts — though it must be said, the fortress does have a certain life to it.

Imbued.

Saturated.

Worn stone under every step – I keep one hand firmly to the bannister – no need to die so soon after becoming Inquisitor.
“Inquisitor Hunter…meh, still shit sounding,” I mumble to myself and continue climbing, up and around the twists and turns of the upper levels. I round the tower typically reserved for templars and mages and just over there on the closest rampart, there stands the myth – though she’s limply hanging over the railing, lazily looking at the Inquisition numbers below.

Not exactly sassy or stoic like I remember.

But she does look nearly exactly like she did in Dragon Age 2 – startlingly blue eyes, an angled jaw line, but she has a scar running across her nose instead of a blood swipe and silver has crept into her jet black locks.

Without bothering to look back at me, she says “going by what Varric said, I thought you’d be taller.”

“Taller than you,” I tiredly return.

“easy you two.. Inquisitor, meet Hawke, the champion of Kirkwall. There, you’ve been introduced,” Varric gravels out while leaning against the adjacent wall.

“Aw, come on Varric, you know I hate that title – so I saved a city. Big whoop,” Hawke says while loosely flapping her arms against the siding.

“Regardless, figured you might have some advice on killing Corypheus…seeing as how we did fight him after all,” Varric says through a winsome smile, confidence restored.

“Ughhh, I don’t know what more I could say – from what I hear, you already dropped a mountain on the bastard.” Hawke mumbles while pulling herself up and spinning around to actually get an up close look at me.

“Meh, I’m sure you’ve got some insights on ‘fighting the impossible.’ From the Arishok to Orsino to Meredith…”

Hawks looks forlorn – clearly she’s had enough of this bullshit. But she says “So I fought a blood mage, a crazed Templar, and a rampaging horde of qunari. Big deal...from what I understand, you qualify as a rampaging horde.”

Leaning against the railing, I fold my arms and waggle my eyebrows at Hawke.

Resigned to talk, Hawke grumbles “Fine. Then what can I tell you?”

“Ya fought this monster before…and ya killed it…and it doesn’t die. Something about it being darkspawn?,” I ask.

“Well, I recently had that same thought. As did a friend of mine in the Wardens.”

“Loghain,” I say to Hawke’s surprise.

“Uh, yeah, how did you know he’s the…”

Varric interjects “he knows some things. Just let it go.”

“Alright, well, he’s been investigating whether the Wardens are influenced….”

**Remember**

The fabric of reality tightens and folds, for a brief moment, My left eye sees the stitches holding
everything in place but then my nose starts bleeding.

"...ening again. Ah shit, I’m gonna…"

Blinking hard and wiping at my nose, I tell Varric “nah. I’m fine. Or I’ll be fine. Whichever sounds more likely,” as the other two just stare with skepticism written all over their faces. Creases form at the edges of Hawke’s eyes as she squints at me in disbelief and mutters “Crestwood. Just…just make your way to Crestwood. I’ll introduce you to my friend.”

“Loghain,” I correct.

“Yes! Obviously. But keep it a damn secret, will you?!,” Hawke whines, throwing her hands in the air.

“Yes. Obviously,” I say with a dizzied smirk, “oh yeah — Leliana says hey.”
I’d done Sera’s favor though Cullen seemed less than enthusiastic at my being day drunk. But, he agreed to the task all the same – thought it a good idea considering the political issues stemming from that city as of late.

From there, I walk the long walk and end up in Solas’ vestibule – inexplicably, the years of neglect hadn’t left their mark on this portion of Skyhold. Even more surprising, Solas has already begun painting this room. A fresco-secco style if I’m not mistaken – he has the egg yolks in a bowl and a palette of pigments on a nearby stool, and he’s been painting right onto the dry plaster. Hues of red, off whites, and stark blacks – despite it being incomplete, I’d know this piece anywhere – it’s his interpretation of the Conclave disaster.

Soft footsteps enter the room and his mellow voice asks “How do you like it so far?”

“Excellent use of color and negative space to depict the Conclave.”

Huffing through his nose, Solas says “I mean no offense, Inquisitor, but you surprise me still. It’s not common for a mercenary to appreciate art.”

Right, that was my backstory somehow.

“Freelance. Merc was just part of the freelance. I’ve been paid to paint before,” I reveal.

“Oh? If you ever allow me to enter your dreams again, perhaps you can show me.”

This a trick? No..he’s genuinely curious; that’s who he is at heart. He revels in learning and exploring. Okay…okay.

Resolved, but looking around for an indicator not to be, I say “okay. I’ll uh… I’ll set the stage tonight. Showcase some of my art. In exchange, you help me with my magic tomorrow morning before we head to Crestwood.”

Folding his arms behind his back, he proudly says “I accept, of course.”

“Oh hey, Solas?”

“Yes?”

“Please, call me Hunter. I’m… I’m not my title. I’m still me.”

With a sly smirk creeping in his expression, he says “of course.”

If anyone gets being more than their title.... it theoretically should be him.

“INQUISITOR!,” rings a voice from above – Solas huffs out in annoyance and returns to studying his painting, trying to ignore the intrusive voice as I glance past the rafters and spy our mustachioed ally leaning over the railing.

“I’ll see ya tonight, Solas,” I say with a wave and head up the worn stone ascending spiral stairs to what once was a library. Reaching that landing, I’m smothered by the pungent aroma of damp moldering books – it doesn’t seem to bother Dorian in the least. Then again, there is an open bottle nearby – knowing what I know of him, his being a lush, he’s probably drunk.
A high functioning drunk.

I catch him in the middle of shoving an entire shelf of books on the floor.

“Each and every one a ruined mess. All except a diary kept by a nameless mother but it’s nothing except for what she eats every day. Rubbish,” Dorian exclaims.

“Uh..”

“Ah but enough about that, I asked you here so we can chat.”

Sitting down on an ancient wood bench, it creaks under my weight; it doesn’t break though. Leaning forward with my elbows to my knees, I say “so let’s chat.”

“If you insist!,” Dorian exclaims and tossing himself into a high backed leather chair, he throws his legs up and over an arm and says “brilliant isn’t it? One moment you’re trying to restore order in a world gone mad. That should be enough for anyone to handle, yes? Then, out of nowhere, an Archdemon appears and kicks you in the head. What? You thought this would be easy? No, I was just hoping you wouldn’t crush our village like an anthill! Sorry about that! Archdemons like to crush, you know. Can’t be helped.” Clearing his threat, he goes on “I suppose a proper introduction is called for, now that we’re not running for our lives.”

Without leaving his chair, he cocks his head my way and says “Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of the Tevinter Imperium. I was in Redcliffe when the Venatori assumed command of your Southern mages, though there weren’t as many of you as I thought there’d be. Are there less mages in the South? Oh well, I only wish I could’ve given more warning”

“Yeah, sorry I didn’t swing through Redcliffe – I uh…something potentially worse would’ve happened if I’d gone there,” I say with sullen eyes.

*Envye was bad enough -- but still, it was probably still a better option than possibly getting lost in time.*

“Oh yes, I’ve heard rumors about you, something along the lines of you know the future,” Dorian says smugly while wiggling his fingers jokingly.

“Varrie?”

Laughing into the crook of his arm, Dorian exclaims “so the dwarf has that much of a reputation for gossip? Oh, I will have to chat him up more...” and then getting more serious, he looks me in the eyes and asks “….so you do see the future? What is it? Time magic? Crystal ball? Guess work? Or are you just lucky? And if it’s all true, tell me a bit of the future, to persuade me of your talent.”

“Oh. My turn to talk?,” I say through a lopsided grin to which Dorian shoos at me, saying “yes yes, it’s your turn. Though, don’t fret, I’ll fill your ears with my lovely voice soon enough.”

Sighing, I say “I can tell ya your future but then part of that future becomes the now. Still wanna know?”

“Mmmmm, yes! No…yes? Wait, am I dying? I don’t want to know about that,” Dorian expresses, suddenly anxious.

“No, not gonna tell ya about death. Gonna tell ya about life. Still wanna know?”

Eyes wide and mustache wavering, he shakes his head for yes.
In a hushed tone, I lean forward and whisper “in the near future, we’ll receive a letter with instructions regarding your return home and a courier you’re to meet. We get there and the courier is actually your dad. He’s upset that I’m present and blames himself for driving ya to join us. Ya snap back at him, saying something to the tune of “I did it because it was right. Once I had a father that knew that,” and then ya both sulk. Then ya rage at him for trying to turn ya into something you’re not…”

Dorian’s eyes go saucer wide.

“…ya then confide in me that you prefer men and that your dad once tried to change ya with blood magic….I accept ya nonetheless, you’re my friend – I don’t give a shit who ya like. That’s between you and whomever you’re intimate with. You calm down, have a talk with your dad, there’s still issues but you’re both on the path towards working it out.”

Dorian is dead quiet.

This is amazing. I didn’t think he could be dumbfounded.

“Ya good? Cause…ya look like you might need a drink,” I ask.

Unflinching, he grabs at an open bottle on the side table and plugs it in his mouth, taking deep gulps of an amber, honeyed liquor. He blinks hard at his final gulp and tossing the empty bottle to the book pile, he turns back to me with eyebrows pinched together, asks “….and you are okay with….this” while gesturing to himself.

“You’re not my type but don’t let that stop ya from being who you are. Besides, you’re a good guy and you’re one of my friends.”

“Oh, you know we’re friends that quick?,” he says somewhat defiantly.

Tapping a finger to my pale eye, I rebuff “yuuuuup. Can’t be helped.”

Letting out a deep breath, Dorian starts chuckling anew and in between outbursts, manages out “and here…hahaha, I thought…it’d be ..hahahahaha…all about me talking about me..hahahahaha..but here, you already know…hahaha, all there is to know and I know shit all about you!”

Letting him catch his breath for a moment, I finally say “so ask.”

Taking another moment to compose himself, he puzzles but a moment more and asks “ any family? Where do you hail from? And from the simple fact that you haven’t tried to kill me, I can assume you to be Tal Vashoth?”

Uh…how…shit, okay, we can say…

“Two siblings. Parents. I don’t remember where but I know it was a farm. Blast kinda knocked the memory outta my head. And I’m just Vashoth – I was never part of that bullshit. Raised outside it,” I explain and partially lie.

“Hmm, what led you to be at the Conclave on fated day?”

Squinting incredulously, I gesture to all of me and say “clearly I was a revered mother,” to which Dorian, going along with my wise crack, says “im certain the other mothers were just green with envy over how well you could pull off the attire….Hmm, how about that thing on your hand then? Do you even know how it works? Or do you just wiggle your fingers at a rift and POOF?”
I know he means well, he’s just being sassy for the sake of sass, but my brow arches and seriously, I describe “Nah, I get it. Imagine a cosmic lock, will ya? Only it’s…a labyrinth of tumblers and this” I say, brandishing my anchor, “this just let’s me access that array. It’s up to me to manipulate it till I’ve got a combination. It’s …draining.”

“I can imagine…well, I can’t. But you get my point,” Dorian says offhandedly, “Now, onto the juicier gossip…I’ve heard talk, and I know that talk can be just that, but enough people are saying you don’t know how to use a staff. Don’t fret, I’m sure I could give you a hand,” and he winks, dropping the pretense that he's straight. Smiling weary at the floor through squinted eyes, I chuckle out “nice innuendo.”

“Innuendo? I’m certain I don’t know what you mean…” he jokes, “just offering a helping hand with your staff.”

“Ughhhhh,” Solas loudly groans at this from down below.

“Oh dear, it would seem we’ve offended the delicate sensibilities of our fellow mage,” Dorian chides.

Speaking loudly to the rafters, Solas says “I simply don’t care for your overtly public displays of flirting.”

In mock offense, Dorian exclaims “how dare you! To accuse me of excellently flirting with our Inquisitor. For shame, Solas!”

Solas huffs as he sounds like he’s returned to his painting; wet brushes pad against the plaster wall below.

Letting out a tired sigh, I tell Dorian “Look, you can give me a hand with casting. I won't mess with a staff. I can’t do it. Solas tried to help. Maybe I need another perspective…no offense Solas!,” I yell the last bit at the railing.

“One can benefit from experiencing many perspectives,” Solas replies dryly.

Returning my attention to Dorian, I say “I can only spit fire and death punch and…” reaching toward a ruined book on the pile, I force-grab it, holding aloft some eight feet away. Dorian’s eyes go wide yet again.

This rate, they’ll fall out of his head.

Leaping from his chair, he crouches in front of the floating book and queries “Telekinesis? No, you’re not concentrating or whispering an incantation. Do you have an unseen spirit as a familiar? Hmm, no, I’d sense it were that the case…. And poking at the book, but not budging it, he asks bluntly “how are you doing this?”

“Don’t know but I can feel that book in my grip. It’s like…I don’t know how to explain…like I’ve been displaced? Or a phantom limb. Like my hand is in both places at once maybe? But that’s just a guess.”

Staring at the airbound book, he utters “so it’s settled – I’ll help you. Meet me at the front gates in an hour – we shall practice outside, where you’re unlikely to do any lasting damage.”

***********
Early afternoon, the sun is high and not a cloud is above us. Though, we’re high enough up in the mountains that the clouds are likely below us if there are any. It’s nearly a dead calm up here – nary a breeze and the snow rests untouched, undisturbed. We’ve walked perhaps a hundred yards from Skyhold and we’ve all the open snowy battlefield we need.

Strutting about in the snow like a peacock, sporting a staff with a brightly yellow painted skull, Dorian begins “You see, I feel the best teacher is practice. And we’ll be doing just that! But you, obviously with no staff, you’ll have be imaginative. Oh, and do me a favor, please refrain from spitting fire or throwing death punches my way. I know I’m amazing but I’d prefer not to press my luck.”

I raise my hands, not like a fighter would, but like a person holding a large bowl of soup would, up and half supporting an imagined sphere.

*Maybe the change in stance will affect the magic?*

“Are you ready? I believe our audience is ready!,” he exclaims and waves at Skyhold’s ramparts – they’re tiny from this angle and distance but they’re definitely there. I can just make out Solas, Bull and Sera among the many.

Varric has to be up there. But he’s just so damn short.

And glancing higher, on a lone rooftop, I spy Cole lazily kicking his legs to and fro over the edge.

“Are you ready?”

“Uhhhh,” I stagger out and he lunges forward, kicking the end of his staff sending it whirling in his grasp – fireballs launch at me during each spin. I throw myself and roll to the side, kicking off the ground and taking off in a sprint. Fireballs soar past my face and I fall to my ass and slide in the snow, scrabbling.

*Shitshitshitshitshitdamnm*

“Oh Inquisitor, here I thought I’d found a dancing partner,” Dorian attempts to goad me.

Kicking at snow and ice, I roll away from yet another fireball as it comes screaming at me.

“This IS bullshit!,” I yell back and throw a snowball at his smug face. He easily dances around it, darts forward, and serpentine to me. He promptly slaps me across the face with his staff, knocking me to the side. Face stinging, I swipe at him but he retreats as swiftly, wagging his finger at me and saying “ah ah ah, that’s against the rules my dear Inquisitor. Magic only!”

Shoving myself off the ground, I sprint back towards Skyhold to put a wall at my back, all the while firebolts are whizzing past me – I fight better knowing I can’t get hit from behind.

I imagine an ice mine and throw my hands forward – nothing.

“Daaaaaamnit!!!” I bellow, hopping to my left as a fireball explodes where I just was.

Yelling over the distance, Dorian says “it’s do or die, Inquisitor – and if it’s all the same, I’d prefer it weren’t the latter.” He extends both hands and raising his staff, summons a wall of fire and pushes it outward. Roaring. Breathing. Roving.

Fighting off a spasm, I blink hard against the thought of that Archdemon back in Haven and I go to
run, but ice keeps me locked in place.

_Whenthefuckdidthishappen?!!!!_

From somewhere above me, I hear Vivienne call out “you had best do something my dear.”

No time. No time to insult her. No time to run. The wall of fire grows and bears down on me.

A racing heart beat, cold sweat, no time to break the ice. The heat licks at me and I imagine myself grabbing at Dorian’s staff, breaking his hold.

Colors invert.

The world shifts and my vision splits – I’m near to vomiting…

..but I’ve crossed the distance, I’m holding his staff in place over his head so he can’t cast with it. I just…

Something wet drips from my nose.

“FADE STEP!!!! OH GEEZ, I FADE STEPPED!!!” I excitedly jabber, victorious, but my excitement dies when Dorian looks more confused and distraught.

*Why does he look so…?*

“OH SHIT!,” I yell at the realization I’m holding his staff – he jumps back and I hurl it far – his staff splinters, energy surging from within and it detonates midair sending flaming bits of skull fragment and wood splinters flying through the air. An outpouring of gasps goes out high on the walls behind me.

“That was MY staff!,” Dorian exclaims in annoyance, “mine!”

“…and I just fade stepped?”

Dorian snaps his head toward me saying “what? Nooooo. That wasn’t a fade step! That was entirely different!”

“Different how?,” I half groan, wiping blood away from my nostrils with the back of my hand.

“You were over there and then…you just weren’t. There was no trail, no lingering effects, no indicator of your moving. It’s like you just popped into existence,” and huffing hard, incites again "BUT THAT WAS MY STAFF!"

Offering Dorian my hand to bring him to his feet, I question “sooo….better fade step?”

Brushing snow off, he shakes and exclaims “yes? No? I don’t know. And I hate not knowing. You should know this about me. All I do know is that for a split moment, you didn’t exist. I couldn’t feel your aura, your magic. You just were, then weren’t, there were again.”

“I didn’t…exist?” I question with trepidation.

“…yes. Yes! I don’t understand it but it’s probably good news. You’ve managed to cast another spell without a staff,” and calming some, he then sighs and declares "Whatever this was, this calls for drinks!,” and throwing an arm about my waist, he marches us back toward Skyhold.

“I’m…I’m still kinda buzzed from earlier.”
“Wonderful, all the more reason to drink – can’t have a midday hangover creeping up on you.”

Great. I’ll have plenty of time to consider the implications of ceasing to exist...

...and another nosebleed? At this rate, I’ll run outta blood.

*********

Another evening of drinking into oblivion. I don’t know know how many I had, but drinks had been shoved at me all night.

Too much.

I’m drunk.

And with no room of my own to return to – the stairs to my tower room haven’t been constructed yet – I drag myself into an empty room on the second floor; it’s overgrown with vines and bushes.

There’s a rotting hay stuffed threadbare mattress on a broken wooden frame.

With a heavy tongue, I slur out “mmno. Thasss howyaget bed…bugs.”

I blink and my face hits the floor. I’m out.

Swirling black.

I open my eyes and I’m face down in damp grass. Damp gray grass. Pushing myself up, I see I’m lost in fog.

Dropping face first back into the grass, I grumble, muffled against the earth, “ohgawf Itszrunktoo!”

It would seem a drunk mind can influence the fade.

Rolling over for air. I gasp out “guess Solas gonna havta wait to hang out,” while flopping my arms out to the sides.

I’m closing my eyes again. Back to black.

*splash*

Sputtering, soaked, I bolt upright and wiping the water from my eyes, I catch myself staring at seven other of me. Some don’t have faces while one is missing the horns. But they’ve all got stress fractures running along them and they’re familiar; all definitely me.

The only one among them with a mouth grins, holding a now empty bucket at his side, and he opens his mouth to talk but no words come out. Scowling, he pauses and considers his options, all the while I’m soaked and still on my ass.

Tapping his foot on the ground and stroking his fingers across his chin, he ponders more.

A flash goes off in that murky grey sky above. A lone firework? Regardless, the voiceless me starts furiously digging at the earth, carving letters and words into the soft dirt underfoot.
The earth scrawling reads “clean this place up or Solas might learn our secrets.”

“FUCK!” I spit as a couple of the others hoist me up. Then, surrounded on all sides, they begin walking into me – phasing through me. With every joining, my head goes clearer and clearer. The grinning one is last to go, but he flips me the bird and bumps into me.

Gone.

I’m back to near functionality – and so, with the anchor awakening, we begin rearranging this scape.

First the fog; high winds blast the gray away – The skies go bright white with a blazing sun high above. Grass goes black and turns to ash, getting swept off in the winds. Only black stone remains as the rest of the world falls away and into a sea of neon pink, the waters so often I’d end up with after washing my brushes. My 50’x50’ slab of obsidian jutting from the sea is the only land in this entire scape – waves slap against this chunk of land and sea mist sprays – salt is in the air. Acrylic painted beasts rise and fall in the neon waters – at a distance. A grand sea serpent comprised of nothing but painted hands fans it’s way by, all dark tones with pops of orange, slithering through the bright pink. Another creature, a titan in scope, bursts from the seas – it’s a pointillism beast, all dots – higher and higher it rises and still only chest deep in these waters. It’s a mountain of skeletons, all together forming a monolithic humanoid with stag antlers.

It keeps grabbing for the sun, and even with fingers wrapped about it, the titan can’t pull the sun from the sky. Instead, slivers of light shine bright through the finger cracks.

Much closer, an oil painted owl swoops in, looking for a perch.

A sturdy branch for you…

Obsidian grows and springs up from the stone it was, twisting, branching, and reaching until fully grown tree of black stands rooted before me on the slab’s edge, little black leaves bloom and unfurl from the smallest twigs. With a flutter, my painted owl find its perch – a jawless bleached white skull sits where the owl’s face would be and in those deep recessed sockets, I spy little fluorescent dancers forming its pupils; they dart and tumble and plié to wherever the bird intends to look.

“Just a couple more and…."

An oversized ink drawn pug emerges from the waves, yapping and snorting. It has a cave in its head from where it’s nose should be to peak of its brow – and within that cave is a baby face, big eyes staring in wonder and awe at the world about.

Painterly chunks of honeycomb, all yellows and oranges, pop into existence and float in the sky – various totem faces are carved into the wax and as they drift about; they’re dripping gold paint into the seas below.

Another creature, a tattoo I’d drawn up, it skirts along the waves – a stark black outline of a shark and at the center of its negative space within, a human skeleton and musculature stretching and contorting itself to pretend to be a shark on the inside – arms are outstretched with fingers pointed, its attempt at shark teeth. The waters around this shark act as if it’s a full bodied one, giving way and displacing where mass should be instead of flowing freely over and through the outline.

The entirety of it all is rather macabre, I understand that, but that’s what my art is.

“Thank you for making this possible,” I whisper to my mark, “this should be…just enough for now. No secrets revealed, no traces of...” I reassure myself when a knock reverberates through the
dream.

Uh...wait.

“JUST A SECOND!!”

Imagine a doorway opposite the tree, one forms and I say “come in!,” inviting him in.

The doorway creaks open and there Solas stands in the threshold; behind him stands a forest but he shuts the door and it ceases to be. “Inquisitor, I must thank you for allowing me this…” Solas begins but falls into silence, taking in the world around us. No longer calm and collected, his arms drop to his side as a look of terror and awe burgeons on his face.

The roaring waves and pug-beast snorts are our only ambient noise.

Finally, pulling his mouth from its agape state, Solas whispers “Inquisitor…”

“Hunter,” I correct him.

Breathing out his familiar light chuckle, Solas agrees “yes. You most certainly are. This world is darkly wonderful…and these..you’ve manipulated the Fade with such precision…you’ve fashioned the abstract…it’s spectacular…”

He spots the enormous pug monster flopping about in the neon waters.

“…that one is grotesque.” Continuing to look around, he adds “ I must commend you for your thought and use of styles. I must admit, I had thought you were simply going to walk me through a memory of yours…but to have created an entire world of your art…breathtaking.”

“Thanks.”

“What was your inspiration?”

“Uh, just comes to me. I’m fond of monsters. Hybrids. Key attributes of creatures merged with others…”

“That last portion sounds suspiciously like the product of blood magic. Careful of such talk around the Seeker.”

she’d probably gut me for that kinda talk

My face twists in thought but I utter “huh. Guess so.”

“Of course, I don’t condemn those that would practice such branches of magic. I just won’t practice it myself – its use weakens the ability to delve into the fade.”

Flipping my hand out to show the glow, I ask “Solas. With this, would it be possible to perform blood magic without losing my connection to the fade?”

“I’m sorry to say that I do not know. But it’s a good question nonetheless. What interest do you have in blood magic?”

After pausing to think over the possibilities, I elaborate “surgery. Control of self. Stopping poisons. Creating. But absolutely no demon or binding or any of that bullshit.”

“A curious response. Most would’ve placed power as their motive.”
My expression falls and I go quiet. Not from guilt, but from thought. Pensive.

“Hunter?”

The great skeletal beast roars in anguish as it fails yet again at plucking the sun from the sky – plumes of smoke billow from its fingertips.

“So, any new ideas why I can’t cast? Or use other spells? It seems death and fire are the only things I’m capable of. I mean, it’s kinda bullshit, isn’t it? Yeah, I can fight, for whatever that’s worth, but I can’t protect. Or heal.”

The hand serpent hisses as it breeches the surface.

“Regardless of your casting capacity, do not undersell your accomplishment today. The Tevinter mage is correct, you ceased to exist for but a moment. I…don’t know what to make of that just yet. And while I’ve seen a great deal in my exploration of the fade, I’ve yet to see what you managed earlier.” Taking a breath, he straightens his stance and says “Perhaps…perhaps we could see your memories to better figure out what blocks your magic?”

Is this Solas being helpful…or is he the wolf on the hunt.

“I don’t remember much – I woke up in Haven a prisoner…” I say as the world shifts leaving my creatures to the void. The light dims as the sun fades with the skeletal titan and we’re left standing in torchlight. The obsidian ground turns to cobblestone and we’re left standing in the leaky prison I first awoke in.

“This is as far back I remember… sorry it’s not more impressive”

“It is impressive. For three days you struggled for survival after the Conclave. I sat beside you while you slept, studying the anchor.

“What a task” I drawl sarcastically “must’ve been a quick study”

Through his own lopsided grin, Solas quirks “A magical mark of unknown origin, tied to a unique breach in the veil? Longer than you might think.” His face takes on a more somber look as he continues “I ran every test I could imagine, searched the Fade, yet I found nothing. Cassandra suspected duplicity. She threatened to have me executed as an apostate if I didn’t produce results.”

“Doubt she would’ve thought. She knew you were trying to help…”

…Or were ya tryin’ to take back the anchor?

“Yes,” he says through his chuckles and walks out the dungeon.

Was…was he supposed to say that then or did he hear me?

We walk in relative silence through the underground – up we go as I avoid low hanging chandeliers along the way.

Note to self: shave down these damn horns when you wake up.

Stepping out of the Chantry and into an empty Haven, the day hangs in perpetuity – the Breach remains, the sun unmoving – this is but a day that the spirits emulate. Though there are light gusts, nothing moves as a result. Not the fabric of our clothing, not the weeds popping up through cracks in the stone, not the direction of the snowfall… an imperfect still. Having the silence to collect
himself, to choose his words, Solas picks up where he left off, “…you were never going to wake up. How could you, a mortal sent physically through the fade? I was frustrated, frightened. The spirits I might have consulted had been driven away by the breach.” We stop just short of the main gates and he turns to face me as memories of snowflakes drift down about us. “Although I wished to help. I had no faith in Cassandra…or she in me. I was ready to flee.” His words leave him with eyes narrowed with guilt, annoyed at his own recollection of events.

“Where do ya hide from the Breach?”

Anger quashed, he breathes a sigh and reveals “someplace far away where I might research a way to repair the breach before its effects reached me…. I never said it was a good plan” and ends with smirk.

Turning to face the former Breach, he raises his probing hand to it and exclaims “I told myself: one more attempt to seal the rifts…I tried and failed. no ordinary magic would affect them. I watched the rifts expand and grow, resigned myself to flee and then…”

Interrupting, I ask “…Solas, you know rift magic. How’s that ordinary? And why can't that close the tears?”

Shock and suspicion pull him back as he plants his staff into the ground, firmly he holds it between us and asks “and what leads you to believe I know such magic?”

The edges of my mouth curl and I say nothing as I look to the remembered Breach.

Huffing once, he doesn’t change his stance but he bluntly says “your fade-touched eye. That’s how,” though, he’s incorrect. He can’t know how I know.

Can’t possibly guess.

Changing topics, likely annoying him, I mutter “this isn’t where the magic would’ve started...” while still locked in a staring contest with this pale imitation of the world eater.

But I really should learn to mind my damn mouth when in the Fade or near the Breach, regardless of its iteration. The world goes black and Solas and I are left standing in but the dimmest of light.

“What” we utter in unison, both shocked by the reaction of the Fade. Quietly, lights awaken. Fireflies. Lazily they fly about, their bioluminescence slowly pulsing.

Pulsing to the beat of my anchor.

With this introduction of more light, it all becomes more clear though still cast in shadow – shelves line this rounded room; hundreds of books are shoved into every crevice and nook, and each with a padlock keeping them closed.

The thin strip of light appears on the nearest wall; the crack runs about ten feet horizontally.

As perplexed as I am, Solas asks “where are we? I’m not familiar with this part of the Fade.”

Ignoring him yet again, I step to the crack in the wall and brush my fingertips against it...

SHOOM.

The cracks splits wide open and I jump back, startled. Solas changes his stance, staff ready to swing at danger. But nothing happens – we’re left staring at a circular hole in the malleable wall
with a glass pane. Through the hole, there’s nothing but blue sky.

Clouds slowly drift by….

*But we’re looking up?*

We’re looking up. The room shakes and the view through the window shifts – tall blades of grass are standing at attention but jutting horizontally out from the left.

“No way…,” I gape incredulously, “we’re inside a giant head,” all the while the view shakes and shifts. The sound is dramatically slowed; it’s all nearly unintelligible. We’re watching through the porthole as a massive hand brushes against a dandelion and it roars. A bumblebee hovers in place and the wings beat like heavy drums. Beyond this foreground, there’s wide expanses of empty fields – empty from a recent harvest; dust still hangs in the air. The ground is breathing. The sky is shimmering.

Thunder cracks on the horizon.

My heart stops.

*This …no!*

The room shakes and the view rises – the giant me we’re in has stood up and begun its march toward the storm. Hesitantly, it looks back over its shoulder and I see my family home again – the two story farm house with the tin roof. Tears well up in my eyes – I lost them because I couldn’t stop walking.

*Why couldn’t I just go inside?!*


Lightning. A flash and the window slams shut – again, Solas and I are left in the dark, our only company the dream world fireflies drifting about.

“Hunter…was that…?”

“My home.”

“And the lightning,” he worries, “How did you survive? What was this?”

Wiping the errant tears from the corners of my eyes with a swipe of my arm, I choke out “wake up.”

The eyes creep open; I’m back in my impoverished temporary lodging, back to the cold stone floor. “You are sad. You left them but you don’t know where,” Cole softly says from the corner, sitting atop an older dresser.

“That’s right,” I sigh out wearily.

“No, I won’t tell anyone what we say – you already told me not to. I’ll try.”

“Thanks Cole.”

“You should stay awake – I heard them say you’ll leave soon.”

“Yes. For Crestwood. Do me a favor and keep an eye on Rasa will ya?”
His eyes cloud over and his voice goes hollow as he whispers “an elf alone, worried she’ll lose again. She can’t begin a third time.”

“W…what?,” I ask him while pushing myself up.

“You should say goodbye before you leave. She’d like that.”

“If you think it’s the right thing to do…” and then changing topic, I state and ask “Cole, let’s get some breakfast. I’ve gotta cure this hangover and you… do you even eat food?,” I say while grabbing him and dragging him along to the tavern.

He doesn’t answer.
Shoveling slices of ram in my mouth and drowning that with sweet red wine, I bolster my defenses against the impending hangover while sustaining myself for the adventure ahead. And lucky me, the tavern is near to empty – too late for the drunks, too early for anyone else. All except Flissa – I suppose enough has been changed that she didn’t seek the cloth after Haven? But despite this good news, I must reiterate the “adventure” ahead.


I am not looking forward to this.

I had quickly grown tired of Cole watching me eat – I suppose he doesn’t – and so I had asked him to ghost out for a bit; perhaps he’ll go about hoarding more daggers while we’re gone.

*THUD*

A stack of blank parchment and maps drop on the table as Cassandra swings her legs around to sit on the bench with me. “Hunter, you had said that you wanted to break into teams again and while I agree that would be most efficient, I absolutely refuse to split off fr….” she drones off while noticing my vacant stare.

“Oh…you were drunk.”

“All yesterday? Oh yeah,” I say nonchalantly while pouring myself another glass of wine and sipping, but looking to her again, I say “but please, tell me what my plan was.”

“Ohgh” she groans out her signature sound but goes on to say “you proposed breaking into teams again where you pass each team a map and list of all details you know of the area. It worked well the last time, but again, I must demand that I be in your party. You are the Inquisitor and I must make sure that you are protected.”

Pushing my plate away from me, I twist in my seat and plant my cheek to my knuckles and elbow to the table; I sit in silence for but a beat and then whisper “Cass, it’s okay if ya want to be close to me,” and planting my free hand over my heart, I whisper in jest “I’m verrrrrrry handsome.”


Rolling her eyes, she shoves at me and slides the blank pages in front of me, demanding “get to work. We leave soon.”

She stays seated next to me, looming like a hedge, to stare me down and ensure I complete this task.

I don’t like it when people read over my shoulder; Hunching forward and inking my quill…

I would literally murder someone for a ballpoint pen.

"This morning though, I'm only writing us one. We're heading to Crestwood. All of us," I reveal.

I spread the papers out and begin my notes.
Crestwood:

I take a map of the area and start scrawling and marking it up, circling the locations of bandit forces and rifts. I scratch out a giant X over a cave branching off from the pass, marking it “Big ass family of Wyverns”

I scribble Vivienne’s name over the town and write in notes like “The mayor is a liar. Flooded old Crestwood” and “Keep an eye on him, don’t let him escape” and “DON’T KILL HIM”

Outside that, I make notes on how she’s to defend the town from the undead and direct the militia as she sees fit.

Over the bandit fortress, I write in Bull + Chargers, Sera, Solas, and Dorian along with the notes “Wipe out bandits within – they have one heavy with a war hammer. Chargers take control of fortress, hold it till Inquisition forces can arrive. Sera, Bull, Dorian, and Solas, take the dam behind it. Controls aren’t broken, mayor is a dick”

Over the cave I’m supposed to be meeting with Hawke, I scratch “Cassandra, Blackwall, Varric, Inquisitor” and “After meeting, we’ll swing back to Old Crestwood to close rift”

In the margins, I write “after everything else, we’re all fighting a dragon” and “it spits lightning”

I doodle little lightning bolts over the ruins where the dragon will be.

XOXO – Hunter

“What do those marks at the bottom mean?”

“Xs and Os? They’re just a stupid cutey thing that some people write for hugs and kisses,” I explain.

“Inquisitor…this is an important brief. Why would you put tha…”

“Because no one else would. And I’m buzzed. And I’m bored!” Rolling out of my seat, I jump to my feet and loudly exclaim “YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL THIS MORNING. IM GONNA FINISH PREPARING FOR CRESTWOOD!” A blush flashes in her cheeks as she stares at me in unexpected horror and silence. I take the opportunity to flick my hand in goodbye, dash out of the bar, and run straight for the main hall stairs – my intention is to put as much distance between us before she regains her composure. And to do just that, I cut into a staircase hidden behind a ragged curtain and fly up to the 2nd floor, slinking past Dorian’s nook and making my way to the Raven’s nest.

Huffing as I finish climbing the spiral stairs, a few of Leliana’s birds flap their wings but ultimately care little for my arrival and caw to one another per usual – Leliana is standing, hunched over her desk and pouring over intel and mission briefs. Without looking up, her face hidden beneath her cowl, she greets me with a honeyed tone, pleasantly saying “Inquisitor, I have wonderful news. Your mages will be arriving shortly – fortunately, it would appear that Skyhold has ample space for both them and our Templars. We’ll just have to keep them from each other’s throats.” And looking to me, emphasizes “no small task.”

Catching my breath with a hand to the railing, I choke out “Remind em.. Corypheus. They’re not
the bad guys – he is.”

“Very true,” and with her hands on her hips, she steps around her desk and leans against it, all the while eyeing me. A moment of silence as I finish catching my breath from the buzzed run and she says “additionally, Dagna the Arcanist has arrived. You should introduce yourself…even if you likely know all there is to know about her,” she ends with a smirk.

“Yeah yeah… I’m a creep for knowing things,” I huff out while screwing my face.

Her face grows more stern beneath that cowl and with quick steps, she jabs a finger at my chest and looking up into my eyes, demands “never apologize for knowing. Never.”

Her tone turning sweeter, she adds “Now go on. Talk to Dagna. Oh! Josie also wanted a word with you – it regards passing judgement.” She stares at me with intense eyes until I back down the very stairs I climbed until our eyes no longer meet.

*How does she make a heart stop like that?*

..and.. *there’s always more to what she’s saying…*

..*does she have an idea about why I know stuff?*

*Shit.*

*No, she can’t possibly…*

*Shit. She probably has an idea.*

....*Always assume the worst.*


***************

On my way down to our throne adjacent forge, I’d had to sneak quite a bit between spotting Cassandra storm through on a mission to the War Room and not wanting to talk to whomever these nobles are in the throne room. I’d even gone so far as to whisper to my anchor to “please go as dim as possible for a couple minutes” so they wouldn’t spot my mark and know me as the Inquisitor as I walked through.

*Just another Qunari merc. La dee daaa.*

Entering the forge was a breath of fresh air – isolated from everything, brisk air billowing in to offset the heat, it hides behind a waterfall. A veritable secret paradise of sorts. Harritt notices me and nods, directing me towards Skyhold’s newest hire and continues his hammering and shaping of something red hot. It’s but a quick step down the stairs but looking around, there’s no dwarf in sight.

I look back at Harritt but he’s pounding away, ignorant to my silent inquiry. I’m genuinely confused until a throat clears with an “ahem.” Spinning back around, I spot her – she must’ve been lurking behind some of the equipment.

“Well don’t just stand there slack jawed, let’s figure out what you need!,” she pokes fun but then noticing my horns, and anchor, staggers, “Wait.. you’re him! The Inquisitor! I’m..”
"Arcanist Dagna. It’s an honor," I say and bow low enough to almost be on her level; Her eyes light up and a smile beams in her face. Giggling to herself, my anchor catches her attention again. “is that it? The hand-anchor-mark? It’s pretty… the Breach was pretty too in a…”destroy everything” sort of way.” Her laughs turn forced.

Standing back at full height, I greet her warmly, saying “Dagna, I’m glad ya made it.”

Relaxing again, she beams “Me too! I’ve heard some impossible things; I love impossible things. Those are the best to make… well, possible. And I’ve looked at Harritt’s devices. The precision is fantastic but typical. Mundane. Old thinking?”

Looking up from his heated work, sweat dripping from his brow in waves, he growls “it’s what now?” with narrowed eyes.

“No disrespect meant to the classical trades!,” she anxiously apologizes, “But you need a new perspective. I’ve made adjustments. As long as I keep making them, you can craft just about anything. Almost safely!”

“And you studied in the Ferelden Circle, thanks to Wan, right?”

“Oh get out! That’s mostly right. The Warden, he got me in and then with that sanction, I visited a half-dozen circles. And the wonders I’ve seen. With an objective eye, I can spot where they overlap—that’s a surprise for every teacher! It’s a grand tradition and it works soooo well with new thinking!” Falling into her memories, she whispers pleasantly “It’s incredible that someone like the Hero of Ferelden would stop to help the little people.” Then perking up, giggles out “Literally!”

She continues “But…now since the college is gone, according to the Shaperate, I’m essentially casteless. So I’m here. And you’re getting my best work, Inquisitor. Let’s make some great stuff.”

With brows arched, ready to argue, I say “First, you’re with the inquisition? You’re not casteless. Everyone’s with us, they belong,” and unfolding my arms, “Second, ya seem impressed by the anchor – wha’ d’your eyes see?”

A smile flits back to her face at those remarks and she says “There’s a long chain of ‘who said what’ but to me, it says “key.” But...keys do a lot of things. Open, lock, switch. Some open one thing. Some open everything. It sounds like Corypheus made it to open. Looks like you can use it to close. It may be that simple? …it sure is pretty. I wish I could see through it…”

Leaning back against an armorers table, I ask “so…you can make stuff?,” knowing damn well her skill level; she’s spectacular.

“The manipulation of masterworks! No secrets, no fears. That lets me apply principles like no other….I can make your toys into wonders. You know, on account of how I won’t go mad from handling lyrium. Dwarves are resistant, so it doesn’t affect us. Mostly...There’s an art to the forge as well as enchanting. You need an ear for it. And hands. Eyes too.
Nothing bad to say about Harritt on that front, he’s wonderful. But there’s this little more needed…”

Remembering what she’ll say next, I join in and in unison, we say “with the right bits, an edge can be more than an edge. Armor can do more than protect. A hue can be just a bit brighter.”
Throughout that, she grew more and more quiet. Picking her jaw back up, she exclaims “ah get out!” and finishes “in short, smithing can be…more.” Laughing, she adds “in short.”
Adorable. And barely phased. She’s great.

“Bring your stuff here and we’ll prepare it like normal … only it’s not normal. I’ll make sure it goes just right. You’ll see. Let’s see together!”

Reaching down, I clasp her tiny hand in mine and we shake on it.

***********

As I slowly close the forge room door, Josephine’s pleasant voice rings out behind me, “oh! Inquisitor, there is a matter we must discuss…”

Grimacing at the wall with my back to the room, I reply “yeah…ya want to talk about throne stuff and passing judgement and… stuff..”

Way to be redundant, Hunter. Y’know? Fuck it…let’s do this.

“Exactly right, Inquisitor,” she says and tiptoes, ever graceful, toward the throne and with a simple gesture, adds “here, you will pass judgment. It is upon you to dole out justice.” Late morning light trickles in through the stained glass above the throne; it glimmers and sparkles off yet another of Josephine’s golden outfits.

Clapping my hands once, I say “fuck it. Let’s do this now. How many we got?,” and drop myself back into the thin metal Inquisition throne. I squirm a bit to find my balance. Not particularly comfortable but I suppose that’s the point of a throne, to keep you seated on edge.

Gonna have to Iron Throne this up – weapons and staves of the defeated, hammered into a new throne. Bet Harritt would enjoy that…

wait…?

Can’t have a throne that might explode when I sit in it.

Josephine skirts to my side, parchment board in hand, quill delicately poised in the other, and looking ever so, she announces “May I present Chief Movran the Under. He stands accused of… striking our hold with…goats.”

Chuckling deeply, the Avvar states “idiot boy went after your Inquisition. He and his are dead. I reacted by smacking your hold with goat’s blood..”

“As is the Avvar custom,” I interject.

“Ahh, you know of us, Ox man?”

A wicked grin graces my face, and leaning forward, I reply “yes. And that’s why I exile you and your clan to Tevinter – I want ya to gather up as many weapons as you can and head there, Chief.”

“Ahahahahahahehehe,” Movran bellows out, “seems my idiot son did something right for once. Be well, Herald.”
'Ughhhhhhh,' I mentally groan at his Herald comment as the guards uncuff and lead Movran from the hall. Josephine studies her notes and states “Igron, you stand accused of stealing Inquisition supplies…”

‘The hell is this?’, I question internally before quickly coming to the realization ‘…right...the game probably didn’t show everything. Duh.’

“Uh, present your case?” I urge the thread bare man.

“M’lord, I’m sorry I am!,” he coughs, “I only did what I cud for m’family. Please take mercy on me,” and tears glisten at the corners of his eyes. Turning to Josephine, I quirk a brow and she says “our investigation has found no family.”

Uncoiling like a snake, he spits at the ground and breaking character, menancingly growls “fuck you highborn pricks. I take what I need and what I desire. Regardless of your size, regardless of your reach, you will fall. YOU WILL END,” as guards pull tighter at his chains. One guard kicks the back of this Igron’s legs and he drops to his knees, raging “I TAKE WHAT IS MINE, WHAT I AM OWED.”

“Oh shit, this guy is guilty. A cell might cool him off. Put him there,” and the guards haul him off even as he struggles against his bindings and bellows out “IT WAS MIIIIINE.”

Josephine begins “Next, we have…”

“Knight Captain Denam,” calls out Cullen as he steps to the other side of the throne with gloved fists clenched tightly – leather crunches and winces under his grip; his face is rigid, a cool fury simmers below the surface. Guards pull this Denam front and center as Cullen glances at me – I nod, giving him leeway and he states the crime “you stand accused of corrupting the Templar ranks. How do you plead?”

Denam, on his knees, pitifully cries “I…had..no choice. You saw the demon. I was forced..”

“BULLSHIT,” I interrupt and Cullen adds “we found the notes, the evidence, and the corpse of your superior in your bedchamber. We know of your complicity. You acted willingly.”

Realizing he's been caught, laughing maddeningly, he raves “you don’t understand the glory that is the Elder One. You. don’t. Understand.” Remembering my lore, I turn to Cullen and inquire aloud so the audience may hear “excuse me, but isn’t there precedent for this? Something something betraying the Order… something about banishment to the Sea of Ash?” and Denam stills – his eyes go wide in fear.

“You’re correct, Inquisitor,” Cullen agrees wickedly, a grin buried deep beneath his steely façade.

With a wave of my hand, I shoo Denam and laugh out “you are sentenced to live out the remainder of your life in the Sea of Ash. Outside it, ya die.” Perhaps it’s my laughter or perhaps it’s his own fear, but Denam is disarmed, not even enough fight resides in him to argue his sentence. Blank faced, pupils unfocused, he’s lead from the room in chains.

“This concludes the sentencing. Inquisitor,” Josephine announces and nods to me, fancy attire bobbing with her as she walks away and back to her office. The room, only moderately repaired, begins clearing of the audience as Cullen addresses me “thank you for that Inquis…” Glancing about and seeing we’re out of earshot, he readdresses “thank you Hunter. Thank you.”

“No problem, man. Ya needed him to get the right punishment.”
“And I’d certainly say he received the right punishment,” Cullen says, a half grin working its way to his face. For a minute, we simply sit in silence with dumb grins on our faces before I cut in “Oh, different topic. In Crestwood, there’s a fort – we’ll wipe out the bandits inside, the Chargers will hold it until you or Leliana’s get a squad in there. Figured we could make it an Inquisition base.”

Straightening up, Cullen weighs the matter and slowly says “…yes. I can understand that being an excellent outpost. Obviously, we’ll give it a thorough inspection and see if it stands to scrutiny before we commit to holding it…but yes.” Clapping my hand to Cullen’s, I say “great. Keep Skyhold safe while we’re out.” With that, I rise to my feet and start walking past scaffolding through the hall – from behind, Cullen stutters out “o-of course Inquisitor!”

‘Must be a good day — no tremors in his hand,’ I think upon Cullen’s condition.

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Exiting the main hall, I find myself breathing deep on the stone rise above the courtyard. But amidst the throngs of people hurrying about, I spy one person in particular. On a high rise above the stables, blurry, Cole is standing still with his arm extended – unmoving, he’s pointing to a lone tower room.

I blink my left eye and he fades. Opening that, I close my right and he becomes all the more clear. This is a message clearly meant for none but me.

…Rasa.

With that realization, I head to the walls to climb the various stairs that’ll see me topside.

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Cole is gone by the time I reach the top. Winds whistle in my ears at this height and cut to my lungs, lungs I’m already trying to refill with air after winding myself, pathetically, from climbing the stairs.

*Suppose I’m still hurtin’ from Haven. Gotta get better.*

..or we die.

That last sentiment screws my face up as I stare into the open early afternoon sky.

Cloudless, high enough in the mountains.

But quick enough, I regain my head and rap my knuckles against the rotting wood door. The latch is broken but I’m not about to invade her privacy.

Assuming she’s actually in here…And that I understood Cole correctly.

“It’s open,” her voice answers from beyond her door and pushing, its hinges groaning from rust and age, I enter her room. She’s propped up in the corner, bundled in blankets and resting on several skins while reading from a moldering tome of Hard in Hightown.
“How in the hell?? How does that book get everywhere?,” I blurt out.

“Don’t know,” she mumbles, all of her focus directed at the book, her darkened eyes unreadable.

Then, remembering the typical smutty content of Varric’s tales, I ask “is that…really a good book for you?”

“Don’t know. Can’t read it,” she huffs and drops it to the floor; some of the loose pages scatter out from between the covers.

Guess she wouldn’t have picked up Elven to Fereld…whatever the fuck we write in.

..wait. Why do I understand this shit? Nope. Not now, that's a question for future Hunter.

Shaking off the thought and leaning against the threshold, I nonchalantly state “y’know, Josephine could likely find a teacher for ya.”

“Maybe.”

“Likely,” I reiterate and add “so, wanna hang out in here in the dark forever or d’ya wanna step out and stare at ..mountains and snow?”

“So, nothing impressive or nothing impressive?” the young elf asks while staring blankly at me. Scratch that, there’s just a hint of a smile hiding in her eyes. Almost makes her look pissed off.

No, it’s snarky.

“I choose the second ‘nothing impressive,’ so c’mon.” She groans in response but picks herself up and squints hard at the light of high noon as she slinks past me and over to the walkway railings. Looking out through the archery slits, she glares, half blinded, at the surrounding peaks and falls. Whispering to the wind, she says “you’re gonna leave again. Don’t die.”

Resting my elbows on the railing alongside her, I reply “thanks for caring.”

Her tiny fist drives into my side in response. Doesn’t hurt but ‘Not even a teen yet. She’s gonna be meeeecan’ flashes through my head.

“and while I’m gone, try talking to Josephine – she can get someone to fix up your room. Maybe give you a working door?”

She doesn’t respond – she just stares out into that white nothing.

“Girl, I don’t think I know a person that gives less of a fuck than you do – I know you’re smart. I know you’re tough. Asking for something isn’t weak.”

Silence.

“Just sayin’, don’t hesitate to ask for things. Ya know, within reason. Like a room that has most of its ceiling…or an actual bed? Maybe even some glass for the sliver of a window?,” I say more jokingly as the corners of her mouth threaten to curl. “Point is…I’m not dying yet and while I’m still kickin’ I’d prefer that you actually live well. Got me?” I state.

Silence.

“Rasa? Raaaaaaaaaaaaaa?” I drawl out with a dumb look on my face. The corners of her mouth are still threatening to betray her. And following a deep inhale, I let out
“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa” to which she smirks, slaps me on my bare arm and yells “okay!” in defeat. I drop to my knees and engulf her tiny form in a hug – at first she goes rigid, my hug unexpected, but as the seconds tick by, she yields and hugs back. She’s shaking like she’s sobbing but nothing is coming out – still though, I reassure her by gripping just a bit tighter and humming low under my breath. The shaking slows and pushing back, she wipes her arm against her face and looking anywhere but at me, says “go on. Kill the bad guys. Don’t die,” and begins retreating to her “room.”

She disappears behind the busted door.

“The hurt is less. And now it’s time” Cole says from my side as I fall backwards against the railing, hissing “ffffuhhhhhhh!” Grabbing at the wall, I balance myself and swat at Cole’s shoulder – he looks confused and says “the hurt is more now?,” softly.

“Then don’t sneak up on a guy in a high place right after he’s promised he won’t die!,” I admonish the little pale ghost boy. And he seems to understand. Or at least he tilts his head to the side and smiles absently.

‘BYE COLE,’ I yell loudly in my head. He gets the message and nods as I walk away, back to the stairs, back to ground level.

Time to not die.

Time to meet the teams.

Time to fix a town.

And again, time to not die.
They won’t shut up. Sure, we’re nearly there but Sera and Dorian won’t shut up. Twenty some hours on and off horseback and somehow they’ve filled every minute of it with words.

Bullshit words.

Number of curse words.

Best types of hats…. Which they eventually decided against.

And to the dismay of everyone except Iron Bull, they discussed “who in our group is the most impressive.” I say Bull, because he ended up with both their votes after an entire hour of debate.

And it’s been raining since we cut North of Lake Calenhad. Wet and loud; that’s how the day has been.

The only, and I mean only, positive of this is that for the first time since Haven, I have a migraine that isn’t related to memory blocks. Instead, it’s because of their incessant talking.

Cassandra looks like she’s about to crack.

Blackwall, he’s been frowning for some time now.

Solas and Vivienne, they both have closed off their minds, instead meditating as we ride.

‘Screw spell work - give me meditation. That’s the power I really need,’ I think in envy of those two. Vivienne, terrifyingly astute as always, states “it truly is a useful skill, my dear. Perhaps you will allow me to mentor you in this.” Solas fires an incredulous glare her way. She pretends not to notice and he doesn’t press so I say “too late to save my sanity this day. But thanks Vivienne.”

“Think nothing of it, Inquisitor,” she coolly replies but Sera caught on – she yells from the flank “There’s nuthin’ sane about you, Inky!”

_No.Why is she calling me that._

Dorian chimes in “haha! Exactly right – sanity would be fleeing this damnable venture. Instead, you march right into the thick of it, yell at the monsters, punch the bigger monsters and so on and so forth! Isn’t that right….Inky?” Then shivering, he mock spits and retracts “no, that was awful. I will not be calling you that again.”

“CUZ ITZ MY WORD!,” Sera argues.

“ENOUGH!,” Cassandra finally breaks, “NO MORE! Sera, trade places with me. Dorian, move to the rear.” Blackwall slowly claps his appreciation for that and his weary eyes meet mine for a moment – there’s relief in them.
Dorian glowers like a scolded child and moves to the back alongside the Chargers. Sera swaps with Cassandra but mutters “yur no fun” in passing. Fortunately, for everyone, she doesn’t argue further. But too little too late – if only she’d snapped at them earlier – we’re here.

Jutting hills, piles of loose stones, sweeping waves of wet grass, sharp drops, small mountains, more rain, and…

A big menacing glow beneath the waves – like when a ship sinks and all the lights and power rage against the floods. Dampened, murky light. Green, ethereal.

“Is that it?..” Blackwall asks to which Solas states “the Rift lies below the surface – reaching it will be no small feat.”

“Wait, does that mean water is pouring into the Fade right now?,” Blackwall asks of the curiosity. No one seems to have an answer for him amidst the chatter and talk among our numbers. As the Chargers pass us to join the scout camp, Krem rides up and says “glad I don’t have your job,” staring at the submerged rift. Bull dismounts and argues “no, but it’s our job to get him there. Or did you not read the plans?”

“Of course I did, Chief! Someone’s gotta actually know what we're doin' around here,” Krem sarcastically replies but catching my look, mumbles “…I mean, ya know, other than… you knowing the plan. You know the plan.” Awkwardly, he spurs his mount and forward to camp he goes. I dismount and tie my horse to a tree as Bull waltzes up and reassures me, “don’t worry boss. We’ll get that fort for you. And then….”

“A dragon,” I say, preemptively.

As he groans “yeeeеееееееееееееееееееееееееееее,” you can actually see his arousal. I’d assumed that was just a quirk of the game. Nope. He’s…aroused.

So I clap him on the shoulder and step around him, leaving him to his thoughts.

Approaching camp, Cassandra and Solas fall in line behind me and we make way to whom I can only assume to be a damp Scout Harding.

Finally!

“Ah Inquisitor. I’ve heard a lot. It’s good to finally meet you. But, there's no time for pleasantries – we’ve got trouble ahead,” the dwarven scout informs me.

“Guess it has to do with undead and that big bastard?,” I say, pointing to the rift below the waves. Folding her arms and looking out over the waters, she says “Crestwood was the site of a flood ten years ago during the Blight. It’s not the only rift in the area, but after it appeared, corpses started walking out of the lake; you’ll have to fight through them to get to the cave where Ser Hawke’s Grey Warden friend is hiding.”

“Have the undead attacked the camp?,” Cassandra inquires to which Harding replies “we’ve had a few shamblers but most head toward the village. Maybe someone in Crestwood could tell you how to get to the rift in the lake?”

“Already know how. Stay safe,” I tell the small scout.

“You too, good luck,” she replies and hurries off to address other scouts.

“Well?,” Cassandra asks expectantly. I turn from the cliff to address my people, “we’ve all got a
task. You know what those are. Then we’ll all meet up at the fort! From there, we’re going up against a damn dragon! MOVE OUT!” Bull, still clearly excited, unstraps his silverite two hander, and heads off with his Chargers – Sera sticks her tongue out at me and follows after. Dorian, he tweaks his rain plastered mustache and does the same.

I swear, they're both kids.

Solas Sighs in passing, clearly displeased about having to go along with such a rowdy crew but he doesn’t complain. Instead, he merely pads along after the large group with his staff in hand.

Falling in, Cassandra, Varric, Blackwall, Vivienne and I begin our march toward town but Vivienne steps to my side and asks “my dear, why would you have me stay at such a …humble location?”

Addressing her pride, I respond “you’re incredibly powerful, a knight-enchanter, so I know you’ll keep their undead loved ones from murdering everyone. Also, I know you can handle demons. You’re the obvious choice. Secondly, you have a calming aura – perhaps it’s how you carry yourself but that’s clearly a benefit in this situation.” With her ego stoked, looking up to me, she smirks and says “so you do know of my attributes? Darling, never you mind – I’ll see to it that not a single undead or demon get past the entrance. And of course, I’ll ensure that cowardly leech of a mayor doesn’t flee.”

Thunder cracks.

“You’re the right pick,” I finish as I spot two Wardens backing away from the B-Team – they killed the shambling undead couple on the spot in lieu of the Wardens and saved a young elf in the process – she profusely thanking Bull but he’s just smiling and telling her to go home, “go be safe – there’s more of them out here. But we’ll get them,” he soothes and marches off with the others. The Wardens are left anxiously standing in front of an offering statue, wary of us in our approach. “Halt! What are you doing here,” one Warden calls out.

Varric, ever the smooth talker says “gentlemen. We’re here to get rid of the undead problem. What about you? Here to help?”

Stumbling over his words, the addressing Warden says “uh, uh no. We’re hunting a rogue Warden. He was seen in these parts.”

“Oh yeah? What makes this Warden so bad? Can’t be worse than the walking corpses and demons,” Varric asks the two and the second of whom whispers to his partner “the dwarf is right – why aren’t we helping?”

The first whispers back quickly “because orders,” and addressing us, he says “uh, good luck with the undead. I’m sorry we can’t… I’m sorry,” and the two march off into the foothills.

“Well, at least we’ve guilted them from the area,” Varric smirks out as Cassandra actually praises him, saying “finally. A use for your mouth.” Ever the humble one, Varric places his hand over his heart and bows, receiving only a minimal eyeroll from the Seeker.

I notice that Blackwall was standing behind me, out of the sight, for the entire exchange.

Smart. Best not to let them question his being here.

Onward we press, rounding turns and such until we see the main gates – and these “shamblers” are much more devastating in large numbers – as if by blood magic, the undead have locked together and as a wave of corpses, again and again they sweep and strike at the barricades.
town militia are poised on top of the walls but their arrows are of little use.

And swords won’t work for this.

Cassandra breathes “Maker guide us” and kneeling, she begins a prayer of fortitude – the cloud cover opens overhead and the rain stops solely over the undead masses. Smoke begins pouring from them as they chatter and writh against one another – then embers. Holy fire erupts from a key few positions and the horde breaks – scattered, some lash out at the other undead while others turn their attention on us. Vivienne grants me a wicked smile and draws a blade handle from her sleeve – with a swipe, light blazes, forming a sword and fades. She takes a two handed stance, arms raised above her head with the hilt and grip held high.

I reposition my feet shoulder width apart and clench my fists tightly; knuckles pop under the pressure – I breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Violet tints my vision on my final exhale and heat radiates from mouth. My anchor flares and a barrier shimmers over me.

Only this time, I actually feel in control.

I’m not burning myself this time.

Viv and I dart forward, leaving Blackwall and Varric to defend Cassandra as she continues weakening the dead – she takes the right and I, the left. With a downward arc, golden light flares and cuts through the dead before her, cauterizing corpse flesh as it phases through. Meanwhile I roar at the horde – violet napalm erupts forth and obliterates those of the horde before me. Splash damage burns out the tendons and legs of those closest.

A bolt whistles past my ear and finds itself lodged in a shambler’s empty eye socket – but it doesn’t drop. They’re possessed corpses – crippling them won’t stop this – only total destruction will. I throw a punch while stoking the fires within and tear clean through the corpse – muddy neck tendons snap and the upper column of spine bursts in a damp cloud of bone dust. The scent of wet dog explodes and mixes with plumes of smoke rising from the sogged corpses around us.

Vivienne continues, darting and dancing, slashing and slicing at the enemy numbers. But never hacking – her movements are too graceful for that; every attack feeds fluidly into her next.

My attacks, however, are more labored. I may be a powerhouse but sweat glistens on my neck and brow as I fistfight through the remaining dead, stomping at the skulls of those that topple. No longer can I spit napalm for fear of dealing friendly fire to our Knight-Enchanter. Fortunately, we make quick work of remainders without fuss – and more impressively, her without getting viscera or mud on her shimmering white garments.

I'm less impressive; scraps of flesh and wet shards of bone cling to me.

With the last remnants obliterated, smoldering and cut down, the gates draw open from within, hinges and rickety wood rattling as unseen hands pull at ropes and chains, and several of the townspeople call us in.
Pivoting on her stiletto heel, our very own Lady of Iron faces me saying "My dear, this is where we part – do be quick. I’d prefer not to stay here any longer than necessary," and with flourish, spins again and glides through the front gates. I’m left waving to the guards along the walls as Varric, Blackwall, and Cassandra rejoin me and when they do, I ask “we all good?”

“Can’t complain,” Varric says with a shrug as Blackwall folds his arms and nods into the rain, grumbling “you said this ends when we close that rift? Let's go then…”

Our Seeker rolls her neck from side to side and after a single pop, relaxes and agrees, “yes, we should hurry.”

Onward we go, marching in the rain around the town perimeter – the tall, wet grass licks against our shins – in Varric’s case, the grass licks at his thighs.

“So Seeker, I’ve gotta say, never seen you pull that trick before…” Varric grumbles as he staggers over the wet, uneven ground to which she huffs “it was a purge of sorts. Through prayer, I can weaken demons.”

"Seems dependent on having allies nearby,” Blackwall mumbles.

“It certainly helps to have others, yes,” she agrees as we continue forward and down into the pass. Cliffs rise high around us as we dip down below ground level – off in the distance between thunder claps, the sounds of battle carry to our ears.

“Sounds like they’re having fun…” Varric mutters regarding the battle for the fort.

“Huuurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
above the shoulder.

Dust.

We function well, even in silence.

“Nice work everyone,” I proudly tell my group.

Wiping wet black from his blade on the grass, Blackwall agrees “we’re actually doing well as a unit,” while Cassandra grunts as she tears her shield from the corpse. As she does, the body liquifies and pours out over the ground instead of turning to dust. Kicking her feet, she flings the dark goop from her boots and states, agitated, “let’s just hurry to Hawke.” Plucking her sword from the ground by its pommel, she marches off. Varric falls in, walking alongside me, clearly pleased with the damage old Bianca was dealing to those demons now that he’s swapped his ammunition – mid walk, he’s rubbing her down, plucking at the tension chords, and whispering softly.

...Wait...we’re about to meet Hawke and Cass only seems annoyed?

Did she and Varric not get into a screaming match?

...Ask her later.

As we wind around jutting boulders, and avoid the druffalo, Varric points out Hawke lurking in the mouth of a cave – meanwhile, I’m keeping an eye to our flank; no one is there. None that I see – things have changed just enough that I’m worried we might’ve led enemies to Loghain.

But...there’s no one. Even only looking through my left, there’s no one in these rainy fields. None but the husks of a few formless spirits floating aimlessly in that In Between: muted from the physical but not quite returned to the Fade.

Calm down.

As we approach, Hawke slinks from the shadows and sheathes her daggers while saying “Glad you made it – I just got here myself. My contact should be in the back of this cave.”

Loghain

“We scared off a few Wardens on the way over; so that’s good for him,” I reply.

As she quirks an eyebrow at us, I elaborate “we came in force, said we were wiping out the undead and they should help. Looked like they might for a sec but...orders,” and I roll my eyes.

Frowning in concern, Hawke replies “Well, thanks for that – they were likely hunting my friend,” while staring off at the fields we came from. “...Anyway, follow me – come on,” she says, walking into the cave. Into the darkness, rainwater drips and trickles around us and our steps splash lightly in the shallow puddles. Those splashes echo – Loghain has to know we’re here.

My horns scrape at low hanging stalactites…

‘Timeforacut,’ I think in annoyance as Hawke leads us to a rotted wooden door and pushes against it, unjamming it from the surrounding stone – no creaking, it’s all too damp for that.

A glint of steel in the low light and a growling voice threatens “who goes there?”

“It’s just us! I brought the Inquisitor,” Hawke warns with her hands up defensively and the sword drops – sheathing it, its owner steps into the lamplight, dark weary eyes reflecting its glow and with
a tired voice, he croaks “Warden Loghain Mac Tir. I believe we have a common cause…”

His fingers fidget at his side, tapping along to a Calling only a Warden can hear.

Stepping forward past Hawke, I extend my hand – surprisingly, he throws a strong grip into mine and we shake as I say “The Loghain. I love a redemption story. It’s good to meet ya.”

Through a tired smirk, he says “the traitor teryn, yes, I’ve heard all the things.”

“Ya haven’t heard this – without the events of ten years ago playing out as they had, ya wouldn’t be here. And that wouldn’t be good because you’re one of the best. And this situation? It demands the best,” I state, looking down at him, my tone low and serious. He doesn’t seem to know how to register this information but he breathes, nearly a chuckle, and replies “I’ve..been a Warden for ten years…I..thank you. I’ve never been truly accepted as one of their own…that’s something which I have cause to be grateful for as of late.”

Releasing our grip, he steps to his table of notes, tomes, maps, and charts. Cassandra asks from my side “So what do we know?”

I add “and does it have to do with Corypheus?” A nerve twinges in my neck, that permanent migraine slowly rises to the beat.

Ruffling through loose pages, he looks to us, gauging, and says “I believe so. After Hawke..”

“And myself,” Varric slides in.

“Yes,” Loghain continues, "after they killed Corypheus, Weisshaupt was content to forget the whole affair. But an Archdemon can survive seemingly mortal wounds, why not Corypheus? I began to investigate…” and looking back to his papers, says “I found evidence but not proof. Then soon after, every Warden in Orlais began to hear the Calling.”

A concerned Hawke springs toward her friend and states “you never told me!” as Loghain, with saddened eyes, replies “I didn’t think it concerned you.”

“The song that signals the end of a Warden’s life, that the corruption will soon claim them,” I whisper

Some surprise shows on his face as Loghain turns and confirms, “yes,” to which Hawke adds “and every Grey Warden in Orlais is hearing that right now? They think they’re dying?”

Solemnly, Loghain says “yes. And it’s Corypheus, I believe. If the Wardens fall, who’ll stop the next blight? That is what’s panicked my brethren.”

“And thanks to the Calling, Corypheus has them scared. Great,” Hawke states sarcastically.

“So..what do you make of this?,” I ask, head tilted uncomfortably so my horns don’t continue to scrape at rock formations.

“I do not know. Even as a Senior Warden, I knew little about it,” Loghain confesses, “the Wardens believe it to be real, despite my warnings of Corypheus; that is all that matters at the moment.”

Folding my arms, I ask “is it all cause of his ties to the Blight? That how he’s pulling this off?”

“I do not know – perhaps it is his nature. Corypheus is, or was once, a mortal man. The Blight owns him but did not create him. Wardens are tied to the Blight through darkspawn. That is how
Corypheus influences Warden minds. Somehow, he’s using that power to mimic the Calling.”

My head throbs, the migraine angrier and my vision blurs just a bit in my right eye. Fresh blood trickles from my nose – I brush my shoulder against it; I don’t think anyone noticed.

‘This is either a mean tumor or I’m on the right track. Or..’ I think drollly, ‘why not both. That’d fit in with my luck.’

“So all the Wardens…. Shit, are you two hearing it?,” Varric asks of Blackwall and Loghain, while stepping back a couple paces.

“Yes. It’s like an itch in the back of my mind…at times it’s barely there at all…then I find myself starting to hum it under my breath. It IS vile; I can understand why so many Wardens have gone mad from it,” Loghain confesses and Blackwall, he stands rigid, ever the soldier when he says “I do not fear the Calling, and worrying about it only gives it power. Anything Corypheus does will only strengthen my resolve.”

‘THAT’S WHY IT’S IMPORTANT YOU’RE NOT A GREY WARDEN. It’s all coming into place, the pieces fall,’ blood trickles freely from both nostrils and pain’s pulse increases, ‘the Wardens. They’re working with Corypheus….something.’ The throbbing strengthens and I press my right knuckles against my temple, ‘something…Western Approach. Why is that relevant? Why are you…I NEED to remember…’

“A Blight nearly destroyed Ferelden. A Blight without Wardens to stop it might well destroy the world. Warden Commander Clarel is…”

THROB

“.preparing a ritual involving blood magic,” Loghain speaks those last words with heavy malice on his tongue, “a desperate measure to prevent further Blights. When I protested the plan, called it madness, they tried to arrest me.” Pointing to his maps, he continues “Grey Wardens are gathering here, in the Western Approach.”

Throb

“There’s an ancient Tevinter ritual tower; meet me there,” he says quietly as he wanders off towards the cave entrance.

Throb

“Hey Knock Out, you doing alright?,” Varric asks of me as I open my eyes. The room is staring at me on the floor.

‘When did I sit down?!’ I question, disturbed that I don’t remember.

“Uh, yeah,” I lie as Cassandra storms up and kneels beside me, “you are not, clearly. How long has this been going on?,” she demands.

“Saw that happen to him the last time we spoke, specifically about Corypheus,” Hawke reveals as Varric grumbles “yeah, I think I saw that back in Haven a couple times too.”

“Inquisitor,” Cass presses as I breathe shallow breaths; a cold sweat coats my skin.

“We should get him back to camp, he’s in no condition..” Blackwall puts forward as Cass demands “Inquisitor?!”
I limply pat at her shoulder, trying to reassure her and confess “it has to…do with memory.”
Another shallow breath, “I lost a lot to the blast…when I remember crucial…”
“details,” she finishes for me and I nod, appreciatively. “Like I’m not supposed to know about..”
and gulping, “..Corypheus.”

Confused, Blackwall asks “how’s that work? You saw the Envy Demon and the attack on Haven.
Aren’t those related to him?”

“You also saw what would befall the mages and had Leliana save those she could, to weaken the
Venatori,” the Seeker adds. My breathing deepens, the pain, though present, becomes more
tolerable and I reply “don’t know…don’t know why it is what it is. But we can’t stop. Something
is telling me we’re close. Something has been telling me…to remember...ever since I woke up.
Ever since ya had me in shackles” to Cassandra’s surprise. Rising, she angrily states “I would hit
you for lying for so long. All of you, for keeping this from me, but if we are in fact close to
figuring this out, then…” She pauses a moment before looking back down into my pained eyes and
ordering “we must proceed. Help me” of Blackwall and he hurries forth to do so – he’s not about to
further piss off a pissed off Cassandra.

He’s smarter than that.

The two hoist me up to my feet and I stagger a moment, before regaining my footing.

Sighing, I breathe out “let’s go see about that rift…” as they walk me from the cave.
A Rift Dies, A Rift Is Born

Chapter Summary

Part 1 of my weekly update.

They’d done it – dragging me around, we saw the Hairy Eyeball flying high over the fort. We’d heard the torrential rush of waters thundering from beyond – the dam is under our control and Old Crestwood available. We’d closed two rifts on the way down, and killed demons and shamblers aplenty. Once in the drowned town, I’d made a pact with a trapped spirit of Command (against Cassandra’s wishes) to slay a rage demon in the caverns below. We’d found the decimated records the mayor had left in his old home – proof – and now, we’re to see about the twists and turns that’ll take us to the rift.

Down we descend, slowly, the rotted walkways and planks – so far, spirits hover everywhere but they’ve yet to interfere. They’re watching us. Careful of the hanging stalactites and spiking stalagmites, we enter a larger carvers within – a lone despair demon drifts about on the far end with some undead. With great pains, my anchor snaps a rift open above them all and off they’re whisked into the abyss.

No fight. No hassle.

Well, only the hassle of moving me along.

Fortunately, Cass and Blackwall have been trading off supporting me the whole way down so I’m feeling significantly better.

Further down we go, deep into the hole, down and down till we hit dwarven ruins, to which Varric, disbelief in his tone, asks “shit, is there anywhere Dwarves haven’t built?!”

“How about above ground?,” Blackwall jokes.

“Even then – the Hissing Wastes. There’s an old thaig out there above the sands,” I murmur to the shock of Varric who replies “bullshit. Dwarves love their underground.”

“Even you, Varric?,” Cass snidely asks.

“Seeker, you know I’m anything but a normal dwarf.”

“…the chest hair alone,” she jokes under her breath and Varric is left gaping, looking about to each of us, speechless. He keeps sticking his hands out like “come on, I can’t be the only one who heard that!” but no one responds.

More fun this way.

But the mood changes when an enormous rage demon, all fire and fury, boils past, melting lesser demons as it flows over them.

Despite the continual migraine and threat of nosebleeds, I push myself from Blackwall and march, staggering, toward the monster while willing death into my left palm – despite my fatigue, green
intermingles with black, the thick miasma bubbles and drips from my fist. Breathing deep, keeping myself standing, I yell out “HEY ANGRY BITCH” in challenge.

Apparently it works. The hellfire face tears around a corner and locks its bonfire eyes to mine. No sound. No words more. It flies at me and I ready myself.

“INQUISITOR!,” Cass shouts out but I throw a serious punch twenty paces – Rage’s face evaporates and its broken body slams into the adjacent wall. Searing and bleeding, boiling goo splashes down at the ground and it fades leaving naught but scars and burns in the dwarven architecture.

“Finally, I am free of this dreaded plane. Farewell,” comes Command’s final sentiment in my head.

‘At least we didn’t have to make a U turn. Well, that’s done,’ I think as Cass rushes to my side. I’m too tired to talk. She sees this and so we press on, the splashing of ankle high water our only sounds.

Ahead, through a crack in the wall, green light pours through and reflects menacingly off the water – hisses and growls, screeches, mocking laughter and roars echo from within.

Cassandra leans me against the threshold and says “stay here. Close the rift – we will fight the demons,” though she’s met with groans from Varric. Instead of letting them fight, I push further into the crack and block it off, my back to them and face the rift myself.

No point letting them get hurt... not if I can do something.

“Inquisitor. This isn’t what we discussed,” Cassandra argues angrily with my backside and tries to forcibly withdraw me – no good, I’ve got my right hand in a death grip on the threshold.

“Oh shit,” Varric whispers from behind as Blackwall agrees. The demons don’t notice us. Lucky.

Pulling some loose elfroot from my pockets, I mash it into my mouth and start chewing it like cud – anything to get an edge. Before even trying to interact with the oversized rift, I envision what’ll feel like, what I need to look forward to.

I can’t let it reopen four times in a row.

Can’t let it pour demons down on us.

Not a simple tear in the fabric of space, instead it breathes and pulsates along the entire cavern ceiling.

‘Find the pins. Find the combo...’ I imagine as I extend my mark upwards and forwards.

How did you open...where are your teeth? ....and can I reverse you?

The anchor seems to understand – we can make this exit an entrance, make the door swing both ways. And so to help, I imagine just that – the rifts I make pull enemies in...I just have to manipulate this rift to do the same...

“Reverse. Please,” I whisper to my mark.

A twist of the wrist.
A low pulse.

Imagined pins.

LIGHT FLARES.

My scars ignite.

Teeth grit, I can’t all the pain to win.

My arm, it trembles.

The rift, its growls.

The demons turn.

But not soon enough.

Tendrils whip down from the ceiling, wringing the throats of the demons below. Thrashing, confused, angry, they tear at their own necks for freedom.

Up they soar, torn back to the immaterial.

A snap of the fingers.

The ceiling closes in on itself, drowning us in darkness.

It all shuts down… things go darker than they should.

**********

“Ughhh” I groan and a heavy hand pushes on my chest, “stay in bed” comes Bull’s deep voice, “you really gotta take better care of yourself. Then maybe next time, you’ll actually be able to join us in fighting a dragon."

“What?!” I choke out, trying to rise and again, he pushes me back down. We’re in the room where typically the player would catch some scouts playing wicked grace – guess it’s mine for the moment.

“..mmm yeah, see, you were out cold. So we left you here in your brand new keep. You’re welcome by the way,” he jokes, and winks while leaning back in his chair.

Or blinks. I’ll never know.

Attempting to joke back, I choke out “you’re welcome for …the.. dragon.”

“Oh you should have seen it. Beautiful. And you were right! The old girl was spitting lightning! It. Was. Wonderful.”

“Taarsidath-an haalsaam, amiright?” I mutter as I relax back against the bedding.

At that, he starts cackling out “AGH, AHAHAHA HA HA HA HA, YYYEEEES! Didn’t think you’d know that one, hehehe,” while slapping at his knee, “but damn straight. Mmmhmmm.
Definitely a thought for later…”

He pauses a moment and hands me a mug from the side table – it smells like rubbing alcohol. Nodding with a grimace, I accept the cup but hold off on drinking it, deflecting by saying “so how’s everyone else? Alive?”

“Surprisingly, yes. Rocky wasn’t paying attention – got bitten by a hound in the the shoulder somehow but he’ll be fine – Cutter took care of it quick enough. And Krem took a few hits, but he’ll shake it off. As for the Northern Hunter…” a smile creeps up upon his face, “…we managed to take her out with zero casualties.”

“Good,” I sigh out.

“Well your notes certainly helped – hard to lose when you know where everyone and everything is going to be, thanks to your weird magic eye shit,” he grins as he leans back in his chair, producing another mug and drinking deep.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhtashiiiiii,” he lets out, refreshed, and wipes his upper lip, “anyway, I should go let Miss Seeker know you’re up.”

Rising from his chair, he lumbers out and through the door, ducking down as he does.

Now out of earshot, I pull my hand free of the sheets and whisper “hey, you okay?”

It pulses twice, yes.

“Know why I get the headaches and nosebleeds?”

One pulse, no.

“Am I dying because of them?”

Two now.

Of course I am.

“Inquisitor? I don’t mean to intrude…I heard you talking to someone?,” Cassandra asks as she leans in through the doorway. Answering down the long hall, I say “all good Cass, was just talkin’ to myself. C’mon in.”

I prop myself up against the headboard as she comes to my bedside; I keep my head craned forward so my my horns down scratch against the wall.

“Does it help to talk to yourself?”

“Yeah…I mean, I’ve been doin’ it my whole life. Like to think it’s helped me work though most of my issues,” I reveal.

Shifting uncomfortably in place, she says “I. have always turned to the Maker. Though, he seldom answers.”

“Does that bother you?”

“I must admit I am jealous – you are always so certain of what you need to do…regardless of where that comes from…” she taps a finger to her left eye to indicate mine, “how….how do you know you are on the right path?”
“When I don’t know the future? Listen to my guts…er, my conscience,” I fumble out.

“Yours must speak more loudly than mine,” she smirks out and leans against my supporting wall and at my side.

Hands floundering, uncertain what to do with them, I state “Seems to me you’re already on the right path – however you’ve been getting your answers so far appears to be workin’ for ya. I mean, we might disagree on certain details but I can’t argue the results,” and with a shrug, I add “Cassandra, you’re amazing” while staring down at my sheets.

“Thank you, but you are the amazing one,” she says to my surprise, “at first, I sought after the Hero of Ferelden…”

“Yeah, Wan.”

“Yes, and then I searched for the Champion of Kirkwall. I should be angry with Varric for misleading me….but I am not. Not even with myself for believing him, because truly, I do not believe that Hawke could do what you have done. You survived the explosion only to be met with animosity…”

“Meh, it was warranted,” I shrug, “strange guy with a strange mark? Makes sense.”

Huffing slightly, she smiles when she says “perhaps. But I could’ve been more patient.”

Grinning, I laugh out “patience…isn’t that one of your twelve middle names?” at which she jabs my shoulder, chuckles breathily in kind, and declares “four. I have four middle names.”

But her smile fades and regaining her serious edge, she continues “you saved the Templars from themselves and fought off possession… you coordinated with Leliana to save the mages, or as many as possible, dealing a serious blow to future Venatori plans. You fought a Tevinter magister of old and survived; you were willing to sacrifice yourself to save us. You do not strive for power but when asked to become Inquisitor, you measured what that meant…not many would. And against it all, you continue to fight all the while suffering in pain.” Those last few words drive a cold knife of guilt deep into my stomach.

“Why did you not tell me?,” she says evenly, but her eyes beg the question.

‘I…,’ my mind draws a blank but my mouth says “I was scared.”

It’s true. Perhaps the most true I’ve been since I woke up in Thedas.

And then the words come pouring out, “trust you with my life…I was scared. I didn’t want to let you down. Didn’t even know how to talk about it. Didn’t want my scare to be your scare. I’m… I’m sorry.”

Her hand comes to rest on top of mine and situating herself in the chair at my bedside, she whispers “I understand fear. It affects us all and in different ways…when I lost my brother, my fear became hatred and that hate was directed at every mage. I’ve…,” and gripping my hand more tightly, “come to realize that I cannot group all mages together. You are people and as such, each one is different. What I mean to say…” She’s tongue tied – flustered is a good look on her.

“I like you too, Cass,” I confess as her breath stills; a deer in the headlight. A pink flashes across her cheeks.

In a hush, she breathes “..it was not my imagination.”
“Nope, it was not. I am very much into you,” I reiterate smoothly despite my heartbeat threatening to crack my ribcage.

“But…but…it’s impossible. You cannot court me,” she frantically whispers in disbelief and retracts her hand from mine.

“It’s the horns isn’t it? I’ve been meaning to trim them back down…” I try to cut the tension as torchlight wavers.

Ignoring my quip and fidgeting in her seat, she anxiously demands “Is that your intention? Do you actually wish to court me?!”

“Well, yeah. And isn’t that what you’d like?”

Rising to her feet, she whispers “no?” in question and stomps off towards the door. I go to toss my head back in frustration but my horns catch the wall, jarring me.

“Ahh fuck me,” I growl in minor pain under my breath.

And damn it.

As if hearing my thoughts, she returns as quickly as she left and kneeling at my bedside to be eye level with me, she huffs out “yes. It is what I want,” all the while frowning in concern.

Trepidation.

“I want…a man who sweeps me off my feet, who gives me flowers and reads me poetry by candlelight. I want the ideal! You are the Inquisitor and the Herald of Andraste…”

[internal growling]

“.you cannot be that man,” she finishes.

Piecing my thoughts together, I recall a poem as if from a dream. Reaching out and taking her hand in mine, I squeeze reassuringly, and as if entranced while looking into her worried face, I recite the words...

“crickets trill when you’re not here, theirs a song of absence.  
And in their silence I do bask, when you are at my side.  
Behind these orbs, ardor burns, ever stoking fire.  
Delight in light, or ours to fight, shadowy desire.  
Death and pain’s license dull, so long as we don’t shy.  
Once together, now unfettered, we prove each other’s essence.”

My mouth goes dry at the shock in her eyes, but regardless, I force myself to talk – murmuring softly, I confess “I’d sweep you off your feet but as you can see…” while indicating to myself and the bed.

Her eyes glisten, a tear rolls down her cheek and leaning forward, she presses her lips to my forehead. Tender. Warm. She smells of smoke but beneath that is a floral scent.

Stronger than roses…maybe lilac? It’s sweet enough to be..

She squeezes my hand in kind but withdraws. Retreats. Her lips leave and I’m left cold from their
departure. With steadying breathes, she rises again and whispers “…the world hinges on our actions. We face death at every turn. Goodnight Hu…. goodnight, Inquisitor.”

I stare in silence as she leaves, closing the door behind her.

She couldn’t even say my name…

For the first time in a long time, and not from panic or pain, tears blur the edges of my eyes.

I take the tall mug of Bull’s reserve on my side table and down it – it burns horribly.

‘No. Can’t wallow. Not now,’ I think as I roll out of bed and crawl over to the nearest desk – some ink spills as I pull myself up the table side – doesn’t matter – grabbing a clean sheet of parchment I tear a piece off. With quill in hand, I hastily pen an urgent note to Cullen:

Cullen! March inquisition forces to
Western Approach. Orlais Wardens making demon army.
Leaving Caer Bronach. Will update you as we find out more.
Expect to alter course as you go.
-The Hunt Is On

Underneath that last bit, I scribble another set of Xs and Os – He’ll have to know it’s me. Any fucking idiot could sign with the title “Inquisitor.”

‘But here’s hoping he heeds it…’ I worry while folding the note in half.

Dragging myself along the wall, my body nearly refusing me, I make it to the doorway spotting Charter with mission briefs in hand and a mean dagger on her hip – her flaming red hair and pointed ears a dead giveaway.

“Pssst!,” I shoot loudly at her, getting her attention. Walking to meet me at the door, she arches a brow while asking “Inquisitor?”

“Charter, you’re the only one I can trust to get this to Leliana,” I whisper and pass her the note.

“How quickly do you need it there?”

“How quickly do you need it there?”

“Yesterday,” I tell her, hoping that conveys the urgency.

Without arguing, she glances at the note, looks up to me with new steel in her eyes and declares “I’ll see this done.” With a wink of confidence, she spins and dashes off. On foot, or to the rookery, I can’t say. Don’t care. She’s one of the best…if not the best. She’ll know better than me.
Here Lies the Abyss

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the weekly update. We're heading to Adamant.

Being a day’s ride East of Skyhold, our band had had to push hard to ensure good time – it wouldn’t have done well to have the message reach Cullen and his forces march before we even had gotten to the Western Approach.

From Crestwood, we rushed to the Imperial Highway and rode hard around the northern tip of Lake Calenhad. Curving, we continued through Gherlen’s Pass and pushing pass Orazammar’s entrance and beyond the Frostback Mountains, we continued West on the long stretch of the Imperial Highway. We had only stopped for food and rest, never lingering. We rode hard past Halamshiral – we’d see it soon enough up close – past Lydes and Verchiel; keeping to the highway, we’d rounded the Southern tip of Lake Celestine and hit the deserts edge.

Surprisingly, no one challenged us on the road – then again, we did consist of one heavily weakened me, the entire Iron Bull’s Chargers mercenary band, a Seeker, a Grey Warden, two stylish and obvious mages, one plain but obvious Elven mage, one chaotic Elven archer, and a particularly smooth dwarf with a particularly wicked crossbow. No one would likely mess with that on the open road.

Not without the numbers.

And right now, I doubt Corypheus has the numbers. Right now? He’s likely going through another “recruitment” period.

The benefit of pushing yourself to the brink of exhaustion in a race to stop a supposedly honorable force from binding themselves to demons? Not enough energy left to pursue my thoughts of Cassandra. And while we’d travelled fairly close together that entire time, we had spoken remarkably little.

Which...is just great. Great. Absolutely great.

What should've have taken at least two weeks, we did in half.

How I'm still conscious, I don't know

***************

I stand in the blistering sun on the desert’s edge, oranges and reds paint the rocks and remnants jutting from the sands. A lone Phoenix sprints in the distance, it’s form wavering in the heat. Breathing deep as he comes to my side, Blackwall says “so the way they said it, we’ll want to head towards that chasm.”
“Yeah, the ritual ruin extends out over the drop. Hawke’ll meet us there…ya know, assuming we didn’t pass her and Loghain on the way here…”

“The way we were riding? It’s entirely possible,” he mutters, and looking more closely at me, says in a hush “you alright? You’re looking grey…er, more grey than usual.”

With a drying mouth, I whisper “no. I’m bad. But this’ll only get worse if we hold off” in admission, ”I was passing out on my horse a lot.” Looking up to the blinding sky, my vision doubles and I wobble only slightly in place.

Blackwall stands in silence, apparently digesting my words. The others are setting up camp on the ridge behind us with some inquisition scouts.

“If this is the course you’re certain uff….then I’ll see you through to the end. My sword and shield are yours,” the gruff swordsman declares.

“Appreciate it, grizzly.”

Stroking at his long greying beard and relaxing some, he chuckles out “hey! You’ll have one soon enough.”

Running my fingertips against it, maybe half an inch in length, I’m struck with the realization of just how long it’s been since I last shaved… and how long I’ve been here generally.

“Months.”

But no time to awe at the passage of time; at present, I’m a dead man walking.

Weakly clapping Blackwall on the back, I turn us back towards camp. We’ll hole up there for the night and deal with this terrible endeavor at first light. Besides, maybe I can get Sera’s help with cutting down my horns.

Last thing I need is an enemy hanging on me by them.

*******

The sun beats down on my head in this windless heat.
Words are garbled, a low echo against a high pitched whine – my head feels awful.

Then again, it always does.

“So weak. So quickly you fall into my master’s trap!”

I wince hard and blink my eyes slowly as the words slowly come into focus.

“Hello?”

“Helllllllo?!”

“Hello? Oh for the sake of… what is wrong with him?! How this pathetic creature held his own
against my master, I will never know!”

It wavers in and out, but I realize someone is talking to me; I grumble out “what?” and look to the
source on the platform ahead – he’s a greasy ferret of a man; patchy black whiskers in lieu of a
proper beard and a sneering twist to his lips, his black hair hangs limply around his sunburned face
but all of this is somehow meant to be offset by his ornate robes and staff.

Against the waves of pain crashing against the inside of my skull, a flicker of recognition blooms
as my nose bleeds anew – “Erimond?,” I whisper the question.

“Yes! Finally! Did you really not hear a word I’ve been saying? You lose!,” he whines as I notice
the possessed Wardens and demons surrounding me. Though glancing over my shoulder, I realize I
should say “us,” seeing as how Cassandra, Dorian, Blackwall, Solas, Hawke, Loghain are just
behind me.

**HOW DID WE GET HERE?!**

***WHEN?!***

...it's getting worse.

Again, mental stitches buckle and pop, and wavering, I ask though my teeth “did you already say
the part about a demon army? And ..how the Wardens wanted to march them into the deep roads to
wipe out the Old Gods. And how Corypheus imitated the Calling so you could point the desperate
Wardens on that path. So you could actually conquer Thedas?”

At this, Solas protests fiercely “WHAT?! They cannot do this! To make attempts to slay the Old
Gods, to preempt the Blight?! What are they thinking!?”

"or how you're a tool?," I ask to which Dorian snickers.

Ignoring Solas and Dorian while looking at a loss for words, Erimond fumbles “you..you know all
that? Well, yes! And just in case your were foolish enough to show, my Master gave me this!”

With renewed confidence, he brandishes a blazing crimson light within his clenched fingers and
taking aim, assaults my mark.

Corypheus’ will. That same malevolence; it slithers, intangible, around my bones and needles itself
through flesh. My nerve endings scream as the old pain rises…

But pain is something I’m somewhat familiar with by now.

Before they’re corrupt. Is moronic.”

“yes, well, they won’t actually have the chance to…” the Venatori scum sneers.

My anchor grows furious, angrily emanating green fade light – it surges bright, raging against this
intrusion and the crimson held within Erimond’s grasp detonates..

...costing him a couple fingers as blood mists – yelping in pain, he’s thrown back against a
sandblasted stone wall. Hissing at his injuries, he squeezes at his hands to stymie the flow of blood
and frantically screams at the possessed Wardens “ATTACK THEM!!!” before scrambling over
the railing, vanishing from sight.

As I watch him go, so does my vision – it triples and goes dark as the yells of my companions
warble and echo in my ears.

It all goes so distant….

“Inquisitor?!,” Cassandra yells out from so far away, “Solas, keep the demons off him!”

Darkness falls.

************************

Darkness.

“He said it was imperative he be here, Cassandra!”

“I know this. Stay ahead, I will shoulder his weight.”

Darkness.

I force my eyes open and they refuse to focus.

Missiles scream overhead with trails of smoke and ashes wafting – the air is thick with soot, blood, and sulfur. The entire land is a cacophony of screams and roars, metal on metal, man on man on demon. Not even the moon reveals itself this night, this fight.

I’m splitting – my head is ringing and the twitches, they aren’t stopping. The pulses of the anchor have grown as well; I think they match the rhythm of my spasms. I can feel her gauntlet on me, but it feels unreal.

Everything is unraveling.

It’s hazy, but her shield flies up and stops a bolt from connecting with my chest and she cries over the din, “Inquisitor!? Are you with us? We are almost inside – Cullen and his men have broken Adamant. We will stop these Wardens, just hold on,” and guides me further.

“How did we get here?,” I feebly ask.

“You wouldn’t stop whispering of Adamant while unconscious. We were going to leave you behind but you screamed how you needed to be here – that only you could stop what’s within. More than that, you did not say,” Cassandra says, worry heavy in her voice.

*And she’s had to shoulder my burden this whole time?*

Breaking.

Fractured.

Demoralized.

*How do ya lead an army when you need to be led?*
“Worry not, we’ve got you. Cassandra, keep your shield up – I’ll take on the direct attacks.” Blackwall growls out to both of us and pushes ahead. He’s out of focus but I see shadows struggling – and a longer shadow penetrate another. Wet hits stone and copper fills the air. More shadows dance beyond Cassandra’s shield and all fall before the shadow Blackwall. Huffing, he drops back to my side and spits out “dumb bastards, can’t reason with em – they’re all possessed now. We’ve got to hurry if we intend to stop this.”

“We should leave him behind -- he cannot fight like – then we could return and bring him where...” Cassandra pleads while keeping her shield arm up to protect me.

“Can’t. You heard what he was saying – he has – ooooof – to be there. He saw it.” our Warden shoots back while taking a punch, stepping left and bisecting his opponent’s head.

Grinding teeth against the pain, I growl to both “ye...es. I have to...st...and...upon..the precipice... to close the..rift before it emerges.”

‘But what is it? What's supposed to come out?,’ I ponder in agony. Every thought is damaged.

“It’s settled. We fight our way through, be smart about it, and get you where you need to be;” Blackwall reasons out as he retreats back to my side and claps me on the shoulder reassuringly.

“We will see you there. I promise that much,” and Cassandra maintains her silence but holds to me tightly, keeping me on my feet.

“No dying on me....tho..ugh,” I cough up.

“I’d give my life for you, for the Inquisition. You know this. But today demands a different sacrifice” he smoothly states and arcs his blade, beheading a rising shadow in the periphery and marches ahead to stand between us and any opposing Wardens...

...those he wishes were his brothers in arms, the men and women he venerates so highly.

The Wardens...what’re...Corypheus...demons....army Corypheus...Blood. Broken. Bound. FALLING.

REMEMBER

My head splits anew; Pain flows freely and my vision goes black. I gasp and cough as what I imagine is blood blows loose from my nostrils. The twitches mean nothing now. And I know I stand in the midst of war, bodies and danger innumerable. And it’s difficult not to feel alone in that black. Even with Cassandra and Blackwall leading me, it feels so empty. But I have one ally that can’t leave me, one that breathes with me, and I refuse to give in to terror.

Fear would only ....fear helps it? Helps what...why...

REMEMBER

Clenched teeth and slow breaths ease the agony that is my splintering grasp on reality. But only so much. I may not be a Grey Warden but I understand the Calling; I feel that sensation Loghain described; I feel those nails raking at the base of my spine, clawing away – a sickly song humming to the tune that something still is missing; there are still stitches where there shouldn’t be. I struggle to think, to collect myself and will my eyes to work past the black and past the static.

Screams and blades clashing, arrows flying and stonework crashing, and I can’t do anything about it. And more forms emerge from the shadows.
Blackwall stands before us, shield and sword raised to meet our possessed opposition while Cassandra keeps me aloft. She’s muttering something low and I can feel the mana dampening willpower emanating from her and it edging toward our foes.

“You shall burn!,” one of the warden mages gurgles as flesh blisters and boils away, leaving a gaping hole in her chest for the demon within to crawl out of. And in unison, the remaining fourteen gurgle and hiss “YOU..SHALLL…BURRRRN,” as they too are eaten away from within.

“Shit,” Blackwall whispers in fear as seared flesh-draped demons froth at us in rage as their numerous eyes blaze and roil. Cassandra’s dampening is working, but only in keeping them at bay, we’re just beyond their reach.

Static again, my vision goes.

‘Ofallthefuckingtimestobebblind,’ flares within my mind and my anchor beats in time with my heart.

Through sharp breaths, trying to maintain her focus, Cassandra whispers “Hunter. Open a rift – banish. These. demons,” and taking my hand in hers, she whispers “I will aim you as best I can.”

I unclench my arm and allow her to direct me, to be my eyes. The mark is furious, upset over my sorry state and primes itself for attack – I can’t see it but I know damn well what it feels like for my palm to crackle with fade energy – my guided hand hangs in the air and Cassandra yells “NOW!”

I snap my fingers together and hear the fade ripping open, and as that energy floods from my mark and up my fractal scars, it ignites my left eye and I can see again through a green tinted lens – but only that one eye. I see the tearing of chunks and bits from the demons before us as they cry their rage. Fire and blood intermingles and spiral up into the rift. Some demons even attempt to scurry back into their ruinous skin suits to hide from the devastation…

But it serves them nothing. Corpses, demons, armor, debris, blood – it’s all ripped beyond the veil and the earth upon which all once stood is barren, devoid of anything but the stonework floor.

The rift cleared the slate.

The rift is closed but the anchor keeps surging. But with nowhere to go, it’s flaring back into me, bolstering me with its own power and I begin standing up on my own.

Not well.

Quite poorly in fact.

But with wavering knees, I stay aloft.

With a fade-lit eye, a memory of vision, I’m blinded enough to the absences and stitching of this reality, enough so that I step forward without physical support. I’m able to ignore the beating Remember in my skull. Without the Remember, without it wracking me with pain, A breath of fresh air fill my lungs.

Without Cass’ guiding arm, I slip from her, and she asks “Inquisitor?” with concern.

“Cass. I’m..enough right now,” I whisper but then direct, “follow me but..not too closely.” Blackwall and Cassandra both eye me uneasily and take a hesitant step backwards.

With this manufactured lifeline, I will myself forward, quickly, and clamber up the wooden
scaffolding the upper levels – I’ve no time to waste running the labyrinth of Adamant.

Up onto the next rise, shimmying between archer’s slits in the stone, I’m immediately greeted by more of the possessed and the feral. But luck favors me in this instance – a boulder whizzes just past my head and crashes into the would-be enemies – bones crunch and organs squish amid the shaking of this section of battlements. With black ichor and blood drenching the flooring, I’m cautious of my footing and grasping Cassandra’s gloved hand, I haul her up and over the siding as well – she immediately goes into a battle stance to ensure we aren’t caught unaware.

Meanwhile, I’m assisting Blackwall with my left – my strongest arm at present.

“Sorry bastards,” Blackwall let’s slip as he spots the warden limbs jutting out from beneath the monumental boulder with insults carved into it.

Together, we three push onward.

Across the distance on opposing ramparts, Hawke and Loghain are working expertly together, their attacks tandem against a slew of despair demons – just as they duel strike against one, another nearby is struck down by a pairing of magic and archery; Varric and Solas are heading up the rear, providing cover fire.

“At least they’re doin’ okay,” I mumble to myself, but Blackwall quirks a brow at me and I nod my head in their direction. “Maker’s ..ahem,” he cuts himself off realizing Cassandra is still within earshot.

“Whatever you intended to say, I have to agree with it,” Cassandra states, while keeping an eye out for demons, and further says “but we do not have time for this – we must reach the Warden-Commander before it is too late.”

‘Idiot. You’re wasting precious energy,’ I scold myself mentally.

Up and down flights of stairs, rounding about corners and sprinting the hallways, wary of recesses in the walls, we’re met with zero resistance. It appears that our army past the gates and our strike teams are doing their jobs – distracting the Warden forces well.

So of course, rounding one corner, I crash into a group of Wardens, bowling them over. Rolling off their asses and backs, scrambling for their lost weapons, they poorly prepare to attack and I yell the question “Are ya demons?!”

The oldest among them, a scrawny man with a receding hairline steps out from behind his companions and hesitantly asks “n..no. Are you here to stop this madness?”

“Damn straight!,” I blurt out, throw my hand in his, and clutching and shaking it, yell “We have gotta stop that idiot in charge. Her and that weasel!”

Shocked at my candor, he looks back to his companions and the look they share, it all reads of the same thought. At this, one Warden with her face hidden in her helm says in a heavy tongue “ee shud go wit em. Perhaps…perhaps ee kin persuade ar brethren?”

With a furrowing brow and a tight lip, the eldest one grumbles “Too right, Ven, too right. We’ve been cowards to hide from this.” Turning back to me, he releases from my grip and says “we won’t fight…not them. But, we’ll fight the demons.”

‘That was a long handshake,’ I think while subtly wiping my palm on my pants.
“Then we agree? LET’S MOVE ALREADY!,” I shout and push through them to continue leading the charge. Then pausing, I turn back and say “You should probably lead. I don’t..I don’t actually know the way” with a dumb look on my face.

At that, they slide by, leaving me, Blackwall, and Cassandra at the rear.

With the Wardens leading us, we make good time. Turns out we had only been three doors from the ceremony and stepping out in that court square.

Jagged bones and massive tusks have been tied and plastered together to form a archway at the yard’s center; from within that gate, a maelstrom of hisses and cackling emanates; blood and shit are pooling beneath, spreading out for 20 feet in every direction. Eviscerated Warden corpses are strewn about the outside of the pool; their bodies form the summoning circle. Beyond this, the remaining Wardens, those unbound. They are steeling themselves to witness the tethering of whatever monstrosity Clarel is attempting to summon, to be tethered en mass.

Stitches pop and the migraine slows, enough for my anchor to lessen its flare and lessen its boost.

‘But it’s all so different….’ I think with my eye wide.

On a platform ahead, five Wardens stand, five of the eldest members – three human men, a human female, and a male dwarf. They kneel facing the crowd with Warden Commander Clarel at their backs.

And she doesn't look good -- gaunt and thin, dark rings around her eyes, she trembles like an addict.

But she steps to the Warden on stage right and begins reciting the oath.

“In peace..,” she drags her dagger across his throat, a divisive cut and blood spurts.

Stepping to the second, she quotes “vigilance” as she cuts his.

Horror wells up inside me, the ease with which she takes their lives, her family’s lives, it’s revolting.

To the third, he grimaces but looks to the sky, exposing his neck. Clarel states “in war” and cuts it.

From back behind the crowd it’s even clear to see the glistening under the dwarf’s eyes – he doesn’t want to do this, but I’m frozen in place. Clarel steps to him, loudly says “Victory,” and cuts him down. His body, like the others, slumps in place, dead on their knees.

And then to the fifth, Clarel tilts the woman’s head back, both faces stony, and says “in death.”

Slice. Another taken for this insanity.

Frantically, I think ‘wait! that’s not the end of the oath!!!’

Clarel approaches the center stage and lines her blade up to her own throat.

“STOP!,” I boom out over the masses, regaining my voice, and Clarel shakes, torn from her focus and all within these walls turn to face us.

No time to draw this out; cutting to the quick of it, I yell “YOU ARE WORKING FOR CORYPHEUS. THIS IS WHAT HE WANTS!”

Clarel looks distressed, shaken, but Erimond’s tinny voice whines out “Utter fiction. We are here to
fight the Blight, to keep the world safe from Darkspawn. Who wouldn’t want that?”

Shifty looks pass among the Warden masses.

*Shit. They probably don’t know about Corypheus. FUCKINGWARDENSECRETS.*

Again he whines “And yes! The ritual requires blood sacrifice. Hate me for that if you must but do not blame the Wardens for doing their duty!” and folds his arms indignantly.

Clarel steps forward and cries “We make the sacrifices that…”

Interrupting, I yell out “THERE’S NOTHING SACRED ABOUT THIS SHIT! THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT CORYPHEUS NEEDS. YOU’RE A COWARD AND A FOOL,” while Blackwall casts me a judging look – clearly he’s annoyed with how I’m addressing the Warden Commander.

*Leave it be Thom, not here. Don’t press me. We’ve got weird shit to stop.*

The name finally sinks for her and she stumbles over the words but whispers loudly, hesitant to speak of him, “but…but... he’s dead.” Erimond places his remaining good hand on her shoulder, likely to reassure her but his stance is awkward, as if human interaction is an alien concept. “They are trying to shake your confidence, Clarel,” he stresses. Somehow his voice, no matter the pitch, is always a whine. Clarel, blinded yet again by incompetence and fear, she orders “bring it through” of a Warden nearest the stage. That person raises their dagger to their throat and proudly yells “SACRIFICE,” completing the oath and staining their own blade red.

*Too weak to even finish it, Clarel? I’m gonna kill you myself.*

As the final lifeless body crumples, a true rift peels open within the arch of bones, no longer a sliver, and a slew of demons peer through from the void.

At this, an ichor drenched Hawke stomps past me, finally having caught up and roars “BLOOD MAGIC IS NEVER THE ANSWER. I’VE SEEN MY FAIR SHARE AND IT IS NEVER WORTH THE COST!,” but the people aren’t listening even for all the rage in her eyes and heart.

Eyes peer from beyond the veil, too many to count, and the cackling intensifies.

To the Warden-Commander, that Tevinter scumbag cries “Be ready with the ritual Clarel, this demon is truly worthy of the Wardens!”

Blackwall takes the opportunity and yells out “You may not know me, but you may have heard my name. I AM BLACKWALL. Like you, I’ve given my life to the grey Wardens. The first time I put on this armor, I felt like I belonged, like I was part of something honorable, something with a purpose. I know how good that feels. How safe. But fighting and dying here today won’t stop the blight. If you want to stop the blight, kill that bastard up there. His master is the living embodiment of its corruption.”

His words shock all the Wardens and they look to their leader, uncertain for sure and she mirrors them with doubt eating away at her. But Erimond, ever pressing, urges her on – “we’ve come so far. You’re the only one that can do this.”

But irritated, without awaiting her response, he reads her as weak and speaks aloud, thumping his staff to the stone, ever theatrical, “My Master thought you might come here, Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!”
Lesser demons emerge from the rift and thunder booms through the smoke and gray above….

Wrong.

A leviathan roars in the sky, hidden in the haze of war.

“FUCK THIS!,” I spit and charge the meek little bastard, shoving Wardens out of my way while others dart to the sides to chop at demons. Drawing her sword, Cassandra yells after me “INQUISITOR!” but her outburst draws Erimond’s gaze; he sees this and his snide little smirk vanishes. With a squeal, he slithers up the nearby stairs and away.

The entire time, Clarel is trying to make sense of things.

Too long to make sense of things. There’s no redemption for her, she set this in motion.

But glancing to the demons and seeing the Warden corpses at her feet jars her back to this reality, to the gravity of what she’s done – shaking her head, she cries “help the Inquisitor” and rushes off after Erimond with her staff in hand, all the while, I’m still forcing my way through the masses.

“GET TO COVER, THERE’S A FUCKING DRAGON COMING! GET TO COVER!!!,” I yell at the frenzied people fighting demons as my mark flares wildly.

Finally, I shove past the last line, hoping demons don't attack me on my right side – monsters continue coming, but only the weakest. The strongest ones must be trapped still. That looming rift is a terrible sight and I hope those Wardens are prepared for a true fight.

Up the stairs and ‘round a corner, the dragon looms into view. Its rotting hulk of a body casts a patchwork silhouette on the clouds and fog of war behind it. Roars crack like thunder, louder than the explosions of battle as it swoops about the perimeter blasting unholy alizarin flames at the ramparts and snapping its tail against the stonework – it’s here to destroy.

But it hasn’t seen me yet so onward I sprint, eager to punch out both Clarel and the weasel.

I hear the clatter of boots hot on my tail – no time to look, can only hope they’re allies.

Flights more stairs to go and smoldering stretches to run, the dragon soars overhead and indiscriminately rains down more inferno on Adamant to the sounds of screams below – Wardens and demons and possibly my own forces, they’re all cooking.

Rounding the final rise and corner, I step out on the peak just in time to watch as Clarel kicks out Erimond’s knees, shattering his knee caps. He hisses “stupid bitch” and grapples at his broken joints – but she shoves him to his back and thrusts her staff to his throat.

And that would be good…

...if not for the dragon perched above us.

And evidently it cares as little for Erimond as I do – it razes Clarel and the weasel both with crimson hellfire; they’re ash before they even know they’re dead. Outstretched, it beats it ragged wings and heads off to continue its assault, to continue its hunt for me.

And the world goes silent. The pain in my skull has receded. This spot, this moment, I both know it and don’t.

But why?
Slowly, I step out onto that open rise. Hands grab at me but I shrug them off and continue my slow step until I’m standing in the corpse ashes as wind and smoke whip around me.

_They were supposed to live? No, just him? She always died..._

The world shakes and makes more sense, imagined cobwebs shake loose from my memory.

**Remember**

*I’m supposed to be here, but they’re supposed to be here? The dragon is supposed to be here. It’s supposed to fall. And I’m supposed to...*

The beast touches down at the edge, claws digging into stone as if the fortress were clay and it thrusts its gaping maw forward to snap at me. I drop down and deliver a Fade powered upper cut’s force to its jaw – the damage is negligible against this monstrosity but it reels back all the same, screeching in fury and tearing up the stone peak as it scrabbles to adjust its weight.

And it does so too much.

The stone cracks and crumbles, the overlook falls away and the dragon plummets while raging at me, its quarry lost.

And I follow suit, not even bothering to make a run for it.

**This is familiar**

An aerial somersault lets me see that Cass, Blackwall, Loghain, and Hawke are all plummeting after me, frantically swatting at debris – their panicked cries are silent to me.

The world is silent.

Varric and Solas are still up above on what remains of the rise, horrified as they look off the ledge at our falling forms.

**This IS familiar**

Casually spinning in the air, I spot the seam and with a snap of my fingers, the anchor splits it wide open in a shimmer of opalescent green and we tumble through into the abyss.
Weakened, dying, our Inquisitor awakens in the realm of the Nightmare.

Pumice rock, volcanic ash, spiny moss and chips of human bone; I land face first into this. Falling through the rift, inertia had slowed, making it a softer landing but still, these aren’t the cushioning you want. My skin stings from where it had ground against me; primarily my bare chest, arms and face. My leather pants are torn along the knees but at least my boots appear to be fine.

Readjusting so I’m on my ass instead of my head, I bring my knees up and drape my arms over them. With the mark hanging so close to my face, I ask it “you doin’ okay with keeping me alive?”

Double pulse.

“Awesome. Thank you,” I say through ragged breaths.

The mark is blazing bright now that we’ve returned to the Fade – the anchor is flooded with energies like its own. Green yet runs up my scars and still I look at the world through a green tint with one eye. Half blind, I stare at this shifting wasteland of abstract horror.

‘So I was last seen here with a woman…. Not exactly a good place for a date,’ I muse as a column of blackened bones floats by, singing its heavy reverberating whale song as it does.

“What happened?” asks Loghain’s from above, “we…were falling,” a certain terrified wonder shading his cadence. Likewise, Hawke asks “are we dead?”

“No, the Inquisitor opened another rift with the mark. This is the Fade,” Loghain states while stepping along wall, defying gravity.

Walking overhead and upside down, Hawke whispers “The Fade looked much different the last time I was here…” while staring to the sky. Flecks of green and ash drift lazily through the air.

“Does that matter?,” Blackwall grumbles from behind Hawke while dusting himself off.

“It may,” Hawke utters without turning back and continuing to marvel at the scenery, asks “the stories say you walked out of the Fade at Haven. Was it like this?”.

“As I’ve told everyone a million damn times, I don’t fucking know,” I growl in annoyance while rubbing at my sore neck.

“What was it like last time?” Hawke quietly asks, possibly to herself.

“Did ya not hear what I just said?!,” I snap, throwing my arms out.

Without taking offense to my outburst, Hawke reasons “Well, whatever happened at Haven, we can’t assume we’re safe now…that huge demon was right on the other side of the rift that Erimond was using – and there could be others”
Still daunted, perhaps in shock, Cassandra whispers “Maker protect us.”

“Maker’s balls, we’re on our own here,” Blackwall grumbles as Cassandra shoots him a death glare. He folds under her stare and looks off in another direction.

“In the real world, the rift producing demons was nearby, in the main hall. Can we return to the world through that?,” Loghain asks wisely, cutting through the bullshit conversations.

“Only option I know of – let’s go,” I reply and rising, I crack my knuckles and step forth from our alcove.

Loghain, Cassandra, Hawke, and Blackwall walk down the stone face to meet me on my plane of orientation – onward we walk, our steps sloshing through the bubbling liquid black. The smell of pitch is strong. Red lyrium veins twist and intertwine with the cliffs at the farthest edges – menacing, malicious in their glow – “this might be the Fade but stay away from those” I hiss.

*I avoided being trapped in a hellish future with that shit, I’m not about to get messed up by it here.*

Winds moan overhead as they strike the jutting gravestone pillars and the gnarled ribs that tower and curve into the sky. It’s hard to take my eye off that Black City but I’m forced to keep my eye peeled – little demons scamper and scurry into the dark recesses at the edge of pools and along memories of furniture ruined, waterlogged, and stained. But the little ones do stay back, not eager to reveal themselves to my anchor’s glow. Around the bend, we walk in silence, weapons drawn – Loghain, his two handed sword, Hawke her daggers, Cassandra and Blackwall their long swords and shields, and me with fists clenched, ready to lash out.

But something extraordinary...

I find myself distracted by bursting golden light, vaguely human in shape, golden even against the green.

I can’t help but squint against its resplendence.

At my side, Loghain falters and whispers “impossible” as the otherworldly glow fades.

Completely human in form now, she says with a knowing smirk “I greet you, Warden. And you, champion.”


The wizened woman tilts her head with a smile and says “Cassandra.”

“Cass, ya knew the woman best. This her?

“I…I don’t…I don’t know. It is said the souls of the dead pass through the Fade and sometimes linger, but…we know the spirits can lie. Be wary, Inquisitor,” Cassandra replies, never taking her eyes of the apparent Divine. Her shield arm is dropped but her arm is still flexed, readied to spring up at a moment’s notice.

“So you’re impersonating a dead woman? One does not simply survive Haven,” I mock.

“Couldn’t I? How much of Haven do you truly remember? You think my survival impossible, yet here you stand alive in the Fade yourselves. In truth, proving my existence either way would require time we do not have,” the possible Justinia replies. She’s too still for my liking – her chest doesn’t rise and fall.
With blades held before her, clearly untrusting, Hawke argues “Oh how hard is it to answer one question? I’m a human and you are…?,” while pointing the tip of one blade in Justinia’s direction.

“I am here to help you ,” this Divine Justinia says, “you do not remember what happened at the temple of sacred ashes, Inquisitor.”

My eyes narrow in suspicion and my breath stills.

Reading me, she replies “no. You lost them to the demon that serves Corypheus.”

I’m forced to roll my neck at that, as muscles pop, a new stream of blood pours freshly over the dried blood under my nose.

Mental stitches buckle and flex.

But I don’t let it drag me down.

The mark won’t let it drag us down.

Not while we’re here.

Not with so much Fade feeding the anchor.

“It is the nightmare you forget upon waking. It feeds off memories of fear and darkness, growing fat upon the terror. The false Calling that terrified the wardens into making such grave mistakes? It’s work,” this woman reveals.

Loghain growls from the back, “then perhaps I owe this nightmare a visit” while his sword hand fidgets in anticipation.

“You will have your chance, brave Warden. This place of darkness is its lair,” she replies.

“Can it die?” I question, malice coating my words, as I look down at her past my nose with my one presently functioning eye.

“I would see you to safety first. When you entered the Fade at Haven, the demon took a part of you. Before you do anything else, you must recover it,” she admits.

It. Stole. From me?

With a hand gesture, she points out specters out in the next messy clearing – violets and greens given form. They howl and wail at the everything and nothing

“These are your memories, Inquisitor,” she says but not even a second after saying that, I whip about and sprint madly at the memories – the one closest, I don’t even slow. Sprinting past it, I push my fingertips through its membrane, bursting it as hollow sounds echo and cry. The other four memories, they glide and float to hide, but it's useless.

This is the right way

Thankfully, my companions hold back while I berserk. Punching, jabbing, tearing, and even clotheslining one with my inner arm, they swiftly fall, no longer “living.”

Their remainder bits, a gelatinous violet and green spattered upon the rocks. But from that goop rises a colorful smoke that swirls about the rocks and drops and flies at me with intent; screams and shrill cries emanate from it as it strikes me hard and climbs into me through my pores…
Days now. It’s been days that we’ve been held up at this Conclave. Days we of the Valo Kas have been shoving templars and mages away from one another. And every damn day, I’m terrified it’ll be my last. I know full well that this conclave is a powder keg – literally an atomic bomb on standby. But I’m the only one that knows for certain how this ends. I just figure, so long as I stick close to Adaar, I’ll have some sort of heads up and start sprinting for cover. But other thoughts won’t stop worming their way between my ears.

If I tell everyone now what’s gonna happen, would that help or hurt?

Would I be branded a spy for knowing this shit?...then again, I could lie and play off that I’ve been stalkin’ Big&Ugly... they might believe that.

Maybe even bypass the entire events of Dragon Age Inquisition?

Without the Divine as a sacrifice, we wouldn’t even have a Breach to deal with...

...and I know the secret to killing him now...that fucking dragon.

...but if I change too much, what are the consequences? ... there’s always a consequence.

I’ve seen Cassandra from a distance accompanying Divine Justinia. Real tempting to say “hey.” Hell, several times I was even part of the Divine’s personal guard. But not today unfortunately, and every moment I don’t see her or Adaar is a small heart attack.

Earlier this day, Iron Ass gave me free reign to patrol the grounds outside the Temple of Sacred Ashes, keeping the peace out of formation.

But I’m following Adaar.

Gotta stick close.

‘But what if she’s not the one that gets the mark? What if it’s the noble or the Dalish or the Dwarf? Shit..no, don’t think like that...’ I worry as another voice yells in my head ‘of course think like that!! What if it is one of them?! We’re screwed!!’

No. Cool down...just stick close to Adaar.

Then looking up, I realize I’ve lost sight of the horned giantess.

Shit shit shit shit shit. Where is she?!

Panic is setting in but I don’t, can’t, wear it on my face – can’t let these mages and templars see weakness. I shove my way through a mob of templars, anxious to hear the results of today’s peace talks and if any ground is made on their part. They grumble as I move through them but they do nothing in protest.
‘Fucking pricks! Get out of my way,’ I mentally yell as I sidestep the pack. “Where the hell is Adaar?!” I growl low but quickly.

Finally, free of the mob, I round a corner to the Temple but she's not here either. I spin back and look out over the crowd.

No Adaar. No lady horns. Oh geez. Oh shit.

I stomp around the edge of the temple and find several sets of boot prints in the snow leading to an easily overlooked side door – curious. I'd already made my round about the temple perimeter this morning after the talks had started. These, these are fresh.

Oh, shit I should run. No, I should investigate. Or I could run... or..

I try the door but the latch is jammed. Locked perhaps. No matter. I prod the iron lock with two fingers and imagine a thermal lance. Willing the image into my finger tips, my hand glimmers, the slightest reflective tint taking to my grey skin as the lock turns molten where my fingers touch – with this, I cut out an arc, effectively slicing the lock bolt, and pressing my knee to the door, I force it open.

The door creaks, its balance disrupted, but I slide into the darkened hall on my toes.

Quietly, I push the door back in place. Just enough to muffle the outside. Clearly people could tell the door had been tampered with should they just happen to look at it. Here’s hoping they don’t. Directing my attention back to the darkened hallway, I start creeping.

‘No noise. Cat feet. Secret steps,’ I think, willing those thoughts into my boots. I assume it's actually taking to them because I am quiet. Silent. Not a single jingle from my steps.

With every corner, I peer carefully past in case of guards. Last thing I need is to get caught. But so far, no one.

Odd.

My foot slides on something wet. I can see it in the dark but crouching down, the slick reeks of pennies. Eyes wide, I scan the dark.

There. What's that?!

My breath catches, my pulse races and I creep forward, careful not to make any squishing sounds in my approach. There’s a huddled mass on the floor, propped against a wall. No torches are lit so I can't see much and I lean in close.

Armor. Staff. Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

“Horns,” I whisper, my breath catches in my throat.

It's Adaar. Still warm but her throat's been impaled, the blade is still sunk deep into her tender flesh.

She drowned in her own blood. Her eyes, they’re glazed and dilated but still staring ahead.

Angry panic drives home and that panic is not the “let's flee the scene” kind. I never really made friends with her – wasn’t interested in talk, but this is bullshit. It's unacceptable. Unforgivable.

SHE WAS MY INQUISITOR. MINE.
Rage intermingles with my panic and I glance about in the dark until I notice someone shifting around in front of a door down the hall. Doesn’t don't look like a guard, if anything they look like they're trying to break down a door.

...why isn't there any sound from their strikes? **FUCK IT. YOU DIE. Then Corypheus!**

I can't process my emotions, my fear, my anger, but what I can do is murder the bastards that did in Adaar, that will kill the Divine, that will kill hundreds, thousands and threaten the world and I will start with that one right there.

My knuckles crack, throbbing with an unseen pressure as I grip at an invisible blade, born of my will. And I step forward, my gait no longer silent. The shadow turns to me, I can feel that it sees me...

‘...but it won't see this,’ I think, focusing more on my blade, honing its edge into one that can sheer steel, a blade that can bleed stones, an edge that will mark you for dead with one cut.

Lowering my blade point to the floor, I sweep up in a two handed stance to do maximum damage while maintaining my guard – and it phases through. I'm pressed up again the figure now, I can see its eyes and see how immaterial it is, how intangible. Disbelief. My blade falls from reality and into nothingness.

‘Another me. More of us,’ I internally hiss in shock. ‘Here. Of all places, it fell here. Must've just touched down…’

The figure, I feel myself pull into it, and it vanishes – We are one. And I feel power blossoming throughout me, tingling in my left hand. It knows, it knows what lies on the other side – it is, the foci, the orb, the rending power. And now a red glow is bleeding out from under this doorway. The ritual has begun. The time is now – there are dark deeds afoot and I can't stand for this shit. This is the moment. “They’re on the other side. Think of something good. Don't ask a dumb question. Don't ask a dumb question!”

I step forward and throw all my weight into my kick at where the latch should be and it thunders open as splinters fly. I storm inside and yell the first thing that comes to mind.

“NOT TODAY, ASSHOLE!,” I roar with a shit eating grin.

But god damn it, Corypheus is so much more repulsive than I thought he'd be – he looks like a sun damaged latex glove stretched out over a human skeleton and a bunch of fruit punch rock candy. And worse, I can physically feel his malice, it radiates from his wretched, towering form. The Divine cries out “help me,” weakened from whatever tortures have been inflicted upon her. And the Wardens, they’re eyes have that disconcerting red tint to them, that glaze. Warden mages, all of them, and they keep her aloft with arms outstretched. Their reactions are slow – possibly the possession.

**“Slay the qunari.”**

But as Big&Ugly demands that, the Divine breaks free of her red tethers and swats at the Foci...

…sending it rolling on the hard floor towards me and I reach for it, left hand open.

**“NOOOO!!!,”** the abomination roars.

Blinding light.
Gasping, I find I’ve fallen to my knees. Stitches have popped. Some, but not all. There’s a release for sure and while that feels amazing, there’s still a pressure building in my head.

Everyone’s eyes are lit up – they saw what I saw.

‘How in the fuck was I at the Conclave?! This doesn’t make any sense! I couldn’t have been somewhere before I was there,’ I worry at this detail, ‘and magic?! What was that? How did I do that?! Was that even me? …but it was my memory, it HAD to be me. Was me.’

“So Andraste didn’t bestow her mark upon you. It came from the orb Corypheus used in his ritual…” Loghain states, processing this new information.

Panic still reigns supreme in my heart – things aren’t making sense.

The Divine approaches and says “Corypheus intended to rip open The Veil, use the anchor to enter the Fade, and throw open the doors of the Black City.” Her word echo and hang heavy in the air. “Not for the Old Gods, but for himself. When you disrupted his plan, the orb bestowed its mark upon you instead.”

Still wincing from the memory of pain, I pinch at the bridge of my nose while taking steadying breaths and rejoining the conversation, I grimace out “yeah. Remember that part now. Got it.”

“So it does not bother you?,” she asks genuinely to which I say “nah. Can we just get going. I get the feeling there’s more to this.” It’s a lie though – I’m deeply disturbed by the implications that I was actually there.

And days?! How could I’ve been there for days? That’s what I felt in the memory…I was there?

“True, you cannot escape the lair of the Nightmare until you regain all that it took from you. You have recovered some of yourself, but now it knows you are here. You must make haste. I will prepare the way ahead,” she says and vanishes between blinks.

Definitely a spirit.

“Is there a problem, Hawke?,” Loghain asks from behind, concern lacing his words as he looks to his friend.

Staring hard at the ground, Hawke has her arms folded. “Trying to ignore the Grey Warden’s holding the Divine in that vision? Their actions..”

Whipping around, I glare at Hawke and hiss “shut the fuck up, Hawke. Big&Ugly had them bound. Or are you blind to that detail?”

Forgot how frustrating my Hawke can be.

Stepping slowly between us with his hands gently raised, Loghain says “ I agree. Corypheus has clearly taken the Warden’s minds. Hawke, you yourself, have seen them do this.”

Hawke pouts at ground, not willing to look at me just yet – upset perhaps that we ganged up on
her.

Softly easing the conversation elsewhere, Loghain says “in any case, we deal with that after we escape.”

Hawke growls “ohhh, I intend to,” but still avoids my over-the-shoulder glare as I walk away.

**********

Deeper we go into its lair; shallow pools of swirling black dully reflect the shifting skies above. Lightning splits the air and thunder claps a moment later – we are in the storm.

Cassandra asks, likely to herself, “could that have truly been Divine Justinia?” She seems to be reeling at her discovery but Blackwall takes the chance to answer “how could it be? She didn’t have food or weapons…I just don’t see how she could’ve survived here.” Whereas typically she’d argue or protest such a response, she simply doesn’t. Her face falls and she walks in silence alongside me, looking only ahead to gauge potential enemies.

“So, a demon that feeds on fear. Despicable. Even for a beast of the Fade. After its corruption of the wardens, I’ll see it pay…” Loghain spits, properly directing his anger and frustration. No time to point at Hawke – there’s only one foe deserving of it; The Nightmare.

Walking down winding chipped stairs, we step into knee deep waters – more oily sludge than water, noxious in aroma, it stings the nostrils.

“Ahhhh, we have a visitor,” rumbles from everywhere and nowhere. It knows we’re here.

“Oh shit,” Blackwall hisses quietly.

Liquid bubbles and splashes as demons pull themselves out from under the surface; pitch black cascades off their gruesome forms as they do.

“Some silly little boy comes to steal the fear I so kindly lifted from his shoulders. You should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay, Forgotten.”

Annoyed, wordless, I fight the demons it sends while trying to ignore the monologue.

‘Why are all villains soooooo cliché? I ponder as I punch through the faceless husk – Cassandra grunts as her blade arcs beside me, cleaving the head from a spiny beast with too many arms. Green and red spurt from its neck stump as it collapses back into the pool. It’s a struggle to move, the sludge is constricting, but Hawke manages to leap free of it, kick off a rock face and drive her daggers deep into the tender face meat of a terror; it screeches in pain and Hawke winces at the deafening tone, but with a twist of her blade, the demon dies with a crunch.

“You think that pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your head with such drivel? The only one who grows stronger from your fears is me.”

Loghain and Blackwall stand back to back, one shield between them – blades swing expertly deflecting claws and slicing tendons. The creatures fall, unable to flail or stand, and drown beneath the black.

“But you are a guest here in my home, so by all means, let me return what you have
forgotten,” the Nightmare rumbles as we finish off the last of the demons.

...Where we stand at least.

Back up we go, no longer trudging through muck and tar. Off we walk passing dozens of Tevinter inspired bronze bird statues – each well over 10 feet tall. Their beaks gape wide with fires burning tall within. Between the divides, discarded books and children’s toys.

...And a lone skeleton sits in a chair too small, staring even in death, at a bed not his.

Beyond that, broken and shattered mirrors are everywhere, their shards unreflective.

Then the voice returns, “Cassandra. Your Inquisitor is a fraud. Yet more evidence there is no Maker, that all your “faith” has been for naught.”

Shaken back into the moment, she looks to the sky and yells “Die in the Void, Demon!,” her fierce warrior spirit returning.

Unfortunately, just as she finishes, little fears attack. For me, I see them as gnashing jaws with bloody stumps for tongue, and arms too many to count as they scrabble towards us. As we all hiss and grunt in our fending off the little beasts, the Nightmare takes the opportunity to goad us again. “Warden Blackwall.” It pauses as we stomp and kick at the monsters, many crunching and squishing underfoot, “Ahh, there is nothing like a Grey Warden… and you are nothing like a Grey Warden, Heheheheheheha.”

Driving his steel plated fist into whatever he sees the fears as, he growls in response “I’ll show you a Warden’s strength, beast.” But clearly, he’s rattled – he knows it knows.

The path forks – ahead looks to be a giant mirror and a dead end… and something scratching at the back of my mind is telling me not to go that way.

It’s..a trap?

Instead, we turn right and head down yet another flight of stairs, breaking the little fears as we march through.

Water pours up into the skies around us, another gravity defying phenomenon to see as we walk through the stony pass. “Did you think any of it mattered, Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn’t even save your city. How could you expect to strike down a god?”

Hawke grunts in response but the Nightmare continues, “You’re a failure, and your family died knowing it. And one day, Merrill will know that too.”

“God, you’re a mouthy piece of shit,” Hawke growls in response, saying exactly my sentiments. Possibly everyone’s sentiments.

Emerging from the twisting pass of jutting gray slabs, we spot Divine Justinia standing at the edge of a pool. Her hands tucked behind her back, she smiles sadly at our approach and says “we cannot tarry long. Please, go retrieve your memories” indicating the nearby forms with a nod. Agreeing with her statement, we march, and in unison, attack the aimless forms. Blades and invisible strikes break them down. My mark flares and again colored smoke rises – swiftly shooting about, it hones in on me and drives straight into my skull.
Choking.
Screams echo.

REMEMBER

*******

Screams in my ears.
Darkness.
Copper mouth.
Smells of cooked flesh and sulphur cut through me.
Heavy head.
I weakly protest against my own charred body and attempt to call out for help but can’t hear over
the screaming.
Am I screaming? I should be.

Cautiously, I open my eyes, half-terrified of actually being blind and half-terrified of seeing what’s

Panic clutches at my singed chest as I gasp and gape “how. How did the storm come ba…NO. This
is what tore me here to begin with. The orb. It did this.”

Heaving and coughing, my throat on fire, I spit what I can only guess is blood.
‘I’ve gotta be nothing but bone mulch and blood. How am I alive?’ is all I can ponder.

A soft touch? Stinging but soft. I blink – a wrinkled older woman is crouching at my side. She’s
mouthing something. ‘Still can’t hear over the screams,’ I think in defeat, ‘I’m just gonna die here.
Don’t mind me’ as salty tears form at the inner edges of my eyes and I wear fatigue upon my face.

‘Wait?’

My eyes are locked on her now, studying her. But she’s still far too blurry.

Who is this?

I blink several times more – she looks familiar – though her face was all gentle creases, kind eyes,
and a violet glow.

‘Violet neon? It’s what my shade told me. I gotta be colliding with fragments of myself. This must be
the acid,’ I consider in pained awe after seeing her glow. But she’s all this even as fear worms
its way into her expression. She starts tugging on my right arm and mouthing more words.

She looks worried…but not for me?

Beyond her, there's charred and barren earth breathing, bubbling pools of black, floating structures.
Even the air feels heavy. ‘Acid or hell?,’ I wince at the thought.
I get that I can't hear myself but I say “thank you for finding me” aloud through cracked lips. She's smiling and despite the fear in her eyes, her smile feels warm. She clearly mouths “no, thank you,” to me.

With this elder woman’s aid, we get me standing upright and sure, I stagger a bit. A lot. I manage to glance down without moving my head – I evidently still have legs. And pants. And boots. I can't be certain – I can't look too closely at my chest – but I think my shirt was blown to pieces. My flesh is burned, blackened with ash, and sticky with congealing blood.

But I'm alive.

Shaken from my thoughts, the woman points toward a vertical staircase – an obelisk made of stairs, blazing with green energy at its peak.

“How do we scale that?” I cough out, my lungs still on fire.

This lifeline of a woman smiles sadly and looks as if she was saying “we simply must.” Then again, I'm just terrible at reading lips. Her head jerks to the side and her eyes go wide – a deer in the headlights.

I'd turn to look but there's no way I'm gonna risk twisting my neck -- it's all sorts of locked up. I do manage to catch a shiver run down her spine, though, as her eyes grow larger. Frantically, she started pulling us toward the stair cliff and upon touching a foot to it, the whole world tilts. This bizarre hell scape apparently grants us permission to walk it. We quicken our pace despite every joint in my broken body protesting every movement. It's slow going, especially with the heavy putrid air filling our lungs, but we clamber up to the peak. And my eyes go wide – exhilaration and confusion flooding my every thought.

“IT’S A RIFT” I roar at the green tear, visibly shaking the woman. She mouths something back to me – still nothing but screams in my ears though.

I gingerly dab at my ears with my left hand – both are wet. My fingertips are coated in blood. And then I finally see my left hand, and flaring against the darkened red, is a glowing green light burgeoning from my fractal scar tissue.

‘Wait.’ I glare at the red and green shit show that is my hand.

‘What?!’

‘NO!’

‘WHY DO I HAVE THE MARK?!’

Panic grips me, squeezing air from my lungs as I hurriedly whisper “that's right. That was Corypheus back there. I grabbed the Foci. This is the anchor.” I whisper even though I can’t hear – it helps just to mouth the words.

*gasp*

“She's the divine!”

*choke*

“THIS IS THE FADE”
“YOU’RE ABOUT TO BE TAKEN!” I yell as my arm rips backwards. Pain flares up my wrist and into shoulder.

I twist around to find countless tiny beasts – creatures all crooked, raking teeth and disjointed fingers scrabbling toward me, already pulling at her. They look like rubber baby dolls that have been melted and stretched. Under normal circumstances, I'd be fascinated. But not right now.

Despite my ruinous condition, I fall forward and boot stomp the nearest demon, sending the creature flying off the edge. I yank her back to me while crunching another little terror underfoot leaving my bones rattling against themselves.

Swarmed; the monsters are skittering all about us and I scream violet flames at the hoarded mass around us. The purple incinerates those nearest us, their forms withering to ash within seconds. Already though, my mana is drained. It’s taking all my energy just to stay conscious.

‘I can’t keep this up. I’m broken. I’m going to lose her’ slithers through my head as a migraine detonates in my skull from the exertion. Tears form anew. Shallow breaths are all I can manage and not enough oxygen is getting into me – if there’s even air here.

My arm again almost rips from its socket and all I can do is weakly dig my heels into the rock, my eyes locked on the Divine.

“NO!!!” I scream “I HAVE TO SAVE YOU THIS TIME”

Looking into my eyes, even enveloped in the swarm, she actually smiles at me.

I furiously shake my head in defiance of her surrender. Salty tears burn and blur the edges of my vision as she mouths “Go” and releases her hand from mine. The writhing swarm rips her backwards over the edge, her body flailing in response, and she's gone, sucked into the darkness.

I roar at the dark like a madman, a purple inferno bursting my mouth despite my already depleted mana. The darkness swirls below, the terrors are coming back. Breathing heavy, I slip on my heel and stagger as hard toward the rift as I can with this broken husk. I tumble through.

‘Too bright’

I close my eyes as I plummet – a return to darkness.

I surrender my conscious mind before I even hit the ground.

**********

Gasping again at the memory returned, tears well up in my eyes and overflow, trickling down my face. Swallowing hard, I whisper “I’m sorry” to the Divine I lost back then, oh so long ago.

But it’s fresh. It just happened for me.

Cassandra approaches Divine Justinia and accuses softly, “it was you. We thought it was Andraste
sending him from the Fade. But it was you behind him.”

 Barely a whisper, I utter “and then she died…”

This Divine’s face furrows her brow, saddened, and admits “yes.”

From the group’s rear, Loghain says “we’ve been following a demon, then” as Hawke chimes in “and for all we know, it’s working with Corypheus.”

 Her face grows mournful and she says to those two “if you believe that, then strike me down.” This catches Hawke and Loghain off guard; they huff like children who’ve been scolded or told “I’m not angry, I’m disappointed” by a parent.

Surprisingly, the not-Divine, that golden light I saw before through the green lens, it blazes and erupts from all of her being, enveloping her in gold. As the blinding drops, she rises up into the air.

“Are you her memory?,” I ask of the radiance.

 Her words echo through the Fade and warm me as she says “if that is the story you wish to tell, it is not a bad one.”

 At that, Hawke sticks it again, arguing “what we do know is that the mortal Divine perished at the temple, thanks to the..”

“Corypheus! Thanks to fucking Corypheus,” I state as fact, interrupting her, a vein pulsing angrily in my neck.

She gapes at me past the scar crossing her face and Loghain stares in disbelief but regaining her voice, Hawke yells at everyone, particularly at Loghain, “clearly the Wardens have gone mad. Or maybe they always were! Someone has to stop them!”

Stomping over to Hawke, I jab her in the forehead and glaring down, I press “you literally have no fucking clue why Wardens are relevant, do you? They are THE ONLY way to finish off an archdemon and ONLY through their sacrifice can it stay dead.”

“Inquisitor…” Loghain tries to calm me but I yell “NO! Time for some damn transparency. Hawke, because of the darkspawn blood flowing through a Warden’s veins, they are tied to the Archdemon and because of that link, when the archdemon dies at the hands of a Grey Warden, instead of its corrupted soul transferring to another darkspawn and becoming a NEW GODDAMN ARCHDEMON, it moves to the Warden, killing both in the process.” Continuing my tirade, I press “And NO, I know Wan didn’t die at the end of the 5th Blight but that was purely because of some hardcore magic switcharoo bullshit that I can’t even get into right now! Everyone got it?! Good,” and turning back to Hawke, I stare her down. With her eyes wide in worry, I growl ”Let’s. Go,” and march off leaving everyone looking awkwardly at one another in silence.

Shaking my head, I’m pissed but the Radiance calls me back, “Inquisitor, there are memories still that you must recover.”

‘What?,’ remembering now, ‘What the hell else is there? …then again..there IS still a pressure in my head…’

 But in that thought, my companions’ faces turn to ones of horror as they stare at something behind me. The Radiance calls out “The Nightmare has found us!” and she evaporates. Whipping back, I see the little fears return; they skitter from cracks and out from under loose rocks – and my little
fears, now they wear the Divine’s face like a loose mask, her eyes and mouth a permanent open scream.

Choking down the squirming sensation in my guts, I will death in my palm and Fade energy into my other – I’m a menacing torch of black and green.

And I take off, propelled by fury and a will to survive.

Dash. Pivot. Boot stomp. Jab. Crouch into an uppercut. An explosion of viscera and old flesh mists the air as my entropic touch obliterates three fears. No longer do those eyeless divines stare me down. Likewise, all my companions grunt and hack, bash and stab at the foul little creatures. Cassandra shivers as she cries out “I am sick of all these maggots!,” to which Loghain responds “that’s what you’re seeing? I’d almost prefer that…” as he cleaves a fear in half, letting loose all the dark juices within.

Haunted, but attacking nonstop, I weakly growl out “so long as you’re not seeing what I’m seeing..”

And as soon as it began, we’ve ended the creatures.

And so we push further, further in to more waters and teeth jutting from the shallows.

"Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir, the brilliant commander. Pity the one time you tried to rule, you failed so miserably you had to be beaten, humiliated, lest you destroy your own country. You even doomed the Wardens by bringing the Inquisitor down on them. You destroy everything you touch."

Chuckling, Loghain says “that all you got? It’s nothing I’ve not said to myself,” while trudging through the shallows and scraps of skin floating on the surface.

But then, unexpected, the Nightmare deals more taunts, thundering “What will happen if they knew? You have so many secrets, heheheheheheha.” This feels directed at me.

But instead of replying, I play it safe and retreat within my head, ‘ya mean this thing got ahold of my memories, knew what I was gonna do…and STILL did things the same way? Is it hubris? Madness? Straight up stupidity?’

‘Dumbass demon…’ I think while squinting at the sky.

And then it all opens up at another fork – one path leads high and one goes low.

There’s Pride demons lurking up high. Or there should be. But I’m unwilling to test that so I make my way to the descending path.

Steps crumble as we descend.

Reaching its bottom, the path opens up into an expanse, a lake sized pool of ankle deep water. Off to the right, there is no border and water pours freely off the side into the void. Traversing the shallows, Cassandra makes her way to my side. “I...have questions,” she asks. I cast her a quick glance but return to scanning the area for demons.

“In that memory…you...how did you know she would be taken?”

“Intuition?,” I lie, “I don’t know.”
'Convincing,’ I think sarcastically.

“And a moment ago, it said that someone had secrets. Truly it could’ve been talking to any one of us…but I feel it was especially true of you,” she accuses quietly out of earshot from the others.

“Caer Oswin,” I reply bluntly, anything to get her off the topic.

“What?,” she asks in a whisper, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“If I die here… that’s where you should check for Lucius and your other Seekers,” I say knowing how desperate she’s been to find them. She just hasn’t asked yet. ”But be careful if you go there without me. Lucius is working with Corypheus and the Promisers.”

Blank faced, she stares at me. Shock? Doubt? I don’t know.

But she doesn’t ask another question. She doesn’t move closer or farther; she keeps her current pace and distance. And I feel her eyes on me. But, this is all too much. And I can’t risk the distraction.

Kicking though the waters, not eager to get to near that drop, we end up walking to a purposefully placed graveyard; rusted jagged wrought iron fencing stands tall around it, forcing us in. Tombstones and tombstones form the grid.

“What in the name is?...” Blackwall utters, sword still drawn, as we pass each stone, names and other words are etched into the granite. Their fears.

BLACKWALL: HIMSELF

Stepping amongst the graves, each reads a poignant detail. But just a few need be read; there are hundreds here. Each marks a companion or ally of ours.

CASSANDRA: HELPLESSNESS

She finds herself standing in front of her own. Too tired to argue, she shakes her head wearily and walks around it.

SERAS: NOTHING

Blackwall walks by hers and grumbles “good on her for not having fear. Smart.”

“That’s not what that means,” I reply, standing in front my my tombstone.

“A foolish thought, you’re right,” he sighs sadly and shakes his head.

HAWKE: FAILING HER LOVED ONES

Hawke huffs, wordless as she walks past her own marker

LOGHAIN: POWER

Chuckling to himself, Loghain says “no surprise, that,” in passing.

HUNTER: LOSS

I can’t stop staring at those words – I grip the edges of the grave tightly and breath out short bursts. ‘Envy was wrong. Envy’s bullshit won’t happen. I WON’T LOSE MYSELF AGAIN, CAN’T,’ I
furiously think. But Cassandra’s gloved hand on my shoulder snaps me from my thoughts. She squeezes gently and whispers “I have questions still…but do not doubt. You won’t lose yourself. I will help you however I can.” Releasing her grip, she rejoins the group and they wait for me.

*Just as I start to feel in control again…*

*…I’m losing my grip.*

“Fuck this,” I gravel out and rock the gravestone – as it cracks, stone shards and dust flick off. My death grip remains tight; I jerk it again and letting go, the stone marker drops backwards into the shallows. Water pools overtop and slowly it fades from view beneath the murk water. Leaving it behind to drown, I pass the remaining stones and rejoin my companions.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I mutter in passing.

************

Strangely, there’d been no barrier, no waves of demons to fight beyond the graveyard. We’d entered the final cave with ease but I’ve yet to see more memory fragments – if not here, where? Through the exit lies an arena clearly worthy of a boss battle – a raised platform lies in the middle, gently sloping stairs connect to it on all sides; it looks like a sacrificial altar. And there in the center, there hovers the head demon itself. Floating in at 7 feet tall with an exposed spine, draped in tattered robes, and possessing spider legs for a face is the Nightmare.

Waiting.

Behind it, and up a set of stairs that twists into the sky, lies the rift we need. Our exit.

The Radiance speaks from beyond, “You must get through the rift, Inquisitor. Get through and then slam it closed with all your strength. That will banish the army of demons…and exile this cursed creature to the farthest reaches of the Fade.”

The demon though, it knows we’re watching it from the mouth of the cave. It know everything within this realm.

“I’m waaaaaiting,” the Nightmare thunders.

“We need to go now – every moment here is another moment that our forces are dying!,” Blackwall pleads to us at my side. He’s right.

“Truly, it is one demon. What are we waiting for?,” Cassandra asks, concerned and confused.

“It’s a trap,” I whisper, “something is missing.”

*But what is that something?*

In a hush, I whisper “but you’re both right. Look, count down – we rush the bastard,” to the agreement of the others.
“3”

Blades withdraw, armor and gear creaks.

“2”

I take a deep breath to calm myself.

“1”

We make a mad dash through the opening and at the demon.

Its laughter cuts through the air and it vanishes as if it were dust. And the laughter grows. More and more until it’s deafening, world shaking.

Thundering.

No, it’s more than that.

Enormous spines fall from the sky.

No.

Legs.

Gargantuan spider legs.

The goliath rears its writhing mass of a head.

Its entire face is its mouth – split from mandible to neck, all gnashing teeth and tentacles.

Far too many eyes are plugged into its flesh – they spin and gawk erratically. But enough of them hone in on us.

On me.

‘The true Nightmare,’ I think in horror while gawking, ‘I can’t beat that.’

The Radiance glows bright, its luminosity sears our eyes as it glides toward the hell-spider, and cries out “If you would, please tell Leliana ‘I am sorry. I failed you too,‘” and with tremendous power surging from her every pore, she collides with the monstrosity. Her blinding light sends it reeling, a momentary banishment.

The Aspect, the 7 foot tall voice box for the Nightmare, it screams “AGHHHHHH, NOOOOOOOOOOOO,” in fury and pain and the shock of it all forces it tangible.

‘Now you know the feeling, asshole!!,’ I rage internally while charging the now visible piece of shit – front and center, I strike my fist into the thing’s ribs like a meteor. Beneath its gnarled, maggot-infested flesh, ribs audibly crack. “Ughhhh-urrrr,” it grunts as I deliver a bony headbutt to its ugly face and skipping backwards, it multiplies.

Snatching at the closest clone, I rift-strike its jaw with an open palm, mark blazing bright, disintegrating the lower half of its gaping mouth.

It doesn’t slow.
Illusion?

No. I deliver an uppercut that strikes solid, the monster flies backwards into three of its kind and its bursts, birthing little fears as it does.

“DIE DEMONS,” Cassandra yells while shield-bashing demon clones emerging from the shadows and Hawke yells in response, “I WISH THEY WOULD,” sinking her blades into two separate terrors.

Loghain, his blade arcing expertly, shears the top of the head off one of the Terrors and yells “a problem! They aren’t stopping,” as it continues swiping and hissing at him. Blackwall batters it away from the true Grey Warden.

While pummeling a third Terror, I don’t see the one flanking me. From behind, it grabs at my neck, long fingers wrap around constricting my windpipe and wrenching me off my feet, it hurls me across the arena at a crumbling wall. Smashing through, bricks and debris topple down on me as I hit ground.

“Eghhhh,” I groan in pain, bruises already growing under my skin.

‘About time ya got here. What took you so long?’, a familiar voice calls out within my skull and the pressure rises.

Wincing in pain, struggling past blurred vision, I see another me, pure shadow, perched on a nearby toppled column.

I groan “you the memory?,” while trying to pick myself up – another terror fade-steps into me sending me flying backwards again. My body crumbles against the downed column and my anchor sputters – my vision goes. Coughing blood, I’m broken again.

Can’t see.

Can feel my leg but there’s something wet on it.

Blood?

The sounds of battle fade as the familiar voice answers in my mind, ‘you really don’t know? You don’t REMEMBER?’

The throbbing in my skull begins anew, the pressure rises, and my heart skips.

Remember

‘Look…just don’t give in to fear. And…’ spectral fingertips gently touch my forehead.

My throat tightens, my breath catches.

Mental stitches buckle and strain.

Remember

**************
‘The bird lied. It's not okay. My everything hurts.’ I jokingly muse regarding my own mortality. I feel like a rag doll that’d been the rope in a game of Tug of War. That a dog had chewed on. Scratch that – a pack of dogs had chewed on.

Something rough is jabbing against my back – it feels like bark but there’s some give around it. Moss? I must've been blown back from that lightning strike. Without opening my eyes, I gingerly test my body, poking and feeling around with my right hand – my left side is numb.

Can’t be good…

“…help” I cry but it comes out barely a whimper. I try to breathe in but the sharp smell of ozone still linger in my nostrils, forcing me to breathe through my mouth past cracked lips. I carefully open my eyelids only to see more green than I should. For a moment, it seemed the storm had swallowed everything before I blinked back into focus.

Woods? There's no way I got blasted to the tree line – I'd be a husk.

It’s then I realized how tall the trees are – at least double the height of those in the forest outside my family’s property.

‘These… these are old.’ Crosses my mind in awe followed quickly by ‘Hope my phone survived…’

Careful not to move too fast and ruin my body any more than it must be already, I fish around in my pockets with two fingers in search of my phone to no avail.

It's back where I was lying down. It must've slid out when I was fidgeting against the tall grass. Shit.

Click. Click.CLICK.clickclick.CLICK. The sounds rip me from my thoughts and I anxiously peer about. Nothing, just green and bark and green and…

Eyes glinting. Too many eyes. No. It's just the acid, right?!

And out of the brush, a Labrador-sized spider ambles toward me, mandibles clicking at the air. I can feel the color bleeding from my face and what blood remains in my body turns to sand. I can’t move. And it keeps walking towards me, each leg testing the ground in front of it, clearly incredulous over such easy prey. Satisfied it’s not about to trip a snare, it clearly grows in confidence.

This isn't acid. That is a giant smart spider. Shit. This IS NOT ACID. SHIT.

My mind goes blank. Panic starts drowning out all coherent thought.

“Why couldn't the lightning have just killed me?” I choke out as the beast looms over me, venom dripping from its fangs. And then with a thud, two arrows sink into one of its many eyes, infuriating it. Reeling back and wheeling about, it attempts to find the attacker, meanwhile, I’m just trying to keep from pissing myself. And then from above, four more arrows whistle at the beast, finding home in its arachnid face.

As the spider crumbles, a dark form drops from the trees, knocking an arrow, and takes aim at me
while saying in a thick accent “ya actually got hit by lightning an survived? Impressive, strangeh. Less impressive is howya managed ta git hit in tha first place with all these tall trees around.”

Regaining my voice, I simply utter “thanks for … that,” nodding at the spider corpse. “Am I still high?”

Still facing my savior/potential killer, I'm stuck holding my breath – she’s pointing an arrow at me, but beyond that, she's wearing rags, foot wraps, and has pointed ears.

_Elf ears?. cosplay…_

“Doshiel, how’d ya get so far inta our forest without alerting us?” She demands in a smoky voice, eyes sharp beneath a layer of grime.

Realizing I'm not at home, I groan “Was in a field. Got hit by the storm. Woke up right here – guess someone dragged me.” and gesturing to my body with a pained wave, “clearly I couldn't have walked here myself.”

She remains silent, weighing my words. And as swiftly as she'd appeared, she turns and disappears.

 вместо того, чтобы кричать, чтобы она подождала, я просто хриплым голосом говорю “and this is where I'll die.”

************

Through the tree branches, I see the sun making it's way across the sky – maybe an hour or two has passed. “Yup. This is where I die,” I grumble.

But then bushes from all directions started rustling to my dismay – my stomach pushes up into my throat and I squeak out “this is where I die.”

_Not more big spiders. Why couldn't it be regular spiders. I love regular spiders._ I think as tears start forming in my eyes.

But spiders don't creep out into the clearing. Instead, it's the woman from before.

Sauntering up to me, she crouches down and says loudly “doubt he'll be much trouble. Hasn't moved en an hour. Likely ta die,” at which point several more hunters slide from the shadows into view. And each with weapons drawn.

_I'm gonna die here. Right here. This spot is my grave._ I note, not even the least bit sarcastic.

With all eyes locked on me, they speak out to each other in a tongue I can't quite figure out. It sounds familiar but I can't pin down why.

_They all have pointed ears. This has to be a cult. I'm gonna die here._

And then the woman before me speaks, allowing me to understand, “We're bringing ya back ta our camp. Keeper wants ta have a word with ya. Donn try anythin’ stupid. I'd rather not have yer blood gunkin’ up ma blades.” All I can do is nod in agreement, eyes trying to stay wide.

Keeper?

She seems content, deadly for certain, but most importantly, content. Pulling my good arm over her shoulder, she hoists me to my feet. And my entire lower half gives out like jello. I tried to balance
myself against her but it's tough – mostly cause I don't want to irritate the giant spider-slaying murder woman at my side with my wobbling. That and I'm hunched over her enough as it is, our height differences much more obvious in this position.

The walk back to their camp is a quiet one – they were quiet so I’m dead silent, even to the point of trying to control how hard I’m breathing.

This only serves to give me a migraine but still, I'm alive. But it's all so awkward. I tower over them all so the woman ends up hugging me at my stomach to keep me up.

I'm not trying to be an asshole but Lollipop Guild from The Wizard of Oz starts playing in my head.

‘No smirks. No smiles. No lollipop dance. NO!’ I regrettably think as my cheeks puff some while I try to keep a laugh from escaping. Fortunately, all that comes out are coughs.

Finally we enter their camp and I see…

‘What the shit?! They’re all dressed like elves! Look at em all. All elves. And …

‘Deer? No…HALLA?!,’ I trip over my own thoughts at the sight of these peaceful deer looking creatures, just traipsing about with the people here. Before I can really wrap my head around these details, the woman supporting me cranes her head up and says “what?! Never seen tha Dalish before?!”

Dalish? She’s fucking with me right?..

Confused, awestruck, I ask “What continent are we on?” Looking up at me with a look that clearly says “you're the biggest idiot around,” she responds “Thedas?,” with her own questioning tone. Clearly she doesn't know what to think of me.

Please be cosplaying…please be cosplaying...

My mouth dries out again, and willing my mouth to cooperate, I utter “where in … Thedas?” to which she replies “Brecilian Forest, ya big idiot. Obviously.”

And then my brain shorts out. I go blank trying desperately to process all of this. And while zoning out, she and her hunting party walk me to a cot outside an aravel, three elves helping lower me to the impromptu bedding.

So...Thedas. Ferelden. Brecilian Forest. Not cosplay? When am I?

The hunters are several feet away, obviously acting as my wardens as a shadow falls across my face – another woman, but this one has a walking staff.

She has sharp, but discerning eyes and waits but a moment, studying me, before saying “andaran atishan, stranger.”

No traces of an accent from her.

From my vantage, she appears a step taller than the others. Her hair is a rich honey color. She has only the faintest of wrinkles or laugh lines on her olive skin – I cannot imagine her age but if I had to guess, I’d hazard to say late thirties. Her eyes are dark and deep, alluring and threatening all the same.
Answer like they’re Dalish. Cause they’re Dalish. Not cosplay? Don’t know. She’s the keeper? Gotta be….

Despite my pain, I choke out “greetings keeper. I apologize for being an inconvenience to ya and..your clan.” This gives her pause, clearly not expecting such reverence. A moment longer, her eyebrow slightly raises, and she states “I am Neria and I have a several questions.”

I just nod in acceptance. Can’t do much of anything else.

Calm, controlled, she says “I am told you do not recall how you came to be here. What do you remember, exactly?”

Got high in a field

“I was… I was in an open field on my parent’s farm. Inebriated and studying flowers…didn't notice the storm building. Think I got hit by lightning. Woke up to a spider trying to eat me.” I say this while gingerly touching at the burns and lacerations on my left arm.

Answer carefully

“Where is this farm?” To which I say “not in Ferelden.”

Technically true.

Keeper Neria holds her hand over me, eyes closed and hums out “interesting, magic lingers on you. Are you a mage?”

Lips pursed and brows screwing, I say with hesitation “I... I uhh don’t.. I don't think I am.”

“Curious. Do the qunari not have means of determining if magic is present in a child? I confess, I possess little knowledge regarding your people.”

“What?”

“Your people, the Qunari?” She hums to herself, “perhaps you're concussed”

What? No, just go with it. Just .. sure. I'm tall. I'm a qunari, sure why not?

I reach with my undamaged arm to brush at my head, pretending to just be bashful, and sure enough, it feels like there are horns. They start at my forehead, and curve back over my skull, ending halfway back. They'd been filed down or snapped.

‘Horns?!,’ flashes in my skull before giving in to ‘course you have horns. Figure it out later…’

“Sorry, yeah, the Qunari have means but I’m not part of all that. I'm…my family and I don't follow that. We’re outsider..But wait… am I magic?”

“Yes. Can you defend yourself?,” she asks bluntly.

I cannot read her – are all elves this enigmatic? Is this an elf thing? Regardless, I reply with “… with my fists, yeah,” which is true but my fights are typically against muggers or drunks.

Blank faced, and without missing a beat, she sighs “I offer a proposition… our healers will see to your injuries and in exchange, you will accompany us in our travels. In these turbulent times, we can use allies. And because I don't have a first, I will train you so long as you are with Clan Dhru’dahn. For our own safety though, you will always have an escort. I'm certain you understand.”
“Yeah,” I say, bobbing my head, “sounds like a good deal.”

As blank as ever, she nods, and walks away with command in her step, which leaves me alone with my thoughts. My gaze skyward, I spy small birds reveling in the tree tops, their songs lulling me.

‘Im a mage? Im a mage. Im a mage?!’ I query, incredulous at what we’d just talked about.

Active thoughts aside, I feel sleep creeping over me but I shake it off, prop myself up on my elbows and blurt out “hey. What does ‘doshiel’ mean?”

My savior, still nearby and cloaked, arches her gaze back towards me and smugly says “grey wanderer. Yer grey and ya wandered.”

“And what's your name?” I ask, genuinely inquisitive.

She just stares at me. I feel her eyes boring into my skull. And then the tension, the pressure, it's gone. “Eirlana. Ma name is Eirlana.”


“Alright, so… that’s means winter right? You’re callin’ me that doshiel thing, I'm gonna call you Winter,” I try to chuckle through coughs.

Her brows raise and stay put.

************

It's been a few weeks since my surprising arrival and we've slow to travel through the ever vast expanse that is the Brecilian Forest. It's difficult to navigate the heavy roots, towering trees, and natural predators while drawing the aravels.

Even with most experienced of the Elven scouts directing our course.

And of course we can't stick to the main paths that wind through this wooded scape – apparently there’s too many mages in hiding that'll attack at first sight and worse, Templars that cut everyone down no questions asked.

While the clan only numbers in the thirties, it's remarkably eerie to hear nothing but silence from this many people. Especially so from the children. Fortunately, we've made some serious leeway and we'll be good to set up camp for the evening.

“Doshiel” whispers in my ear and I squirm to distance myself. Twisting about, I see Eirlana, casual as ever, strutting along behind me.

“You're gonna give me a heart attack one day” I hiss whisper back while regaining my footing.

“Yer a big ol' thing but a whisper in yer ear turns ya ta jelly,” she retorts almost song like, and rapping her knuckles against my horn ridge, says “you an me, we're on hunting duty while tha others make camp. Then you can go off and do yer precious magic with tha keeper.”

Every night after making camp and completing the evening chores, Keeper Neria would teach me
for an hour and only an hour. So in that regard, it didn't feel like I was advancing all the much. Though, she had said otherwise. I've had to forgo training with a staff – limited resources. That and she prefers to train me at weaker levels. For the clan’s safety.

“Big ol horn man, lets go.” Without waiting for me, she dashes off into the surrounding greenery, inexplicably silent doing so. That is an amazing talent and were it not from her living her whole life outside, hunting and foraging and fighting… I’d almost be envious. Breathing my resignation, I follow along, snapping brush and crunching leaves under my boots, probably scaring off all nearby wildlife.

It's tricky but with keen eyes, I’m starting to spot the tiny snapped branches Winter leaves in her wake, her intended trail markers.

’Oh, the ease with which she could lead you to your doom. Here's hoping you stay on her good side for all eternity,’ I think while mentally raising a glass of imagined drink in a mock toast to my continued good health.

Fortunately, I’m nearly healed so I shouldn't mess with her hunt too much – Clan Dhrua’dahn’s healers are pretty remarkable, they've fixed most of me. The scars racing from my left palm and up my arm and face though, they refuse to heal and reform even with regenerative poultices. And because of this oddity, I'll likely have this skin etching till the end of my days.

Continuing forward, my foot clips a root; I fall and smash my forehead into a root cluster. My skin feels hot but it's all bone up there – doubt it's even gonna bruise, but it still stings something fierce. “Ya gotta get outta yer head,” Winter jokingly utters, her back to a tree trunk and not even looking my way. She's too concerned with wagging her tongue against a speck of elfroot caught in her teeth.

“Or you could stop leading me into shit like this,” I fake growl.

“No lessons learnt tha way,” she says, spitting out the plant matter.

Propped up on my hands and knees, I just arch my head up to mock glare at her. She doesn't care and taps me with her foot, “get up. Yer not catchin’ anything from down there.” I crawl to my feet, careful not to catch them on the same roots and together we push further into the greenery.

Birds flutter and chirp at our passing.

About a half mile in now.

She motions with her hand for us to split up – I’ll be the distraction and she’ll be the true predator.

You’ll never learn how to actually hunt at this rate if you're always the bait. Not even good at being your own name.

At this, I dart left and start running, clapping my hands and hooting every few yards.

Just please no more spiders…

************

In the distance, I hear whizzing echoes, arrows that I’m sure have found their mark. Night is falling
fast and we need to finish this though – I'm no good at navigating this mess. Usually I lie in wait, making small sounds until Winter tracks me down but I'm confident I'm walking the right way back to camp. It just feels like the right path.

Branches and brush grab and cling at me as I walk, letting my footsteps fall, uncaring of the sounds they emit. Winter will find me faster.

This is the right way. I'm sure of it. I've definitely been this way.

And the sensation builds, confidence directing me through the forest back towards the camp. Or at least, I thought is the direction of camp. Instead, I break through patches of bushes and tall grass and step out into a clearing. The grass is remarkably short here, like grazing animals frequently use it as their feeding ground. Which bodes well – foraging animals wouldn't go near predator territory just for grass. Looking at the soft earth, I see signs of hoof prints.

Ah yeah, definitely deer or harts or halla.

Oddly enough, my innate “sense” of direction is telling me I'm where I need to be. This can't be right.

A pang of exhilaration travels up my spine, setting me on edge.

My vision darkens, and the edges of my periphery bubble and melt like film over fire, the sky goes gray and shudders.

The winds howl through the trees around me.

Exhilaration turns to panic but quickly levels out and transforms to comfort. An odd switch up.

*Something feels …Normal?*

I'm concerned, sure, but I'm not leaving this – I have to find the source of this sensation. All sounds beyond the wind howls and the rustling of leaves have vanished. And I'm just now realizing this. I feel … almost alone.

‘Here,’ whispers from somewhere outside my body but somehow in my head. My pulse quickens – this could be demons – but why does it feel so normal? Blood rushing in my ears, my pulse pumps all the harder as I look at a small pool of water at the clearing’s edge.

That’s where I need to be. That’s the source.

Slowly willing one foot in front of the other, I approach the pool. It's lined with cut stones, smoothed by the passage of time. Moss lives between the cracks – this had to have been a man made…

sorry, an elf made pool.

I can't see it's bottom so I hesitantly creep to the edge and with my feet firmly planted – in case I need to jump back or defend myself – I peek ever so slightly over the edge.

And I just see my own reflection.

‘Wait.’ I tremble, eyes perfect spheres, ‘where are the other reflections?! Where are the trees and sky and border edge?!”

My reflection goes pitch black, all of it, except for its eyes; they look like mine. It bows low from
within the pool.

Too comfortable to fear the thing, I stand my ground. Perhaps foolishly.

“You're pretty polite for a demon” I say nonchalantly, crossing my arms. “How'd ya get trapped in the pool? Oh! Let me guess, you possessed a fish and when it died, you got stuck.”

“Are ya done?” Odd – this thing’s voice sounds like mine. “Please stand back.”

I do so, about 10 feet back, ready to fight if things get out of hand. The now blackened pool defies gravity as water starts pouring upward into the air. And it keeps doing so until a perfect copy of me has filled in, standing in the pool’s center, delicately balanced on the surface. “It's about time ya got here. Listen up”

“No, you listen demon, I'm not gon” but the shadow mass cuts me off, yelling “no, ya big dumb idiot. I'm not a demon. I'm you. We're each other. Duh.”

Dumbfounded, I almost have to pick up my jaw as I stare, wide eyed in disbelief. “What?”

“Look. When we were pulled here, we got split into fragments and tossed about Thedas. Shit, I'm certain some of our bits haven't even made landfall yet.”

“What?”

Annoyed, shadow me says “whatdya mean what?? Isn't it obvious? Original Hunter, all of us combined, got caught by the blast and scattered. I mean, shit, think about it. You were drawn here right?? And I could feel you walking through the woods. Pretty sure that if we slap hands we’ll be back together.”

“How do I know you're not a demon…or a liar?

The shadow stares me down and folds its arms.

“Which would be redundant. And why are you a shadow?”

The dark water mulls this over for a beat while I scratch at the back of my head. “Uh, okay, to me, you look like a shadow with horns. I can see my own skin. As for disputing my being a demon? Let’s see, we saw three rabbits when we were last home. We just finished hardcore mode on Dishonored 2. In 5th grade we kissed a girl named Kalie who then made fun of us for weeks. Hmm, other embarrassing stuff, we fell out of a barn onto a wasp nest once. Last summer, we.”

I cut it off, yelling “shit fine! Yes, alright. God damn. I get it, you're me.” Fuming, I stomp forward and extend my arm out over the pool. Liquid Hunter approaches, not a ripple forming in the pool as it steps, and clasps a wet hand to my sweaty one and… it feels right.

“Holy shit, you are me!”

It’s final words are “Duh” as whatever the shade was pulls into me and the water form spills, back in to the pool, it's shape lost. Staring at my hand, I whisper “so how many more do we have to get?” No answer.

Shit. I should've asked more questions.
We're the same thing now and I have to admit, I feel more like me than I've felt since arriving. I peer up to the sky and whistle, mimicking the birds that have now returned. Or maybe that earlier light show was just in my head…

“Fenehdas! That was strange.”

I whip about to see Winter perched on a high branch at the clearing’s edge.

“Woah, shit. Not a demon. Whatever magic put me here, it” I start to plead. “Shut yer mouth. I heard it.” And enunciating every syllable “Was here the entire time. Got tha whole story. And now you have to tell the keeper.”

“Wait, you believe me? And .. shit, other me?,” I ask, very much confused.

“Look, I've fought demons. Especially with this war goin’ on. Demons feel a certain way. And tha didn't feel like a demon. I may not be a magic type but I'm good at reading things.”

More quietly, I say “…and how did it read?”

“It read like ya do. That was you.” No trace of doubt in her face. If only more people could act like her instead of forcing their preconceived notions and fears into the mix. She slinks down from her branch, landing in a crouch, rising and sauntering forward, each sway of her hips flicking blood droplets from the rabbits strung to her belt.

“So, ya feel any diff’rent?”

I respond “yeah actually. I feel good. I feel less hollow. Healthier maybe?”

“Alright. Yer gonna stay here while I get the Keeper. Let her get a read of everything before we head back to the clan. Ya get it, right?”

“Yeah. It makes sense. Don't want a panic. I'll be here.” I say as I plop down at the pools edge, parallel to it. “See ya soon.”

“Yeh, see ya soon,” she says as she disappears from view.

************

An hour passes and I'm starting to get stiff. Must be around midnight, the moon is high in the sky and the winds have died down.

“I hope Neria isn't pissed about all this.” My eyes widen a bit and I utter with a grimace, “I hope they don't try to kill me.” I clap a hand to my throat, trying to ward off the idea of my mortality.

As I do so, two forms emerge from the brush, silent. I just manage to catch their movement out of the corner of my eye. Sitting up in the dew covered grass, I see it's just Neria and Winter, and I make an exaggerated shrug.

Keeper Neria passes me, blank faced, and stops at the pool’s edge. Staff in hand, a faint glimmer dances on her skin as she holds her hand out over the water. Studying.

“The same magic that lingered on you when you first came to us is present here. It is very distinct. Eirlana has told me what she observed. In your own words, tell me your experience.” She
commands without turning form the pool.

“Was looking for a way back, felt something familiar whispering to me. Walked until I found myself here. Looked in the pool, it was me looking back. It rose out of the pool and told me it was also me and that we got broken by the storm. There's other mes out there? And then we rejoined.”

Still calm, but curious, she asks “and how do you feel now?”

“I feel like me. More like me. Less injured. Less broken.” I utter confidently.

Silence falls. Winter is looking to both of us, an eyebrow casually raised. Her mouth is pinched to the side. Keeper Neria drops her hand, and looking over her shoulder at me, finally concludes “I sense you and only you. And now, I sense that your magic has grown. We will continue your training. We shall return to camp,” and glides over the damp grass towards the path. At the tree line, she calmly calls back to me “and should this be a ruse; should you be trouble, I will end you.”

She vanishes and my breath catches. Without a single change in expression, she had easily been the most terrifying entity I have ever witnessed.

Winter knocks on the top of my skull, leans over at the waist and whispers “don’ let that scare ya – she likes ya. Only makes threats ta those she cares for. Means she believes in ya,” in her usual rasp.

“When yer ready, we can head back,” to which is reply “is it cool if we just sit here for a bit? This has been a lot to take in.” Wordless, she crouches down and rests her elbow on my shoulder. She doesn't even have to say anything – I'm aware that’s her silently agreeing.

Thank you…

***************

Months since I'd first been brought to the Dalish camp – it’s been months. And while most of the clan was distant to me, a few respected me.

Specifically for tearing so many rogue Templars in half. Protect the clan and that does wonders for ya.

And through it all, I've at the very least made a friend – Eirlana – the elf hunter who had found me. And threatened me. But the important part is she found me. And she'd made the case to keep me around this long. Don't know what she and Keeper Neria first saw in me but I assume it was decent.

Clan Dhrua’dahn is still migrating – their intent is to cross North into the Free Marches and from there, I guess head East. The clan has finally been able to book passage on a smuggler ship. The keeper hadn't shied from using me as a negotiating piece between her and the ship captain – frankly, the man was intimidated by me and gave the clan a discount. Guess he assumed I was a mercenary. Their mercenary. I mean, I could put on a severe and permanent looking scowl with menacing eyes like the best of em. And Winter definitely could.

As for loading the ship, the aravels have to be left behind to make room for the halla. Not many like losing their home but to escape the war, enough seem content with that compromise. And
From the Storm Coast and into the Waking Sea.

We are sea bound.

______________________

The trip is taking longer than anticipated – apparently we’ve been skirting past naval routes.

About a week has passed, rocking to and fro; I can’t handle the below deck any longer – my horns kept scraping the ceiling when I’d stand. That, and I desperately need some fresh, non-halla scented air.

So I’m sitting on the main deck, back against the starboard railing. It’s all slick darkened wood, minimal splintering, and a sail clapping in success at grabbing the breeze. I’m just examining the scars that ran up my left arm. I know the scars run up my neck, over my jawline, and up to my left eye – I’d stared enough at that mess of skin any time I’d passed a reflective surface.

Were I more vain, I’d be comparable to a bird. And speaking of birds, the cry of gulls lulls me further into my thoughts.

Pale fractal lines, making their way to my palm. The lightning got me good. But there’s an empty here. A hollow. It could just be nerve damage. But why does it feel like it’s missing a piece? Need more ghost-hunters?

Found seven so far...how many are there? And why so many in that damn forest? Scatter shot, maybe?

A finger flicks at my forehead, jarring me from my thoughts.

I glance at the offender, slightly blinded by the high noon sun, but I know her by her silhouette by now. While average height for an elf, she was different in the way she carried herself – like a cat observing prey. She has a tendency to sway. As for her actual looks, her pale blonde dreadlocks cascade to her shoulders, pale blue eyes, a few minor scars on the side of her face, and a voice slightly raspy. Perhaps from too many campfires. And her vallaslin is just as faint.

If I’m recalling right, they’re Mythal’s marks.

“Hey Winter.” I say, squinting.

"Doshiel” she smirks, sliding past me to lean against the railing “looked like ya’er about ta carve some dirty words inta tha ceiling down there” then lifting her index fingers above her head “with yer horns.”

“Again, I’m not all that gray” I state, gesturing to all of me. “Second, yeah. The carvings were gonna be absolutely filthy. The sailors would’ve learned a new set of curses.” I say wearing my exasperation. “Actually, would ya mind helpin’ me file those down?” I say, while directing my eyes up. She hums in acceptance, pulls a knife from her belt and says “where they were when we met?” and not waiting for my answer, starts sawing away, just above the center of my head.

A couple sailors look on in fascination at the sight of us – an elf and a qunari, what a pair, and one giving the other a horn trimming. I notice their awkward gaze and glare at the few – they’re quick
to avert their eyes and go back to their tasks of doing rope stuff or mopping the deck. I couldn't actually move to threaten them, I have to keep my neck rigid while Eirlana saws away.

But it's amusing to startle them so easily.

“So what's goin’ on in tha head a yers? Caught ya staring at yer hand agin.”

I'm silent for a few minutes, trying to figure out the mystery myself.

“The palm of my hand – feels wrong. Like it's missin’ somethin’. Not sure what. Then again, might just be nerve damage.”

She keeps sawing away. “Maybe ya lost somethin' when ya got hit. Ya know? Like how ya lost other pieces of yourself. Yer good at findin’ them though. Maybe, yer yet to find what it's missin’.”

“Er maybe ya never will” she adds while pressing down, cracking the first of my horns in half.

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“Mine” she claims, pocketing the piece of horn before I can protest. Not that I was going to. She starts cutting into the other horn, and we stay silent for a beat before she follows with “ya wouldn't mind, I'd like ta hear more about that Elven history ya said you'd found.”

What’s a good piece to start with. What haven't I told her yet?.. what can I tell her?

Alright. Let's talk about the Fade.. er, the Beyond” I tell her. Eirlana grunts in response.

Continuing, I say “well, the veil didn't always exist.” This stops her sawing and she quirks an eyebrow, bending her neck to better look me in the eyes. Continuing, “for time eternal, the beyond and the mortal world were one and the same. Spirits and people, they existed in the same space. Magic was everywhere and elves were immortal. Ya know, so long as they don’t kill each other. In time, war broke out among your gods. It wasn't until Mythal was struck down, murdered by her own, that Fen Harel took to the fight. Freed slaves and fought the other gods. But in a critical moment, Fen Harel did something no one expected – he created the veil and forced it down, cleaving the beyond from the waking world. In the process, he destroyed the elven empire, but he stopped the war.”

Eirlana stops her sawing and goes silent.

“The Dread Wolf … he's not exactly the villain everyone makes him out to be. His intentions were good, but how often do good intentions lead to bad results?”

“Careful speakin’ like tha. The keeper likes ya but she'll tear ya a new one if she hears ya.” She huffs out a light breath “but it's interesting ta say tha least, ma serannas,” and continues cutting.

Minutes pass, she finishes sawing through my other horn and pockets the piece again with a “Mine.” I arch my neck, the sun blinding me again, but even in silhouette, I can see her smirk. “So, ya ready ta try more magic? I've been listenin’ in on yer lessons with Neria.” she whispers.

Looking back to my scarred hand, I clench a fist and watch as my knuckles crack and smolder. “Sure, but we gotta be quiet about it – doubt the captain would appreciate it.”

Crouching down, she leans in an whispers “magic is all about focus. So just focus on it bein’ secret magic. Tha should work.”

Despite being Dalish, she wasn't really like the rest of the clan – for decent reason. She'd been
adopted into it, her previous clan having been decimated by a dragon.

Greater Minstral is what she thinks it was.

While she shares most of her clan’s beliefs and practices, she wasn’t shy to stray from the path. In particular, despite being a non mage, she had a lot of intrigue regarding magic.

And she has a lot of interest in my brand of magic – I don't need a staff – I'd just been imagining what I want and where it needs to be and tada, magic. The only noticeable thing was that my knuckles would crackles and vein with whatever school of magic I was practicing. I mean, back when we'd finally emerged from the Brecilian, she'd found me a staff off some dead mages but the minute I touched it, it had cracked and exploded.

Clearly overpowered.

We agreed it best to stick to bare hands from then on. And the Keeper agreed, granted she hadn't expected to hear about a staff reacting to me like that.. But it's been working out alright enough. And Neria’s pleased all the more with her choice to deny me a staff in the beginning.

I get off my ass, crack my back, and turn out towards the water. No land on the horizon. Just sea as far as the eye could… see.

Eirlana follows suit, leaning against the railing, and under her breath, says “seems natural tha ice would be tha thing ta use in this situation.”

Focusing on wave crest trailing behind the ship, I tighten my first and glare at it.

_Cold. Slow the atoms. Stop and become ice._

_Thank you Earth knowledge of physics and state change._

Sure enough, the wave crest cascading from the ship turns hard and snakes after us, it's tail growing longer and longer as we sail onward. Not a sentient ice snake, no will imposed on that front, just looks like a serpent from the zigzagging pattern it's leaving behind.

Mid thought, a small fish breaks the sea surface and something in me whispers “Revenant.” I flick my hand forward, imagining I'm holding the fish and yank back – surprisingly, the fish, it soars to my hand on telekinetic strings.

_Blegh. I don't even like fish._

Gritting my teeth in an awkward smile, I offer Eirlana the fresh catch.

Standing on her toes, she raps her knuckles against my forehead and grins wide – she looks like a proud older sister. “Yer gonna be good at this magic stuff. Juss remember ta be strange. Then again, its you. Shouldn’ be too hard.”

This has truly been a good time – Keeper Neria teaching me the basics of control and willpower when she can, and Eirlana, my Winter friend, giving me out-of-the-box pointers.

***************
It’s a cloudy sundown as we begin unloading from the vessel.

Some of the clan our way through the small harbor town. A few of us were straggling behind, me because I was begins leading the Halla off through this pirate port. As a smuggler ship, we couldn’t make dock in a reputable town.

I’m carrying several sacks of belongings from elder Drua’dhan members over my shoulder.

“You stupid knife ear!” A drunk yells at an elf a few steps ahead of me. His name is Edge, former city elf.

Guess they bumped into one another. “I should shorten those tips for you” he hisses with malice. Edge looks furious and I assume he can handle himself; What little I know of him, he’s good with blades and the reason he left the alienage in Denerim was cause he executed several guards.

*Elf murders man, might cause a riot. I punch an idiot, people wouldn't care maybe?*

Walking right between the two, I grab the drunk by his face and throw him backwards into some horseshit on the bank. Edge’s fury melts away and he just starts cackling a low laugh. “That was good. Could've handled him though” he said to me.

“You could've killed him and he wouldn't know it for a few minutes.” I state with a lopsided grin. The drunk groans from his shit pile but doesn't get up – clearly too many drinks in.

Edge backhands the side of my arm, before grabbing his pack off the ground, and says “you're alright. They were good to keep you around.”

“Pfft, just glad the clan wanted me along for the ride,” I say as Edge walks on ahead to catch up with the others.

I just keep lumbering on from behind. Eventually, I walk into the loose camp setup the Dalish have started at the harbor town’s border. Knowing what I know of the Dalish, I look up in the trees now whenever I enter their camps. Sure enough, I spot the predatory eyes of Eirlana looking down on me. I’m about to call to her when I see her eyes dart past me – she draws her bow. I whip around and at the town’s edge is a horned woman. She has her arms raised, surrendering. “I am here to talk. No fighting. I want to speak to you and your employer,” she says gruffly.

Glancing back at Eirlana, I spy her nod and flit off into the shadows. I turn back to the stranger, asking “qunari or vashoth?” while willing explosive force into my finger tips.

No answer. She stands, arms now folded behind her back, in wait.

Annoying. Suspicious.

At that moment, Keeper Neria emerges from the cover of trees with Eirlana in tow. I spot the glint of several pairs of eyes in the shadows behind them, clearly ready to attack should this meeting go sour. The Keeper steps to my side, eyes locked on the stranger and says loudly, but calmly “your name and your reason for following us.”

The female stranger approaches while saying “Adaar. Vashoth. I'm interested in purchasing his” gesturing to me “contract from you.”
The Keeper, puzzles over this but a moment. “He's an ally, not an employee.”

I cut in “why do ya want me?” but Neria merely extends a hand out in front of me, an attempt at calming me.

The Vashoth smiles “I'm to offer him a position in the Valo-kas. He has the look of someone that can handle themselves. Or at least that's what my commanding officer believes.”

My thoughts finally click into place, ‘Wait a second …she said Adaar? Valo-kas? She's my inquisitor. Crap.’

I feel the weight of everyone's eyes falling to me.. My mouth dries but I manage to ask her “what.. what is your current job?”

*The conclave. They're gonna go to the conclave.*

“Within the next few days, we'll be shipping out to make our way to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. We are to act as a buffer between the idiot mages and templars.”

*The story is starting. Conclave and die. Elves and stay alive. Or... or maybe this'll be the chance I need to get home. Yes. A chance is a chance no matter how slim. Just have to not die. Maybe the blast’ll send me home? Or you’ll die terribly. You’ll die. There’s no proof you can get home. Idiot.*

“Well?” She asked.

I'm stilled, mulling over my options. Breathing out a heavy sigh, I turn to Keeper Neria who nods, knowing my answer already, and says “it's time for you to find your path. You have helped us on ours. I hope we have helped you. Good luck.” She places her hand to my chest, nods again, and leaves the clearing. Many of the elves stay in the shadows as a precaution, but they relax some as the Keeper returns to camp.

Eirlana’s the only one left now. And she, she looks conflicted. Her pale eyes look resigned while her brow knits itself in worry. She casually pulls an item from her pocket and holds it up, not looking me in the eyes. It's a small carving of a honey bee with the veins of its wings branching out and intertwining with itself. Black with grey specks, it's beautiful, and even more so because of the natural twists and curves that come with her Elven style.

“Made it from yer horns. Bit on tha nose but … juss remember us.” She stood there awkwardly, and turns to leave but not before I catch her by the shoulder, spin her around and wrap my arms around her. She let out a little sigh into my chest. I breathe deep. Her pale hair, even after being at sea for a month, it still smells like wood chips and smoke.

Don’t tear up. No tears. She's only the closest thing you've had to family since ya got dropped here. Awwwwfuck, here come the tears.

We release the embrace and I furrow my brow, attempting to control the water works. Of course, she notices and weakly smiles before saying “Prolly bout time ya git goin. Ya big idiot, don't die.”

“See ya around, Winter.”

“Later Doshiel.”
Don’t let this happen again

Gasp.

My back cracks as it arches, the Fade ripples though me.

I’ve returned — I’m back.

I’m whole.

Gasp.

Rising from the ground, lifted, my toes scrape at the debris and dirt.

I rest on the balls of my feet. My eyes tear open and color soars back into view. What felt like months, was merely seconds. Everything falls into place.

The fight is still happening – everything is as it was.

But then the pressure returns, pain imaginable, and gasping uncontrollably, I seize and arch back towards the sky. Twitching eyes, that pain refocuses behind my forehead, between my horns. Something is stabbing me from inside my head.

No screams.

Can’t or I’ll swallow my tongue.

A spike pushes up through my forehead.

It looks like it’s made of horn. Carbon black. Spiraling, twisting, it keeps sprouting from my skull.

Paralyzed, I stare in horror and agony’s it grows from me.

Disembodied, horses whinny and wolves howl.

And Starkill’s Convergence plays, in beat with my pulse.

The jutting horn, it corkscrews out from the hole in my head.

Reverse trepanation.

Out and out it grows, it’s weight heavy on my neck.

But then nothing. No pain. No weight.

The growth stands from skull, just shy of doubling my height. Trembling fingers, I reach for its length and wrapping my hand around it, it falls cleanly from my forehead and into my grasp.

And the music stops.

With my left, I touch where it’d torn through. ‘And not even a mark’ I marvel as I study the staff in hand.
At first, panic ripples though me; I’m tempted to throw the piece but against my better judgment, I hold on tight.

Carbon black, its length is smooth. It’s all smooth except for the word “MINE” etched into the rod. It ends with a tight spiral that resembles the texture of my horns. That too, black.

“It is mine,” I say in wonder but I’m torn back to reality when Loghain cries out. My eyes dart across the arena – he’s on his back, his stomach sliced open by demon claws. Without giving it any thought, I blink and I’m kneeling at his side, the landscape bypassed through magic. Staff in hand, my knuckles crackle around it as violet fire quickly builds within me; I glare up at the descending terror and open my mouth – fire erupts and immediately the bastard collapses to smoldering ruin.

No time to admire my kill, I direct my attention back to Loghain as he struggles to keep his entrails from spilling out; I imagine skin knitting back together, my finger the needle and I drag its tip across his wound. Blood builds up under the nail but his mortal wound seals where I’ve touched and Loghain stares at the miracle in awe.

“You all need to leave. Get back to the outside,” I say, encouraging him to flee.

Reluctantly, he agrees, “yes…you are right, Inquisitor. But what of you?”

Rising, I pull him up and shove him off toward the exit.

Stomping back into the fray and impaling a terror on my staff as I do, I’m met with screeches and hisses as it tries to claw its way off the length but with a jerk, I tear it upwards through the demon and out through its collarbone. With its body crumpling at my feet, I grip the staff in two hands and imagining chained entropy, my take on Walking Death, it lets loose. A swift smoke, jet black, forces its way through the bodies of several demons and tethers itself to others. Wherever it hits, rapid rot begins chewing away at the monsters and where one dies, the pull to death is ever compounded upon the others.

“CASSANDRA, BLACKWALL, GET OUT OF HERE!,” I roar at my friends who are backed into a corner.

“Ugh!,” Cassandra grunts while hacking away – Blackwall is looking rough; blood trickles from his forehead, an open gash and his breathing is ragged. They can’t look beyond their current foes.

I intervene.

Focusing in on those two, I extend my hand and remember the Revenant.

My force unseen, it snatches my companions from that place of danger and whisking them through the air, I reposition them by Loghain.

Confused, disoriented and stunned, Cassandra cries out “INQUISITOR!,” while Blackwall holds her back. Tries to at least. It takes Loghain grabbing her other arm to actually hold her back — she’s far too strong for only one to hold her back.

“Ahhhhhh!!!,” Hawke groans out and I whip about to see her hopping back on one foot, retreating from the Aspect. Its clones have vanished – only it remains.

“A champion no more…”

Just as I’m thinking how cumbersome it is to not have free hands, my staff starts smoking; I think I’m about to watch it explode, to rob me of my hands like a shortfused M80 – but instead of succumbing to fear, I watch as that smoke is drawn to me, absorbs into my right arm – and settling,
the skin is carbon hard and extends to the elbow.

But all joints move and bend effortlessly.

Carbon made flesh.

I laugh madly at seeing “MINE” on the back of my hand, painlessly etched in skin.

Empowered beyond imagination, I yell out “I remember at the intro to a certain game, Varric embellished how Hawke had defeated the Ogre,” as my fingertips crackle with energies unseen, “but you should know what I mean.”

The Aspect wheels about, its eyeless face baring its teeth in recognition.

“You saw my memories. You wanted in.” My eyes spasm as that Fade empowers me and ozone grows sharp in my nose. Magenta outlines everything I see and with an outward thrust of my fists, they plunge into nothingness...

...and two enormous Pride hands, not my own, tear through thin air, crushing the Nightmare between them.

All the creature can do is screech as organs squish, bones break, and joints pop. Forcefully, I push, the Fade-born palms grind at the demon as it gurgles “im..im...possible.” Tearing my arms back, dissipating the bodiless hands, I stomp over to the broken form.

It’s still alive.

Barely.

Too weak to struggle as I clutch at the back of its malformed skull, I whisper “hi. Can the actual Nightmare come out to play?”

“Agch..aggg…cahhchh,” it gurgles and clicks unintelligibly.

“Hmm. Didn’t quite catch that,” I finish and shove my hand through its back and into its ribcage. All those memories, everything I’d recovered, everything good I have, I will them into my palm and let that ball of light permeate it’s being. Light floods the Aspect as its face-legs twitch and curl. Seizing up, the Aspect froths and shakes.

Light radiates through its pores and it begins to swell. Filling. Expanding.

And like a party popper, the Aspect bursts – a swarm of honey bees are left flying about as flimsy confetti scraps of skin waft to the ground below.

“What kind.. of magic was that?!,” Hawke coughs out in question, pale as blood flows freely from her injury.

Stepping through the swarm and to Hawke, I crouch down and ignite her stump, cauterizing the wound in an instant without waiting for her go ahead — it’s too ghastly a wound to simply stitch. Hawke roars as I sear the veins and arteries closed – she’s missing her leg from just under the knee and down. Smoking flesh, smoldering pant leg, I telekinetically lift and propel her across the arena towards the others.

“GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!!!,” I roar at my companions.
And answering my call, the colossus returns, its terrible self descends to envelop us, its eyes furious and wandering. Without looking away, refusing to, I send out a final push of telekinetic force and my companions are driven up and out of the rift. No cries. No goodbyes. No time.

“Hey beautiful…” I say sarcastically, “just us two now”.

My anchor flares.

“Sorry, just us three now,” I correct. Planting my feet, I brandish both palms toward the monstrosity and breathing deeply through my nose, I feed on the Fade. The spider moves, terrifying tentacles sprouting from between its mandibles.

“Begin again.”

Both hands ignite, my left through the anchor and my right, it surges with purples.

The bees divide and everywhere they touch is infected with golden light. Little patches at first, but swiftly they grow. Radiance grows and the darkness of this realm chips and flakes.

The world shudders.

The Nightmare’s kingdom, crumbling now, little bits scattering to the winds. And it all picks up speed.

Convergence begins playing again, its heavy metal blasting from everywhere as high speed sands and grit whip and howl in chorus.

The vortex forms.

My storm tears into the borders of this domain and chews away at the legs of the beast, wearing it down to shards of exoskeleton and ropey tendons beneath. It clicks and and gapes in pain as its own kingdom fights against it.

Nosebleed. I wasn’t meant to be a conduit for something of this magnitude.

The vortex thunders as the landscape wears away, smooths away – every particle only goes to strengthen the storm. The monster, it staggers, its size a burden now – there’s no escaping this. Blinded, cloudy red eyes and muted protests – Tendrils tear and carapace breaks. The true body of the Nightmare grinds away in the razor winds, blasting away into thick splashes black and brown sludge...

“From what little I get, spirits and demons can’t actually die…you’ll be reborn as something new. But if ya have to come back, here’s hopin’ you come back as something decent. Like you used to be.”

“AGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHRRRRRRRRRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr,” the Nightmare sounds its deathcry and fades to nothing.

Heavy breathing. Woozy. Double nosebleeds. Eyes open and only the staircase remains. I stand alone, arms still raised. This place is a blank slate as the fade green still churns above, immutable. But what once was the Nightmare’s realm is now flat.

Empty.

Barren.
The only activity lies at the borders – bits from the storm still floating on the wind.

With limp arms, I go for the portal and reaching the top of the remaining structure, I turn back and whisper “mine” to the Fade and exit through the rift.
To Survive, to Run.

Stepping from the portal, I snap it shut behind me, immediately disconnecting the summoned demons of Adamant; they break down and dissipate.

Fatigue. That stunt back there should’ve knocked me out if not outright killing me.

*Must’ve been taking in Fade energy as fast as I used it...*

The people, my people and Grey Wardens alike, they’re eyes are filled with shock and awe; fear and hope dance on their faces.

Not allowing for interruptions, I roar out “GREY WARDENS!” and they stand at attention, anxious to hear the Inquisitor.

“Return to Weisshaupt until Corypheus has been dealt with. Until then, you are vulnerable. And we cannot have weak Wardens,” I yell forcefully and go on to add “And don’t follow blindly! Demand more transparency within the order. NEVER GET CAUGHT IN THIS MESS AGAIN!”

Many look upset. Many nod in acceptance. Hell, some actually clap and cheer, fist pumping the air or waving swords.

Gripping at his midsection, Loghain slowly emerges from the crowd and states to me “without the Nightmare, Corypheus loses both his Warden mages and his demon army,” and looking more thoughtful, says “but in the eyes of your soldiers, their Inquisitor broke the spell with the power of the Maker.”

“Not a hypocrite, man. I just argued for transparency. That’s what I’m going with.”

*Mostly.*

“I suppose you’re right. Ignorance started this mess” he smirks out as a scout breaks from the crowd, yelling “Inquisitor! The Archdemon flew off as soon as you disappeared! There’s no sign of the Venatori magister nor Warden-Commander Clarel, but Cullen thought..”

I quiet him with a hand raise and answer “they’re both dead – Dragon got em.” The scout, he bows slightly and dashes back into the crowd.

Hopping over with Varric as support, Hawke sighs out “so I think I’m gonna go along with Loghain to Weisshaupt but first...” and she punches me in the chest before yelling “You lit what’s left of my leg on fire!”

Exhausted, I casually reply “pffft, you’re welcome. Saved your ass.”

Her frown curves back up into a remorseful smirk when she answers “yeah. You did. Thanks for that. And..I apologize for...”

“Don’t worry about it. Just try to be more objective, okay? And..maybe don’t head back with the Wardens? Maybe..maybe get back to Merrill,” I tell the limping champion. Her mouth pinches to the side as Varric looks up to her and argues “bet Daisy would like that.” She huffs, pats Varric on the shoulder and without an answer, turns to shamble off into the crowd dragging Varric along with her.
And she’s still my favorite Hawke.

“And your Worship?” I turn and meet Blackwall’s intense stare. Haunted, he says “I would stay, if you allow it, and continue our fight.”

Leaning in close, I whisper so only he can hear, “Thom, you’re the Blackwall we need. Of course you’re staying with us. You’re part of this team,” and leaning back, I put on a tired, but warm, reassuring smile. His breath catches in his beard and he goes still, color draining from his face as his eyes meet mine. “You’re good,” I say more loudly, “really.”

Leaving Blackwall where he stands, I walk back to Loghain and tell him “good luck.” The man breathes out a pained chuckle and replies “I must thank you, both for believing in me and for saving my life. It would seem I’m in your debt.”

“Keep the Wardens out of trouble and consider it paid,” I smile weakly and shrug.

The senior Warden smirks, his tired as well, and replies “no easy task. Farewell, Inquisitor.” With that, he leaves to rejoin the others of his order.

Me? I need to sit. My everything hurts.

But in Loghain’s absence, as the crowd withdraws, Cassandra approaches, hesitantly.

Cautiously?

Her sword hand rests on her grip.

Curious.

Bull also has his axe in hand; he’s looking off toward the departing Wardens but I can feel his eye on us.

No. On me.

“As I said, I have questions,” she states and without awaiting a response, she demands flatly “what was that shade?”

This doesn’t feel like the intro to a party.

“You are possessed.”

What?!

No lies, I tell her “look, that was a stolen piece of me. Or were you not listening to the Justinia lookalike? I’m not possessed.”

Unconvinced, her tone doesn’t change as she says “and the staff, it emerged from your head. How?”

“Because it’s mine? And that was the Fade,” I laugh out defensively through a lopsided grin, “Imagination and intent change the nature of it – don’t know what else to tell ya about that.”

Vivienne now; standing straight, measuring me up, she raises her staff slightly. Hell, even Sera has her bow knocked – fright in her eyes, she’s much more obvious – she’s aiming at the ground but she’s quick. It wouldn’t be difficult for her to put a few through my head before I could act
'Are you fucking kidding me?,' I angrily think with my eyebrows knitting together and eyes narrowing.

A worried glare, Cassandra’s fingers fidget at her side now, her breathing shaky as she whispers “you must come with us back to Skyhold,” while pulling a length of rune inscribed chain from her side pouch. "There are tests...

Surprise, my eyebrows shoot up as ‘areyougoddammedkiddingme’ explodes in my head.

“A few written tests? Oral perhaps?,” Dorian remarks as he steps between us. His tone is joking but his face is anything but.

“This doesn’t concern you,” she stresses, never breaking eye contact with me.

To my defense, Solas chides “Doesn’t it? Does this not concern us all? You witness something you can’t comprehend so you must assume the worst, is that not it Seeker?”

“It is a necessary precaution!,” she lectures back but Blackwall, he’s returned to us, to the conversation and surprisingly, he too chooses to stand between us alongside Dorian. “Cassandra, he’s a good man. You and I both know this. He saved us. All of us. And at the risk of his own life over and over again. That he managed to survive is a miracle. No demon would’ve gone to such lengths,” Blackwall utters wearily, tired of the fight. "If you didn't believe in him, you wouldn't have carried him so far."

Looking back to me, she whispers “please” imploringly, her face struggles to maintain its look of contempt.

Nauseous now, my stomach does backflips but I recite “Behind these orbs, ardor burns, ever stoking fire…” a temporary goodbye and all the while, I feel the Fade energy still swirling throughout me.

Her expression cracks, her eyes a blend of anger and sorrow, and shoving past Dorian, she grabs at me.

Escape

I blink.

************

Musty air fills this humid, stifling cottage as moonlight filters in through the weathered splits and breaks in the thatching. Untouched in ages, not since Wan went hunting Morrigan does it appear that life has entered this home. Thick dust coats all – tables, chairs, the mantle, bed and even the doorknob. Cobwebs line the ceiling and corners of the room. Roots and grass stretch upward through the floorboards. Empty bowls and pots sit unused on the table and books, once torn hastily from the shelves, lie upon the floor.

My mana vanishes and I drop back onto the dusty bed.

Perhaps it’s the exhaustion but I giggle “I...just. Fast…traveled!” while drifting off to sleep.
Embracing darkness.

******

Strange to have a dreamless sleep. To sleep as dwarves always do. Probably closed my mind off after the events of yesterday.

*It was yesterday, right?*

Eyes open as evening sun filters into the hovel – my back is scratchy, bare skin against the filthy sheets. Rolling out of bed, my horns, even trimmed down still hook the frame. But with a twist, I’m free.

*Lucky I don’t break my damn neck*

My body creaks in protest. Clutching at the wall, I stand and cracking my back, whisper “at least it’s not bed bugs” and scratch at the filth on my skin, rubbing some of the grit and dirt away.

*Been asleep at least a day.*

“errroooooooowwwwww” my stomach growls.

*Or days. Ughh.*

Hard to tell from within the potentially warded hut – no one wanders here. Nothing wanders here. Not even vermin. Her presence was too potent.

Flemeth.

Asha’bellanar.

Mother of Vengeance.

Mythal.

Regardless of her name, they stayed away from here. And even now, a decade gone, they’re wary.

But I’m hungry. Shaking thoughts of the past away, I think of what I’m gonna do in the now, and what I can do in the future. But there’s nothing here for me aside from four walls, most of a roof, and a filthy bed. I struggle with the door, dirt and vines have built up along the outside and the hinges, they’re rusted.

Jammed.

Sighing, I press my face to the swollen wood and peer out through a crack at the hill on the swamp’s edge.

*Blink*
Eyes open to the humid outdoors. The pungent stench of mud and decomposing leaves punches me in the nose. There’s some pinching behind my forehead but nothing compared to the previous migraines and aches.

Late afternoon sun filters through clouds. And pacing some, I stretch my legs. I stretch my legs all the way over to a nearby tree. Fishing my stuff out of my shredded pants, I take a piss and mumble “could scavenge.”

“Could blink over to Redcliffe and buy some food there….then again,” I pat down my sides and realize my coin purse is missing which earns a “damn.”

Talking it over, I mumble “so Redcliffe pros: I could likely use a line of credit for now. Cons: people know me…and assuming the blink doesn’t drain me….hmmm.”

Shaking it off and shimmying my pants back up, I straighten myself out and murmur “then what about the Inquisition? Should’ve just gone with em; a prisoner again? No…never mind..” and swat at a mosquito on my arm.

Retrieving a bent nail up off the ground, I saunter back over to the hut and start scratching into the door.

We need to talk.
-Hunter

‘Maybe you’ll see this. More likely ya won’t… but it’s there. That’s what matters.’

My stomach growls impatiently and I growl back “yeah, I know” and turning to a sigh, “I was always bait though…she always did the hunting. Half a year and all I learned was how to be bait…”

Resigned, I grumble “screw it. We're risking Skyhold.”

I form a picture of the frozen crumbling ledge outside Leliana’s rookery in my mind.

Blink.

*******************

Open.

Delayed, my ears pop with the change of barometric pressure. Winter winds howl and the sun hangs in the sky where I just saw it.

'Screw Fade Steps, this is the real shit!,' I laugh inwardly.

Creeping along the outside, I gently push at the door. No creaks, it’s been well oiled with all the renovations going on. Me being as tall as I am, I slink through the opening as best I can and into the rookery. Breathless, I peer about in the dim light.
No Leliana.

The birds aren’t cawing. They may be asleep. But a flagon of wine and a bowl of green apples draw my attention – it’s sitting off to the side of Leliana’s correspondence mail. Not about to read her mail though. I’m not a monster. Creeping awkwardly, one heel higher than the other, I reach the desk and pluck an apple. The flagon, I also snag, and retreating to the shadows, I guzzle it down. Don’t have time to purify water.

‘Or do I? Could I magically purify water? Be nice not to always have a hangover,’ I query while munching down on the apple. Tart, but sweet. Chewing at the apple, I lean over to the railing and peer over to the floors below – to my surprise, Fiona is standing in the library talking with Leliana. What a good day.

I finish the apple quick enough and return for a second. And a third. But being by her desk gives me an idea. Pulling loose parchment aside, I take a quill and scribble out a quick drawing of a nug, all the while peering up at the entrance to make sure I’m not walked in on. Below the illustration, I write hastily:

Leliana, hop you’re having a nice day.
Don’t know what you’ve heard, but I’m not possessed.
Not a demon.
I just don’t want to be a prisoner again.
Makes sense, right?
-Hunter

But spotting the cloaks hanging on hook on the wall, I add:

P.S. I’m cold so I’m borrowing a cloak.

But remembering what the Fade Divine said, I scribble in:

P.P.S. saw Divine in the Fade. She told us to tell you
“I am sorry. I failed you too.”
That’s it. Enigmatic is a word for her.

Heading back out the door on the ledge, I grab an extra cloak and bundle up, wrapping it over my shortened horns as well. Then I double back and grab up the bowl and remaining four apples. Still missing a boot though.

Wiggling my barefoot against the cool stone, I whisper “ehh, I’ll figure something out” and head back outside, gently closing the door behind me.

On that broken ledge, holding my cloak and apples tightly, I find myself staring at Rasa’s tower room across the courtyard.

Could check in…

Edging myself around the corner, I glance out to see where the patrols and sentries are. And there are many but none are stationed on the path leading to her door.
“Your foot is cold,” Cole softly says at my side as I almost squirm out of my skin and over the edge. Gripping tightly at the wall, apples lost, I hiss “Cole! Give me more warning next time” through clenched teeth.

No answer, he looks confused.

Calming down, catching my breath, I say “yeah, foot's cold but could ya tell Rasa I’m here? Don’t wanna surprise her.”

He’s gone. As swiftly as he appeared at my side, he’s gone.

Looking down at my dirt and soot covered foot, I slowly wiggle numbing digits against the snow.

“She’s says yes,” Cole says, again at my side and enters Leliana’s room behind me. No heart attacks this time.

Sliding around the crumbling edge, I step over loose brick and shimmy along the wall edge. Carefully. Keeping a firm grip with one hand on the wall, I manage the iced steps and floor and creeping along the scaffolding, I find myself outside her door. Not bothering to knock, I push at the door – it smoothly opens.

*Guess she talked to Josephine about repairs.*

I’m met with glowing candlelight in a well furnished room. A small bed with multiple furs and blankets, a desk by the repaired window slit, and on the dresser in the corner sits Rasa, back propped against the wall.

She looks taller.

“Heard where you had to go. How did you get back so fast?” she rasps out and swings her legs around and over the edge of the large dresser. Staring with that typical indifference in her dark eyes, she states “You’re hiding.”.

And pulling my cloak from my head, she says “that’s new,” looking at my right hand.

Leaning back against the door, I reveal “Uh, yeah. Remember that shade on the mountain? Turns out I found all of em. I’m me again.”

“And you being you involves hiding?,” she asks, not a trace of suspicion in her tone.

“Pffff, some people don’t know what they saw, they think I’m a demon.”

“Are you a demon?”

“Nah.”

“Good enough for me,” she shrugs, “so I take it you’re leaving?”

So blasé about everything.

“Uhhh, well..” I’m interrupted by a gentle knock on the door and I slide back behind the door hinges. No shock in her face, she puts a finger to her lips, goes to the door and opens it a crack.

She allows the outsider to enter. My stomach perches in my throat until I see it’s Cole again. And he’s holding a bunch of clothing and odd bits.
“I gave warning this time,” he utters gently.

A panicky laugh slips from me and I pat him on his tiny shoulder. “Yeah, and ya did good. But what’s all this?”

Looking down at his pile, Cole says “I left a box of kittens in the bar. People like kittens and get distracted. So I took a bottle from the shelf. I put it next to Harritt. He drank it quickly and went off to take a nap. I went through supplies he’d made and brought them to you.”

Awestruck, I’d forgotten how intricate his plans for helping could be. And the expediency!

“Cole, this is amazing,” I say to the ghost boy and he smiles. But Rasa, she says “We’ll be outside. Knock when you’re done changing,” and slinks out the door, pulling Cole with her onto the ramparts.

Not wanting to waste time, I strip as quickly as possible and pick what I need from the bundle – a pair of hastily stained dark brown boots, a pair of thick black pants meant to emulate denim, an unevenly stained black leather vest with grey fabric lining the inside, and brown leather gloves with more grey lining. A motley choice. But it’s good. And it all fits well enough.

Upon knocking on the door, they shuffle silently back in and Cole beams, saying “your foot isn’t cold anymore.”

“Nope. It’s a defrosting foot now, thanks!”

But then getting more serious, Cole states “you’re leaving now. Both of you.”

“Wha?”

Rasa rasps out “you leave, I leave,” to which Cole elaborates “she’s tired of losing things.”

Uncertainty. I ask “uh, can..can you handle yourself?,” exasperated while shaking my head.

With a sigh and roll of her eyes beneath that dark mop, she rasps out "just trust me."

When I pinch my face to the side, she adds "I'm trusting you to not be a demon."

*Fair point.*

Decided, I shrug out “yeah, okay, but we gotta go” as she slides bits of leather on over her clothing.

And turning to Cole, I ask “hey, it’s a risky move but can you tell Josephine to still prepare for the Winter Palace party? Just…do that whisper thing where you give her ideas. Make her think that even though I’m not here, I wouldn’t dare miss that.”

Blank faced, he nods in the slightest. “Alright. Take care, buddy,” I whisper to him and as he watches us, I take Rasa’s hand and say “you’ll feel a slight pinch.”

She raises one brow while glaring, waiting.

Focusing, I imagine ‘*Storm Coast*’

**Blink.**
Outside.

Our 4th night here and we’re taking it slow – she might know a blade but she’s still green when it comes to demon-slaying. Though, we managed to take out one rift with only partial difficulty as the sun had set, though the twilight and unending rain were no boon. To feel the chill of despair demons when soaked to the bone is unpleasant to say the least.

To say more on the matter would be to discuss how the blood literally begins freezing in your veins – how your flesh burns from within as capillaries expand, how your pulse slows but your heart beats faster in panic, and how your movements grow sluggish as death encroaches.

But we managed. And without loss of limb. Mostly scrapes and bruises. Turns out imagining fire in their skulls packs a wallop against creatures of cold.

Camped out in a barnacle encrusted ship hull on the shore, its bow aimed to the night sky, we’ve a small fire in the rocks to keep us company as the storm rages outside. Rain and wind beat and howl at our shipwreck of a sanctuary. Water leaking through the splits in the warped wood and port holes just washes back down off the stone shore drop. Lightning rips the sky apart, its flashes momentarily illuminating our space as thunder shakes the very foundation.

Embers float from the small fire between us – she on her strip of bedding and me on mine, both of us lying back and gazing to the rotting planks and framework above.

Exhausted.

Shifting her weight to get her arms behind her head, she rasps “Where were you before the Conclave?”

‘Easy enough I guess,’ I think against the fatigue.

“I was with Clan Drua’dahn. Good people. Their keeper taught me control. This other elf, the one who found me, she inspired me to be different,” I reveal while holding my carbon black arm above me, twisting it gently back and forth, watching muscles and tendons ripple beneath its hard surface in the dim orange glow. “They helped me and I helped them.”

“Heard people say you were a mercenary though.”

“Uhh, kind of? Ended up getting’ hired by the Kalo-Vas. They brought me to the Conclave. Turns out I messed up a ritual and blew shit up. Then….you know the rest.”

“Why were you with the Dalish?”

Less easy.

“Hmm, they found me. Got hit by lightning, was half dead, about to get eaten by a spider.

“That’s what broke you?”

Keen

“Yeah.”

The storm rages outside our modest shipwreck, the rains and wind beat at the hull.
“Wanna know something weird?,” I ask and chance a glance her way. She’s slowly nodding her head, her dark eyes still looking up.

“I’m not 100% sure of this but my gut’s tellin’ me that that lightning was from the Conclave.” Wincing at how dumb that sounds, I shake my hand and explain “That explosion, it was magic, big. Big enough to maybe ripple backwards? Weird time traveling blast bullshit maybe?”

Rolling to her side to stare me down, her dark eyes question mine – her lips struggle to find the right words. Finally, she manages to get out “how? *sigh* how would that even… you’re trying to tell me that you got hit by an explosion that you would later cause?” Regaining her senses, she plops back on her back and sighs “that doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s why it makes perfect sense. When has weird magical shit made sense?”

No answer.

Feeling the need to change topic before this spirals into an argument, I ask “alright, fine...so what’s your story? I mean, you’re Dalish but you don’t have your blood writing.”

Her breathing goes more rigid, clearly she’s uncomfortable with the question but she quietly says “we were banished.”

"Shit," accidentally slips past my teeth.

I wait in silence, only the heavy rains and crackling fire fill the void.

“Way she told it, mama found out she was magic too late – too many mages were in the clan already so we were forced out. I don’t really remember though, I was too little. Father didn’t care enough and stayed behind.” Angry tears well up in her haunted eyes but her voice doesn’t crack, “Too many clans refused us – too many mages, so we lived alone. Didn’t need clans. Just needed each other. I remember that. But then the war started and mama got nervous – we left the forest and travelled to the Conclave…”

But?

“but she coughed herself to death on the way,” she finishes.

My chest hurts. Her story hurt. Explains why she is who she is. Tears threaten my own eyes and I stretch an arm towards her, palm down on the earth between us past the fire’s edge. Wiping the wet from her eyes, she glances over and puts her hand on mine. A connection. Reassurance.

“I get that I’m not blood...but you’re family.”

“Yes,” she meekly rasps.

The storm rains lessen outside but the winds persist.

Her voice cracks a bit, still stuck on her story as she asks “Do you regret all this? Do you even like being Inquisitor?”

My body goes slack as stare to the ceiling in silence as the question burns in my mind. ‘Do I even like being Inquisitor? I liked playing it but I never expected....Should’ve been Adaar. Not me. Shit, should’ve been any of em. Trevelyan, Lavellan, Cadash. The only reason I’m anything here is because I played the games – know stuff I shouldn’t.'
“Don’t regret it…But I don’t like being Inquisitor,” I confess, “while I appreciate the certainty that comes with the title, I miss the freedom. Power can be a leash.”

“You’re free right now.”

*She’s almost right.*

“Fair point. Alright,” I withdraw my arm and shove them under my head, “I’m gettin' some sleep. See ya at daybreak.”

I close my eyes, dry from the salty tears, and find my meditation in the drumbeat of the waves and the vocals of the wind. Sleep comes easily this way. Within minutes, I’m out.

******

Atop a pillar made of blue grey flesh, the odor of rotting fish and salt permeates all. Lo and behold, this pillar is a whale. Upright, rigid, a memory of some sailor long forgotten. It’s skin is still damp from the ocean spray and the Fade sky casts an dim green glow over the dreamscape. But again, gravity isn’t functioning here, this towering leviathan of the deep is balanced on its tail fin. Lifeless though, its song still carries. But I’m not here for this; I have a mission. Walking over the edge and trusting the Fade won’t drop me, I step over the blowhole and wait.

I utter “To skyhold” to my awakening mark.

A wet explosion of purple and red goes off beneath my feet and I’m fired into the sky. My face stings at these speeds even though it shouldn’t hurt. And as suddenly as I achieve liftoff, I’m driven head first in a mountain of snow. It takes a bit of wiggling to get free. Unstuck from the cold, I brush the imagined snow and slush from my shoulders and look to my new horizons. Surprisingly, Skyhold stands as is – no warping or skewing of self. As it is in the physical world, it is here. But somehow despite the nightfall, it’s all the brighter. It feels alive.

But nothing definitive; it’s just a feeling.

Walking through the gates, I see the wisps, bright white orbs floating lazily. But they don’t register my presence. They hum at my approach; whispers and garbled words emanate from most.

“Dreams,” I let slip in wonder. Previously, I had seen the person dreaming within bubbles…but perhaps there are too many dreams inhabiting this space to allow for such grandeur. Perhaps even the Fade can allocate.

Most wisps sound pleasant at my passing, some holding tunes or symphonies. Some just the simples strumming of a lute. But some wisps own a more red hue, or blue. And some black.

‘*Emotions running wild?*,’ I question of the wisp-dreams.

But I press on, ignoring most. There are only a few people I need to check in on; my core group.

Climbing the stair to the towers above, I investigate Cullen’s office – only his desk is within though it’s significantly larger than real life. I scale the ladder and peer into his sleeping quarters – no wisp. Unsurprising. He’s likely still awake, burning the midnight oil reviewing session briefs and
troop movements. Sliding back down the ladder, I exit his office and take off down the ramparts and enter the tavern form its upper level door.

“No glimmering wisp for Cole. Right..he doesn’t sleep.”

Thus far, my investigation is proving fruitless.

Descending to the next floor, I peer into room after room, uncertain where Sera actually boards. Every door and the last one proves to be hers. I know this because of her open diary on a table riddled with terrible grammar and complaints. That, and the nearby wisp echoes with her goofy laugh. Anxiously, I touch the orange wisp aura and I’m squeezed into the light as it blooms. As the light retreats, I’m no longer in Sera’s room but instead on the rooftops of Denerim overlooking the marketplace.

A chorus of boos and jeers sound from below as faceless townspeople scurry for cover as a blueberry pie smashes into one of their own.

“Hehehehehehe, that’ll show em!,” snickers a younger Sera, a bundle of snacks and pastries in hand.

“Who’s the target?,” I ask, genuinely curious how she can even identify these faceless people.

Finally, she takes notice, frowns a bit and says “you shouldn’t be here. Yur not right,” while edging away from me. Playing to the dream, I exclaim “I know, I know. I’m supposed to be swiping more snacks, but there’s too many people down there!,” while peering down over the rooftop.

“No yur…wha?,“ she utters In confusion and looks back to the crowd. The fire in her eyes reignites and she flings a cookie at the masses. She manages to peg one unlucky dream guy in the side of the head in an explosion of crumbs. “Heeheheheheh,” she sniggers again. I take a second look at the people she’s pelting – they’re not quite the faceless humanoids I thought them to be; some have spines, others have pointed teeth or horns or limbs too long.

*Her demons.*

From behind the crowd, a prominent well-to-do dressed womanoid stands glaring, eyeless, at the young Sera. Mother to daughter. A chorus of jeers and cries rise from below and Sera scoots back from the edge, a smirk still cloying at her lips. Maintaining my distance, don’t want to spook her, I whisper “lookit Miss Fancy back there – thinks she won’t get snacked from over there? Fat chance. You’re too good at this” and with a knowing look, add “yeah?”

Without looking away from her mother figure, her smirk stretches into a full grin. The mother has a moment of panic and backsteps. Sera rises to her feet, a waif on a rooftop, with a cream pie in hand. Pitcher style, she winds back, left foot rising – and throwing her weight down, fires that cream pie at breakneck speed. Somehow it retains shape. A split second and a sea of whipped cream explodes on impact, flooding the streets, swallowing stalls and people alike. The jeers are drowned out – only bird chirps remain.

“Gotta ask…do you still hate them? Hate her?,“ I question while lying back against the rooftop.

“Yeh! They all deserved it!,” she retorts, flapping her arms a bit in wild gesticulation.

“You do get that she was jealous right? She wanted to impress you. I mean, she went about it in a shitty way but obviously she cared. Or she wouldn’t have done it in the first place.”

Her mouth gapes, ready to argue, but instead plops her butt back to the rooftop and huffs. “Jus iznt
right. And yur not right!"

My legs hang loosely over the edge and I say “but I’m not wrong.”

“How ya mean?,” she asks, ready to pelt me with a hard cookie.

Dropping all pretense, I say “you’re scared of magic – I get that. And my magic is weird. I get that too. But me being weird and magic doesn’t make me a demon. I’d have to be a demon to be a demon.”

“But itz weird! Yur weird! And yur in my dream! Weird!”

Oddly perceptive.


“Wait! Where ya going?!,” she demands, holding her throwing cookie at the ready.

“If you think I’m sticking around to clean all this up,” I wave at the sea of whipped cream, “you’re the crazy one.” And with that, I’m squeezed from the dream. Her dream wisp’s aura has calmed as well – it’s transitioned from orange to pale yellow in the time I was within.

Interesting. Admit you’re crazy to the crazies and the crazy calms down?

“Guess I helped some?,” I mutter while looking about the tavern for more dream wisps I’m willing to enter. Though, it’s much more crowded as I reach the ground floor – suppose many of the regulars pass out at their tables. It’s loud down here – I wanted to look for Bull but… there’s no way I’m finding him here.

Not in all this noise. Exiting the tavern, I find myself wandering towards the stables – I’m curious to know Blackwall’s state of mind. In between two bales of hay, a dim wisp floats.

“I would stay, and continue our fight, if you allow it,” a rough voice plays on repeat from its glow. He’s reliving the aftermath.

“No, the last thing I wanted was to haunt him,” I groan and force myself into the wisp. Another squeeze and I’m standing in a blurry Adamant fortress; it’s features and colors are muted. Only Blackwall remains in focus – he’s repeating those words to an empty space before him. “If you allow it…”

I step before him. He face is tired, his eyes stare through me.

“I would stay…,” he growls.

“Blackwall?,” I ask attempting to garner his attention.

Again, he gravels “…continue our fight….”

“Blackwall!,” I yell at this haunted man before me. Nothing, no reaction. No dilation of pupils. He doesn’t know I’m here.

“…if you allow it.”

I grab him by the shoulders and roar “I NEED YOUR ANSWER!”
His pupils turn to pinpricks and he gasps hard, “AHH MAKER!” while ready to hit me. Recognition sinks in and looking up to my face, he states “I would stay, and continue our fight, if you allow it.” He tries to sink back into that loop.

No whispers, no secrecy, I dispel the illusion saying “Thom? You’ve since redeemed yourself. I know this. I’d have hoped you’d know it too.” He tries to pry my grip from his shoulders, panic racing through his body as he spits “no! I’m Blackwall! I’m no one else!”

Refusing to let him squirm away, I squeeze just enough to hold him still and warmly correct “no. You’re both. You are Blackwall and Ranier.”

Bitter tears wet his face and his breathing shakes as he utters “I can’t… I can’t be him again. Maker knows all he did back then.”

Relinquishing him, I take a step back and state “heroes fight darkness. You’ve fought yours and won. Learn to forgive yourself for the mistakes of the past. Do this.”

“But…”

Interjecting, I state “You are good” as fact. With that, I turn to leave but he asks “and what if I’m not?”

Through a toothy grin, I reply “then we’ll be havin’ this talk again” over my shoulder and with a wave I’m returned to the stables. His light stays dim, muddied.

“This’ll take him time,” and turning back to Skyhold, I list my next visits, “Solas. Dorian. Leliana? Josephine maybe? Vivienne...”

Taking a breath, I finish with “Cassandra.”

She’s the dream I’m most curious about.

But I’m torn from that thought – I feel eyes on my back. I whip about but there’s naught but dream wisps. There may be a spirit or two exploring this Skyhold of the Fade but I’m not seeing any. Keeping my eyes peeled, I head back to the main hall – from there I enter the side stairs and enter Dorian’s nook. With every blink, the bottle on the side table becomes a new one. Booze swaps for booze. Then again, kinda makes sense – Dorian is a lush. His dream wisp, a ball of bright teal, floats in his high backed chair; chuckles and music sound from within.

Time to see how Dorian’s doin’.

Tap. Squeeze. Eyes open….

…and fire wide open in shock. My mouth twists in discomfort as my cheeks burn. We’re in a grand ball room of golds and silvers, thin ornate curtains are draped about, and an orchestra plays triumphantly in the corner.

And in the middle of the dance floor, is a sweaty pile of men. It’s a sweaty, naked pile of men. Fifty something elves, humans, dwarves, Qunari – they’re all grunting into each other and tangling each other up in their sex. And Dorian emerges from the top like a stripper from a birthday cake. Confetti explodes and he laughs outrageously.

I can’t move.

Dorian’s father is off to the side and he’s clapping. He’s clapping while proclaiming “I am proud of you, Dorian.”
"..wha?!," I gawk in horror.

Dorian turns his lusty eyes on me and exclaims "Ah! Inquisitor! You finally arrived! Do hop in, make yourself comfortable," with a tweak of his mustache and wicking sweat from his brow.

‘NO. TOO WEIRD. TOO WEIRD!,’ explodes through my head as I tear out of there for the light.

Squeeze.


I’m done.

I’m not messing with anymore dreams.

Last thing I need to is see what Bull’s capable of dreaming… or more salacious, our Antivan diplomat. She’s sweet and kind but I hesitate to say her dreams may likely be more…just more… than Dorian’s.

“I can handle a lot, but an orgy while your dad cheers you on isn’t on that list.”

Returned to the courtyard, I’m slapping at my face, readying myself to wake up, but a wisp on a stump catches my attention It’s interesting because it keeps shifting from bright white to dark red like a storm on Jupiter. I’m still wincing from my intrusion on the extreme display of debauchery upstairs but I can’t shake the feeling that I need to see this one wisp. No sounds or cries or music, it inexplicably feels both angry and at peace. Uncertain what to make of that, I tap the aura’s edge with my finger.

Squeeze.

Darkness. Dim torches flicker at the walls.

I know this place – it’s the cage I woke up in. A ragged looking me kneels chained to the floor but no guards this time around. No Leliana either. Just Cassandra and me and me. But I hang back in the shadows to watch.

She looks furious, just as she did that day. But surprisingly, she kneels before the shackled Hunter and presses her bare hand to the side of his face; both still their breath. It’s all so intimate.

"I am sorry," she whispers sweetly. He closes his eyes at her words.

But that sweet turns bitter as her fingertips glow and the lyrium in his blood ignites.

“Aggghhhhhhhhh!!!!!,” this imitation chokes out in pain but can’t retreat. He’s bound. My breath catches in my throat – I cling to the shadows of the corner. Can’t have them know of my presence.

‘THAT?! THAT is the test? The hell kinda test is that?!!’ races through my head.

She stops and leans closer, her forehead to his. Tears spill between them both. He goes to talk but growls “ti htrow era uoy kniht uoy tnod yhw? Hcum os uoy evol I”

Like a record played in reverse; it sounds menacing but the look on his face was anything but. But she doesn’t read it that way. She spits “demon” and lights him up again to a chorus of screams.

She is not ready to talk. Not even close.
I creep closer to the exit – pressing against the cool stone I came through, it gives way but my boot scuffs the floor – she spins about, her touch still cooking her imprisoned Hunter.

“YOU?” she accuses. For a heartbeat, neither of us do anything but stare in shock.

But then she charges and I leap backwards. Light explodes and she disappears with it as I’m squeezed back out into the courtyard. My heart is racing – this was foolish. And her wisp, it hasn’t changed.

Wrong. It’s more stormy.

“Shit,” I hiss at myself and sprint back to the front gates.

"This was a bad idea. Shit shit shit!"

I feel those eyes on me still as I run but I’m not investigating. Not tonight. At the gate I yell “WAKE UP!”

My eyes flutter open as rain beats against our solitude. I flick myself in the neck – pain.

‘Good. I’m awake. I’m…awake,’ I think as the last of the fires embers hiss in defiance of extinguishing. But they do and the hull goes dark. I resign myself to stare into the void.

“Hey, you awake?,” I whisper to the darkness. No response. She’s asleep. I roll to my side, my back to her and whisper to my hand “you awake?”

One pulse, yes.

“We can’t go back to Skyhold anytime soon, can we?”

Two pulses; no.

“…haven’t talked to ya much since Adamant. You okay?”

A moment passes, the question lingering in the air before it pulses once. Yes.

“Good. Just wanted to let ya know – sorry for how useless I was through most of that. Since the beginning, from losing everything I knew…my family. My friends. My life. My conveniences… I guess I’m just trying to say thanks. I know you’re stuck with me but thanks. You’ve… you’ve made this experience tolerable,” cascades from my mouth in whispers.

It can’t reply – this isn’t a yes or no statement.

Its lightdims and evens out.

“Goodnight,” I finish.

**********

Thunder builds and lightning strikes on the horizon. A larger Inquisition force is traveling by foot on the nearby roads so we’ve settled into this moldering cabin for the moment. Still a rift in these swamps to close but I can’t remember where by heart. We’re just wasting time in the low light till our next chance to explore.
Then again, it’s all swamp and more swamp. Not many places for a glowing tear in reality to hide.

I. Fucking. Hate the Fallow Mire.

“Well, I didn’t think it possible but between this stink hole and the Storm Coast, I might actually hate rain now.” I grumble peering past the window’s edge. Can’t even light up a fire to keep warm for risk of alerting the troops. The din of marching footsteps echo in the distance under the storm.

So we play it safe.

Meanwhile, propped against an old crate, Rasa’s lazily cutting off slices of apple and popping them in her mouth. In between chews, she manages “boredf. Shoree chim.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” I shoot her a glance but crouching back down beneath the sill, I ask “but what about?”

Swallowing, she thinks a moment while paring out another slice, “don’t know. You know things – what’s the deal with that?,” she says nodding to the anchor.

My left hand buzzes, the mark awakens at being called out.

Curious.

I mash my lips together in thought of how to approach this, ‘how…How much should I tell her? No.. screw that. I need one person in the know. She’s chill enough. She gets the truth.’

My stomach does a backflip in anticipation.

“You ready for that story?,” I ask and she nods. She’s facing the door but her eyes don’t leave me. “You’re like an owl,” I mumble. But she ignores the comment, awaiting instead to hear what comes next.

Flashing my palm towards the young elf, I begin my tale, “this? This is the anchor – a piece of the Foci Corypheus used to try to tear open the Fade. Now, Foci, they’re elven – used by the Creators to store their power and yes, the Elven Creators were…are real.” She turns to face me now, eyes flitting from the mark to me and back.

“The Creators…called Evanuris, they’re powerful mages. They were generals, then lords, then gods – and all because they wielded magic like no other and with each victory, their myth grew.”

‘Time for the reveal,’ I ready myself as my guts squiggle with anxiety.

“…of course, this was back when the Fade and the Waking World were one. Before the veil. A world before….shall I continue?”

My mark pulses once as Rasa whispers “yes” with brows raised incredulously.


“Those nine are those Evanuris. Each had a house, and each had slaves… well, all but one. Fen’Harel refused to mark his people with Vallaslin and for that, many rallied behind him. But, perhaps inevitable, as such happens between those with power, war broke out. According to legend,
The Creators fought The Forgotten Ones…”

I take a sip from my flagon of wine and go on to say “but what happened is they warred amongst themselves. And the world suffered for it. But when Mythal was murdered, that’s when the Dread Wolf enacted his endgame. He couldn’t simply free people from slavery anymore. No longer could he continue the struggle against the remaining seven and their armies. He built the veil. But he knew that such a thing would have devastating consequences…but drop it he did and the world was destroyed. The moment it fell, the Elven empire was obliterated – severed, it all crumbled to ruin and innumerable people died. The creators? They’re trapped beyond the Veil, likely in shattered Eluvians…those spooky mirrors.”

The mark is a steady stream of low light, alert. Rasa, her face is blank but her eyes attentive.

“With his power gone, Fen’Harel went to sleep to recover. And a millennia passed…but he finally woke up. He walks among us still but he’s too weak to truly fight back. Too weak to access his Foci. Too weak to reclaim you,” I say while pointing to my mark.

The mark pulses once.

“So I did that story justice?”

The mark excitedly pulses once more.

“Any questions?,” I say, looking to a dumbfounded Rasa. She’s hunched and just staring, “…the mark is alive… and something powerful enough to cut off the Beyond….and he’s real?”

“Uhhh, yep.”

“Why wouldn’t the Dalish know this?!,” she hisses while leaping to her feet to pace.

“Tell enough people a message and someone will mess up the words. Gotta write this shit down or it gets forgotten. The wonders of written word,” I sarcastically flourish.

“How do you know?,” she quietly demands, “how do you know that isn’t a lie?”

Pursing my lips, pondering how to word this, I finally mention “Saw the ruins and remains. I saw the murals. And once upon a time…”

I take a breath, steeling myself for this.

“...the Dread Wolf himself told me so.”

Technically true.

This hits home, her jaw drops at the finality of that; she’s wrapping her brain around the details of this new information. We sit in silence, or relative silence; the troops are still marching, splashing and stomping as the muds sucks at their feet.

The mark waits, a low light, curious to hear her.

Silence.

Disquiet.

Moments stretch to minutes and I crane my neck to peer outside once more. No one in the distance though the sounds of footfall still travel far – acoustics of the swamp are remarkable.
Bad for us, though.

She slinks forward, snatches my flagon of wine, and steals a chug. With red stains in the cracks of her lips, she whispers the question “have…have I met him?”

The anchor pulses once. Her eyes go wide before the words can even leave me.

“Yes,” she whispers in awe and drops back down into a crouch, hugging at her knees and gawking at the floor.

“Yeah,” I confirm, “but keep it to yourself for now. He doesn’t know I know. Not yet.”

_Not yet._
Two weeks now since departing Skyhold, we’ve been traveling on our own and have since sealed all the rifts in the Fallow Mire and the Storm Coast. And all the while, we’ve been avoiding Inquisition forces. Fortunately my use of the fast travel has improved – the pressure differences are still disorienting depending on the distances but no longer do I get woozy from its use.

And it’s been days since my last nosebleed.

I’m finally coming into my own with this, unfortunately I’ve also learned I can’t fast travel to places I haven’t seen before so it appear that we’re confined to Orlais, Ferelden, and the Free Marches.

Rasa, though, she’s proven to be much more than the Rasa I knew – on the move, she’s willing to talk more, even occasionally smirk. And she’s much more capable, especially after outfitting her with stolen Carta gear.

In our short time, she’s gutted bears, eviscerated Venatori, and even ruined demons from the rifts. Agility is her forte and so, I’m glad to have her watching my back; feels a lot like my memories of me and Winter.

With every Inquisition camp we encroach upon, she creeps in and sneaks notes from me into plain view. Secrets of the land. Enemies and creatures to watch out for. Guilty parties and where to find the proof of such.

Good system. Hope they’re actually using the info.

And during our adventures together, we’ve told each other stories...though it’s more me telling her than her telling me but whatever. I’m just glad I’ve told her what I’ve told her – she deserves to know, someone does. The only things I’ve held back have been how this all potentially ends and my exact origins; she willing to wrap her head around me getting hit by time-traveling lightning or me knowing the future or my staff….or any of the other weird shit about me…

But I doubt she’d get if I told her I played through this. As a game. On a television. In an alternate reality. And what a television is.

But today is a new day. In the early hours of the morning, still under the cover of darkness, I blink us to the Southern portion of the Exalted Plains atop some ruins overlooking the vast expanse. Army outposts and encampments dot the scarred land. The dead shamble. Packs of wolves roams the grasslands. Ruins rise from that sea of green. But closer to us, aravels line the riverside at the forest’s edge, tucked away from view at lower heights. Their Halla roam freely on the banks and drink from the stream.

“What’s that?,” my companion asks.

Following her look beyond the elves, over a hillside, I see a ritual in the making. Or rather, a ritual gone wrong. Totems glow and tiny figures scurry about the outside as a hulking Pride demon rages against its cage.

_Solas’ loyalty mission? That's still happening? Damn it._
At my side, on her knees, Rasa has our supply satchel open; various cheeses and breads are laid out on a small blanket before her. A meager breakfast. Crouching down, I pluck a wedge of something Brie-like, likely named “despair of blah blah blah” and pop it in my mouth. Chewing at the bitter, creamy substance with my mouth half-closed, I point out at the ritual I the distance and mutter “I’ll dance with the demon while you destroy those totemf. Should reverf the effectf and make it a spirit again.”

“Chew. Swallow. Then talk,” she quips at me. Then carving away at a pear, she looks ahead and actually grinning, rasps out “so some idiots summoned something they shouldn’t have. What’ll you do with them when we’re done?”

“Threaten em.”

Noting the lack of a harsher consequence, losing the grin, Rasa states “that’s the end of that? Fools are fools?,” while tearing into a chunk of oat bread.

“Yeah, I guess. If Solas wants to punish them later for real, that’s on him.”

Quirking an eyebrow, she asks “Solas is that bald one? How’s he involved?,” and returns to nibbling at the bread hunk while eyeing the scene ahead.

Oh, he’s just the dread wolf and that’s his pal.

Instead, I edit it down to “Demon used to be a spirit, used to be his friend. Those idiots forced it to fight, so it became a demon.”

“Maksh af mush shenf as anything else these days,” she remarks through a mouthful of bread, hiding behind the back of her hand while wiping a blade off on her pants. “Let’s get to it,” she rasps.

Quickly we bundle the blanket around the foodstuffs and shove it back into our satchel and rising, she takes hold of my wrist.

Blink.

******

We flit into existence right next to the idiots and spook them; they stumble over one another to distance themselves. They likely think we’re villains but upon noticing we aren’t focused on them, one approach of the three.

“Ahh, are.. are you a mage? You’re …you’re not with the bandits are you?” a patchy mustached man in thick robes asks, “do you have any lyrium potions?” ”We’re exhausted – we’ve been fighting that demon,” he adds, pointing at the Pride Demon that’s huffing in pain at the ritual’s center, baring it tiny razor fangs in hatred.

“I think he means that demon,” I mock while giving Rasa a sarcastic sideways look.

She retorts flatly, “oh, that demon right there?,” and points with her dagger.

I nudge her dagger arm until it’s pointing at the mustached mage and say “nah, think he means that demon”
“Oh, how could I have been so blind,” she replies in monotone.

“L-l-l-look, I understand it can be confusing for someone who hasn’t studied…” the mustache man lectures poorly in a panic as color drains from his face. Leaning forward, I press my index finger to his lips, silencing him as I say “bop bop bop. It would be confusing. For you” and wrapping my arm around his shoulder, pulling him in, I whisper “but see, what you did was force a spirit of Wisdom to fight and in doing so, corrupted its very nature.”

“Listen to me! I was one of the foremost experts in the Kirkwall Circle!,” he sputters while trying to escape my grasp.

“Oh, from Kirkwall ya say?!” I sarcastically applaud him but keeping the tone, I add “then clearly you learned sooooooooo much,” mocking a final time and shove him back to his other fools.

“Kirkwall Circle sucks,” I finish.

Rasa and I share a look and nodding once, we’re off – she bolts along the perimeter in a mad dash for the farthest totem first. Me, I sprint straight at the Demon formerly known as Wisdom. Enraged and enslaved, it lashes out, throwing its weight into its massive fists – hopping to the side, I narrowly avoid a crushing blow and go to circle Pride.

Rasa’s cutting away at the gleaming totems to the horror of those that started this mess. Me, I’m dancing clumsily with this giant – every dodge barely bypassing its attack. Can’t hurt it, don’t wanna hurt it. I’m all about the distraction. Three totems left, the border magic ripples and breaks but still I entertain.

But this thing is smart and it quickly learns the steps. It changes attacks, dragging an uppercut past my head but follows with a slash. On the defensive with my arms in front, its claws catch against my right arm slicing through the leather but go no further. Claws grind and screech as they meet my carbon arm and though uninjured, I’m forced back; feet dig in and plow the earth. I’m not wounded but my shoulder is rattled from the hit and I’m trying to shake it off; Pride cackles deeply as lightning crackles between its fingertips.

“Shit!,” I growl out while thinking ‘it’s getting used to that form’!

No time to lose.

Can’t let lightning strike. Can’t risk it hitting.

Rasa is still breaking down the last totem.

Reckless, I charge forward as it lines up its shot. But I drop into a slide and end up under its outstretched arms – driving my fist into its wrist, I knock Pride’s aim off sending the lightning ripping over my head and over the tree line. In a shower of rubble, the electric shot blasts the ruins Rasa and I had just eaten breakfast on top off. And with that crumbling in the background, I dive at the beast’s ankles and heave.

Staggered. It topples onto its back with a roaring “HRAAGHHHHHHHHHH.”

And the final totem breaks.

Immediately, with the ritual broken, Pride is Pride no more.

Like a snake shedding its skin, the spirit sloughs off the fearsome purple hide; the monstrous flesh evaporates as it does and only a darkened female elf form remains. And in her eyes burns the
On my knees before her, I offer Wisdom my hand and taking it, she smiles a sad smile.

“Ar lasa mala revas,” I say through my own sad smile.

Wisdom tilts her head slightly and says “Din elvhen emma him.” Not an accusation. Just fact.

With a shrug, I slowly wave to the ritual site and say “ir abelas.”

...but shaking her head, she responds “Tel’abelas. Ir shathe. Ir tel’him,” and taking a deep spectral breath, whispers “Ma melava halani.”

But she pauses and looks past my shoulder as a glow of orange flashes across her face. Fire crackles behind me and following her gaze, I turn to find Solas standing over the smoldering corpses of those mages. His brow is knit tightly and he wears his fury like a badge. Wisdom, languishing beside me, pronounces “Mala suledin nadas” to Solas.

Stomping over, bitter tears threatening his eyes, he drops his staff to the grass and falls to his knees beside us. He’s hesitant to look his dying friend in the eyes but she leans forward and picks his chin up, again stating “mala suledin nadas.” Sorrow and regret line his face as he looks to her, his eyes pleading how sorry he is for allowing this to happen.

“Ma ghilani mir din’an,” she whispers to her friend.

With the slightest of shudders, he quietly replies “ma nuvenin” and places his palm in front of her face – a tap to her forehead and like scraps of paper scattering to the wind, she’s gone.

We kneel in silence as the bodies continue to snap, crackle, and pop at the ritual’s edge; dark plumes of smoke rise from their burning remains.

“Why are you here?,” Solas asks, breaking the quiet and breathing sharply to maintain control of self, “how are you here?”

“We’ve been around, closing rifts and fighting from the fringe,” I reveal off the cuff.

“No, how did you know to be here? Was it a future you witnessed?,” he asks locking his eyes to mine. Catching on, I sigh “it was a fixed point. Some things can’t be changed.” I cringe at the thought ‘some things can’t be changed,’ realizing how dangerous those words to Solas truly are. But adding in an attempt to repair the damage, I say “but you make the best of it. Why I came here. I know I didn’t save her, not entirely, but she’ll be back eventually as someone new…”

“This... You have my thanks,” he replies flatly.

I put a hand to his shoulder and squeeze gently to let him know he’s not alone in this; he doesn't cringe or flinch at this.

Rasa all the while sits upon a toppled totem, staring blankly to the horizon. Though her eyes are perceptive and sharp, perhaps she’s actually giving a moment of peace to the mournful elf. Or perhaps she’s bored. It can be hard to tell with her.

Rising, I step to join Rasa but Solas whispers “wait.”

I slow my gait and turn back towards him, waiting for his next words.

“What is your plan? What do you intend to do?,“ he says in a hush. His query demands an answer,
that’s what his tone says.

“Mmm, depends.”

Looking back to me, he asks “on what does it depend upon?”

“How’re things at Skyhold?”

A sigh escapes his lips as he launches into his answer, eyes half-closed, “The Inquisition is without their Inquisitor but they’ve covered well – official reports state that you’re in the field combatting Corypheus’ forces. For all intents and purposes, the Inquisition is thriving. But you should know that Cassandra and Cullen are not pleased, among a few others. Why would you run if not possessed? They believe your evasion a sign of guilt. I have argued the point but they have refused my perspective on the matter.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I grumble “yeah…I get where they’re comin’ from, I do…but right now, I can’t work with people that aren’t willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. I pushed myself until I was mostly dead. Everyday was agony. But no, the minute I fix myself and destroy a king among demons, suddenly I’m a risk?”

“I know this…but trust goes both ways. You would do well to remember this.”

Pinching my mouth to the side, I stare at the sunrise in silence, uncertain how to respond to such a sentiment. Oranges and pinks, they glow on the horizon as I mull over his words.

“Dumb to not trust the guy literally saving people,” Rasa interjects from over on her totem.

With a huff, Solas stares to Rasa, stating “you are not wrong.” Solas continues to eye her – measure her character. She doesn’t flinch; of course she doesn’t. I can’t read minds but I imagine Solas is trying to understand why this young elf travels with me. But finally, looking away from her, letting the matter drop, he says “also, for some reason, Josephine expects you to be present at the Winter Palace. I can’t fathom why she would thi...”

“When?,” I cut in.

A look of incredulity falls over his face as he says “In three weeks time. Surely you don’t mean to attend.”

The corner of my mouth pulls into a smirk and I continue heading over to Rasa. “Thanks! I’ll see ya then, Solas.” I risk a final look back and see confusion written on the ancient elf’s typically collected face.

"Please don't tell anyone!,” I yell out.

When standing next to her, I prop my heel up on the totem and lean in. Rasa slides her blades back in her boot sheaths and leaning in as well, far from earshot, scratchily whispers “that’s him.”

She’s way more perceptive than I give her credit for...

With a raise of my eyebrows, her question is answered. She shrugs while whispering “hard times for a “god,” right?” actually flippantly using air quotes.

How can she be this chill about it?

With that, she grabs ahold of my wrist, her stare never leaving Solas while I conjure up the shores...
supposedly nearest the golden Halla past the ridge. We’ve missions still in this region.

But we don’t need Solas following along. Not today.

Blink.

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry for the delayed update -- was stuck in a booth all weekend for Comic Con*

Elvish to Common translations thanks to my scouring clips of dialogue and "Project Elvhen" by FenxShiral

“Ar lasa mala revas” - (I give you your freedom.)
“Din elvhen emma him.” - (You aren't Elven)
“ir abelas.” - (I'm sorry)
“Tel’abelas. Ir shathe. Ir tel’him,” - (I'm not. I'm happy. I'm me again.)
“Ma melava halani.” - (you helped me)
“Mala suledin nadas” - (you must endure)
“Ma ghilani mir din’an,” - (guide me into death)
“ma nuvenin” - (as you say)
From Green to Black.

Turns out showing up to a Dalish camp unannounced with a golden Halla in tow is a pretty decent hello. Compound that with announcing you’ve taken care of their demon problem at their burial site will put you in good standing. Further more, tell them you did this for no reason other than to assist the clan, they might actually crack a smile.

Might.

A couple younger elves did. That much was visible from the torchlight.

But it wasn’t long before the clan elders questioned my association with Rasa. Why wasn’t she in a clan? Is she my slave? Am I some kind of monster?

Fortunately, she squashed that bullshit line of thinking immediately by stomping up to their Keeper and rasping “you would do well to not speak of what you don’t know.” When that was met with brows raised in shock and disbelief at her irreverence, she spits “I have no clan. I need no clan. Tall guy here’s the only family I need,” before storming off to cool down near the stream.

She doesn’t typically let her temper flare but she's almost a teenager.

Keeper Hawen, he turns his wizened face up to me and utters “the child certainly has fire. It is a shame she doesn’t know the support a clan can offer.”

Uncertain what to say to such a loaded statement, I just keep my mouth shut and stare off after Rasa. A halla trots up over and nudges her with its face, almost knocking her over. With one hand, she rubs at a halla’s snout; the creature seems pleased and furthermore, her stance relaxes, her fury diminishing to a simmer.

“But what does she mean? You are not Elvhen,” Hawen asks of me.

“I’m her people though. That’s enough,” I state to the grumbling of some elders and Hawen himself.

“The child hasn’t even...” Hawen starts up but I interrupt, saying somewhat bitterly “no. She doesn’t have Vallaslin. I’m aware of that distinction. If you take issue with that, bring it up to all the clans that rejected her.”

She doesn’t need vallaslin. Not unless she wants that shit.
...I hope she doesn’t still want that shit.

I realllly hope she doesn't want that shit.

“It is a shame then.”

“Mmmm, okay, I’m out,” I say before revealing offhand “look, we’re Inquisition. We helped out. We’re leaving now.” With that, I start pacing toward the stream as Hawen questions “Inquisition? We have no need of that human institution.”

‘This dick...’, I lament and spinning on my heel to walk backwards, I address the keeper, “maybe not, but we helped.”

Wasted a couple days dealing with "stuff you didn't need help with."
And pointing to myself with both index fingers, I state "and I’m not human…"

_Anymore._

“…she’s not human,” I say pointing over my shoulder and with arms outstretched, I remark “you’re welcome.”

Now I’m angry. Can’t tell if it’s lack of sleep or just that Hawen is genuinely an ungrateful jerk, but, as I reach the stream, I pat Rasa on the shoulder and leaning close, whisper “so…ya good with leaving?”

She shoots me a look that reads “you’re damned right I am,” all fire and raised brows around those dark eyes.

Taking the hint, I offer my wrist which she promptly grabs ahold of. “I’m gonna take us right into a corpse pit that we need to burn to stop the undead. Cool with that?,” I offer in warning. With her free hand, she unsheathes a dagger with a fire rune inscription.

It’s a “gift” dropped by a now dead Venatori mage. He has her to thank.

“Okay?,” I shrug.

‘Into the pit,’ I imagine a mass grave that’ll likely have an arcane horror looming overhead.

_Blink_

************

It had been rancid – I hadn’t realized the extent of those pits, the state they were in. In the dark, we’d plunged into a soup rather than atop a mound of corpses. Rains had filled the grave and left the bodies within to stew and bloat. Waterlogged bits of flesh fell from the bone as we had thrashed to escape and all the while an arcane horror had cackled at us as we gagged.

Rasa though, better than me in that situation, inexplicably found footing and pegged the demon in its eye socket with her fire inscribed dagger. It crumpled, dead, to the ground as plumes of black smoke rose from its skull.

Once out, drenched in rot, the hardest part had been setting the pits ablaze.

…I’m ashamed to say it took me longer than it should’ve to remember that I can spit violet napalm. With that epiphany, the undead had dropped and the next few pits were child's play.

Come daybreak, in wandering to the Envuris River to wash off the bits of dead plastered to us, we spy a Venatori camp on the embankment. It’s hidden behind a rocky ridge, just before the ruins of town. Most are awake, despite the early hours; one cooking some type of meat in a pan while others study their tomes. One is in his small clothes smoothing out his robes.

Disregarding our filthy state, we slink to the hilltop and peer down upon our foes. We’re not used to the smell, not by a long shot but this matter takes priority...even if I'd rather pass out in the tall grass after trudging and battling the undead all night.

In a hush, I ask “so what’s the plan?,” giving Rasa the reigns. It’ll be good for her.
She counts them up under her breath – fourteen in total – and begins mouthing out words for her plan. She stops herself, squints, and starts again. Take two. I take to laying facedown in the grass, trying to breathe through my mouth so I can’t smell myself.

But I can taste the smell. We’re disgusting. To describe our scent, it's thick and smells like a dumpster fire that someone drizzled honey over.

She swats at my shoulder and I shuffle to listen, my face never leaving the cool grass. “Plan. You pop up in the middle of them. Scare them. I rush from the edge cutting at their ankles while they’re surprised by you. You attack, avoid me, we win,” she reveals her strategy.

I groan in fatigue but prop myself up on my elbows and nod in agreement.

“On your mark,” she rasps.

Deep breaths.

Honing in on the middle of the camp, I keep watch as enemy mages wander about within the perimeter – I focus on the campfire’s edge.

Right next to the cook.

**Blink**

Suffocating.

It’s like being inside a sausage.

I’m squeezed and pinched like I’ve been swallowed by a great snake but it’s starting to give some slack.

More and more.

I still can’t see. It's all reddish and dark.

Can’t breathe.

My joints are pinned together.

Then a nauseating ripping sound penetrates my ears and bones grind on bone. I'm left standing at the fire’s edge as the sizzling pan meats drop to the dirt. It’s raining blood and skin not my own clings to me. My esophagus shrinks; I vomit up the red wine I’ve been sipping all night and my mouth goes dry. The surrounding mages stare in horror at me.

Thinking more quickly than I should be capable of, I wax menacingly “CORYPHEUS HAS ALLOWED ME YOUR VESSELS. COME UNTO ME AND BECOME MINE! AH AH AH AH AH AH AH!,” while hooking my bloody fingers through the air as the flame’s glow dances on my wetness.

“Agghhhhhhhhhhh!” Is the collective response as mages run screaming from me in all directions, one even crying “this isn’t what the Elder One promised!,” tears and snot streaming down their face. Within the minute, they’ve fled the scene. They didn’t even try to fight.

Hopefully they’ll run into a wolf pack.

I vomit again, shuddering but my stomach is empty; I taste bile. Without looking for Rasa, I turn
and walk to the riverbank and slump into the dark waters. Waves lap at me and taking a breath, I plunge beneath the surface.

“Awghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh” I scream into the water, a drowned roar as a torrent of bubbles explode forth. I sluggishly swipe and wick at the pieces and chunks and death stuck to me and I refuse to open my eyes – naught but rot and red would get between these lids if I did.

I stay under until my lungs collapse and shake.

With a gasp, I emerge from the surface, splashing, half submerged now. I strip my leathers and clothes off piece by piece and hurl them, soggy, at the shoreline until I’m naked. Fortunately, the waters are concealing me to some degree because Rasa edges to the shoreline and upon seeing me, spins on her heels to keep her back to me.

“..so,” she starts, “the plan…kind of worked.”

Washing and scrubbing grime and funk from my face, I spit rancid water out in reply, "pfffbbbt"

“Yeah…sounds about right,” she responds uncomfortably, shifting awkwardly in place.

I cough and hack up bits of something indistinguishable but it’s slick and dark.

Don’t wanna know.

“Plan was fine. Didn’t know I could end up inside someone.”

I continue furiously scrubbing.

*****

Back on the shore, I’m trying to wring the water from my clothes and gear. I’ve since pulled my leather pants back on – they’re essentially second skin at this point; clinging, awful, abrasive, weirdly heavy.

Bad idea.

I’m keeping my eyes peeled in case those Venatori return; they left just about everything behind from food to books to staves and tents – Rasa’s taking her turn washing up in the river behind me. Can’t let them catch us unaware if they do return.

Amidst the splashes, Rasa rasps “didn’t know that’d happen. That was gross” to which I reply “understatement of the year. Ehhh” with a shudder. It makes sense in retrospect but I didn’t anticipate displacement.

Fucking awful. Something else to worry about.

A hush returns; her scrubbing and me trying to dry my gear. Trying. The leather is just warping. Moments pass in relative silence when surprisingly, she breaks it first. “We’ve fixed most everything around here right? Can we just leave?,” she questions.

"yeah. We've gotten most of the rifts... and all the pits. I'm not fucking with a dragon. So yeah..."

I mull over our options, ‘emprise du lion or hissing wastes or emerald graves? Can’t do the basin yet.. not just the two of us.”
“Hot or cold?,” I ask the prizewinning question while keeping my back to her. The splashing ceases and she says “cold I guess.”

“How much coin we got?”

“A lot. Dead don’t empty their own pockets,” she replies.

“Right. So when you’re done, don’t bother cleaning your armor. This stuff is ruined and I have an idea.,” I say through a grin, still looking off towards the roads. But here’s hoping she heard it in my voice.

“What idea?”

My lips part and I say “let’s pay a visit to the Black Emporium.”

**********

We fli into existence, her in only her small clothes and me in my now ill-fitting pants that I have to hold up with one hand. Boards creak beneath us at our sudden appearance; river water pools at our feet and stagnant air hits us in the face. Wet and cavernous, this particular market lies deep below the streets of Kirkwall.

And it shows.

We walk the long and winding bloodstained dock, our bare feet echoing as they slap and pad at the wood; at it’s end, it all opens up. It’s a damp chamber cut into the bedrock, an offshoot of the sewers and drainage tunnels but it makes for a grand shop if you’re devoted to secrecy and the illicit.

A hollow voice cackles out from ahead, “Ah I don’t recall mmmmm sending you an in vi tation! But no matter, you’re here now.” Xenon the Antiquarian sits immobile in his throne, his flesh more bark than human. But that’s what immortality without everlasting youth will get you. That fun feature along with too many equally paralyzed arms.

Rasa's eyes go saucer wide as a tiny albino bear scuttles past her ankles. Her breath catches and she takes to stalking along after the miniature ursine in wonder. As she does, Xenon coughs out, “Do be careful with Chauncey – he nips!”

"Look for clothes!," I call out as she disappears behind some crates after the bear.

Stalls and barrels and crates and shelves line the perimeter of this room: odds and ends, from a cask of something purple and writhing to a velvet painting of the late King Cailen, from tomes on forbidden magics to a barrel of socks.

Ordinary to the extraordinary.

“In the corner. There! Do not try on that hat unless you wish for a smaller head! Of course, it has real world applications – the headsman won’t know where to drop his axe, heheh ha he kha kha,” Xenon cackles – although, I’m nowhere near that plumed hat. I reply “that bored, huh?”

_He wants me to cause trouble._

His cackling ceases and he turns to grumbling unintelligibly.
Ignoring him for the moment, I browse the wares: heavy steel plate with ornate gemstone inlays, pairs of broken scissors, and golden marbles that whisper of breakfast foods. A candelabra that steals light, silver jewelry cast from human jawbones, and leathers that inexplicably feel like they carry a heartbeat. A bin of runes, a platter of scallops, an assassin’s satchel that you can drop corpses into but never remove later.

Doesn’t smell great.

Fortunately within this mess, I find some sturdy armor; just normal black leather armor. There’s no tag that reads otherwise. But the set is next to a sheet of some serpent printed textiles that look to be slithering.

*hoping that’s just an illusion.*

Picking up the gloves from the set, I hesitantly slide one on and yell out “hey Xenon! This armor isn’t weird right? It’s just regular armor?”

“Bahhh,” he hacks out, “booooring is what it is. Mundane! I have no use for that – at a discount, it is 60 silver.”

He can’t even turn his head -- how Xenon knows which piece I’m talking about is beyond me.

Looking closely, I notice the outline of rings that have been sewn in between the layers; an extra measure of protection. But beside that, it’s a decent enough set: boots, pauldrons, cuirass, gloves, knee bracers. But all that aside, it looks like it’ll actually fit.

Surprising. Good for me. But I leave the right hand glove on the table – no need for it. Just want to be able to conceal the mark from time to time.

Rasa is sucking on the side of her hand – Chauncey must’ve gotten her – but at least she’s finally browsing. I’d join her by the weapons rack but a tall mirror grabs my eye from the other side of the room. Slowly I step to it, muttering in awe “no way. Figured this couldn’t be real…”

Standing before it, there is no reflection – it’s surface murky and dim. Looks to be as broken as every other magic mirror in Thedas.

Xenon coughs out “that!..hasn’t worked in months – some…one used it too many times!” Adding on after a hollow inhale, “But let it rest and return in another few weeks, oooooohooo, perhaps. the mirror. will be b-hacceck hawkkkkk etchhh arawww” he retches and coughs even more before a ragged looking child scampers from the darkness and up Xenon’s husk, dabbing a wet sponge as he goes. “Ooooo, yes. Good urchin,” the ancient man praises as his dust dry bark is wetted down.

The urchin doesn’t reply.

Moving from the inert mirror and away from this odd scene of hospice care, I step to a rack of clothes. Bright silks, dark stained trousers, crimson robes, smaller trousers, a yellow vest that looks wet but is dry to the touch, a brassiere, lace stockings….

After ample time perusing the rack, I find adequate clothing in the form of dark wine colored trousers, a thick grey button up, and a black leather belt. I pull the articles on, right off the rack.

Not the most unified pairing but it’ll do. It’ll do for the cold that’s to come.

There must be more clothing options in the other corner because Rasa comes back over wearing nothing but black. Pants, boots, belts, tunic, and bracers, they’re all a matching matte black.
“So…you ready?” she asks while smoothing down a crease in her pant leg.

“Yeah. Think so. Grab a couple of fur lined cloaks – I’m gonna pay the talking tree,” I reply, which to the annoyance of Xenon, earns me “mmmm you, you! When you’re a few centuries older, I hope you loooook this good.”

He continues on, adding our bill “but for now, your total is ..ack…11 gold pieces.” I don’t pretend to know the actual prices of his wares, nothing has a price tag, so whatever the case, I place the gold at his feet and walk over to wait by the entrance. Rasa hurries up, stepping over Chauncey to avoid crushing the small bear, and grabs at my wrist.

“Cloaks on,” I state, to which she quickly does. I throw mine on as well and hold tight to it.

*Emprise du Lion. The frozen lake.*

*Blink.*
As we burst into existence, the air is torn from our lungs. Colder than the peaks of Skyhold, this winter’s edge cuts deep. Gasping, we tighten our hold to our cloaks in the hopes of keeping our remaining breath. But amidst that momentary struggle as the winds whip about us, I realize the Inquisition camp on the bank above is eerily silent. No boot steps, no coughing or talks, no sounds of fire eating away at logs. Cautiously I creep out from under the ridge and stand on my toes to peer over…

Red is all I see; steam gently wafts from the painted snow and ice. No white remains within the camp – naught but pulp, blood, and red lyrium shards remain. An Inquisition banner still smolders, lit at some point during the apparent massacre.

‘Red templars...’ works its way through my head as I whisper “ya don’t need to see this” to the hidden Rasa.

“Ffffuck…” I whisper once more to myself as I take in the carnage.

An atrocity.

Edging back down, I take to creeping along the bank to Sahnia as Rasa slinks silently along behind me. At the town’s border, we peer through the ruined buildings and watch as a dark scene unfolds.

The Red Templars were indeed the culprits and here, numbering in the twenties, they stand at Sahnia’s center with a herd of people knelt before them. One among their number, the least corrupted from I can see, she holds a ledger and paces in front of those eleven kneeling. Though at the whimpering of an stick-thin elderly man, she comes to a stop and with a bored tone, says “no crying. This is what’s required. Or would you care to argue that point?”

Frantically, the old man shakes his head back and forth.

“Good. Though I suspect Poulin is lonesome on that wall,” she says with a metallic inflection while looking off to something beyond my narrow field of vision. As the man cries and shakes further, I adjust my position to spy on Poulin.

But it’s not a well dressed Poulin I spy. There’s nothing but a flayed corpse staked to the stone slab – only her agonized expression remains beneath all that red.

I blink hard, wincing as something sharp whines in my ears. I’m back at Therinfal Redoubt on those uppermost step, Envy Lucius beckoning me. My heart stops as his grin twists his face horribly wide and his words echo “I will be you.” Knuckles hit the side of my face and I’m back, the vision is gone. Cold sweat clings to my neck as I absently stare at Poulin's corpse. And as if repeating her words, Rasa whispers “they’re taking them.” She’s right, they’re leading those people off – each step a clattering of chain links. I don’t have time to think about Envy.

Not here.

Don’t get pulled back.

Not now.

‘Focus. FOCUS. Strike now, civilians die. Wait, civilians get infected? Shit. No, gotta stalk em.'
That many templars might be able to kill me... Maybe deny my magic, red lyrium or no. Pick em off. Yes. Tha…,” I’m pulled from my thoughts by Rasa slapping at my arm.

“What’s the plan?,” she rasps, concern lining her voice.

“Uh, I think it’s time for a hunt.”

That earns me a smile – she gleams wickedly at the idea.

*She loves surprises…. Err.. Surprising others.*

***********

With Sahrnia’s residents stolen away, the town lies empty – now only an open mausoleum for the late Poulin. A number of crows already pick at her meat, cawing happily as they snip at bits. But these ruins, regardless of their morbidity, are our beginning in this frozen land.

And so, after rummaging through the few standing homes for food, we begin our hunt.

But immediately I note the absence of that chevalier at Sahrnia’s edge – no corpse to see, no red to indicate a fight, no heavy footprints showing his course. *Maybe…maybe he was never here?* I ponder suspiciously as we pad along past his supposed point of vigilance.

*Things are changing...  
...then again, you can’t save everyone.*

We bide our time, patience our ally as we creep and crawl to survey the enemy numbers while avoiding rifts. Over hills, through the shadows, along the edges, atop the ridges, we spy upon the infected – the Templars I saved weren’t enough; Envy got to too many still and now the red blooms within their veins with that bastard’s help in Suledin Keep.

*Imshael*

I was wrong. There isn’t time to pick off the hundred red Templars in the region. This frozen land now belongs to them. But there’s one way to hit them all… there’s one enemy I can see to; after that, the red will grow unchecked in those Templars and they’ll perish. Choked out, lyrium roots constricting them from within. They’ll die.

Looking about through the snowy pines for the horizon, I try to pinpoint the keep without moving too much – the nearby Templars are keen adversaries but hidden in shadow, I find my destination. Staring to the keep in the distance, I focus hard, hoping I’m picturing it correctly from within – the lone Templar dead on the balcony. That’s where I need to be.

*On the balcony, not inside the Templar. One the balcony... not inside...*

I grab ahold of Rasa’s shoulder; she flashes a glance at me in worry, her face asking if unseen enemies are on the approach.

But I don’t give my answer.

*Blink.*
Lids open to gales and gusts howling at the walls. We lie in shadow, the sun hides behind the mountain peaks.

Shallow breaths fall from our side; a broken Templar, one that refused Imshael’s deal. His chest barely rises – he’s in the final throes of succumbing to the red. So far gone, he doesn’t even see us through his open visor. His face is veined and shimmering, tiny slivers of lyrium growing from the enlarged pores in his nose.

He doesn’t have to know we were ever even here.

But still I crouch and softly demand of the dying, “tell me about Imshael.”

With all these changes, is the demon still the same?

Eyes unfocused, their whites stained pale yellow with flecks of red, his breath catches and coughs as he tries to say “he said we…he said we are his garden. But what he wanted…”

He doesn’t care of friend from foe, clearly so long as they aren’t the demon.

So that much is the same.

“But….cff kffft, it. was. too. much. he has won. It is…” he struggles out and falls to silence. His head drops limp – if not dead, he will be soon.

“I forget how many didn’t choose the red…I forget how many Envy tricked,” I whisper bitterly to myself, not even noticing when Rasa slides her blade into his throat. Not even a sputter crosses his lips; he accepted it with ease.

“You should’ve done it,” she rasps in annoyance, “he could’ve…”

“He wasn’t a threat. He dies every time…” I explain to her confusion.

“..every time?,” she picks up on that detail.

Without elaborating, I simply confirm, “yes” and slowly pace inside. Cold stone, frost damaged wood, crumbling infrastructure…but despite all this, there’s a warmth here.

But it’s further in.

Padding along after me, whispering in confusion “what do you mean every time?!?”

“He dies in every possible future. That’s it,” I reply. Not exactly a lie. And not elaborating further, I just put a shushing finger to my lips and slowly make my way down the wide stairs. As I do, I’m seeing less snow and ice, more water and melt.

And red lyrium spikes, they’re fucking everywhere in this demon’s keep.

I start feeding energy into my right, knuckles popping as I do; coils of power snake about within that arm, tightening in preparation, ready to strike.

Stopping halfway down the stairs, I spy the bastard pacing. Well dressed in feathery black, his dark hair brushed back and from his face, and even from here I can see the phosphorus yellow of his eyes.
Imshael.

“What? Do I have to do everything myself?,” he questions a Templar at his side, more jutting spikes than man at this point, “the weeds don’t control the growth, the gardener does. And I am the gard…”

He catches himself as his eyes flit to me – a most curious grin spreads upon his face. But for a moment, it hauntingly reminds me of Envy and I have steel myself, convince myself not to flee.

“Uhh, who is this? Who are you?,“ the choice spirit asks the Templar then myself but my mark gives me away as it awakens with a flare, its light eating through my only leather glove.

‘Fucking perfect,’ I lament at the loss of my new glove – should’ve known this could happen.

Eyes darting from the glow to all of my defining attributes, he licks his lips and pleasantly says “Mmm, horns AND that anchor – you must be the Inquisitor. Welcome to my garden. Me? I am Imshael, the..”

“Choice spirit,” I finish for him to his amusement. He claps and shaking a finger at me, exclaims “finally! Someone who gets it, ahahahahahehe.”

Rasa edges away, back up a few steps and toward the bannister. She knows danger when she sees it and my enigmatic future talk but a moment ago is no longer her concern.; my rigid stance is screaming “danger.”

“I like you,” he says with a honeyed tone but then turning to vinegar, “much more than this one,” he throws a thumb back over his shoulder. No one is behind him but following his gesture, I finally see what he means – Ser Michel de Chevin, or what remains, has been pressed over the largest of the red spikes, his various fluids running down its glittering face, like a fruit being juiced.

My heartbeat slows – a flicker of panic at the new thought ‘another keep. Another demon.’

I have to hit him.

‘I have to kill him,’ I think as my right arm twitches.

That’s it?,’ a voice interjects internally.

What?

You’re told to be creative, that’s your power, so you just want to kill him?

….uh, yes?

How uninspired..

Wait.., I’m not actually possessed, right?

I can almost feel the voice slapping at their own forehead in annoyance as they reply ‘No. We are not possessed. Remember Adamant? We’re whole. Finally.’

The pause is long and I realize Imshael is looking at me strangely now while he mouths “hello?”

‘Yeah. Makes sense,’ I relent, ‘just making sure.’
*Just go up and shake his hand. We’ll...you’ll do the rest.*

*What?!*

No response.

“What?,” the demon asks, concern and suspicion etched into the corners of his eyes.

*Trust me. Trust myself. Trust.... Okay.*

My posture relaxes; rolling my neck, I smirk out “Hey! Yeah I’m good. Just gets loud in there sometimes, sorry about that,” tapping on the side of my head in emphasis. Walking casually up to Imshael, I drop my cloak and offer my right hand in greeting, saying “it’s good to meet ya.”

“Wait. WAIT,” he announces while taking a step back, “what are you doing? It’s worrying…,” his eyes flitting back and forth between my confused face and my offered hand.

“What? People shake hands when they meet, right? It’s just... a damn hello.”

He eyeballs me hard but tentatively places his hand in mine, reiterating “heh, I was right, I do like you. You’re a curious sort, different than..”

The black on my arm explodes, it’s particles forming a roiling cage of storm cloud around us, blotting out all outside light while writhing tendrils lash our wrists together – Imshael’s face twists in horror as he struggles to free himself, tugging and jerking. Purple lightning crackles within the cage, our sole illumination as the howls of wolves and roar of freight trains hammer from within that darkness.

“What is this?!,” he spits over the cacophony, unable to move as the black buzzes and hums and bubbles further up his arm.

*This has to be what we meant.*

“I offer you a choice,” I loudly explain, a pang of anxious excitement rippling through my guts as I level the anchor with his face, it’s light dancing wickedly off his yellow eyes, “I can open a rift in that pretty face of yours…or you can stay still and see what happens next.”

“Counter proposal!,” he yelps, “my freedom in exchange for power.”

The black rushes further, swallowing him up to his elbow, pulsing, writhing.

“No?! Uhhh, I can give you riches!”

Tendrils skitter forth and burrow, rooting in his flesh; he’s swallowed by black up to his shoulder.

Panic stains those yellow eyes as he desperately yells “VIRGINS?!”

It slithers and hugs at his neck, tendrils slapping at his jaw.

Fighting the panic, he attempts to collect himself and yells “Fine. Remember, you chose this. Not me,” solemnly swearing as his eyes go black. His skin splits, its stitches coming undone – hundreds of spiders crawl beneath his surface, seen only through flashes of static discharge – but my staff’s viscous black has other plans. More vines, snakes, tendrils and veins launch forth from the abyssal dark of the cage and my arm and lock him in place; there’ll be no shifting this moment, he has no room to.
“WHAT ARE YOU?!,” he spits as tendrils snake their way into his mouth and up his nostrils, “ackk bhraaa hrrrrr,” his final words as the black swallows his face. Within the minute, he’s swallowed whole, his entire form wrapped in the dark webbing – he still struggles beneath but the black constricts all the tighter.

Swallowed by the storm.

Bone splinters in muffled pops and cracks.

Tighter.

His mass bubbles and blisters.

Tighter.

The squirming stops. The prey is broken and my staff knows this; like a knot being pulled taut, his form crushes down, drawn to my palm.

More.

Tighter.

Down.

Throbbing, the black shifts and twists to break him more. A surge of power ignites in my arm – but it’s from my staff, not my mana reserves.

Crunch. Twist. Pop. Grind. Another surge. My arm buzzes as energy courses up into it, like grabbing an electric fence. All black withdraws, wrapping back around my forearm and nothing of the demon remains; I glance at my now empty hand in awe, its carbon coating smooth.

‘Mine,’ my inner voice and I mentally state in unison, but without skipping a beat, anchor still raised like a cannon, I swiftly step to the Templar and press the green to his helm.

But he doesn’t move to defend himself.

“No point; He’s already dead,” Rasa whispers from behind me. Confusion forces my eyebrows up my forehead as I ask “what?”

Hesitantly tiptoeing to my side, she points to the man’s feet – from the knee down, his armor is split and the red has grown so fervently from him he’s rooted into the stonework of the keep. She tips the helm visor up and only the barest of flesh still clings to his lyrium skull.

“But why was Imshael talking to him?,” I question.

“Why do you talk to yourself?,” she asks, making her point. Dropping my anchor, it’s glow calming, I return my stare to my staff arm as I ask “what?”

Hesitantly tiptoeing to my side, she points to the man’s feet – from the knee down, his armor is split and the red has grown so fervently from him he’s rooted into the stonework of the keep. She tips the helm visor up and only the barest of flesh still clings to his lyrium skull.

“But why was Imshael talking to him?,” I question.

“Why do you talk to yourself?,” she asks, making her point. Dropping my anchor, it’s glow calming, I return my stare to my staff arm; slowly observing it for changes, I twist it to and fro. Nothing on the surface. No foreign sensations on the inside. It’s as if it didn’t just swallow an entire demon.

But excess power does burn in my veins.

A droplet of blood lands upon its surface and beading, rolls down and off into the snow at my feet.

‘Curious. Still there?’, I ask of the voice in my head while wiping my thumb under my nose to catch the apparent nosebleed. No response. ‘Fucking typical. Can’t even hold a conversation with
my own inner voices,’ I note in exasperation and feel the stirring of a headache.

Nothing so serious as the ones of preadamant; this one is likely just as result of over exertion.

Returning to the present, I snatch up my cloak and offer Rasa my left hand, saying “we still need to rescue the people…let’s end the rest of these monsters.”

With some hesitation, Rasa glances at my right and up to my bleeding nose but places her hand on mine.

She's worried... I get why.

Fingers close around hers and I imagine the mines.

...Jutting stone, deep scars in the earth, red veins...

Blink.
Cold days.
Colder nights.

Under the cover of darkness, we commit to tracking, stalking, and hunting our foes.

By day, we commit to hiding, sleeping in shifts and plotting. The mines run bigger and deeper than in game and I’m uncertain of where all the cages are now.

The little sleep I do manage to get in all this, I refuse to unlock my mind in case Solas is walking the Fade. I can’t risk my mind wandering right now. I’m not ready for it.

Foraging and scavenging is the most we accomplish – by now the red Templars will know of their gardener’s disappearance. Whether they reason his disappearance as a death, I can’t tell. They’re not the most talkative bunch, their vocal chords only seem to allow for guttural roars and metallic growling.

They do not talk.
They do not eat.
They do not sleep.
They do not tire except for when their physical form can no longer support the growth.

Most are more lyrium than man; they’re gemstones in cans.

They’re monsters through and through, those of the mines, regardless of who they were before.

They toil and rage unending, cracking the whip over their slaves’ heads and at their backs, all the while the most human looking of them, their monotonous voice box, she announces how it is their duty to see this through, no matter the cost.

But Imshael is gone and already some are showing signs of instability, a factor I hope to be to my advantage.

It’s been a dangerous task, navigating the frozen ruins and icy passes, and all the while leaving the rifts open – we cannot alert the red to our presence. And we have to do this before any more Inquisition scouts arrive, I can’t have their blood on my hands too. And they’re sure to show after the silence from this region.

As twilight turns to dusk, I stand atop a ledge overlooking these great scars chock full with Templars and their slaves. And even though the aura is nauseating, making my skin itch and crawl, I have to see this through. But now I should have the additional power necessary to swiftly perform such a task – my dark arm tingles still from the consumption of Imshael.

And as much as I appreciate the terrifying move my staff pulled off, there’s no way in hell I’ll use it here – red lyrium, regardless of how powerful it makes you, is not a drug I’d take.

No absorbing these enemies...

“Get creative...” I mumble as such thoughts as ‘long range – spirit bow? Pop in, stab, pop out?”
Can I conjure lyrium seeking magma snake? Probably not. Bash em with a rock? Not that...

Still studying the drop, I whisper to Rasa “Hey, you’re gonna hang back on this one – I don’t want you down there. Hell, I don’t wanna be down there. Just…”

“Got it. I’m fine playing lookout for this one,” she rasps while uneasily eyeing the drop, “save the people…and come back from this.”

Am I ready to dive into that red pit? No. It’s good my skin is already greyish or I might look ill. Dabbing at the cold sweat on my brow with my sleeve, I breathe out “yeah. Of course.”

Then oddly enough, without warning, I find myself humming a song I’d frequently listened to in my old life — Mastodon’s The Ruiner — it plays unsummoned from memory; heavy metal chords and double bass pedals pairing with ‘you take life…’

Humming, I continue aloud, “…give nothing back. You need to return what you’ve stolen.”

New confidence flows, pushing aside my anxiety of this hellscape, and eyes wide, I half grin in a daze while humming “you need life, to multiply.”

My imagined blade, unseen, forms in hand as the anchor awakens – it knows what I intend.

My attack comes now.

Magically, the song projects itself from my mind, bass and percussion shake the air, an illusion echoing terribly off the mountainside.

Interesting.

“…devour all that surrounds you,” I growl and step off the cliff. Perhaps not the right song for jumping into a death gorge, but I favor it.

Dropping fast and striking earth, my blade parts a Templar of his head, only because he was looking about for the source of the noise. I rise, he falls, crystalline blood shakily pumping from his stump of a neck…

With an outstretched left, the anchor charges, its green surging up the scars of my arm, readying to fire.

A guard with spikes jutting from his forearms rounds the corner to investigate my cacophony of sound but with a flick of my wrist, a wave of green light detonates and his skin burns to ash, green embers and fire eating away at the lyrium and tissue beneath – his screams are drowned by my song as he writhes in pain on the cold ground of the pass. Walking up to the pitiful creature as the anchor recharges, I slide my blade downward into his torso. He shakes against the blade but only ravages the cut more deeply – his back arches off the ground and his body collapses; I know he’s dead, even as his body continues spasming — surprisingly it twitches in beat to the music.

I must have hit a nerve cluster.

Instead of pulling it free, I simply drag the blade down the length of body, splitting the corpse as I go. His blood clings to the blade, the only indicator that my blade exists if not caught in the right light.

“We’ve got this,” I encourage the mark as it twitches with power and with an outward slash, the blood is whipped from my blade, painting the cliff side. Something hungry in me awakens,
something driven, something answering the scent of seared flesh and copper heavy in the air.

And this primal force inside me, it smiles, teeth bared. It's enough to blot out the whispers of the lyrium.

Resolve bolstered, confidence shoving aside worry, I dash forward, easily avoiding the more icy patches.

Rounding the corner, a group six strong unsheathe their blades and knock their bows – in time with the percussion, the mark pulses angrily and the remaining flesh they possess ignites, cooking most in their own armor. Amid the howls, I lunge and slash, robbing those closest of their limbs, shearing their armor as I do. Pivoting to meet the blade of one knight, I uppercut with my left, rocking him backwards into the cliffside. The hairs on the back of my neck rise and I pirouette low in response — my spectral edge cuts my attacker down at the knees.

But my song masks another's approach at my rear — a crushing spike drives down into my shoulder, pain rips through my arm as nerve endings and muscle ignite — immediately my song dies, my breath is torn from my lungs. My face locks in a silent scream as I twist against the weight and reaching overhead, I clutch at his face with my staff-hand — metal on metal. I tear at his helm until my fingers find purchase in the soft yolks of his eyes — plunging and clawing, I pierce his head and he unleashes an otherworldly roar in my ears. Grappled; we’re unable to unlock from one another — his elbow spike in my shoulder, scratching against the shoulder blade and my metal fingers, deep in his skull.

And even though he’s a templar, I still have my magic.

Against the pain, I urge my fingers further, deeper into the monster’s skull.

And they do just that — the metal coating my fingers starts extending, piercing, twisting, until a wet shunk pops from behind his helm with a finishing whine of metal and I feel his weight shift, slumping down against me — wincing, ear ringing, trying not to vomit from the pain, I drop to my knee, dumping him off me and retract my fingers.

Surrounded by scraps of steel, guts and chunks of wet lyrium, I frantically hiss “shitshitshitshitshit” while prodding at the wound – it doesn’t feel like any of his lyrium growth broke off. I can’t see any pieces under the skin – don’t feel a dark aura in the wound. No strange whispers.

At least none that aren’t my own.

My nausea flares and I feel my temperature rise.

Close still to vomiting, I worry ‘gotta...gotta change styles. Melee’s no good. Gotta...’ while compressing the wound with my right. Willing my fingers as needles, I begin suturing my own shoulder.

“...gotta get weird,” I wince while stitching myself shut.

Staring at my carbon arm, a distraction from the pain, I mentally question ‘what can I do ...with you?’ while testing the give of my left side.

I’m drawing a blank, I can’t think of an unprecedented attack so for the time being, I’ll improvise. But even still, I move with extreme caution now – I can’t get stabbed again. Not by that red shit.

Especially not by that red shit.
Through the pass, creeping into the next opening, clanging and hammering fills the air – infected miners, despite their captors having been cut down, still they toil. They’re lost to this world. And not a Templar in sight.

Aside from these lost souls lies a wagon, filled to capacity with people – without a moment’s hesitation, many call me over, regardless of whom else it may attract. Several are frantically crying that a big one has the keys but I’m not in the mood for picking locks; I’m bored with finesse.

With but a thought, the fingers of my right hand ignite. Pressing them to the keyhole, those caged scoot away as best they can and watch in awe as I melt the lock. The mechanism liquefies and drips to the snow with angry hisses; I tear the door open and out they escape, avoiding the molten metal as they do.

“Th-th-thank you,” one possibly hypothermic blue-lipped woman cries while a dark bearded man clenches his fist at me and shakes in approval. Others cry but all depart and as a mob, they run back the way I came from.

Good.

But they’re the only ones that have the will to leave – those still mining are too lost, too infected.

“That was a mistake,” states a chillingly bored voice over the clinking of picks to rock. From the shadows under the scaffolding, the female commander I saw but a handful of times emerges with a length of chain dangling from her fist. Dropping a ledger to the snow and mud, she grates “I can not tolerate mistakes” and begins spinning the chain at her side while taking an offensive side stance.

“.what?,” I ask while staring at her atypical weapon.

“Not the standard of the Order, I’m aware,” her voice slightly muffled by her helmet as she adds speed to her swing. “But Inquisitor or no, you will fall,” she states and looses her chain like a lightning bolt – it tears past my head, grinding off my horns. I leap away but with a minor shift of her step, the length fluidly changes course, whipping me across the back. Stinging from the lash, annoyed, I charge at her with my anchor half-raised.

But she’s keen – she darts backwards, faster in the heavy plate than I thought possible and grabs a miner by their scruff. Spinning the broken man between us as a human shield and shoving him at me, slack faced he still he swings his pick by default. Trying to avoid him and with my mark about to detonate, I trip backwards and aim up.

The scaffolding explodes in a torrent of splinters and green, larger pieces of lumber hammering down into the pass around us, impaling the ground.

And then she strikes; darting out from the dust cloud, she knocks aside the miner and sweeps at my legs, dropping me to ground. My back to the stone, I jab erratically with my right to keep her at a distance – one punch connects invisibly, knocking her helmet clear of her head and jarring her enough that I roll away and back to my knees.

It’s all open space behind me and her back is to a wall.

We’ve reached our intermission and take to measuring one another. She’s likely confused how I hit her without hitting her. Me, I’m confused how she’s a red Templar.

She’s slight of build, at least her face would indicate that – sharp cheekbones and jawline, even her neck is small. But no where on her dark olive skin is there signs of corruption, no where except the eyes which are reddish where the white of the sclera should be. But that could just be from sleepless nights and cold air.
Slick black hair is matted to the side of her face with sweat, but sliding it out of her eyes, she unsheathes a dagger. Crouching with it poised to stab, she says flatly, “not so unimpressive. You improvise well.”

With fists still raised, I reply “be dead if I couldn’t.”

‘Can’t let her talk too long – more reinforcements are gonna show after all that,’ I stress, eyes occasionally darting to the passes around us.

Huffing out once, she states “an introduction before I end you, a courtesy. I am Loria,” and something other than boredom flickers on her face. Happiness. And it’s wholly disturbing.

Or it would be if I wasn’t in such pain already.

“I. Don’t. Care,” I reply in annoyance. I don’t have time for idle chitchat. Not here. No time for clichés. So I throw a punch – watching my movement, even some ten feet separating us, she springs to her left as the force of my strike cracks the wall she was just in front of.

No! She knows?!

She forces a smile, straining her face but it’s for my detriment. She absolutely knows.

She rushes me, every punch I throw, she dances easily around.

I throw one where her feet will be.

She reads that too – in a shower of snow and dirt, she rolls to the side and snatching up her chain, whips me again – this time though, it latches around my neck. My fingers rake at the chain to get it loose and she lunges with her blade. Adrenaline pumping, it all kind of slows down, just enough that I can blink to the other side of the pass.

But the chain comes with me, obviously. And she’s still gripping it tight – it snaps, I’m torn off my feet and my backside meets dirt; choking hard, I gasp for air.

“Interesting,” she tiredly says, her tone returned to boredom as she walks up and drives her boot into my shoulder

Pain ignites anew. Dizzied, my vision goes spotty. I try to light my fingers to melt the chain, consequences of doing that so close to my neck be damned, but she knocks my hands away and stomps down on the wrists. By all accounts, our difference in size alone should give me the upper hand but she’s strong. Very strong.

Heels on my wrists and her dagger pointed down at me, she states flatly, “and now you die, Qunari.”

Choking against the chain, I hack out “not. Qu ..nari. Tired. Explain. That!” My skull pounds at the lack of oxygen but amidst that, and I feel my arm roil – the same hungry energy it had when it opened its maw to devour the demon.

‘NO.’ I command; I can’t risk any absorption of the red.

My mind scurries for another answer...

Adrenaline pumping, time slows to crawl.

Her blade inches closer.
...and that answer comes in a flash of the dreams I used to have. Just a flicker, just enough of the old scenes. I remember the bees. Their drone, the beat of their wings.

‘The bees…’, I smirk in pain at the thought as my eyes bulge, ‘ exactly weird enough.’

Inches more, her blade plunges toward my neck.

Become the swarm.

The black of my right arm, it shifts and churns, buzzing with power.

I hear them in my head now, loud, all moving to protect the hive – my staff, the angry swarm some thousand strong.

The bees explode forth, infuriated and envelop her, leaving my arm bare. Knife dropping, it bounces off my leather chest piece and clatters to the dirt and stone. Stingers pierce her armor and flesh, and no longer capable of being bored, she screams while swatting at herself and the air to zero effect. In the struggle, she finally drops the chain and fiddling with the coil, I’m able to get loose.

Falling to the ground, she shudders and begins seizing up, spit frothing at her dark lips as her eyes go as vacant as the miners’. Even still, the many bees dance upon her olive skin.

With a wave, the swarm retreats and returns to my arm, shifting and buzzing. Rubbing gingerly at the already purpling flesh of my neck, I horsely rasp “aren’t you glad I didn’t let it eat you?” as my throat burns.

I’m just gonna use bees for the rest of this bullshit.

Back on my feet, I stumble toward my downed foe and kick her side. No movement, no twitches.

Picking up the dropped ledger, another fucking group of Templars enter the pass, barking and growling unintelligibly. Without looking their way, I cast my arm forward and again my bees attack. Their roars and blades mean nothing against the swarm and within minutes, all the while I’m studying the ledger, they fall, dead and dying.

And so I press on, ledger in hand to find the people, all the while giving the swarm free reign – may their sting bring down all my foes. Sustaining this might be tough, I’m already battered and bruised but I’ll give the bees whatever they need this night.

Into the darkness I walk, executing Templars as I go with bees. No one expects bees. No one expects black metal bees. Fucking bees.

Courtesies of the ledger, I’m able to somewhat navigate the mine and find each of the cages, rescuing those I can and sending them back whichever ways I know are safe now. Each time I tell them to look out for a young elf girl, that “she’ll make sure you’re safe.”

I don’t even hear the whispers of this crevasse anymore, just the drone; the buzz. This is good.

Templars fall to the black, stingers piercing eyes and flesh, cracking lyrium joints – I feel like I’m just doing an extermination run at this point.

Save the people.

Kill the Templars.
I just keep stinging them to death.

******

Yet another night gone, I’ve been in this frozen mana-sapping hell for far too long. It’s just hitting me now that the Templars, a far gone as they were, still likely had anti-mage measures in place. That’s the only reason I can think of as to why I’m so drained. It’s that or a fever.

*It’s both, ya dummy. You’ve been sweating buckets since the shoulder stab.*

The sun has since risen over the mountain peaks but before rejoining with Rasa and any of the citizens I sent her way…

*..hope they made it to her…*

... I’ve got another message to make. At the base of the keep, near where one part of the mines lets out, I go to carve another message while a murder of crows in a nearby tree watch in eerie silence. I need it bigger, more noticeable – so I form my blade and carefully work its long reach into the stone.

**WE NEED TO TALK.**

-HUNTER

*It’s legible at least,* I think as my blade falters and fades, taking my last reserves of mana with it.

A heavy thud drops in the distance.

*And she’s smart... she’ll... she should know know that’s for her; she has eyes everywhere, maybe even more so than the Dread Wolf.*

Again the hammer drops.

*And I’ve got words for her.*

“Caw caw cawcawcawcah” the flock calls out and takes to the skies, leaving me wondering if they’re just birds. Or if she’s one of them.

Thud. Thud. Thud, a massive shadows blocks out the morning sun. “erroOOOOOOOH,” the mass of red lyrium roars at my back.

*No. Just scared birds being birds.*

Too tired to panic, too weak to summon magic, numb, I focus on my fist and clenching, I try to will it more powerful with whatever I may possess; sloppily pivoting on my heel, I trip into a frantic dash at the Templar Behemoth as it raises its jagged fists to attack – it may be gargantuan but it’s slow.
And that’s all the delay I require – falling to my knees and sliding on ice, I roll right between its legs, my fist connecting with its right knee as I do. With a crack and pop, a sharp twang of a thin wire, the monster’s kneecap explodes in a cloud of lyrium dust. Hitting a rough patch, I tumble, but nothing so unpleasant as what the behemoth experiences; with the loss of its leg, the other one splinters beneath its immense weight and down it drops, roaring “HAAAAAAAAAAAGHH” as it plummets. The ground shakes on the impact.

And in a lame attempt to fight me, it flails its enlarged arms uselessly, not quite gaining purchase on the ice. I’d finish it off but my magic is gone; even my knuckles feel bruised from the hit, despite the black staff metal coating.

Let it flail. It’ll die on its own.

“grraAAWWhhh,” it roars in fury and embarrassment, stuck in place.

But I can’t linger on that or stay here.

I’m tired. More tired than I’ve been in weeks, the most I’ve been since becoming whole again.

The black of my arm-staff is smooth – sustaining that for an entire night drained me immensely. And of course I just wasted my last bits on writing a message and cutting down one enemy. A big enemy, but still just one.

So climbing to my feet, I start walking, leaving the creature behind as it roars again, upset at the distance between us. Or perhaps it yearns for death, those guttural roars actually cries for death. Not likely though.

Mind, exhausted.

Body, worn.

Emotions, empty and grey.

Feeling more husk than man at this point, even after devouring Imshael those many nights ago. His addition to my power was a boon, sure, but even that has its limits.

And I’ve reached that limit – hours upon hours of sustaining spells would knock out a lesser mage. So it’s no surprise when a few pill bugs make their return – they shimmer and crawl across the snow, always just beyond my step.

“really? Leave me alone..” I weakly state while limping along.

I’d blink, a fast travel, but I don’t think I can muster even that. Probably end up inside a boulder or a tree if I tried right now.

I’m going on foot for now. And Sahrnia’s mostly empty at present, shouldn’t have too much trouble. Sure, there’s still a few rifts I shouldn’t mess with but...

“…clean up that mess after a nap,” I wearily remind myself while crunching through the snow, unintentional following along after the hallucinations. The cold winds whip at me through my button up, the blood on my arm has since dried but it scrapes as I move. But the cool feels good against the self inflicted burn. And my throat. And my bruised left wrist. And the lash mark’s across my back.

Hell, the cold may be the only thing keeping me upright and awake at this point. Perhaps it was
fortuitous I lost my cloak back in the mines.

No it’s not – I paid good money for that.

Every step becomes a bit more staggered than my last, I’m wavering now. I shakily snatch the wine skin from my belt and shake its weight – empty. I know it wouldn’t have helped but I’m thirsty. Dehydrated. Sighing, I hook the useless pouch back to my belt.

For some reason, I still follow the bugs. Or they’re following me? They’re not real anyway.

It doesn’t matter.

I find myself standing outside a small tower, snow built up against the door.

But is it really a surprise that I find it locked?

I punch at the wood but my fist thuds uselessly against the grain.

“Hey pal, wake up please,” I desperately ask of the anchor.

No fluctuation, no pulse. The mark sleeps as well, recharging.

Turning from the door, I slump back against it, sliding down to the snow and try to fight back my heavy lids.

Another gust, cold stings my dry eyes.

I lose.

And as I fall to darkness, I rasp “survive spiders. Demons. My own damn head. But no, cold is what gets me.”
Warm.

Really warm.

My eyes flutter open

I’m lying down in the dirt, staring up through the gaps in the tops of the corn at a pink sky; the sun looms just over the western horizon, casting its lovely glow as shadows stretch. A gentle breeze makes them sway and bristle. Dust and sweet water, their scents waft into my nostrils and a further sense of warmth fills me. Beyond that, a light jingling, my boot clasps twitching with the breeze – they’re loose, never got around to tightening them up. My jeans feel smooth and toasty, they’ve been soaking in the sunlight as I slept.

I remember this…

Rising to my feet, corn stalks scratch against me; they’re just another rainy month from growing to maturity and going green to gold. Standing a head over the crops, staring out across that sea, I see it stretch on for miles.

My heartbeat trips and my hands shake, ’more than remember.’

Amidst that green, to the South, I spy a tin rooftop peering over it all.

Growing flustered, nervous, I stare at my hands – no mark. No scars. No staff armor. No grey skin. It’s all too good to be true.

Tears form at the edges of my eyes as I breathe “home.” But I don’t walk to it, not yet. I’m too scared it’ll vanish if I move, like a skittish deer. And I’ve imagined it so many times since I was torn away – but this is the most real it’s felt since then. Another warm breeze, the last vestiges of summer and the corn sea ripples in response.

“Everyone! Dinner!,” my dad yells inside the house; my heart races. Unable to wait any longer, I take off through the corn, weaving through it as I run the row, my feet remembering how to avoid the roots. Ears of corn bat at my sides as I rush the house and my arms itch in passing.

“It’s real,” I huff.

Slowing at the field’s edge, I hesitantly step to the lawn, its manicured grass giving way under my boot. Even the ground feels right. It all feels so right. From the moss and wisteria growing up the sides of the white farmhouse, to the garden of tomatoes and sunflower that wraps around its western face, to the noises and thuds of family rushing around inside.

The tears flow freely as I gasp at the sight, the smell, the everything.

I’m actually home?!!

“Hunter ma boy!,” my dad boisterously exclaims – eagerly, I step to the kitchen window, following my father’s voice, but as I press my face to the glass, he says “please pass the potatoes.”
And that’s when I see the scene – my family, siblings and parents inside at the dining table, close together, but I’m already seated. Me. Former me. Human me. The sounds of a dinner being enjoyed and a loving family go mute as I brush my fingers over my head and against my horns; a pained whimper escapes me as the human me replies "yeah, Dad, just..a..second," and carefully picks up the hot bowl with an oven mitt and spoons a serving onto everyone’s plates.


“But you could be…” croons a voice at my side. No need to look to confirm what I already know; it’s another damn desire demon. Blinking away the tears, they turn to salt as I angrily demand “leave.” Her fingers trace the side of my face as she whines “oh, don’t be that way. We could have fun here…,” and gliding behind me, she drapes her arms over my shoulders and presses her breasts against my back. Her breath is hot against my skin. “So. Much. Fun.”

“You just had to corrupt this? This?!” I growl and grabbing her hands, I spin and pin her to the siding of the house, moss clumps coming loose as I do. All the while, the dinner inside continues uninterrupted. Unfazed, she confidently purrs “oh yes, mmmm,” and slowly gyrating in mock ecstasy, "we could also take to a more base and bestial endeavor. Perhaps right here, so close to those you love?"

“No,” I growl, my eyes radiating my malevolence. And she drops the act, saying “If you refuse to entertain me, release me” while struggling against my grip. Hatred burns in my chest and my skull pounds, trails of black smoke start rising from where my grip holds firm her wrists and she starts hissing in pain “no! This is a dream, you shouldn’t be able to… ragghhhhhh, aAHHH! I APOLOGIZE. JUST Let me leave! Iwontbotheryouagain!”

I hiss in return, “the last demon that used my family against me wanted to get away too,” my memory of Envy cuts deep. My mark awakens in earnest and reacting to my rage, detonates.. In an instant, she turns to ash, her wails now a haunting echo.

The house is ash.

The fields are ash.

Everything turns is ash.

Bits of smoldering debris and planks rain from above and the smog is choking. The sun is gone and a cold wind sweeps in. This place is ruined. My family, dust. Still standing at ground zero, now a small crater, I fall to my knees and sob, but no more tears will come. Everything I knew is gone. Everyone I love is beyond me. And even my memories come with strings attached.

In the distance, a tiny voice cuts through the grey, can’t make out what it’s saying though. “Not in the mood for more demons,” I answer while simply staring at the scorch marks that were my family; I’m content to stew and wallow.

“Wake up,” a tiny voice calls out in the distance.

“Please wake up,” it begs more loudly.

“What do you want with me, haven’t you done enough?,” I hiss at the dreamworld, a warning to all other demons.

“WAKE UP!,” the voice screams and something hits me in the face.
Wincing against the light and pain, my eyes snap open as my cheek grows hot, stinging from a hit. I’m laid up in a bed under actual sheets with Rasa standing over me, fuming, clearly ready to yell but biting her tongue because of the company present. A few of Sahria’s citizens, those freed, they’re in the room watching over me.

“Ah good, you’re actually alive,” an older woman greets me and pulls a wet rag from my forehead. Raising a vial of elfroot potion to my lips, she continues with a smile “You should be dead. Between your injuries, that fever, and falling asleep in the snow like that…You’re lucky she found you.” She pats at Rasa’s shoulder, as if I didn’t know it’d be her that found me. A young man, one with eyes like the woman, he rushes to the bed to throw another blanket over me and awkwardly exclaims “thank you for saving us! You two ... FANTASTIC!”

Still touching at the spot where Rasa evidently slapped my face, I gently nod at him while the woman mutters “boy, no need to yell indoors.”

‘Duh. Family…….family,’ I lament, remembering the dream, but as my look grows hard, locked in a staring contest with the ceiling, the mother chuckles out “at least your fever broke. We’ll..we’ll be outside. If you need us, just call.” With that, she snatches her son by the scruff and drags him from the room. The one other man, silent thus far, but with a grumble, he closes his book and rises from his chair, taking his leave.

With no witnesses, she slaps me before yelling “YOU COULD’VE DIED BACK THERE! WHY DIDN’T YOU FALL BACK?!,” glowering as she does while grinding her palms into the mattress edge. “If I didn’t find you, you’d be dead! Dead! And then all that talk about family would be bullshit cause you’d be dead! I can’t believe you were stupid enough to..”

Her rants stops when I squeeze at her hand and hoarsely interject “thanks.” My throat still bears the bruises of the fight.

Still angry, she demands “what happened?,” her dark eyes trying to pierce my mind.

So as not to agitate my throat further, I whisper “Too many Templars. Mines went deeper than I remembered…got turned around some. Too tired, couldn’t get back.”

She looks like she’s about to slap me again but instead, throws her arms around my neck and hugs tightly, rasping into the pillow “you’re not allowed to die. You know this..” And as quickly as she lunged, she retreats, wiping the wet from her eyes. With a shake of her head, her dark mop of hair resettles around her face, effectively hiding it.

“Was death really about to get me?,.” I painfully ask while shifting some under the blankets, drawing upon whatever warmth I can.

“Yes,” she states flatly, “it’s been days since I found you.”

What?!

“What?!” I repeat in disbelief; my throat aches.

Grabbing a bloody plate from the side table, she hisses angrily “and this! This was in you!” My
eyes focus on the flat surface – a sliver of red lyrium dripping red. My heart stops and she sees that; Sliding the plate back to the tabletop, she takes another elfroot potion from the table, and shoves it into my hands, commanding “drink.”

Still numb from my dream, I can’t even taste the medicine; downing the single shot, licking at my cold-chapped lips, I groan “ehhh, we gotta get outta here.”

“No. You’re weak,” she states as fact, folding her arms.

“We have a party to attend,” I argue, albeit weakly, in kind.

“No,” she states definitively despite my wishes.

A thump. Outside, many boots tromp by as a muffled voice mumbles “ah, more Inquisition?”

*Inquisition. Time to go.*

Darting to the window, she peers past the curtains, spying on the troop and scout activity in the town center. Rushing from there, she dashes to grab our gear and takes to throwing what she can at me – my leather armor, our gold, whatever potions she can grab. Running back over, she starts wrapping the sheets around the gear – fortunately I’m still wearing pants. Shoving the twisted bundle into my hands, she grabs my wrist and rasps, annoyed, “this doesn’t make you right.”

“I know.”

More muffled voices talk outside, talk about "the two in the house," drawing closer; the troops are closing in.

“Then let’s go!,” she demands while glaring back at the door.

*Upper ring, Val Royeaux. Overlooking where the revered mother was yelling at me. Val…*

*Blink*

*******

Without warning, I bounce off the railing of a skiff and we splash down in the harbor; I’ve overshot our destination. Heaving and thrashing, we surface relatively unscathed though in my weary state I’m having difficulty dragging my weighted bundle up through the dark blue waters. We manage to pull ourselves onto the docks and sopping wet, I collapse, cold and gasping for air. It’s sundown but there isn’t much in the way of foot traffic.

In between gasps, I cough out “you” and “good?” to which she responds with a weak thumbs up and plops back down on the cool stone of the long dock.

Gingerly touching at my side, I feel the scrape where I struck boat and ruefully think ‘another for the collection.’ I’m a mess.

“Oy! Get outta here yeh bleeding oxman. You too, ya damn knife ear!” some racist asshole of a
sailor spits at us in passing while rolling a cask down the walkway; he’s sporting awful sunburns, his skin peeling around his forehead and the bridge of his nose. I go to yell back, argue against his vitriol but I cough sea water out instead, sputtering more water on my already soaked body. He cackles at that and keeps on down the stretch toward his boat.

Fuck. King. Great.

Despite my sore throat, I can’t help but growl “I hate this place.”

We stay in place just long enough for the sun to set, for the street lamps to light and for the nightlife to come out of the woodwork. But the air grows damp; a storm is likely to roll through. My elf-sister gets to her feet first and helps me find mine. Battered, tired, still damp, and dragging our improvised bedsheets satchel behind me, I follow along behind her from the harbor into the city. As we walk, we pass numerous masked, high fashion Orlesians deep in their cups, many a bottle empty and littering the streets. Surprisingly enough though, aside from a few drunks stumbling into us, no one beyond that one sailor bothers us. Not the drunks. Nor the clerics preaching to the drunks. Not even the guardsmen pay us any attention.

*Or maybe they just don’t feel like dealing with a bloodied, salty, ragged Qunari and an elf child.*

*That’s more likely the reason.*

But regardless, we’ve gotta find a tailor and barber. Maybe an apothecary.

*Or a grave digger.*

Thunder rumbles in the distance and a few drops of rain meet my skin.

This change of weather does nothing to dissipate the partygoers and drunks; still they party in the corners and cafes, high balconies and doorways.

Past the square, down a side street, rain still sputtering, we finally find a salon – though, it’s closing up for the night. We get there right as a silver masked gentleman in all blue satin turns his key, locking his shop door. As he spins around, thunder claps and his eyes go wide at my towering half-naked form illuminated by only the street lights.

“Oh, no! No! Shoo! We are not open, especially not to an ox or a rabbit. We are not a pet shop!” he excitedly states in a heavy Orlesian accent with his nose held high while waving us away. All the while, Rasa sneers at the man.

Without a word, I dig around in my makeshift satchel, his eyes growing wider in panic behind the mask, but I fish out our coin purse – a hefty thing, full of the gold and silver of the dead. Once in, I pull out a handful of gold and jingle it in front of him. I imagine him salivating, the way his eyes are locked on that precious gold; he immediately changes his position on the matter and forcing a wide salesman grin, he sweetly requests “oh how brash of me. Ov courz you two are welcome, do please come in!” Spinning on his heels, he throws the key in the lock and opens his shop to us, dancing inside to relight the torches and prepare his equipment. Staggering in behind him, I pass the “satchel” off to Rasa and plop down in the closest of workstation chairs; Slumping down, propping my feet up on the table, I resign myself to staring at my reflection in the mirror while I await the stylist’s return. My horns, they’re an inch longer than I’d like…and there’s a groove cut into the side of one.

*Her chain got me good. Lucky that wasn’t my eye.*

My hair, it’s just long enough to grab. My beard has grown in and there’s a few silver strands in
there now. Not surprising with the stress I’ve been dealing with. Beyond the cosmetic necessities, I look at my injuries – there’s a welt above my right eye, bruises running up my right cheek, and the skin of my neck is a spattering of blues and browns. Looking at my exposed shoulder, it’s closed but still an angry bruise lies beneath the skin.

_Ouch. Gotta be better about this shit._

Returning to my side, I see his frown in the mirror as he eyes my feet but he quickly locks his eyes to mine and begrudgingly asks “so how can I help the gentleox tonight?”

_Gentleox? Not the worst I’ve been called…_

With a sigh, I breathe out “got a Winter Palace party to attend, need to look presentable.”

Stunned shock, the man doesn’t know how to reply – surely this qunari wasn’t invited. But to allay that confusion, I simply wave my open palm at him, anchor aglow. He stares at the mark for a good minute while fumbling with his words before he finally gasps out “INQUISITOR!?”

“My”

“I am sooo sorry! Had I known…I, I am so, so sorry! Please, forgi…” he frantically tries to spit out in apology to which I cut in, more tired than bothered, “doesn’t matter. Just need the beard gone, need the hair trimmed. Maybe shave down the horns a finger or two if you can.”

“Right away!,” he yelps excitedly and hurries off to gather additional tools, leaving Rasa and I looking to one another in the mirror – she mutters from her leather bench in the corner “power isn’t much of a collar right now.”

“Sure, right now,” I quietly snipe back. She’s obviously still irritated with me for nearly dying. Hell, I’m still irritated with myself for that. Dying in the snow would’ve been embarrassing.

Bustling back into the room, the stylist drops an armful of supplies next to my feet on his workstation – razors, files, a saw, tiny gold plated scissors, a variety of combs, and a lathering brush. Having memorized my words, he immediately takes to his task, lathering up my beard with a heavy foam and tilting my head back as he carefully glides his straight razor against my skin. Even bruised, I barely feel it – he’s got a light touch. If not for the earlier insult, I may actually praise the man; he’s good. I can only use disposable razors.

“A party at the Winter Palace? A magnificent sight, I am told. Oh, to see the Empress…I must admit, I am jealous of you,” he rambles on while gliding portions of beard off my face. Trying not to move in the slightest, I stiffly reply “less grand than ya think – goin’ there to help with negotiations.”

“Do not take lightly your role, ser, for the world shifts at events like zees,” he says quietly.

_Man does have a point..hmm. But whose world will shift._
The haircut had taken no time at all. The horn trimming though…

I don’t know what that saw was actually for but I feel it wasn’t meant for horns – I mean, he doesn’t seem the sort to often have horned customers and it takes him forever to cut them down. Dumping the bone pieces in the waste bin, he takes to filing at the harsh edges. And oddly enough, as grating a sound as it’s producing, it’s kind of soothing, the back and forth grinding. Meanwhile, Rasa has passed out on her bench, she’s curled up in a ball like a cat.

*Lucky. Wish I could sleep that easy.*

“If I may inquire, surely you don’t mean to attend in those…things?” He says, his gaze evidently directed at the torn and abused rags still clinging to me.

“Know a tailor in this town?,” I ask, tired.

“Boot ov course,” he answers, his eyes lighting up as he does, and dusting off his hands of bone dust, he dances over to the heavy velvet curtain and draws it back, revealing a second half to the room. Mirrors line the walls, as do racks of various fabrics, and in the corner sits a pedal operated sewing machine. Putting on his salesman’s pitch, he says “I am the tailor,” self-aggrandizing in tone as best he can. “And…oh..zis..but you already have an outfit ready to pick up?”

“What?,” I ask and spin my chair to face him, certain I didn’t hear him correctly.

“Rather, Lady Montilyet placed the order some time ago but specified that it was for you and… how could I forget?,” he whispers while reviewing his list of sales and orders, “ah, whomever shall arrive first, may receive the outfit.”

“Josephine planned for me to be here?,” I ask, trying to wrap my head around this serendipitous nature of this situation.

“I do not know, truly…” he laments, “and to think I was so rude to a customer. I am shamed. Keep your coin, please.”

Looking at the sleeping Rasa and back to my red attire on the hanger, an idea forms – “how ‘bout this.. you make a dress for her,” I say while thumbing in the elf’s direction, “something similar to what you made me. A rush job. You keep the coin, we call it even.”

Marching up to me, he plugs his hand into mine and states “ser, I graciously accept your terms. She will have her dress. I swear it!”

The shop door sweeps open to the sound of light rain and a damp shorter blonde man yells “Emile!”

“Oh no…” the stylist evidently named Emile quietly groans before briskly apologizing “Cyril, I know I’m working late, my love, I just..”

“Don’t you ‘my love,’ me! We just had this argument last night! You work too hard – I barely zee you!,” Cyril exclaims in an equally thick Orlesian accent before realizing all the company present and glares hard at me and with an angry fist pump, he spits ”an ox?!”

Unable to say much else, I interject their argument with “uh, hey there.”

All the noise must’ve woken Rasa – her eyes are open but he’s hasn’t moved. She’s just gauging the situation.
Ignoring me now, Cyril turns back to his husband and pleads “come home.”

Emile breathes to say something else but instead, an unexpected voice of reason cuts in – “I’m taking a dress off the rack, we’re leaving, and you’re going home,” Rasa rasps in annoyance to the room, “now.” She still hasn’t moved from her spot.

A stunned silence fills the air and I shrug in agreement.

Acknowledging the situation and agreeing, Emile quickly steps to the racks of clothing and eyeballing Rasa, picks out three items – a dark red lace dress, matching flats, and a wine red hairpin. Bagging those up with my outfit, he also slides in two copper colored masks, and passing me the bag, whispers “they need not zee how hurt you are. Please, take care.”

_Odd request...considering what he'd called us just hours ago. Orlais, I will never understand you._

I simply nod and walk out the door with Rasa on my heels. Out into the night, into the light rain, we head for our next destination and that place is a tavern.

Where’s there’s drinks, there’s rooms.

Where there’s rooms, there’s beds.

Where there’s beds, I can collapse.

Chapter End Notes

I’m trying to be quick to update but the next several chapters are a struggle — wanna make sure I’ve got them right before I post more.

But on the plus side, the next few chapters are at the Winter Palace.
What will Hunter do?
How will he handle this pressure cooker of a soirée?
And what will Cassandra think?

STAY TUNED TO FIND OUT.
Three days lounging about in the inn and it’s finally the day of.

The highborn invited all left yesterday and the day prior for Halamshiral from the port – many of their cavalcades passed under our window on their way. But they have to allow for the travel time; they can’t just appear.

‘Of all magic, blink is my favorite,’ I muse while staring out the window and sipping at my ale, ‘unless I wind up in someone or off something. But usually it’s fine.’

“I hate this,” Rasa groans while modeling in her new dress to the mirror, “there’s nowhere to keep my knives.” That Emile chose well — the open backed dress fits her well — but she’s right, it’ll be difficult to sneak blades in wearing that.

“It sucks but ya might have to improvise in there — fork. Grapefruit spoon? Oh, cheese knife! Those are everywhere in Halamshiral.”

She smiles at that, first time since Sahrnia, and replies “can you imagine? Death by cheese knife…”

“ya give em a taste of…,” I say drawing a blank, “damn, what’s that despair cheese? Well, that. Give em a taste of that.”

“Orlesians and their cheese…,” she comments while figuring out her hair pin in the mirror and the best way to fasten her dark mop of hair.

“When you’re done with that, would ya mind helping me with my shirt?,” I ask as I sit down on a stool; my shoulder is painfully stiff. Annoyed with the pin, resigned to keep her hair loose, she tosses it to the dresser and snatches my shirt off the hanger. Shuffling it over my left arm, she holds it back behind me to allow for me to slide my right through. I button it closed myself, no problem there, “thanks.”

I approach the mirror and stare at the two of us in its reflection – we actually look decent. My outfit resembles the ingame one – carmine red, a military style regalia with sharp shoulder pads, brass buttons, black boots and gloves. Or...glove. The mark is already eating through one. But as a bonus, the collar is just high enough to hide my neck. Pulling the final accoutrement from the bag, I pass Rasa her’s and I take to fastening my copper mask over my face as best I can with one hand.

I fail and Rasa finishes the task.

My bruises and injuries are there, still, but at least they’re hidden.

Coin purse on my belt, I don’t bother grabbing up the rest of my gear – the harbor waters ruined what was left of my leather armor. At this rate, I may just forgo armor altogether. Standing in front of the window, looking out over the cityscape, I continue sipping my beer. It’s imperative I be present tonight, I know this, but I can’t help but be nervous.

*How will she react?*
…last time I saw her was in her dreams…
…will she remember that?

I’m not ready for this meeting but it needs to happen. Regardless of what transpires politically, I need to see her. I need to prove I’m not the villain…

“If things go sideways, I’ll fight to make sure you get out of there…” Rasa rasps deadpan at my side, “…even if it is with a cheese knife,” and offers her hand. I inhale a calming breath, anything to quiet my nerves, finish my last gulp of beer and placing the empty glass to the sill, I take up her offered hand.

*Calm. Precision. The storeroom under the first halla statuette, just a door away from the courtyard. Calm…*

“I appreciate that. Always,” I reply, even toned and she squeezes my hand in reassurance.

*Calm. Precise. The storeroom…*

**Blink.**

******

Eyes open. No displacement. No witnesses. All good.

“And would you look at that…didn’t even pop up inside some unfortunate person,” Rasa badly jokes and I wince at the thought.

Dimly lit, even the storeroom is lavish. All white marble, gold wall sconces, rich oaken tables and shelves. Sure, the crates and casks are a cheaper stock but regardless, the point remains.

Through the heavy door, muffled voices are tittering and chatting to one another – still mid afternoon, the party sounds like it’s been going on for some time now. Then again, with the sporadic arrivals, it only makes sense to host an all day event.

My hand hovers over the door knob – slight trembling.

*Breathe.*

*Just breathe.*

*Just. Breathe.*

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Heh, you’re right. You go first — tell me if anyone we know is outside!,” I anxiously breathe out. Evidently not the answer she was hoping for, she glares in passing and slides out the door.

A moment alone, I raise my left hand as close to face level as my shoulder will allow and ask “feel anything weird about this place?”

Two pulses. Yes.
“Powerful weird?”

Another two. Yes.

“Uh…like only one rift weird?,” I ask, hoping for simplicity.

One now. No.

Shit.

“…what does that mean?,” I ask myself — the mark can’t answer that — but the door opens and in creeps Rasa asking “what does what mean?”

“Uh, try to stay out of the servant quarters tonight. That’s all,” I play off and rolling my neck, I force myself to grab the door handle.

“Okay?,” she replies, confused but agreeable. And with that, we step out into the garden.

At first, pacing along the marble path, bushes, and foliage, the other guests pay us no mind…that is, until they see my horns. Then it’s all veiled insults and secreted slurs. And that wouldn’t change, even if they knew me to be the Inquisitor. But my trepidation was unwarranted – I don’t recognize anyone out here..

“Why is an ox here?,” one woman questions as another remarks “Perhaps it does tricks?”

‘Oh yeah. This won’t get old,’ I sarcastically reflect as we ascend the stairs into the palace.

A few of the guards leer at us in passing but do nothing else. But beyond them, we’re greeted by infinitely more marble, angelic sculptures cast from gold, heavy cobalt blue curtains tied back with golden ropes, and wait staff providing drink and finger foods – and this is but the vestibule. I’m admiring these details when a hand snatches my right wrist and struggles to pull me into a side hall away from the gathering crowd; looking to the owner, I catch myself smiling down at Josephine, her own copper mask in hand, and I eagerly join her in the passageway.

‘Guess Emile did all the outfits?,’ I ponder as I slide my own to the side, revealing my face.

“You! You are actually here. I have not gone mad. Or have I?,,” she breathes deep and shakes her head, “I was so sure you would come but the others didn’t believe me. But you’re here! You’re here. I knew it had to be the case, after all, you had picked up your attire.” Collecting herself, breathing out a pleasant smile, she whispers sweetly “it is so good to see you. Regardless of what others may have thought, I know you to be good.”

Disregarding all aspects of professionalism, I scoop her up in a one armed hug, chuckling in her ear “ah, I missed ya. Thanks for not givin’ up on me,” and delicately place her back on her feet. She immediately takes to smoothing out any ruffles in her matching uniform, her cheeks slightly flushed – she’s flustered.

“Inquisitor…,” she breathes out.

“Hunter,” I correct her.

“Hunter,” she smiles but sternly adds, “but only here. Out there, you are “Inquisitor,” understood?”

I shrug and she grows more serious and panicky, stating “this…oh no…we never had the opportunity to train or to teach you the steps… how you speak to the court is a matter of life and
death. It is no simple matter of etiquette and protocol. Every word, every…” but she stops when she realizes I’m tapping at the side of my left eye.

Her posture somewhat relaxes and she whispers “but of course…you already know this. But even knowing what can happen, still be careful.”

“I’ll try to be,” I reply as I slide the mask back in place, “just gonna need…like four drinks to get started.”

“Inquisitor!,” she stresses but I answer “look, I’m nervous.” Not picking up on the true why, she replies “you would be crazy to not be – the political ramifications alone.” I just nod along and follow as she heads back into the vestibule. Rasa has vanished.

*Lookin’ for the cheese platter?*

Tuning back into Josie’s words, I catch the tail end of her commentary, “…And as a guest of Grand Duke Gaspard, you must absolutely meet with him before entering the ballroom – otherwise, the discourtesy would absolutely put us in a difficult position.”

I’m listening to her, nodding and grunting appropriately at each question or comment but I’m more interested in who’s who behind the masks. Fortunately, outside us two, I don’t spy anyone else wearing Inquisition red.

“Ahh, the Vashoth. You must be zee Inquisitor,” a thick Orlesian accent quips at our approach, to which I reply “Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons, I apologize for my delayed arrival,” with a knowing tilt of my head.

Waving his hand to dismiss the notion, he chortles “nonsense, I understand zee pulls of power. They take us every which way. Now, we shall see which way they take us tonight,” a smirk locks itself on the visible half of his face. “Shall we?,” he gestures to door.

“Please, potential emperors first,” I quietly joke to the evident amusement of Gaspard…and to the utter distress of Josephine as she stress whispers “everything will be okay. Everything will be okay” behind us.

Stepping into the ballroom, an announcer greets us, saying “welcome, Grand Duke Gaspard,” and addressing me, “and…?,” he trails off stuck staring at my horns.

“He iz zee Inquisitor, you fool,” the Duke berates the announcer but oddly, the anchor buzzes weakly – just enough to alert me.

*Huh?*

Without further comment or apology, the man leads us to the stairs to the dance floor and leaves us, my thoughts now distracted — above us on the balcony, reading from his scroll, he announces to the room for all to hear “And now, presenting Grand Duke Gaspard. And accompanying him…,” he pauses for dramatic effect, “Lord Inquisitor Hunter…”

The room falls to a hush, many edging to the railings and balconies to steal a closer look at the famous Inquisitor.

I bow to the Empress across the room and descend the stairs, following Gaspard as the announcer continues, “Shepherd and leash of the wayward Order of Templars, purger of the heretics within the ranks of the faithful! Champion of the blessed Andraste herself…”
I mash my lips together in disapproval.

Leaning in, slowing his gait, the Grand Duke whispers through his teeth “do you see zee look on their faces? Hehe, priceless.” Clearly he hadn’t seen mine.

“..Vanquisher of the Grey Wardens of Adamant and destroyer of the demon army within.”

“Accompanying the Inquisitor…” the announcer continues, my lungs stutter and my spine goes rigid.

‘They’re right behind me. I forgot. How did I forget this?’, I worry.

“Seeker Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena…”

‘Just turn around ya idiot. Just look at her,’ I struggle to persuade myself but fail.

Groaning, true to form, Cassandra demands “get on with it!”

Speeding his patter, he reads “Pentaghast. Fourteenth cousin to the King of Nevarra, nine times removed, the Hero of Orlais, Right Hand of the Divine. Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford of Honnl…” I tune out the remainder of the announcement, I’m too caught up on Cassandra.

What am I supposed to say?!

I miss your face

Be subtle. Subtle is key. Just be…

Fortunately, Gaspard speaks first, allowing me a moment more to process, saying “ah, cousin. My dear sister.” He sounds genuine when he opens his mouth, not like the rest of the Orlesian nobility present.

Regal, head to toe in deep cobalt blue and gold, her prop wings sharply fanning out behind her like a radiant aura, she addresses her cousin “Grand Duke, we are always honored when your presence graces our court.” She’s disingenuous, her eyes say as much. While quickly digesting this notion, a sickly blonde in a crème colored Venus-fly trap shaped dress steps out from the Empress’ shadow and eyes me curiously, the slightest of sneers twitching on her lips.

“Don’t waste my time with pleasantries, Celene. We have business to conclude,” Gaspard forces, bluntly revealing his distaste for The Game, as the Empress, composed and statuesque, answers “We will meet for negotiations after we have seen to our other guests.”

With that, the Grand Duke bows low, seemingly in mockery, and whispering “Inquisitor” in support, he departs from my side; the royal eyes find mine, her stare weighted, judging. “Lord Inquisitor, we welcome you to the Winter Palace…”

And your potential killer is behind you…

“…Allow us to present our cousin, the Grand Duchess of Lydes, without whom this gathering would not have been possible…,” Celene says while gesturing to Florianne who curtsies meekly.

The pale Duchess, her turn now, says “what an unexpected pleasure…”

’Bullshit,’ I think while maintaining a straight face.

“…I was not aware the Inquisition would be part of our festivities,” and with an awkward nod, she
finishes “we will certainly speak later, Inquisitor.”

At her leave, Celene speaks anew, “your arrival at court is like a cool wind on a summer’s day.”

Vaguely recalling an option from the game, I respond “cool winds may indicate the storm to come.” A bold thing to say in the court of royalty which only rouses the crowd around us; the room whispers.

Celene, she smiles pleasantly but her eyes narrow as she returns with “indeed. I must ask, how do you like Halamshiral?”

“I’ve never seen it’s equal,” I confidently lie, an attempt at placating.

Having measured me with her stare, she finishes with “I hope you will find time to take in some of its beauties…”

Wait…is she flirting?..no…she’s challenging.

“…feel free to enjoy the pleasures of the ballroom, Inquisitor. We look forward to watching you dance.”

Challenging. Definitely.

I will most assuredly have difficulty with that considering my shoulder – but I will try, regardless. But with those final words, I take my bow and take my leave. From the periphery, I see the Cassandra, Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine approaching for their turn with the Empress. I hurry my pace, leaving the dance floor and snagging a flute of champagne from a platter as I stride to the entrance of the ballroom.

But I just have to look back…

So of course I manage to lock eyes with Cass from across the room; her talk with the Empress was significantly shorter than mine. She’s looking as stormy and annoyed as ever. Panic twists my guts so downing my drink, I round the corner and hurry off into the long Hallway of Heroes, passing statues and placards toward the guest wing and guest garden, my mark buzzing intermittently along the way.

Entering this next section to the palace, I replace my empty glass with another as soon as I spot another servant. Uttering my thanks to the confusion of the elf, I step out into garden to breathe deep of the cool twilight air.

‘Easy, easy. She’s not gonna try anything,’ I posit and down my second flute, my half mask somewhat discouraging me from drinking faster as the crystal clinks against the copper edge. ‘Not with all these people. Just talk..just talk…and wait, what’s up with you?,’ I direct the thought at the anchor to no success – it’s but a steady glow.

“Is that the Inquisitor I see? Nooo, it couldn’t be; he vanished months ago without so much as a farewell,” a familiar voice chides, pulling me back to reality – the voice belongs to a well dressed Tevinter mage, clad in silks, who leans back against the railing I’m bracing myself on.

“Just ‘poof,’ gone,” he jokes as he lifts his mask, “though I must admit, it was quite impressive. Not many can..”

I shut him up by pulling him into a side hug and smirk out “It’s good to see ya.”
Unable to move, he simply laughs back “Looks like I won the bet.” Releasing him, I stare quizzically until he elaborates “Varric and myself…you see, well, there was.”

“I write fiction and even I didn’t see this coming,” laments the gravelly voice of Varric as a small pouch sails between he and Dorian.

“That’s because you thought our Inquisitor here merely a survivor. I, however, think him to be more daring than just that,” Dorian points out and winks at me as Varric raises his hands in defeat.

“Yeah yeah, Sparkler, I get it but Andrus’ ass, there’s gotta be easier ways to get in trouble than coming here,” Varric jokes, “I mean, what happened? You get bored after months of vacationing?”

“.oh yeah. What a vacation, “ I sarcastically reveal, “killing every Red Templar in Emprise du Lion…day at the beach.” The joy drains from their faces; Varric growls “shiiiiit,” looking up at me with pity or concern in his eyes as Dorian swings about holding a fresh flagon of wine, stolen from a nearby servant. Pouring several glasses, he shoves two in my hands and barks “drink.”

I comply with my flashy friend, quickly consuming both—certain the wine will stain my lips, I dab at them with my sleeve while sneaking a peek back at the doorway; still no Cullen or Cassandra or Leliana.

Still time though.

Breaking the momentary silence of our small group, Varric uncomfortably shifts and asks “so..uh..how many we talking? The Templars?”

“A hundred or something.” I sigh, “and their demon master.” Dorian sucks at his teeth immediately pours me another drink but I decline and Varric whistles low before asking “What is it with Templars and Demons?..and…you’re alright?”

“The mere fact that he stands is testament to that,” Dorian quips before downing the intended drink. “However…it would seem I was wrong. I know! How shocking. But you’re not daring — you’re a fool.”

“Obviously. But I did manage to save some people.”

Furtively casting a glance about the garden for prying eyes and ears, Varric whispers, barely audible, “That’s good and all but what are you doing here? Surely Curly and Nightingale can figure out the plot against the Empress.”

“The ways things typically unfold? Figured I had to be here just in case.”

“Or perhaps these things happen because you’re present?,” Dorian quips as Varric folds his arms, chuckling under his breath, his head held low to hide his smirk.

“no doubt…look, just keep your eyes peeled for weird shit. I’ve gotta see about something,” I ask of them, casting glances to the garden — plenty are observing us but none seem of ill intent.

None seem.

“Keeping my eyes open is about all I’m good for at the moment — my dance partner had to wait at the door,” Varric laments and at my eyebrow raise, elaborates the obvious, “weapons check at the door. Oh, my poor Bianca.”

“Eghh,” Dorian groans at the dwarf and then saying to me, “you’d best go before he bursts into
tears again.” Varric mock jabs at the mage’s hip, earning a smirk before Dorian utters “do go already. Just be sure to come back this time.”

“What he said. Unless the Seeker has other plans. Then you run,” Varric advises.

With an upturned nod, I break off and weave through the crowd, now much larger. Finding a recess tucked away from prying eyes, I peer to the second story balcony and blink.

Instant; Much easier than scaling the trellis in full view of the guests.

However, there was little need for me to come up here — the door across the way is wide open and a corpse sits propped against the far wall within; an obvious kill. The same murder, the same way.

So things are still the same, more or less.

With nothing more up here, I shrug and blink a retreat to my previous spot in the garden behind a column in the dark. For the casual observer, it’s like I was never anywhere else.

“I was hoping to catch you,” flutters a voice from the darkness around me but swiftly she reveals herself, her short carmine hair spilling out past her mask.

Leliana!

“You left the ballroom so quickly,” she says, her smile a mask of its own. I breathe to speak but she presses a hand to my chest and whispers through her smile “now is my time to talk. I know you are not possessed. My agents have reported no suspicious activity from you…”

‘She knew where I was the whole time,’ my stomach lurches at the thought.

“…and I must thank you for dealing with the issues in the Exalted Plains — that won us favor with Celene and Gaspard, as well as lesser noble houses.” She pauses to watch me but a moment before continuing “…so what did Gaspard say?”

Relief. I’m safe for the moment. Breathing easy, fake smile still anxiously plastered to my face, I reveal “Gaspard didn’t actually say anything. But I know the assassin — or one of them at least. And it isn’t Morrigan,” as a glimmer of surprise shines in her eyes at the mention of her former companion. Or rather, at the fact that I already knew of her involvement here.

“But if it isn’t her…,” she questions.

“It’s Florianne,” I whisper, “she’s the one with the plot.”

A momentary frown breaks her smile as she questions “Interesting. You’ve witnessed this outcome?”

I shake my head in confirmation.

“Very interesting,” she whispers, “I will think on how to use this to our advantage,” and goes to leave, but not before smiling once more at me, and with equal parts malice and honey, she hums “Do not think to run again.”

With that she vanishes into the crowd, leaving me to my darkened corner.

“…terrifying. But she’s on your side. She’s on your side…,” I say to no one while trying to urge my nerves to calm. She wasn’t the one I’ve worried over but she has that effect.
A bell tolls, its high tone ringing out through the estate, a signal to the partygoers to make way to
the ballroom, that the Empress is done greeting the guests and that the dancing will soon
commence. Pushing into the crowd, I do just that, moving along with the flux of people. Through
the guest wing and back down the hall of heroes, avoiding the stumbling drunks and gaggles of
sycophants.

This place sucks.

Several drinks in now, at least I’ve got a decent buzz; it dulls the shoulder pain. Hopefully my stiff
dancing will go unnoticed. But it won’t – these vultures see everything.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, but as I said, these next few chapters have been difficult to piece
together.

Any criticism or compliments are always welcome.

Enjoy!
“Well well, what have we here?,” sneers The Morrigan as she descends a staircase — boots padding softly against smooth marble, she flairs dramatically “the leader of the new Inquisition; fabled herald of the faith. Delivered from the grasp of the Fade by the blessed Andraste herself!”

My face twists in a grimace at that last bit.

She spies this and smirks as she sashays before me— adorned in an elegant dress of purples and blacks, a wide gold collar latched about her neck, and raven feathers clasped to her shoulder, she puts hands to hips and looking me up and down, she queries “what could bring such an exalted creature here to the Imperial court, I wonder? Do you even know?”

Excited, I've always had an odd crush on her. I'm not exactly interested in her, mind you, it's simply fantastic to meet someone I feel I've known for so long. Without letting my face show more than a knowing smirk, I bow a bit and smoothly state “Morrigan, it is a pleasure. I know well my reasons for being here...”

An approving smile graces her porcelain face and she purrs “you know of me? Perhaps I should feel honored. But what more do you know?,,” and narrowing her eyes, asks “and do we hunt the same prey?” She silently beckons me to walk along with her down a more quiet hallway.

“Perhaps,” I reply evasively while following along.

“hmm, then you should know, I recently found, and killed, an unwelcome guest within these very walls. An agent of Tevinter...so I offer you this, Inquisitor: a key found upon the Tevinter’s body,” she whispers and passes me the discovered item, “where it leads, I cannot say..”

I know...

“...yet if Celene is in danger, I cannot leave her side long enough to search. You can.”

Smirking again, I whisper “fine, go play protector to your Empress. I know where I’m headed. Thanks, Morrigan,” and leave her to her own devices as I head to the kitchen.

*****

It had taken longer than anticipated for a lull in traffic to occur and for me to enter unnoticed.

I immediately regret coming to the servant's quarters...

A sticky film of red coats the floors — the intruders had butchered everyone and stuffed the bodies out of view. An odd choice, considering that they hadn’t bothered to remove all evidence. Slogging through the thick blood, I exit past open stacks of crates — their contents now contaminated. Out onto the tiny balcony, looking out over the maze of tendrils and trellises, all surrounded by the grand apartments, I spy the noble lying at its center.
They lie in the grass, a dagger firmly planted in their chest.

*So..I just have to kill everyone here. Easy enough.*

But as I step onto the railing, ready to drop, a voice angrily calls out “Inquisitor!”

Frozen. I can’t move. My heart races and my mind goes blank.

I hear her approach — Her boots peel off congealing blood with every step.

Shhhh shhk shhhk shhk

I force myself to turn, to look her in the eyes, and coming face to face, I shakily breathe out “Cass.”

No words more pass either of our lips, we stare at one another like deer caught in the headlights..

**BREATHE, IDIOT, BREATHE!!!**

I manage to reconnect brain to mouth and softly utter “hey.”

“Hey,” she parrots, her rage giving way to anxiety, and awkwardly, she takes a step toward me.

I huff out nervously and she pauses — she’s just as shaken as I am now that we’re both actually here.

*What..uhh, what now?!*

In a desperate attempt to make some progress, I thumb it back over shoulder toward the corpse and ask “wanna...?”

Scanning me with stilled breath, she awaits my words.

“….wanna….help me get rid of some Venatori?” I get out in a let down, the only thing I could, and I take to biting my tongue.

It takes her but a moment to process my question but shaking her head clearer, she huffs with weary determination “yes,” and avoiding my stare, soldiers to my side as we face the gardens and streets.

With not a word more, we step from the railing and drop to the grass below — not a significant distance mind you, merely a single story. It’s then I realize Cassandra’s disadvantage; no sword, no shield — she’s entered this place unarmed.

*So I may have to play defense.*

And that time comes now — a harlequin assassin leaps from the shadows, blades in hand, and darts at us with deadly intent. But she fails to recognize us for our potential. Empty handed, I tuck my left behind my back and with my right, I grip the very air itself and make a slashing motion — a thin red line vertically spreads up the attacker as she rushes us, but her gait slows, and soon she finds herself wobbling, her footwork confused; blood trickles down the line and her face separates as it goes slack; both halves slump to the ground, wetly sloshing as they do. Not waiting for another chance, Cassandra steps over and claims the daggers from the split corpse.

‘Easy enough so far,’ I think while giving Cass a thumbs up; she doesn’t have time to process my gesture — another Venatori assassin attacks. With ease, she steps forward, parries, and drives her newly acquired dagger between the assassin’s ribs. As I crouch over the dead noble, she pulls her blade from the harlequin and stomps over; “he is a Council member… and that blade?,” she says while studying the pommel, “this blade belongs to the Duke.”
An obvious ploy — I know it was left to implicate, not merely forgotten. “Try Duchess,” I quietly reveal.

“Hmm, even knowing this, we still must rid the area of Venatori,” she comments, “they are far too dangerous to leave alive.”

Silence falls again between us but even without words, we are in agreement — our mission is to root out those remaining and neutralize them. This works for me — I still don’t possess the words or courage. It would seem she lacks the same. As that revelation comes to me, some twelve more Venatori mages emerge and yell their cries of battle.

Without instruction or plan, we charge into the fray, our attacks pairing well, coordinated from all we’ve fought in the past. She focuses her strikes and abilities against the mages while I work to execute from their flanks — blinking about the battlefield, slashing at the encroaching killers, she takes to impaling a mage closest her. Instead of dropping the corpse, she chooses to wield it as a shield. Incoming spells burn and pop at the deceased as she pushes forward, keeping her “shield” raised. With her providing a distraction, a target, I maintain my blinking assault about the area, cutting and punching, breaking and hacking apart our enemies.

I litter the yard with their limbs and chunks.

Upon their numbers diminishing to one, we surround our singular foe; the mage panics and tries to flee; a fade step. Cassandra has other plans though — in a fluid motion, she unsheathes her blade from the corpse shield and sends it at the escapee.

It cuts into their leg just as they mouth their spell, staggering them enough for me to grab them by the shoulder and cave in their skull with my fist.

That's the last of them...those twelve at least.

It feels like old times, us against the world. And though the moment passes, it’s less awkward than before.

We continue on, sweeping the surrounding apartments. As peculiar as it is, every foe we duel slay, every attack we block for one another, it somehow seems, unspoken, to be bridging the gap between us.

A stolen glance, a tired sigh, just fighting in each other's presence, those are her rewards to me throughout this. And this chapter comes to a close: the floor stained red, bodies and limbs littering the ground, us panting from exertion. My chest rises, heart swelling, I need to talk, to...express…to say anything to this powerful beauty before me; and she’s looking to me in expectation!

*Do you hate me…*
Do you?
Just say something…anything.

But another unfortunately intrudes upon this dark intimacy — a waifish redhead with pointed ears concealed behind a silver mask splashes in and stresses “Fancy meeting you here, Inquisitor Hunter..”

Our moment, whatever it may have been or could have been…it’s ruined; Cassandra takes to glaring at the Elven ambassador instead.

“Ambassador Briala,” I gruffly respond in monotone and reluctantly turn to face the elf as well. Looking out the doorway, stepping from the blood, an attempt at salvaging her silk flats, she
exclaims “...what a surprise! My reports said you were terribly dull. It would seem they were wildly incorrect...,” and looking back to me, says with an air of indifference “but you seem to know me.”

Cassandra and I both simply wait for her continue.

Taking the hint, Briala does just that, flicking her toes of blood as she says “you two cleaned this place out. It will take a month to get all the Tevinter blood off of the marble.” Casually stepping out onto the balcony into the moonlight, she continues “I came down to save or avenge my missing people...but you’ve beaten me to it,” and without looking to the noble corpse below, she cautiously queries “…the Council of Heralds’ emissary in the courtyard...that’s not your work is it?”

It’s not actually a question – she knows damn well it wasn’t us. She’s toying with us, wants to measure us by our answer.

“Does that seem like my style?,” I ask annoyedly and Cassandra scoffs. I presume she’s on my side – at the very least, it kind of feels like she is again. Though no words have confirmed as much. Laughing out, Briala blurs “no, haha, I do not think that is your “style.” For one, I would say this is a reflection of you,” and opens arms to indicate the pools of viscera about us, “clearly this was Gaspard’s doing. Clearly he intends to strike tonight.”

“It’s not him,” I bluntly state without offering an alternative. Cassandra, she knows, but she refuses to deal with Briala and steps away to watch the entrances.

Not budging, Briala persists, “Don’t let his charm blind you. He’s Orlesian; his smile is his mask,” but growing pensive, “while we disagree, at the moment, on the who, it would appear I’ve misjudged you...”

“Ughhh,” Cassandra scoffs from her position.

Sneering at the Seeker for the interruption, she continues, “Inquisitor, you may just be an ally worth having. What could you do with an army of Elven spies at your disposal? You should think about it...” Without awaiting my answer, she says “I’d bet coin that you’ll be part of the peace talks before the night is over...and if you happen to lean a bit our way, it could prove advantageous to us both. Just a thought.” With that, she lunges over the balcony, grabs ahold of the trellis and climbs her way down and out of sight.

Annoyed, though relieved by Briala’s departure, Cassandra wearily asks “is there anyone here who is not corrupt?”

Were she looking at me, she would see my hand raised in silent response.

But she doesn’t. And I slowly withdraw my hand from the air...

The second bell tolls, another reminder to make way to the ballroom.

“We should...we should head back before we’re missed.”

“Yes,” she brusquely agrees.

*****
We returned in silence – a pair of servants were waiting with towels at the gate for our arrival. Servants talk and they seemed thankful for avenging their brethren. With their assistance, we removed most of the blood – Josephine was wise to choose such a red for our outfits. Then again, she likely considered such a possibility; she is Josephine.

No one should ever guess at our actions this night.

Upon reaching the threshold of the ballroom, we hover but a moment before yet again, we’re interrupted – this time, by Florianne.

“I-i-inquisitor Hunter?,” the sickly blonde stutters out in her approach; Cassandra leaves, looking over her shoulder at me with eyebrows tightly knit together – my eyebrows mirror hers.

‘Never gonna get a damn word in…’ I mentally growl.

“We met briefly…,” Florianne continues, potentially unaware of her interruption, “I am Grand Duchess Florianne de Chalons. Welcome to my party,” and dips to curtsy.

‘I hate you. So. Damned. Much,’ I silently curse the Duchess before replying “you uh..you’ve got some interesting timing,” biting my tongue to keep from saying what I truly mean.

“Oh?,” she questions. She most certainly knows what she’s done. She may appear weaker than the game had made her out to be but she’s still a manipulative piece of trash.

Still.

“I believe, tonight, you and I are both affected by the actions of…a certain person,” she goes on, “…come, dance with me. Spies will not hear us on the dance floor,” urging me to accompany her with a tilt of her head. I hesitate before giving my answer – shifting in place, I test my shoulder without being obvious about it; breathing deep and keeping my arms locked, I find only minor discomfort – the adrenaline and booze of earlier are still in effect. So I acquiesce to her wishes, contrary to what I’d actually like.

Fortunately, the band starts fresh with a slower song as we descend the stairs into the pit. It’s almost serendipitous that they’d play this right at the moment of my arrival, almost as if they know of my hinderance. They obviously don’t, it’s just good fortune.

Gloved hand takes gloved hand, leather on lace as we take to the dance floor. My left to her waist, her free right to my left bicep – 1,2,3,1,2,3.

My hand buzzes again, more strongly now, though Florianne doesn’t appear to notice.

Mid step, she asks up to me, “the tal-vashoth are hardly known for their political maneuvering. Just what interest do you have in our little war?”

Step, pivot, step, step. I spy Rasa leaning against the railing — she can tell I’m not into this, her devilish smirk says as much.

“There is more to this world than Orlais,” I utter, hopefully to the dissatisfaction of the Grand Duchess. I’m not about to stoke the precious ego of those in earshot..

Step, glide…
“Perhaps. But the empire is the center of everyone’s world,” she quietly argues in time with her step.

Reverse. Step, step...

“It took great effort to arrange tonight’s negotiations, yet one party would use this occasion for blackest treason…,” she adds as we sidestep around another couple, “the security of the nation is at stake. Neither of us wish to see it fall.”

Lies.

Irritated now, but masking it, I say “and I prefer a bit of mystery. How about we dance in silence?”

“Inquisitor, do you trust anyone?”

Of course she still wants to talk.

Keeping up the guise of pleasantness, I return “do you?”

Step, pivot, step, step.

Her smile still phony, she says “you…are a curiosity to many, Inquisitor…and a matter of concern to some.”

“And what am I to you, your Grace?”

“A bit of both, actually,” she titters but returning to coy, says “this evening is of great importance, Inquisitor. I wonder what role you will play in it?” As if it were a melody, she hums “Do you even yet know who is friend and who is foe?”

“Who in the court can be trusted?”

I reply “No one.”

“In the Winter Palace, everyone is alone. It cannot have escaped your notice that certain parties are engaged in dangerous machinations tonight.”

“Ah, the Orlesian Pastime,” I drawl sarcastically while lightly dipping her.

“You have little time. The attack will come soon. You have to stop Gaspard before he strikes,” she whispers brazenly as I raise her back to her feet, “in the Royal Wing garden, you will find the captain of my brother’s mercenaries. He knows all Gaspard’s secrets.” With that, the songs ends; our dance is finally over.

Curtsying, she says “I’m sure you can persuade him to be forthcoming.”

No reply from me, I simply stride away as she bats her eyelashes at me. Nauseating. All the while, the anchor buzzes. But I can’t help thinking about the rift trap I’ll be walking into in the Royal Wing.

Grumbling “I’ve gotta check it out,” I step from the ballroom, pushing my way through the steadily growing numbers, and back out into the vestibule and continue onward until I find my lurking outside a doorway to the aforementioned cordoned off section where a trap is absolutely awaiting me.

And even knowing how this should play out, I’m still dumb enough to go along with it.
Everyone is drunk; Why am I sneaking?

The music fades and the raucous sounds of the revelry muffle; my footsteps echo loudly in this empty wing as I walk in darkness.

No guests here.

No lit torches.

Or rather, it should be empty. A door swings open to my right, someone’s bedroom. But it isn't a noble I witness; in the threshold stands a rapidly blushing elf.

And The Iron Bull, His mask askew, looms right behind him. Of all the places in the palace to be, of course he’d be off screwing the staff. The elf hurries off with his cheeks burning crimson, escaping back to the party. Bull, his shirt remains untucked, buttons undone and he glares at me in angry confusion. His hand is halfway in his unbelted pants, paused partway through tucking in a shirt corner.

“No fucking way,” he growls having forgotten what he was doing.

Awkwardly, I wave to him while weakly saying “hey.”

“ragggghHHHHHH,’ the half naked Qunari roars and charges at me, getting tangled in his own unbelted pants as he does. I blink across the room, me at his starting point in the doorway and him slowing over to mine. Realizing where I’d gone to, he growls low “You just gonna do that all night?”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t wanna get hit,” I shoot back.

Slow stepping around the perimeter, trying to edge closer, he grumbles “coward,” as his pants fall all the way off.

Annoyed and avoiding eye contact with his junk, I loudly question “how am I a coward? What have I done?!” Pissed off, I yell back ”Was it killing the Nightmare? Was that it? Or is it the part where the fucking Conclave blasted me to pieces and I had to find myself? Or was it when I found my memories in the Fade?! Is it my magic? I know that shit doesn’t make any sense! Is it the future knowing stuff and still trying to fix shit?!..."

But I’m monologue-ing.

He got me monologue-ing and mid rant, he hurls a potted plant at me. Lost in my train of thought and the immediate need to block a houseplant, it’s all too easy for him to reach me. For a hulking, pants-less, sex-sticky Qunari, he’s quick on his feet — timing his attack and executing it flawlessly, he hits me like a freight train right at I swat the fern away. Tackling me, we go crashing to the floor and with his forearm to my throat, he easily takes control of the situation. His other fist raised, he’s ready to strike should I fight back.

I could fight him off. I just don't want to.
Menacingly, he threatens “Don’t move, Boss. And none of that magic vanishing crap,” while glancing about.

But as previously stated, he’s missing his pants. In what may number among the more uncomfortable of circumstances I’ve experienced is made all worse. I can feel his thick cock mashed up against my thigh.

My face is rapidly flickering between pain and cringe.

Fortunately, Cass rounds the corner right at that moment. “Ugghhhh,” she grunts in disgust and shielding her eyes with the back of her hand, cries out “release him!”

This was a bad idea.

Bull, confused, growls “wait, what now?! Isn’t he possessed?”

“his actions would suggest otherwise.”

“you’re shitting me!,” he growls in frustration while crushing my windpipe; I slap at his arm in a desperate bid for oxygen but still the naked qunari presses the air from me.

Death. By. Naked..Bull......

“Get. Off. Him,” hisses Rasa from over Bull, a dirty cheese knife is digging into his neck; she appears like an apparition. Ignoring her pitiful blade, certain of his ability to survive, he refuses her demands.

“Enough!,” Cassandra yells at everyone. Eyes darting between Bull and the Seeker, Rasa withdraws her blade from tender flesh. Bull though, it takes him longer than I’d like but he relents and eases his forearm off my windpipe. “if this is a trick…” he threatens, still on top of me, which now wheezing, I struggle out “not *gasp* a *huff* trick.” He eyes me suspiciously but ultimately picks himself up, leaving me on the floor gasping for air while he unabashedly saunters away to reclaim his lost pants — Cassandra forces herself into a staring contest with the floor to avoid this sight.

Rasa though, she’s doesn’t give a damn about modesty; she keeps her eyes locked on the biggest target in the room as he shuffles his pants on. We’re on his blind side but I can still feel his eye on me.

“So why are we here?,” Cassandra asks objectively as I crawl back to my feet; I cough out “Florianne told me to go to the garden — obviously a trap,” and begin treading along toward the intended rendezvous down darkened halls and scaffolding, construction tools, and blue prints.

If they’re quick or slow to follow, I don’t know. Don’t care. I’m just looking dead ahead. I’m tired of this night already.

The mark won’t stop buzzing now, and all I can do is think ‘what does that mean?,” completely oblivious to its purpose. But I have to focus — I hear a low chanting outside the doors.

Can’t understand it though.

“So. Boss,” the Iron Bull mocks, “What are we walking into?”

Despite the buzzing, that static sensation, I feel the familiar tug of a rift and reveal as much — “Florianne, rift, and some enemies,” I utter, imagining it to be like the events of the game. After
all, so far, everything else has coincided in the same way. Rasa’s ready with her cheese knife. Cassandra has a handsaw and a hammer likely taken from the surrounding work tools. Bull, he forgoes any improvised weaponry — he is a weapon.

Outside the double doors, the chanting continues more loudly now.

Tired of the Winter Palace, tired of its people, tired of the dodging, tired of the politics, I waste no more time, injured or no and exit out into the garden.

It’s a gristy scene — the troops that Gaspard had smuggled in have all been slain; their corpses and blood positioned and painted in a bizarre array on the stones beneath the shimmering rift. And even though I’m here, some thirteen Venatori stand entranced around the perimeter, chanting still and swaying in place like people possessed; they’re completely unaware of our arrival. Bull growls uneasily, hands raised ready to fight. Rasa is a blank slate, dark eyes darting over the enemies and the rift, cheese knife at the ready. Cassandra narrows her eyes. And me, I saunter till I’m just a scant few feet away from the tear in reality.

Up on the balcony, Florianne sidles to the railing and cries out “Inquisitor! What a pleasure! I wasn’t certain you’d attend. You’re such a challenge to read. I had no idea if you’d taken my bait,” all the while, the rift continues folding in on itself and stretching back to scale.

“You’re too obvious,” I retort while studying the Venatori surrounding us; I don’t bother to look at the Grand Duchess — hopefully this irritates her.

“Such a pity. You could almost be Orlesian, if you were just a little quicker. It was kind of you to walk into my trap so willingly. I was so tired of your meddling,” Florianne says but goes on to add, “Corypheus insisted that the empress die tonight, and I would hate to disappoint him.”

With a wince, I casually remark “isn’t he used to disappointment?”

At that, she falls to stunned silence — she knows the score and presently, The Elder One is losing.

Whispering, perhaps to rally her conviction “why settle for an empire when Corypheus will remake the entire world?” It appears to have worked because she further adds “I admit, I will relish the look on Gaspard’s face when he realizes I’ve outplayed him. He always was a sore loser…I’ll deliver the entire south of Thedas, and Corypheus will save me… ME! When he’s ascended to godhood, I will rule all Thedas in his name.

“You’re probably gonna die tonight.” I savor these words. But they don’t seem to faze her. Instead, she frantically cries “in their darkest dreams, no one would imagine I would assassinate Celene myself. All I need to do is keep you out of the ballroom long enough to strike. A pity you’ll miss the rest of the ball, inquisitor. They’ll be talking of it for years to come.”

She’s unhinged.

A vengeful sneer twists her face as she cries to the Venatori “NOW!” Whatever power they’ve been granted, it mimics my mark — Corypheus must have given them a piece — they brandish their pale imitations and release its power. The rift expands, unfolding, and a monstrosity cackles from within

“Kill him and bring me his marked hand,” she commands and the demon hisses it’s obedience. “It will make a fine gift for the master,” she says offhandedly before traipsing away, off to rejoin the main party.

“Shit,” Bull, Rasa, and I growl and rasp in unison as the deformed pride demon pierces the veil.
Space had folded in on itself too many times, folding and pulling the beast in turn. Too many faces and nearly double in size, an asymmetrical form, arms too many, and elongated horns bordering on antlers, Pride cackles in stereo, “SCURRY, LITTLE ONES, RUN.”

Bull and Cass rush past me to attack the aberration before it can finish exiting the rift while Rasa darts off to cut at the Venatori. I stand my ground and raise the anchor to shut the door before it can even emerge…

But it doesn’t work?!

There’s no familiar tingling as intangible pins meet my mind, no flare from the mark as it works its magic. Panicked, confused, I shake my hand in an attempt to rouse the anchor — nothing.

‘Shit shit shit! WAKE UP!’, I mentally roar at the mark. It does nothing.

“Uhh, this isn’t working!,” Rasa yells over at me as she backs away from several mages whose throat she just slit — still they stand, still they chant, even as blood flows freely from the deep gashes.

“Keep cutting!,” I shoot back.

“Close it already, before the demon escapes!,” Cass cries out while trying to saw at the protruding legs to no avail – each injury only folds in on itself, healing and further deforming the monster.

“It’s not working!,” I yell as I join them in the fight; stepping over corpses, I throw my weight behind my good arm as I punch at its various leg joints.

Rasa continues slashing throats with her pitiful blade but even as blood pumps from their wounds, still they stand, chanting. They’re conduits, human no longer, mere props to keep this thing bound to this world.

“HURRY, LITTLE MICE,” Pride laughs out as it squeezes its head and shoulders through the tear, malice gleaming in its dark eyes and wicked toothy smiles.

“DO SOMETHING,” Bull roars in my ear before he's swatted away. Jumping back, I will my blade into existence and yell “GET OUTTA THE WAY!” at Cass. Leaping from my path, leaving the demon unencumbered in its rift crawl, I slash upward and watch as flesh, ribs, and organs divide…

But again they fold. Flesh fuses and bubbles. Even a severed jaw twists until it’s two functioning ones.

‘Cutting isn’t working. Not on any of them,’ my mind speeds for an answer as I keep up the attack, ‘can’t cut. Maybe cook?!’ I scream a jet of napalm at the demon but still its flesh twists and shifts to stretch over the melting hide all the while laughing maniacally “YEEES, YES, TRY AND FAIL.” Switching attacks, I alternate between punches and slices when it finally it hits me…

Make it unfoldable! Pin the butterfly.

Whipping my arm back, my black metal coating tears through my glove and from my arm reforming the staff. With a twisting thrust, I shove its corkscrew horned tip through the tender flesh just under Pride’s sternum. Seemingly unfazed, the demon cackles but the staff takes root; it understands my intent. Purple flesh tries to fold and fails, it slaps uselessly against the rod; for additional support, the staff launches a series of spines and smaller ribs against the demon.

Finally, it’s toothy grin shifts, confused that it can’t rid itself of this thorn. Bolstering itself, the
staff launches another series of spikes, some extending far enough to pierce the stone of the courtyard and hold firm against the beast. The beast more closely resembles a grotesque hedgehog now.

Furious, it’s entrance to our world stopped, it tries to tear at the staff but only cuts its thick hide against it; black ichor sprays and leaks form its wounds leaving the courtyard stained in red and black. No folding now; the creature is finally wounded. Still the spines grow riddling the demon with holes. It would gasp its hate at us but enough of the black pierces it’s throat and vocal chords within. A surge of energy, a flare within my mind, I feel its hunger, it craving to consume Pride.

Let it feed, let it eat.

Trapped between worlds, Pride thrashes against its stabbing cage — the staff erupts, aggressively coating its pinned prey. Pride tries to give voice to its rage but it only comes out in pained gurgles.

“Huh,” Bull grumbles in concern as the staff devours and crunches down, twisting and destroying the demon within. Faster now, this thing isn’t Imshael, it’s more easily broken down and within mere minutes, the demon is compressed into nothingness and only the staff remains, hovering within the rift. And akin to a lightning rod, it takes in the channeled energies from the Venatori present…

And then the backlash.

A cacophony of screams rise around the perimeter, the enemy mages cook from within; their eyes burn from their skulls and fire licks at the sockets edge – their summoned beast is dead, recycled. And as suddenly as the screaming began, the bodies drop, dead to the ground. And the buzzing stops. Plucking the floating staff from the portal, the collected power blazes through me as the black metal returns to my arm and the mark finally awakens uninterrupted. Without wasting any time, we snap shut the rift.

The only folding I want to see is one where the rifts close in on themselves.

“Welcome back,” I murmur in a pained whisper to the anchor as it pulses excitedly.

“What was that?” Bull growls impatiently but Cassandra rebuffs him yelling “no time.”

“Right, got an empire to save,” I remind him and run off to the chapel. I feel their discerning eyes on my back as we run the halls. At least there's no enemies to impede our progress now and soon enough, we're back to the ballroom, entering just partway into Grand Duchess Florianne’s final address.

No!

“...My friends,” Florianne’s voice echoes “a great change is coming for all of us.” And with that, the dagger is driven into Celene’s back. Some in the audience gasp and cry, while the others seem unimpressed. Crimson stains cobalt as she collapses to her knees, pained confusion the only emotion on her face.

“Florianne!,” Gaspard yells, “What have you done?,” trembling with rage.

Laughing out, she gloats “Don’t play coy! It went just as we planned! I did this for you, brother!” Words fail him, all he manages is “…you are mad,” but I cut through the disconcerting calm roaring “you bitch! You did this for Corypheus!” as I shove through the crowd to get at her. But it’s then that some among the partygoers attack, revealing themselves to be on her side. But still I
push for her. Whipping about to face me as the fighting goes on, she sneers “What a terrible guest you are, interrupting your host. FOR CORYPHE....” but gags on her words as my invisible fingers crush around her throat – even this separated, I feel her neck in my hand and a wave of angry energy lashes off me into the room – doors and windows slam shut as an eerie whale song reverberates over the crowd – the fighting slows and dies as all eyes turn to us.

Even with eyes bulging, she glares daggers of hatred at me but that turns to surprise and doubt as a banner pole runs her through. Struggling to turn her head against my spectral grip, she stares, defeated, to her brother at her back, with a banner pole in hand.

Her killer.

Hilamshiral’s savior.

She sputters blood but tries to speak, mouth forming silent words — her heart gives out. Dead, her arms drop and she hangs limply in the air.

We both release; her corpse crumples and the embedded pole clatters against the marble floor against the hush of the palace nobility.

Ignoring all else, Gaspard drops to cradle his dead cousin, whispering through restrained sobs, “not like this. I wanted to win, but I wanted you to be there…”

“No…”

“Please.”

“Oh, Celene…”

Turning my attention to the would-be fight below, the Venatori have given up – trapped in this room, they know theirs is a fight of futility. Surprisingly Lady Mantillon steps forward; someone else's blood has stained her gown. Slowly clapping, her mask removed, she says “so, you do know how to dance.”

‘Her? She's one?’ I question bitterly, but that anger is short lived. Without another word, she drags her dagger across her neck and falls to the floor, just another splash of red for the white marble halls. The same goes for all the other Venatori nobility revealed; they too take their lives before anyone can restrain them and take them prisoner.

The shock of it all, it loosens my magic’s grip and the doors ease back open with loud creaks.

Outside the quiet sobs of the now-Emperor, the room stands in stunned silence over what has transpired this night.

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Guards had since come to whisk away Celene’s body, as well as the treasonous Florianne’s. The corpses around the ballroom had been more conspicuously dragged out though. Now alone we stand, Gaspard and I, on a balcony just outside the ballroom.

A calm has settled over the Winter Palace, he’s had his time to regain his composure. Leaning
against the railing in silence but for a few moments, he says “we…owe you our lives, Inquisitor. I will remember that.”

Casting glances for a lurking Briala, I find she’s nowhere to be seen.

Gaspard continues, more in his head than in this reality really, “tonight was a tragedy. Venatori, a demon, an assassination…all within these halls. But…I made a friend.” He lifts his mask to hold at his head, massaging his temples before pulling it back into place. “You are that friend. I will remember this. I am not a man who forgets his friends,” he solemnly swears.

Still no Briala.

He stares long and hard at the ballroom beyond and remembers his duties. “Please, stand with me. We should speak to the people…” he requests and I nod for him to lead to way. Entering again as the nobles frantically whisper and gossip, approaching the murder scene, the blood is wiped clean but I notice how Gaspard steps around where Celene and his sister fell.

He will remember.

Taking his position at the center, I come to a stop beside him on his right – by appearing on his right side, he appears the stronger one; he’ll need that in the days to come against the fickle Orlesian populace.

A hush fall over the room as he gives them a moment to realize.

“So…the crown falls to me. This is not the victory I hoped for. I wanted this moment filled with song, not with sorrow,” Emperor Gaspard States somberly, quietly, but he was born for this — his voice, it resonates through the crowd. He fits the role well. “But I have always been a soldier, and as every soldier knows, the difference between defeat and victory is how it is named. An enemy has struck the empire in its very heart; as your Emperor, I promise justice. Orlais will NOT allow such atrocities, corruption, deceit, murder to go unchallenged.”

With the nobles rallied, they give applause and Gaspard continues “we will face this Corypheus. He will know the wrath of the lion. We will fight, shoulder to shoulder, with the Inquisition. Together, we will send our enemy to the Maker’s judgment.”

The crowd cheers at his words, they seem to love him – after all, he had a hand in taking down his sister. And all saw that. No doubt now about his character. They will know him to be the sort to deliver justice, regardless of those involved.

The crowd quiets some, awaiting my response, so I give them words – “the world will know…” my words hang in the air in suspense, “it will know how we fought and how we win.”

A breath of pride seems to fill the people in attendance.

Gaspard finishes “but that is what’s ahead. Tonight, be at ease. Rest and prepare yourselves for the battle to come.” The crowd erupts in applause and the orchestra begins playing anew, a more lively tune now. With that, the new Emperor smiles to me and whispers “try to enjoy yourself, please.” I offer my hand and he eagerly accepts, shaking it firmly as I reply “you do the same.”

At that, we part ways as the music swells and some sense of normalcy returns to the Winter Palace.

*****
I can only shake hands and listen to their versions of compliments for so long.

“Oh the stories they tell, the magic you wield despite being an oxman?,” someone asked.

“You may be grey, but you are certainly a light at this party,” a woman beamed at me.

“Don’t the horns ever make it difficult to sleep,” one man flirted

*Well, he wasn’t wrong.*

“So the Oxman *does* do tricks.”

“So tall…you saw it all, did you not?”

“Simply amazing. You surpass expectations.”

Others simply smiled or kept quiet in passing. But Leliana’s words stick with me – I had told her the culprit and after it all, after the assassination, she simply said “an unfortunate necessity” through a smile and a whisper before blending back into the crowd.

*I get that Celene was weak…but she didn’t have to die. Or maybe she did…could I keep the truce between three people eager to backstab the others?*

As I fall into a reserved posture, leaning against the doorway threshold to a balcony, a drink is thrust in front of me – but a moment, I register the gesture and realize it’s Bull’s hand offering the drink. Hesitantly, I take it but he feels the need to explain “it’s not poison. Just drink.”

‘*That’s comforting,*’ I note sarcastically with a quirked eyebrow.

“You…ermmm, you’re alright,” he begrudgingly admits in his typical low rumble.

“Thanks?”

“Ahem,” Solas clears his throat while staring indignantly to Bull; message received, Bull awkwardly pats me on the shoulder and returns to the festivities. Perhaps he can find himself another consenting servant to impress.

“You surprise me,” the mystical elf states with slight pride and mirth begins his eyes, “you arrived and easily navigated the intrigue and etiquette all the while investigating and fighting the forces of evil.”

“Wouldn’t say easily,” I return with an eye roll.

“Ah hahaha, certainly. But still, you did. And while the outcome may not be as expected, it is a victory. One I hope you’ll celebrate…back at Skyhold?,” he says, hopeful.

“Yeah. Probably best to. Going solo…er, duo, was workin’ well enough but I took on more than I could handle,” I admit and hilariously, Rasa weaves by just in time to agree, rasping “damn straight,” before sliding away again. She seems to be trying to avoid some young nobles who appear to have guessed at her connection to the Inquisition. Whatever their intentions, she’s not having any of it. Solas snorts at her brazen statement and pinching his lips together to stifle laughter, bows and backs away. He’s in fine spirits – been some time since he last enjoyed a party of this caliber. Been some time since I last was at Skyhold to wax magically with him. Clearly he’s eager for what the future holds.
Taking a sip of my steadily warming flute of champagne, I retreat to the balcony to get more fresh air and toss my copper mask off to the floor.

As nice and confusing as it is to be on speaking terms with Bull again, I’m not quite ready to mince words with anyone else, I’m still feeling an outcast of sorts. But outside, shrouded in night and dim lighting, Morrigan lies in waiting.

At least she's interesting.

Slinking from the shadows, she jokes “Hidden away, despite the efforts of all Orlais’ to paw at you. Gaspard drunkenly toasts in your honor, “Deliverer from Darkness” and other titles complimentary and awkwardly phrased,” to which I sigh with a wince “I’m not all that thrilled with the titles.”

Chuckling earnestly, she says “often the work of the unimaginative.”

“Hero of Ferelden. Guessin’ he didn’t like that one much either, did he?”

Sobering some and raising a brow, she admits “no, he most certainly did not.”

“At least he’s alive to hate it, so there’s that,” I say with a forced wink.

“Yes,” she flatly agrees but redirects the conversation, “Ahem, but as far as names and glorified titles of grandeur go, it would seem that I’m to join that “esteemed” crowd. By Imperial decree, I have been named Liaison to the Inquisition. Gaspard wishes to offer any and all aid to the one who supported his ascent to the throne…so, here I am.”

“Gaspard’s not too keen to keep you around?”

She sucks in some air through teeth. I hit the nail on the head with that.

Finishing, I say, “well, I know what ya bring to the table…the Inquisition is lucky to have ya.”

Studying my bruised face to ferret out what I know of her, she slowly relents and simply replies “a most gracious response,” while coming to a stop on my bleached left eye. Not finding what she wants, she breathes out “I…shall…meet you back at Skyhold.” Gliding away, she says to my backside “oh, it would appear another wishes to bend your ear…” as the doors creak closed behind her.

Curious as to her meaning, I turn from the railing and find an unmasked Cassandra. Brows pinched in thought, her dark eyes look everywhere but at me. My mouth goes dry and I try to say something, anything, but she forces herself to go first.

Staggering deliberately, she uncertainly and slowly states “You were right about Caer Oswin. You were...right about...Lucius. You…were right about the Seekers. You…were right,” while awkwardly shifting in place. Finally, her eyes find mine and she tiredly admits “you were right.”

Regret. Worry. Fear. These are but a few of what lie in her eyes. But there’s also...concern. Anxiety. Care. Upset.

“I...uh...” I stutter out but she raises a hand and cuts me off, “no, you…I did not trust you when I should have. You have always done what is best, pushed yourself beyond what was expected of you. I know now that you are not possessed...in truth, I haven’t been certain what to believe as of late…”
‘She doesn’t hate me?!,’ my brain shakily handles this possibility.

“You…Erm…you had reason to doubt,” I say mirroring a conversation of ours from back in Haven.

“I…” she catches on that we’ve done this dance before and huffs in a whisper “not a good reason.”

We stand in uncomfortable silence but she again breaks it first, “please return to Skyhold,” her eyes fall to the ground, “the Inquisition needs you.”

“Dance with me,” I blurt out — my face feels flush.

Her eyes shoot to mine, wide open; she sees me with my hand extended. Her breath catches in her chest and her cheeks take on some pink. Gingerly, hesitantly, she accepts, her fingers brushing over mine — the staff’s black retreats up my arm and away from her touch, exposing my bare hand.

A welcome sensation.

Her fingers, cold at first, warm in my grasp; hand in hand, I draw her to me. My left finds her hip, her right instinctually goes to my shoulder. But with no music to be heard outside the palace wall, I project some of our own, just for us – a simple piece.

Ethereal woodwinds and strings.

A tiny gasp hangs in her throat as the otherworldly sounds about us.

Measured breaths, we take in one another as we slowly spin and sway; wordless. As we dance softly about the balcony, our sanctuary from the partygoers inside, her hand on my shoulder brushes against my jaw; I lean into it and she chooses to cup my cheek. I close my eyes for a blissful few seconds as we sway in time.

A shock rolls through me, not enough to hurt or maim, just enough to jolt – our dance momentarily interrupted, my eyes fly open and my cheek stings under her touch.

Her hand, it still rests there – she’s nervously biting at her lower lip and staring up at me through half lidded eyes.

Did she just?’ I question as my heart beat races.

Through a stunned chuckle, I ask incredulously “did you just use..?”

Blushing, she buries her face in my chest and admits through whispers “yes. I used my Seeker ability.”

She’s embarrassed. I’m ever more drawn to her.

Wrapping my arms around her to comfort her, to let her know that while curious, her’s was a pleasant touch.

We continue our dance.

Spinning and swaying.

Pleasantly.

I can smell the rose water in her hair and just a hint of sweat.
Alluring.

She wraps her arms around my sides – we move to and fro in place as the song repeats.

We’ve lost track of time. My projected music fades, the spell coming undone.

I murmur into the top of her head, “I’m coming back with you,” and I feel her chest swell against me.

“Thank you,” she breathes.

We dance in silence.

I know I could do this all night long; I just... it feels spectacular to finally hold her close, to breathe her in, to feel her breath.

A creak.

“Oh, my apologies,” a servant expresses as he opens one of the double doors.

Somewhat annoyed over the repeat interruptions, flushed, I force myself to breathe “we... should... probably head back in.” She hums her agreement, “Yes, Inqui...” she catches herself and instead says “Hunter, we probably should.” I can hear the relenting smile in her voice.

*You said my name!*, I try to process in disbelief.

My heart races.

Releasing herself, she brushes out the folds in her outfit as the servant paces about us to retrieve the empty glasses left out here by myself and other attendees. Cassandra casts me a knowing smirk and heads inside to rejoin the others.

My heart is pounding, my stomach is fluttering, my nerves electric. Closing my eyes, I breathe deep hoping to capture any lingering scent of her.

My lungs warm.

But something cold and sharp ruins it. My eyes shoot open and I twist. A knife sticks from my side.

*The fuck!?!*

His tiny knife is lodged in my side. I go to tear him in half but my legs give out and my mouth starts frothing with spit.

‘Wha? No!!’ I rage panic.

More elves calmly exit out into this space, daggers calmly being pulled from sleeves, and the door shuts. I go to roar my fire but the froth extinguishes that idea; I feel close to choking. They pounce in silence, kicking and hitting, and with my heart pounding, the poison spreads. Grabbing one by their face, I slam them back into the doors to the concerned murmurs of people inside. Still they beat and hit at me, stabbing at me with tiny knives.

More cuts.

More poison.
My arms feel like sand bags.

I blink with them clinging to me and slam myself against the wall. Another blink, some are crushed behind on the railing but still they struggle. I don’t care who set this up – I just need to escape.

Doors creak.

“ISA’MA’LIN!,” Rasa shrieks as guests turn; she draws her blade to murder these bastards but an elf jabs me in the side of my neck and twists his blade; I unintentionally blink in pain. Pressure drops as we’re hit by hot sands and cold air – thrashing against my attackers, I knock someone off and blink again, leaving them to the night of the Hissing Wastes.

No control now.

Plummeting through the sky over an ocean of forestry below; the Emerald Graves. The remaining attackers tense up and grab tight but I manage to wrest one from me and kick him to the winds. He’ll perish in the tree tops below. I’d yell my hate but it’s all I can handle just to not swallow my swelling tongue.

Blink

Unfocused, we splashdown in a cold murky waters, the smell of rot and mud fills my nostrils. Lightning rips overhead as rain beats down on us. I struggle in the mud to tear them off me. Growing weak, head swimming, mouth still frothing.

Slowing.

Blink

Inside a cloister, knocking over candles and collection dishes in the scuffle, a lay sister screams as I shove an elf into a triptych of the Maker, Andraste, and Maferath.

Blink

We hit cliffside and bounce, the lot of us. Ears pop.


Can’t move.

Shallow breaths.

No…was almost…

It fades to black as the elves rise and continue beating me.

Was almost there…

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for being patient everyone. Part 2 was difficult for write for a number of reasons. As always, I appreciate any and all constructive and editing criticism.

So...

WHO ORDERED THE HIT?

WHAT WILL THE SEEKER THINK?

WILL INQUISITOR HUNTER SEE TOMORROW?

STAY TUNED TO FIND OUT!
This chapter is broken up into pieces of consciousness.

Empty.

Drifting on fog, I’m immobilized as it’s grey mists waft and swallow me.

Whispers in the grey.

Can’t quite make out the words, they’re all so far away…

Labored breaths.

I sluggishly blink, taking it in. I am one with this fog. I am its indifference.

Pop.

Pressure builds, I’m squished on all sides until...

...nothing, I’m lying on a hard surface.

Blank white all around me.

My harsh breathing echoes across the empty.

“I’m dead?” I question as I prop myself up. White void stretches out as far as the eye can see in all directions – only a hurricane's edge of black sands on the distant horizon stop it from going on forever. Trapped in the eye of a storm; as my eyes focus, but a single piece of tangible material comes into view from the periphery.

Winding stairs that go to nowhere, more a cliff of stairs than anything else. Chipped, weathered, and gnarled.

Like the worst of hangovers, my brain throbs, my blood pumps slow as I groan “eghh what the hell happened?” I brace my hands against my skull.

“Well, we’re not dead yet…at least, I don’t think we are,” someone bluntly states, “but we’ve discussed this….oh, three times now?” This shadow of me, They’re lounging on the cliff of stairs.

Tongue heavy, I slur “whatd’ya mean?”

The shadow sighs and leans forward, elbows propped on it’s knees, and it asks “Look, I’m just keeping track. Do you remember this place?” Looking about with nothing in sight, naught but the winds of black and grit and sands raging in the distance, I realize and arrive at the question “I killed…the Nightmare here?”

Taps himself on the nose and clicks his tongue. “At least you got that right this time.”
“What’dya mean this time?,” I mumble inquisitively, “and so what, are we trapped here?”

“For now, yes.”

The world outside this one rumbles and shakes; the shadow looks about warily, mumbling “see ya soon.”

Pressure drops and like a snake sloughing skin, the world slips away — back into the grey, back into the fog…

*****

Afloat, aimless, whispers try to guide me through the miasma.

“….Hunter…”

Warbled, echoing, they boast of secrets.

Too far away still.

A beating pulse in my skull, a pounding on a door. Pressure builds until the grey slips away and...

Nothing. I’m in a familiar void.

…but even the absence of anything is refreshing, like I can breathe again. Surrounded by blank white into eternity, I sit in silence. Or I do, until a familiar shadow whistles. A pleasant tune if not wrong sounding; its cadence slow and off pitch, it sounds more a threat.

“What is this,?,” I worriedly ask, my stomach twisting with Déjà vu.

Still whistling, its face is turned, avoiding my gaze.

“What is this,?,” I worriedly ask, my stomach twisting with Déjà vu.

Still whistling, its face is turned, avoiding my gaze.

“How?”

Full stop; the shadow quits and as if spurned, slowly returns “oh?.. you’re talking to us?”

Confused, I pace toward him and ask “yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

“That right? Alright, who are we?”

“Me, obviously. This a joke,?,” I ask flippantly.

Retracting bitterness, the shadows stands cautiously and measure me with its dark stare. After a decent pause, it questions incredulously “you remember us?”

“Duh. You’re my memories…or my fkn brain. Take your pick.”

Relief eases the shadow’s face, its shoulder sag, unburdened, and it states “finally. You’ve been ignoring us for a while now.”

“I…I was just talking with ya,’ I say with squinted eyes and furrowed brow.
“No. That was a while ago. You’ve been popping in here, all blank faced, and leaving just as quickly.”

‘Losing time?!’ I panic. “What the hell is happening?!”

Thunder roars and the world shakes.

“Something is tryin’ to enter,” he hums singsong.

“What?”

The shadow shrugs and returns to lounging; humming still, it says “Only way to find out, ya gotta wake up but remember this time.” The world vibrates, pressure drops, my mind drop from the fade. Bright white goes black in an instant…

*****

A dimly lit room, torch fire burns low amid the smell of soot and ammonia.

I can’t move.

Restrained to a table, I can’t even move my head; the bindings and chains sting – a current of sorts runs through them as rainbow light glows from their links and engravings.

My eyes focus on two figures: both female. They stand at my sides, face shrouded in shadow, speaking to one another in low tones.

“It did not work.”

“So we try again.”

“We should use the Qamek,” one growls.

“It would mean more to convert it. We just have to find the right narrative.”

‘Qunari,’ I solemnly whisper internally.

Further within the darkened room, another speaks, “Vidathiss, the subject is awake.” There’s more sets of eyes on me than just these three, I can feel that much. I try to stay calm but I know damn well what Qunari do to mages.

And I kind of know what Qamek is.

Tongueless and collared or lobotomized; those are the only options offered someone like me under the Qun. My vision blurs and eyes sting; tears well up in the corners and roll down the sides of my face.

I can’t feel my magic.

I can’t feel the anchor.
I can’t feel my staff.

Without a word, a damp rag is shoved under my nose and the noxious smell forces me faint. My vision blurs again and I hear heavily reverberating whispers of “Saar” and “don’t feed it” and “vat” and “kata”

*****

The fog lifts.

Someone is crying, their sobs stirring me.

My eyes peel open, wincing at even the low light.

A horned-woman cradles me, tears running softly down her face. Plain faced with dark eyes, her pointed horns rising from her messy black mop of hair, she almost looks familiar…

Can’t figure why though.

Shakily breathing, her eyes open and sees I’m awake – frantically, she cries out “Tamassran! He stirs! Oh, Adaar, you awaken,” all the while gently brushing her hand against my face. We’re in a temple of sorts, just a guess from the candles and stone…everything around us.

“Nice to meet ya but who the hell are ya?,” I groan and try to twist myself from her lap. She looks taken aback, heartbroken, as she sadly asks “Truly…you do not remember?”

My mind is a complete blank on who she is.

???

“Oh, nah. Only one Adaar I know and I’m not her. And you’re not her,” I pull myself from her grip and sit upright – her arms go slack in disbelief.

“We..we were raised together. Trained together. The Tamassrans chose us as…,” she begins but is interrupted. “Enough. This is clearly ineffective on it. Try again,” a genderless voice demands through a vent in the wall. My nerves ignite, bracelets explode with rainbow light and fall to the floor spasming in agony. Through the pain and writhing, the caring Qunari, her demeanor shifts dramatically; she wipes away the fake tears on her cheeks. Ignoring me, she addresses people unknown, “trial 10: failure.”

Someone mashes a noxious rag against my face.

Passing out, pain burning through my very bones, I hear “Subject non-responsive to…”

“Diminish rations…”

“….then….”

”...perhaps if we...”
Empty white that stretches on into the horizon. A storm of sand and black tears along outside this vast nothing.

“Ehhh,” a voice groans, tired – I spin around and a shadow sits upon a meaningless staircase.

“What is this?!” I demand in a panic.

Sighing, the shadow grumbles “eleven times. You’ve asked us that eleven times. Please say you’re getting close…”

“Eleven…what? Close to what?,” I worriedly ask while standing up.

“Oh sweet fucking of…,” the shadow grumbles and slaps his forehead; enunciating dramatically and using hand gestures, the shadow yells “SOME ONE IS TRY ING TO CHANGE YOU. YOU HAVE TO RE MEM BER.”

The world shakes again.

“Remember what?!,” I stress but the shadow’s focus shifts – it looks to the empty nothing of a sky and whispers, bemused, “trying to go deep this time. Persistent.”

Panicking at its strange words, I frantically question “what is?!?”

The shadow breathes a tired sigh and replies “just try again.”

I’m forced backwards through my own head, everything squeezes around me as pressure drops and bright white goes dark.

****

Floating in fog…

Memories I don’t recall, they flit about like smoke in my head. Must’ve been buried deep.

I kind of remember the great pyramids. The shadows they’d cast at morning and sundown and the merchant stalls at their base.

The old woman made the rules; I barely remember other children in the group.
The training we had…

I sort of remember growing up under the Qun, how it annoyed me but I kept to it for the “greater good.”

Always the greater good.

I had a sister – not blood related. Her skin was more pink than mine, her horns were shorter too. There…was a nickname I had for her? It was…is…”Shadow?”

The Tamassrans didn’t like that.

But there were so many of us – I needed to give her something of her own. A tiny rebellion.

We were made Ben-Hassrath. The Bessthari chose us. I vaguely remember.

I was proud?

Yes.

I was tasked with hunting dangerous magics and mages.

Years of hunting.

But then something worse – the assignment was to trail a creature named Corypheus and report his movements.

Months of stalking, interrogating.

A temple for peace.

There was…pain.

*****

My eyes creep open.

A well lit brushed metal room – I’m strapped to a bed. I can’t even see my arms for how much gear they have locked on.

On the table next me are surgical tools and medical equipment – lazily I gloss them over.

No blood on them..

Soft snores draw me; a dark haired woman with short black horns, she’s asleep in a chair at my bedside. No blades. Not a guard. Her head is slumped over against the mattress edge and her hand rests upon my bindings.

Her neck is gonna ache somethin’ bad
She looks familiar. Why?

Snoring more, her head rolls off the bed and she awakens with a jump. Shocked, she needs a moment to remember her surroundings but slowly relaxes...until she steals a glance at me and her eyes go wide. She leaps out of her chair and swings to my side, her face levels with mine and taking my face in her hands, she whispers “Hunter?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember who I am?,” she hurriedly questions.

“You’re...,” I whisper but have to close my eyes in an attempt to remember.

“Yes,” she coaches me through, “I am...”

“Now now, that’s enough,” an elderly Qunari woman enters in a red robe, “He has to remember on his own. I told you, if you wanted to stay by his side, you weren’t allow to interfere with his recovery.”

Saddened by the scolding, the younger obeys and whispers “sorry, Tamassran. I won’t...I won’t do it again.”

“Good,” the elder rifles through some papers and charts and pulls a chair up to sit on my other side. “Now, do you remember who you are?”

“I’m..Hunter,” I say, confused.

“Good. What is the last thing you remember?”

The last thing... music. People...a dance?

Eyes closed in concentration, I say “a party.”

Concerned, the elder looks to her notes and grumbles “mmm, that’s..” but going more loudly, says “no, that’s...do you recall your mission?”

The word Corypheus worms about in my head.

“I was...have to stop Corypheus.”

“Accurate,” the Tamassran states, “your mission was to track and report on this Corypheus. Now, do you remember what happened?”

A sharp memory.

Blood and copper.

Green light.

Pain.

Fire.

“An explosion?,” I question softly.

“Yes. You tracked him to the Conclave in Ferelden. He found you out and you tried to kill him.
There was an explosion. You nearly died and the creature escaped. Ambient energy contaminated you. For your health, you are temporarily under quarantine,” the elder woman reveals.

“Doesn’t feel right…”

The elder agrees, “no, I don’t suppose such vile magic would feel right.”

This is wrong... the magic doesn't feel wrong...

...but something is...

A stunning raven-haired beauty dances in my mind; my cheek stings at her touch.

Beautiful.

Angry.

Cassandra.

Can't forget that. Won't forget that.

“Ya almost had me,” I smirk out with seething anger creasing the corners of my eyes, “you people are sick. You monsters gaslight and lie until ya trick someone to your side? Disgusting.”

Worried, the younger woman asks “wait?! What’s wrong with him? Why is he like this?!” The Tamassran ignores her pleas and presses a hand to my forehead, exclaiming “he’s burning up, the magic is eating away at him. His condition is more dire than I..”

I cut her off, certain I’m not insane, and spit “liars. I’m the Inquisitor. You’re the Qunari pricks that ordered my abduction from the Winter Palace. I remember now.”

“Failure,” someone yells from outside the room. This little play is over,

A damp rag is forced in my face, it’s fumes sap me of consciousness but I’m slow to fade and I hear “Trial thirteen. Failure. Subject appeared compliant with conditioning but broke through.”

Footsteps; someone new enters the room.

“Decrease his water rations. Perhaps dehydration will assist us.”

*****

Empty white, I know this place.

As if by instinct, I turn to find a set of useless stairs and a shadow sitting bored upon them.

“Thirteen,” is the first hint I say. I don’t know why, but it feels right.

“Yes yes.. Thirteen…,” but perking up in realization, the shadow turns and exclaims “THIRTEEN! Yes! You finally know something?”
“I’ve been here thirteen times now. I don’t exactly remember it all, but I think I remember enough,” I say to the cautiously grinning shadow, “something is trying to change us.”

“Who and how?,” the shadow asks, anxious and curious as it creeps down the staircase.

_Pointed…women with horns…demons? No._

“Qunari,” I growl in disbelief, “trying to…implant memories.”

The shadow grins wide as it comes to stand on the lowest step, “and since we know that, we can better defend against the invaders.”

“This is the Fade right? Can we get a message to Solas?”

“No. You closed this part of the Fade off to the rest when you did your thing. And right now, that’s working for us — with us shut away, the Qunari are having a tough time getting in.”

_Shitshitshitshitshit. Only way out is awake. Gotta do it._

Stupid plan. So stupid. But gotta do it.

Yes.

I slap myself across the face and hiss “wake up” as the shadow, amused at my determination, whispers “wake up” just a moment after. Pressed again from the Fade, my heartbeat pounds in my skull.

*****

Everything is heavy, dense. It all echoes like I’m underwater. Too many voices, all overlapping.

The air feels thick.

I keep my eyes closed against the pressing sensation and an annoyed voice echoes “It has been too long. We are not seeing results.”

“We will continue,” I hear echo in response; I crack my eyes to peek but the blurring and nauseating lights urge them closed, “…at the very least, we still need to study the anchor and the arm”

“Strange material. Though metal, it’s reactive.”

“We shall continue in our attempts of rewriting it…”

“Ashkaari, let it be on record that I think we should just kill it and be done with this whole endeavor.”

“Know your place, Avaarad. Magic doesn’t die — it’s a weed. We need to study it to better our preventions. Killing it solves nothing.”
“Hrmm, then what narrative is next?”

Several sighs echo through the dark.

“Remarkably little is known of it before the Conclave. It was of the Valo-Kas Tal Vashoth group for a short time. Before that, it is alleged that it travelled with an elven clan. Before that, there’s nothing; It’s as if it has only existed for little over a year.”

“Keep searching. It isn’t breaking easily....” echoes heavier and I feel myself fall under again.

Back into the fog.

*****

You weren’t always Qunari.

You adopted it.

Your own Tal Vashoth brothers turned on you for not being savage enough in combat.

They thought you dead and left your husk to rot.

But such wasn’t the case.

You still live.

You live…for a greater purpose now.

You are viddathari.

You learned from an Elven viddathari as she nurtured you back to good health.

You…

No.

Winter…she was your mentor, your trainer.

She…

No.

She was tasked with bringing your former Tal Vashoth brothers to heel; she broke rank and brought you along.

She perished in the fight.

Furious, you sought revenge on the bas and Vashoth. You…

Lies.
I inexplicably force myself from sedation; in the middle of their attempt, I spit at them, albeit weakly. My mouth is dry from dehydration. “You’re bad at this,” I groan.

“Vashedan!” a reeducator fumes and strikes me in the jaw, “do you not see?! Fourteen trials and still it resists. This is not working.” No response from the others present but the damp rag returns.

My mind fogs over yet again and darkness falls.

Warbled, words flit about in the dark…

“Truly? There is nothing?”

“Who are you,” someone hisses as they shake my body.

”...more information...”

”we must know him.”

_Fucker sounds a lot like Envy._


*****

Back to The Empty, back to the nothing. I’m quick to rise as the shadow asks “so what’s the word?” from its lonesome staircase.

“Fourteen times now, they’re not getting through.”

Relieved at our progress, the shadow sighs “good. All good. Ya know, unless they go ahead and turn our brain to mush.”

“Don’t think they’re up to that yet. They’re too curious and…”

“...Qunari aren’t the sort to let things go to waste, we know,” the shadow finishes my thought for me.

We both fold our arms and look to the nothing skies in hopes a real plan will make itself apparent. Of course, nothing is revealed.

Weary, I ask “So how do we get out of this?,” while pacing in circles.

“Not actually sure…all we know know about the Qun comes from our knowledge of a video game
premise. So far, all we’ve done is safeguard our mind – don’t know what to do if they actually use the damn qamek or kill us outright…”

“How comforting.”

“We know what we know.”

“So we’ve got nothing?”

“We…” the shade starts but looks to the skies, “shit. They’re trying again. Good luck.”

Wordless, I feel the pull of reality as I’m drawn from The Empty.

*****

You are Hunter.

You are the Inquisitor.

You leashed the Templars and destroyed the Envy demon.

The horrors that Envy visited upon my psyche flash across my eyes — a wrong choice on their part. I’m more aware now, more leery.

‘Was right,’ I think in annoyance even as they try to implant false memories, ‘fuckers are exactly like Envy.’

You fight Corypheus at every turn.

You found Skyhold.

You vanquished the Grey Wardens of Orlais.

You stopped their demon army.

Accurate…so where’s the…

You are a deep cover operative of the Qun.

There it is.

Despite being a mage, the Ben Hassrath count you as their own.

Lie.

The bas would never consider a mage an agent of the Qun.

Hmm.

That’s why you’re our best.
You are a champion of Thedas…
A champion of the Qun.
…you are infatuated with a human Seeker.
…you...
..you will one day betray her.
…you

*****

A surge of furious energy courses through my veins.

Eyes rip open; I roar napalm through my gag — liquid fire jets at the ceiling and splashes down to the panic of my captors. As they evade the attack, one ignites my nerves using the control rod and as I thrash against the table, another unsheathes their blade; their stare drips with malice. Stopped just inches from executing me, they’re grabbed by guards and hauled away. Dragged from the room, they scream “IT MUST DIE! IT MUST DIE!”

Several take to beating me, trying to force me under even as the avaarad uses her control rod to cut short my rebellion.

Pain is all I know as blow after blow strikes skin. Lightheaded, mouth bone dry, I still manage to scratchily gasp out “Fuck the Qun.”

The hits just keep coming, they despise me.

Something solid clocks me in the skull.

*****

Jarring, I’m thrust back into The Empty, tripping on my own feet as I hit the center.

“Ow,” I mutter while touching at my face — the pain of the beating is still fresh even though I shouldn’t feel it here. Then again, memory and thought are everything here.

“So.. what’s the plan?,” I ask.

“They seem close to giving up on re-educating us…However, part two isn't...,” The shadow rolls his tongue along his teeth, “it’s uh, it’s gonna be less pleasant.”

“Experimentation,” I dread.
“Unfortunately...,” the shadow begins but booming thunder rumbles in the distance and a high pitched whine cuts the air — wincing in pain, I throw my hands over my ears to block it out and shut my eyes. The whine goes sharper, cutting into my ears — I can feel the sound behind my eyeballs. I scream in pain but can’t even hear myself over to the pitch. Whining and roaring, it’s hell on me as the world shakes.

And nothing.

It’s gone; the pressure, the thunder, the piercing whine, it’s all gone. At first, I worry I’ve gone deaf — there’s wet on my hands. Blood drips from my ears; strange, considering this is the Fade and I’m just a bounded consciousness.

“What WAS that?!,” I stress yell, partially to test my hearing and partially because I need answers. This place, its stagnant nature, it’s driving me mad. But no one answers me. Whipping back to the stairs, blinking back the pain, I find them empty. The one construct in this abandoned realm, the one thing, is devoid of the only friend I can count on here.

“What?!?”

No response.

The shadow is gone.

Alone. I’m alone in The Empty.

No one.

Nowhere.

Nowhere.
The passage of time is indiscernible.

But just because I can’t see its march doesn’t mean it’s not flowing as it always has. It’s just…it’s tough; It’s always just white, blank space in here. And there’s no sleeping. There’s no eating.

Not in here. It always just is.

I can’t even influence the Fade here. Maybe it's the cocktail of drugs they’ve sedated me with...

And still the anchor sleeps; not once has it woken since our capture.

I tried the border storm wall once, but I couldn’t get through.

I couldn't even get close enough to touch it; the pressure at the edge was enough to hold me back.

There’s no exit. I’ve looked. I’ve tried.

Yelling at myself to “wake up” hasn’t worked since the shadow vanished.

I’m stuck, locked away.

_A dog in his cage..._

Could be hours, could be weeks I’ve been here.

_Could be years...

I’ve been lying back on this staircase for what feels like forever; with my legs dangling over the edge, I’m just kicking back and forth as I whistle incessantly. Otherwise, it’d just be me and my thoughts.

And my thoughts these days, they’re none too pretty.

'_Maybe they already did me in...maybe this is my grave. Probably. Likely,'_ I muse darkly at the circumstances.

As for the whistling, there’s no tune or rhythm to it — I’m just making noise to make noise.

'_Maybe they did the Tranquil thing – maybe I’m the part that got cut off,'_ nags at my thoughts.

My freeform stutters at that, just a bit, and I let "melody" drop.

There’s no point. I should just sit in silence until I one day go mad and future mages discover my rotted mind lurking in the depths of the deepest reaches of the Fade.

Alone with my thoughts, I stare absently at bloodied hands raised against the blank sky of this nothing world. The red hasn’t dried, but then again, everything here seems to exist in a state of permanence. Why would this be any different.

“That was nice. Do it again?,” whispers a tiny voice from below.

“Might as well…” I mumble as I wipe at the still wet smear but in realization, I flip over with a heavy thud to stare over the tall staircase's edge. Eyes peeled, wavering, I hunt for movement.
Anything.

“...hello?,” I ask cautiously, but eagerly.

Silence is the only reply.

'I didn't make that up right?! I haven't cracked yet,' I ironically ask myself.

“Hello?”

Something soft, fabric and leaves perhaps, they rustle under the stairs.

I'm not crazy. Not yet.

“He..hello?,” I ask in anxious plea through a whisper to whatever it is below.

"...hello," a tiny voice replies while hidden under the recess of the stairs.

"Can you come out? I thought I was alone here...though, I'm not entirely convinced I'm not and I'm worried I'm losin' it," I backpeddle over my words.

“Are you going to hurt me?,” that something small questions to which I frantically reply, taken aback, “No! No. Absolutely not.”

A child's face pokes out from hiding; blazing green eyes peer around the edge and up at me.

"You're real," I murmur in disbelief but stick to my perch like a man clinging to debris while lost at sea.

The timid child, draped in a patchwork blanket of leaves and grey threadbare strips, they hesitantly crawl from cover. A genderless spirit, this child with silver flaccid hair, their dark skin shimmering against the empty white, they stare hard at me in trepidation despite the Fade burning within them.

Trying to calm the newest arrival, I quietly ask, “look, not gonna hurt ya...just tell me, who are you and how’d ya get in here?”

This IS real, right?

Anxiously, the spirit paces to the lowest step and with fidgeting hands, they nervously kick at the unyielding staircase. Teetering between panic and bashfulness, the spirit child breathes an anxious breath and avoids eye contact.

"So...?," I try to encourage a dialogue.

Finally giving an answer, the spirit states “I don’t know.”

Not exactly helpful, but it's better than nothing.

"No name? No...what's the thing?” I weakly snap my fingers in an attempt to recall and quickly remembering the desired info, "purpose. Spirit's have a purpose and that's normally their name."

"I've seen you here before..." the spirit states, "I don't know."

“Yeah?,” I question.

“You’re scary.”
Suppose I do look a little rough.

“It’s the horns, isn’t it,” I weakly joke trying to ease the tension, still hanging my head over the edge. “So..uh, how about that you getting in part?”

“There was a time I was forever. Forever ended and here I am,” it whispers enigmatically.

“Oh…kay…don’t really know what to do with that info,” I mumble to myself as the kid continues eyeballing me.

Hmmm...

“You said you’ve seen me before. You talkin’ about me or are you talkin’ about the shadow that looks like me?,’ I question but as puzzling as every prior statement, the kid simply replies “yes.”

“Like…yes to both?”

The child stares in silence, neither confirming or denying.

Under my breath, I groan “it’s like talkin’ to Cole. It’s exactly like talkin’ to Cole,” while rolling over on my side. I just take to staring out into the empty — I can’t really handle anymore weird right now. My shadow is gone, gone, the only thing that seemed capable of giving me straight answers, or at the very least, could hold a damn conversation.

Prone, I pick up the whistling again; tweets and trills and sharps and some other notes, I let that noise roll though my lips into empty eternity…

“Thank you,” the small thing says.

I lift my eyebrows in lazy acknowledgement.

******

However long we’ve been here… I don’t know.

Spook seems to have taken a shine to me. Still an anxious, troubled kid, but at least they’re talking more often.

Then again, the options are limited. It’s just us here.

I call the kid Spook now; it’s an apt name – they’re ghostly – and they seem to like it. Or they don't actively hate it. That's a win.

Or maybe just having a name is good enough…

Still won’t tell me what it knows, how it got in...

Doesn’t matter much, I guess.
Nothing really matters here.

For the past…however long this stretch has been, we’ve been sitting with our backs to the staircase playing Rock Paper Scissors unceasingly – taught the kid and the kid is good at it, good at watching for telltale twitches and hints. Me, I’m barely trying anymore.

Upon absently throwing rock against Spook’s paper for 1000th something time, the kid whispers “you want to leave.”

“Yes,” I mutter and throw two fingers as scissors to Spook’s rock.

I lose again.

“But what if you don’t like it out there?,” Spook genuinely asks, blazing gaze studying me.

“Doesn’t matter. Still be nice to know.” I throw rock again but Spook pauses, lost in thought.

“…aren’t you scared?”

Not even taking a moment to ponder it, I fire off “of course. The Qunari have me. I’m likely a slave or dead. Being scared doesn’t change that.”

Nervous, the kid goes deathly quiet and stares through me. Trying to ease Spook from the episode, I clap a hand to the little ghost’s shoulder and a calm seems to settle. “Knowing is better than not. Even if it sucks,” I educate but Spook barely seems to be registering my words.

Kid’s just sitting there in silence with scissor fingers.

“Ya good?”

Silence and a dead eyed stare are all that reply.

"...uhh?"

Without warning, Spook spins and jabs a finger to my forehead; with an unmoving mouth, the little spirit thunders “then know.” My vision blurs and I fall back through my own head, like falling into a pool. Splashdown, the fade pours past me as reality takes me back into its grasp.

I spiral from the empty into darkness and back into light again; blinding white tries to pierce my eyelids, can see that much.

Numb.

Bound in place.

The fog of sedation blurs the edges as I try to open my eyes.

Harsh, sterile light beats down on my face as I sluggishly blink. I can’t open my left eye; it feels swollen. Guess they beat me too thoroughly.

‘Alive..I’m alive!’, I slowly but happily piece together, ‘I’m close to dead but I’m still alive!’

Testing my limbs, I tug against the restraints. No give or leeway. Still they tingle with the magic denying current channeling through them.

Can’t see my captors yet but they haven’t noticed I’m awake.
Can’t hear much of them either, not over the sounds of pumps, gears turning, air hissing, and electricity crackling out of view.

I go to swallow out of habit and my throat catches on a length of feeding tube – struggling to gag in silence, uncomfortable tears well up in the corner of my good eye as I force myself to get used to it.

To ignore it.

To breathe only through my nose.

So... Can’t taste. Can’t hear much. Can see even less. Numb...

The only sensation of mine that’s unaffected is my sense of smell – strapped down, I hone in on that lone ability. I smell the ammonia, the steel, the alcohol, the sharp ozone, the…

‘The wet copper...’ I dread and try to see myself through the blinding overhead. Can’t see my body, a blanket covers me from the neck down; the anchor’s docile light glows through the heavy sheet. But it’s then that panic grips my heart – the closest source I spy is the bloodied gauze packed in around the feeding tube – red soaked scraps poke out from my mouth. I try to probe the mess with my tongue…

But…

But I…

I feel nothing.

Tears roll down my cheek in realization and my jaw trembles; I quiver against the restraints as I push the ragged stump against my tonsils. Shakily breathing, Envy’s vision dances cruelly before me and a painful muffled sob escapes me. Wincing, trying to process everything, I blink at the tears and turn my head just to escape the blinding light.

But I shouldn’t have.

Floating in a gleaming jar, I stare into my own eye, its bleached iris and gold aura pupil float, suspended in a dense fluid.

NOT SWOLLEN. EMPTY. NO.

No thoughts, all fear, all panic and hurt. I thrash against the restraints and scream a tongueless cry against my gag – the Qunari present, they rush me, barking orders. Hands try to shove me back and in the scuffle, wordlessly roaring, the covers fall loose and I see the worst of it.

My right arm is gone. Amputated, it’s been cut off just above the elbow.

“AYY AHMM! AYY AHHMMM!!!,” I choke out against the tube while thrashing, “ER IZ IHH??!!”

More guards rush in and pin me down as hands shove soaked rags in my face – the knockout agent. They’re trying to put me under again.

I’LL SCOOP YOUR EYEBALLS AND LEAVE YOU FEARING THE DARK. I’LL BLEED YOU.
I’LL END YOU ALL.

Hands grapple at my face, twisting it to the side – several sharp pricks to the neck and the fog rolls in hard. I’m swept back into darkness, and for all my hurt, all my rage, I can’t do anything against
it. But there’s no down time, my fury snaps me right back to The Empty and I enter roaring my hate as Spook scurries away to hide.

I roar until my throat burns raw and my voice goes hoarse.

I scream until I collapse to my knees, clutching at my memory of an arm, an eye. Tears flow freely as I pinch at the tip of my tongue.

“Only…only in here now…,” I cry angrily through staggered sobs, “they took…they took it all..”

My tears and sobs echo far off into the nothing.

*****

I ran out of breath what must’ve been days ago. Just as empty as this vast nothing now, I’m too tired to even tremble.

Resigned, defeated, broken, I lie on my side – dried tears stain my face and I stare blankly into this void.

In the silence, soft steps pad towards me. A tiny hand, it hesitantly pokes at my side.

Spook. Didn’t even think how my anger and terror would’ve scared them away. Should’ve been more considerate.

“You know now?,” whispers quietly behind me. Still clutching at my arm and staring dead ahead, I wordlessly nod, my horns scraping against the featureless ground as I do.

“And it’s better?,” Spook questions.

Numb, I struggle out “don’t know how, but it…” I take a measured breath and finish, “…it will. It will.” Its more to convince myself than the spirit.

“You could forget. I could help.”

A pang of fire hits my nerves, it fills the hollow in my chest and crawling to my knees, I glare at the ghost and threaten “Never. I never want to forget. This is mine.” Jabbing a finger gun against my temple, I angrily whisper “mine..what’s in here, is mine.”

Spook stares back at me uneasily.

“And you still want to leave.”

Looking into Spook’s blazing eyes for answers, I state “absolutely.”

In that moment, Spook changes, perhaps just standing taller. Taking a pause with eyes to the sky, the spirit slowly says “I...like...you.” Curious where this is going, I angrily quirk an eyebrow and my nostrils flare but I wait.
“I will…help. Yes.” The spirit seems less scared; determination blooms. Placing both tiny hands on my chest, Spook looks me in the eyes and says “I am sorry I stole from you.”

‘What?,’ I question, disbelief and uncertainty snuffing mania.

Spook’s hands glow and my chest warms as tendrils of power snake through me. “Maybe you will be able to leave now,” the ghost child says with a sad smile as little scraps of spirit waft off Spook and into me.

“Nightmare,” I whisper dumbfounded as more of the Fade green and bright become me.

“Not anymore. You should be you…all of you,’the familiar voice whispers past the radiance. The glow blazes, I’m blinded by the light and raw power filtering into my veins.

“I…c a n…h e l p….”

My spirit and mind ignite.

“h a v e n t…d o n e…t h a t… i n…a…l o n g…t I m e..”

The light doesn't recede but I can see past it now. Spook…Nightmare…whatever the name, they gave me all they had, their power, their life…

…everything

It’s just me again, alone but not entirely. They may be gone, but they’re a part of me now. And I’ll never forget that. Sitting down upon the lonely steps with a sad smile, I whisper “Thank you” to the void. A breath, a pause, I convince myself I’m ready to return…

Assuming this actually...

With a clap of my hands, I roar to The Empty “WAKE UP!”
With a gasp, a blink, and a crack, I’m returned to the waking world; the sheer force of my snapping to hurls several scientists studying me back into the walls and through equipment with sickening crunches.

Spook…Nightmare…its gift was evidently enough to sunder my veil prison and let my mind go free. It’s all so much like a dream though; I’m not entirely lucid yet, I’m in my head, watching as my body acts of its own volition as a pair of surviving doctors try to inject me. The gifted power writhes and churns within me and with a surge, the restraints are overloaded and split, crackling as they do; excess magic arcs from the bands and electrifies the final two Qunari present, their forms spasming before dropping to the ground as spit froths from their open mouths.

And the anchor finally awakens, a solitary pulse of green illuminating the room.

And it is furious at being forced dormant — even as a passenger, I feel its hateful charge as the green emblazons up my scars. The air crackles with static and my body rises into the air, feet barely touching the splintered dissection table; guards rush with weapons drawn, each barking “KATARA” as they bear down on me but something builds in my empty socket. A menacing light goes of like a flash bang before my attackers with a mixture of the various energies swirling within; they drop to their knees. Screaming and crying, awash in snot and tears and rage, they scrape and claw at their own faces in a panic while others take to swatting and swinging at things unseen.

‘Hehehe, perfect,’ I note darkly.

Metal doors loudly grind open and the Arvaarad, my handler, stomps in thinking herself in control with her rod brandished, rainbow glyphs ablaze. But if it’s doing anything to my body, I’m certainly not feeling it. And my body is not showing any signs of slowing — it’s too hopped up on the sweet elixir of undiluted power.

Magic. What a drug.

Amidst the screams of terror, my captor continues her futile efforts to use the rod, demanding “PARSHAARA” as she does.

But it does nothing.

And it’s in that moment her eyes are showing signs of realizing this crucial detail; the hesitance, the distress cracking her steely veneer; she’s wavering.

Guess she’s not used to losing.

As her will to win grows desperate, mine is all the more empowered — fierce winds whip around the room with me at its center. Display cases shatter and loose parchment flies; the Arvaarad tries to stand firm against the maelstrom but before it all goes too loud, she lets slip “Astaarit… itwasaaam” with her face locked in confused shock. Surely I can be the devil they fear. Surely I am.

“VINEK KATHAS!,” barks a voice through a vent but my storm becomes something more. The room becomes nothing but painful noise akin to every key on a pipe organ being slammed simultaneously; wind screaming and whining as the very air shakes.
The screaming and shaken Qunari guards, they don’t even realize their ears are bleeding; still they’re trapped in personal hells — the Arvaarad, she doubles over, dropping her rod to the floor as she clutches at the sides of her head to block out the chaos symphony. But even as a mere observer, I can see the stream of red dripping out from between her fingers.

I’ve ruptured her eardrums.

The walls rumble and heavy blast doors drop, sealing us in the room and the gas lamps go dim, taking on a red glow— whomever is outside, they know to fear the power rampaging.

They’re wise to activate the security measures.

Doesn’t mean I don’t hate them any less.

Still levitating with static crackling, I lightly descend to the floor. But my stomach twists as an anxious power builds within — my empty socket and mutilated stumps start bleeding fresh. Tendrils of dark magic and blood explode from the wounds, whipping and slashing at the air.

Incorrect, they're probing. Searching.

'Blood magic?,' I mentally gasp; while this isn't my plan, I'm curious to see it to fruition.

They hunt for what is mine.

My eye.

My tongue.

My arm.

I...understand.

One tendril immediately snatches something from the air and snaps back into my skull. Jarring, yes, but my eye is back in its socket. Power pours through my flesh into the dead orb, flooding it with creation and blood magics… and the anchor pushes to grant me a much needed boost as well, igniting the roads of scars up my body. Even as pumped with adrenaline and magic as I am, it’s a disgusting and wholly nauseating experience — I shake and breathe shallow gasps with every pulse. The eye, it swells and twitches in place, partially restored, and as vision flickers back into view, my consciousness regains a modicum of control; I feel myself plug back into the driver’s seat.

Pain – the socket is still terribly bruised from being hollowed out like a jack-o-lantern but there’s nothing I can do about that at present.

All I can do is suffer and muddle through.

The blood magic tentacle protruding from my open mouth, it winds and whips its length about the room, dripping as it does.

‘Find it, you got this,’ I encourage the blood born mass and as luck would have it, it snatches something from the shadows of a broken display case and promptly bestows the stolen piece into my extended palm.

With that, it retreats back into my mouth, gagging as it does, coating my throat so thick I can taste the copper even without my tongue reattached.
Grey but damp with preserving fluid and coated in tiny flecks of glass, I struggle to wipe it a couple times across my chest and gingerly pinch it by the tip – cold, dead, it’s entirely vile but I ease it back between my teeth and press its severed end to the bleeding stump. Blood flows and the very magic that returned my eye works its way into this atrophied lump of muscle.

Veins expand.

Nerve endings reach forth.

Dead cells awaken.

I feel flesh connect and hold firm.

The tip curls, unintentionally, as sensation returns.

My tongue is on fire – the needling pain as blood flows, pumps life back into it.

Taste buds tingle and immediately retreat in horror – the preserving agent is still a slick coating on its surface.

I vomit vile, its acrid taste burning my reawakened tongue but it is back.

And it is mine.

It’s a struggle but I regain more control over myself and in doing so, I test my tongue and mention to the anchor “Go..od to..to have ya back,” my words booming over the thundering storm of organ wails.

It pulses excitedly, its green glow flashing the room and casting a terrible light on the guards still screaming in terror.

I test my jaw and it aches terribly, but even still, I face my torturer amid the cacophony; I state in deadpan, piercing her thoughts, “Now, if you would be so kind…” and wagging my stump of an arm of her, I add “tell me where my missing piece is?” Despair has claimed the Arvaarad but whether intended or not, she shakily glances to the security door.

“Oh yeah? Through there? Thank you so much.” I wickedly gleam and grabbing her by a horn, I hoist her into the air. “…and just for the sake of knowing, what prompted you to come after me?”

Her duty wins out over self-preservation; in the blink of an eye, she’s driven a previously hidden knife deep in her jugular. As red flows and her eyes go dim, she hangs limply in my grasp and I comment “how…Qunari of you.”

Dropping her corpse to the floor and gliding to the blast doors, I spot the array of wards and runes against magic etched into them, their rainbow current humming even as my discord rages.

Still though, the power pouring off of me, the sheer radiance, it’s shorting the currents.

Weakening them.

The current pales in the face of this power; my rage, my confidence. With some stiffness, I raise the anchor and it is enthusiastic to work with me again, to get us out of here. Angry green rips and claws at the doors, cutting into steel, but it isn’t enough. While waning in strength, paling against my own, it’s just enough to hold.
To slow me.

But my infused body is not having that — It refuses.

With this bounty of energy, I feel something creeping inside me, something I haven’t felt in too long…

Not since Haven…

Something just below the surface…I can’t put my finger on it though.

It’s like a wiggling under my flesh...

Worms? Snakes?

But it’s not behind my forehead this time…

Tentacles?!

No, this time I can feel whatever it is working its way down through my butchered arm.

“**AGH, ERHH!**” I groan at the painfully unexpected.

It’s too much, the pressure building.

Sutures pop, muscle slides aside, and the skin stretches to accommodate.

Gritting my teeth against the nauseating torture, it’s all I can do to stand upright and not black out – fingers, so many fingers, visible only for my blood that coats their spectral mass, they force their way out through my arm. Shifting and shoving aside what they must, pressing and twisting against bone, fingers became hands become arms.

Plural. Daunted I stand, leering in shock and awe as the plurality adjusts for their scale relative to my own. Scores of ghostly arms, each similar in proportion and flailing independently, they grip the door and I go rigid – the doors’ current channels through them and into me, like holding an electric fence. But the arms, they go to work, prying at the doors; steel groans and whines as it bends unwillingly to the assault. Metal scraping metal, they’re forced outward, tearing past the framework threshold and ruining the security measures.

Panting in pain, I manage to get out an “**o..okay?! This is wha..what’s happenin’ now?! Great.**”

I go to glide through my manufactured exit but the arms hold firm, refusing me entry; I’m forgetting something.

Or rather, some people.

I turn back to face the guards and grant them a tired smile even though they’ve long since lost it — crazed, maddened, they cry and and rock in horror..

I raise the anchor once more, this is a task it can easily accomplish. With a snap of my fingers, the mark detonates as do the other Qunari in the room; blood and guts paint every corner of the lab. As blood mist catches in the wind amid the torrent of swirling green, I leave that mess behind and exit out into stone and metalwork tunnels; I tow my storm behind me. But a new issue is presented – complex arrays of glyphs and wards are etched into the halls, from the ceiling to the floor.

I can feel them trying to push me back.
This will take longer than I’d like.

“Smart. Then again, if they were, they wouldn’t have…”

The anchor pulses wickedly with deliberation.

“Yeah, exactly.”

Ghost fingers prod and needle the markings as the anchor flares with rapid succession – their borders disintegrate as we inch closer and closer – prodding, needling ghost fingers scratch and test the strength of the array as the anchor overloads them.

This place is immense; hallways built for bigger things, things twice my size as if dwarves had built this. The lights are dim and an alarm drones, echoing through the halls. I slowly glide onward, feet barely scraping the floor as I do, my spectral arms searching and pulling, anxiously, curiously, and furiously seeking out my final stolen part as the anchor strobes against the glyphs.

We’re building speed, getting used to their defensive structure.

“If I were an arm, where would I be?” I loudly inquire to myself. Several guards emerge from a side hall, drawn by my voice, but are caught in my web of arms – there’s no time to panic or fight; they’re choked and torn apart without hesitation. As their wet chunks slosh to the floor, I close my eyes and listen for more than the alarm, for more than boots, beyond my summoned storm. I know they’re out there – my arm and staff. They’re somewhere in this goddamn labyrinth.

And while it’s just a feeling, I think they’re close.

Further through the halls I progress, obliterating glyphs and all who come to pass. No one gets away alive from here, not after the shit they’ve pulled. I intend to leave this place a tomb, no, I’ll leave it an sea of dust and blood.

This place is deserving of nothing less.

After all, how many innocents were tortured for the Qun before I came along?

Gears crank loudly as the walls hiss — an additional security measure, purplish gas pumps from tiny holes in steel grating. I don’t smell anything but that doesn’t stop my stomach from lurching. I taste copper and bile just past my tongue, my breathing takes effort; my lungs can’t grab enough oxygen.

“Where. Is. My. Arm!.” I angrily but staggeringly demand instead of asking the important questions — is this poison? Is it flammable? What are its effects? I fail to care, I’m losing myself. My body is slowed but my rage refuses, darkly tinting the magical outpouring; specter arms, disjointed and stretching, they yank and drag me through the halls; clawing at the floors and walls, anything to find purchase. We hunt and they’re my twisted chariot. But then amidst the alarms and scraping and various hisses, there’s a pulse – a distant call, my staff to me.

I don’t know how, I barely understand the staff when we’re joined. But it’s here. It’s faint but it’s here.

‘So close,’ it whispers to me in my mind across the unknown; it’s not far now, it can’t be.

Turning at a fork, down the hall stands a squadron of guards with a couple scientists – they’re hugging a large heavy cylinder between the two of them with all their strength, the glyphs on its smooth surface visible even from this distance.
That’s it.

That’s the cage, the holster.

That’s my...

“**MINE!**” I roar with gale force as the guards respond with a volley of arrow. Most are caught or bounce uselessly off the specter arms but quite a few find my flesh. A shoulder and pec impaled and several grazes on my legs.

I feel their sting, the dull throb despite the adrenaline and power, and my vision doubles but a moment — knowing the Qunari, they poisoned their arrows like they poison everything.

*Especially for monsters like me.*

Soldiers till the end, in their next formation, spears and control rods are brandished; they move to control in unison and I feel the energetic noose of their rods struggling to choke me, reel me in.

Leash me.

“**Sorry kids, we’re past that shit**,” I threaten as I tear the arrow from my chest and with a dry gulp, press forward.

But then a shift in rank, warriors hurry to the front line and heavy shields lock in place. One among them, he lights a grenade and hurls it down the halls over the front shield wall and together they brace.

A ghostly hand snatches it up, cradling it questioningly while three more reach in to smother it — the explosion is nothing, quashed.

But that wasn’t the plan — a spark escapes from between the fingers and the air ignites, roaring and hungry, trying its best to swallow me.

But that’s not how this story ends, not this day. My consciousness snaps and I fall in and out of control as my body screams. Then the unexpected; my form doesn’t shrink away or evade the flame. Instead, it dons the fire, a new set of robes that lick the ceiling and flare wildly. I must truly look the part of the menace they so feared.

I can see it on their face.

*Good.*

Countless spirit arms tear from my wounded right, surging to rip at everything.

The sheer magical energies radiating off me blisters the metal walls; pockets of molten ore dribble and pop, the very air hisses and whines as the corridor becomes a furnace.

The fire is mine now.

They’ll be mine.

Mine.

The guards, they lock ranks and hold their position, singed shields bracing against my approach all the while their scientist frantically tries to undo a containment measure on the far door.
A step forward, the heat follows.

“So how d’ya wanna die?,” I ask, an intimidating rhetorical. I don’t actually care — just so long as they do in fact die.

The fire matures, becoming an inferno, and still I slowly step.

They know this is it and many have chosen to forgo the rods; The floor is littered; They’re just useless sticks now.

They’re barking commands at one another over the cry of the storm, however closer ears again are starting to bleed.

Another step, the floor cooks and sizzles underfoot.

But a red light goes off and heavy gears start cranking, rumbling through the walls, the security door slowly rolls from place back into its track. Murky daylight pours in through the crack.

“Get the fuck away from that door,” I demand over the howl of the storm.

It’s difficult to control the rage inside me; my gait is staggered, the arms reaching and yearning to maim, kill, and reclaim. If I give up the reins, I’ll bring the place down on top of me…and I’ve already had one mountain fall on me. Even this powerful, I may not survive round two. And I may not be all there in my head right now, but I know that crucial detail. I didn’t go through all this just to die.

For now, every step is a victory and pressing towards my goal, the fires about me cook and sear – what little clothing I had left is ashes and soot clinging to my flesh.

The door is slow, there’s still time

It’s difficult to maintain, to keep myself from bringing this fortress down on top of us, on top of me — it’s everything I can do just to keep my focus on putting one foot in front of the other. Invisible fingernails carve away at the walls, floor and ceiling — the guards, while resolute in their task are clearly distressed; they’ve never seen this level before. The edges of their shields are beginning to glow red; some break formation and forgo those as well, trying to preserve their hands for whatever fight they think is next.

Another step; I can barely see beyond the flames.

My vision is wavering, blurring from exhaustion and dehydration, magic now is all that’s sustaining me.

The agents are slipping away, squeezing through the door, the cylinder scraping along the threshold between the, as they do.

They’ve escaped the facility and are vanishing into the grey beyond as several guards more trickle out behind him.

“NOOO!,” I fume and the foundations tremor — the commanding officer retreats to reseal the doors.

Everything cracks; I slip and let loose.

The wild violent power inside me detonates.
The world becomes fire, all purples and golds and greens.

The Qunari ahead evaporate — their various tissues cook off in an instant and skeletons are all that are left standing, seared in place…

…just like the Temple of Sacred Ashes…

And then the foundations yield, the deep bass of their groans audible even with the blast.

A mountain of rubble and metal come crashing down, crushing and suffocating everything beneath. Swept away, the arms and hands, they furiously stretch forth and wrap around me, grappling me, cocooning me as I feel another bomb priming within me. Protected but my breathing haggard, painfully I howl “MINE” as the hands clutch all the tighter under the weight.

“MINE!”

Overwhelmed, trapped under the crushing black of the stone, I go off again.

*****

"Inquisitor?! Answer me! Where are you," I hear Solas yelling but I can't see him past all the spirits and demons.

"INQUISITOR!," the Fade folk parrot in unison.

Water fills my lungs, water I can't see. Sputtering and drowning, I reel back as the repeated words go distant.

*****

I awaken suddenly as saltwater slaps my face and fills my nostrils. Snorting and sputtering out the unwelcome drink, I flop from the shallows backwards into wet sand. With stinging skin, I tear my eyes open remembering my task and gasp shallow breaths.

‘Arm,’ my only thought as I shiver from the wet.

My weight shifts as the incoming tide eats at the sand under me.

Looking about for enemies or tracks, anything, I realize I’m stuck to a shoreline.
The distant cry of gulls grabs my attention and I look out beyond the waves.

Too late. Too fucking late.

A lone ship speeds ahead into the horizon, wavering like a mirage as a fog bank slowly sweeps in over the whitecaps.

Scrabbling to my feet as panic tears at me, in a last ditch effort, anything to be made whole, I lock my eyes to that vessel; glaring, I frantically hiss “Qunari ship, onboard, I need to be there. Get. Me. There!”

**Blink.**

Eyes open, I’m still stuck to the shoreline.

Disbelief, uncertainty and hurt taking root, I yell “GET ME ON THAT SHIP.”

**Blink.**

Nothing.

An explosion — the earth quakes and groans, I’m dropped to my knees. Jolted, I spin around and watch in shock as an enormous rift twists and snakes through the air, growing and consuming the destruction and corpses.

A ravenous rift, much larger than any I’d ever conjured before.

Looking to the mark with fearful trepidation, I whisper “well…shit”

‘the mark is getting stronger. A lot stronger. This good or bad? Already lost one arm, can’t lose another…’ I gravely contemplate before realizing my disorienting mistake — I whip back to the ocean and glaring death at the escaping vessel, I yell “GET ME ON THAT GODDAMN SHIP!!!”

**Blink.**

Reality scrapes past me, like forcing my face through an itchy turtleneck sweater; the instant it starts, it ends and I plop down beneath the salty waves as I’m spun and sloshed in the ocean waters. Kicking and struggling to keep myself upright, I manage to breach the surface, to start doggy paddling back to shore in stunned dismay.

Apparently I’m no good at swimming sans arm.

As I thrash against the waves and saltwater forcing its way into my lungs, I focus tremendously on everything I have on reserve, I hone in on ‘that ship. Put me onboard, right behind the captain,’ as I uselessly bob up and down.

I feel a familiar tug, reality goes to slide past me again but it’s not enough – it’s all I can do to stay afloat in these choppy waters.

Loosely staring from the horizon to my resealed stump of an arm as I gasp for air, it slowly dawns on me...

‘I can’t…my fast travel..how?…’ I question while glaring at my stump, ‘it was all the staff? No, I did it some…but?’
As I work my way back to the gray lit shore, trying to ride the tides, I sputter “fuc *cough* uck” repeatedly until my knees scrape the sands of the shallows with the rift light reflecting off the waters. Bits of ash snow down on me as the ruins of what was the underground fortress smolder and smoke; all the while the rift still feeds, pulsing and growing as green auras flit across the overcast skies above.

Rubbing salt water from my eyes with despair twisting my features, I watch as the Qunari vessel completely vanishes from view.

Defeated, I pull myself back onto dry land.

Lying in greying sands, bits of soot and ash clinging to my wet face, I horizontally reach past my head and in an attempt to do at least one thing right, I feel about the tumblers within the growing rift, the anchor’s magic connecting to its own – fingers limply fidgeting, I find the intangible pins and press the trigger.

It thunders, shudders, and I blankly stare as it surges and collapses; chunks of fortress and mountain pause but a moment as gravity is restored and swiftly return to the earth like cannonballs. Fortunately for me, I’m not in the path of any such debris.

*****

An hour or two more of moping, depressed, in disbelief, I stayed immobile, paralyzed from the shock of having lost the staff and my favored arm. It’s not that I don’t like my left – I’m just right handed. And now I can swim as well as I can write…

Or fight…

Or draw…

Paint…

I thought waking up in Thedas was the worst day of my life. Then I’d thought my battle with Envy more so. After that, I’d thought it to be that look Cassandra gave me at Adamant. But no, it’s more than just bad days. It’s bad for-fucking-ever.

Abducted while riding the high of having smoothed things over with Cass, stabbed a bunch, tortured, locked in the Fade, beaten, dissected, gassed, had a secret base collapse on top of me, and my arm and staff have been stolen.

I am having a bad time

‘And I’m naked. Add that to the list…’ but prodding at the spots where arrows were once lodged, healed as if they never were, I note ‘but I’m not bleeding out…so at least there’s that.’

Clinging now to the shoreline, I’ve been treading along for hours with shells and bits of driftwood crunching under bare feet. Finally, my annoyance peaks and I scream “WHERE THE HELL AM I?!,” my upset echoing off the inland trees and rocky outcroppings, almost mocking in its
repetition.
But seagulls cry, somewhere further along.
It’s distant but…
*DANG*
*ding ding*
Bells clang and I stagger faster, a difficult task to perform with awkward steps on the loose sands.
Onward I go, rushing as best I can towards the sounds of familiarity.

*****

There’s a port town; mostly a shantytown but a few structures are made of stronger materials.
Mostly hidden in the tree line, I’m staring at this place – it’s not big but it’s big enough.
Humans, elves, dwarves, they’re all busy, each doing whatever they want. From selling wares in merchant’s stalls to getting drunk in the streets, from tying off the ships to getting drunk on the docks, from unloading cargo to getting drunk.
Scraping barnacles…
…getting drunk.
Fucking in the alleyways and getting drunk.
From the saunter, the swagger, the gruff to the charismatic, it all comes to a head when I notice most of their hats.
Bandanas and…
“Pirates.”
This is a pirate town?
“Where the hell...?,” I start but fade out as someone distinctly yells “OI! A naked ox!” Many in the crowd go still and eyes track the tree line for me but before I even get a chance to react, something heavy smashes into the back of my skull sending me reeling. Seeing double, I whip back and spit “You’re gonna give me a damn concussion!” right as two more clubs collide with my head.
One clatters off my horns but the second connects just fine.
Then a third.
Can’t keep count.
Knock out.

Chapter End Notes

"Katara" = "Die, thing."

"parshaara" = "enough!"

"Astaarit...itwasaam" = "it rises...we all fall"

"Vinek kathas" = an order to kill or seize.

"Arvaarad" = a Qunari that holds back evil; controls a saarebas

Work has been hectic and this has been a difficult chapter to write. Had to do a lot of research into the Qunari, the layout and landscape, Qunlat...

So, I apologize for the delay and I hope you enjoy.
Skyhold Calling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clear skies tinted by green.

The world wavers and shimmers before me as eerie whale songs cry out across the void; waterfalls pour, locked in place, as mountains drop and burrow beneath the earth like giant moles. Individual bricks and strips of mortar float listlessly overhead, clearly once part of something bigger, something whole, but have since grown bored and detached from one another.

Amidst all this, the remains of a solitary campfire sleep before me until but a few feet away — then remembering its purpose, it yawns itself to life, breathing itself back to strength.

“Umm, thanks,” I express to the evidently aware construct. It doesn’t reply; burning is apparently enough.

While nice to be in any part of the Fade that isn’t The Empty, I’m still eager to return to form — sure, I’m whole here, but that’s not important, it’s a falsehood — I’ve still got real world things to take care of. In the immediate, I need to damage the bastards that beat me with clubs.

With a clap of my hands, I go to force myself to wake up but a stunned gasp of “Inquisitor?” stays my intent.

“Please don’t be another trick of the Fade…there’s only so many times I can handle…”

“Solas,” I breathe in excitement, and rushing to the ageless elf and clasping him by the shoulder to prove our mutual tangibility, I continue “damn it’s good to see ya!”

“Heh heh,” he huffs in relief and actually reaches up to clasp my shoulder as well, “I have been combing the Fade for you; I’m aware you’re a difficult person to find here, your walls are strong, but I had hoped…” and shaking his head, “…after the attack, I’d hoped you’d gone to ground again and that you’d allow me to contact you.”

“How long since the Winter Palace?,” I ask.

“Seven week’s time, but surely you…” Solas answers but realizes my meaning. Hands withdrawing, face going grim, he questions with building urgency “where are you? Can you tell me that much? Any information can..”

“Look, I’m free now…err freeish. I’ll know for sure when I wake up. But uh, I think I’m on an island. And…there’s pirates.”

“Pirates? That doesn’t make sense…the strike was too well coordinated for a group such as them.”

”It wasn’t. It was the Qunari.“

Solas goes still as his eyes widen in stunned revelation.

”And they…they tried to break me. My eye…was…scooped out.”

Solas’ face twists in silent fury but I leap in to say “but I ah got it back. I’m just not seein’ every future as clearly.”
Deeply breathing several times, he makes attempts at stifling his rage but only gets it down to a scowl while spitting “the Qunari. They are monsters, picking and dissecting all that is natural and...” But, then, the elf questions “wait...How did you?,” his curiosity competes with his anger as his eyebrows pinch together.

“Don’t tell the others — did a blood.. creation magic combo, I think.”

“Blood magic. Yet still you move so freely though the Fade. Ever impressive,” he mutters, piecing information together, and finding a modicum of calm through the questioning.

If only he knew how restricted I’ve been...

“So why haven’t you returned yet if you are free?”

“Uh, can’t quite get the spell working,” I partially lie; I’m not prepared to see his rage when he finds out they took more than my eye.

“Well shit,” a female blurts out in the distance and I turn to find the source — nothing behind me for miles but burrowing mountains, each growing anxious under my gaze. Hesitantly rejoining my conversation with Solas, he quirks a brow at me and asks “what is wrong?”

“Look, you pay us to take out Oxmen...” someone with breathing problems argues; their throat sounds swollen?

Looking about, I’m still not seeing anyone, but I reply to Solas “Uhh, I’m hearing things...”

“But look at his hand, even I know what that is,” the initial woman argues back.

Solas, ever the knowledgeable one, he speculates “whether intentional or not, you may be in a meditative state.”

I look back to him in confusion and he elaborates “it would seem that your mind is present in both the waking world and the Fade.”

“Look, you pay or...” the unseen swollen throat man begins to threaten with phlegmy disdain but the lady ends it, purring “I cut off your cock for free. So how about it, sweet thing?”

Another’s voice, more nasally, he worriedly whines “Bremmers, I need my bits. I get you don’t use yours, but I use mine!” as swollen throat retorts “fuck off, you only use your shriveled piece to bait the hooks.” Nasal voice shoots back defensively “fish is fish!” to which this Bremmers mouths off “Jern, you stupid piece of...”

“As the only woman present, I feel obligated to say that I’m offended,” the lady interjects, clearly feigning her hurt by the sarcasm in her tone.

Filling Solas in, I tell him “they’re arguing about me..and dicks. And fish? And...ugh. I don’t like this.”

“...it may prudent of you to wake up so you can discover your location..and avoid a potentially despicable event. I will confirm to Leliana that you live and then I will return here for further contact,” Solas states.

“So I find that you’ve found me a Qunari; finders finders keepers, he’s mine now,” she says but
after a brief pause, she urges “That’s your cue to leave” to the sounds of metal unsheathing; two pairs of boots hurry away down creaky wooden floorboards

“This..should be interesting,” I unenthusiastically murmur with a sarcastic raise of my brows. Without awaiting Solas’ response, I shout “wake up” and the world trembles as I flee from it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all, I apologize for the delay — and I know this is a shorter update than I usually post — it’s just with the holidays and freence work, I was pretty slammed. Then last week, my face got intimate with the hood/sideview mirror of a passing car. I’m fine, albeit bloodied and incredibly bruised, but I am healing nicely.

I’ll try to edit the next several chapters I have written and get them up soon.

As always, THANKS FOR READING.
“Owww,” I groan with my eyes still shut.

‘Definitely some bruises and lumps,’ I wince at the fresh injuries I can already feel forming.

“So you’re still alive? Eh, it’s likely for the best; it’d be problematic if the mighty Inquisitor were to die in my town. Well, problematic for you…because of the you being dead.”

Squinting past the fresh bruises on bruises from my place on the floor, I find myself staring up at the blurry buxom form of a dark skinned beauty — thigh high leather boots, golden bangles and jewels, raven black hair cascading over her shoulders, all of her wrapped up in a royal purple tunic, she sits perched on a table swirling an amber drink in hand while sizing me up.

And a sizable curved dagger is gripped in her other. She looks as likely to kill me as kiss me.

Scratch that. She looks much more ready to kill me.

“Isabela?,” I breathe out through a pained and questioning smile.

Gulping down her drink and tossing it haphazardly away — it shatters against a wall sending glass shards flying — she slides from her spot with a curious gleam in her eyes as she questions with a deliberately slow delivery “So. You. Know. Me?” all the while twirling her wicked blade.

“Yeah actually...”

“As Pirate Queen of the High Seas.”

“Uh..no?”

“Admiral Isabela.”

“ermm,” I mumble.

“The Most Ravishing Raider.”

“Uh.”

Confidence flickering, she attempts a recovery by boldly stating “Greatest Sex any man or woman will ever know!”

I just purse my lips together and awkwardly stare as she blinks in shock. Her freehand slides to her second dagger on her hips as she hisses “Andraste’s flaming knickers, if you say you know me from Varric’s awful book, I’ll stick you where it…”

With my one hand darting to protect my “valuables,” I blurt “I’ve heard things! That’s it! That’s all!”

Her gaze wandering, studying, she eases her daggers back into their scabbards as she questions “things? No, doesn’t matter. How are you here?”
Hand still shielding what’s between my legs, I reveal “the horned fuckers had a base on the other side of the island…” and with a slight pause to roll my eyes, “. . . had. I blew it up.”

*Hope the eye roll was visible past the swelling.*

“Damn it! They were on my island this whole time?!” she blurts out and kicks the table in annoyance. But that outburst quickly changes; her shoulders relax and she whispers “but I take it...” and pausing to chuckle immaturity at her words, “you...you’re not actually Qunari; you’re lacking their usual stick-up-the-ass-ishness.”

“That's right, I'm a mage - the Qun isn’t exactly kind to my type. Two...” I stress while pointedly wagging my stump of an arm at her, “This is their brand of kindness.”

That at least seems to sway her to my side to some degree.

“Listen, at least they didn’t get in here,” she says ignoring my grievous amputation and finger jabs me between the horns.

Wincing, I darkly grumble “Damn did they try though.” Her brows raise in recognition and with a grim shake of her head, she saunters to a liquor cabinet, pulls two glasses, pours heavy in one and struts back to offer the lesser. Well, more demand than an offer, she urges “drink.”

Cautiously leaving myself unguarded, I take the proffered glass and do just that — drink. It’s definitely not a smooth rum, the dark liquid has a serious bite to it. Then again, I evidently haven’t had a drink in months.

‘And you were missing a tongue for some of that... but did the magic make it more sensitive? Shit, that’s probably the case,’ I wonder as I take a second taste. With my tongue retreating from the burning taste, I manage to ask “so where the hell are we?”

Through a knowing smirk, she swirls her glass and passionately breathes out “little Llomerryn. My home away from home.”

“wh...where?” I question with a lopsided grimace.

Trying again, she proudly breathes “Estwatch!”

My silence and questionably quirked brow tell all.

“Oh come on! Estwatch? It’s an island? Home to raiders?...”

Still I sit uneasy in awkward silence.

“In the Amaranthine Ocean... Off the...” she sighs “off the coast of the Free Marches...” and finishing in defeat, “everyone knows this place. There isn’t a nation that hasn’t tried to hold it”

I simply shrug and take another sip.

“Where in The Maker’s ass have you been? Under a very large rock?”

Taking another sip, acclimating my tongue to booze like a teen new to hard liquor, I remark with a cringe “not from around here.”

“Ugh, obviously...” she bemoans and throws back her drink to drown out any other choice words she may have in store.
She's got a boat. Maybe she can...

“Unless you intend to serve under me and while I do mean under me, I think it best if you get off *wink* my island and get back to...wherever.”

‘Uh? Oh, sure. Straight to it,’ I note while uttering “Skyhold.”

“Oh you would reach for the sky when I hold…ahem, no, no Isabela” she admonishes herself before purring “Denerim. I can get you there, I can get you anywhere…”

“You can’t turn it off, can ya?,” I ask regarding her innuendo and euphoric euphemisms.

“I only turn things on,” she proudly beams with mischief in her eyes, “but as for the cost Of transport, it’s 50 sovereigns, nonnegotiable.

“Probably enough for that in horned corpses if ya feel like digging,” I challenge remembering her conversation I overheard in the Fade.

“35.”

“I obliterated their trespassing asses.”

“20.”

“Paid upon arrival.”

“20...and you have to destroy one of Varric’s books in front of him.”

Raising a solitary brow in question, I finish my rum, taste buds crying the entire time.

“He wrote me out like a whore. I am not a whore, I’m just exceptionally open. There’s a world of difference.”

“Are you two even friends?” I query.

“Of course!,” she answers taken aback, “but sometimes you absolutely must take your friends down a few pegs or else they’ll think they’re better than you. And that, that is friendship.”

I feign agreement, muttering “yeah. Obviously…” sarcastically.

“Then that’s that. On to other things…well, thing” she says as her eyes trail south. Following her gaze, it dawns on me that I’m still naked — I’m too sore to move to conceal myself though, no adjustments, I just sigh out “god damn it” in defeat. I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks, I’m blushing harder than I should be.

Tossing a rag to me but continuing her admiration, she laughs “So it goes grey to pink? Who knew? Ahahahaha…”

That's enough to make my ears burn.

Finally though, she makes her return to a modicum of professionalism, “Well, you’d best figure out how to wear that because weather permitting, we leave at twilight.”

At that, she turns from me go pour herself another glass.

‘…I don’t think I like her,’ I’m surprised to find myself thinking as my cheeks still burn.
In retrospect, I don’t believe I actually needed to negotiate passage back to the mainland. From the stores and barrels of perishables onboard, it’s clear she was slated to head out soon regardless. And considering how quickly she pulled a crew together, it just stands to reason this was a previously scheduled departure.

‘Felicity — of course that’s the name of her ship,’ I muse from within the hold of the dark spirit upon which we cut the waves by the light of the waxing moon rising through the sky. Dark stained wood, almost too many sails, multiple decks with a slew of cannons and mini cannons tucked away in case of emergency, Isabela claimed this vessel was a swift one despite the larger than average derrière; this big bottomed merchant vessel soars like the wind itself and I now know she was not exaggerating.

I’d love to snatch some clothes or a larger rag and head up on the main deck, watch the waves...but by her order, I’m never to go topside, something about “and when the Qun comes sailing our way? What then?” was the commanding dialogue. I mean, she’s right, I can’t afford to let the Qun know my location – not now.

‘Not yet,’ I darkly anticipate the hour I’ll see them again, ‘but when I do...they’ll feel regret.’ That’s all I promise for now. Hidden from crew and view, hunkered down between barrels and crates of what I can only hope is cheese by the smell of it, I can’t help but let my thoughts roam dark regarding my newest of enemies.

_Corypheus is powerful but cliché…_…_the Qunari are intelligent and brutal. They plan for contingencies and utilize…’_ I note as a pained smirk escapes me, ‘…_surgical precision in their attacks. I mean…’

“How in the hell did they know to swoop in at the Winter Palace? How’d they know to strike on the balcony – was it planned or merely an opening they took?” I question to the dread of my freshly restored tongue. Pausing a moment, I stick out my tongue and trace a finger over the thin trail of scar tissue. It’s still incredibly tender and painful to the touch; feeling the raised flesh, I ponder ‘only Josephine and Solas knew for certain… then again, Inquisition shows up, it’s normal to assume the Inquisitor’ll be there.’

Then a thought more paranoid presents itself, ‘Bull gave you a drink. Merely an attempt at repairing a falling out?...was he fucking that elf or was that a cover up?’

‘Was he one of my attackers,’ I struggle to remember the faces – it was swift and they kept injecting me.

_No. Stop. You were drunk and drugged up, worry about that shit when you get home._

‘And beyond them...there’s still The Dread Wolf...’ I think upon my relationship with the elf, ‘assuming his plans haven’t changed, he’s as big a threat as these other assholes.’ Then, contemplating the mark, I query ‘and if all goes according to the narrative, I’m gonna be down both arms when that time comes. How in the hell am I supposed to make this work?..’

Nothing comes to mind, though I suppose Dagna could investigate golems to build me substitute arms. The idea of me with chunks of brick and lyrium in lieu of flesh and bone just goes to make
me grimace.

*Weird enough that I popped out with horns. Weirder still I have magic. Weird I ate some demons. Don’t know how far I’m willing to push this threshold.*

Shoving the inquiries and oddities aside for another time, I hug my knees to my chest with the slapping of waves and creaking of wood my ambient noise. Staring absently to my useless stump hanging over my knee, I whisper “I heard you once. Can I still hear you?”

Silence.

Of course there’s nothing from the other side — no response to hear. Only the sea, creaking, yelling of the crew, the soft clanging of cannons rocking, and the cry of following gulls fill my ears.

“If you can hear me, somehow get loose. Take out as many of em as you can,” I whisper.

Still nothing.

At this point, I almost wouldn’t mind running afoul of the Qun bastards — they could still have my arm onboard. ‘Wouldn’t that be...fortuitous’ I muse. The likelihood of that scenario is essentially zero at this point. Pretty certain they were sailing North whereas we’re heading in nearly the opposite direction. And I have no idea what my fighting potential is at present – was my explosive and terrifying display of power a one time courtesy of Spook giving itself to me or do I still possess that daunting magic?

But I’m not about to test that question here – last thing I need is to bomb the ship.

So, for now I sit, save for the rum soaked rag, naked on a boat with the night breeze blowing through the open portholes. Huddled down between some crates of cheese in the dark, I continue unenthusiastically examining my half-an-arm. Turning it over, flexing, I feel the phantom pull — it’s not real, but damn does it feel like it if I close my eyes.

‘Stupid nerve endings are still convinced it’s there,’ I figure before turning my attention to my left, ‘and gotta be careful; there’s more scars now. Supposed to have a couple years before it kills me...this is goin’ too fast.’

But the anchor draws me away from this examination — it pulses softly, rhythmically, trying to get my attention.

“Sorry, not willing to accept collect calls at this time,” I joke without mirth.

It flashes in annoyance, a quicker patter.

With a sigh, I reply “You tryin’ to talk about my missing pounds of flesh?”

One pulse, no.

“Is it cheese related?,” I question noting just how thickly pungent the air is — suppose that’s why the portholes are all wide open to the starry night.

One pulse.

“Fade stuff?”

Two now, yes.
Curiously, I stare at the mark, wondering what it could want but then I remember…

Solas.

The mark flashes brightly twice, confirming my thought.

“Did I...” I begin but finish the thought internally, ‘did I say his name out loud? No..yes? No..weird.’ but returning thought to mouth, I whisper “get me in.”

I’m not overly eager to return just yet but it’s necessary. The anchor acquiesces — its pulse become an unwavering conduit of green, the space between the crates more than illuminated as I slip the surely bonds of mortality and fall headfirst into the world beyond, leaving my body behind.

*****

The effects are instant — perhaps it’s the Spook power but I’ve assuredly gotten faster at entering and exiting the Fade.

‘A useful skill,’ I drearily note now knowing how long I was locked in The Empty before I turn my attention to the Fade around me.

Reverberating whale songs, the scrape of glass up harp strings, the muffled rumble you hear pounding in your ears beneath the waves – the Fade greets me in its usual unusual manner.

“At least there’s stuff here,” I whisper trying to still my panicked heart.

The sky and sea have swapped places and presently I stand firm upon the clouds below — the eerie whine of the Fade echoes through the bright blue waters above as only the outlines of ships sail by. While staring this curious location over, a surprising wisp darts up and flits about me in excitement before bounding off and away beneath the cloud cover ground.

“What was that about?,” I fire off defensively but the mark pulses with curiousity as well. But no matter, we’re answered soon by the hollow thump of footsteps climbing a creaky wooden staircase, every step more loud than the last. It’s then a bald head rises from out of the stratus, every step revealing the elf more and more.

“Nice entrance,” I let out as he fully emerges to which he smirks “was it? Well thank you, but unto matters more significant than my arrival… do you have news?”

“Yeah, I’m on the Felicity to Denerim. Should arrive in four days...and right, look, I need 20 sovereigns, a copy of Tale of the Champion, Varric, and some pants.”

His face twisting, Solas stutters out “ex..excuse me?!”

“Nice entrance,” I let out as he fully emerges to which he smirks “was it? Well thank you, but unto matters more significant than my arrival… do you have news?”

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“The pants are optional but it’s the deal I struck with the Captain— try not to question it.”

Rubbing at his temples with both hands, he groans “ugh, very well,” but then with his face taking on a more somber look, he adds “I look forward to seeing you again, but for now, I must make the necessary arrangements. Farewell, Inquisitor.” With that, he’s swallowed back into the clouds; he’s returned to the waking world to convey my message to the advisors.

Even as he assists me, I can’t help but wonder ‘friend or foe?’ and ‘how will this end now?’
Worthless thoughts for now if not correct, but they linger but a moment more before I eagerly whisper “wake up.”

Get me the fuck out of here.

*****

Day 2 on Felicity – high noon.

I’ve been slipping in and out of a daze, willing myself to stay awake. I never did manage to get any sleep since dipping into the Fade. It’s not the ship, the swaying and rocking, nor is it the crew…

…nor is it the fact that the crew evidently all have their mandatory “private time” one deck below mine – I heard their frenzied grunts echoing throughout the hull. It’s times like these I curse my vivid imagination and their salty self-pleasuring is not an image I needed lodged in my head.

There’s enough batshit fucked-up-ness in there already.

But right, as for my sleeplessness, it’s none of that aforementioned stuff — it’s the insane chance that I could get stuck in the Fade again, mind trapped while my body withers. I know it’s not likely but a fear is a fear.

Hard to change the nature of a fear.

So here I sit, nose blind now to the thick scent of Orlesian or Tevinter cheeses — doesn’t really matter which at this point. But as for new developments, the hallucinations are coming back — the pill bugs returned, their tiny, translucent, chitinous forms flickering like strand lights. I’d tell them off if I could; I’m not ready to sleep.

I’m not ready to give up control.

Every time my eyelids fill with metaphorical sand, my lungs heave in panic and I jolt awake.

This will be a problem if I don’t deal with it now though…so I force my eyes closed despite the panic welling, the chilling sensation creeping up the back of my neck, despite the fear.

“Fear is just fear…” I try to convince myself.

It can’t hurt you. Only hinder. Only slow ya.

Darkness — my chest tightens but I try to calm myself, whispering “it’s okay. It’s okay. You’re not in chains. No needles or saws. It’s just you…” Poor choice of words, that last bit; my chest outright seizes and I gasp for air. Realizing my mistake, I aggressively hum “not just you. Not alone. Not. Alone. Almost home. We’ll see them soon” as I realize the litany of phobias I’m likely to own. To combat this, I draw upon my memories of the friends and family I’ve since made, the bonds I’ve forged.

Varric, Josephine, Leliana, Blackwall of course… Ever uplifting.

Winter…if I ever see her again.

…Cullen…bet he blames himself for this. Gotta buy him a drink.
'Sera…only family can be that annoying' I smirk at the thought.

Dorian. You snarky little…yeah, you're family…

…Solas. Time will tell...

‘Rasa’ I imagine my adopted sister but the freshest image I one of her is her shrieking as I was stabbed — my heart races as panic attempts to reclaim me so I scrounge for calm.

Anything.

Eyes closed tight, I’m again in a dusty, humid cottage — streamers of sunlight filter in through the cracks in the walls. No one has been here inside in years but it hasn’t been without company — that company has just often times preferred to visit from a safe distance. ‘Flemeth’s Hut,’ I mentally breathe; stagnant though it may be, it offered me refuge once. But that was fleeting — I need something a bit more permanent.

But what here represents permanence?

In the shadows, I see a face coalescing and without willing it, I latch onto a memory of Cass’ furious dark eyes boring into me when first I woke in chains. The smell of soot and torches, damp cold stone, the uneasy stance of armored guards, her furious need for answers… Just thinking of her looking down at me, even frozen in this certainly odd moment, it’s a small comfort, just enough to smother the panic.

‘Cass…’ I breathe easier.

The scene it shifts, it becomes a slow montage of every scoff she ever cast my way; a smile threatens the corners of my mouth.

Again, the scene changes; that it’s changed now to her from our time fighting through Adamant is an odd direction, but it’s working. I see the concern and care on her face, the worry for my wellbeing. She wanted to leave me behind but ultimately trusted me enough to haul me along despite the danger. Her determination in the face of death, dragging me forward in spite of whatever fear she harbored. It strikes me that I’ve never seen her paralyzed by fear — even in the Fade, when confronted by her fears given form, she fought on. She doubts herself like any other, she panics, she dreads, but she perseveres through sheer willpower. She’s spectacular, dauntingly so and it’s just enough to let me breathe more evenly, to lull myself as rats scamper and scurry amongst the crates.

A new scene, it rotates back to our first demon encounter together while rushing to the Breach; her surprise and shock that I required no weapons, no staff.

All I required were my fists.

She never shied away.

'Cass might be my hero," I realize as pleasant tears run down the sides of my face. A warmth spreads and I easily welcome the darkness of sleep, a reprieve from my scattered thoughts.

*****
Calm.
Restful.
The world is naught but slow tides and corn stalks haphazardly jutting from those waters; twin moons hang in the sky.

It’s a curious sight, but not a distressing one.

Good.

And knee deep in those waters, Cass stands with her hand offered. She’ll see me to the safety that I can’t find myself. Armor gleaming with a golden radiance backlighting her, she even looks the part of a fairytale champion. I trudge though the shallows to meet her, to take her hand and follow her lead…

But I trip.

A trap door falls open and I’m swept away, sputtering and choking as I wash away into the deep. Thrashing wildly to find air, to find escape, I hit hard against a cold surface and the waters vanish. The dream slips from whatever grips of sanity it claimed nearly immediately — again I’m strapped down with cuffs biting into my flesh.

Bony knees jab at my sides as a weight hits my stomach. From the dark above, Envy leers down at me while straddling my waist, the former Arvaarad’s face is loosely hanging off its own like a cheap Halloween mask. Poking its tongue out between the dead lips, it mocks high pitched and manically “I changed my mind — I don’t want to be you. You’re not good enough anymore” before chomping down. Spittle and blood dribbling, the fleshy severance falls to my chest and rots upon landing. Lungs pumping in panic, I struggle to knock it off but then the hands come bearing down with needles, ready to pierce and flood my veins with weights. As needle after needle penetrate my neck, every last one of the Qunari shades whisper in my ear “but what if you’re still here?” and “what if you never left.”

“How can you be surrrrrre?,“ the voices sing.

The whole dream becomes a carousel of mocking laughter, the room spins around me faster and faster as colors bleed and everyone yells “we got inside, we got inside” while jabbing at their own skulls. My blood goes cold and my stomach churns.

We got insiiiiide.

We. Got. Inside.

*****

I awaken with start, hurtled back to the waking world. Drenched in cold sweat and my heart pounding, I yank myself to the porthole overhead and expel the bile shooting up my swiftly shortening esophagus; several gags and coughs later, taste buds crying from the stomach acid washed over them, I gingerly retreat to my space between the crates. Chest shaking in time with my terrified heart, I slump down against the gritty wooden deck; I feel my nerves tingling, my
phantom limb screaming to imitate the real thing, to get us out of here.

To get us home.

But it’s not real.

And it won’t be.

‘Never again,’ I lament while hiding my face with my one and half arms.

“Never again,” I whimper through fresh tears as imagined luminescent pill bugs scurry through the air, ignoring the cover on my face.

‘We got inssssside,’ those words chatter around in my skull.

*****

Morning. Day 4.

Time is kind of bleeding together and my breathing arrhythmic, I can barely handle eating. I’ve vomited up most of the food I’ve tried getting down the past couple days. Whatever bland bullshit liquid diet the Qun bastards were pumping into my stomach while I was under has left me weak. Or maybe it’s my constitution after seeing Envy so vividly before me. Slow to digest, unable to sleep, I just try to keep myself awake till we reach Denerim.

It’s the best I can do.

I accidentally slipped back to sleep several times more and it was always the same — Qunari, Envy, pieces of me getting pulled off with ease…

I can’t let myself fall under now — not yet at least. Maybe back at Skyhold, maybe then, but not before.

Just keep breathing.

Just keep...

“Hey! You’re not dead are you?!” a boot nudges me and I’m knocked from my haze — my eyes trail up the leg of the boot’s owner until I’m staring at Isabela. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for five whole minutes! Did you seriously not hear me? I mean, you are looking rough, and not in the fun way,” she says while hopping up on a crate; she’s cradling a half-drunk bottle of rum that I can inexplicably smell over the powerful cheeses.

“Trouble sleeping,” I blankly mumble.

“Well, you’re not getting the rest of this,” she jokes while pulling her bottle into her bosom, “this is my treat, a job well done for being such an amazing Captain.”

Fatigue has slowed my reaction time but she answers what she correctly suspects to be my next question, saying “we’re almost to shore — perhaps another couple hours more if this gale holds strong.”
“Hhh,” I wearily mumble, swaying in time with the rocking of the ship.

“…anyway, a crucial detail we may have glossed over,” she says with an inquisitive squint and a curling of her lips.

“Should be…at the docks…with the required…payment,” I breathe with heavy lidded eyes.

“Ah, good. See, despite being the professional that I am, I may have been drunk at our first meeting” Hopping off her crate, she nudges my barefoot with her boot and commands “no dying on me, right? Doubt I get paid if you die.” With that, she sashays away, a bit drunk, to return topside. Not bothering to watch her leave, I just stare to the darkness of the hold while trying to focus on the hallucinated bugs as a means of keeping myself awake.

While the seconds are crawling, this should work for the next hour or so.

‘Almost…’ I think as my stomach growls its outrage. Weakly putting a hand to my side to crush down the sensation, I mumble “Yeah…almost.”

From the shadows slinks a splotchy tabby, a fat rat bleeding in its teeth. Though dead, its legs still twitch as the cat leers at me with bright yellow eyes, watching. With the sway of the ship on the night waters, it never takes its eyes off me, they never stray. Potentially delirious, I murmur softly “are you her eyes? Does she laugh? What does Flemeth know?” to the leering feline — it merely tilts its head, studying, staring at me, through me. Though cats often appear to see beyond the physicality of reality, this one’s gaze is particularly disturbing.

Like it knows more than it should.

Or maybe that’s just the exhaustion making connections where there are none.

Or maybe…

Growing disinterested, the tabby lazily turns and creeps away, off to consume its trophy in privacy.

*****

Four days naked, hungry, dehydrated, and delirious on the Felicity and while I can’t say Isabela has been the most courteous of hosts, she’s done her job with haste. Slowly her ship veers toward the labyrinth of docks, ready to be leashed as smaller boats glide to escape her path. As capital, Denerim is ever crowded, ever packed to the gills with vendors, mercantile delights and curios.

I hear the clamor of the city beyond the harbor, even from below deck. Even the air smells different now beyond the sickening cheese stink — less salt, more bread, more smoke, and…

‘Wet dog,’ I unfortunately note; while wildly exaggerated that Ferelden smells of wet hounds, this city is particularly ripe this day. It’s likely that there’s been too much rain in the last week. In my daze, I don’t notice the ship quartermaster approaching; for a heavy set man, his gait is anything but.

“Master Oxman,” he growls sarcastically past his sunburnt nose and cracked lips as imagined bugs flicker over his face, “Captain has rescinded her order of indecency,” his weathered baritone cuts the air. Through half-lidded eyes, I look to the gentleman and what he holds: a fraying head wrap,
pants likely too small for me and a poorly stained cloak riddled with knife holes.

Whomever wore this last was not a fortunate soul.

Regardless of their condition, he drops them on me and continuing, he growls “it occurs to me that she may have been joking... Now, I would apologize on her behalf but...eh meh,” his not-apology abruptly drops before he staggers off. Still, he’s inexplicably quiet for a man of his weight and with his awkward steps.

I just stare after him, lightheaded, as I weakly hold the garb aloft to which he shoots back a loud grunt, “put on the damn hat — not allowed up without it.” With that, he limps his way up the stairs; he must’ve felt my gaze on his back. My stomach chooses that moment to call out as well, actually echoing off the crates I’m sandwiched between.

*****

A dreary grey noon and despite the scattered pockets of sunlight filtering through, the cloud cover looks ready to let loose its barrage of tears. Stumbling alongside the captain on her right in my gifted cloak with my loss of flesh and my anchor hidden from view, finally I’m breathing deep of the moderately fresh air. It just feels amazing to be outside, even covered up as I am, to be soaking up any of the minimal sunlight my grey skin can. It's enough to ward off some of the hallucinations.

My stance is wobbly, my steps unsure from low blood sugar.

Every movement just lends a dizzying array of fireworks to my field of vision.

But it's fine. Even with that blinding me, I can see enough.

Being in Ferelden is enough.

This South-most portion of port is less crowded — maybe that’s why Isabela chose it. Less prying eyes means a perfect spot for her potentially illicit dealings.

Cheers and applause erupt from within the city — fanfare and drumbeats call out to the masses.

Noticing my lingering stare to the city, Isabela sarcastically states “just a parade. There's one every time royalty steps outside.”

Reaching the bow, we peer down at the stony landing — it’s a miserable location; weeds and roots have worked their way through the mortar and mud, the docks are in sore need to repair, even the various awnings and store fronts look to be in shambles. But to the people below, it’s just another day — they go about their business, hauling their wares or nets. Some are blackout drunk or potentially dead in the narrow crooked alleyways between the buildings. Have to say though, it's actually a good spot to dock — aside from my height, none are likely to take notice of me back here; I’ve got my important parts hidden at least, the anchor and horns are cloaked and wrapped.

“He even knew where I’d dock...ah! Maybe he does know me,” the Captain breathes out in a small laugh. Knowing I’m not altogether present, she grabs at my chin and redirects my attention to the rather short cloaked individual leaving the shade of a tattered awning. With his every step, it’s all the more apparent that’s Varric by his walk; he may be dressed down but it’s the shocking absence of Bianca that really makes him blend. Because of his short and sauntering gait, it takes him a beat...
to walk the dock and boarding plank but soon enough I’m side by side with his gravelly under-his-breath chuckle.

“Rivaini, it’s been too long,” he beams at the Captain from under his cowl; only his thrice broken nose peeks out from the fabric cover. However, before she can respond, he takes a better look at me and spits “Damn Rivaini! Way I heard it, you were bringing us live cargo, not this...” but his scowl cracks back into a smile as he slaps my hip saying “just kiddin’ K.O — you look...”

“Like a dead man,” the Captain and I casually reply in unison, forcing an ending to Varric’s attempted nicety.

“Well, I mean...” the dwarf shrugs before sucking air through his teeth.

“Look, not to cut this short but I’ve got things to do, things to do, and things to do — in that order,” Isabela admonishes while rolling her hand his way, open palm. Offering little resistance on that end, he fishes the hefty coin purse from inside his shirt and tosses it to the pirate. While she’s fondling its weight, he pulls the requisite copy of Tale of the Champion from his deep pocket.

“You know, if you wanted my autograph, you coulda just asked” he pauses to wink at the beautiful raider, “didn’t have to go and ransom him off.” As I take the copy off his hands, Isabela smirks out “Oh, you thought this was one of yours little signings?” while wagging her finger at him — in that moment, knowing my end of the bargain, I drop the book to the deck, kick it’s cover open and stomping down to hold it in place, I bend down and start tearing pages from its binding.

“Uh wha-what!?” the dwarf stutters out in shock — in disbelief, he can only look on in bewilderment.

“Sorry man,” I mutter under my breath as Isabela cackles out “That! That’s for making the world think I’m a whore!”

All he can do is shake his head in response — but quicker than expected, he breathes out another smile. “Guess this makes us almost even.”

“..almost even? This is MY win, this just made up for...” she starts.

“Ostwick,” he interjects. The one word is all he needs and she’s actually blushing. “No! You knew? All this time?!,” she pushes the question.

“Mmhmm,” the dwarf hums out and folds his arms across his chest; the corners of his mouth are ever so curved upward, pleased to reveal whatever it is these two are talking about. Stifling her embarrassed laughter, she shoves me and exasperatingly admits “just take this one and go already.”

“Happy to oblige,” Varric gravels out with a smile and a slight bow as I murmur “later, Captain” while swaying on my feet. Rolling her eyes, she struts back up, springs onto her toes and planting a kiss on my cheek, whispers “careful out there — I know a thing or two about running from the Qun” so only I can hear. With that, she makes a hasty retreat back to her quarters as Varric tugs at my cloak — “We’ve got somewhere to be.”

To tired to blush from her unexpected peck, I acquiesce to Varric’s orders and awkwardly shuffle along after him.

“It’s good to have you back,” he gravels out as we walk the dock — a spitting of raindrops begin to fall on Denerim as another rounds of applause and cheers rise from within.

Still dizzied, I manage to gather myself enough to question “Ostwick?”
“Not on your life,” he smirks out in reply.

*****

Realistically, we’ve likely only been walking for thirty minutes or so but in my current state, every second I’m conscious feels an eternity so I can’t rightly say how long Varric has been weaving us through the more ragged and frayed neighborhoods Denerim has to offer. Twisting and winding, I’m half certain he’s had us double back on a few of the streets and alleys — it’s almost as if he isn’t entirely in the know of how to get us wherever it is we’re headed. “I’m not wrong but this isn’t the way” and “don’t like the look of them” are the more frequent of choice phrases. Well, those and “shit.”

But at least we haven’t run across all that many people — it seems like the streets are as empty as they are because of the parade. And despite the sprinkling of intermittent raindrops, the weather isn’t dampening the spirits of cheer and revelry over along the parade on the other side of the Drakon.

But, as Varric has chosen to remind me, “Ruffles can organize a party when we get you back; then The Seeker can stop hounding everyone.”

My lungs clench at mention of her — excitement, terror, those are just the more prevalent of emotions in feeling.

‘Just wait till she gets a look at you — doubt she’ll look at ya the like she did back at…’ I shake the depression from my head, willing ‘shut up’ to suppress that bullshit.

Back alleyways, side streets, past hovels and skirting the Alienage, Varric knows our destination. I’m just along for the stumble. My footing is still uneven – several nights no sleep, having eaten only a kid’s meal worth of food, even my resilience has its limits. If I had to guess, I exceeded those limits a few feet back but all I can really do is hope our intended rendezvous isn’t much farther.

We’ve yet to confront anyone on these streets but still, I’m wary. Back in Origins, these streets were rife with gangs and thieves and vagabonds. So of course, it’s in that moment of concern that a greasy drunk staggers out from the shadows and shoves herself into Varric. I’m too tired to react but Varric just glides off her, rebuffing her stagger – cool and collected, he isn’t phased and the drunk just falls back into her nest of junk. Without batting an eye, he just laughs it off and we veer right at the fork.

“You good?,” I question; last thing I need is for a friend getting cut up coming to my rescue.

“Hehehe, just conjures fond memories of a watering hole I used to know,” he replies, “drunks are my kind of people, they’ll often tell you more than they mean to.”

“And she told ya something?”

He doesn’t answer, he just belts out his typical low chuckling — personal amusement is his specialty if nothing else. Guiding us, he veers right and squeezes us between buildings. The alley dank, long, and winding — it’s all moss and litter — only slivers of dim light flicker down upon our heads through the gap between rooftops. We reach the alley’s end, Varric saunters out with ease while I have to squeeze through that opening into the intersection of back streets and upon
managing to do so, a passerby hooks their arm around my waist and starts trying to guide me. I’d object, fight my way away from him but a Tevinter tongue whispers “oh, do just come along” from within their drab cowl. “Do hurry, but don’t be obvious about it. Just keep going…” the surprisingly unremarkable looking Dorian chides, “…and a left here.”

Glancing back over my shoulder, Varric is calmly heading off in the direction opposite us and in anticipation of my concern, Dorian comments “don’t you fret — we’ll see him again soon enough.”

So only he can hear, I breathe “Dorian, what’s going on?”

“I know, I look a disaster; stains of grey really aren’t my complimentary palette,” he jokes — though, he’s likely serious about hating his current get up — he adds “all in good time, however let’s make good time. I truly want to be rid of these rags” while hurrying me along into another dank alley. He supports me like anyone dragging along a drunk — perhaps that’s the game.

The disorienting path, the hand offs…

It’s to confuse tails.

'Just one big distraction,' it dawns on me.

Creeping to the exit of our current alley, he peers past the edge and I hear Varric striking up a conversation. He must’ve rounded the block.

“Not yet..” Dorian says as Varric loudly asks “so what’s the game and what’re the stakes?”

Whatever group he’s chatting up, at least one among them spits “piss off, dwarf. Full game.”

Persistent, Varric returns “Oh, come on, there’s always a buy in. Just gotta know the cost.”

“Now,” Dorian whispers and shuffles me out and across the open street while Varric has their attention. Right as we get into the alley across, the gamblers stand and silently threaten Varric but he calmly sighs “understood gents, I’ll look elsewhere.”

“Damn right you will!” one counters but as we continue on, it sounds like they genuinely let the matter slide, their upset now turns to cries of joy or regret as they return to their game.

Still trudging down this wet and disgusting alley, out of earshot, I whisper “we’re lost.”

“Gasp,” Dorian actually says, “do you really possess so little trust in your friends?” as we slow our approach coming up to a slim metal door set into the wall of the alley – a purple XOXO has been sloppily painted on the exterior; it must have been recently, the paint is still wet. Quickly rapping his knuckles on the outside with tinny clangs, he breathes out “once inside, do keep your hands to yourself.”

Again he knocks, but slower; “oh, and don’t worry,” he reassures enigmatically.

What?

The door swings in and a pair of arms yank me inside; as I’m swallowed by shadow, all I hear is Dorian tittering and the slamming of the door behind us.
Aside from my potentially scarred lip, I'm all healed up from my making out with the side of that passing car -- with that behind me and a few of my freelance projects having been concluded, I can return to working this tale. Thanks for hanging in!

The ship is named Felicity due in part to Isabella loving the use of "Felicitations" in Sebastian's REPENTANCE questline.

THANKS FOR READING.
Extraction

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flint strikes and the room is washed in flickering torchlight; a warehouse of sorts, it looks to be depot for carriages. A pair of Ferelden Forders knicker and softly huff from their stalls. Leliana stands serious before me with a number of her agents just behind and reading the room, Dorian’s suppressed laughter outright dies as he sighs “oh, so it’s this type of reunion…” I can feel his eyes rolling even if I can’t see them.

With haunted and tired eyes, she whispers “it is my job to know, to anticipate… and I failed you.” Even rueful, her voice falls like a song; lovely even with it mournful notes.

“No, you’re...” I start but her eyes silence me.

“I failed to recognize how embedded their agents were, I failed to recognize the threat level... my agents and I were unable to… to pry information from the attackers you left behind in Hilamshiral. We exhausted our leads and…” she’s on the verge of tearing up, her breathing sharp.

"You...," she huffs.

“I found my way out, that’s what matters,” I reassure here, though I’m not sure I believe it myself, and I move to close the gap between us. But shrinking away from my presence, she continues “I failed you...”

“Shut up.” I stress, my turn to cut her off, “you’re the best in the game. Stop being so damn fatalistic. That’s not your style.”

Well, not in this timeline.

Still dizzy, I step to her and pull her into a one armed embrace, “you’re good,” I growl. I feel a single dry sob shake her but she shuts that down, ever in control of her emotions, and retreating a step, her calculating eyes dart to the area of my cloak hiding what isn’t there. Her pale blue eyes dart back to mine and she breathes sharp yet again – I shouldn’t have gotten so close, she knows something’s wrong. The motion is slight, or I hope it is, but I shake my head once and breathe out “not here. Just get me home.”

She gets it but her pupils have shrunk down to pinpoints; she’s furious but hiding it well. Looking up to me, she merely blinks in accepting that.

For now.

“Umm, yes, well, on that note,” Dorian intrudes, poking his head between Leliana and myself, “how are we getting back to our cozy mountain castle? I’m afraid I wasn’t made privy to that knowledge.”

“None but Cassandra, Cullen, and myself know that… and even they don’t know the full scope,” she reveals. I hope this is just extra scrutiny and security and not the whispers of paranoia, for her sake.

“Agents, return to your routes. Dorian, you are to travel with me," and looking over her shoulder to the darkness, she mouths something I can’t catch.
“Are we to travel in style, deep in the lap of luxury?,” he quips as her agents depart the room in silence. With them gone, she directs our attention to a cart in the shadowed corner already loaded down with crates and barrels, “my agents will prowl the streets and act as our buffer. You have questions but now isn’t the time – you need to get in the open crate. It will be tight however…” she explains but I just groan “got it” as I pull myself up on the cart and sidle into an open crate. I’m not thrilled to be in such cramped quarters but it makes sense. She has to smuggle me out.

Hugging my knees, neck bent, I conform myself in the fetal position – in such, Dorian smirks through the opening and drops a wine skin on me, explaining “you know, for the road.” With a wink, he retreats from view but it’s mere moments later the lid slides into place and the hammering starts. It’s painful, migraine birthing, but it’s required for the ruse.

Everything has to look normal, otherwise, it’s doomed to fail.

Bathed in the dim green light inside the crate, everything beyond is muffled – them hooking the horses up, their minimal conversation, the ruffling and scratching of fabric – they must be tying a tarp up over the haul.

“Ooh, ahmo fogah.” I hear Dorian’s muffled words; the cart creaks as he leaps off and the cringing of rusted hinges tell me that the warehouse doors are opening. With another shifting, the cart lurches forward to the pace of the mounts.

’I regret this,’ comes to mind as I shift uncomfortably; my damn stump is gonna fall asleep from poor circulation at this angle.

*****

I have to assume we’re traveling through the countryside; I’ve heard nothing but the constant creaking of the cart, whinnying of the horses, and no...no, that's really it.

We're definitely in the countryside.

And damn it do I have to pee. That's not an option though, not in here. No.

The only good news about all this is that the constant jerking, shaking, and bladder fit to bursting are more than enough to keep me awake. I’m feeling sick to my stomach with a terrific blossom of a headache, my groin hurting, but at least I’m not asleep.

At least I’m not asleep.

Again, the cart lurches and my stomach does in kind, but swiftly after, it just whines in protest – we’re still famished. Fidgeting to get ahold of the drinking skin, I manage just that and twisting the cork lose with my teeth, I place lips to spout and just relax as a slow drip of honey wine enter my mouth. Won't help with my need to pee, but it might trick my stomach.

Tastes like mead. Not bad.

The wheel takes another hit from the innumerable potholes of Ferelden’s roadways and I slide the few inches I have of space into the crate siding with my face; my drinking skin empties on impact. As my face lights up in pain, I hear the muffled apologies of Dorian, "ohhh, ah misjuhhd tha sigh ofv tha one."
"fuck off," I hiss in a single breath; I adore the man but it's smuggling 101 not to damage the "goods."

Huddled and sticky in a thin pooling of honey wine, I can only hope the wood absorbs it before long, otherwise, the remainder of this journey is gonna be a compounded mess of awful.

*****

The rest of our journey to wherever is fortunately uneventful.

"Uneventful," a most welcome description after the events of the recent past although, I’d be remiss in not saying how much I’m loathing cramped spaces — for a creature my size, this crate really isn’t doing me any favors.

That, and the fucking wine; an unpleasant film has since formed.

And the need to urinate has just formed into a constant cramp.

And then there's the migraine and the stomach pain.

At least the jostling is enough to keep me from fading — too difficult to sleep when you’re being tossed around in a box every couple minutes while basked in the bright green glow of the anchor.

My permanent nightlight.

But these minor grievances aside, we’re soon to pass under something — or through something; the sharp whine of rusty hinges pierces the wood of my confinement and the cart wheels over a few more potholes. I’m banged about, but then the cart lurches to a stop.

I strain my ears to make out what’s being said outside…

“Ahendify oordeffs”

“Daan Down. Aham Pymassdah ov the Imquihishun”

“Oww apohogeex, ayady. We didnh know,” come muffled apologies.

…we’re here?!

The strangers’ continue on to voice “May yooh way imshy”

‘Definitely finally somewhere,’ I recognize and the mark does as well, it takes to excitedly and erratically pulsing with the attitude of puppy.

“Oh I’m with ya on that,” I tell the mark, “real eager to get outta this box… I need to piss, take a bath, continue fearing sleep.” The anchor lets out a slow single pulse — it feels like a wincing frown, if that can be quantified.

“Yeah, make that face,” I comment as I question, ‘am I actually arguing with this guy?’

It pulses twice, yes.
A curious thought enters my head, 'you hear me?'

Nothing, no response.

Well?!

Reluctantly, it pulses twice more and my eyes go wide. The anchor is more attached than previously thought.

'This always the case or is this recent?,' I push the matter, but only via thought.

No answer; it's playing at being coy.

A sharp knocking on the crate, the hollow banging tears me from our back and forth and Dorian calls out “sill alife?”

“Oh, you’re talking to me?!” I yell back only to be met with his laughter — a curious purple blue aura creeps under the lid and with a splintering crack, the top is torn off. As quickly as it rose, it flips away, discarded, as I’m greeted by the twinkling of starlight.

It’s breathtaking — a dangerous thing in my current condition but it has been too long since last I beheld the starry sky, watched for winking and flickering that wasn’t hallucinated. I mean, the imagined bugs still crawl through the air before me but it’s a pleasant change of pace to witness other little lights.

Nebulous clouds of shimmering dust.

Streaking tails of debris burning up in the atmosphere.

‘Freedom,’ I regard as I remember to breathe. Suddenly a mustachioed face blots out this view, though the new sight isn’t unpleasant — smiling wide, the mage offers up a hand, cockily asking “need a hand?” His smarmy gaze just reads “but of course you do” without him having to say anything as smug.

I consider using my unfortunate circumstance to my advantage, to force a change in my mentality.

Be the change you want to see.

You are what you will.

As shit as things have been, I'm willing to make the adjustment...

‘No time like the now,’ I muster the courage to make light of the dark, ‘do it, Hunter. Do it, DO IT! Don’t be a coward, JUST DO IT’

“Yes,” I half heartedly smirk out in remark while jabbing my stump at him from under the tattered cloak. “Ooowhhaa?!” slips from Dorian’s flabbergasted mouth — his expertly groomed and twirled mustache falls slack at the sight.

‘Hunter 1. Universe 999,’ I relish the victory of witnessing him lose his composure; despite being quick and snarky, he’s actually having difficulty registering this, just muttering “wha..ah I? No, no! This, of course not…heh?!’ as his eyebrows try to orient themselves to his feelings. Leliana, tired of his babbling, pushes him aside and reaches in to haul me to my feet. No mirth in her eyes though, especially seeing up close what she suspected earlier — she reveals only the slightest of winces as she does.

I don't recognize this fortress.
It isn’t until the guards are saluting and Leliana is leading me towards my temporary quarters that Dorian storms after us shouting and hissing “THOSE-THOSE BASTARDS! DON’T, NO, DON’T YOU DARE TELL ME THEY LIVE.”

Peering back over my shoulder, still guided along by Leliana, I reply “only got most of em.”

“THEYRE STILL OUT THERE?! I’LL EXECUTE THE FIENDS, NOOooOoo…I’LL RIP THEIR SPIRITS OUT AND FORCE THEM UP THEIR OWN ASSES!!!,” he rants and rages.

“Dorian, calm yourself. This yelling isn’t helping anyone,” Leliana advises.

“BY THE OLD GODS, I’LL..I’LL..” Dorian struggles out but Leliana shoots him a murderous look and effectively bridles his rage.

“Well, if I’m not allowed to hate then I’ll have to seethe, and that, that isn’t a look I particularly love…despite it being particular to me,” Dorian retorts, managing to inject his sass back into the situation. I understand his anger but I also understand hers, the need for silence.

Hers is a depression of recalculation.

His is the need to break silence, to unleash hell.

It’s not their injury but they’re free to feel whatever it is that they are, I don’t blame them. I’d be hollowed out and filled to the brim with fury if what happened to me happened to anyone I cared for.

A weary smile finds its way to my face.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s the update, hope I’m posting in a timely manner.

Imagine being smuggled somewhere in medieval times…I truly feel bad for Hunter.

Thanks for reading!
Old Acquaintances Can't Be Forgotten.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn’t take much longer to shepherd me to my temporary lodging in this fortress, to have the medics strip me of my ratty clothing, scrub the filth from my flesh, do a once over for injuries, and whisk me off to bed.

According to the lead medic, I’m in good standing considering what I experienced, that I’m “better than I’ve any right to be.”

But above all else, I’m taking to an actual bed, a bed likely belonging to some Lord Whomever-the-fuck, but it’s an actual bed; a shiver runs my spine as the downy bedding sucks me in. It’s been literal months since I last felt one.

Observation tables and dissection slabs don’t count.

I’d pass out this instant if I could — I get that it’s unhealthy to go so long without sleep, that I’m pushing 5 or 6 days without but I can’t help it. And the bugs are a constant experience as of late. The medics attempted to sedate me but I denied them that, there's no chance of me willingly going back under.

Not this night.

So I’ve stayed awake, Leliana now debriefs me as she leans against the opposite wall; her eyes never leaving the bedroom door. She allowed Dorian entrance under the one rule that he not speak, that he sit quietly in the corner as I answer her questions. It’s tough on him but he’s managed thus far – no snide commentary, no sassy quips, only his angry exhaling is audible as I recount the events.

“…and then I sort of …exploded…and that took out their secret base,” I fill her in, excluding the detail of absorbing the spirit formerly known as Nightmare. I doubt that, even as progressive as she is, Leliana would be wholly accepting of that particular ability of mine. Dorian may find it more curious than detrimental but he’s not allowed to voice an opinion on matter just yet. Likewise, I omit my knowledge of how my eyeball and tongue were returned, simply guessing “healing magic? I dunno."

“And after that?,” she asks clinically.

“Woke up on a beach, their ship was already on the horizon. I tried to teleport, didn’t work. Hard to swim with one arm,” I inform her to which Dorian exhales heavily – she allows him that.

“And then?”

“Uhmm,” I hum out, trying to remember the order of events, “Little Llomerryn, pirates got the drop on me…found Solas in the Fade while I was knocked out. Woke up, struck a deal with Isabela. That’s kinda it – the rest of the time was spent below deck.”

“Why do you believe they focused on that arm – why not your anchor?,” she hones in.

Tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, I manage out “cause ofv my staff material. New stuff. Tangible.”
“And knowing them, their intent is to weaponize it…,” Leliana ponders the possibilities, the threat that the Qunari military already present and what advantages such a living metal could provide.

“You’re worrying too much,” I remark, dizzy with headaches and blurred vision, my comment though immediately garners her attention – “doubtful. I believe I am the proper level of worried,” she questions.

“Imagine the metal is me. It’s not metal, not really, but…” I take a breath to steady myself, “…it’s a…uh…”

“Coalescence?,” Dorian offers.

“Yeah,” I sigh out, “it’s a coalescence of my memories. And last I checked…it absolutely hates Qunari.”

She’s returned her eyes to the door as I add “kinda difficult to convert imaginary metal.”

Dorian snorts under his breath at that – just enough to warrant a glare from Leliana.

Goodbye happy Leliana. Hello Master of Murder,’ I darkly consider as the sound of arguing blow up just down the hallway outside the door.

“he’s through here?! Move aside!”

“Uh, my apologies Ser, the Lady Spymaster has demanded a private audience at this ti”

“Do I look like I care?”

Cullen?

“GET OUT OF THE WAY,” Cassandra demands, her aggravation somehow still pleasant to my ears.

'Classis Cass,' I wince our a smile at the thought.

Those two must’ve shoved aside Leliana’s chosen guards because they’re storming their way to the bedroom now. The dialogue has barely processed before Cullen slams the door open while shouting “Inquisitor?! But his concerned outburst drops to pained calm the moment he turns my way; his is a face of stunned but acknowledging silence. He knows well what torture is, all too well, and he can clearly see that in me. Cassandra though is less willing to shy from the sight — she approaches my side with nary a reservation. Removing her gloves and dropping them to the bedside table, she slides her exposed hands to my face.

Warm with the slightest of tremors.

She’s nervous?

Her thumb skirts the deep bruising around my Breach-bleached eye and I lean into her palm as I gaze up to her. Her brows arch high as she looks me over.

Meanwhile through hushed tones, the commander asks the spymaster “your agents are in place?”

“Some are obvious, others less so.”

“Good…good…I will position our troops within equal lines of sight in case the enemy is embedded in those we brought.”
“They are embedded, of that I have no doubt, but I hope they’re foolish enough to try something this night,” Leliana whispers through a lethal frown, “they’ll have the chance to dance with me.”

“Maker’s breath...not if I relieve them of their heads,” Cullen bluntly promises but quickly turns awkward upon glancing Cassandra’s and my way — how quickly his demeanor changes when confronted with tender displays of affection; even removed from the Chantry, he’s ever the awkward Templar he used to be. All the poor man can do is cough out a meek “uhmm, uh, ermmm, yes,” and force his exit from the room. His visible discomfort curls Leliana’s lips toward the inkling of a smile.

Just a bit.

Convinced she’s gotten all she can from me this night, Leliana chooses then to take her leave as well, bidding “Goodnight Inquisitor. Cassandra.”

Remarkably, it takes Cassandra clearing her throat for Dorian to actually pay heed; picking his feet up off bed frame and swinging them to the ground, he pops up and daringly quips “yes yes, I know how much you want your alone time with…”

Cass shoots him a scathing look and he throws his hands up defensively, quickly responding “well, do be gentle with him, he’s not entirely himself…” but stops to suck air through his teeth in regret. “That was in poor taste,” he grumbles apologetically as he exits.

Focusing on me again with narrowing eyes, she bluntly demands “What did he mean?”

_Thanks, Dorian. Thanks._

I’m terrified to show her the extent of my torture; my guts squirm despite how deliriously numb I am from fatigue but ripping the metaphorical bandaid off, I just throw back the blanket’s edge.

The big reveal, my lungs hold as my ears strain to listen for her next words.

But none come, not even a gasp.

Instead she does something infinitely more surprising than merely whispering a rueful platitude — as one hand continues caressing my cheek, the fingers of her other move to wrap themselves around my stump.

Exhaling after the minor eternity, I breathe out “Hey, Cass.”

"Yes?"

“Thanks.”

“Huffing sharply, she asks “For what?”

“Being here.”

Her grip tightens just a bit.

On a tired exhale, I breathe "I missed ya."

Releasing but a moment to pull up a chair up, she sits at my side; her anxiety pulses through her fingers into my arm with every heartbeat.

It’s in her pulse I find the calm I’ve been seeking.
I'm drifting, finally finding solace I can only find in her presence. I meant to tell her this earlier but as usual, my timing is garbage; instead I now whisper "I love you Cass" as sleep finally claims me.

Against the immutable and blurring darkness, I hear her whisper back...

"...I l o v e y o u..."

The pressure builds and ebbs as my mind penetrates the veil.

Frosted glass, glitter, and mirrors gimmer and shine as every surface, every mineral deposit. All that is is housed within a gorgeous crystalline cavern that certainly belongs to the Fade. It’s made all the more obvious by the whining of crushed glass on metal strings from somewhere unseen but often heard.

The echoing whines and reverberates, the usual welcome.

For but a moment, I breathe that panic I’ve become so accustomed to as of late but it’s then I remember who watches over me just beyond the Veil.

“Cass,” I sigh out in relief like I’ve found a life preserver after treading water for hours.

There’s no need to fear this place just yet.

Looking to the crystal ground, I witness proof of such — it’s like watching my bedroom through a fisheye lens on the ceiling; Cass sits frozen in time at my side, a sentinel ever vigilant.

“God, you’re beautiful. Everything about you, even your battle scars only add to you. Me on the other hand…” I critique my sleeping form below while realizing the irony of that statement, “missing an arm, bruises on bruises on bruises. Gotta trim those horns. And that beard…”

I mean, it makes sense it’d be shaggy; haven’t had a haircut since my last stay in Val Royeaux. Feeling at my own face, even if I am just an astral projection, I feel enough of a beard to grab ahold of. Definitely not beating out Blackwall though, not in that category.

“And you fell asleep as she softly professed her love for you — you’re quite the romantic,” chides a familiar voice, his words echoing within this reflective cave. Instinctively, the anchor flares to life, ready to burn any and all potential enemies.

*I'll end you like I did Desire...wait...,* I realize but keep the anchor leveled; I’ve no intention of using it. Just to threaten.

Can’t risk it spreading on trivial matters.

It’s then I see a pair of wicked yellow eyes glowing at me, or rather I see them reflected a number of ways at me like a demented house of mirrors.

“No, no, that won’t work on me,” laughs Imshael as he struts to me from the shadows, “and I know you’re unwilling to try but I’ve got to hand it to you, you did a good job putting me down that first time.” For added emphasis, he slow claps.
Confused, shocked, I angrily question “no, you’re fucking dead?! I...”

“Ate me, yes. I only exist in your head now, killer,” he mocks while casually propping himself up against a glass boulder. His demon stare ever lingers, always watching as he adds “and before you jump to hasty conclusions, no, I’m not possessing you...I am merely...” and snapping his fingers, “merely filling a role!”

Hesitant to lower the anchor’s light, I furrow my brow and growl “the fuck do you mean.”

“I have no sway on you, I'm just here to review your choices. And it's all beeeecause I. Am. A...” he leads with a flourish of his hand.

“Choice spirit, right...got it,” I belittle him.

“Oh, don’t be like that, don’t be petty. You’re better than that — anyone that could kill me with a handshake and smile is certainly better than that,” Imshael has the gall to lecture, “but if you must know, I’m simply here to help in lieu of your typical shadowy self.”

Putting on my best not-giving-a-fuck dead-eyed stare, I lean back against a stalagmite and question to myself ‘what game is this. I killed this prick...can’t be the real one...’

“No, it is actually me — oh, you thought you could think here and I wouldn’t hear it? We’re in your head together. It’s deafening really, your thoughts. Although,” he cackles through a wide grin, “you are certainly not at all what I expected of you... for example, you weren’t even a mage before all this?”

I maintain my dead eyed stare although a pang of dread twists my insides.

“And the Qunari... Vashoth thing, eghh, whatever..You’re not even those! A human,” he unpleasantly sighs to himself, “how delicious.”

“Make your point already,” I threaten – I don’t like this guy, nor do I enjoy his “revelations.”

“You aren’t even of this world?! I mean, what?! Hahahhehaha,” he cackles and claps, “look, look, I’m not here to antagonize...” He reads my dour expression and expresses, “no, really. I’m dead, I know that. No coming back from that infinity of a stomach you tossed me in — I’m just here to...” a wicked sharp toothed smile grows across his face “to help you grow.”

“Hard pass.”

Dropping the smile, he doubles down “no no, I mean that seriously. You need help, nay, inspiration! Though, I have to say I'm just shocked you even need it...” he drops to a mumble and taps his head, “in here, you feel more Fade than Flesh.”

“Elaborate,” I growl.

“Will reality how you want it — have you really not figured that out yet?,” the demon gapes incredulously, "you're something else...something wild. I haven't seen the likes of you in years..."

The hell does that mean?

“Ahem, still hearing you...but putting that aside, consider me your biggest cheerleader, pom-poms and all! Blazes, I’ll even wear the skirt if it inspires.”

“It...does...not,” I reply in mild disgust. This asshole has been checking out my memories like
they’re public library.

“Do the impossible — believe or not, since I’m here for the long haul, I want you to succeed,” he tries his damn hardest to sell himself as an ally. “Really, truly, seriously and all that. Side note: I was never one to lie. Perhaps I possess a tendency to mislead, but I do not lie. Besides, at this point in your digestion...” he pauses a moment to cringe and mock gag, “...of me, I happen to be less and less with every passing moment. I'm just a ghost of my former self. Would've said hello earlier but..."

Sighing, annoyed, I breathe out “you're the only asshole waiting for a chance to talk?”

“Oh, no...but I’m afraid those poor sods were so thoroughly broken down and ripped to shreds that even their consciousnesses can’t piggy back. They're simply food now,” he smirks out.

“Sods,” I question with a note of worry, “plural?”

“Right...looking back, you may have been out of sorts for a few of those dinner dates,” he furrows his brow and folds his arms, remembering the order of things, “hmm, well, there were quite a few mages that you got ahold of at...Haven, yes, during the assault. There was...that spectacularly distorted Pride demon...mmmm, oh yes, in Crestwood, when no one was watching, you blacked out but the video kept rolling – you devoured a rift’s worth of demons before shutting the door. And you did that again, in the caverns under Crestwood, only a few though. Like sneaking a snack.”

“Wait!,” I anxiously gulp against a drying mouth, “Is Spook here?!,” I question and pace toward the demon Imshael.

“Nnnno. Sorry. That one gave all that it was of its own accord. No slow processing for that one. Shocking really, considering what it used to be.” An even larger smile spreads his wicked mouth as he continues “ahh, well, I’m almost jealous...the sweet release of instant nonexistence...but then again, I wouldn’t know what I do for the limited time I have left. Can’t put a price tag on that...” he reassures. Surprisingly, it sort of does. Spook was terrified of being alone, scared of being locked up – being trapped in my head is the last thing I’d want, last thing Spook would want.

And considering how much the little one helped me out, Spook deserves more than this place.

*Sorry Spook...*

“Owww,” Imshael winces and rubs at his ears, “keep that up and I’ll...well, I don’t rightly know if I can but it’ll feel like I’m going deaf. Look, as much as I enjoy the company, really, you should get to waking up – you’ve got an interesting future to prep for.”

“Yaaaay,” I drone unenthusiastically.

“...lovers to lie to about who you are, allies to tell half-truths to...an ancient elf with a particularly confusing agenda...” he darkly rumbles out with sharp teeth bared.

I just growl at the bastard — I don’t appreciate his insinuations.

“Yes, blah blah you think we’re enemies blah blah. Just go and wake up already...and remember,” he pauses to look back my way, “**will it how you want it.**”

“**Wake up.**” I hiss, anything to get away from this asshole.
‘...Will it how I want it...’ I linger on those words. ‘How much of what that thing said is actually good? Gotta be a trick.’

But my eyes creep open — midday sun pours though the stained glass windows, illuminating the bed chambers with a pleasant orange and yellow glow.

And no bugs. Finally.

Guess I got enough hours in.

Even groggy as I am with the fog of sleep, a soft murmur draws my focus; neck creaking with stiffness, I find Cassandra, face burrowed into her arms, all of which rests atop my stomach. She fell asleep in her chair, leaning against me.

Facing me, although half hidden, and in her sleep, small snores escape her.

‘Adorable’ comes to mind as I smile, the sight of her is enough to banish the unpleasantry that is Imshael... but not enough to rid me of his wicked grin and yellow eyes as he laughed out “lovers to lie to.”

Her single braid crowned pixie cut has a few errant dark strands standing on end, bent from her awkward sleep.

“More Fade than flesh? That makes sense;” speaks a soft voice almost giving me a heart attack — keeping my panic squashed down tightly, I slowly turn to Cole who’s sitting on the recessed window sill, swinging his feet to and fro. Reading my glare, he apologizes more quietly “sorry. I forgot you don’t like when I do that.”

Whispering equally quietly, trying to say as much as I can on a single breath so as not to rouse Cassandra, I reply “Cole. Glad to see you... but don’t sneak upon me please.”

“I didn’t sneak? I was here the whole time...” he quietly disputes; a confused sadness seems to creep into his posture and he stops kicking his feet. “I’ve been with you since the nice lady kissed your face.”

My ears burn in embarrassment and the idea that I might have to explain to Cass what happened. Or rather, explain all that didn’t happen. ‘Of course, of course he saw that,’ I think while forcing my nervous heart to slow itself, ‘there’s no reason to be nervous idiot, you didn’t do anything. Besides, Cass knows the tales of Isabela backwards and forwards courtesy of Varric. Stop being so damn jumpy.’

“Leliana asked me to follow you — she likes that I can make people forget,” he almost hums.

“Thanks. I just... can you understand why I might not enjoy being surprised right now though?,” I ask as my voice takes on a certain sharp edge.

He tilts his head in wonder like a curious puppy, staring around the room for the correct answer but upon looking through me, he finds it — “you’re scared they’ll find you. Angry they did. Sad they did.”

“Ye...yeah,” I whisper to the bluntness of his answer.
“Please get better — people need you.”

“Mmm,” I quietly consider, “I’ll try.”

Silence hovers between us for time. Troops patrolling the castle can be heard marching by, as can the idle banter of everyone in the courtyard below — most of it consists of “can’t wait for lunch” or “Maker’s breath…found another corpse” or “you hear? The Inquisitor is back, yeah. Time for Corypheus to pay.”

I finally ask “how is she?,” hoping he knows who I mean.

“She was everything you are now. She still is…,” he explains through hushed words but turning his head to the side with a panning gaze, his eyes going deathly pale, he monologues “can’t lose, not again. It isn’t fair, why does everything get taken? Have to set this right, have to try, can’t fail, can’t fail him…” His words hang in the air almost painfully.

’I’ll see ya soon,’ I hope, I really do — Rasa deserves that at the very least.

“Yes,” Cole smiles and becomes nothing. Even as he uses his power, I still have the vague sensation of who I was talking to — Cole never truly disappears for me.

Maybe he wants it that way.

There’s so much still that’s going on, way too much to make sense of right now — from my various enemies, from being haunted by a demon to actually having one chat me up in my head, one I killed and ate, from my lack of an appendage, the people I need to see, to save, to love. Then there’s the immediate future — how big of a wrench has been thrown in my plans, how events are supposed to go. Where is Corypheus in all this? What are Solas’ intentions as of late?

‘I can still use magic…,’ I try to convince myself — though, I can’t know for sure; I haven’t used any since exploding. What if I lack control, what if…

'Will it how you want it. More Fade than flesh,’ circle their way back around to the forefront of my mind. I don’t like Imshael, don’t trust him in the slightest, but there’s something real about those words. Some of it feels right. No matter though, these thoughts turn to dust as Cassandra stirs.

Grumbling, likely possessing a stiff neck herself, she rolls her face off me with her eyes still closed. A thin strand of drool clings to her lip — there’s a small damp spot on the bedsheets.

“Adorable.”

Eyes still closed against the light filtering in, she furrows her brow and and scowls “I am most certainly not adorable.”

Memorize this, never forget, show her in her dreams sometime soon.

Reaching across with my left, I brush my fingers through her bed head, careful of her braid, feeling her short raven locks. “I promise. You are.”

Glowering now through half-lidded eyes, she scoffs “ughhh” in hopefully mock disgust — although, she doesn’t move from my hand, she rests against it like a pillow. But then she recognizes the wet, the dribble, and with her face blushing, she tries to flee my side in embarrassed horror but I catch ahold of her wrist before she slips away.

“Inquisi…Hunter. I apologize for being..” she sputters out but I argue back over top of her
“being gorgeous? Nope. No apologies. You’re amazing and I’m in love with you.”

Stunned, eyebrows arched high as her ears burn and cheeks keep their glow, she chances a glance my way and is met only by my lopsided winsome smile. Suppose she wasn’t expecting that look on my face — she actually snorts, just once, and her embarrassment blazes all the harder.

“Ughh, I cannot believe I just made that sound,” she drops back onto the mattress and sitting upon the sagging edge, she questions “what have you done to me?”

“Good things, I hope,” I chuckle out as I draw her captured wrist to my lips; I kiss softly at her knuckles.

Despite her rolling her eyes, the corners of her lips curl. “You typically cause me worry and stress,” she replies with none of the biting edge of an insult.

“Thanks for caring enough to worry,” I reply and hold my smile in place.

smooth.

Huffing out in feigned exasperation, she turns toward me and leaning in, asks “what am I going to do with you?”

Propping myself up to meet her halfway, I whisper back “I’m open to hearing your ideas on the matter” with a brow quirked in amusement. She responds with but an exhale and edges her face closer and closer to mine, our lips about to touch — my heart is pounding, my stomach fluttery; it’s been well over a year since I was last this close to this brand of intimacy.

I feel the heat in my face.

It’s then the door creaks open and Cullen paces backwards into the room, burdened with a tray of food and drinks, muttering “the medics informed me that this was all you can tolerate at present, that..”

Whipping her head back at the Commander, Cass yells “CULLEN” in dire warning.

The poor man freezes in place, locked in abject terror with his back to us; I don’t suppose anyone told him Cassandra was still in here. In fact, he hisses out “I’m going to kill that dwarf” before crying out “APOLOGIES!” and retreating from the bed chambers, flatware clattering as he hurries away. Cassandra, still glaring at the empty space by the door, still annoyed, doesn’t notice me sitting up all the way to meet her. And as she turns back, her face meets mine and our lips brush; only startled momentarily, that swiftly changes as her scowl fades.

Pleased now, smiling into my lips, eyes closed, she whispers “it is...unfortunate that we have so much to do this day.”

Whispering in kind between kisses, I ask “what. Do. We have to do?”

Pulling back to look me in the eyes, her pupils dilated, she informs “you…”

Interrupting, I comment “oh yeah?,” while flashing her a sly grin.

“Ha,” she says rather than actually laughing, “We have to train you; get you back to full strength. We cannot afford you being caught off guard again….we” but I cut off her off with a final kiss.

We’ve wasted too much time feeling sorry for ourselves, there’s no time more for regret.
Lips parting, she sighs against me and I whisper “understood. Lots to do. Help me up?”

Lazily rolling off of me to her feet, she offers her arm which I gladly accept – she hauls me up and out of bed. And her cheeks go crimson again as her eyes lock on mine; her eyebrows launch up upon realizing I’m in the buff.

I completely forgot that the field medics stripped me down and my everything is sore enough that I didn’t even notice. Stunned silence, she’s hesitant to move so I do so for her, easing past her with a shy smirk. Grabbing the only clothing in sight, I pick a robe off a wall hook and throw it on, albeit with minor difficulty – it’s inconvenient to slide my arm through the sleeve when I’ve nothing else to grab onto with.

‘Better get used to this shit,’ I smile sadly.

Slow breathing, collecting herself, and avoiding looking at me, she walks me to the door but exits first, ensuring my safety. I don’t relish the idea of an assassination attempt but I like her putting herself in harm’s way for my sake even less.

Thank you, Qun. You’ve fucked my life in ways I didn’t think possible.

Still avoiding eye contact, she remarks “Everything is as it should be,” upon her return, “Leliana’s agents are still in place; they will escort you wherever you may go in this place.”

“Where are we?”

Sighing, she answers “Caer Oswin.”

‘Of course. I wasn’t here when she needed me, I..’ I ruminate in disappointment, but she sees me, reads me and assures “no, this was something I needed to take care of. And it is taken care of; Lucius now sits in a cell below Skyhold.”

Impressive.

“Still though, sorry I wasn’t here to help.”

“But you did,” her eyes flash up to mine, “in telling me where he was, that was more than enough.”

“Please tell me you had backup…” I breathe out, stressing retroactively.

“Of course, I am not so prideful as to assume I can solve every problem.”

'Ouch’ flits through my head as I joke “that’s a jab at me, right?” through a pained smirk.

“Only somewhat,” she breathes out an easy smile and closes the gap between us – draping her arms up and around my neck, she finishes “you have actually solved many of our problems. Granted, you have also caused quite a few...”

“Ehh,” I shake my head. “stop, my ego is a fragile thing right now.”

“Then come along, we have only the day's light to train you,” she begins leading me down the hall as Leliana’s escorts fall into place around us.

My stomach chooses then to cry out and she huffs “fine. A small meal, then we train.”
Good news: Hunter didn't die in that crate.

Bad news: [insert most anything]

THANK YOU FOR READING!
Weak ale and bland porridge to the crackling of a fireplace.

’Delicious,’ I wax sarcastically.

Staring down at the one meal I’ll likely be able to tolerate and pushing the grey mush around with my spoon, from across the table Cassandra orders “Stop delaying and just eat it” while casting her gaze uneasily around the dining hall. Don’t know why she’s anxious – the place is empty except for us and the guards. Then again, her demeanor has dramatically shifted since returning to the public eye; she’s likely maintaining a professional air so as not to arouse gossip because if there’s one thing she hates as much as demons and politics, it’s stories about herself.

Without enthusiasm, I shovel a spoonful in my mouth and note how it tastes of wet cardboard.

‘Jus... just swallow the damn stuff,’ I urge my mouth to obey and it begrudgingly does so.

At least the drink goes down easier, granted it is weak.

“Ahem,” Varric’s voice growls out, “I’m with him,” he argues with guards blocking his entrance. “Oh, come on! If I was a suspect, I doubt the Spymaster would’ve put me on point for getting him home” he pushes to which I yell back over my shoulder “HE’S GOOD.”

Varric pipes up victoriously, “told you!” and shoves his way past the legs of the wall of guards. “Maker’s ass, those guys huh? Well, looks like our little detour through Denerim was worth it,” beams Varric as he struts over with a wave and a smile. “But I gotta say, you looked like shit yesterday,” he adds as he takes a seat.

Limply dropping my empty tin mug to the table, I reply “and now?” as it clatters hollow against the wood.

“Now you just look like crap, hehahahaha,” he jokes and bats at my good arm with his knuckles while Cassandra groans out her disgust.

“Oh, come now Seeker, will we ever agree on anything?”

“Doubtful. Frankly, I am still shocked Leliana chose you for that mission,” she rebukes as I just try to force another spoonful of the grey mush into my mouth.

“It’s allll about who you know, Seeker,” he smiles out at her, “and me? I know everyone. But you already know that.”

Regretting my decision to give the porridge a second chance, I muffle-speak “you di’nt have Bianca wiff ya” and swallowing hard, I take to scraping my teeth against my tastebuds.

“Alas, we are too well a known pairing.,” he dramatically pronounces with a hand over his heart and a smile tugging at his lips, “and while it was difficult to leave her behind…”

Cass groans mid sentence.

“...Oh, I was just following Nightingale’s orders,” he explains, “besides, I knew her birds had our
backs the whole time” he explains and throws a thumb back at several of Leliana’s agents mixed in with the guard.

“Still though…” Cassandra expresses her disapproval.

“Agree to disagree. But all that aside,” he says while turning back to me with concern etching into the creases around his eyes, “how ya doing? Really? I uh…see what I heard was true.” The excess arm of the robe hangs uselessly off my stump, a dead giveaway. Tired of dancing around the matter, tired of feeling sorry for myself, I grab the excess length and pull it back as I slide my ruined arm on through.

“Pretty pissed. I liked that arm. I dare say it was my favorite arm,” I reply with a forced grin to the annoyance of the anchor; it pulses a couple of times, bristling like a spurned cat.

‘Easy. I’m joking. Sort of.’ I think to the mark and releasing my sleeve edge, I drop my palm back over the table, concealing most of the green glow. It’s not hiding the fresh fade veining out from the mark but it’s enough for now.

At this time, Cullen enters And the guards part for him. His march is even, cool, and his nose is to his missives but he staggers a bit upon spotting Cassandra. Forcing himself forward, he greets everyone. “Inquisitor,” he says while his “Dwarf” is a bit more pressed – apparently he’s still not over Varric’s trick with breakfast earlier. Turning to the Seeker though, he awkwardly states “Cassandra” as the color fades from his cheeks and with a hard swallow, he adds “the preparations have been made, the proper staff are on standby in the event that…uh umm yes”

“Thank you, Cullen,” she addresses him dismissively, “we will make our way there shortly.”

“Ehm, Inquisitor-ah Hunter. If you..if you need to talk someone…about what happened, know that I..I have experienced…,” Cullen begins but the collective stares from our table wither his confidence and sends him marching off with the tips of his ears ablaze.

‘I’ll consider it,’ I think over what I believe to be his intended offer.

“Ah, poor Curly,” Varric hisses under his breath, “just looking to help.”

Unwilling to let him off the hook, Cass shoots Varric a glare and grumbles “I blame you.” Instead of replying though, Varric just takes to breathing out a low series of snickers.

“So…,” I begin, anything to break the odd tension of the hall, “what was Cullen on about?”

Ever quick to interject, Varric slides in “oh, hope you don’t take offense but I’m betting against you,” while jabbing a finger at me, “I’ve got some coin on it. But uh, do me a favor and prove me wrong.” He finishes off with a wink.

My confused and dumbfounded look says it all.

“…for your…no? Seeker,” he whips back toward Cass for an explanation, “surely you told him?”

“What?,” I question, growing concerned.

“No, I have not yet explained,” she replies, ignoring my query completely.

“What?!,” I growl out again.

“Considering the opponent, he should probably have a little time to prep himself, no?,” Varric
replies, being purposely vague.

“I’m a fucking ghost,” I groan in annoyance and reach for my cup but only remember it’s empty as it touches my lips. Dropping it yet again, I merely stare at the rafters in disbelief.

“I disagree,” Cass declares, obstinate in her decision, “I believe the Inquisitor will persevere.”

‘Hunter, injured in the sheets, Inquisitor in the …Inquisitor everywhere else,’ I mentally grumble. I’m done asking who or what they’re talking about and I return to staring at my empty mug.

Beer magic. That’s what I need. S’what the world needs.

“So, wanna know?,” Varric asks, finally addressing me to which I begrudgingly shrug. The moment has passed, I don’t even want to know anymore. At my low energy gesture, however, Varric proudly gravels out “You are gonna go up against…”

He pauses for dramatic effect.

He finishes “..., the Iron Lady herself.”

I sit for a moment with a blank stare, trying to remember every nickname Varric has for everyone ever.


But I fail – I just mouth “who?” with squinted eyes.

“Oh, come on! The Iron Lady! The iron...Ehh, Vivienne,” he groans to Cass’s amusement.

Huh... figured she was Ice Queen.

“I told you your nicknames were awful,” she argues.

“No such thing,” he defends through a smile.

“So?,” I mumble to Varric’s and Cassandra’s astonishment.

“Looks like you were wrong, Seeker, he does need preparing if he doesn’t get why he should care.”

“Why?,” I absently question while shoving porridge I wont be eating around the bowl with the edge of my spoon.

“I’ve got two words for you,” Varric growls, shocked he even has to say this, “ Knight. Enchanter.”

Oh, right. That specialization.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the delay -- work has been hectic. Additionally, I'll be posting more
often but with shorter chapters so as to keep up the flow of the narrative. I hope you see that as a win-win.

As always, thank you for reading!
Caer Oswin, it’s bigger than I remember. Then again, that was just a game. This is the new real.

With Cassandra on my right and Varric hurrying alongside my left, an escort of armed guards see us up the crumbling stairs and through blood-stained corridors with only dim torches and their trailers of greasy smoke lighting our way.

"How anyone survives this age with their eyesight intact is a medical mystery," I murmur under my breath.

It isn’t until we reach the garden that the welcome afternoon sunlight pours over us. This place though, this at least finally looks familiar; it’s where the fight with Lord Seeker Lucius was meant to take place.

And Cass got the smug lunatic.

The arena is set with some among the guards having formed a shield wall as the edge, medics stand in waiting behind them along the wisteria-choked walls. All appear ready for this “training” exercise but I fail to see intended opponent anywhere on the field.

Leliana’s agents on high...

Cullen with his own shield raised and held in the Templar fashion, tilted downward to divert potential magical splash damage...

A cheerful Dorian on an overlooking balcony wiggling his fingers at me...

Leliana herself, her face a blank slate as she stand in a darkened corner in the shadow of a parapet with her arms crossed...

Noting all this, I’ve missed Varric and Cass breaking off to join the audience. Cass merely readies her shield and puts her back to a wall while Varric outright ducks inside a doorway. He’s likely aiming to get to a higher vantage with Dorian.

My pulse quickens in anticipation as I scope out possible means for her imminent attack; shifting my weight, I raise my arm defensively. It’s about all I can do for now, all I can without know how she’ll strike.

And damn does it feel awkward.

“My, you look absolutely dreadful,” her sardonic voice chimes out over bushes and rubble, echoing off the walls as a chill takes to the air. Peering about as my breaths comes out as puffs of fog, I realize the most likely point of origin – the weathered statue of Andraste at the garden’s peak, she has a fresh coating of ice that sparkles in the hazy glow of the midday sun. Again, her voice carries coolly, stating “Don’t tarry, Inquisitor. It’s rude to keep your betters waiting.”

Bold.

Finally, she reveals herself and proves me correct; she rises before the crumbling Andraste and
moves to lean against a low, crudely made stone fence overlooking the rest of the courtyard. Adorned in silky white and emerald greens, her gown clings to her form as her headpiece curls back like a dragon’s horns; clutched in her right hand is more of the same, it’s a whitewood staff twisted about an emerald core, cold visibly radiating off it in waves. “Regardless of your... condition,” her biting voice rings out, “don’t expect any quarter from me.”

Without awaiting a response, she strikes – with an upward swipe of her staff, the ground beneath my bare feet goes frigid as layers of glyphs carve themselves into the earth. Were I not already on edge, I likely wouldn’t possess such quick reflexes; leaping to the left, I avoid her trap as it primes itself and detonates in a shower of frozen splinters.

“So you can jump. How high, I wonder?,” Vivienne coldly sneers. Rolling over the short wall, she throws herself into the arena and takes a battle stance, angling herself so that as little of her is exposed to me as possible. As the core of her staff blazes, she throws her open palm toward me — ice daggers explode from her hand and rocket across the distance. As some impale the wall behind me, the ones that do strike me evaporate with a furious hissing like a nest of snakes disturbed. My pulse thuds heavily in my skull, my blood feels thick; a migraine threatens to crack me open while Vivienne does so without.

“This is the might of the Inquisitor?,” she taunts as she repositions herself, a freezing mist building in her grasp, “can you only run and hide?”

_I’m not_...

More daggers erupt and I evade.

_Not hiding_...

Again, glyphs explode near my feet.

_Just...I’m not_...

Winter snatches at my ankles, locking my bare legs to the ground below.

_...no, not now! DAMNIT._

The anchor burns with Fade light and my scars ache as unveiled magic pours into the barrier, strengthening my resistance to her assault. As ice spikes drive into me on all sides and cold threatens to tear the air from my lungs, the world goes mute. Adrenaline has everything slowing.

Everything except my personal demon. Imshael, he flits into my field of vision, unburdened, moving at the speed of thought. Ice chunks slowly tear through his incorporeal form, unseen, upon which he smirks out “so, why aren’t you fighting back?”

_Go. Away._

“Where’s the vigor and swagger of that man that killed me?,” Imshael questions while ignoring my order. “Where’s that killer instinct?!,” he presses as his vile yellow eyes gleam.

’B_People WILL die_’ I think as the anchor feeds ever more Fade into my defense.

“Oh, come now,” he croons, “just a taste; you don't need the whole..enchilada? Am I using that correctly?”
Just go away.

He refuses to look away, biting his lip in anticipation.

‘FUCK OFF,’ I mentally roar and Imshael’s grin vanishes; reluctantly, he too retreats to the sidelines but he finds a modicum of joy in standing exactly where Cassandra is, his imaginary form sinking through hers as his repugnant smirk returns. Sighing through his teeth, he lets loose “well, at least the view is nice.”

I fucking despise you.

“No!” he yells from the sidelines, merely a displaced head on Cass’ shoulder.

I’m not about to punch another hole through the Veil!

"It doesn't have to be that!"

Ignoring the demonic jackass, I realize ‘but I can't just stay here either.’

"obviously," he grates, a curious look taking to him as he awaits my next move. The adrenal rush gives way to the normal flow of time and the Fade burns through my winding crossroads of scars up to my elbow. Continuous Fade intake won’t be a boon for my health in the long run, not if I intend to keep my left as long as possible, not if this otherworldly whale-cry sings through the anchor as it fuels me.

'Can't keep this up,’ I recognize.

Through gritted teeth, even as ice threatens to shred my flesh, I growl out “stop the..flow. Shut down” to the mark so only it can hear.

Amidst the steady outpouring of light, I witness an even brighter pulse from within — one defiant flash.

“Whatd'yamean?!,” I growl as Fade-light spreads up my bicep.

Another single pulse, no. But this time, it’s response feels worried.

“Trustme,” I huff out, “please.”

No response but I feel its anxiety, its concern. It knows my weakness, my strength, my current lacking of my usual strength. “Please. Promise it's not suicide,” I wince out, still holding firm against Vivienne’s ranged barrage, “justop..whenIsay…fire.”

The anchor lets out two deliberate pulses.

Thanks.

Steeling myself, willing my legs cooperate for what comes next — and this next part will be tricky — I steady my breathing and focus the outpouring of mana that the anchor has gifted me. In that moment, I roar “FIRE!!!” and dropping to a crouch as the anchor shuts the floodgates, I vomit a stream of brilliant violet napalm at my feet and reeling back, I meet Vivienne’s call of Winter with that blazing spray, commanding her cold to retreat in a hissing fog; the arena turns to a misty grey as our elements argue with one another. Legs cooking, already numb to the searing, I roll off to my left just as an ice shard pierces the fog and cuts through where I’d just been. By all rights, this was
an awful plan and I should already be dead — it would appear some residual barrier still yet clings to me.

“A foolish move, Inquisitor,” she warns through the immutable grey as she draws in more mana.

“Probably!,” I yell in retort, the words lingering but slightly as they echo shallowly off the several high walls. With but a word from my lips, “extinguish,” the fires fade and my leg flesh only smolders; a thin layer of Fade still cushioning against the brunt of the heat is my sole protection.

And I mean only. My robe has scorchmarks and has been mostly cooked to ash. I'm but a strong breeze away from being naked.

Again.

With that, I stomp headlong into the garden as my innate mana channels into my extremities. All my time here and I’m still stuck performing purely melee aspects of the arcane but damn it if I’m not gonna try.

I dart right into that grey and white where last I saw her and with a mighty jab of my left, the rubble fence splits from the sheer pressure enveloping my fist. I damage the castle, but inflict nothing on Vivienne.

'Where are you,' I question uneasily, holding still and breathing only through my mouth in the hopes of being as quiet as possible.

There’s a swirling of the heavy mist, a movement of the grey with me at its center. I see her now, her silhouette at least, it stands in place before me but shudders unnaturally. In an instant, she’s on all sides, despite having never taken a step.

'Fade step?,' I question while cocking my fist, prepping to throw another, ‘nope. No cold radiance. What then?’ Twisting and turning to meet her, hidden as she is, I can’t seem to meet her angle of approach. Her goading laugh comes sharp and quick, a wicked and grating whine against my ears, like a recording distorted, much too sped up.

Even some 10 feet away, the fog is faster than that closest me.

Wait…

It’s not faster. It’s normal.

I’m the slow one.

*I’m an idiot and I walked right into her trap.*

I’m struck with rocket force by a blunt object to the guts — it whips away at lightning speed before I can even react. She managed to get me, to break my rapidly diminishing barrier, somehow finding the gap in my armor In an instant. Still reeling from the first blow, I’m struck another three times within the passing of a second. My body is slow to react even as pain flares through my ribcage. I should’v felt the magic, should’v realized what bubbled up around me — the air is heavy and sluggish, so much more than the condensation should allow. My movement feels suffocated by plastic wrap and quicksand. It’s fucking magical, she’s managed to trap me in a damn stasis bubble and I walked right into it.

*Crap.*
In a series of loud bangs and cracks, she pommel strikes me another several times from all sides — at least she’s kind enough not to part me in two with that spirit blade. She wanted this — knew I’d fight with fire, knew I’d walk headfirst into this mess.

Predictable.

This is bad.

...time to?.. gotta change, gotta...
No. Yes. Oh, god this is stupid...

Winding back even as she strikes me over and over, I think but one word.

**BREAK.**

My knuckles crackle with so much potential as I let loose — arm rolling over shoulder and driving through the slow, I strike the disruption field and reel as heavy thunder roils from within as space shudders. The very air shakes on impact and it’s enough to give Vivienne pause; her barrage of pommel strikes cease. Pulling back and trying again, the stasis ripples as I punch at time and stranger still, the impact is enough to push fog back from the edge. I see her now, sped up as she is, comparatively. She’s watching, predatory in her staring, waiting to see how I play this out — it’s the only explanation for why she’d quit her attack.


Again. Punch. A boom reverberates through the fortress like someone taking a sledge hammer to a the side of a dumpster.

"BREAK!"

Yet again, my knuckles crack, willed kinetic force wrapping around each joint like armor; the feeling, rigid. I throw forth another punch, an uppercut grinding against the force bubble, shattering it as I rake its side. Punctured, filling with cool air, I’m able to breathe easy again as the sound of shattering glass explodes across the garden, slowed time rippling away into nothing as the majority of fog is blown out and away from the arena.

“God Damn!” Varric spits out in admiration from on high, slapping his palms audibly against the stone railing as Dorian whistles; a series of impressed murmurs and nods roll across the audience as I ready to strike yet again.

A curious pout graces the Knight Enchanter’s face as she measures and reasons what they’ve all just witnessed; as mana folds itself into her staff, drawn from the wasting energy of her spell, bolstering her anew, she warns “You have my attention, Inquisitor. That’s a danger in and of itself” with a delighted and less scathing tone. She’s enjoying this — it must’ve been quite some time since she last fought someone capable of...well, not dying outright.

‘How very Flemeth of you,’ I reflect upon Vivienne’s words as I breathe deep. Even free, everything still feels tight — the stasis sensation is lingering despite my return to the normal ebb and flow of time. But tired of her controlling the battle, I dart forward, closing the gap between us and jab hard at her shoulder – in a fluid motion one should expect from someone of her ability and stature, she effortlessly casts fade cloak and smirks as my strike passes through her. With a mere flick of her wrist, she rematerializes and with a sound akin to splitting tree limbs, I’m blown backwards, clear across the arena and into the stone side of the castle; with rubble dusting me, spit drooling past my now-bleeding lips, teeth buzzing from the shock, I slowly peel off the wall and
hit dirt.

“Inquisitor!,” Cass yells out in worry as Varric grumbles out “Ooo, god damn” and while peering over the edge, yells “hey, Curly! Probably time to call it, right?” I can’t see the Commander but I can hear multiple sets of armor clanking toward me. Inexplicably, I’m able to twist my arm loose from under me and hold it above me – I hear the clanking march halt with hesitation.

“In..inquisitor?,” he and Cassandra ask in unison, worried, but with a stressed whisper, Cullen adds “Hunter, you should quit. You’re still healing from the events of..”

In slack jawed, numb-tongued grunts, I get out “Appreciate it, Cullen, but I gotta…” Carching my breath, I wince out “..gotta finishzis .”

“No,” Cass huffs, fury creeping into her voice, “ this was all too soon.”

Kneeling down at my side, his gauntlet lightly gripping my shoulder so as not to further injure, Cullen whispers low “there are times when quitting is not an option, I know that all too well. Then, there are times when it isn’t weakness to quit. There’s a…strength in recognizing which is which.”

With all the belligerence of a bleeding wyvern, I twist myself until I’m propped up on my knees; with the sun beating against my face, it’s warmth intermingling with the pounding in my skull; with eyes closed, I breathe “if I can’t…hold my own against pulled punches, how’ll I survive facin’ a real threat?”

I can almost hear his beleaguered smirk as it stretches lopsided across his face; yielding his protest, he replies “I can understand that.”

Her hand gripping my forearm for reassurance, Cass questions “you..are certain?”

My tongue catches but I manage to nod and huff out a sharp breath with my eyes closed.

Rising to their feet, they both hoist me up and brace me, keeping my towering form aloft.

Breathing shallow breaths to steady myself, I weakly nod and they hesitantly release, easing away but sticking close in case I crumble.

A minute of remaining upright and there somewhat convinced of my resolve; Cullen eases into a nearby doorway to watch the remainder of the fight – a few among the guards hoot and clap their approval for their Inquisitor, damaged and barely clothed as I am.

“No! You haven’t! But you can still make this fight worth watching!,” Imshael encourages from the sidelines, "remember what we spoke of!"
“Obviously!,” he yells yet again.

As pained as it is, as hellish as the migraine that threatens to metaphorically crack my possibly literally crack skull is, my mind still races, seeking answers for the problem.

...napalm mouth...

'Deathtouch. No. Invisible Blade...no, you suck at being left hand,' I criticize. In that moment, ever racing, my thoughts wander in vain. Instead of spells, I try to remember people, people and what I did for them, to them.

Eirlana.

Keeper Neria.

Envy...no! No, go elsewhere, happier.

Rasa...

'Cass,' I remember our dance and my sealing the dancehall during the assassination just prior to it.

'Solas,' I think as I recall the living art I showed him while stealing across the dreamscape.

Spook. The Nightmare. Hawke. Loghain...

'LOGHAIN,' I mentally roar in recollection of what I did for the man – I healed him, I healed his evisceration. ‘I put him back together. I put myself back together.’ I realize with bruised, but widening eyes. My tongue folds against itself and I feel the scar.

Got it.

Drawing mana from deep within me, everything I haven’t been relying on, anything that wasn’t gifted by the anchor, I weave its power through my being, though my flesh and bones. Stress fractures and breaks crack loudly back into place and smolder from within as marrow and plating forge my skeleton anew. Muscle strands bind and flex, twisting whole again. As that energy spreads out through my being, the splitting migraine tapers off. Weirder still, the streaming blood reverses, flowing back into their cuts and wounds, purpled flesh and bruises fading in an instant. With a final gasp, my lungs healed of possible punctures, and with a vertebrae-popping arch, I finally feel right.

Lack of arm aside, I feel like me.

And I feel that violent spark ignite within me, that violet aura awakening. My power, not the anchor’s.

All mine.

Mine.

Chapter End Notes
Finally, a positive note for the Inquisitor. Only through the trials of fire can ore be forged into something more.

Hope you enjoy!
A lingering exhale escapes me as I savor the absence of pain; a hollow whistle rides it, a melancholy note of all I’ve endured and now, now with its departure, I have a chance of moving forward. Flesh still steaming from the cellular restructuring, I think I feel complete but that’s merely still the phantom limb tricking me. While my arm is still missing from the elbow down, it must be said that the lack of surgical scars is pleasant to behold. It’s been smoothed out, no longer a folded, sutured, and seared mess.

Renewed, refreshed, reinvigorated. I stand now before my opponent a new man. Cracking my neck with audible pops, I marvel over this previously broken body and how it’s returned to this state. It’s a strange thing to witness after having been such a wretched husk. With an intense gaze, I stare down Vivienne across the garden and with an actual sense of control, I smile out a “ready?”

Evidently not — she questions with deliberation “what…manner of magic…was that?,” her eyes narrowing as she does.

‘Oh. Shit,’ I realize, ‘that looked…at least ninety percent like blood magic.’ Scanning the crowd, looking to see if anyone else shares her sentiments, I find only a few reluctant eyes. Cullen’s eyes are wide — his face frozen in shock. Cassandra, surprised, her eyebrows riding high on her face. Leliana, hers is a mask of granite, unflinching and discerning. Dorian and Varric though, they don’t shy from the opportunity to crack wise or inject snark into this potential debacle.

“Oooh,” Varric groans out loudly, purposely and through a smirk, “looks like I’m losing that bet after all!”

“You were foolish to think otherwise,” Dorian prods the dwarf while wildly waving a hand my way, “if I’m not mistaken, he’s spit in the face of an ancient magister, reigned in the Templars, and killed the origin of fear itself. Why would a grievous mortal injury stop him now?”

“Hehahaha, well, ya put it that way,” Varric’s chuckles out, “I swear, I'll never be able to write about him — too unbelievable.”

“Unbelievable indeed,” Vivienne states, latching onto those words. Annoyed but ignoring the pair’s levity, Vivienne demands of me “Explain yourself” with thinly veiled venom dripping from her words as she levels her staff my way; I can feel her not-so-subtle drawing of mana, her focus becoming ever sharper. Again, Ishmael flits into existence beside me, he explains to only my ears “Entropy to break down, blood to reshape, creation to renew. Not my particular specialty, no, but I know what I saw. There’s levels to it that her ilk refuse to understand.”

My breath catches in my throat – I’ve already been through this once before, these biased fears and hates, only this time, I can’t vanish on a whim.

“Circle folk – they’re a superstitious lot,” Imshael elaborates.

“Are you serious?!” I spit in disbelief – her disposition and stance not changing in the slightest.

Imshael begins, “Yes? I mean, they do tend to...” thinking himself the subject of my ire but I talk through him to Vivienne, arguing “Entropy and creation, paired up, this is a result,” I say, leaving
out the crucial blood bit, “the fact that ya don’t recognize that combo speaks volumes.” My words are a slap to the face, and that, that she will not tolerate. No longer interested in questioning and silently seething at my words, she brandishes the hilt of her spirit blade in one hand and her staff in the other. Emerald core radiating with a cold fury, she stabs at me from across the arena and the air cracks as latent moisture flash freezes.

‘She’s fast but...’ I think, squinting, ‘it’s different from before.’

It’s like I’m looking down the world through lilac-tinted glasses and I can somewhat see the dispersal of her mana, its branching, where it’s going. My pupils, there’s a focused heat to them, behind them. With a backhanded swipe, still radiating entropic magics, I negate her attack, breaking it down into a mere snow flurry. Refusing to let that slow her, she fires off a series of frozen daggers which I deftly sidestep, easily weaving through the barrage now that see their intended course.

The anchor isn’t even active; surprisingly, this is all me.

And…perhaps my fear was for naught — this feels like same beast within me, the same hound I unchained on Estwatch, only now it’s less ravenous.

Less angry.

Neither feral nor rabid.

It doesn’t feel intent on destruction, only to drive me harder.

*Please be that. Please ease don’t bite.*

Vivienne goes to evoke another frosty explosion but I burst past her in a blur, ripping her staff away from her; blistering and swiftly growing tumescent with unstable energy, her staff is fit to blow and I spear it over the castle’s outer wall.

…but it doesn’t quite clear the overlook – it detonates in a tiny mushroom cloud bristling with cold lightning, arcing out and taking the unfortunate Andraste statue with it. As cries of panic shake the audience, and others cheer, impressed, I twist back to meet my opponent, wielding my arm like a rapier.

Both hands gripping her hilt, her stance one of power, undaunted and daring me to approach, she sneers “I had forgotten what an unfortunate effect you have on magical items — what luck you must possess that you haven’t gotten yourself killed.”

“Luck? Maybe,” I reply while taking up a fencing stance. One foot pointed her way, my other prepping to launch me forward, I pulse mana through the muscles and tendons of my legs.

**Strike.**

Stone cracks underfoot and I shoot forward like a bullet, lunging forward in the blink of an eye and raking her blade with my arm in a shower of sparks. Surprise finally registers in those eyes of hers as we duel, and even more surprising, the ghost of a smirk threatens the corners of her lips. Blow matching blow, our mana screeching and hissing with every parry and clash, I huff out “you’re enjoying this?”

More sparks fly as our “blades” meet and in that blinding glow of white and magenta, she returns with “whatever do you mean?,” no laboring for air, no struggle. Only the glistening sweat on her brow is any indication of her fatigue.
“This is taking tooooo long!” Imshael whines, his yellow eyes growing dim from boredom as he lazily circles our fight, “just win already. You possess the necessary power.” He’s likely right, but I’m still hesitant to really let go of that leash, to go all in. However, before I can reach a decision, a deep slithering despair winds about in my chest, constricting my heart and lungs. Choking up, muscles spasming in regards to this abrupt disturbance, I at the very least manage to grab ahold of Vivienne’s spirit blade before it can slice me open — fingers wrapped tightly around its shimmering razor’s edge, energy crackling and throwing out rising plumes of embers, I try to ward off this panic, this utter dread that’s sunk its claws into me.

“A new player? Oh, everything is interesting again!,” Imshael cackles nearby.

The fuck?! Who else is…

“DORIAN!,” I roar out, trying to shout the flood of despair into submission despite my chattering teeth, “WHAT. THE. HELL?!“ Vivienne takes this opportunity to phase out of my lock, to retreat to a more advantageous position. Erstwhile, the dapper Vint has taken the field, his face wearing the look a child has when caught in the act of some misdeed — eyes wide, his stance flighty, the skull adorned staff of his pours swirling azure mist from the empty sockets.

“Please know that wasn’t personal,” he apologizes while his casting hand fidgets, “really! I was invited to join in.”

Trying to steady my breathing, to regain control against his invasive depression, I huff out “nothing personal, but I’m gonna smack your mustache off” through a pained grin. His turn to squirm now, he twists in place with indignation furrowing his brow and spits “You. Wouldn’t. Dare.”

“Your lover’s spat is darling, really,” Vivienne goads from across the way as she urges even more of her mana into that enchanted hilt, “Should I allow you two a moment of privacy?”

“Noooooo,” Dorian quips sarcastically, “everyone here is entitled to their fun, wouldn’t you say?”

“Quite. Very well…brace yourself, Inquisitor,” the Knight Enchanter coolly demands.

At that declaration, with another dizzying resurgence, my mana incinerates the shackles of fear and despair.

They attack in tandem, her taking the frontal assault, slashing with precision and renewed strength while Dorian takes up a support role, casting a haunting display of necromancy I’ve never seen him use before — wisp forms of Caer Oswin’s past dead, specifically Lucius’ corrupted chosen few — and as each of them twist into existence, they glide my way with empty eyes. All opposition, theirs is a whirlwind of attacks and it’s all I can do to evade and dodge. A number of voices shout to me, offers of advice and concern but it’s all background noise.

The torrent is a storm in my ears, the waves of infinity crashing...

The violet light is spreading – in the short time since bringing me back from the brink of death, its glow has snaked down my cheek and neck, across my shoulder and wound about my bicep all the way to my forearm. If the anchor’s effects when its glow spreads that far is any indicator, a terrible release is imminent.

‘Shit! No, stop the match!’, I try to yell out but it’s only as thought — my mouth is uncooperative, my body fending off attacks as if on autopilot.

GET. CONTROL.
Still fighting, only increasing in speed and ferocity, I dispel Dorian’s horrid creations by impaling them with mana lances at close range. Vivienne attempts to lay down another displacement field but I strike at very space she seeks to alter, dispelling her attempt as well. The terrible violet light blazes through my scars and I watch in horror as even the anchor’s nebulous green glow shrinks against it in fear.

LISTEN TO ME, DAMN YOU!

No amount of inner wherewithal seem to put me back at the reins — the magic has me by the leads now.

The afternoon sky over Caer Oswin darkens as the clashing of energies upsets the natural order; thunder rolls and the rains begin. Fat raindrops beat down upon us.

STOP! JUST FUCKING STOP!!

My rampaging body throws a charged uppercut at the air itself and the very ground cracks beneath our feet; Dorian and Vivienne are blown backwards, splashing hard into the rapidly growing puddles. The gates within me explode, the earth beneath my feet ignites, and Imshael cackles like a madman in my head.

“A drumroll please!,” he laughs out while slapping at his thighs for effect, “Ladies aaaand Gentlemen! I present to youooou…”

Lightning arcs off my now smoldering horns into the storm above and the sky responds in kind, letting loose several bolts of its own upon the aging fortress, cracking at the tallest towers. As stone is blasted to rubble, internally, my floodwaters threaten to drown me — they’re deep and only getting deeper. The magic is primed, my scars are smoldering. Pain. Thousands of fingernails rake down a blackboard in my mind as I gasp for air.

But I’m not the only one hearing it — my skull feels fit to splitting, I feel the capillaries rupture in my nose and ears; I bear witness in horror as tiny grooves are scraped into the masonry of Caer Oswin, so many unseen fingers clawing at the fortress; curls of stone flake off as those present reel in kind, grasping at their ears to block out my cacophony.

“...The star of the show, your Inquisitooooooor!,” Imshael cries out over the din, the widest of sharp-toothed grins upon his devilish face. Finished with his dramatic albeit cliché intro, Imshael sighs out “isn’t this wonderful?” with his hands on his hips.

The storm builds, rain turning to sheets, high winds manifesting with me at their center. I can’t move, all I want to do is scream; my insides are ablaze. Worse still, I feel those familiar telekinetic fingers prying me open.

Over the roar, the faint cry of “KATARA” reaches my ears.

A lone bolt hangs in the air before me, invisible hands gripping it in place, its sharpened tip just a hair’s breadth from penetrating my forehead.

Imshael hisses and glares to the parapets above, hunting for my would-be-assassin, pissed that his fun has hit a potential snag.

Still locked out of my own body, cocooned in ferocious magic, all I can do is watch, and watch I do – agents are already rushing the battlements, guards are taking half measures to approach me, to shield me…
…but...they maintain their distance, fearful still of the magic maelstrom.

Surprisingly, Cole flits into existence behind the assassin on high – his thin arms constricting about the throat of the bowman, he whispers into their ear and sleep takes the human.

As agents converge on their location, Cass cuts through my barrier, chanting something under her breath as she struggles to pull me back from the brink, her Seeker abilities allowing her this far. Somewhere, Cullen barks at Cassandra to retreat, to fall back to safer ground until the Inquisition Templars can set up a perimeter – but despite this, she persists, my violet energy buffeting off her own aura.

Rain streaming down her face, her short soaked hair clinging to her forehead, in her eyes, there’s a cold fury – it’s either at herself for allowing me into this exercise so soon, or it’s at me, for not understanding my limits.

‘*Blame me,*’ I internally plead, she already holds herself accountable for so much of what has happened in Thedas.

*This Is My Fault.*

I feel the invisible tug of her words, whatever they are, it’s a curious sensation – it’s not stripping me of power like the Templars would try for, no, instead it’s like opening a window, allowing for my rampant magic to vent on its own.

And my insides, I feel the fires calming. Not suffocating, but slowing. She’s…soothing…the beast within.

Cole again, he races to us despite the wind and rain threatening to blow his small frame away. No one reacts to him though, he’s still intangible to the mortal world, moving as he often does; he’s using Cass to bridge the gap and weather my storm; his pale eyes are pained as they hone in on mine, hypnotizing, my spiritual pressure is nearly too much for the little guy to bear.

But he pushes though, fights against the pain, and whispers but two words.

*“Please Sleep.”*

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Chapter End Notes

"Katara" = "die, thing!" in Qunari.

Some forges burn too hot.

...Hunter really shouldn't have agreed to that bout.
A Pause, a Conversation, a Demand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another dream, another shoddily stitched together scene — ignoring the discordant harp strings being plucked and whale song reverberation the Fade so often whispers, ignoring the haze and disjointed seams of this deciduous forest campsite, I immediately look to the anchor, worrying “please tell me you’re alright.”

No response, it remains a constant nebulous swirl.

“C’mon! I didn’t mean for it to go that far, I didn't think...”

A hint of a flicker triggers in its depths — it feels equivalent to the silent treatment.

“...you’re right, doesn't matter what I thought...I'm sorry.”

Though dubious, it brightens at my apology, coming to life with Fade light.

“…really though, you okay?”

It’s slow to answer, but it does eventually flash me a double pulse.

A wave of relief sweeps through me; the last thing I need now is to screw up my ability for closing breaches and rifts. I know for damn certain I’ll need that power come the final battle with Corypheus because for all his might, all his wickedness, he’s a cliché.

And clichés are predictable.

Additionally, while I’m not too keen on the probability that I’ll eventually lose my only full-length arm, I do enjoy the company of the anchor. I mean, its conversation skills leave a lot to be desired but all the same, ours is a relationship grounded in mutualism. Where one dies, the other likely follows suit.

...and I do like living.

“Glad you’re good…,” I whisper to the anchor as I drop my ass to a mossy log by the long dead and muddied remains of an ancient fire pit, “Me? I’m a fucking idiot. Shouldn’t have been using magic…that shit, it was inevitable...”

“Perhaps,” replies the overly familiar demon as he steps out from the brush,” perhaps not.”

“And you…” I hiss as the dream increases a few degrees in temperature.

“Yes, me,” Imshael agrees as he takes a seat across from me….from us.

“I’d break you down to your fucking atoms if you had any” I threaten.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Out there? That was just a bit of harmful fun,” he sighs through a relaxed smile, like he's lost in a daydream.

“Harmful. Yes!,” I latch on and drive a finger at his face.
“Mmm? No, harmless. I said harmless. I mean, no one actually got hurt,” the worm explains, side eyeing me, his yellow glare fixed on me. Breathing out wistfully, he hums “besides — I saw something.”

“Me about to tear through my people. No shit,” I growl and the anchor responds in kind, it bristles at the demon like a disgruntled cat.

Shaking his head, a knowing smirk curling his lips as he tries to hint at what he thinks so damn important, “Think. You’re not so obstinate as you pretend to be. What do you remember?”

Not more of this remember bullshit, fucking…god damn..

Wincing at the mental assault, with eyes clenched tightly to ward off the residual pain, Imshael groans “ouch. Yes. More remembering. Oh god, what a monster that makes me.” Rubbing two fingers at his temple, he explains, as if he were talking to a child, “perhaps you are that thick. Think. Back. To. What. You. Were feeling.”

During the fight?

“Yes! St-stop doing that!,” he shouts, pinching at his forehead to relieve the pressure, “obviously!”

“Fine,” I agree; the anchor though, it remains on guard, its energy angry and vigilant even if it can’t actually do any harm against this particular demon. It’s all bluster. Finding my words, I try to elaborate, “I was…I don’t know, angry?”

Just going along with his curious brand of therapy, I question “fe…fear? That what ya talking about?”

“GODS, YES!,” he exclaims and claps, the sudden outburst echoing into the empty, hazy forest, “Finally. Uggghh.”

“Really loving this tone you’ve got. Keep it up — I’ll think at you again,” I growl sarcastically.

“Okay, fine, alright. Have it your way. What I’m trying to explain is that you’re afraid of your own magic.”

My squinting look reads “no shit” so obviously that I forgo even commenting.

Fortunately, Imshael is quite quick for a creature being slowly digested. He chooses to explain “Magic is alive; you already know this but often forget. Your magic, it lashed out, like an animal. Think about – DON’T THINK! Just…agh, HOUNDS!”

“What?”

“Hounds. They react to their master, they pick up on emotions. Alright, so..vaguely similar principle; your magic picked up on your fear, that’s why it went vicious. It was…scared for you.”

“Shit. That…may be the…wow…I’m still pissed at you but that, yeah, that was good,” I actually commend him for his metaphor.

“I’m a nurturing spirit. It’s what I’m good at,” Imshael growls – I can’t tell if he’s serious but
knowing him, he fully believes that crock of bullshit. His ears perk and his vile yellow stare flashes to the lonely forest, scanning. "Something approaches," he hisses through his teeth. I don’t see anything, hear anything, in fact this whole forest feels dead. Rotted. No ambient noise, no memories playing of what once was or should be.

Nothing.

Silence.

More of the same.

But a crunching branch and the rustling of brush disturbs that quiet, betraying the approaching entity. A shuffle, a soft padding through damp leaves, Imshael's accusation is correct.

Something else walks my dream.

By sound alone, I'd say it's not a person or an upright demon. Sounds like too many legs to be a human.

And then it stops, right at the tree line.

At the sudden quiet, following Imshael’s hard stare, I look over my shoulder to the intruder. To my surprise, I find Solas half hidden behind a tree, his bald head poking out and merely watching. But that aside, his aura is what throws me off – it’s more predatory, hungry.

‘Curious,’ I question to the unamused flinching of Imshael; pained, the demon hisses under his breath “please. Stop. Doing. That.”

“So…,” I speak directly to the ancient elf, ignoring my frustrated demon “…ya gonna take a seat? I mean, if ya wanna hang out there all night, by all means…” In that instance, his demeanor shifts, the calm and collected Solas returns. With a smirking sigh, he nods and pads out from the thicket. As he takes a seat on Imshael’s log, I realize just how dim and depressing my little nook of dream forest is; with but a whisper of “ignite,” the damp, grey remains of the pit breathe anew, first as birthing embers, then as long flames licking at the air. As the crackling of the fire builds, an orange glow illuminating us all, I flatly state “Welcome to my dream.”

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate the setting,” he quips, “ but if I may ask…”

“Why here? Probably cause it feels isolated,” I admit as my expression turns ever more embittered, “considering I lost control, makes sense my unconscious mind would bring me here.”

Concerned curiosity mirrored in his sharp eyes, he leans forward and inquires “What happened?”

“Pushed myself too far,” I mumble but Imshael mumbles back “..not far enough.” I flash my demon a malicious look, eyes narrowing while hoping Solas doesn’t take notice. If he had, he isn’t showing signs of such. Instead, his face turns pensive while the flickering fire forces his shadow against the trees behind him. And that shadow is a wolf; even as a darkened silhouette, its features are undeniable.

Tufts of furs.

Attentive ears, pointed.

Regal, powerful, even seated on its hind legs.
“Wonder if I see it cause I know who he is…” I ponder as Imshael grits his teeth, trying his damndest to ignore my thoughts, “…Or something else? My magic, maybe?”

Concern registering on his typically unreadable face, Solas leans forward and resting his elbows on his knees, putting his chin upon his knuckles, he urges “I make for an excellent listener.”

“Ehhh, was down training, dueling really. Was doin’ fine up until I got blasted into a wall,” I begin as Solas furrows his brow, watching and absorbing, “then I let my pride get the better of me — should’ve stayed down. Should’ve. Didn’t.” Petering off, I grumble “Flooded myself with mana, and ermmm”

He doesn’t push, he doesn’t press, he simply waits and that’s his best weapon in his arsenal; his patience is his greatest asset.

Compelled by the quiet to keep talking, even if hesitant to elaborate, I ask “…keep a secret?”

“Of course”

‘He just makes it all so easy…’ I realize as I explain “look, I used multiple schools to sort myself out — entropy, creation…and uhh…”

Again, he’s quiet, simply waiting for me to finish in my own time, at my own pace.

“…blood.”

At that admission, his eyebrows raise in surprise as he notes “…yet your connection to the Fade hasn’t diminished. Perhaps it’s your bond to the anchor?” to himself.

Continuing, I describe the event, saying “after that, I uh, I heard a storm, my pupils felt like they were on fire; shit, they probably were. I was…I was locked out of my own body.”

“And you suspect possession?”

“Nah. It’s not that. I’m out of sync with my magic, unbalanced.”

“Why do you think this to be the case,” his eyes take on a hard edge, that predator instinct returns. Even Imshael notices and scoots over to study the ancient elf up close. Ignoring those two and the hanging question, letting my demon observe in my stead, my eyes roam over the crackling fire and I feel the intention, the idea of warmth on my cheeks even if it’s but a lie. I sit a moment, taking my time to carefully craft what next to say…

“A…person…” I begin to the stunned gasp of Imshael as he understands what I intend to say, “…a person once told me that…hmmm…my magic, it’s akin to a protective dog. It senses me, how I’m feelin’ and reacts accordingly.”

At this analogy, Solas purses his lips together.

“It sensed my fear and overreacted.”

“A simplistic explanation, if not somewhat accurate. It’s more than that of course but don’t expect the people of Thedas to have a firm understanding of how..” he begins his rant but I interject, correcting “Fade person. Spirit, demon, whatever. They’re the one that told me that.”

Blinking, confused, Solas ponders a moment more before catching on; breathing out a smirk, the familiar Solas returns, chuckling “of course…spirits are people to you.”
“Perhaps it was simple because that’s what I needed at the moment,” I shrug.

“I can’t quite assist you at present,” Solas admits through a tired smile and holds his arms out to the gloomy Fade, “But when you return, I would wish to help you, in whatever way I may be able. However, it does seem that something more is bothering you…”

‘The future is a terrible and bizarre creature? Please don’t be a dick and steal my last arm?’, I think, to the upset and grimacing of Imshael, assaulted by my very thoughts, ‘Don’t kill Flemeth? Why do you wanna tear down the veil if you’ve been helping me strengthen it?’

Instead of asking any number of the questions plaguing me about his involvement, what he may be involved in, and so on and so forth, instead, I postpone it all, saying “meh, it’s nothing. If it’s still buggin’ me by the time I get back to Skyhold, I’ll talk about it then. That cool?”

“Hehe,” he chuckles even as his wolf shadow stands on edge, “yes, well, if that concludes our talk...I apologize but I must take my leave. I will investigate your condition from Skyhold with the resources available.” At that, he rises, his darkness of a canine following at his feet.

Before he can actually depart though, I ask “how’dya know I was here?,” a simple ask but an important question all the same.

He pauses in his gait, locking his hands behind his back; he says “the spirits told me of your arrival” through a friendly, lopsided grin, as if it were the obvious answer. With that, he steals away back into the deadened forest and fades away into its mists.

But what is truth when dealing with a friend whom is also a so-called trickster god?

Quiet, even his footsteps have faded to nothing; no snapping of twigs, no shushing of leaves.

Nothing.

“Hehehehe, you called me a person,” Imshael brags, shattering the silence with his grating laughter. Tired of his presence, trying a possibility out, I simply say “Goodnight, Imshael.”

“No. Goodnight yourself! You’re not getting rid of me that eas…” he mocks but cutting him off, I repeat with potency “GOODNIGHT, IMSHAEL,” and like that, he’s vanished, proven wrong, returned to whatever depths of me in which he’s imprisoned. Sure, he’ll find his way out all too soon, but here, right this instance where my wandering mind is king, I now know I can always shove him back down.

Alone, just us, my anchor and me. With the demon’s absence, the mark seems more at ease. That makes two of us; he may have helped identify an issue or two of mine but that doesn’t cancel out how much I despise his leering, his insistence, his inability to be digested as rapidly as his peers.

Whatever.

Though still reticent, I know I can’t stay cooped up here forever.

Can’t...don’t want to...potato potato.

Whatever the case. I have to get back and face what’s going on topside. That, and I’m experiencing a new sense of existential dread from knowing how thorough a network of spies Solas has….

Elves and spirits.
Can’t say I’m surprised, though.

I’m not quite ready to comprehend the scope of that; it’s a dizzying concept. Instead, for now, I just sit on my log, breathing in the damp smoke as the world remains in hazy silence, a dream veiled in muffling mist. Normally, considering my previous stay in The Empty, I’d make extreme haste in getting back to the waking world — oddly, though, this place doesn’t send a chill through me, a gut-hollowing sense of isolation. Nah, it feels familiar…

Ancient trees stretching to the sky above.
Gnarled roots jutting from the dirt and banks.
Even this deadened campsite, with its rotted bedrolls, feels like I’ve been here before.
And then it dawns on me…

‘The Brecilian Forest. Of course…,’ I realize and softly close my eyes in memory, just for a moment.

In recalling its identity, it all grows so much more vivid as if thankful. Flowers bud and the haze burns away as actual dawn cuts through the canopy. The sounds of life return. Score of deer step through the brush at a distance, chewing at tall grass and crunching fallen leaves under hoof. Beyond them, the far off chittering of spiders as they ensnare their prey.
And even closer…

‘Birds,’ I think of the murder of crows lurking overhead, their flock eyeing me in silence.

You been here the whole time?

Their eyes red, the feathers and downy a sleek soot dark grey as they huddle together upon their thickened branch. Their eyes, they wear the same gleam so many watchful creatures before them have shown when peering at me from afar.

It’s almost as if…

“Flemeth,” I bark at the dreamscape flock, assuming these to be hers, “damn, we need to talk.”

They make no movement or cawing in response — they merely study and yet again, I’m left wondering. But just in case, considering she likely walks the Fade even now, I snap my fingers and my usual message carves itself into a nearby boulder, one that juts and wears a tree like a ragged knit cap, its roots spilling down over the face, yearning for purchase. But between those lengths of stretching fibers, my declaration lie engraved.

For extra emphasis, to her potential murder I tell my message, yet again, “Oh, We Do Need To Talk!”

Whether real of the Fade or purely fictitious, my own active imagination, I can’t help but watch after the crows, awaiting a response they’ll never give…and hope upon hope that if these things are spies of sorts, they’re hers and not his.

Moments to minutes, my dreaming continues until finally, tired of the staring match, the uneasy ball knotting up in my stomach, I ask the anchor “ready to get outta here?”

A double pulse. Yes.
I growl “WAKE UP” and force myself from this world as well.

Chapter End Notes

Considering how often our Inquisitor falls unconscious, it would seem his greatest asset is his ability to wake up on command.

And as always, thanks for reading! I’ll update with another chapter soon.
Blinding light, my pupils shrink in distress.

Can’t move.

A horrid current courses through my limbs, severing my magic.

‘NO. Not again. NOT AGAIN!,’ I panic with bulging eyes.

“Teth a, anaan esaam Qun,” the foreign words fall deep and echoing in my ears, painful in their rumbling. My lungs seize, my heartbeat rockets; mouth as dry as the Hissing Wastes, I roar “FUCK YOUR QUN!” in defiance with remnant spittle flying from my mouth. I see their backlit forms, all of them shadowy and huddled about me, prodding and experimenting.

“ASHKOST SAY HISSRA,” it’s a thunder clap against my skull as furious tears trickle down my cheeks. Teeth grit, fearful but determined to not let these monsters have satisfaction, I hiss “I’ll take you with me.”

Eyes darting, stressing for a means of escape or attack, I see more observation jars.

More pieces floating, more stolen flesh.

The largest on display — my amputated forearm with its pitch black mercurial metal sluggishly shifting about the tank like a dark lava lamp.

Fingers jab at my throat, at my pulse, but with a surge of rage, hateful that they would dare touch me again, I manage to tear free of a restraint — my hand snaps shut around one of their scientist’s throat, white knuckling with pressure. If I have to die, I will kill at least one of theirs.

Bodies fall on top of me, crushing, struggling to force my compliance.

“HUNTER!,” one among them shouts as leather gloves grapple tightly at my jaw, twisting my face to meet theirs.

“I’LL BURN ALL KNOWLEDGE OF THE QUN TO ASHES!,” I spit back, frantic as air is pressed from my lungs.

“MAKER! SOMEONE ELP ME!”

“EBOST ISSALA!”

“SHAKE HIM!,” someone yells as another argues “HE’S NOT SNAPPING OUT OF IT!”

I roar in kind, shaking and fighting back against my bindings as fiercely as possible — they cut into my flesh with every motion. Pain, I’m nothing but pain as my nerves scream from the current’s discipline. Even still, my mana refuses to sit this out, refuses to be denied — I feel those heated pinpricks in my eyes, my vision growing fiery.

“HUNTER, PLEASE!,” a familiar female voice rocks me. Gasping for air, trying to fill my lungs, everything changes.
In an instant, there are no Qunari, and there never were.

Cassandra is here, holding my sweating face in her bare hands. The energy I felt, feel, it’s pulsing into me from her touch, vibrant cyan in its glow as it permeates my flesh. It’s not what I thought I felt — that was purely my imagination.

Coaxing my furious mana to dissipate, she loudly pleads “I AM HERE. YOU ARE SAFE. PLEASE, CALM YOURSELF.” In hesitation, shock, I immediately cease in my struggle as I stare into her worried eyes, allowing myself to fall into those dark amber eyes of hers. There’s no bright light, only wall sconces. No display jars, only stained glass windows backlit by pale moonlight. No shackles or slab, it’s but the lord’s bed. Though, between Cullen, a small contingent of guardsmen, and a handful of medics all pinning me down, it makes some sense that I’d imagine them as restraints.

A hallucination, a reliving of my darkest days. That’s what it was. My tears are real enough though, my vision blurring from the bitter salty sting. My vice grip unlocks and someone slumps to the floor behind Cass; coughing and clutching at their chest, the stranger manages to rasp out “almost. Bleeding. Killed. Me.”

“And I told you to stay back!,” Cullen argues and shoves the stranger further from me.

“I was,” the frightened medic continues to cough out, “checking…on..the patient.”

“YOUR OWN FAULT, THEN.”

“WOULD YOU BOTH SHUT UP?!,” Cass shouts back at them without breaking eye contact with me, without allowing the outburst to disturb her process, and asks of me “Hunter, do you see me?”

Still trying to come to grips, all I can manage is a flinching nod of affirmation.

“Do you know where you are?,” she questions as her bright blue aura softens and rubbing her thumbs upon my cheeks, she further reassures “You are safe.”

Fighting back the dry mouth and the lingering imminent sensation of panic-vomiting, inhaling short breathes now, I struggle to reply “Caer…Oswin?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

“E-everyone okay?,” I croak weakly in question while easing my head back onto the pillow.

“I’m not,” grumbles the accosted medic as Cullen shepherds him out the bedroom door; groaning, the Commander begs “Maker…just go” while applying pressure to his own temples. It’s certainly an inopportune time to be suffering lyrium withdrawal, his symptoms more obvious with the stresses of earlier.

Sorry.

Cass, she slowly rises having completed her ritual; her dispelling energies taper off as she comes to believe I’m well enough to keep calm. She wavers some, she’s tired — she’s likely been maintaining some form of that ritual since Cole knocked me out. As if I wasn’t feeling guilty enough, now I can add her physical exhaustion to the ever growing list. Gripping at the bedpost for support, she states to the room “Cullen…” in expectation.

“Men, give us the room,” he orders of his guardsmen, the agents, and medics.
“Commander…” one bold agent starts up but Cullen shuts her down, telling her “I don’t care what your orders were. Right now, you orders are to vacate.” It doesn’t go any further than that — those that aren’t Inquisition heads take their leave, albeit some begrudgingly. With only known entities now in the room, Cullen feels confident enough to voice his concern, asking “While I am glad you’re fine…you are fine, right?”

Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, on an exhale I reply “yeah. Just a flashback” and shaking my head in exasperation, I further comment “…thought they’d gotten the rest of me.”

“I can empathize. I…uh,” Cullen scratches at the back of his head, “I have visions as well, of well ermm…”

“You’ve got your share of demons…” I reply, blank faced and still convincing myself that this is reality.

“As do we all,” answers Cassandra, her hand gripping at the Commander’s shoulder both in reassurance and for support.

An uneasy silence falls upon the room as we acknowledge our common enemy, our varied pasts.

Cullen, his demons, his lyrium addiction.

Cassandra, her rogue mages, her perceived failures.

Me, my losses, my enemy in the Qun.

Trying to break the tension, hoping talk for the sake of talking is enough, Cullen asks, “Inquisitor…what happened out there?” Of course he falters in his attempt — the room feels just as, if not more, heavy.

“I uh…I apparently had a crisis of confidence,” I drawl out in elaboration.

“Oh, is that all?,” Cass dryly quips, stone-faced, though successfully cracking the somber air and causing Cullen to snort. Me, I just roll my eyes and can’t help but breathe out a smirk.

Yeah…this is real.

Continuing, she asks “so… what are we going to do?”

Propping myself up against the headboard to actually see the room, I comment “get back to Skyhold and kill Corypheus?” as if it were not some great and difficult task.

“Were it so simple…” Cullen points out while gripping at his sheathed sword, likely to keep his withdrawal shakes from being too obvious, “but after the attempt on your life, until Leliana has finished her interrogation, it’s unwise of us to move you out into the open. Until we know their numbers…”

“We are better off here for the time being,” Cass backs up Cullen’s assessment of our situation; she moves from his side to mine and taking a seat on the mattress edge, she adds “the open road is an unknown. At least here, we have defenses.”

Shrugging, I agree “makes sense. How long ya see us being here?”

The two look to each other and Cass concludes “several days” while simultaneously, Cullen answers “uncertain.” Annoyed at their inability to make a totally united front, Cass further adds
“the **point** being that we feel it best that you remain here.”

‘*But how many chapters are actually left in this story,*’ I puzzle while slow nodding to them in quiet agreement, ‘*how much time can we afford to waste here?*’

With a faint creak, Leliana slips into the room and shuts the door behind her with her heel. A fresh splash of red on her sleeve, her interrogation must have required quite some old school convincing. Even with obvious evidence of violence upon her, her tone is sweet and bouncy as she hums “our guest is surprisingly talkative.” Then noticing me, she smirks out “ah, you are awake!”

Cutting straight to the chase, Cass questions with narrowed eyes “they were willing to talk?,” suspicion heavy in her tone.

Almost cheerful, Leliana elaborates “while I do know a rather chatty former Crow, this assassin was nothing comparable. He was playing scared, too eager to share; he too overtly implied a larger number had infiltrated than seemed reasonable.”

“And your assessment?.” Cullen asks, leaning against the far wall now.

“He has overplayed his hand — either their numbers are significant…” Leliana begins, the quiet clockwork of her mind having already sussed out the most probable answer, “…or.”

“Yes, exactly,” I enter my opinion.

“My thoughts exactly,” she smiles out with a wicked and knowing glint to her eyes, “He is attempting to distract us by making us look to everyone as a suspect. The reality? I believe there only a handful of their agents left undiscovered.”

Stating the obvious, I say “So…ya just have to keep an eye on me to find them.”

“**ABSOLUTELY NOT,**” Cassandra argues, “**WE CANNOT USE HIM AS BAIT,**” while gripping at my forearm. She’s already lost me a number of times now — I understand her reticence. Leliana though, she does combat with her pleasant smile, arguing sweetly “Cassandra, bait is too crude a term…”

Cullen buries his face in his gloved palm as Cass commits to staring down Leliana with a sternness that could bend iron; her grip goes uncomfortably tight on my arm as she does.

“What I mean,” Leliana smiles and flutters her eyelashes, “…is yes, we will watch and wait for them to make their move.” Then in jest, she pouts at the Seeker “Oh, don’t make that face Cassandra — you will be close. Right here, in fact. And that certainly shouldn’t be an issue…”

Cass goes to argue but again Leliana shuts her down, pointing out “after all, you and the Inquisitor are on **familiar** terms, no?”

As Cullen stifles a sudden snicker, trying his hardest to keep from shaking, Cassandra’s cheeks light up in embarrassment, her eyes going wide. Her grip eases up only a bit. Sure, I’m blushing, but not from embarrassment — I’m blushing from my proximity to Cass.

Cassandra does have a response, albeit lacking articulation — she groans out a noise of disgust but that only tickles Leliana further, her lips curling ever so at the corners.

“So it’s agreed?,” Leliana asks the room.

“And if we’re wrong? We’re leaving him wide open,” Cullen presses, “Maker’s name, he was
abducted from the Winter Palace while we were just footsteps away. What’s to keep this from…” he trails off, upset by his and their own perceived ineptitude.

Cass seems to share his sentiments, nodding slightly to his words.

‘The difference is that we weren’t looking for em,’ I mentally note, ‘that..and I blinked while under the influence.’

She’s already won her argument and she’s about to explain why — they’ll see. Confident, Leliana educates the room, informing us “in Orlais, there were too many opportunities for disaster — the Assassination Plot, the politicking, the necessity to play The Game as Orlesians want it. We… overlooked a possibility amidst that chaos.” She flashes me an apologetic look as she continues, “...here, we control what opportunities are present and when. That is what grants us the upper hand — our stronghold, our people against this one unknown.” With that, she clasps her hands behind her back, awaiting a counter.

“Screw it. I’m in,” I ineloquently agree; I know what direction this meeting will take without my immediate intervention — only more back and forth until Leliana’s plan wins out. I’m just shortening the inevitable.

That, and I’ve enough of a headache already.

Cullen, he shakes his head and taps at the wall in consideration. Cass, she doesn’t look to appreciate the notion of using me as bait but she doesn’t say anything more in opposition — her brow simply furrows in concession as she quietly huffs out passively aggressively.

“Let us begin,” Leliana smiles out like a cat eyeing its prey.

Chapter End Notes

***Qunlat lessons***

Teth a, anaan esaam Qun = “Look here, another victory for the Qun”
Ashkost say hisra = “Find peace with your gods.”
Ebost issala = “return to dust”

...of course he has some PTSD. That’s not surprising. What IS surprising is that they have to stick it out in Caer Oswin a bit longer.

Already working on the next couple chapters! As always, THANKS FOR READING.
I had intended to bring up Dorian’s joining the fray but in the midst of assassination attempts, it seemed a paltry thing to fret over. That, and my outburst may have been the one thing that could save me from that attempt. Instead, I let the questions fall to the wayside as the Inquisition heads planned their stealthy trap. With charts, moldering blueprints, and blank parchment, they discussed and planned their pincer attack well into the night. By the time of their resolution, as I understood it, Leliana’s most trusted agents would take positions in rafters to play the role of her eyes and ears. The guardsmen posted outside my bedchamber will be absorbed and replaced by passing patrols. As an extra measure, patrols are to randomize their routes, to never walk the path of the previous patrol. A set number of guard groupings are to stay posted and vigilant at the higher lines of sight, to form the best of panopticons they can.

The intent of it all is to give the impression of us being on high alert with only a small number of exploits, the vulnerabilities intended but subtle. A good rogue will notice the weakness in the sets but likely won’t see the metaphorical noose tightening until it’s too late.

Additionally, I’m banned from having foods and drinks that haven’t been tested first for poisons.

_Fucking great._

It’s been several hours now since our meeting broke, just few hours more until the sun breaks the horizon. In that time, no matter how short, it’s been difficult not to feel like a caged animal.

But we’ve made do.

Cassandra, she took to pacing back and forth.

I’d join her in that pointless venture but I’m still feeling the effects of my earlier episode; despair still has its hooks in me. As such, I’ve done very little outside of lying on my side and reflecting upon what I thought I’d seen.

_Those horns.._

..._It felt so real..._

It isn’t until Cass asks “how are you, really?” that I realize how long I’ve been out of it — last I’d noticed, she was on the other side of the room whereas now she’s kneeling before me, studying my face. Blinking back the disorientation, I clap my palm to my dry eyes and rising, I wearily smirk out “regarding the attempts on my life, my episode, my other episode, the world ending monsters we have to stop, or didya just mean in general?”

“Yes,” she flatly replies.

_All of the above, then._

Scooting over so she can sit beside me, my eyes go distant as I begin, “honestly, I just wish the assassins would get here already. Waiting is the hardest part…”

Interrupting, she softly scolds “Dying is harder.”
“You know what I mean — besides, I used to be great at this.”

“What do you mean “used to be?” You are one of the most impressive people I’ve ever known,” she comments with her eyebrows rising slightly in annoyance.

“Remember when we first met?”

Huffing, she rolls her eyes and says “don’t remind me. Every chance you had, you would throw yourself at the demons with such fervor. I thought you mad.”

“You were about to kill me, threaten me, yell at me to drop my staff…,” I chuckle out through a half smile, nostalgia tasting sweet for the moment.

“Yes. I was…” she starts while searching for the right description, “…surprised. With no hesitation, you had slain a demon with only your fists. And you were smiling. You were actually smiling even with…ughhhhh there was so much ichor dripping off of you.” Knowing full well the connection I was building to, she concurs “but yes, you have been quite reckless in the time I have known you.”

“Some say reckless…” I say, pretending I still have both hands to use as scales weighing my words, “others might say brave…Me, I’m the one saying brave; I like to think it’s a good quality.”

“Yes. Some might say that,” she pokes fun at me. Wrapping her arm around my good one and intertwining her fingers though mine, she adds “but there are times to be reckless…and now is not that time. You are a target.”

“I’m always a target,” I state as fact, pursing my lips together after the fact.

Sighing heavily, Cass comments “hopefully, Leliana and Cullen will soon eliminate the threat.” Noticing my arched eyebrow though, she questions “what?”

“Something’s gonna go wrong. That’s just my luck lately.”

“For all our sakes, I hope not,” she states and rises from my side, “now, lie back. You have to keep up the illusion that you are…”

“Comatose. Yeah…yeah,” I grumble and fall backwards to the mattress and unenthusiastically, I comment flatly “yippee ki-yay.”

She shoots me a curious look, mouthing “yippee ki-yay” to herself, trying to decipher the meaning but after a few moments more, gives up and takes her position opposite the door.

*****

Dim midday light trickles in through the stained glass, muted reds and oranges intermittently shade the floor; the sky is overcast, looks right at the precipice of pouring.

Me, I haven’t slept. Not a chance.

For once, it’s a good thing sleep doesn’t come easy to me.

Cass though, she’s looking like she’s feeling its absence, her breathing just a bit more labored. But
she hasn’t complained from her chair in the corner, her sword unsheathed and laying across her lap. She wouldn’t — it’s the soldier in her. Hers is the task, the duty, of staying ever vigilant.

But in that silence, a knock at the door startles us both.

Through the door, Dorian sassily greets us to the tune of “Good morning! Just a deadly assassin, here. Do please open up.” Annoyed, sword in hand, Cass tears the door open and yanks the witty ‘vint into the room.

Trying not to snicker, he loudly and dramatically exclaims “Our mighty Inquisitor — why, oh why won’t you wake?! These are dire times and Thedas needs you oh sooo much!” even as Cass slaps at his shoulders to silence him.

“Dorian,” she hisses, “what ARE you doing?!”

“What? Too much ham, too overdone?,” he whispers through a smirk.

“Errrrrrrrrrrr,” my stomach creaks at the mention of ham.

Still annoyed, Cass berates him, aggressively whispering “you are going to blow the operation, you may have just…” but he cuts her off with a deadpan stare and quietly arguing, “hello? Just the flamboyant one here. Was simply playing to the stereotype.”

“Uh…” I quietly and curiously interject, “but is there actually ham?”

Both go quiet but only Dorian recoups by fishing a bottle of red wine from the inner pockets of his robes. Holding it aloft like a prized treasure, he quips “no, but I do, however, come bearing gifts of the liquid sort.”

“What else are you hiding’ in there?,” I ask, surprised I hadn’t noticed the weight in his pocket.

“Mmm,” he hums, “buy me dinner first, why don’t you” as Cass scoffs and rolls her eyes.

“Walked right into that,” I mumble while softly shaking my head.

“But what are you doing here?,” Cassandra questions of the other mage.

“Oh, right. Our most secretive of ladies told me to swap out with you for…” he begins but even as Cass sternly states “No” he continues with “Yes. It’s my turn to watch over our sleeping beauty and it’s your turn to go out, talk up the important people, and catch up on some rest.” With finality, he states “My shift starts now.”

Concern and worry furrowing her brow, she fiddles with her sword pommel as she mulls over whether or not to actually depart. So of course Dorian takes the sincere moment to make light of the situation, darkly joking “relax. If something does happen, I can always bring him back. You know, being a necromancer and all that.”

“Ughhhhh,” Cass groans and looks ready to gag, her eyes flashing to me and I suppose imagining me as any number of the mummified undead she witnessed growing up in Nevarra living with a Mortalitasi. Not relishing the idea, she storms from the room after shooting Dorian a death glare. Choosing to leave him in the dark regarding Cass’ childhood — it’s not mine to share — I merely pinch my lips together in silence. But Dorian breaks that, like he does most everything; he whips about and genuinely asks “Were you truly going to slap off my mustache?!”

Keeping it vague, I simply shrug and smirk before actually replying “Can’t even imagine it, you
with a naked face.”

“Absolutely mortifying, I know,” he quips, “But I must say, it certainly felt like you almost did when you went all purple eyes on us.” Then going serious, he questions while leaning upon his skull adorned staff, “Speaking of which, what was that? Glowing eyes, that’s not typically a good thing…you know…because of exploding…things.”

“Aw, ya didn’t think it was pretty?”

“Pretty murderous, for certain,” he replies, “really though, you’re not going to explode, right?”

“Again? Probably not.”

Snickering to himself despite the grave potential, he comments “how reassuring.” Dragging a chair over, plopping himself into it, he props his feet up upon the footboard of the bed as he uncorks the wine and takes a swig. Wiping the excess from his lips and passing me the bottle, he remarks indelicately “not a great year, but wine is wine. Speaking of not-so-great years, hows the uh…arm? What’s that like.”

“Imagine you have four limbs.”

“Okay, picturing it now,” he smirks easily.

“Nope. Now you have three and a half,” I revise to his immediate grimacing, “…shit, I still feel it sometimes.”

“I’ve heard of such things,” Dorian waxes more somberly, “…people, they still feel what’s missing, like it never left. When I was a boy, I’d oftentimes hear that from my countrymen returning from the frontlines.”

“Phantom limb syndrome,” I inform, flexing my half an arm and somewhat feeling the pull of tendons where there now aren’t any.

“Apt name,” he sighs before fishing yet another bottle from his robes and proclaiming “sorry about the mood, perhaps this will help.”

“Two is better than one,” I quip but Dorian takes it a step further, joking “or in your case, one and a half is better than one.”

“Pfft, bad joke,” I reply through a winsome smile, enjoying his dark humor.

“Drink more, then we can make alllll the bad jokes we want,” he sasses, “About you. Not me. You’re the focus here.”

“Asshole,” I chuckle to which he replies devilishly “a handsome asshole. Oh, we are talking about you, right?”

Trying not to get wine down the wrong pipes, I choke out “can those assassins just get here already?” while smacking at my chest to alleviate the pain. Eyebrows quirked, Dorian takes a swig before answering “Assassins: never where you want them to be.”
Woah! It’s been a year since I first began writing this story. How time flies when you’re caught up in the whims and whys of characters, plot, and development.
As we drain the last drops from our respective bottles, having already killed our first, second, and thirds, I presume that to be an end of our day drinking.

No such chance, not in the company of a Tevinter Magister with a deep resentment of his upbringing.

Dorian swiftly corrects my flawed reasoning as he slips another bottle from his robes. With a smirk on his lips and his cheeks maintaining their now rosy glow, he utters “surely you didn’t think that was all. I am alwaaaays prepared.”

‘Where was THAT one?,’ I question in curious concern — its as if his tailor wove enchantments into each and every pocket. Uncorking the dark bottle with but a gesture, his staff unnecessary for such simple magic, he takes a deep swig, eyes me incredulously, and chuckles out “Ohhh no, this is mine.”

“You call yourself a respectable drinker?”

“Oh! You would dare question my honor?,” he quietly jokes with enthusiasm, feigning upset.

“Drunk honor?,” I ask with an arched brow.

Another heavy pull from his bottle, the edges of his lips already stained red, he pauses a moment with a soured look before answering “ih..is there any other sort?”

“Then that.”

“Fiiiine, deplete an honest mage’s meager supplies,” he groans as he inexplicably reveals yet another bottle. My question is how he’s toting around all these bottles without it weighing him down or showing in the slightest. As he passes it my way, still reticent to use magic, I take and ply my physical strength as a means of opening it. Tightly corked, it’s tough to open but I manage with modest success, only minimal chunks of cork crumble into the red contents.

However, it’s not my intention to actually drink it — I’m most of three bottles in already. I’m not keen to sedate myself, not eager to match Dorian’s inebriation.

Sitting in silence, we match swigs or so it might seem to my increasingly drunk friend.

Drink.
Swig.
Gulp.
Glug.
Slurp.
Down.
Trying to fake a drunken demeanor, I slur some as I ask “eyyy. Whin I was fightin…uh” while lazily blinking unevenly, “Viv! I was fightin er. Why’d you go an jump in?”

“Mmm?” He groans out sluggishly, his cheek lifting off the bedpost, “ah was helpeeng.”

Low toned, I reply “Wuh’d’ya mean?”

Nearly falling out of his chair, he stretches out and tries to mash his fingers against my mouth, tries to shush me, stress that I’m too loud — I’m not. I’ve been whispering this whole time. Slapping his hand away from my face, I push “C’mon, Dorian” while losing some slur.

“She thought it’d be good setup. Trickum into attack. She,” he hiccups, “Ghost boy wiz watching someone she suspect...ed. Past tense now. Mmm.”

“She?”

“Elee..Leliana! Wanted to test you nd lure out fanatical assholes of the Qun. A two for one,” he replies casually, twirling a finger through the air as he does.

*What? That’s all it was? Why keep me in the dark about that?*

Putting back on my fake drunken attitude, I growl “Cole a babysitter? Assassinass got an arrow off.”

Gaping, he shouts “I know!” but realizing his error, winces, shushes himself and repeats “I know” as an abrasive whisper. Slurring his words, he lets slips “You distracted him — he tell me you.. no, not you, him. He tell..told me he was worried aboushu. Something...your thoughts were upsetting him?”

...so maybe Leliana didn’t tell him everything?

“So that was the…,” I start before realizing Dorian is snoozing away in his chair, his head lolling to the side uncomfortably. Dropping all pretense, I grumble to myself “Leliana, ya gotta start talking to me.” As Dorian snorts hard in his stupor, I whisper despondently to him “exactly.”

*****

Dorian had slipped into a drunken stupor for a time but fortunately it was Varric who came to relieve him for the evening shift. While he wasn’t the most alert of company, he had certainly made it more interesting…

...well, interesting and somewhat informative.

Varric though, after he splashed Dorian awake and snuck him out, he set up shop in the corner, a chair and desk facing the doorway. Bianca, she lies across the wooden surface, primed with an explosive bolt, her deadly tip directed at any who would seek entrance uninvited. Reading spectacles on, a quill to his lips as he ponders what to write, he has a small stack of parchment before him.

*Tax forms. Of all the things to bring...you chose taxes*

Murmuring his thoughts under his breath, I keep hearing bits and pieces that sound like “damn the
guilds” or “allocate those funds for this…” or “any dependents? Yeah..Bartrand.”
I’m not about to interrupt but fortunately, he feels my eyes on him; without looking up from his paperwork, he asks quietly “Knockout, something I can help you with?”

Whispering my reply in case of eavesdroppers, I return with “pfft, not really. Just gettin’ antsy. Want some killers to make an appearance. Then we can all go home.”

“Oh no,” he gravels, still reviewing his paperwork, “let assassins come on someone else’s watch. Besides, it’s only been, what — a day since the attempt? Try to space that stuff out.”

A heavy sigh escapes me in response and I roll back into bed.

*Why try to kill me when I can just waste away in here?*

Trying another topic, anything to fill the silence outside of his quill scratching, I whisper “been a while — ya hear from Hawke?”

Still not looking up, inking initials and dates, he sighs “uhh..ah yeah. Took your advice. She’s back with Daisy…something about her wanting to make an enchanted wooden leg for Hawke…it would bend like one but it would also flower in the Spring? Hard to tell if she was serious or not. But, point is, they’re good. Just..traveling, protecting wayward elves, best they can, that sort of thing.”

”Hear anything about Weisshaupt?”

”nnnnnope.”

“How’s uh…Skyhold?”

“It’s a castle. In the mountains,” he replies, stating the painfully obvious.

“And the people inside Skyhold?”

“Well, they’re inside it,” he hums, a playful smirk curling his lips even as he focuses all too much on the documents before him.

*Really, Varric? Really?*

I can’t, not today, not this brand of back and forth — instead, I begin zoning out since he’s going to continue being so obstinate and vague

*****

Who would’ve thought spending time with Varric could be so…well, boring. His typical wise-cracking, know it all, roguish attitude has been replaced with a responsible dad facade.

Im not certain how, but I blame Hawke.

*Yeah, that feels reasonable.*

After hours of silence, and him having moved along from finances to literature, I finally question anew, asking “so those people of Skyhold…”
“Mmhmmm,” he absently hums.

“Of those people,” I start and pause to which Varric replies “Chuckles, Ruffles, your’s truly? We’re aaaaaahhhll good.”

Broaching the subject, I cautiously ask “and uh…how’s… how’s Rasa?”

A pause, he needs a moment to ponder before he answers “Little elf girl? She’ll be better off when we finally get you back there,” and grumbling, actually taking the moment to cast me a side glance, “took a lot of talking her down after you were snatched — surprised she didn’t try an execute every server, maid, or caterer in Orlais.”

“That bad…,” I wince in statement; I know her and her violent tendencies all too well even if it feels like years since I last saw her.

I shouldn’t have asked.

shouldn’t have.

Did though.

*Can these fuckers just make another attempt already?*

“But at least she’s not in a holding cell — Nightingale put her to work.”

‘At least she’s not?‚’ I ponder for some deeper meaning before asking “There’s someone in the cells?”

“well, yeah, the crazies, the villains…,” he starts and trails off.

“And.”

“Fanatics…”

“You’re being evasive.”

Sighing, he murmurs “and maybe..Tiny and…..and Hero or whatever his actual name is,” looking hurt.

“What,” I ask deadpan, twisting upright and squinting hard in disbelief.

’’They both sort of turned themselves in,” he reveals, leaning into his gloved palm for head support as he ponders the implications.

*Damnit Bull! God damnit Thom!,’ bangs through my skull like a gunshot. It’s the last straw; Lunging to my feet, I rush the door as Varric scrambles from his chair after me, ink spilling as he does so.

*click*

“Afraid I can’t let you do that,” he says as my fingers clutch at the pull, something in my gut telling me he’s got Bianca trained on me. “.holy, magic, or whatever you are, I won’t hesitate to put a bolt in your ass.” With great effort, I release my grip — the metal of the handle lightly steams as I let go.

An unintentional flare, I feel the anchor’s irritation matching my own.
“No offense, but the Seeker is scarier,” he retorts, “now would you kindly get back to pretending you’re halfway to dead?”

Dragging my feet, I do just that — I’m not about to willingly defy an explosive bolt.

Not from this range.

“Good,” he grumbles out while laying Bianca back down, “seriously though, I’m hoping to get through the night without assassins making their move. Don’t make it any easier for them.” At that, he takes to grumbling under his breath as he dabs at the spilled ink and ruined pages.

Seething still, but feeling just a bit of guilt, I offer my condolences, muttering “sorry” and waving an open hand toward his setup.

“Oh, you only ruined a love scene,” he quips sarcastically, “Those practically write themselves.”

No words, I simply grimace.

Only going so far as to smear ink, he tosses the blackened rag haphazardly and dropping his hands at his side, his shoulders slumping as his eyebrows furrow incredulously, he questions “What in the Maker’s invisible ass was your plan? Storm out half naked, barefoot, and hunt down the killers yourself?”

Realizing how stupid it would’ve been to exit now, I wince out “honestly, didn’t really have a plan.”

“Oh, well, that makes it sooo much better,” he berates me while sorting good pages from bad ones.

*****

Early morning, just past midnight.

Still no sleep.

I seem to trade one inability for another, an inability to eat for an inability to rest. But at least this is a return to some sense of normalcy for me. My eyes are dry though, the smoke and oily haze of torches and candles are finally getting to me.

Amidst the shuffling and rattling of the guardsmen posted outside, there comes a knock from outside — with an inaudible sigh, I lie back in bed to maintain Leliana’s ruse. Gently clutching Bianca and glancing my way to ensure I’m ready, Varric calls through the door “It’s polite to announce yourself.”

“Open the door, Varric.”

“Whom may I ask is calling?,” he taunts while undoing the lock and drop bar.

“You know who I am. Now open up.”

As the door partially opens, he smirks out “oh my, Seeker, you should’ve said it was you,” and closing it swiftly behind her, he’s met now only by her disgusted scoff and an eye roll before she asks loudly enough for the guards outside to overhear “Has there been any change to his
condition?"

“Nope. Been out as long as I’ve been holed up in here,” he replies, playing along while collecting his papers.

“All the more reason we stay in this castle. On the open road…”

“Yeah, I ah, I know. We get him out of this room and he’ll be easy pickings.”

_Is..is this scripted?_

“Cullen and Leliana agree, we must stay the course until he wakes.”

“Hmmmm,” Varric grumbles out with his items now safely secured back in his satchel, Bianca in hand, “Makes sense.” At that, with sword in hand, she escorts Varric out through the door and slamming it shut behind him, she turns the lock and drops the security bar back into place. Sliding her sword back in its sheath, the necessary measures having been reset with the door, she paces over to me and placing her hand upon my chest, whispers softly “I apologize for how long I was, but there were important matters to discuss.”

Peeking out through one eye, I return sarcastically “let me guess, another plan where I’m bait?”

With a heavy sigh, she sits at the edge of the bed and asks “how much do you already know?,“ her eyebrows knitting together in regret and her shoulders slumping.

“I know that combat exercise was meant to draw out potential assassins…” I begin but she cuts me off, interjecting “it was a dangerous plan, we know. We did not expect things to go as far as they did…we should have, but we didn’t.”

Propping myself up on my elbows to meet her stare, I grumble out “Don’t care about that — I’m always in danger. We already talked about it. What annoys me is that no one bothered to fill me in on the plan. I don’t appreciate being in the dark…” while noting my hypocrisy, I amend my statement, adding quickly “yeah yeah, I know I left you all in the dark when I vanished the first time but…god damn it…fine, we’re even.”

“Still though, I understand your concern.”

“Still pissed even if we’re even. What if I’d blown up or torn open a sec..third breach?!,” I aggressively whisper while counting fingers on my one hand.

“…third?,” she questions.

“Meh, the second one didn’t count — it was only half the size of the first one.”

Her eyes widening, her brow rising, she stares in stunned disbelief.

“I closed it,” I comment nonchalantly, “can we pretend I didn’t bring that up.”

“What of the demons!?”

“Nah.”

“Nah,” she repeats, stressing my monosyllabic response, frustrated.

“Likely too scared to come through.”
“Demons,” she slowly states with a look of angry incredulity taking over, “scared.”

“Cause of what I did to my captors,” I answer vaguely, staring at nothing with a stormy look. Trying to recall what I’d divulged during my debriefing, my attitude simmers some as I question aloud “I told Leliana. I told her? Yeah, pretty sure I did.”

*Sedation. Check. Secret base, check. Blood magic, nope. Becoming a nightmare? Also nope. Lesser breach?...now it’s a check,* I lament mentally, ‘*fuck.*’

Trying not to grit her teeth, her fingers digging into my chest with her ever tightening grip, she demands “Tell me” in an angry hush.

“So…we’re not gonna pretend that...,” I try to joke off but she strikes me in the shoulder and growls “No. We are not pretending,” somehow adding a sneer to the word itself.

“Full story? There time for that?,” I ask in all seriousness, one eye squinting; releasing me from her death grip, she sternly explains “we act based on what information we possess. If you do not tell us what we need to know, how can you expect us to act accordingly. So, I have time. Now talk.”

“Please put away your angry face,” I smirk, trying to defuse the tension though it doesn’t work. She simply replies “what you have to say will determine my expression.”

‘Worth a shot,’ I mentally argue albeit it futile. Mushing my head back against the pillows, horns uncomfortably raking the headboard, I begin my truer account of Estwatch,

“You know where I killed the Nightmare during Adamant?”

Stern, she replies “yes.”

“My mind was trapped there. It may have been a few weeks but for me in there, it was eternity. Every time I was asleep or under the knife…,” I grimace and look distant at the thought, “pretty much any time they weren’t trying to torture me, beat me, convince me I work for them…”

Her eyes soften as she states “They tried to convert you.”

“Hard emphasis on “tried.” And I showed them the consequences of trying to mess with my head… but getting back on point, I was always trapped in the empty white…giant nothing. An expanse. The Empty. Time didn’t exist, there was nothing, and no escape. But it protected me, kept them out of here,” I whisper while tapping a finger to my skull. “They couldn’t get in but I couldn’t get out. I think I set it up that way, more reflex than actual strategy…”

“Elaborate,” she says, her face unreadable.

“How many mages d’ya know that can actually have a conversation with themselves? I don’t mean talking to a mirror, I mean physically talking to an aspect of yourself that replies and has insight...whatever the hell it was. Well, I can. Could. Right up until they chopped my arm off. Then I was alone for years.”

Cass sits in silence, weighing my words.

”Then there was that Nightmare I’d killed — wasn’t truly dead. Apparently most spirits and demons never actually die, they always come back eventually. Well, that giant spider monster reincarnated as a scared little kid.

“They don’t...” she begins but I finish with “die? No, not according to Solas. Anyway, the kid
trusted me, was really just sorry for everything it had ever done. But that was Spook.”

“Spook,” she repeats.

“Nickname I gave em — Spook sacrificed itself so I could wake up from my prison. True death killed itself to help me. And when I did…”

With a sharp inhale, she stammers out “y-you made a deal? With a demon?!”

“What? No. No exchanges made,” I stress, almost insulted, “Spook was…tired of being scared, tired of not helping, just sorry. Now it’s dead dead — gave me an out and then I killed those Qunari monsters.”

Eyes narrowed in concern, she questions “how,” asking for the specifics — how I killed them, how a Fade creature freely gave me power.

“Ya know how you can rally and improve allies with that Templar..stuff? Kinda the same principle but instead of lyrium, kid used itself as the fuel.”

“And your captors.”

“Wasn’t all there...I was a storm. Blew out the anti magic shackles, became a conduit to the angriest part of me. They bled, they burned, their brains melted. Most were torn to shreds. But,” I pause for a breath, “a few escaped, they got away with my arm.” Picking up the pace, speeding along, I say “That...I lost it, exploded; I was all rift magic and hellfire. I...I woke up next to the smoldering crater, a breach just overhead chewing up the ruins. I panicked, tried to blink onto the dreadnaught, failed, almost drowned, but once I remembered that the breach was still active, I locked it up. No more breach. It’s dead. Not even a sliver in the air.”

An eyebrow twitching, her eyes shut in consternation as she pinches the bridge of her nose, she growls “No. More. Half truths.”

Grimacing, I silently nod along while pursing my lips but that’s not enough, she jabs me with her fingers and threatens lowly “say it.”

Like a reprimanded child, my insides squirm in the face of her ire but I manage to eek out “al..alright.”

“Alright?”

A yawn from the corner distracts me and she sees my eyes dart — she whips about with sword unsheathed only to find nothing, for nothing is all she’ll see in this room. I however see just fine, Imshael has slipped his cage and now sits with his feet propped up on the desk. As Cassandra questions through hushed tones “Did you see something?,” the demon speaks over her for my ears only, asking “lovers quarrel?”

Replying to both, I whisper “no.”

‘You just promised her,’ one voice in my head whispers as another urges ‘a lie of omission isn’t a half truth.’ Meanwhile, a third voice whispers in warning ‘Technicalities will be the death of us.’

“Oh, don’t mind me,” he stresses, “I’m just enjoying my freedom. Your mental defenses really do crumble when you don’t sleep...so thanks for that.” Bitter over being caged, he counts the seconds to the drumming of his black gloved fingers against the side of the chair. Annoyed by me, Cassandra retreats to a chair near the door. Fiddling with a small pack strapped to her leg, she
withdraws a silken scrap, a whetstone, and a vial of amber oil. Resigned to silence, tired of arguing, she takes to sharpening her sword in the flickering light of the brazier next to her.

The demon snarks out sarcastically “you were right, totally not a lover’s quarrel.”

“Shut up,” I hiss at him under my breath as Cass slides the whetstone. She pauses to glare at me, convinced I’d said something but she doesn’t bring it up. A moment more of hard staring and she returns to her chore.

The room falls into uneasy silence with only her sword speaking up.

A minute passes.

And another.

The room slowly smells of oil, its aroma a dusty sweet.

The minutes stretch into an hour.

Her hands pause in their task — the whetstone slides to a silent halt, no longer does her blade edge sing of its own cutting potential. She sighs and looks up and over at me, the silence only furthering the distance between us.

“I know you are in danger…and I am still upset with you” She comments.

The room falls quiet yet again.

“but I do understand that you must take risks that no one else can, because you often are the only one who can...” she notes. I await quietly for her and she finally adds “this..this is the calmest we have had. We have seldom…,” but she drifts off in search of her next words.

Hoping I’m helping, I offer with a lopsided smirk “Had a chance to talk? Yeah. Funny how a threat on my life makes things easier.”

“You joke,” she huffs lightly, “You were gone for so long. Even the brief time we had in the Winter Palace was rushed. And before Adamant, you weren’t well off…”

“I remember-errrm, I remember the parts I was conscious for.”

“My point,” she breathes out wearily, “Before that, you were recovering from self inflicted injuries.”

“Napalming Envy. Painful, but a reasonable trade off to get rid of that monster.”

“And I don’t disagree, but as I’ve said, we haven’t exactly had a moment of peace…not since the Hinterlands,” she starts and pauses before realizing and adding “…and even that was hectic to say the least,” her brow quirked as she does.

Has it really been that ba...how the hell am I alive?

“As if reading my thoughts, she remarks “you have been through much. We all have, certainly, but you more so.

I remain quiet, even my breathing is measured.

“I just want to keep you safe,” she huffs out and grinds the whetstone harshly along her blade.
My mouth fails me and I can’t help but think “god I’m an asshole. All she ever wants to do is help and I make it worse...’

“And I’m not one to disagree with you on that but you know,” the demon casually calls out to me, “it really is quiet out there. One might say too quiet.”

‘I get it, you think this is awkward,’ I think at the demon but he replies aloud “For me, it is, but that’s not what I meant. It actually is too quiet.”

‘Is it?’, I wonder as my ears perk, straining to hear through the door from the sanctum of my bedding. Nothing but the rhythmic grinding of stone on steel, no noises beyond.

Not even a murmur or a cough.

I creep from my bed and let slip “oh hell” as Cass eyes me, trying to understand my intent but I pantomime for her to continue sharpening her steel as I nod towards the door. Only staggering for a moment, she continues her pacing, watching the door now with narrowed eyes as I slink just out of shadow’s reach of the crack beneath the door — whomever is or isn’t outside, I don’t want them knowing my exact location.

But then there it is — a soft clinking of metal on metal.

_Picking the lock? No..they’re taking too long for it to be thaaa....oh shiiiiit,’ I gawk in realization as my heart clenches, ‘it’s a bomb. Oh fuck. It's a bomb. They're setting up a bomb._

_FUHHHHHHHHH._’ Not bothering to consider the repercussions, I lunge forward and strike the door with an open palm — the anchor eagerly detonates on impact, blowing both the heavy wooden door and bar off their hinges from the sudden blast and careening wildly into any and all just on the other side. A gasp, a whine, the sickening crunch of bone twisting in response, in an instant, all is revealed.

Armed corpses litter the ground, the guards posted to my door, the stone slick with their lifeblood.

The air is dank with the taste of pennies.

One among the dead, the doctor from earlier, only now he lies in a crumpled heap, his neck bending very much the wrong way — he was alive but a second ago, his cheeks still have color to them.

Assassin.

Another though, the last alive, an elf boy with clipped ears, he scrambles for balance, to trigger the blackpowder’s primer, but a nasty gash across his forehead is the obvious source of his disorientation. But even so, the explosive is less than stable.

Its gears click and twitch, tempted to roar with fire and death, the parallels between us undeniable.

A pin drops...

...another click.

Adrenaline burns through me.

Cass is stuck rounding the bend, sword in hand, her roar a slothful one as my mind races.

The first spark, it dances slowly off the bomb.
The elf struggles with his dagger, nearly at a standstill, stuck trying to unsheath it unsuccessfully.

I feel the mark surge again, ready and primed to fire as well.

In but the span of a single breath, the scene speeds back up but the anchor and I work in splendid synchronicity as I snap my fingers just as it pulses. A green bolt flicks from my hand to the elf, shimmering through him and killing the wild look in his eyes.

As his light fades, his mouth goes slack, a whispered insult escapes him for none to hear.

An unmistakable sloshing churns from within him.

An instant more, he peels apart as the growing rift splits him open — both halves balance awkwardly, the portal slurps his innards in most eagerly, bones, intestines and all. As the vacuum’s pull increases, the boy’s dead eyes suck out through the fresh opening in his skull and for a moment, it’s but hollow sockets that stare back at me, empty.

Another blink and he’s gone entirely, his corpse torn inside out and into the rip between worlds.

The gravity jumps, the green mouth grows with every bite.

Limp limbs flapping in the breeze, the doctor’s broken body whips off into the tiny hellmouth.

And then the door.

The explosive.

A torch.

The corpses of guards.

And even flecks and shards of stone from the walls.

Hungry, its mouth splitting wide in a terrible way, it sucks at everything and everyone.

Dead, alive, inanimate, it cares not.

In the distance down the darkened hall, beyond its wavering outer aura, I spy Leliana’s agents — clad in black, they race from the shadows with urgency.

“STAY BACK DAMNIT!,” I roar at them over the gale force shrieking of the rift.

I know how dangerous, how desperate a situation I’m in.

Somewhere, alarm bells are ringing — the fortress awakens.

But I can’t have more lives on my conscience, not theirs. Even sworn to the Inquisition, I don’t want their deaths. I want their lives, fulfilled and worthwhile, working towards the safety of the people in this realm...

But they ignore my warning, rushing in to help regardless, to lay down their lives if need be.

Frantically, I yell “AGHHHHH JUS CHARGE ALREADY!” at the anchor as I struggle to keep myself from being pulled in, hoping to slam the hellmouth shut before anyone else is hurt. Fingers clawing at the stone floor, no traction as I slip on blood, I’m losing ground but an iron fist grabs my robe collar as a flash of steel whips overhead and into the rift.
Her sword, she let it fly so she can keep me from vanishing again.

Peering behind me even as I’m threatened to be swallowed whole, I see her — Cass, all strength, fury, and smoldering beauty incarnate, but even still, her other hand trembles at the doorway as she struggles to keep us both from harm. From within those vivid depths of the rift, vicious thunder booms and illuminates us all the more. Likely, it was the swallowed Qunari bomb, its tremendous force felt even on this side as the floor quakes.

“CHARGE FASTER!,” I roar again to no avail as the agents inch closer and closer to aid us.

The anchor won’t stop frantically pulsing, screaming “no” in its own way, panicked as much as I am.

I feel it charging, trying its damndest to draw power from the Fade.

It’s not enough, certainly not fast enough.

Teeth grit, Cass cries out “INQUISITOR!” but her fingers fail, the pull’s too much and the floor too slick.

With a flash, the maw tears wide open, a terrible grin to the other side.

Consuming tendrils lash onto everything and everyone nearby.

A sharp inhale, we’re devoured.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Cassandra, every calm is just the eye of one storm ever circling the Inquisitor.

You should know that by now.

THANKS FOR READING.
In an instant, the Fade mouth spits us into open air — with wind whipping at my skin, the robe flapping and offering little resistance, my eyes blur and sting. No ground to catch us, we plummet through a nebulous sky angry at our arrival. It thunders and spits lightning, furious that the waking world would dare gift such an unappetizing thing as a bomb.

And we’re but more of the same it seems.

It’s only because Cass was holding tight to my collar that we haven’t been torn from each other. Even shouting with her lips to my ear, I can’t hear her over the shrill scream of wind. With my arm wrapped about her and hers about me, I squint against the harshness, the force of it all, and miles still below us, I spy the darkened ground.

Between us and it, corpses fall, droplets of their blood turning to mist trailers at these speeds.

‘Last time, the Fade caught us. Will it catch us now?! Shit, no, we’re going too fast,’ I try to process even as floating pieces of debris pelt us; with my jaw clenched while growling “HRRRRRRRR” at the sudden shock, the anchor flares back to life, recharged

We hit ground, we’re paste.

Dark shapes flit and spin in my periphery.

‘Agents,’ I realize — we weren’t the only ones devoured. Squinting against the darkened miasma of a sky, I spy three of Leliana’s people.

...wait.

Scratch that, I count two — the third, there’s a streamer of blood escaping from back of his skull like something popped it; his body falls limply through the air. The other two, they plummet at equal speeds just out of arms reach but they are very much alive.

Every second throws us closer to an unforgiving ground.

Locking my arm in place around her, I breathe the best I can, summon the energy necessary and will a barrier to life. The mark crackles, pouring what it can out and over us both.

‘It’s not enough,’ I imagine, ‘need even more.’ Drawing deep without reservation, urging the mark for more even as I try to tap into my own mana, I can’t fret the consequences, not here, not while lives are on the line.

I can’t stress about what havoc I may or may not wreak.

Whether it’s the rapidly shifting atmospheres or my own attempt to rouse my mana, a dampness forms in my nostrils.

Blood, a fresh nosebleed; it couples with lightheadedness and leaves me dizzied as I try to extend the barrier. As loud as I can muster, I roar “hold tight” to Cass and release her, leaving her to keep us together as I stretch forth my hand as a means of reaching for the others.

No good, they’re too far out of reach.

But I know what I can do — imagining a revenant, how they telekinetically pull their foes, I
imagine instead how to draw friends to me without breaking them.

*You’ve done this before. You can do it again.*

Every thought staggered, I can’t rush the process as I try to persuade my magic to keep calm — thinking ‘*Slow. Easy now. Not...too...tight*’ with great measure, imagined fingers clutching carefully about the closer of the two.

Foot by foot.

Seconds pass.

I haul him to me and release only when I feel him hugging my backside.

One down, one to go.

Attempting the same with the second living agent, the mark acting as my substitute mana source, I feel my grasp on her strengthen but drawing her to me, disaster happens. In an instant, a floating length of spire spears upward through the poor girl — locked relative to my position, I feel every shudder as she’s torn down its length in a shower of viscera until I manage to sever the link between us.

“*NO no NO no NO FUCK dammit GOD FUCK!*,” I roar uselessly in panic and pain as I twist the anchor’s output entirely into bolstering the shield around us three, even as the magic recoils through me and into my very bones.

Pain — we’re old friends by now, I can deal just fine with it and deal with it I shall.

Nothing will stop me from saving Cass and this stranger both hugging tightly to me — green sparks flying as the barrier grinds against the sliver of a spire stretching into the endless sky, I feel that telltale heat behind my pupils. My rage is so palpable, I can taste the copper on my tongue.

‘*Not another. No one! None,*’ blazes in my skull, my only thoughts as energy folds and folds again, weaving and tightening about us all in a rich gradient of emerald...

And I can’t be certain, but I swear I see a streak of purple.

We strike hard, a cannonball to the earth, but again the Fade throws me for a loop — we plunge beneath thick dust-coated waters, stagnant for ages until now. Airtight, this shield holds well against the murky depths but I didn’t do all this just to sink to the bottom of a lake.

‘*I DON’T DO WATER LEVELS!*,” I stress. Still those pinpoints sear in my eyes and with that gut wrenching concern, we immediately shift direction, a dramatic reversal as telekinesis tears us back towards the surface and shoreline. But much farther below, something stirs, its form scraping and whining like steel girders crying in pain, every twitch of its hulking mass a slow thunder in the deep. What was determination shooting us to safety is now fear.

Breaking the surface like a missile, we scrape the burnt, rocky shores and my Fade-vessel ruptures — thrown, we scatter and roll just as the earth quakes and the surface roils; a fleshy skyscraper, chunks of chitinous plating jut from its body at random, a great and terrible leech of a beast emerges screeching as torrents of mud come pouring from its gaping maw. It rises high, nearly meeting the scattering of floating spires.

“What..Andraste protect us,” Cassandra wavers with eyes wide, hesitant to rise from the ground.
Apparently deaf and blind, no eyes or ears to speak of, the monster pays us no mind but instead waits eagerly for scraps of flesh still falling from the sky to drop into its cavernous mouth. Mere morsels to a thing of that scale, I doubt the pieces of much substance but so long as it doesn’t find its attention on us, I’m satisfied. I’m content to simply backing far, far away from these rocky shores and sharp sands.

“Every…one…okay?,” I huff out, daunted by the sheer size of the lake creature, “that thing…is…what the hell is it!?”

Cassandra, though, she realizes the bigger issue long before I do — slowly rising, she groans in frustration and disgust with a shiver “even if that…ughh….thing wasn’t there, we would still be unable to reach the rift.”

“And….damn,” I groan, shaking my head, “that’s a timed one — countdown’s about to ru…” but before I can even finish, the forged portal snaps shut leaving only a glimmer of green, a faint scar against an even greener sky. Wiping away the blood from my upper lip with a knuckle and a sharp exhale, I grumble dejectedly “never mind.”

“What do you mean never mind? You aren’t allowed to give up,” Cass starts arguing but falls from focus as a singular bumblebee flits past my face — as its wings beat and the small buzzing drone becomes the center of my universe, I hear “follow” in my ears.

One word, just a word, but its voice is my own.

I know this game.

As soon as that happens, the buzzing fuzzball vanishes from view, leaving me not entirely confident that it ever truly existed.

Cass’ words come pouring back in, arguing “...nd the Inquisition!”

I admit, I have no idea what she said in the middle there, however, my eyes lock in on something else entirely — a clanking of suit armor, a knight of blazing orange, it jogs to us from around the lake with a hand firmly gripping at a sheathed sword. In warning, the soldier gruffly declares “Ho, otherworlders. I witnessed your arrival by foul magics. Return from whence you came, this is no safe haven.”

As Cassandra takes a defensive stance, fists at the ready as the quiet agent slips free a single blade from his chest sheath, I question bluntly “Can you fly?”

Confused, the spirit replies “What!? I am no bird, of course I cannot fly! What would lead you to..” but noting my tired and wry expression, he remarks “ohhhh, sarcasm. A mortal device. Such won’t help you here.”

“Who are you!,” Cassandra yells the important question, irritated by our predicament.

As a slow flame rolls along its visor, its eyes glowing with equal heat, it declares “Vigilance — mine is the duty to watch over this wicked leviathan until the end of days, to ensure it never escapes this flooded crater, that it never finds freedom of its shackles.”

Stepping between the Seeker and the Spirit to act as a buffer against further hostility, I utter “alright, look, I’m Hunter, this is Cassandra, and he’s…uh…ermmm” but I stammer and stare blankly at Leliana’s agent. In silent response, the black clad elf throws me the forks gesture, a favorite of Sera’s, a wordless “fuck you” accompanied by a mean smirk.
“Shhhure, Okay, “ I continue before Vigilance can interrupt, “wanna help? Get a message through that,” I say while pointing to the remains of the rift.

“You have need of a courier.”

“Yeah, gotta tell our allies on the other side that we’ll be finding another way home,” I tell of our intent, “oh, and that we’re mostly alive.”

Puzzling, his thick gloved finger pressed to his heroic cleft chin, he reasons “Hold. I may have means of assistance.” At this, he pulls an equally orange horn from his hip and blows deep of it — a shrill, echoing blast sounds off into the wastes and rolls into oblivion.

Cassandra hisses “what are you do-agh — the worm!!!” like she’s suffering an aneurism but Vigilance waves her off, rebuffing “the beast only knows of what swims with it — beyond that, it is an ignorant creature, but it’s on me to keep it contained.” Wary, the other two stand uneasily, cautious of what aid this spirit is offering, but I realize another issue with our being here — my fingertips are blackened.

Dark grey like spent coal, the tips are singed but even wiping them against my short robe, I can’t rid myself of the stain. Smaller cracks have begun to form, new streams of Fade light branching out from the anchor, its energy now a near constant droning in my bones. ‘Two years too early,’ I lament in silence, my face absent of emotion as I note ‘I’m hitting the threshold.’

Though in the Fade the anchor’s floodgates open in full, its light ever more pervasive and bright, I’ve used it far too much — I really can’t be relying on its power anymore; its abilities aren’t worth risking an inability to close the final Breach Corypheus will likely still try to tear open.

Not worth a hastened death.

Whatever we open and close here, it has to be my last until then…

“Hunter,” Cass draws my attention but doesn’t quite know the true root of my reservation, “what is our plan? How do we leave this place if not through that.” As if timing their moment, several wisps answer the blaring call of Vigilance, their glowing blob-forms bobbing excitedly through the air from over darkened hills and behind debris. Failing to converse in secret, Vigilance all but booms to his summoned allies “Though these mortals brought damage to the veil, they require aid. Would one among you brave inklings choose to volunteer your assistance?”

“Volunteer for what exactly?,” Cass questions with eyes narrowed, her distrust of all things Fade quite apparent.

Unable to answer, the floating orbs of light glide to us and simply wait, spectral dust drifting and wafting off them.

“Stop your dilly dallying and give them their task!,” Vigilance shouts at us in annoyance, “I cannot watch the beast while watching you intruders!”

‘Dilly dallying,’ my face screws some at that term before turning to the wisps and requesting “So..find Cole. Tell him we’re in the Fade. We’ll find another way out. Everyone needs to return to Skyhold.”

Their cores dim and shimmer as they record my words, this moment, before they take to the skies, flitting through the air as if riding a warm draft. Maintaining a firm distance from the great leech in their ascent, they reach the glimmer of a scar floating in the sky and trying their best to pass through, they ram and ricochet over and over in their attempts at slipping past the weakened lock.
Leery, Cassandra questions from my side “What other way do you mean? Have you had a vision?!”

Several of the wisps manage to shove their way through as thunder cracks overhead.

A fatigued smirk flickers to life on my face as lightning flashes and I reveal “there’s a few ways out but uh..kinda had a vision. A bee told me.”

“A bee?,” she questions with heavy doubt — even the quiet agent squints his concern.

“A bee,” I shrug, “it counts.”

“Whatever it is that leads you from this place, I must urge you take it,” Vigilance announces, its armor more fire now than before, “this domain is my burden and mortals do not belong. Make haste and leave.”

“See, ghost knight agrees.”

“A bee,” Cassandra repeats again, incredulous.

“I am no ghost, I am Vigilance!”

“Exactly. Ghost knight. So…let’s go?”

*Hope the little things actually got the message to Cole.*

With that I walk, distancing myself from the irritable Vigilance, from the lake, and away from the grotesque worm still jutting from the murky waters like a baby bird awaiting its next vomited offering of food. I’m not waiting around for however long it takes the wisps to return, assuming they even can.

Cass and the unnamed agent follow along, making haste to keep up with my strides.

Leaving Vigilance to the lake, his blaze spreads and consumes the shoreline, a great ring of fire quickly encircling the murkwater. As his armored form becomes nothing, his new form an inferno along the perimeter, an otherworldly shriek shakes the skies above. The leviathan slowly makes its retreat beneath the filthy waves to hide once more and the world shakes from its disagreement.

“A bee. I hate this place,” Cassandra groans her disapproval, “I hate it so much.”
“Follow.”

The word I act upon.

An hour’s march and I haven’t seen the bee since...but I have heard its whisper, its intermittent drone drifting over the wastes.

For now though, only the ambient noise of the Fade keeps us company — sharp glass rubbing a harp, a deep reverb forcing the very air to quiver — the bone chilling screams from the lake have long since drowned, it’s but evidence that Vigilance has restored balance to whatever unsettling domain that was back there.

And still we make our way still across barren earth.

We may have left behind dark waters but now we tread upon a sea of ash, soft charred flakes as far as the eye can see. Even the sky above is empty of debris. The air is thick and heavy, dry to the point that the eyes can’t help but want to close. Every breath, labored and harsh. I can’t help but wonder if this dismal locale was a byproduct of the ancient wars of the pantheon or if it was born from the creation of the Veil. But all this ash, all this burnt land, it doesn’t help to distract me from the worsening effects of the anchor.

‘Soon,’ I contemplate of my glowing hand.

“These other means of escape” Cass stresses, breaking the uncomfortable quiet, “you have yet to elaborate. Please do so.” My feet dragging over and through the tips of black ash dunes, fatigue obvious in the way I carry myself, I reply “uh. The..there’s two ways I know of. Maybe three. We can tear through a weak spot in the Veil or we could…wait, did Morrigan bring a really tall mirror with her to Skyhold?”

“A tall…mirror? I don’t know what that witch brought with her..” she stresses but the quietest of elves taps me on the arm; glancing over my shoulder, I see him flash me a thumbs up and a nod.

“Yeah? Good. Means she’s got her eluvian. And if you don’t already know, it’s a magic mirror — works like a doorway. Old, old Elvhen magic.”

“A doorway to here?,” she asks with cautious optimism while trudging along beside me.

“Eh, sometimes. Depends on your key,” I comment and feel the apologetic pulse of the anchor — in response, I say “look, it’s all good” to the anchor knowing Cass and the agent won’t catch that I’m talking to it and not them. “But uh, who are you?” I ask, slowly pivoting in the ashes to face our quiet companion who in turn creates a flurry of hand gestures.

He jabs at his chest, smacks his fingers together, then taps the side of his hand against his mouth all rather swiftly.

“Oh, that’s right,” Cass says in understanding, “you are Silence. Leliana has spoken highly of you.”
“Silence,” I repeat with a quirked eyebrow, not even bothering to question how Cass knows sign language — with a sharp exhale, Silence opens his mouth to show off his absence of a tongue, a stump long since parted of the whole. Though my face is blank, my insides squirm in remembering just what the Qunari did to me in that lab so recently. I nod stiffly, pursing my lips together. His is an apt name and to steer the conversation elsewhere, anywhere, I divert “so no ink. Uh, you from an alienage?”

He’s swift to swat my arm and tap himself on the nose.

“Sorry ya got dragged to hell with us,” I apologize unenthusiastically to which he just shrugs. Even dropped into a desolate hellscape of nightmare and dark whimsy all the while suffering a broken arm from the fall, he doesn’t seem particularly perturbed by the situation. It may be paranoia but it doesn’t escape my notice that he could be yet another Qunari assassin and just biding his time, to use me as a means of escape before finishing his job.

Alternatively, he could be one of Solas’.

Or he’s just one of Leliana’s trusted.

In any case, to gauge his character, I ask him “got any thoughts about this place?” It’s a serious question, seldom answered with indifference but Silence opts to respond with a loud “fffpp” sound, his lips mushed into the crook of his good arm as he blows a raspberry.

Well, that feels like an instant disqualification from the Qun.

“And uh, how about those Creators?”

“Ffffp,” he blasts out before inhaling deep and repeating “ffp-p-p-p.”

…And probably not one of the Dread Wolf’s.

“Fair enough,” I answer.

“Inquisitor,” Cass huffs in concern, ever formal when in the company of others, “not that I am complaining, but where are all the demons? There have been none since we began our march.”

“And kinda hopin’ it stays that way.”

“Still, it give me pause,” she explains.

“Yeah and considering how this place draws on will and ideas, how about we purposefully ignore their absence for a bit longer and try not to draw them here.”

“Or,” an older woman rasps while leering at us from under her silver spiked tiara, “you could learn how to avoid them altogether.”

“No. Fucking. Way.” I gape as a nervous chill runs my spine from her voice. Marveling in utter shock as the legend herself comes tiptoeing through ashes before us, her steps barely leaving prints, I blurt out “Flemeth.”

“Ha, just a piece...but you know this all too well,” she hisses — white hair bound like four curved horns, clad in shimmering mauve, dull steel gauntlets and thigh high greaves, she’s exactly the vision that the games made her out to be. “You seem to know a great deal more than you should.”

Powerful.
A force not to be reckoned with.

Stunning.

Terrifying.

“I saw your messages…I imagine you have…questions,” she rasps as fact and steps ever closer. While I’ve tried to force a meeting with this goddess of a witch time and time again, I’m at a loss for words now that she actually stands before me — it’s all so unexpected.

“Well?,” she asks impatiently, “you have your moment. Ask.”

I awkwardly turn to introduce Cassandra and Silence to the ancient one before us, stammering out “so-so, ah this is the Flemeth” but I find them frozen along with everything else.

The vast expanse of ash.

The once ever shifting Fade sky.

Even bolts of lightning hang in the air, blinding fractals stretched and hanging in perpetuity.

Flemeth rasps “These two aren’t ready for this meeting.”

Dumbfounded, I mumble “Yeah…that uh..I guess that makes sense?” as I realize the inconceivable scope of her power…

Power that I sought to argue with.

Power that I actually had the gall to think I could meet as equals.

I can change dreams — she is the change in the world.

Regaining my clarity of mind, I recall what needs addressing. But I do so with somewhat more caution, stating “Flemeth, Mythal..uh Ashabellauhmmm whatever…whichever. Look, we really need to talk about how things end.”

Ethereal, she rasps out “need is a strong word” with a knowing squint, skin creasing as she does.

“An accurate one. When the Dread Wolf comes knocking, please don’t meet him. I get that ya know each other, but what matters here is that you can’t die. Not allowed to. This world still needs ya and your death wont fix anything.”

Bored, her stare uncaring, she whispers “Little horned thing, you only know so much, so little of what the future actually holds.”

“You..uh, you say that,” I hesitantly argue with a worried look etching into my face, gesticulating as best I can with one arm, “but he kills you, takes yours and the soul of Urthemial… Cutting to the quick, that’s kind of a world ending scenario.”

Seemingly unphased, she beckons me with a clawed finger as she cuts the very air — ash rises to twist and meet her will, wrapping and coalescing in the empty air as she inconceivably forges a portal without the use of an eluvian. Nearly boundless, only a thin border of char to mark the idea of a threshold, the newly opened gate blinds at first, sunlight pouring through as I shield my eyes against the unexpected bright. Sweet grass mingles with the dusty burnt scent of ash as trees creak from within, slow dancing with a gentle breeze; robins call to each other in warning and as my eyes adjust, I spy a patch of yellow dandelion with honey bees buzzing eagerly to collect pollen, to do
their daily work.

And at its center sits a black cellphone, its glass face down on the ground, short grass curling around the edges.

“Wha..how is this happening? Thi-this is impossible,” I whisper with distrust, fearful that anything louder would scare such a vision away.

In the distance through that brightened cavity in the veil, there stands a two story farmhouse, off white and tucked behind even taller trees. It’s all surrounded by a vast expanse of recently harvested fields, golden stalk bits sticking from the soil haphazardly, remnants left behind from the combines.

“I assure you,” Flemeth rasps out in whisper, “it is quite possible...after all, you did manage it first. What I offer you...is a means of return.” Disappointment tugs at the corners of her eyes and mouth, remorse tints her words as she adds “This world isn’t yours...I’m sorry to say but you don’t belong...you’re falling apart at the seams. This...end all scenario you worry over, you won’t live to see it if you choose to stay.”

Uneasily, I cross the ashes to the open portal — standing before its glowing threshold, mockingbirds argue and the pull is real.

“Home,” I whisper through a dry mouth, my fingers stretching forth to feel the warmth of the midday sun.

But questions twist their way through me...

I can’t abandon...

...but my family...

The Inquisition though...

...will I lose my magic?

Who will stop Corypheus?

...Cass...

...who will show Solas another way?

...but my family.

The mark is oddly quiet — it offers no pulse of insight, no stirring of energy in response.

“I understand your dilemma...but your coming here was a mistake. You weren’t supposed to be the Inquisitor. You were never even meant to be at the conclave. Your burden...it was meant for another...”

“So the others were there...”

“Yes. Were. Most were fated to perish in the blast, but one was supposed to live,” Flemeth sadly explains, twirling her claw through the air, “but now you know...and what more, I can grant you your freedom.”

“How..how would they get home without me?,” I worry over Cassandra and Silence, “I can’t just
leave them here.”

“I will send them back — it is within my power. They...will be confused by your disappearance, but in time that won’t matter.”

It...won’t matter.

“If I leave...who would kill Corypheus?”

“I’ve weighed many options, but I always find myself arriving at the same conclusion,” she begins but I finish her thought for her, uttering “Solas” as the obvious choice. It’s his Foci. If anyone could wield it without killing themselves, it would be him.

‘But what would he choose to do with it after?;’ I quibble internally over the details. Not adding anything more to the conversation, I turn again to gaze at my home, tears softly rolling down my face at the thought that with but a step I can have my life back.

With my family.

My conveniences.

My world.

Beyond the portal, my mother’s voice sings out “Hunter? Hunnnnter!”

My fingers tremble and my chest shakes in nervous anticipation; I’m still too scared to move, convinced this is but another painful lie.

Barely a whisper in my ear, “What are you doing? You know you can’t go home” echoes through the air — Imshael’s formless words hang there.

“Please..please, just let me savor this a few moments more,” I plead with damp eyes.

Confused, Flemeth implores “I can only sustain that doorway for so long — if you don’t go now, you’ll never have the chance again.”

“AND YOU,” Imshael’s echoing voice spits increasingly louder, unheard by all except me, “YOU’RE THE MOST PATHETIC THING I’VE EVER SEEN! LOWEST ON THE LADDER, YOU THINK YOU CAN HANDLE HIM?! NO. YOU ARE TRASH.” Even nowhere to be seen, reduced to merely his voice, I can imagine his yellow eyes wild with rage as he stomps and rants unseen. “HUNTER HAS PURPOSE. YOU HAVE NOTHING!”

Shaken from the choice presented, I twist about to stare in bewilderment as my imaginary demon berates the literal goddess before me though only I can hear.

“I..uh...What?,” I blankly query, my head feeling foggy.

As if suffering the most grievous of insults, as if she had personally offended him, Imshael races to me to spit “that thing, it’s not the old woman. Fight it.”

Flemeth, unknowing what conversation is actually taking place, rasps out “I sense your hesitation. The Seeker... she will be far safer without you...how much danger are you willing to expose her to?”

Sluggishly blinking, finally feeling the invisible tethers trying to rein me in, still not quite understanding, something deeper irks me — she doesn’t sound like Flemeth.
Flemeth is telling me to... be careful?

Her voice maybe, but not her attitude.

Wait..

“Yes, damn it, yes! FIGHT IT YOU GIANT BASTARD,” Imshael encourages, his wicked yellow eyes locked on me, refusing to roam anywhere else.

This...something isn’t...

“IT’S SLOTH!,” he shouts through my mental haze.

“Slo...sloth?, ’ I hesitantly and anxiously question while trying to get my bearings as Flemeth hisses “Noooo. What are you doooooing?,” her form rippling like a water balloon stretched to its limits, “why ...mmm prolong this? You won’t ever get...hooOme without me.”

“Sloth,” I utter it’s true name, power flashing within the spoken words, “leave or die.” At that, the lie of a portal with its false promises of home shimmers like a mirage, the whispers of family and comfort vanishing with it. Still though, Flemeth stands before me, her yellow eyes now red, her voice no longer hers. Deeper, slower, more labored, she groans “yo-o0o could have...just..stayed asleeeeep. Issssss this mmmlife really worth...all...your...pain?”

“Why do you assholes all think that pretending to reunite me with my family is some grand idea?,” I insulate as salty tears sting my eyes. But in that stinging stokes a flame, tinder building a spark into a fire, a pain, that familiar and angry heat blazing behind my eyes.

“Mmm...you...can still hmmmhave them.”

Dripping with hurt, hate, I growl the threat “No. I can’t. And I won’t repeat myself.”

Cackling maniacally, Imshael laughs only for me “That’s right, you vulture! You lose! Let go while you still can!,” clapping and grinning all the while, “This man is waking up and soon nothing will stop him!”

“Mmmmm very...well, you are ...very mm tiring,” its mouth fidgets with every word, clearly uncomfortable, “You’mmmmm. hmmph... I shall...allow your mmm leave, yes.”

With a sharp inhale, ash spilling into my mouth, I awaken half buried, time no longer at a stand still — my mark is flashing in a panic, still trying its best to awaken me.

“Sloth was hinging you,” I whisper to the anchor, “it almost got me.” Consoled, knowing my mind is my own, it pulses excitedly like a dog greeting a friend at the door, just pleased beyond measure that I’m back. “Thanks for the help. Imshael might not’ve reached me without ya trying to boost my lucidity.”

I pull myself from the dune, shaking loose layers of ash. Where once there was nothing, this place is now quite obviously Sloth’s lair; transparent bones and dried corpses lay strewn about, dead where they slumbered.

“The minds of those it enticed, every victim,’ I realize while shaking my head, noting from my knees the countless more bodies and bits of remains, ‘this is a fucking graveyard.’

“Hmmyou can...mmm leave now. Mm’y...es. I’m rath...emmm weary now,” Sloth grumbles from behind me as I spy Cass and Silence lying among the dead, trapped in dreams of their own as ash
slowly drifts over their sleeping forms. Turning about, I find among those dead a great bear buried up to its snout, hibernating in ash, its flesh pocked with rot and vicious spines protruding — every movement sure to cause great pain, even its breathing is staggered — its bloodshot eyes, though sluggish and laden with damp grit, are keen and ever leering.

“Release my companions,” I threaten while taking a stand as that protective hound of mana howls within me, furious.

In this moment, I can’t fear my magic and what it might do.

Bite me.

Break me.

I don’t care.

I only fear not being capable of defending those who need protection.

Without my urging it to, the anchor blazes bright, naturally becoming a conduit as Fade energy pours in and out without measure.

“Mmhhmm…nooo. They..erm are mi…mine..myyyyyaghhhhhhghghhhhh,” the festering corpse of a bear lazily quibbles over its catch, its rotted mouth struggling to cooperate.

“Then burn” falls from my lips as violet napalm drips, overflow from my thoughts of incinerating this repugnant creature.

But I don’t spit — instead I imagine the napalm already deep inside the bear, clinging to the lining of its decayed stomach.

A vengeful grin on my part.

My pulse quickens.

My heartbeat throbs in my skull.

Too lumbering to move, too deteriorated to flee, to claw at its own insides in some desperate attempt to smother the jellied flames, it only grunts in pain, in panic, “erm..hmmm arghh ahhh achhh.” Snorting shakily as the blaze intensifies, its flesh cooks unevenly, burning Sloth alive from the inside out; its reddened eyes bulge and twitch, focusing all their ire on me even as death consumes them.

Jagged spines, bones, they crack and pop as liquid inferno bubbles out through the splits in its blistering flesh.


Eyes ablaze, I stare in rage as the hellish ursine creature becomes naught but crusty ichor and dust, adding only more to the black desert as yet another vein bursts in my nose.

“Yes!,” Imshael crows victoriously inside my mind, “and you’re welcome!”

Before rousing my companions from their forced dream-state, I concede and actually find myself uttering “thank you” to my demon. He breathily chuckles “Next time, don’t be so blind” and with that, he vanishes, willingly returning to the depths of my mind. No time to focus on him though,
not when Cass and Silence still slumber among bones. Eager to pull them from their dreams,

I ask the anchor “could you glow just a bit brighter? Gotta wake em up” to which it lets out a
single pulse — yes. It understands my request, what I need of it.

It’s use may not be in my best interest but it’s clearly in Cass’ and Silence’s.

I don’t know how deep Sloth put them under.

And that’s not even factoring in whether they accepted the lies the demons spun or not.

Not wasting any time, I drop to my knees to awaken the Seeker; massaging her temples with
glowing fingertips, the anchor a lighthouse in whatever falsehood she wanders, I whisper “hey
Cass, time to wake up.”

Her brow furrows but she doesn’t wake — still I keep its power close to her.

“Please don’t make me say your full name,” I threaten in jest, hoping an attempt at laughter,
coupled with the mark, will sunder the walls of her dreamscape now that Sloth has been reduced to
nothing.

A breath escapes her and her arm twitches but not much more — she can’t possibly be trapped in
the dream anymore, not with Sloth dead. Her dreams now are purely her own — they have to be.

The mark pulses softly, fluctuating in magnitude and frequency as it searches for the correct
approach.

“Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera,” I begin, following through on my promise, but she flinches,
growling “Stop” and cutting me off.

The anchor and I pause in unison, hesitant to ruin our progress.

Slowly, her eyes flicker open but remain unfocused as she stares through me — lazily stretching
her arms, she yawns “Hunter, why did you wake me so early? Surely you know how exhausting
last nigh...” but then she registers just where we are and she goes still. Color drains from her cheeks
as her eyes dart. Annoyed, she complains “Demons. It is always demons! How long have we been
here?” while shoving me back and hauling herself to her feet.

Definitely still herself.

As she paces through the bones, I go to wake Silence and while shaking him, I comment “well, I
killed the demon but I’m guessing a day?” I pause and look to the Fade sky, thinking for a brief
moment that I can use the sun to tell time.

There’s no sun.

My stomach whines

“Yeeeah. Probably a day,” I grimace, returning to the task of waking the mute agent as I position
the anchor close to his head.

“Wait,” she demands and stomps back to me, “why is your voice...and your eyes?!” Holding my
face in her hands, she stares hard and I see two purple lights reflecting off her own. “What is
happening,” she questions, forcibly turning my face from side to side to better study me.
Offhandedly, I explain “Don’t know for certain — I can guess though.”

“So guess.”

“Had to kill a demon. Guessing my magic is awake,” I explain as she returns to her pacing.

“You are in control of yourself?,” she questions warily, recalling the recent training incident.

“Yee..yeah. Probably. Kinda,” I hum out, “most likely.”

“You are a font of confidence,” she drawls sarcastically while rolling her eyes.

With a sputtering cough, Silence rolls away from me, away from the glowing Fade conduit so near his face. Confused, eyes wild, knife gripped tightly in hand, he whips about as if still living his dream.

“Easy. Eeeeasy. Welcome back to hell,” I shoot him an exhausted smirk and withdraw my hand, “it probably only gets worse from here.”

With his haunted look giving way to one of relief, he exhales hard and flops back into the ashes, a tiny powder cloud puffing out at his sides. Even though his left arm is broken, he does his best to throw the forks gesture to the angry sky above — he’s evidently got plenty of fucks to give and damn it does the Fade deserve them.

“By the way, Cass,” I ask and slide from the ground back to my feet, sidling up to her, “what was your dream about?,” lightly teasing.

Lightning and thunder do combat in the sky but the flash of blush in her cheeks doesn’t escape me. Gone as swiftly as it had come, she growls “no” to my inquiry.

“Just no?”

“No”

“Tell ya mine,” I offer offhandedly.

“No.”

Drawing my robe tighter about me to remain somewhat decent, I explain the ruse I nearly fell for, saying “I was teased with the fantasy of being sans anchor.”

“There is no point in dwelling on it,” she huffs while rubbing ash from her face, “it was a trick of the demon.”

“Sure, but demons are pretty good at sussing out what we want most. It’s kinda their whole thing…that plus, well, possession.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she states as final and returns to kicking her way through Sloth’s lair. Silence bolts upright, eyes narrowed and stares off in the distance, ears twitching as he does — a second later, convinced of something, he leaps to his feet and cups a hand around his ear.

A pause.

A minute passes as I watch the elf in silence.
His ear twitches again and he flicks my arm; with a snap of his fingers, he points to the horizon, and his cupping his ear again, indicates that I listen as well.

Quiet. Naught but the whistles of wind over ash and the occasional rumble in the skies. The ambient whining.

“Follow,” a single word, the word, but it drones out over the wastes.

“I hear it...wait. You hear that too?,” I ask with concern — this is a new twist, “how the hell are you hearing...”

Cassandra, she shoots us both a skeptical look, asking “what are you talking ab...” but pauses.

“Follow,” it repeats as she cocks her head and states “I hear it too.”

“Okay. This is..yeah, this is weird; this is out of the ordinary,” I worry to which Cassandra sarcastically adds “what about this is supposed to be ordinary?” She has a point — this is the Fade — but up until now, no one else has been able to hear my hallucinations. A certain speed to my patter, I anxiously ask “justmakingsure, but we’re all hearing the same thing, right?!”

She replies “follow” as Silence nods in agreement.

“Follow,” again it calls out.

No words, no reasoning, I just start stomping off in the direction of the calling. Not five steps in, I pessimistically quip, “here’s hopin’ it’s not another demon, ha...ahah...haaaa.”

“Your plan is to just trust the voice?,,” Cassandra objects, folding her arms.

“Look, I’m not trying to starve to death here. My plan is keep walking until I have an exit or something edible.”

My stomach agrees with that sentiment, whining as if on command.

“Ughhh,” she groans as Silence halfheartedly shrugs — they’re tired. We all are.

I wipe at the crimson under my nose with the sleeve of my robe and press onward.

Chapter End Notes

Silence sparingly uses ASL — I hope I translated his actions accordingly.

I = *poking at own chest*

Cannot = *holding left index finger out and swiping down against it with right index*

Speak = *Right hand, 4 fingers together, thumb slightly extended, vertically tap side of index finger against mouth*
Marching sucks.

Marching across unstable ground is worse.

Marching like this while starving, that’s the worst.

Then again, nothing is following us…

But nothing is ahead of us…

*Cass was right. This IS the worst.*

I can’t tell time but it feels like it’s been a half day’s march since departing the Sloth’s feasting ground.

At least it’s on all of us to listen out for the bumblebee summons. Not just me.

Despite being present here, here in the source of all magic with my eyes smoldering like twin dying stars, I’m still not confident I’m ready enough to casually cast. Not yet. Obviously if I’m forced into a fight, damn straight I’ll try...

But just not…right this moment.

I don’t particularly enjoy having to devolve into an emotional mess every time a demon needs slaying.

At least I’ve got mana flowing into and through me — hell, just breathing the air here does that. If I didn’t have that charging me, I doubt I’d still be upright. Haven’t eaten in three days — Dorian’s wine barely counted as sustenance.

“*Follow,*” the word ripples over the wastes.

‘*At least we’re going in the right direction,*’ I grumble internally.

*****

“*Inquisitor,*” Cassandra utters and takes me by the shoulder, breaking my trudging trance, “it is a dead end.”

The sea of ash has ended, tapering out into but a thin strip of rocky land hanging out over the intangible abyss — below it lies naught but swirling green and the chunks of debris that inhabit it, twisted columns drifting lazily and defying whatever gravity there should be.

Fatigued, thirsty, Cass uses me for balance; staring out to the speck of the Black City hanging in the distance, she whispers “Andraste help us” in reverence, a prayer for us.
Exhausted, we stand at the edge of the world with no means of turning back.

No clear way forward.

No retreat.

“This uh..” I mumble past parched lips, “this is a first. Then again…this isn’t a game.”

Maintaining her staring contest with the Black City, still gripping my shoulder, she utters “no..it certainly isn’t” in response.

‘Get it through your thick skull — this isn’t a game anymore. Never was though,’ I conclude far too late, ‘Events and people may mirror it, but that’s the end. No casual mode...not here.’

Equally fatigued, Silence meanders to the edge and with an uneasy step, leans out over the open everything, peering into that swirling abyss with tired eyes.

‘The Fade usually shifts to meet intruders or guests...’ I review our limited options, ‘there’s often a switch.’ Too tired, too dry, I casually glance about for something out of the ordinary, something that doesn’t belong.

Fiddling with his belt straps, his back to us, Silence plants both feet and takes to relieving himself, pissing off the edge of the world. Cass stares for a moment in disbelief, one eye squinting but a breath later, she draws the necessary energy to roll her eyes and avert her gaze.

Continuing my unobtrusive investigation, I think ‘One of these things isn’t like the other?,’ as I glance from ash dunes to more ash dunes, from the open sky to the edge itself. Stealing a glance at the anchor, I quietly question “anything?” to it.

One low pulse, no.

Nothing.

A low rumble rolls, muffled thunder in the distance.

Think. C’mon…think.

Then the oddity begins anew — a streamer of urine flows up, trickling from below the edge and up into the air above. Curious perhaps, Silence peers once more over the edge, merely staring for the cause his gravity defying piss. He’s frowning in concern but not enough to quit peeing. Ignoring the streamer now, staring to the abstract below, he shakes himself off and redoes his pants — simply stepping back, he watches as a landmass slowly elevates to our level.

An inverted island, it holds still in thin air — a fortress clings to its underside, dangling towards the abyss below. Upon the underside of the shoreline, tied to posts, is an upside-down rope bridge sticking out to meet us with the rigid nature of a steel bridge.

Exhausted and flabbergasted, I blankly shout “Silence. Ya did it” to which he throws back a confused thumbs up, still staring with furrowed brows at the floating structure. Cass, she looks equally baffled but she’s beyond questioning the Fade at this point — instead, she gives my half-an-arm a squeeze before trudging forward and tapping the underside of the ropes and planks with the toe of her boot.

No give, it holds true.
Through a heavy sigh, sheGuesses “should I assume this to be the correct path forward?”

“It’s kinda the only way forward so…yeah. Probably.”

Her shoulders slump as she sighs out “probably is unfortunately enough for me right now.”

Silence mirrors her sentiments, nodding in agreement to her words — bold, taking the first step, he walks past Cass right out onto the planks and doesn’t give any sign of pause.

It doesn’t drop, doesn’t shift or sway.

Following his example, we do the same, stepping out onto what defies sense and continuing along with him until we reach the island — there’s nothing here but a staircase leading down, burrowing into the ground.

Without second guessing, just going along, we default to descending into the dark as the word “follow” rises from the depths.

*****

Further into the dark, countless steps down, the black finally broke as luminous mushrooms spawned and bloomed into being, unfurling from the walls at our approach. Cast in faint blue light, shadows receding, our path made infinitely safer with the organic bulbs illuminating our way, we continued down.

Down.

Farther in.

More.

Farther still.

We must have made a few unorthodox, gravity-defying loops on that descent because unexpectedly, we find ourselves emerging quite suddenly into the hanging ruined fortress’ courtyard, oriented with our feet to the ground.

Then again, up is a relative term here; direction doesn’t exactly matter.

Crows caw at our intrusion even though there are none to be seen. On guard, readying ourselves to put up a fight, we creep into the abandoned yard, stepping carefully about the bevy of forgotten or damaged items littering the ground.

Nearby, a forge crumbles slowly into ruin, its fires long since dead.

Empty braziers on their sides but not quite touching the ground, coals nonexistent.

Chairs and tables flipped, hovering in the air perpetually.

Padding softly through the mess, we’re careful not to upset or trigger anything — spirit defenses aren’t a foreign concept.
Silence, his dagger raised and his injured arm tight to his chest, weary eyes narrowed and mirroring Cassandra’s suspicious look, he slinks ahead, searching for pressure plates, tripwires, and potential enemies — while his training is better suited for the waking world, his actions are appreciated. If nothing else, he should be able to spot enemy movements before they notice our own.

‘Or maybe I’ll feel their presence?,’ I question, feeling as if someone is watching us.

Cassandra, she steps softly to forge, seeking a better means of defending herself — a sword, a lance, a shield, anything. The racks though, they’re bare.

“Of course,” she groans at the realization, “why would anything here be easy?”

Carefully walking among the debris and remains, through a tired grin, I reply “I’m easy.”

“You are anything but,” she fires back, missing the joke as I sigh “that’s not...nevermind.”

In response perhaps to our conversation or disturbance, a cyan spirit, more vascular system than anything else, it flickers into being in the center of the yard, greeting us loudly “Andaran atish’an, garas quenathra?” in a monotone. Fight or flight, Cass quickly kicks over a table for cover as Silence rushes for the stab — before they can act rashly, actually attempt to damage the entity, I growl out “it said hello” before trying to establish contact with the spirit, shakily replying “Ela’ane vhenallin uh..Mana. Ma halani. Lasa ghilan vhenan.”

“You...know Elven. Of course, you do,” Cass questions, maintaining her guard as Silence throws his good arm out to the air like “how the hell do you know Elven!? I don’t even know Elven.”

At least, that’s what I figure he means.

“Lived with the Dalish, remember? I’m only okay at it though,” I remind her.

Changing hue, more teal now, the lone spirit shudders — staring though us, it rumbles out “Shemlen renan...assessing...accessing...communications updated” but soon returns to its original cyan self. Floating in place, its empty eyes return their gaze to me, recognizing my presence, and it states “Direct all questions to this one.”

‘Really? An information kiosk?,’ I think before asking “what happened to The People here?,” knowing pretty well what happened.

The spirit’s empty socket glow brighter as it states “they are here” very factually.

Creepy.

“Are they alive?”

“No,” the spirit states in monotone and slowly rotates, pointing to the upper walls as it does — corpses, fused with the crumbling walls, part of the stone itself, their skeletal faces locked in perpetual screams. Many, their empty sockets still smolder.

“Oh..okay, yep. This is awful,” I mutter to myself as Cassandra unflinchingly asks “What happened here?” of the spirit.

It’s vascular form twitches, convulses, and states “INACCESSIBLE.”

Cass, she presses harder, demanding “Where is the way out?”
“INACCESSIBLE.”

“How do we exit the Fade?!”

“INACCESSIBLE.”

Annoyed, she huffs out “then tell me, where is an armory in this castle?!”

“INACCESSIBLE.”

“What can you actually tell us?!” she further demands of the information spirit.

“Innnnnn…” it mumbles before its eyes go dim and its form hangs limply in the air — the silence fills with the cawing of unseen crows, mocking us.

“Broke it,” I point out while tilting my head at the same angle as the spirit, studying its blank face to which Cass defensively replies “it was already broken. It told us nothing.”

We’re all irritable — fatigue, dehydration, starvation, they’re wearing us ragged. If we can’t find an escape, we’re as good as dead. In a desperate attempt for answers, a second try, I gaze into the cyan’s empty eyes as my own begin to burn again — the power never left me, its only been fluctuating since Sloth. I push my index finger through its forehead, trying to establish a connection.

A bridge.

Network.

That power swells within me as I thunder “RESET,” attempting to convince entity before me — My fingers crackle, the Anchor pulses its frustration, pained by the current running alongside its own. As the dull throb returns to the bones in my hand, a feeling I’m only getting more familiar with, the broken spirit’s eyes ignite in a blaze of cobalt; jerking and twisting, it scratchily states “ATTEMpTING RECONNECTION…ESTAblisHING…ESTABLISHING…INITIALIzing…BeGin.”

More program than spirit…

….or is this my will being forced upon it, unintentionally changing it?

"Uhhhhh…”

‘Wonderful. More questions of morality,’ I wax tiredly, ‘or maybe you just gave it enough juice?’

It’s voice still glitching, it grates out “INPuT COMmaNd.”

Not..not what I was trying to do.

“Find” I question slowly so as not to overtax the spirit, acting as if it’s a search bar, “…exit to Fade.”

“UNABle tO LocATE.”

“Find eluvian.”

“SeARCHiNG…SEARCHiNG…seARCHiNG…” it goes on repeat before stating “Twelve.”
As Cass and Silence stare in confusion to my line of questioning, I further ask the spirit “Find eluvian location.”

“VaulT,” it declares before rotating midair and pointing farther off between some arches leading to a larger hall. Excited, our first prospect of good news, I start to go in that direction but pause; on a whim, I turn back to the ghost and state “Find food.”

As if channeling the personality of a dialup connection, it screeches and chirps, beeps and hums before stating “One” and drifting to point in the opposite direction, to the entry of a short tower whose rooftop floats in perpetual disarray, shingles and mortar chunks locked in the air about and above.

As my stomach whines for the umpteenth time this day, I voice “So… I vote we check out the food option first.”

Cass, she keeps looking between our two options, our prospective destinations until finally she groans and stomps on by me, marching to the potential food the spirit spoke of.

“Be on guard. Based on experience,” she expresses, annoyed but starving, “even food will be a demon.”

*I mean… she’s not wrong.*

Chapter End Notes

I recall the spirits in the Trespasser DLC and how they were disconnected from their source — they only knew bits and pieces of their former wealth of knowledge.

…and since spirits are so attuned to the emotional or willful states of mortals, it’s understandable that Cyan would shift its mannerisms after being powered up. An unintentional side effect of linking to Hunter, potentially having a taste of his memories.
A Way Out pt. 4

Into the upset tower, its stonework disjointed and cracked — with caution, we scale the wide spiral staircase. Cass takes the lead as Silence follows up the rear, both doing their duty to protect their Inquisitor from threats before or behind. However, upon reaching the second landing of the stunted tower, we’re greeted with the overwhelming aromas of a feast, cool and sweet, warm and savory.

A small preparation, as perfect as the day it was set out — pewter flagons of crystal clear water completely free of dust, small platters of charred poultry and fresh oat bread, bowls of red and black berries, hunks of soft cheese, empty plates and untouched cutlery, it’s all too perfect.

Not a corpse litters the room, nor debris…as if it’s been well tended to all the years.

With a dry gulp, I rush the table, uncaring what the consequences may be, and tear into a still warm loaf of bread with my teeth.

“Inquisitor!,” Cass yells out in concern to which I reply through chews “getting possesed…it isn’t a high priority..concern for me.”

“It should be! You are too important to ignore such risks!”

“Mmmmm that’s good…ah ermm, I can kill demons in my dreams, where they’re supposed to be y’know, unkillable. ‘Sides, this tastes too good to be evil,” I add before stuffing the rest of the hunk of bread and cheese in my mouth and pouring myself some cool water. Hesitant but eager, untrusting but starved, Cass approaches the table as well, gazing longingly as the food and drink available. Silence though, he has less reservations and stabs at the cooked bird with his dagger, carving off a piece of thigh and looking it once over, pops it in his mouth. Chewing, he nods his approval and continues to cut off another slice. Still wary, a sensible act given the circumstances — I’ve never heard of food in the Fade — Cass cautiously plucks a single blackberry and slips it past her lips.

Nothing happens.

The blackberry is a blackberry.

The roast bird is a roast bird.

The bread is exactly that.

In perhaps the most bizarre of outcomes, everything in this room is exactly what it seems, give or take the fact that the roofing isn’t all there, shingles and stone locked in the air relative to the tower. The calm is a surprising boon, albeit an uneasy one. And this food, while likely a trap, I’m willing to risk it over starving.

As is Silence.

We both pull up chairs and take to the meager feast, piling bits of food on empty plates and offering various cuts and items to one another. Cassandra, she’s much more reticent but even she’s past her breaking point — she, too, pulls up a chair however before taking any further bites, she expresses “even still, we should remain on guard. This all makes little sense. How is this here, who put it here? What put it here? These are important questions.”
Trying my best to smear a glob of cheese on a torn off piece of bread, I comment “Yeah, but I haven’t eaten in days. I’ll gladly fight demons if it means I’m doing it on a full stomach.”

“Inquisitor…” Cass groans at my dismissal.

I fail to accomplish the simple task of applying cheese to bread, my left hand too clumsy to wield both a cheese knife and hold the bread in place simultaneously — frustrated simply from watching me try and try again, she scoffs and takes both from me, doing what I cannot. “I’m way better at killing demons,” I smirk out as she passes back my small serving, “I promise.”

Annoyed, she returns her attention to the bowl of berries as I continue on to say ‘look, we can make camp after this, take shifts keepin’ watch, and try to find the exit come whatever counts for morning here.”

She sighs heavily in response while picking only blackberries from the bowl, ignoring the red ones. Chewing, surprisingly enjoying myself, I take note of Cass’ avoidance of the red berries.

*****

We hastily made camp, keeping to the tower far less bizarre than everything else in the vicinity. With no need for a campfire or tenting, the temperature here moderate and dry, we merely grabbed all the cushions we could to use for impromptu bedding. Our stomachs full and our thirst slaked, we find ourselves in better spirits.

Silence claimed first watch, opting to walk the grounds.

I wasn’t about to argue —even over saturated with Fade energy, my eyes are still finding it difficult to remain open. Lying upon a bed of threadbare cushions, enough to keep my head propped up and horns from scraping the floorboards, I gaze through that hole in the ceiling to the swirling Fade sky above.

“We’ll find a way out,” I hum out.

Cassandra, nearby with her knees drawn up against her chest, she asks softly “do you know? Is this all part of a future you witnessed?”

“Nope,” I reply as my eyes close, “We’re way off the beaten path on this side quest.”

“Then you don’t actually know,” she comments grimly.

“Specifically this? No, but I’m fairly confident I know how to get us out of here”

She’s quiet for a time following this, mulling over the possibilities and ramifications.

Minutes pass, and finally, she eases back onto her cushions and pillows; rolling over to face the door, she says “we should rest while we can.”

I whisper “pleasant dreams” to which Cass abruptly and anxiously asks “how do we know we are not still dreaming? How do you know that Sloth is truly dead or that it was even Sloth that had tricked us? How can we even be certain that it was not actually Desire or even Pride. What if your
killing Sloth was just what Pride would want you to believe?"

I’m at a loss for words — my eyes peel back open to stare and analyze reality as my thoughts race.

_The anchor keeps me lucid._

_Real food aside, nothing here seems out of the ordinary...for the Fade._

_Sloth burning smelled really real._

Darting upright to look at my hand, I count my fingers over and over…

**“Five fingers. Five. No more, no less. Five fingers…that’s the right number for me to have. Five!”**

“What?,” she turns over to watch me ramble like a fool.

**“One two three four fi-uh, something someone said once — in dreams, reflections and counting are warped,”** and plopping back down into my bedding, I groan “just gave me a damn _heart attack…havin’ me think I’m still stuck in a dream._”

“And how do I know that _this_ isn’t a dream?,” she worries further.

My face screws up under her line of questioning and I stammer “_shit. Uhh ahh…becau..uhhh_” and puff out my cheeks as I blow out a heavy breath.

Cass huffs out a sigh of relief and exclaims “this is real. We are awake.”

Turning my attention to her, genuinely curious how she arrived at such a conclusion, I ask “how..uh, how’d’ya _know that_?”

“Because…” she starts as she rises and shoves her bedding closer to mine. A long segue and she lower herself to lie beside me; looking to my wide eyes, she continues “no demon would intentionally be so bumbling and ineloquent. You are you, there is no doubting that.”

My ears feel hot as an embarrassed warmth rises to my cheeks.

“Definitely you,” she states as fact and runs a finger over my blush. Her concerns apparently allayed, she nestles up against me, my arm curved under her, and she whispers “Thank you, Hunter...we should sleep while we can.”

Too tired for anything BUT sleep.

_God damn demons. I take it all back — I’d gladly have gone to some Red Lyrium future hell if it meant never having anything ever trying to fuck with my head._

I tentatively close my eyes and try to find my much needed sleep.

*****

And I reopen my eyes.
Clad in my familiar dark clothing — black jeans, a faded black T-shirt, and black leather boots — I stand perched upon a charred pillar of bones as it lurches through the fog below, like a horrid maidenhead of a ship overseeing the waves below, I watch for mortal dreams.

“Does using your power for dream stuff hasten my death?” I ask bluntly of the anchor.

It pulses once, no.

“Only using rifts and supercharging my spells then?”

It’s hesitant but it emits a double pulse.

Yes.

“Alright…it’s..alright. I can work with this,” I sigh out, “let’s track down some Inquisition.”

It still feels apologetic, anxious.

But for now, we can’t linger on that — we return to our task.

Searching.

I’ve got to find Cullen.

Or Leliana.

Either.

Both.

Doesn’t matter who really, just so long as I can confirm the wisps actually got my message across the divide.
Through the grey, the sleeping miasma, I search with the anchor hoisted, its light slicing the fog and clearing my path — personal spheres of influence are what I seek.

But no matter the intent behind my actions, regardless of how many times I command to be brought before Cullen or Leliana,

I can’t seem to find my council.

Nor Dorian.

Nor Vivienne.

Obviously, I won’t be finding Varric — dwarves don’t dream.

I can’t find anyone I knew to be at Caer Oswin and I’m left pondering exactly what time it is in the mortal world.

How long have we been in the Fade?

While it won’t help ensure that the Inquisition forces received my wisp message, I turn my attention elsewhere, to Skyhold and its inhabitants. Shockingly enough, I can’t find anyone’s dreams from there either…

…not until I focus on The Iron Bull.
No other name I know yield results, but his does. The world blurs, stretching unrecognizably until I’m left standing at the doorstep to his shimmering dream sphere — a barrier like a peppermint, all swirling reds and crèmes as he bellows within, hefting and swinging some unseen object like a great sword…

‘…probably actually a great sword,’ I note and knock upon the outer barrier out of politeness…

...please, no more eyefuls of hardcore sexual fantasies.

No response on his end — I knock again. He either can’t hear me or he’s incapable of recognizing a dream. Pursing my lips and steeling myself, I resolve to enter without his permission. Rude, sure — but he’s the only mortal world mind I can interact with at present it seems.

His mind offers minimal resistance as I push through, as if something battered his shield in a previous visit, a robber smashing a window or breaking a lock to the front door.

Fuck…right. He’s been mindfucked. They got him too,’ my heart thuds a bit in realization, ‘Fuck the Qun.’ A bit more upset now, recognizing the shared aspects of our experience, his dream takes shape about me and I join his imagined fray — thunder cracking and rain pelting us, he brings his great blade crashing down upon a dragonling; it’s thick warm blood sprays in arterial spurts all over my freshly imagined boots but the viscera washes away just as quickly.

Beaming like a kid in a candy shop, rain pouring off his hulking frame, he huffs in satisfaction and rips his great sword from the baby dragon before laughing out “HEY BOSS! KNEW THIS WOULD GET YOU OUT OF BED!”

“Bed?,” I question just as the air itself splits from the deafening screech of something tremendous, it’s weight shaking the ground and the beat of its wings, thunder all their own.

From Bull’s excited growl “There. She. Is!” and the tent unabashedly forming in his loose pants, I don’t even need to look behind me to know he’s reliving the Crestwood Dragon fight.

Unyielding storm. Check.

Electricity charging the air. Check.

The great wyrm roaring behind me. Check.

Bull’s unchecked arousal…check.

“Always a sex dream,” I murmur with my eyes tightly shut, rubbing at my temple, “why is it always a sex dream?”

“COME ON, BOSS!,” Bull bellows with a thrilled look of arousal now entirely upon his face, “LET’S SHOW HER WHO’S IN CHARGE!”

Lips pursed yet again, I just nod and turn to face the terrible creature, lightning dripping from its furious maw. Without awaiting my answer, he charges the dragon mother, great sword still slick the blood of her offspring.

If this is how the fight actually went, I’m finding myself a little bummed out. One one hand, I can’t have innocent villagers starving or getting snatched up by some tremendous death from above, elemental attacks eradicating entire villages.

On the other hand, dragons are impressive and increasingly rare.
Shit. Have I been contributing to the death of an endangered species?

Hunter, this is only a dream...

...but in real life though...

But you haven’t killed a dragon yet.

As Bull hacks and slashes, diving between legs and dodging claws, his blade slicing at densely scaled flesh, I come to figure that only this particular dragon has been slain as a result of the Inquisition.

Only this one.

‘Damn it. I loved the dragon fights in the games…’ I mull with sinking shoulders, completely ignoring the fight in the foreground even as jets of lightning explode from its toothy jaws, ‘This one is a dream though… guess I can enjoy this one.’

Conflicted, I jog ahead to join the fray, entropic magics forming and enveloping both my fists — a return to my old ways. Sidestepping the dragonling corpses littering the field, avoiding stray misfires of lightning discharge, I rush the terrible speckled beauty to fight in tandem with Bull.

He wants at her face, her full attention.

Shades of his Chargers, they flank the big girl, fighting in unison to fell the beast.

Me, I prefer a less bold measure — I rush in and strike at her wings whenever they rake the muddy, flooded field. My attacks, they devour the webbing between the prongs of her leathery wings, rotting away her capacity for flight — even if imaginary,

Bull’s dream keeps with realism, allowing for worldly physics to still have value.

The enraged dragon mother, crippled now, forced to the ground, she slashes and whips at at us all, scattering the shades — the conjured Krem, knocked back into a muddy pile of debris and rubble, he yells out “FINISH IT, CHIEF!”

With a roar matching the dragon mother’s, lightning splits the sky and backlights all as Bull leaps from the highest peak of the stony ruins, gleaming great sword held firm and driving downward — too late does she recognize the descending threat, too focused on us at her feet, she can only screech as his blade sinks into her skull and his own weight forces it all the way through. The fuller of his blade locks the hardened edge in place as she drops dead, life evacuating her immense form, crashing to the storm stricken, battle marred earth.

“YEEEEEEEEEEEEAAH,” Bull roars in victory, rising from her corpse, drenched in dragon blood and flecks of grey matter, “WHAT. A. FIGHT.”

And still he has his erection...

As Chargers cheer and the cloyingly sweet scent of wine floods the air, I avert my eyes from his maintained arousal as he jerks and tugs at his sword — with a fierce grunt, he tears it loose and tosses it to the wet ground, letting the heavy rains wash his blade clean for him.

“Oh boss, THAT WAS GREAT!,” he beams at me through the storm, “Thanks, really. Thanks for bringing me here.”
An embarrassed laugh escapes me and still averting my eyes, I sadly chuckle out “taarsidath-an halsaan, amirite?,” the one phrase of Qunlat that doesn’t physically repulse me now.

Bull though, his smile flickers, confusion growing on his face — under his breath, he rumbles “you’ve…said that before? Wait…” and looking about the mess of a field, it dawns on him that not everything is as it seems — his Chargers, though celebrating and singing filthy songs of “tits and victory,” though cracking open casks of Tevinter red, his lone eye peers past the imagined and discerning something is amiss, he questions “it didn’t happen like this…it didn’t…Boss?”

Crouching and leaning back against a downed tree, I reply with some reservation “yeah Bull…”

Remembering how it really happened, souring his disposition, he repeats “it didn’t go down like this.“

“It didn’t.”

Ignoring everything but me now, his brow weighing heavily over his eye, his shoulders going stiff, he states “You’re…supposed to be in bed…you’re hurting..no, we’re past that?”

“Yeah Last saw ya in the Winter Palace — you uh,” I grimace out, “you smushed your dick on my leg when you tackled me.”

“And…and then you were abducted. Ben Hasserath spies…”

“That part wasn’t my favorite.”

“What is this, Boss?,” he questions, standing before me.

“Well, if I understood Varric correctly, you’re in a cell under Skyhold. For me, it’s been one hellish clusterfuck after another…tortured for weeks, escaped and nearly died. Got beat up by pirates. Almost died. Assassination attempts. Almost died. Almost killed everyone. Almost died. Killed my assassins, but fell into the Fade,” and taking a breath for dramatic pause, I add, “Again.”

“Well shit.”

“Well shit.”

“Yeah, that’s… that’s kinda the consensus on most things these days.”

“But uh…”

Holding up the anchor for him to understand, I explain “when I dream, I can explore. Like I said though, I’m trapped in the Fade. I mean, I’ve got Cassandra with me, so it’s not all bad…”

Bull, he just stares in groggy concern and I further elaborate “shit, look, sorry for walking in on your dreams — I just, damnit, I realize how bad this looks, but I’m not the fucking Qun or a blood mage, not tryin’ to control you, I just needed to talk to…” but he waves me quiet.

“This is weird. Kind of new territory for me…but I guess I get it?,” he weighs in, “I mean, I figured you could do dream stuff — overheard Sera complaining about it.”

“Wait, Sera was pissed? Of course she was pissed…shit.”

“I don’t think she understood that it was actually you but the way Solas would talk about being in contact with you…I figured it to be the case. Still weird though.”
“Sorry for intruding. I was knockin’ but you weren’t answering,” I apologize.

“Huh,” he grumbles, “still… Just when you think you understand magic…”

“I shrug and dart my eyebrows up, “Yeah.”

“Yyyyeah”

We sit in uneasy silence for a beat, ignoring the dream storm and the dream people celebrating in the background — the dragon corpse still groans, blood and air still escaping it.

Finally, I find my voice again and question “So, a holding cell.”

“Yeeeeeah,” he rumbles.

“What’s that about?,” I ask with worried eyes, creases forming from the squint, hoping beyond hoping that he didn’t play a role in my kidnapping.

“Put myself in here, actually,” he slowly explains while reading my face, “look, I’m gonna level with you — after Adamant and you disappeared, I wrote a report and sent it through some back channels. Didn’t let Red review it.”

“What?!,” I growl, hurt and shock flaring within me; jumping back to my feet, glaring, I question “The fuck did you do.”

Elaborating, he reveals “I know, wrong move, but I didn’t tell them all that you did. Didn’t tell them about your magic. Nothing. Didn’t even go into specifics when you outright vanished in front of us. I simply wrote that you had gone missing. Cassandra seemed convinced you were possessed, I’d never seen a mage do that before…I was just hoping it would lead to someone tipping me off to where you were.”

No words — I’m too angry those — I just stare in confused hatred.

“It did work though,” he continues, “pretty sure Red used their back channels in the effort to track you.”

“Fucking Qun! You broke the one rule! My one fucking rule” I rage to which he sighs, dejectedly “I know. But you had everyone worried. We didn’t know if you were possessed or what..no one knew…”

“BULLSHIT,” I furiously interject, “They cut and cut and cut at me!” pointing to and slapping at each piece of me I mean like a butcher choosing prime cuts. He chokes out a small gurgle and his arms go limp; his mouth going dry, even in the dream, he anxiously questions “they…that’s not what they do…the Ben-Hassrath wants to use people, they would’ve tried to rewrite…”

“They tried. For weeks. They went on and on, attacking my mind but they never got in” I seethe, “and when they realized they couldn’t, fuck if they didn’t advance to the bloodier option! But how’s brainwashing me any better?!”

At a loss for words, he can only stand there flinching as he whispers “boss…”

Disappointed, pissed off, hurt, depressed, seething, I shake my head as the corners of my eyes grow damp not from rain but from salty tears threatening to spill. Coldly, I cut to the quick, demanding of Bull “give a message to Josephine — tell her to get the rest of the Inquisition back to
Skyhold if they aren’t already on their way back.” It hurts all the fucking worse because I can actually understand his side of things, why he did what he did.

I don’t want to, but I can.

“Boss…,” he tries to call out, to explain something more, but instead, as I turn back to face him with my eyes stinging, I hiss “wake up” and experience the whirlwind of breaking a dream and ejecting all participants — it’s a head rush, dizzying, but I needed it done. A moment broken, I’m returned to my perch on the bone pillar, the grey sea of fog shifting slowly past its base.

“At least now someone on the outside knows,” I emotionlessly whisper to no one but the anchor and it pulses once in kind, agreeing with me. Sighing, my face still blank from the betrayal, I ask the mark “fuck it all. Would ya mind turning off for a bit? For once, I think I want a normal dream. Just…distract me.”

Two pulses, yes.

It’s worried for me, I can feel its concern resonating in the bones of my forearm.

At that, the buzzing lessens and the world goes dark…
A Way Out pt. 5

Like old filament bulbs, the world struggles to relight, the sun slowly building to its full potential.

As a new dawn rises, fields of golden wheat jingle and sing with every gust, literal gold falling to the soil below in lieu of dusty seeds with every jostle and sway. A sizable crater now overgrown with wild flowers and tall grass, only the charred support beams jutting from it, is the grave marker of my memory of my family’s home. No longer do ash and smoke choke the air — time and imagination have since tempered this vestige of a former life that Desire once sullied and ignited with my hate.

Lying in the tall, unkempt grass on the crater’s edge, swimming in the sweet scent, I loosely mimic my final day on Earth; an arm folded under my head as a pillow, I conjure a lit joint to my free hand.

Not in the mood for imagined acid.

Instead, I’m just smoking away my frustrations.

Trying to at least.

A memory of the high creeps in, that floating sensation I’d feel so long ago as my limbs hum with pleasure. Bitter sweet and pungent in my lungs, nostalgia rolls from my nostrils in plumes of hazy purple and grey.

‘God damnit, Bull,’ I angrily think, lingering on the hurt, exhaling more of the pungent smoke, ‘Guess that’s what I get for going off script.’ Another toke, another heavy exhale, I mutter “worse…actually get why he did it” to the sunny sky above.

Another toke, another exhale.

Backlit clouds blow by overhead, puffs of their tails getting lost in the breeze.

“You just had to be you…,” I mutter on an exhale.

“What is this?! Cass yells out, stomping about in uncertainty just mere feet away.

Coughing, not expecting a visitor, I drop my lit joint and it bounces off my forehead, ashing me in the eyes; sputtering, I manage out “wha da-damnit Cass! Gonna give me a heart attack!”

“But what is this?! The work of a demon?”

Idiot, juuust had that worrisome talk about dreams and knowing when they’re real — don’t be an ass. Talk to her.

Still blinking ash from my right eye, squinting even though it shouldn’t actually be affecting me, I more calmly explain “nah, it’s just a dream” and flash the anchor up at her. Taking a deep breath, certain my eye is free of grit, I give a more proper intro, further explaining “Welcome to lucid dreaming.” Sitting up to greet her, showcasing the anchor, its pulse a steady heartbeat, I wave my other hand about it like an infomercial host, jokingly marveling “it slices, it dices. It opens the Veil and moOooOore.”

The anchor, pleased by the attention, it purrs with energy.
“So this is?,” Cass questions, frustrated by my evasiveness and not understanding my reference.

“Just a dream,” I repeat, “why we’re sharing it, can’t say” and turning my attention to the mark, I grumble in mock sarcasm, “asked for one not weird dream. Thaaaaanks,” not even bothering to hide my conversation with it.

It pulses a few times unapologetically.

Mhmmm. A likely answer.

“A dream…” she murmurs to herself, I suppose not noticing...but recalling what I’d done earlier that evening, she moves her lips, silently counting her fingers. “I remember your intrusion into a dream of mine many months ago…I just had not expected it to happen again.”

Lips firmly locked in place, I hum out “mhmm.”

Quicker than anticipated, she takes to scanning the horizon, staring over the golden crops and summer foliage, asking “we are sharing a dream but I do not recognize this terrain. And you once said that the Fade draws upon memory — is this yours?”

‘Woah. Uhhhhhhhh…’ I worry while puffing out my cheeks, exhaling slowly before letting a timid “yep” escape me, even as power still fluctuates through my voice.

“Your family farm?,” she questions, quick to recall the mentions of my background.

‘Ahhh fuck. Hey, if ya would, make sure it’s only me and Cass in here,’ I think to the anchor, ‘no eavesdroppers, please’ and I feel the dream’s pressure change slightly, an invisible membrane snapping shut about everything. All good?

It emits a subtle, low frequency double pulse — yes.

Guess I’ve got some explaining to do...

“Sort of...obviously we didn’t grow actual gold,” I finally say through a sort of pained smirk, “that’s just a compliment of the dream...but yeah, welcome to the homestead” and end with a sarcastic wag of my eyebrows. Curious, Cassandra takes a moment more to look about before I further add “there used to be a house...you know, where that big hole is. Blew it up purgin’ a Desire demon.”

“You can damage your own memories...that is...unfortunate,” she consoles while taking a knee beside me, “I know how important a memory can be… I...know what strength you can draw from them.” A somber note in her voice, she reveals “for years after my brother’s murder, I found my resolve in my memories of him. Then again, what do I really know? For just as long, I blamed all mages for his death. Perhaps it isn’t good after all...I suppose it truly does not matter.”

Huh...never mentioned that, did she?

“I can repair it whenever I want — for now, this helps, even if it hurts. Keeps assholes from using it against me...” but dropping to a hush, almost in a daze, I whisper “don’t get lost livin’ in the past...remember but don’t get stuck.” But coming to, snapping from my nostalgia high, I thank her, saying “I appreciate it, Cass. Ya make a good point.”

Her mouth shifting to the side in uncertainty, she grumbles out “…if you found something helpful
in what I said, then you are welcome.”

“You might be stubborn,” I smirk out, “but you’re one of the smartest people I know. Now ya just gotta learn to stop doubting yourself so often.” No hesitation, she shoves me down, back to grass, ass to earth, while muttering “right. Because I am the stubborn one.” Having gotten her retort out of the way, looking as if she won, she crawls down into the grass, lying beside me — shoulder to shoulder, we look to the clouds.

“Cass?”

“Yes”

“Of everyone that could’ve gotten stuck here with me, I’m glad it’s you…” I say before realizing how that sounds, and backpedaling, I rephrase it “I don’t mean…I’m glad you’re here, not that your life is in danger. I like your life being danger free. The less of that, the better.”

On an exhale, she sighs while a smile threatens the corners of her lips, “I feel the same way.” Her hand eases over my right, her pulse in her palm, evident even in here. Hers is even, steady — mine, it’s faster than usual. Even though I’m a flirtatious creature, I still experience the exhilaration of her touch, that nervous fluttery feeling.

And that just blows my mind —I never actually imagined this outcome, this possibility. Of course I enjoyed the flirting, the back and forth, but to actually feel...

Extraordinary.

We’re just two people in a world of dreams, looking to the clouds as they lazily take shape.

And it feels right.

But all dreams must one day end — The world trembles and only I seem to notice — stealing a glance her way, she’s relaxed, eyelids half-closed. Her chest softly rises and falls with every breath.

Another rumble, a shake.

It’s time.

“I’ll see ya soon,” I whisper, not wanting to disturb her peace; rolling to the side, closing the gap between us, I put my lips to the scar running up from her jawline. A slight blush, her sharp eyebrows creeping up as her eyes open to catch a glimpse of me, she breathes out “you are waking up?”

“Yeah. Enjoy this place a little while longer, love,” I say with a wink, and with that, I shut my eyes tight and force myself to think hard upon my old mantra...

Wake up.

*****

The world blurs as I’m shaken awake.
Eyes open, I’m staring up at Silence.

A flurry of gestures, he taps me on the chest, puts one fist on top of the other, both hands making a peace sign, and does a counter clockwise circle with them. I squint, groggy still with eyes adjusting, and his shoulders drop. Again, he taps me on the chest like we’re playing charades only this time, he does a circle in the air with his finger, pointing everywhere about us.

“Right, Duh,” I rub the sleep from my eyes, ‘my turn for guard duty.”

A tired smirk and a double tap on his nose, he confirms what I’ve said and hastily crawls to a darkened spot directly across the room from the staircase entry.

“Enjoy the sleep.”

In final response, he throws his arm straight up, a victorious fist to the air, even as the rest of him slumps and shuts down. And just as quick, he withdraws the gestures, hunkering down.

*****

In the fetal position on her impromptu bedding, Cass soundly sleeps. And I know she’s supposed to have final watch, allow for me to get a couple hours more sleep but I’m too awake to to go back, far too amped up. What sleep I did get was phenomenal.

Gotta be the ambient energy.

That and I’m a mage.

...And I’ve got this fractal scar burning a hole in my hand, unnaturally taking in and spitting out Fade energy.

In the quiet of the tower, shielded some from the outside Fade and the ghastly courtyard scene, I turn my attention to the mark, quietly saying “Hey buddy, gotta a couple questions for ya.”

It steadily glows in recognition, waiting for my words. Studying my charred fingertips, the cracks and splits forming fresh, I ask “in the end, when we snag back that foci from Corypheus…is there any way for…”

Still it glows, constant, waiting for me to finish my thought.

“...instead of pulling the rest of yourself from the foci into me, is there any chance of…well, the opposite? Like…do you think it’s possible for you to go back into the Foci?”

No response but I can feel it mulling over the my question.

“Ooooor,” I ask, wincing in concern over how to phrase this delicately, “is there a way for the rest of you to be part of me without killing us? Not too keen on the dying part of our alliance.”

I can feel its hesitation, the slow confused churning of Fade light within it as it tries to find an answer…

“I mean…I used to be broken…” I whisper and pause, taking a look at my stump of an arm, “guess
I still am, but *that doesn’t mean you* have stay broken. Can get the rest of ya back to...well, you.”

Two slow pulses, concerned. Yes.

A snore escapes Cassandra and I hold to watch but confident she’s still soundly asleep, I whisper to the anchor “You wanna be whole again.”

Less reticent, it pulses twice more.

“**Hope we figure out a how before the final chapter,**” I whisper ruefully.

A final two pulses — it assuredly agrees. But just as it does, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. On instinct, even though I shouldn’t, swore I wouldn’t, I twist about with the anchor charged, primed to fire.

But there’s nothing here.

There’s nothing but us three.


But even then, I can’t shake that creeping feeling that someone has been here.

Watching us.

Or perhaps it’s all just the Fade’s natural state, to constantly feel the collective cries of anguish and pain, to never feel alone in the presence of such.

Or I’m just being paranoid..

Or maybe I’m just feeling out of sorts because this is one of this rare times I have no clue what we’re actually doing.

*Yeah...probably that last one.*

*****

With an abundance of time on my hands and tired of wearing a robe several sizes too small, I took to quietly rummaging through our tower room for cloaks, sheets, anything really I could use as a substitute while the others slept. I’m not naïve, I know there’s no chance in hell of finding clothes that’ll fit me; a vashoth of my build finding something my size in a place once held entirely by elves?

No way.

But I did manage to find a heavy curtain — it had been knocked loose from the tall tower window at some point, falling behind some crates and casks. Pine green though plain woven, a rough spun material likely made from some type of wool, it’ll work well enough tied about my waist like a towel or a skirt.

I’m just sick of my junk almost always showing — it’ll be nice to finally have some coverage.
Outside that particular detail, the remainder of my watch had been equally boring, granted I just couldn’t shake that feeling that someone else was with us the entire time. An odd sort of feeling — foreign, curious but not exactly threatening, everywhere at once but gone in an instant.

At least that’s my read of it.

Still though, I’m not big on unannounced visitors, especially here.

Whatever the case, we’d made a breakfast from the remnants of last meal.

…and now we find ourselves back in the horrid courtyard, back to our original calling, our task of finding a means of escape. As the cyan information spirit floats in place at the center of the yard, it occasionally screeches like dialup as it attempts to reestablish a connection that will never be made unless the Veil were to be destroyed.

Before us, a monolith of a tile mosaic, a puzzle lock as tall as me.

Every piece is exactly the same.

Each one is a weathered plate of gold, withered vines and roots clinging to their façade; they all bear the exact same pattern — the left half has embossed vines while the right side has the inverse, the negative space around the same vines raised up.

If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say they look reminiscent of the various vallaslin of the elves.

But I can’t be sure.

I’ve tried just touching them, thinking them similar to the ritual path of the Temple of Mythal. No luck, no change.

Tried actually sliding the pieces around, one at a time, but that doesn’t seem to yield any noticeable results either.

I’m at a loss.

We all are.

“It would be a literal puzzle that bars our exit,” Cass huffs in frustration, just as confused by the secret to it as I am. Silence, he keeps cocking his head at different angles, trying to see if the secret is a matter of perspective.

“Enough of this,” Cass grumbles, turning away from the vault, “at this pace, we will be here forever. I am going to find whatever qualifies as a weapon in this place” to which I mumble absentmindedly “don’t go too far. Don’t wanna Scooby Doo this.”

Both she and Silence look at me, puzzling my meaning.

“Don’t split up,” I quietly elaborate. Silence, he shrugs at me while making another sarcastic fart noise with his mouth, what I can only assume to be his version of “obviously. We’re not dumb” before strutting off in Cassandra’s wake as she mutters “I swear, half the things to come out of your mouth make no sense…”

Despite that strange earlier feeling that someone was watching us, I’m not overly worried about them running afoul of danger here — it’s a keep, sure, but it’s smaller than Caer Bronach of Crestwood. Just your average structure: a couple ruined towers, an empty armory, this damnable
vault, a debris stricken courtyard, and a protective wall surrounding it all with Elven corpses burned into the very stonework, their pain and fear immortalized.

You know, average.

Old Cyan back there, limply hanging in the air some distance behind me, unfocused, it chirps several times before screeching once. ‘Dialup has never been more unsettling,’ I note before shouting out over my shoulder “Internet ghost, ya know anything helpful?”

Not answering, the specter opens wide and a ringing sound echoes from its empty mouth before it grates out “ErrOR.”

“Function: Open vault,” I yell back.

“ErrOR. AcCEss CorrUPted.”

From somewhere within the vault, muffled comes the lone word “follow,” beckoning and taunting all the same. Sighing, so close to an exit but still so far, I groan loudly “This suuuuuuuucks” to which the anchor agrees, buzzing, while those nonexistent crows take to cawing at me, mocking. Dropping to my butt before the doorway, crossing my legs, I ask the anchor “please tell you know the secret to this.”

Quick to answer, it flashes once, heavy, a definite no.

“Daaaaaaaaaamn it,” I stress as the crow caws continue.

*****

“Dalish puzzles and locks…the trick of it,” I mutter to myself, my ass still firmly planted to the ground, “in the games, they were always some elaborate thing about timing or touch. Usually both.”

‘The old elves valued form over function, aesthetics over practical design,’ I posit as old cyan chirps again in the background, ‘it’s always some grand event for them, a damn ceremony for even the simplest of tasks…’

“Then again, they did have more time on their hands,” I shrug at the vault before me, “being…immortal and all that.”

Think jackass, think. Elven puzzles…

...Levers and lighting torches.

Walking a path the right way...

...Touching statues in the correct order.

Or activating gravestones...

...or some sort of offering before scooping up some friggin’ water in a pot and praying to it…
“There. Are. So. Many. Types,” I groan aloud and drop back to lie upon the stone flooring. This endeavor is giving me a headache — the possibilities are fucking limitless. It could as absurd as finding all the shiniest pebbles and throwing them by the handful at the door, it could be as bizarre as performing an interpretive dance dedicated to Andruil the Huntress. And remembering how Merrill gained access to the shrine of Asha’bellanar on that bleak and lonely mountaintop, I whisper grimly “could be as awful as having to slice my hand open and smearing it all over the door.”

On that, the mark and I share the same sentiments, groaning inwardly — we’re not too keen on the cutting option.

“Psssh, as if that can actually be considered an option,” I mutter while staring to the churning Fade sky, all the while thinking ‘been cut up enough’ however another whisper interrupts me — his a familiar rasp in my ear, without revealing himself, Imshael mournfully states “still so limited.”

To the nothing, I ask back of the void in my mind “if you’ve got a fresh take on this, I’d actually love to hear it.”

“My telling you how doesn’t inspire growth,” the choice spirit growls, “it hinders you to rely on others.”

“Dick.”

“If being such helps you in the long run, I’ll gladly accept that moniker,” Imshael twists my words to his win but light boot steps interrupt us — Cassandra, finally making her return, she wearily announces “I managed to find a sword…unfortunately, it is quite rusted” and with a sigh, she adds, “I will make do though.” Peering past my brow at her, I note the blade she wields — a Dar’Misaan — Elven, curved slightly like a saber, it has but one pointed groove as its sole guard.

But I don’t doubt her proficiency with it — she’s a veteran of the Seekers.

In her hands, a blade is deadly, regardless of its make or state.

“I see you have made great progress,” she states sarcastically while coming to stop at my side. Closing my eyes against the swirling green and ethereal whale songs above, I quietly plead “please tell me you found a clue to this stupid thing.”

“We did not. Any parchment and books we found were far too rotted to read.”

“Wait uhhh..you’re missing someone?,” I query of Silence’s location to which she quickly points back towards the information spirit of the courtyard — peering that way, my line of sight upside down, I spy the elf hanging out by the broken ghost some twenty feet back, looking past us to the vault, squinting for clues.

Slicing at the air, testing the ancient blade, she states between swings “he is convinced *shwpp* the secret lies in a *shwtt* different vantage.”

“So..” Imshael whispers in my ear, “stop relying upon others and use this empty head of yours to grow an actual idea.”

*If you’re not going to help, just shut up. Please. God damn it.*

“Hehehehaha, I’m trying to help. You’re the one being stubborn like a weed.”
'Laying on the gardener shtick a little thick,' I inwardly mock.

“I choose my words deliberately.”

‘You mean you’re deliberately an asshole,’ I argue back with the voice in my head.

“Hunter?,” Cass asks, drawing me back to this reality, away from the debate with a former meal.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to zone out — just tryin’ to solve this,” I say of the puzzle lock before us. Pausing in her swordplay, she expresses “I do not know exactly how long we have been at this, but it feels as if it has been an entire day. We really should retire for now, regain our strength and rest, approach this with fresh eyes come…”

“Whatever in the Fade qualifies as tomorrow morning?,” I interject as whale songs and thunder drone out beyond the parapets and ruined walls.

“Ughh, yes,” she groans in admission and offers me her hand.

Taking her up on it, hauled back to my feet, we walk in tacit agreement back to our ruined tower, our solitary respite in this arbitrary horror show.
“Well, it doesn’t seem to go bad,” I mutter while poking at the scraps of roast bird, “like it’s stasis locked or something.”

“If that truly is the case, then we should ration out that which remains,” Cass declares, ever the voice of pragmatism, “we do not truly know how much longer it will take to escape this place.”

Silence, he just nods along while not-so-stealthily sneaking bites of a bread end, crumbs spilling to his lap and the tabletop. It’s a paltry piece, not worth fighting over, so Cassandra doesn’t quibble over it.

But it is amusing that he only steals bites when she isn’t looking his way.

Regardless, we’ve enough food for several days more if we portion appropriately.

But will that be enough? I can only hope.

*****

We ate our allotted meals, eating only what we deemed a decent ration in relative silence. While the day hadn’t proven to be physically taxing, it had drained us of our mental vigor. Of my share, of the meager fruit I’d been given, I’d slid any red berries I’d found towards Cass. She seemed to appreciate that; while savoring them, she had cast a knowing look my way. Following that, we retreated to our improvised bedding as Silence took up first watch yet again.

Quiet, beside me, lying with her face to the Fade sky, she looks reserved, contemplative.
It’s not an awkward or tense silence, but simply a calm I’m hesitant to break.
But she does, saying almost shyly, “the dream from last night…”

Rolling on my side to gaze at her, I simply hum in question.

“…I wouldn’t be opposed to it happening again,” she whispers, nervous.

My turn to blush, a nervous excitement flutters through me; I coolly reply “I’ll find you” and finish with a wink. At that, on a soft exhale, she closes her eyes, almost eager to sleep.

And I do the same.

‘Give me another normal dream, please,’ I request of the anchor and it buzzes in kind.

*****
A curious pinching happens just behind my forehead, like my thoughts have been shoved through a narrow funnel and just as my eyes adjust to the calm of the pitch black, blinding lights click on, theirs a vibrant hum of electricity through filament. Squinting against the bright, panic tries to tug at me, fears of days now past, but my worry evaporates as the light goes purple, easier on the eyes.

I recall I wanted this.

It’s not a return to the cutting room.

*Just a dream. No actual Qunari…*

And I still have both arms.

Seated on an uneven stool, hunched over the bar before me, voices talk over one another, but there are no actual people to be seen — everyone crowded about me in the dim lights are but cardboard cutouts. At that odd observation, a wet tumbler slides down the sticky counter and slaps damply against my open palm — the scent of cheap whiskey fills the air from the hastily cleaned glass in hand.

Throwing caution to the wind at presence of the familiar, a most welcome bouquet, I swirl and sip, letting the biting amber wash over my tastebuds.

“Smooth,” I cough out, sarcastic, while spinning on my seat to study the rest of the room. Beyond the standing cutouts of people, grainy photos of monsters and horror scenes adorn the walls, paint marker graffiti scribbled in between each hanging frame.

There are stained wooden floors, worn down from years of abuse.

Across the ceiling, a motley display, red and magenta bulbs in tin cages and string lights, all creating a dimly lit atmosphere. Heavy metal crashes like waves from the back room as the audience of cutouts crowd the stage, power chords shaking that half of the bar as bass pedals hammer.

This is definitely my scene — a good dive bar.

Taking another sip, relaxing some in the familiar, I yell out to the anchor over all the noise “THIS. THIS IS GOOD” and it flashes twice in response, excited it would seem by the energy of the room, even unmoving as it all is. Scratch that — a few curious lesser spirits weave through the crowd, eager to observe and learn as they steadily flicker with veins of orange, absorbing what they can of the scene.

Bass vibrates through the floorboards and into my feet.

No vocals, the electric growls of guitars tickles my inner ear.

The slow creep of remembered intoxication whispers through me.

“I miss this,” I hum out under my breath, drowned out by the audio and discord scavenged from my memories.

“WHAT IS THAT NOISE?!” yells in my ear, somehow matching the volume of the bar — snapping my head about, I find Cass, hands mashed against her ears for protection and eyes wide in shock. No armor, she’s done up in tattered grey jeans and a slim fitting black A-shirt, a studded belt and laced up combat boots, also black. Inexplicably, I manage to resist the urge to do a spit take at this vision — I’ve never even considered her wearing anything but her armor and leathers, but she jolts me back to this reality, shouting again “WHAT IS THIS??”
Coughing on my whiskey — this is the second time she’s made me choke now in a dream, I even knew she was likely gonna show this time too — I hold the anchor aloft and slowly twist my wrist, turning the volume down on the dreamscape by a couple of decibels while I try to catch my breath. With a steadying breath, I manage to get out “Sorry ‘bout that — didn’t realize how loud it was.”

Letting her hands fall away from her ears, she gawks at the scene as she turns to and fro, saying loudly “clearly this is your dream.”

“You’ve got it,” I nod out, taking another sip of the dream-provided beverage in hand before asking “what do ya think of all this?”

“I am uncertain what to say of the…the music? But I can...appreciate why you might like it,” she tactfully states and I’m quick to comment “wanna get out of here?” I know Cass — she’s not into this sort of thing. She’d only be enduring, not likely enjoying herself if we stayed here.

“Please, yes. It is very crowded and loud.”

‘She think these cardboard people are...people?,’ I ponder a moment before agreeing, offering my hand. No hesitation, she throws her’s into mine and I leap to my feet, whisking her away with me to the front door. Hauling the rusted steel door open, even with its weight heavy and its hinges uncooperative, I’m able to force our escape into the next dreamscape with the aid of the anchor’s manipulative glow — out we step into another dream, darkness bleeding into a hazy, incense filled chamber.

The previous discord has been utterly replaced with an eerie calm. A young girl and boy sit upon high-backed wooden chairs in the corner, unmoving, done up like porcelain dolls while an older man in grey robes prepares a dead body on an examination table — at his side, there sits metal scalpels, hooks, and flasks of noxious looking liquid.

He chants under his breath, coaxing whatever spirits he can to the corpse in his care.

Necromancy.

Mortalitasi.

Fear tries to grip me, to hold me close, but I refuse to fall sway to it, angrily thinking ‘No, this isn’t then. This isn’t them. You’re fine. Still free.’

The corpse, it twitches as possession takes hold.

Cassandra, though, she goes stiff beside me as “no, not this” slips from her — anxious, she edges backwards, tugging at me to leave.

I’ve seen enough, I know enough of her past to piece together what this was to her so we double back, retreating the way we came.

But not back to the bar, no, we step into a much more vibrant scene. Like walking head first into an imitation rainbow, we enter dead center into a carnival, surrounded by all the whirs and dings of automated rides and amusements, all the sweet and savory aromas of cotton candy and funnel cakes, all the blinking and flashing lights.

Despite the commotion, we’re the only ones here.

No cardboard cutouts.
No pretense of others.

Not even spirits stray into this dream.

“I am…sorry,” she utters, annoyed it would seem that such a memory could shake her, “that was clearly my dream.”

“No, no apologies,” I protest calmly, “we can’t always choose what’s going on in our heads.”

“…still though, I am sorry you had to witness that,” she apologizes, still annoyed, unfocused on the surroundings.

I go to reach in to comfort her, to pull her to me, but in an instant, she’s gone and I’m ejected just as quickly. Falling from the carnival, I land again in the charred and twisted wastes bridging any and all dreams.

“The fuck!?” I spit in shock with my backside to the pumice dusted ground as islands of the same float overhead. Uncertain, stunned that it all took such a dark turn, I ask the anchor “she was just woken up, right!? No weird demon dream Fade bullshit?!”

Two pulses, the anchor confirms my query.

“Shit...none of that was my plan,” I mumble and I feel the anchor buzzing. Recalculating slowly, I grumble “…okay. She’s not in danger the...what if we try for round two of contacting the Inquisition?”

It buzzes in my bones, felt even in dreams, before it agrees — a double pulse.

I spit off the usual roster of names, trying my damndest to make an outgoing call…


No answer.


No answer from any of them. I can only assume they’re all awake.

Weird.

“Cullen?,” I question and at my hesitant whisper of his name, the anchor blazes and the world blurs, hurrying me to the commander. In an instant, I’ve docked just outside a dream sphere, its barrier shimmering with shades of lyrium blue and lion’s gold.

I spy the commander within, only him and not yet what he’s dreaming.

Within the dome, he stumbles and falls to the ground but he wears a smile despite this.

“Huh. Didn’t actually expect him to be sleeping.” I mutter while rapping my knuckles against the outside and from within, Cullen calls out “Yes? Enter” without pausing in his actions. At his invitation, I find myself stepping right into his Skyhold office, the floor absolutely just crowed with yipping and excited mabari pups as pleasantly warm sunlight beams through the gaping hole in his ceiling. Chuckling to himself on the floor as large-pawed, slobbering pups scamper to climb him, he shouts “oh! Inquisitor! My apologies…” and struggling to climb to his feet, he explains while awkwardly shrugging “Sera likely thought this a prank but I..well, I like dogs.”
“This is a lot of puppies,” I remark as some turn their attention to me, jumping up against my denim covered legs and trying to nip.

Smiling still, he snorts “yes, they are quite a handful. I don’t even know where she found them all…” and he looks to them all, lost in thought, slowly being drawn back to the dream. I want him to be happy, to find that whenever he can, but I have to distract him.

Just for a moment.

“Uh…Cullen?”

“Yes Inquisitor?,” he asks as he smirks lovingly at his furry, slobbering legion.

“Did the wisps get through?”

“The..the uh what now?,,” he questions, confused.

“In Caer Oswin, after we got sucked into the Fade…” I slowly ask, ensuring he’s hearing me, “after that…did some spirits exit through the weakened veil and give you my message?”

“A..a message?”

Clasping both his shoulders and staring him dead in the eyes, I repeat “yes, did you get my message?” as the anchor chooses then to blaze, to assist in granting him clarity of mind. In an instant, the daze vanishes from his confused face and he groans “huh..uh, yes. You…we thought they were attacking at first.” Growing more concerned and alert now, he grumbles “that thing, Cole, it shouted at us, told us they were from you…that we needed to…to return to Skyhold?”

“Can’t get back the way we came. We’re looking for another way out. But you are returning to Skyhold?”

“Ye-yes. We…we’re…” he stammers but then looks to the ground and groans anew “there aren’t any hounds here are there?...this is just…this isn’t real.”

“Yeah, but I am.”

“Eghh, Maker’s breath,” he mutters to himself and moves away from me; his hand tremors return, permeating his psyche even in the dream.

“Sorry Cullen. Didn’t mean to ruin your…” I sigh before resigning to just put him back under, demanding “go to sleep.” The fog of dreams, the glamour, it glazes his eyes, the tremors pass, and he returns his attention to the numerous pups at his feet.

“Ahhh, perhaps Sera was trying to improve my mood? Nonsense, that girl is chaos incarnate” he murmurs to himself with a confused smile, already having forgotten my presence.

I leave without a goodbye, refusing to hurt the man anymore than needed.

Any respite, any relief, he deserves all he can get.

But that answered that question — all the people that need to know my whereabouts know. 

Good.

But that was a short dream, a minor detour.
There’s likely time still before I have to wake.

As a desolate haze attempts to shift about me, the anchor beaming bright like a lighthouse piercing, I try again to reach out.

“Krem? Flissa? Grim? Dalish” I question like an idiot...

...until finally her name comes to mind...

Rasa.

That it took me this long to think to contact her is an insult — I should’ve tried for her the very second I first finished talking to Solas back on Estwatch.

I don’t even speak, the anchor knows and in an instant, I’m thrown just outside her dream sphere. Grey and greyer, hers looks most depressing as it barely swirls, almost stagnant in its form — she stands still within, her back to me, clad in black leather armor..

A knock.

No movement.

“Rasa?,” I anxiously call out to no avail.

Another knock. No response.

‘This bodes well,’ I think ruefully and force my way into her dream — sliding through her grim barrier, I intrude upon a nightmare. A return to the Winter Palace, I slog through knee deep blood to find her stilled, muttering to herself in a crowd of faceless Orlesians.

“You let it happen...no. You’re all monsters..” she shakily breathes, “no one. No no no... All complicit. Why won’t you just die? Just die… just die.”

Servants and nobility alike, they all have deep cuts across their throats, red pouring and spurting freely, drenching their various outfits and costumes. Sycophants all, their snide and abrasive laughter rings out hollow and mocking.

And Rasa, her mop of black hair is wet, slick with their blood, her pointed ears poking through those plastered locks. In her trembling hand, a red stained cheese knife.

Beyond the crowd, the double doors are open to the balcony from whence I was abducted.

Eyes wide, I understand all too perfectly this horrid scene, what it meant for her, how she lost me.

Hurt.

Alone.

She can’t reconcile that she’s lost another family.

With forced steps, uncomfortably warm blood slowing me, I push to her side, dropping to my knees as the thick red swallows me and spinning her, she nearly drives her knife into my eye.

Nearly — she holds, its blunt curve threatening me.

Shaking slightly.
Questioning.

"Hey," I whisper most quietly, unsure of what to say next.

A shiver rolls through her.

Her eyes, they twitch and focus.

Finally, a glint of recognition.

The spell, it breaks.

Angry tears run down both our faces; she snatches at me, almost choking me as she throws her arms around me in a panic — hugging hard to ensure I can’t vanish, she scratchily sobs “I’m sorry. Sorry. I’m so..I..I couldn’t find you.”

Arms about her, holding her tight, red eyed, I utter softly “**hey hey...you’re good. I’m almost home. You’ll see me real soon**” reassuringly into the top of her head, trying to hold back a sob as well. Confused, a bitter edge taking hold, she slowly pushes back to stare me down as she questions “I see you now” with narrowing eyes.

“And this is a _**dream**_ — ya can’t blame yourself. You’re too cool and mean for that,” I explain, staring just as hard back at her, “just one more obstacle to fuck with and I’ll be back.”

Her air of indifference returning strong, that bitterness leaving her voice, she bluntly demands “when?” as the mocking Orlesians vanish, no longer relevant to the narrative.

Blood still tries to swallow us both but it’s only us in this soup now.

“Damn you’re good,” I whisper of her resolve, her adaptability, before answering “**better be tomorrow. Getting’ real sick of this Fade shit.**”

“You’re not with the rescue team,” she states, quick to understand as bright red drips down her young, calm face.

“**Was. God damn.**”

Nearly returned to her normal self, with only traces of her bitter tears now upon her face, she rasps “stop wasting time then — wake up and get here already.” With that, she shoves me backwards and I inexplicably trip out of her dream and the moment I do, her sphere vanishes as I tumble backwards into the dirt. Ass to ground, surrounded by smoke and fire, confused, eyes darting as my brow furrows, I question the anchor “**she just wake herself up?**”

Hesitantly, it flashes twice, potentially unsure itself of what she’s managed.

“**Cool kid,**” I mutter proudly of the girl, brow still pinched tight as I take in my new surrounding —the air is thick with the smoke of burning corpses. Hundred of them, all littering the streets. The sun is blotted out, the walls too high, all light here comes from fire. Through the haze and heat, some of my surrounding look familiar.

An alienage. Broken and filthy. Burnt and caved in hovels, vines and roots upsetting the very foundations.

Everything but a lone table under the Sacred vhenadahl tree is burning.
Homes.
The walls imprisoning this awful place.

Bodies — Corpses litter these rancid streets in piles.

No...

It’s all one person; the late Empress Celene over and over and over again.

Each and every one among the dead is her.

Her half masked face, its stares blankly in death as the flames consume her, as her elegant gown cooks and crinkles against the heat, as her blonde hair blackens and smokes.

Walking through the mud, wafting embers, and viscera, trying to orient myself, I hear ghostly chatter but searching for the source, staring through the burning haze, I find but one elf talking up a storm as unseen others laugh and shoot the breeze in kind,

“No”

“But did you see zee way she died?”

“Too perfect!”

Snorting, choking on laughter, Silence spits out “thas what you get when you fuck with zee elves of orlais!”

“Hear hear!” formless voices cheer.

...Too happy with himself to be a nightmare…

‘And he can talk,’ I note before remembering my own arm issue, ‘course he can. Duh.’

In my cautious approach, my boots jingling some with each measured step, Silence whips about mid gulp from a pint — spilling on himself, sputtering in pleasant surprise, he shouts out “Inquisitor! My apologies for the mess” and wipes at his face with a smudge stained sleeve. The unseen others, they yell and jeer “agh, who’s this then?!” in unison, clearly upset by my arrival.

Wheeling back on his company, he shouts back “manners!” and donning his thickest of Orlesians accents, he belts out “Ehvreewun, zis iz zee inquizitoooor!” Unable to restrain himself, he snorts out “hate that fake shit, hahahehehehehaha. What brings you here, boss?”

“Probably a proximity issue...did this with Cass earlier, but uh we’re sharing a dream”

“A dream?” he ponders aloud while addressing his invisible comrades, “Oh please, this shithole isn’t a dream. I’d absolutely get out if I could…but those poxy nobles, got the walls up, gates locked. They trust us about as much as we trust them.”

“Yeah...saw uhh saw a lot of fiery Celenes around here,” I mention but Silence leaps to his feet, standing on his toes and claps his hand over my mouth, warning “Easy now. I talk a big game, but best not be invoking hers.

“That what happened to ya?,” I ask, thinking about his missing tongue in the waking world. Dazed, forgetting what I just asked, he turns back to his friends and bursts out “did I ever tell you all how this big bastard saved my life?” to the sounds of laughter and dismissal, “No really.
I’m trying to rush back to this nothing of a town, Haven, snow and ice everywhere. Abominations and possessed mages bearing down on Haven — they came out of nowhere, had to hurry back to tell a certain a redhead” and with a wink, he adds “and you know I love those fire touched women…”

“Sileal, get to the important parts already!,” someone jeers unseen.

‘Sileal?’ I ponder the word, ‘birth name?’

Sighing and smirking, Silence comments “Eat a Wolf dick” while giving the pronged finger salute; slapping at my side he continues on to tell the audience “anywaaaay, he comes soldiering out, blood just pouring from his nose, and just proper fucks every last one of the monsters coming in. You ain’t never seen so much red. The air was hissing, their hot blood splashing on cold snow. Well, he was enough of a magical battering ram that I had time now to get in, get to safety.”

“I don’t… I don’t think I remember that?,” I question, unsure of that particular event.

“Undoubtedly. You were a walking seizure, all murder eyes and death on your fingertips. Anyway, like I said brothers…”

”hey!” shouts a more feminine voice.

”and sister,” he corrects and finishes, “hez good.” Turning his attention back to me, he beams out “Pull up a chair, enjoy some shade, some drinks!” to the agreeable cheers of elves unseen. A mug appears in my hand as I let the dream take hold, guiding me through the narrative of “Sileal’s” mind.

*****

“It is time,” Cass quietly greets me while nudging me awake, wearing a certain stress about her.

Stretching, I reply “Good mornin’ beautiful” despite the litany of darkly twisted dreams I’d wandered. Like the day prior, upon my waking, I find I’m well rested; every breath is like inhaling pure electricity. The energy, it’s invigorating, intoxicating. The way I figure, it’s because I’m a mage and physically sleeping in the Fade, it’s like charging a battery.

…and likely part of why Solas wants all this back...

“While I like you saying such,” Cass yawns and settles in beside me, “I doubt such a statement. And furthermore, I apologize for last night.”

“And again, there’s no need; we both have a past. As for the beautiful bit? Still true,” I reply, tryin to find some manner of silver lining in this ever shifting hell. Eyes closed, huddled beside me, she sighs out “appreciated, but not likely.”

With my taking third watch and her having gotten less rest, she’s quick to fall asleep, her breathing becoming repetitive.

’All this power and of course I forget I can actively control dreams…” I think in regret, ‘such a dumbass.’ But as I’m mulling over such thoughts, yet again the hairs on my neck stand on end as my skin shivers.
Something is watching us.

“Definitely not paranoid,” I mutter under my breath. Hand extended, senses dialed to ten in search of a foreign presence, right eye shut tightly to stare at the world through only my left, I’m stunned to find that I don’t find anything malicious.

I don’t feel anything out of place.

I can’t see any presence.

Maybe it’s because the Fade is everywhere and everything, there’s nothing to actually pinpoint.

Shit.

But I must be off because an emptied pitcher on the table starts bubbling, refilling as if straight from a crystal clear brook.

‘A moment frozen in time? Can you eat a moment? Ahh, uh...no, that’s dumb. What am I missing?’, I anxiously question and second guess as I ready myself to throw down, kinetic force bolstering in my knuckles as my pupils burn hot. Cass though, perhaps in response to my uneasy steps on creaking boards, she stirs.

“What are? What are you doing?,” she grumbles and works at the kink in her neck, “is something…” but I interject, waving and shooting back “nah, no nope, shhhh” with my left eye wide open.

Already, she has her sword firmly clutched as I warn “Watch my back” and extend my hand to the room again.

Under her breath and uncertain where to look, she questions “give me a location.”

Worried — I don’t like fighting what I can’t see — I swallow dryly and whisper back “I...I can’t see it.”

“You are excitable,” the room replies, the very stonework rumbling with its tenor tones.

And I go still.

The both of us do.

Trying to force some courage back into my voice, I express anxiously “And you’re…I don’t know what you are.” On edge, I’m uncertain where to look.

And I don’t particularly enjoy the thought of being inside a spirit.

“Demon,” Cass hisses under her breath and puts her back to mine, ready to fight with her Dar’Missan in hand. Everywhere and nowhere, the room answers “there’s no longer a name for what I am…” and further reading Cassandra, it says “oh, your companion?”

I feel Cass shift uneasily at my back as she furtively looks to the still snoozing elf in the shadows — only oddly enough, the room decides to gently urge “do wake up, young Sileal.”

Silence, his eyes creep open at that beckoning to a most curious sight: Me, an arm extended and fingers audibly crackling with potential energy. Cass guarding my back, glaring about the room with fearful suspicion. Emptied flagons from the last meal slowly refilling even as we stand on
edge. Food literally regenerating before us, the roast bird reforming cut by cut, the bread becoming fresh dough, expanding, and baking in an instant.

Cass, she pales beside me, looking as if she’s about to vomit, gagging out “The food was a demon.”

“That which was prepared isn’t anything more than what it seems. It’s all I can do now,” the room explains to us, “I once provided relief, laughter, camaraderie, drunken revelry…”

Anxious still, but less so than before, I question the possessed room, asking “What’s your name?”

There’s power in a name and knowing this one will tell us much.

“I have been forgotten in the wake of less yielding entities like War and Hunger. I remember I was mercurial in nature, the feeling one gets from…” the room rumbles.

‘Shared XP?,’ I think to myself but the room reads me, replying “It doesn’t matter… I don’t matter. Just...just take care of one another when you leave this place.”

I go to ask how it knows but all that comes out is a confused unintelligible grunt.

“The moment you feasted together, I understood your intent…”

Definitely something about sharing.

“...You mean to open the vault and use the eluvians there to leave this place.” it elaborates, “but I must warn you, though I have never seen outside this tower, I once heard the concerns from the sentries that darkness claimed many of the mirrors.”

‘The taint?!’, I mentally hiss, ‘FUCK.’

“Why am I being so open?,” it asks and Silence glares at the ceiling, confused and nervous — evidently, it’s his thoughts that the room is reading and it continues on to say “it’s what I am…”

‘Who you are,’ I think to which the room responds “you are too kind.”

‘What was this place?,’ I continue on in my head to which the room replies “It had a name...now it doesn’t. An outpost. Everyone knew they’re time was short. I came here to comfort them in their time of crisis, whenever they should find the time to spare. How they watched and hunted for the Dread Wolf, maintaining a border for Elgarnan…”

“Elgarn’nan,” I state incredulously, flatly. Cass, still suspicious, she groans out “what?”

“I never saw him through the sentries. He must have been powerful to make them all so scared.”

“Mhmm…mhmm. Yeah, that’s all cool but uhhh,” I hasten the conversation some, “in those… guard minds, you ever see how they unlocked the vault? Kinda need to know about unlocking the vault.

Sorry, a depressed tremor entering its words, the Everywhere answers “I apologize…the key you search for is dead. She is dead. As their commanding offer, she shut the doors before the corruption could spread, knowing it would be her undoing.”
“Ahhnmm damn it,” I hum while furiously thinking, mind racing, ‘new idea. Need a new idea. Door was tethered to one person. Blood magic? Probably. Doesn’t matter if she’s inside — can’t use her corpse hand for access. Shit, something I’m overlooking...anything.’

‘So break the rules,’ whispers a thought that feels eerily like Imshael’s — still plotting, my mind churns out ‘why do we even need a key? Can’t finesse the lock, so how about some brute strength? No, can’t risk damage to the mirrors. Angles. Silence was on about perspectives and distance.’

“You are upset,” says the room, probably of everyone and not just me but I just continue to chew on my lip, eyebrows knitting as I persist in trying to think out a new play.

Punch it at an angle, rip that thing off its hinges...

Ya get a shockwave. R.I.P. to the mirrors. Shit.

What about leverage? Pry it open.

No. Probably has failsafes for mundane attempts like that.

Blow torch. Drill bits. Safecracker...

‘Or what if there simply wasn’t a door anymore?’, I pause after landing upon the curious notion, ‘how do I do that? How do I do that. Can’t blink.’ Distress momentarily flashes in my eyes as I grimly think ‘definitely can’t blink,’ remembering how I ended up inside a person back in the Plains.

And with my current capacity for it, I’d absolutely fuse us with the door.

No blinking.

Then how do I ignore the door?

Can’t ignore...focus on the door. I have to focus.

‘It’s a door now but...’ I think and let slip “…what if it wasn’t?”

“What if what wasn’t?” Cassandra questions without letting her guard down, clearly concerned.

“Wasn’t a door...break the rules?,” I absently explain, far too locked in on the idea to be present, “distance. Atomic, Gold is matter, has a state. Magic can’t change that fact. Gotta make em dance a bit faster.”

For the millionth time, Cass shoots me an incredulous look — exasperated, she fires back “none of that sounds like a plan! Make...what?!”

“An interesting concept,” rumbles the room, impressed, “please, do be careful.”

“Ughhh,” Cass groans in annoyance, sword wavering, “what is even happening right now” and Silence shrugs hard, equally confused by the exchange, returning his dagger to its sheath in a jerky, uncertain motion.

Chapter End Notes
If you’re curious to know what music was playing in the bar, look up Sleep’s Dopesmoker.
Yet again we huddle before the patterned door of the ancient vault.

Yet again we try our hand at cracking it open.

Only this time, we’ve an actual plan for dealing with it. Granted, I’m not entirely on board with it…not yet at least. But with Cassandra behind me, ready to vent my mana, we’ve our best and only precaution against…well, me…in place.

Beginning her ritual, preparing her circle of influence, she kneels and plants her sword tip to the earth, her free hand outstretched and ready to snatch at me.

“Explain it one more time,” Cass sighs out and I respond “everything is made up of inexplicably smaller pieces. The distance between those pieces determines whether it’s a solid, a liquid, or a gas. Heat and vibration can impact that.”

_Thank you, science._

I suppose somewhat content with the plan, Cass takes to uttering “Andraste, guide us, guide me as I……in the name of the Maker…please…” and falling to inaudible whispers, she stills herself, preparing her mind and spirit for my potential backlash.

She has begun.

I’m hesitant to give rise to my power — I know I shouldn’t fear it, fear only goes toward upsetting it. But like my reclaimed memories once told me, “don’t fear.” But explicitly trying not to fear something for the sake of not fearing is damn near impossible. ‘Please don’t bite,’ I hope against hope of my magic, recalling Imshael’s analogy not too long ago…so of course the demon himself, he chooses then to step into my periphery, just out of view. But even there, I feel his yellowed eyes on me, judging as he whispers “you have so much potential…you really should listen to yourself” but correcting himself, he rephrases “your other self.”

_Quiet._

“You already have the idea, you just. Need. To. Pursue it,” the demon stresses hoarsely. I chance a glance his way but he steps from view, concealing himself as he whispers “I’m not what you should focusing on. The door, that is your objective. Take it. Make it yours.”

_And I could kill them both…one mistake and I could,’ I worry, internalizing, but Imshael argues “you could have killed everyone at every point. You have power and you’ve had power this whole time. The only difference is your hesitation.”

_But._

“No buts! You have had literal death bleeding from your fingertips from the very beginning. You never harmed your allies then! Why would you harm them now?”

_You know why._
“Bahh,” he spits, “you told yourself to remember and you persevered. You told yourself not to fear, and you managed that for quite some time. What are a few missing pieces to you?! You are Hunter, the rift sealer, the death bringer, the demon killer.” At that last title, he extends his arms and takes a bow oh so ceremoniously but ignoring the devoured, I whisper to the anchor anxiously, “ya ready?”

Two pulses — while powerful here, it feels just as eager to return to the waking world as I am, to continue on our truer path.

“Be prepared to protect yourself in case this goes sideways,” I request of everyone present.

The anchor, it hums in my bones, vibrating the very joints of my hand. It understands the danger. Cassandra, she doesn’t give a reply, instead choosing to maintain her focus.

Smart.

Sil, I can’t see him and he’s not making any noise. Probably for the best.

That, and he’s no idiot.

"Here...we...go."

Inhale.

An attempt at a calming exhale…

...an inhale.

Exhale.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

I feel that heat just behind my pupils, it stokes itself to life having never really died. Not here, not in the Fade, this world is all kindling for a mage.

‘All that time, I could hit, I could grab, I could kill without laying a finger on someone...do I still have that?’, I question, trying not to doubt. Extending my left, the anchor probes and tests — the doors have a lock after all. And what good are keys if not for locks. While no visible tendrils of energy arc between the lock and myself, I feel the shuddering and ticking of the anchor as it tests the old wards, trying to nullify them as I ready to assault the old door through other means.

With my right stump held forward, awkwardly mimicking the other, I try to reach.

Try.

I stretch it forward as far as I can, the skin wrapped about the end pulling tight.

Teeth grit against the discomfort of having both the Fade channel through me and having our seeker trying to contain it, I shut tight my eyes and imagine it all before me.

‘It’s just a door,’ I think in frustration of those weathered vallaslin patterns, ‘gold. Weak. A yielding metal.’

A click.
Something recognizes us.

Greater wards go up within, shielding against me and my lack of a proper key. Or perhaps, it’s because I carry Solas’ key — surely an outpost of Elgar’nan wouldn’t open itself easily to the Dread Wolf. But all the same, the door refuses the anchor, rejects and denies it further access but still the blazing scar tries, needling at the wards in sharp bursts, the pain of which ricochets back into me.

*Why should it open easily to me?*

*Because you’re different.*

*Strange.*

*Foreign.*

*We’re not trying to unlock it — we’re tryin’ to break it*

‘*Brave,*’ I try to convince myself, to rally — fires rising in the deep, those first licks of violent violets and magenta, they singe and cook from the inside as they build. My heartbeat in my throat, in my skull, every pulse just reminding me how close I am to toppling over into the abyss.

*Reach.*

I imagine my hand dipping into the surface of a pond, its waters inviting and warm from the summer sun. Not a ripple as dragonflies dart about.

A muscle spasm, both my shoulders tense up.

*Push through it, mind over matter.*

*Stir, break the calm, shake the very fucking atoms of the water.*

I feel the strain of the anchor, its growl as it tries to keep Elgar’nan wards from retaliating, keeping pins from triggering. My right, that phantom twinge is back, that feeling that what’s lost still remains. I don’t quite know how, but those fingers flex, tendons taut, I feel it diving beneath those stilled waters of my imagination and I feel it now as it churns the calm…

...upsetting the surface.

Ripples and waves…

…colliding and sloshing.

Breaking and crashing.

My eyes tear open with that blistering heat blazing just behind my pupils, blotting out the lesser lights of the world about.

Like it did for Sloth.

Like it did for Vivienne.

Like it did for those god damn Qunari bastards.

And Cassandra’s prayers are interrupted by her own growl, staggered by the inferno of power.
roaring within me. But still she doesn’t begin the venting.

...she trusts me. That I can handle it, hold back the brunt of it.

She...

Trusts...

Me...

And I find I don’t fear it.

Oddly, in this moment, right here, this is the most comfortable I’ve been in ages.

All pain aside, every nerve ending screaming in protest as I awaken the beast in me, I can’t help but smile.

Cassandra trusts me. Trusts me to hold my own, as she always has.

Imshael was right. I’m the only thing holding me back.

I’m the idiot, the roadblock.

And I savor it, smiling out in relief at this revelation as I whisper “welcome back,” my voice crackling like a bonfire. That inferno within, it redirects itself, funneling that power through me, beyond me. Or perhaps I’m doing it. Really, I don’t know, and at the moment, I certainly don’t care where the responsibility lies.

I just need us out.

Five digits dig deep in the door, like mashing fingers to soft clay.

My fingers. Mine.

The hollow expands.

No true resistance.

Not stopping me, not this.

Cackling weakly, Imshael says in my ear, “there you go again, breaking the rules, heheheheah” but I pay him no mind — I taste blood in my mouth, copper washing over tastebuds, the mounting pressure is clawing at my insides.

Not stopping.

Just push through.

Bear it. Direct it. Be it.

A fist in, a forearm deep, the gold groans and complains as that word “follow” calls out from within, spurring me harder.

Yes.

Sweat drips from my brow as mana boils, roiling, flooding my veins.
YES.

My vision flickers with static, nerve endings twitching with raw mana, my mortal vessel struggling to handle the torrent.

More.

Faster.

“Transmute. You. Bastard,” I hear myself yelling as I push and twist further into the obstacle from afar.

Shaking, its surface quivering like gelatin, the door rattles on its very hinges.

And then the unthinkable becomes thought becomes will becomes real. As fresh blood dribbles from the corner of my mouth, that damn door just can’t help itself — the left side, in that instant, it flows like water, pouring as it forgets its hardened form. But as liquid gold floods the ancient cobblestones, something darker hits us — rot, powerful decay. Rancid sweet and horrid death, it bludgeons our senses and though mighty mere seconds ago, I’m left reeling while the other two are audibly gagging.

Hissing and gnashing, chittering. Milky eyes glare out at us from within the darkness, the vault actually something’s personal abyss.

“HRAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH,” scream wordless mouths, things of the black rushing to freedom. I lash out, flipping my hand at the door, splashing liquid gold at the monsters within in a useless effort — blinded by hate, madness perhaps, they press forward en masse, fearless, limbs and fingernails scratching and clawing at one another to be the first to get at us, held back by only the limiting size of their new exit way. Silence’s big knife soars past my side and I can only watch as it meets the first of the prisoners within — ruthless, it plunges into the first’s ravaged face and as the body drops, foul blood and ichor spewing from the wound, I realize our foes.

And it's worse than just taint.

“Darkspawn,” I hiss, eyes stinging as I choke down the nausea from their mere presence, their rotten, rancid aura, but a curious thing more instinct than thought takes life — with the crunching of bone and the slithering of muscles pushed aside, something forces its way up through my stump, just like back on Est March.

But unlike back then, nothing rips through the ruined end and throwing my right to the imminent attack, action becomes fact. Old elven ghouls smash up against a wall unseen, furious and spitting their hate as they claw with ruined fingers and screech their vitriol, stopped even though they see us with their blighted eyes. Fingertips bleed against my instant barricade in their desperate bid to tear their way to freedom.

Cassandra, though staggered, she rushes the barrier of darkspawn, staring in repulsion at their horrid, ruined faces, elven features long since chewed off. Taking a piercing stance, she drives the tip through my wall and impales but one of the many trapped within.

Then another.

A third.

My phantom magic grants her access.
A fourth.

Another.

Swallowing hard to fight back the nausea, she does her duty, her task with no objections — stabbing and stabbing, getting each the best she can through the soft yolk of their crazed eyes.

Inexplicably holding back the ravenous horde, my vision blurs, darkens again as blips of static fill my sight.

Breathing hard, too hot.

Another darkspawn ended.

Sweating profusely now.

Another.

‘Come on in, the water’s fine,’ whispers a voice in my skull that wants to sound like mine, ‘drink the black, it tastes like wine.’

“No,” I growl, trying to threaten it off but it returns, scratching at the back of my skull, urging me, beckoning me, ‘it will stop the fears.’

Cassandra is shouting.

I’m rocking back and forth, shaking?

She’s struggling to hold back the squirming Silence. He’s in a trance, his eyes look crazed.

Not himself, trying, scrabbling to get around her, anything to get inside the vault as she distantly shouts “it is a trap. We were tricked! Snap out of it” while striking him across the face.

Struggling against the whispers and rhymes, the twisted sensations they inspire, I do the only thing I trust myself to do now.

Dropping to my knees, teeth chattering as I shiver, I demand myself stay put.

I’m choking back vomit.

I’m not going any closer than this.

I try to reach again from afar, urging that phantom hand return. And despite my lungs burning, it’s much quicker to comply — I grab ahold of Silence — he can’t fight what he can’t touch, can’t escape. My only other option, I hiss against the threatening madness, “hurry Cass! Break the black mirrors!” While I fight to keep him in check, she rushes into the darkness and the cacophony of shattering glass quickly follows.

‘There’s no fears to fear when you’re in here, sing our song, we’ll get along.’

Teeth bared, Silence gurgles his madness and stretches to stop her, anything to free himself and get closer to that darkly sweet song. But I only have to hold on long enough for her to succeed, fighting to keep my sanity as I do so, lest we all be lost.

‘JOIN US NOW AND DRINK US DOWN, WE’LL LIVE TOGETHER, EVER AND EVER,’ beats its song in my head
“HURRY,” I cough out, twitching — It’s getting hard to breathe.

Harder.

Worried I might slip under.

*Almost there, but don’t you cry, when we’re in you, you’ll never die.*

But if that’s the case… I have to drop him with me. Keep him from danger, from corrupting himself.

‘*Fuck you,*’ I weakly argue against the invasive songs and those intangible fingers of mine, I twist and bend them about his throat, choking the air from his lungs.

“Pass out man, c’mon, just black out” I gasp as my heartbeat throbs in my eyeballs.

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Distant muttering, murmuring.

Garbled.

Can’t quite hear the words but I know it’s Cass — her palm, clammy, planted to my forehead, her other to my chest, she’s venting me.

Closer, coming into focus, I make out her words now, her prayers of “In your name we pray, to find the power within ourselves, the power you…”

I cough and violently loll my head to the side, vomiting bile and traces of blood. But with that foul mixture suddenly out of me, dry mouthed, I gulp hard and shakily exhale “in my name, huh?”

*Lame joke.*

“Heh,” she coughs out, “you have returned to me. Thank the maker.”

Emptied, hollow feeling for now, at least until the Fade refuels me, I question “thank yourself. **Was I** hard..hard to put...to put down?” as I shiver and wince against the churning sky, nauseated still as a constant pain throbs through my jaw.

“Very. I had to fight you to the ground while also extinguishing your mana,” she pants.

“Really...glad...you’re so tough,” I groan and press my tongue to my teeth — even they feel sore.

Glancing about with discomfort, I spy our spy. Silence is awake and slumped down under one of the arches, bracing himself against it, massaging the bruising on his neck. He looks just as shaken as I feel. Quick though to spy me in kind but too exhausted and beaten to do anything else, he just weakly nods at me, agreeing that what I did was the right thing to do.

Choke out is better than taint, than death.

”Do you still hear it?,” she asks, clearly worried.
"nah," I manage out, “no voices in here but my...but my own.”

"Alright. Then, I need you to stay still. Don’t move."

Weak, I give her the thumbs up and try to smile as I say “Yeah. You got it.”

At that, she hurries back off toward our ruined tower, the one we used for shelter and sustenance and in passing the damaged information spirit of the fort, it chirps at her before screeching out a long dialup tone.

With labored breathing, gulping to try to get some moisture back in my mouth, I throw Sil a thumbs up.

He shakily throws one back.

"Hooray," I weakly state without enthusiasm, “we’re not dead.”

His thumbs up slowly twists into a prongs gesture.

"Yeah, that’s about how I feel too," I wince out.

At that, he drops his hand to the stone flooring and just shuts his eyes, likely just as nauseated by the ever flowing green about us as I am.

Bootsteps hammer through the courtyard and again the spirit chirps. But with a thick bundle in her hands, she doesn’t stop at us but instead hurries back into the vault. Too tired to call out, I just lie on floor in in silence, with Silence. From within the chamber, the sounds of fabric tearing echo back up to our ears.

Still too tired to question.

But a few minutes later, she emerges again, the bundle gone, a few scraps of fabric in hand instead. Kneeling, she takes to tying them around my bare feet and explaining “I was too reckless in my destruction of the black mirrors...there are glass shards everywhere.”

“That’s fine. Thanks for shoes.”

“Easy now,” Cass cautions as I try to lift myself off my backside. Rising, I can now see within the chamber doorway — kicked to the side, rotted bodies smolder with smiting fire, summoned by Cassandra as some point during my unconsciousness to further cleanse the area and alleviate the pressure. Not worth wasting time — I’m always on the brink of some sort of black out anyway it would seem — I cut to the quick, wincing out “is there actually a mirror?” while gingerly touching at my bruised jawline.

She clocked me hard.

No judgment.

A necessity to take me down.

“There is but one,” she explains while pulling me back to my feet and propping my wobbly self up.

“And the call we’ve been following?”

“It is...still calling,” she answers as a her eyes take a hard edge.
“What’s wrong?”

A hard exhale, she rolls her eyes and questions in kind “what isn’t? This whole thing feels like a trap, a siren luring us to our deaths. And what if that is all this is?”

“Then we destroy it and find another way,” I grumble stoically through a swelling jaw with a certain resolve I haven’t felt in what feels like ages — maybe it’s the confidence of a dead man, knowing indifference? Regardless, whatever it stems from, it’s enough to persuade Cass. That much, I see upon her face, her innate sense of determination stubbornly winning out.

“You are right. We will remove all obstacles from our path” she states, nay, commands, “we will succeed.”

“That’s the Cassandra I know,” I answer back with a mad glint in my eyes as the shakes vanish, ready to fight, to survive, to see us out of this underworld, “We’re gonna walk right through the gates of Hell and damn anything that dare try to stop us.”

“And that is the Hunter I know,” she says with an air of pride, looking up to me; almost certain I can again stand on my own, she nods and leaves me to help up the injured Silence. He can walk just fine but his breathing is ragged, damaged. But with all of us on our feet, into the foul chamber we go, stepping over charred remains, down a short flight of stairs and into main vault, amidst the burning rot and corruption heavy with smoke now. Shards, many mirrors broken, frames bent, hack marks evident, Cassandra had swung and destroyed with reckless abandon, anything to stop the impending evil from taking us.

And damn did she succeed.

Albeit pained, we’re still ourselves, free. She’s our champion this day — our seeker, our guiding light, impervious to whispers, to darkness and blight.

The chamber itself is devoid of the traditional Elven ornamentation. Though, the pocked walls would indicate such adornment had been ripped out, pried from the fixtures by the prisoners. Instead, patterns and blood scrawling, like the rambling of madmen, they fill every last inch of walls. They’re prayers to the old lost gods. The floor is slick with black blood and vile fluids inside this house of the damned — bits of flesh strewn about, grooves scratched into the floors and walls, fragments of fingernails embedded, torn from the darkspawn as they raged for escape.

Or perhaps they were left from elves before corruption took them, their last panicked attempts, anything to avoid such a fate all those years ago.

But I can’t dwell on that. As horrible as it must’ve been for them, that’s the past, they’re the past.

I have to look to the future, ours.

But again, Cassandra’s efforts are evident — like lily pads dotting a dark pond, sheets have been torn and strategically placed over across the floor for me to use. While glass crunches under each of their steps, I have to take a more careful approach as the rags shoed member of the party, limping from one cloth island to the next to avoid getting cut up and poisoned.

“It is that one,” Cass says pointing out a dead looking mirror towards the back, as tall as myself, half covered with a stained heavy curtain, the only mirror not currently a pile of broken glass. Dim but not black, simply dormant — we have to assume that whatever beckoned us has been calling
through that one.

How? I’ve no clue. I only have the roughest idea of how to use them.

So interacting with one outside the game? I can only guess at what one actually has to do to use them.

*And why didn’t they try to escape through it?*

Shoving the thought aside, tired of breathing in this foul stench, I shuffle forward and plant my left hand to the dull surface…

Nothing.

I try again while mumbling “*I swear, this never happens*” in unenthusiastic jest.

Again, nothing occurs — its scratched surface reveals no change.

Cassandra huffs out “of…of course…” in a long sigh, exhausted, her bravado withering — Silence on the other hand, he limps forward, still clutching at his throat and grabbing my stump of a right, he shoves it toward the mirror. I just stare at the elf, brow furrowing as I try to understand his intent but he nods back at the main entrance.

*Not melting the mirror…*

*Wants me to?*

He taps at his bruised throat.

*Oh.*

And then it all clicks into place.

I close my eyes.

I press forward, imagining how the cool surface should feel, and I sense something stir within it…

Cassandra gasps as Silence releases me.

I open again to see what they see — a purple spark dances across the reflective pane, simple as flipping a switch, and the eluvian stands primed to grant us instant travel. And just past its thin threshold, its blood spattered frame, a forest lies but on the other side.

*Mighty trees standing tall, they’re branches creaking.*

Dark grass swaying in the gentle breeze, cut short from absent grazing animals.

A familiar wellspring, handmade long ago, its waters still as death.

“*It worked,*” Cass breathes with her eyebrows high, her sword hand slowly falling to her side.

Silence, he nods in approval, that’s about all he can muster at present.

My fingers slip through — it’s but an open door now, the pathway accepting of us.

And so I step, feeling for the variation of atmospheres as I step between worlds…
…but still the air is stagnant. And that distant moan of a whale song, that whine of glass dancing on tightly wounds strings, it’s all the soundtrack of the Fade.

We’re still here.

Dark, an abundance of grey and black, this little glade is but an imitation of that Brecilian well I once stumbled upon with Winter in my first weeks. The same clearing, the same mossy stonework, the same tall trees on the outskirts. But it isn’t all the same — glass litters this place, a strange energy inhabiting them, little whispers and cries, faraway shouts…

And as I stand in confused dismay, Silence and Cassandra step through to join me.

But as they exit, the mirror dies, immediately severing our connection to that horror show of a room and with it, any means of retreat.

I’m at a loss for words, my mouth struggling to find them as I wheel about, searching in vain for another doorway, another answer, another anything. Cass, in realization, she groans “of course. Why would anything be easy” and pinching at the bridge of her nose, “why should anything make sense?”

With a surprised huff, a voice sweetly coos to us “you..finally..came,” haunting and ethereal.

Chapter End Notes

Hunter is both the luckiest and most unlucky person in (and out) of Thedas.
“A demon!” Cass shouts, her sword flying back before her, its edge threatening, malicious, “I knew this was a trap!” Sil, he pulls free another knife but drops it just as quickly. He’s still shaky — shoulders slumping in disappointment, he reaches down to reclaim the blade and takes up an offensive stance.

This isn’t good — we’re all still winded from our last incident.

I’m still too stunned though from the crushing realization that we’re still in the Fade. Without changing my stance or footing, I turn my shellshocked gaze to the demon and unenthusiastically, I state “Desire” like a threat.

As her clawed fingers fly up defensively, attempting to dissuade us from attacking, she quickly replies “This was not a trap,” her tone sweet and honeyed despite being visibly nervous, “This is your means of escape and I have been waiting for you.”

“Liar,” our Seeker spits at the creature but shaking free of my fog, my daze, my eyes narrow in suspicion and I notice something more — a specific burn pattern, her pale skin is pink and gnarled at the wrists, scarred and blistered, unable to heal properly.

‘Impossible. She’s the…’ I think while absently questioning “but I killed you?”

“No,” she shakes her horned head, chains and tassels jingling and rattling as she does, “but not for lack of trying. I’d never felt a dream burn around me before.”

It is her.

Anger unfurling, I glare at this creature that dare invade my dreams, that has the gall to stand before me now. That hellhound within me, my magic, it roars, trying to burn back to full strength as I seethe out “What. Are. You. Doing. Here?”

...however, with what I’ve done, what energy I’ve exhausted, there’s no chance I currently possess the capacity for demon slaying.

She doesn’t have to know that though.

Retreating back to the tree line, she’s quick to explain “all these wants...” and indicating the broken glass about the clearing, “I..I can feel all their desires…but I cannot help them, cannot deal with them.”

Her fearful nature, it may stop my step, but still, angry and sarcastic, I sneer out “junkie can’t get her fix. Boo hoo.”

“I want to help,” the demon whispers, almost ashamed to admit such a thing.

“Help? You the voice of altruism now?,” I growl out the question with heat shimmering off me in waves, my inner beast drawing hungrily upon the Fade around us.

“No…I know what I am but,” the demon pouts while feeling itself up, perhaps not even
intentionally, “You have always had the clarity of mind to rebuff my advances...so perhaps...”

“I don't make deals, I don't make compromises, not when my mind is on the line.” I growl, fury and magic flaring in my voice.

“I know!,” she agrees sadly before uttering softly, "I’ve felt the sting of your rejection..." In a moment of reflection, she traces her long nails over the scar tissue before continuing "Just please hear me out."

"I'm bored. Just listen to her already so we can find another exit," Imshael breathes in my ear and oddly enough, the anchor pulses twice in agreement.

'Really? Both of you? Two against one, I don't appreciate that,' I think in annoyance at them both before finally relenting, grumbling out "Talk. Quickly."

Cass, she groans in irritated disgust, shooting me a dire look, but Desire dives right into what she needs to say, rambling "You, you did something more...you...you actually burned me. I fled your dream, but I heard whispers wherever I went. So many whispers, incessant, and I couldn't escape them...but in time, I realized whose they were..."

I cock a single eyebrow.

"They were yours. Your whispers. I found myself intrinsically connected to you and I didn't understand how...until I looked to these," Desire whispers gravely while holding out her scarred wrists, "these...you shackled me! But of course that's what I get for getting too close to whatever you are... I tried to scratch through the scars, to break the ring, to get through whatever it was you did to me. You..." and silver tears roll down her hauntingly beautiful face.

Stunned silence falls over the glade; to witness this manner of reaction from a demon of her type, it's unsettling to say the least.

A pang of guilt twists deep in my guts for this creature before us. Just a bit.

Just enough, enough that that beast within stows its rage and the heat stops pouring off me in waves.

Calming some, perhaps in reaction to my own, becoming herself again, she explains "Thinking they would lead me to you again, I followed the whispers but it was not you I happened upon. No, it was just one of the shards at your feet. I didn't understand until I found more...all of these in fact.” An air of regret taking to her, she annoyedly whispers “Of course, I just had to get myself involved in....regardless, I spent quite some time collecting them.”

Eyes hard, uncertain whether to register her now as enemy or not, I grumble "like a magpie gathering shiny stuff?"

“No,” she confesses, more certain now, “I just...want to help. Just this once.” Cassandra though, an aura of radiance taking to her skin, battle ready, she stresses “Do not trust its words.”

I cast a glance Cassandra's way to assure her I’m listening but still I continue, asking of the demon “...so what's the deal with the glass? Why here, why now?

"You don't...? They're a part of you,” the demon explains with some frustration.
“Yeah. Problem with your theory, I got all of me back at Adamant.”

“No, you didn't. These, these are the last of your missing pieces,” she says, revealing her intent, “and when you finally become one, hopefully the whispers will stop. I just...I’m exhausted. Constant screaming, the crying, the anger, the shouts for help... I need it to end and preferably without my death. “

Quiet, I stand, calculating the chances this is actually the truth while our seeker and elven agent are on edge, blades ready to strike.

‘She does look tired,’ I make the mental note, observing the dark spots under her eyes, 'but how the hell can I be all this glass?’

In this disquiet, this uncertainty, Desire adds “What other motive could I have for drawing you here? I know how little a challenge it is for you to kill my kind,” but a sad breathy huff escapes her and she pauses but a moment before finishing, “you can end us with a handshake.”

‘She knows,’ both Imshael and I think in unison just as another stomps with determination through the dead leaves and trees behind us, their light casting deeper shadows. Emerging boldly onto the field, their visage ever shifting, a rainbow given human form loudly proclaims “Desire isn’t wrong. Its drive drew even me here — what a curious thing. You became its purpose.”

I sense no threat or ill intent from this armor-clad newcomer; they're too bright, just like the others of hierarchy of spirits that embody positive aspects. But ignoring the worry and stress evident on the faces of my companions, this beautifully radiant spirit continues on to announce “I am Purpose — and you, you have an audience,” its voice a multitude of simultaneous pitches.

Countless eyes more peer at us from the darkness of the forest, curious to learn, eager to watch — lesser spirits glow into existence at their mention and Cass shoots me another grim look, questioning “Hunter, what is the plan?”

Since entering the Fade, we haven’t been this utterly surrounded by its denizens but that they aren’t attacking, it lends credence to what Desire has told us.

Keeping calm — can’t risk infecting the spirits with my emotions — with a hand extended, testing the auras and inherent life in the shards about us, though incredibly weak, I do feel a familiar pull.

Distant, many tiny voices cry out "heeeeeeelp" in the back of my mind and begrudgingly coming to accept Desire’s truth, I’m forced to reply “Shit. They are me.”

Cassandra, scowling in disbelief, hesitantly glancing to the fragments scattered about our feet, unwilling to take her eyes off the surrounding spirits for too long, she shouts “some of these aren’t even Vashoth. Some are human, elf. Dwarf? There are even females here?!” All I can do is shrug out my best guess, taking a stab at explaining “I don’t even know anymore. If I gotta guess…ya break something, you’re changing its nature. There’s bound to be some inconsistencies…fuck”

‘Or they’re my other play throughs,’ I mull over the possibility while running my fingers over my horns, ‘versions I could’ve woken as?’

“You are incomplete,” Purpose presses on, “is it any wonder you break as often as you do?”

Desire, she adds “we watched your progress and your failings, but all we could do was wait. Had I the means of getting these to you sooner, I would have done so. I despise waiting.”

Concerned, worried, her blade slow dancing between the two Fade inhabitants closest us, our
Seeker asks “what does that mean though.”

Pointing to the black water well, Desire instructs “Whatever he does, he must begin with that” and commanding my attention, she adds, “that was the first piece of you.”

It’s then that something new reaches my ears.

A faint heartbeat.

”Hunter?,” Cassandra asks and I want to answer her, but I find I can’t help but lock onto that well and slowly step to it.

Another step, another beat, heavier.

”Hunter?,” Cass shouts at me — she sounds so far away as that rhythm fills my ears.

Closer still. Another beat, doubled in excited anticipation.

I can’t tear my eyes from it.

It pounds in my ears now, more war drum than heart beat.

I can’t shake how uncannily this all resembles the first pool so long ago, the aspect I accidentally happened upon while playing bait for Winter in the Brecilian. This focus, it doesn’t disturb me, doesn’t scare me like the whispers of the vault; I know this thing and I let slip to my reasonably upset Seeker “Don’t worry, Cass. Somehow, this’ll make sense…”

For me, the world is mute as I study the dark surface, not a ripple upsetting its glasslike stillness in the least.

Wordless.

I know this.

It knows me.

Finally revealing himself, Imshael steps into view for me and me alone, adorned in the finest of funerary inspired suits he could scrounge from my imagination; sleek and black, there’s a bit of a shine to the material. Little embers waft from his pale self, now merely a shade of a shade, but still he grins his wicked grin.

Tiny cracks and chips mar his flesh — he’s digesting more quickly, breaking down. I flick him an inquisitive eyebrow and he swallows with difficulty, uttering out in my mind “I was confident...that I would...last longer. That I would...find the opportunity to possess you or escape, heheha...I suppose that’s not...not the case any longer.” Wincing with labored breathing, he growls quietly “When you draw them back in, I do believe that’ll be my cue to..to leave” while adjusting his black silk tie.

How it began, it hopefully ends.

“A word of advice? Don’t revert to your weaker self,” he struggles to ask, his breathing harsh, “but most importantly, remember to break the rules.” As his yellowed stare bores into me, he clutches at his side, gripping at the hollow forming as he says “even though my killer, I’m surprised to find I don’t regret meeting you.”

‘Choice Spirit,’ I think at him without any sarcasm, pausing to find the most adequate response,
“Stay worthy of being my killer,” the figment flourishes with a dramatic bow, gritting his teeth the entire time with a sort of prideful smirk upon his face, “and do remember that your Solas...is an old god bent on restoring an older world. Be wary of that one.”

*You’re not wrong.*

At that, all the world fades from view as the heartbeat of the pool draws me in.

Confident, certain, standing at its edge, I crouch down and touch my palm to the placid surface, finding it solid.

*Like a mirror...*

Exactly like before, I’m the only subject in its reflection — trees, spirits, the Fade churned sky, none but me exist in it. Other Hunter, there’s great pain in his eyes, scars more burned into his flesh; he’s slow to copy my gesture but as his palm presses to mine from the underside, we both smile...

Paired, in unison, bridging, we both think *finally.*

*****

Rural nowhere.

This memory immediately begins playing out differently than all the others — I’m not simply remembering...

I’m part of it, but not truly living it. It’s as if I’m still a part of the audience, I’m looking out through the eyes of my former self instead of experiencing any sense of control. I know I’m on my back in an empty field and I can feel that my arm is shoved up under my head, but it isn’t me breathing, isn’t me speaking even as my lips part to breathe out “This is good. Necessary.”

Her words echoing, Desire narrates “at this particular moment, this exact time, the Veil was thin, stretched farther than ever before.”

“Acid in my blood, a universe to witness” I’m forced to utter slowly while awkwardly twisting an arm out from under my head to tug at my t-shirt — it’s all on autopilot — the grass may be poking at my side and neck, it may frustratingly pointed and scratchy, but I’m just the passenger, watching from the backseat as my body fidgets to find a more comfortable position.

And then my body laughs out the question “And what of you? Are you in high spirits, Princess Goldenbloom?”

*Yeah, I remember this...*

No answer from her though — she’s obviously just a flower, but as my body tilts its neck to look down at her but only I’m met with screams overlapping screams, her horrid death screeches blaring and piercing.

Recoiling, surprised that that part we still heard, I mentally shout *I already know all this. How is*
‘This new information?!’ but apparently Purpose hears those thoughts because the spirit immediately demands “Patience!”

‘Alright…wait…what?’, I anxiously wonder, watching through my own eyes before noticing my shadow on the grass...

Flitting in and out of existence, not all quite there, horns jut and curl off this body’s skull.

Horns.

Off my human body.

HORNS.

OUTSIDE OF THEDAS.

And as if knowing more than she’s letting on, Desire whispers through the memory to me “this was important.”

Me though, I’m still performing mental gymnastics while trying to stay quiet — I don’t know who all can hear my thoughts — but I tune back in just as I’m forced to grumble out “Maybe the neon’ll give way and I’ll walk again.”

I’m upright, trying to move, but I can’t.

Not in control.

And even though I know that storm is coming, this version of me is apparently still unaware.

Shadows rising and falling, the winds whip about. The air goes damp as sweet winds blow, the ambient sounds of life go dead and within seconds, the sunlight vanishes as the incoming front swallows the whole horizon.

‘What the actual fuck,’ I bluntly think, still caught up on that glimpse of horns while the driver of this memory, other Hunter, hisses, “storrrrrrrrrrm. Yesssssss” through his teeth.

‘One: what the fuck? Two: what the fuck?!,’ I furiously question and again Purpose shouts “Just watch,” its words cutting through my daze of confusion.

This Hunter, he lifts his hand to the oncoming storm, attempting to feel it out, divining its intent and magnitude while staggering into an upright position — stumbling toward the aberrant weather, every step jostles and shakes me.

A most disorienting point of view...

My body twists to face away, to yell out “SOON” over the din of thunder to family unseen — but as the storm claps and cracks, other me asks loudly with awful modulation “EVERYTHING IS GETTIN’ LOUD. STORM OR ACID?” just as a flash fires off, momentarily blindingly me.

But with spots blooming in my field of vision, a notably dead bird at our feet, unmoving, chirps out and whistles “it’s okay. Everything dies.”

‘Agh?!,’ I mentally yell as this body reels backwards, put off as well by the encounter.

Purpose, it chooses then to shout out “brace yourself!”
Oh...shit. No. The seco...

I’m cut off mid thought as a second flash of green hits me with such force, I feel my heart stop — I can’t breathe, neither version of me can. Time slows as adrenaline pumps, that arc of lightning ignites my every atom.

Unfashionable pain.

I can’t process it all — overloading, overbearing.

I can only seize up as I’m punched through the Veil.

Flesh cooks off me in strips and stripes as I hurtle through the churning void, all green fire and fury like a meteor crashing.

CROSH.

CHOOM.

PANK.

Chunk after floating chunk of Fade locked bits of land explode on impact with my face.

BRUM.

My skull is hammered to the point that I should be dead.

GUURM.

I can’t take much more of this.

Agony. I shouldn’t feel all this pain if I’m not in command of this body. It isn’t fair.

But then this body’s eyes drift open, one too many concussive strikes ruining its survival instincts.

But dead ahead, a lonely Eluvian floats through space, its reflective pane dim and chipped.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM.

Instant impact.

The Fade quakes.

I’m sliced to ribbons as I explode, a scattershot of screaming mes. Blazing fragments rain as the cries of the many fill the air, bits and pieces cutting through the Veil to the Waking World like embers to tissue while others still tumble to the barren wastes below.

I am all and all are me, my mind is stretched across every shard.

As the remaining pieces of me wail and cry their way through the swirling green, the biggest piece, the part most me, it slips through the Veil, my consciousness clinging on for dear life.

CRACK.

I crumple against a mighty tree, it’s massive form and ancient bark unyielding even against the missile that is me.
Gagging, convulsing in the Brecilian Forest, having sundered the Veil twice in minutes, Desire’s words reach me again as she explains “all eyes were in upon you from the moment of your arrival — such a curious thing, none had seen its like before. A singular event.”

Struggling to not swallow my own tongue, the smell of my own charred flesh inescapable, I feel like bone mulch — pulverized, broken, bleeding against the trunk of an ancient tree, I can’t even cry or gurgle, the hurt is immeasurable...

...but the vision ends just as quickly and I’m left crouching at the edge of the ancient pool, the aspect of me trapped beneath its surface gone.

And immediately I drop to all fours, vomiting hard and heaving, cold sweat dripping off my shaky self. But before I can wallow, before I can collapse in full, a spark dances through me, bringing me back to myself, jolting me free of that horrid experience.

I’m...me.

No wild and jarring boost, instead it’s more a controlled burn, my nerve endings awake with magic, aware of their potential, their capacity. Taking a steadying breath, gulping back the last vestiges of that terrible memory, I push myself back on my knees...

But the unification ritual isn’t complete — the various shards from that impacted eluvian, those scattered about the grove rise from the dirt and grass, celestial bodies caught in the gravity of some greater force.

“It isn’t over?,” Cass groans in disbelief, still wary about dropping her guard. The shards all coalesce on me, slowly spinning about me, caught in my orbit. But then a change, they only increase in velocity, superheating as they speed, blazing red shards cutting the air about me until finally I hear a click in the back of my head and again I feel those phantom twinges of an arm long gone.

I don’t know why, but I raise what would be my hand. I’m still too shell shocked to think it through — something deeper, instinctual, is demanding it.

It’s then that all shards come colliding at gale force to the intangible appendage, and with every heated impact, the veins that arm would have had ignite in a blazing spectrum of purples.

Every hit only giving more and more light to the missing limb.

Brighter and brighter.

Veins and nerves branching and interlocking, filling out the hollow.

And just as quickly as it began, it ends as I’m left catching my breath.

Everything is brighter now — no more blistering heat behind my eyes.

It’s all just so much more...vivid.

I didn’t want to relive that, all that pain, but now I think I’m glad I did.

As my arm fades back to nothing, invisible once more, I arch my back, hissing in an odd mixture of pain and pleasure as the tips of my horns smolder, still hot from the my joining. The rags I’m wearing burst into flames, falling from me as ashy bits like a snake shedding its skin.
But I’m only naked for a moment — in their place, my clothing of old comes as smoke, black as night and settles upon me, knitting together and holding firm. Black leather boots with loose, jingling clasps, fitted black jeans, and a black t-shirt, they all coalesce.

And then the final piece — a shadow black half cloak — it drapes over my right shoulder, concealing what isn’t exactly there.

Breathing out a relieved smirk, I whisper to myself “so that’s what I’m supposed to feel like…”

No longer is there a fluctuation to my voice.

I am me.

All of me.

More a solemn prayer than an actual question, Cassandra breathes out “What did we just witness…” to which Purpose proclaims “something greater,” certain of the absolute.

Desire though, she disagrees, somehow making an annoyed groan sound sexual. She’s far too concentrated on her wrists to care for us.

“Hunter?,” Cass questions delicately, uncertain still of the events that just transpired because of the otherworldly entities present — she’s not against me becoming whole, but rather against the means by which this moment has come to fruition, that a demon pulled it together.

That much is evident.

In reassurance, I smile to her “Not disappearin’ on ya this time“

“No more whispers? No more whis…oooooh ahhh,” Desire coos, evidently pleased as she massages the bands of scar tissue cooked into her wrists.

“So that’s all it was. I smashed face first into a mirror?!“

“I’ve done enough for you already — I’m not interested in further explaining the nuances of what you went through. Figure it out yourself,” Desire groans but gathering a sterner tone, she urges “Please leave already. I’ve had quite enough of you mortals.”

Purpose, also avoiding my question, hungry to observe its namesake in others, it claps its meaty fists together and exclaims “a demonstration! To see this blink of yours up close, exhilarating!”

“Are we not going to talk abou...wait! No! Noooo! I can’t do that!”

“That is your doubt speaking. Ignore it. Deny it,” Purpose demands as Cass sighs at me “It is...correct. You have to try. Only you can do this. If anyone can get us out, it is you.”

“May...maybe there’s another way out…” I ask under my breath, not the slightest bit hopeful, but Purpose and Desire are quick to state “No.”

And then Desire takes it a step further, elaborating “none that won’t result in your death.”

Staring hard at the ground, shaking my head bitterly, I understand what I’ve reclaimed, that I should be in high spirits, but I can’t just suddenly convince myself that warping us out is possible — upset with my weakness, hating my inability, I prattle out “and what if I can’t. What if…shit! What if I flip our skin inside out? What if...what happens when I fuse everyone together like Jeff Goldblum in The Fly?! What if…” but Cass is quick to interrupt my deprecating rant, to soothe “I
do not know what a goldblu…blum?..I do not know what that is. But that won’t happen. You are not being attacked, you are safe. There is time to breathe and I am with you. Silence is with you” and her stare going hard, she huffs out “even they are…here to help” in reservation regarding the denizens of the Fade.

“But…”

“But nothing. Where is the man who said he’d destroy every obstacle?”

Glowering, annoyed with myself — she’s right — I nod in agreement. With an impatient wave, I beckon Silence closer and with my companions now at my side, an eerie calm settles over the glade; The spirits and demon watch with bated breath, curious to witness what happens next, what this anomalous mortal will accomplish.

Cass, my balance, she holds tight to my arm as I try to focus…

*She’s...right.*

*I can do this.*

*No one is trying to stop me.*

*No one is trying to kill me.*

*It'll be fine. FINE.*

*Just focus on Skyhold.*

‘Skyyyyyyhold,’ I think as the Veil ripples about us, affected but not greatly so.


The Fade shakes, like a hammer beating a door but nothing beyond that changes.

“Hunter;” Cassandra gently urges while softly pressing a palm to my bruised jaw reassuringly. Distracted, not so caught up in my head for a moment, the Fade about us shifts, a lens through which we can glimpse the Waking World but it’s shifting randomly from location to location.

Like flipping through a magazine, images come and go just as quickly.

Dust town. A number of carta thugs dash into an alley as Bhelan’s troops march through with impunity. A child cries in the dirt.

Shift.

A dark, dank cave. Water droplets dripping from stalactites. A massive spider creeps past our field of vision, its hair more like quills and spines than anything else.

Next.

The Wounded Coast, the skeletons of ships long dead jutting from the angry seas as the sunset bleeds them red and orange.

Change.

The ruins of Ostagar looming over deadened trees, a great mausoleum now to thousands.
Flip.

A desert I’ve never seen, we linger but a moment as a lone elf huddles about a his dying campfire and his horse, it lies dead of dehydration some paces back. He casts a glance our way, his piercing eyes peaking out through the protective face wrap — but he doesn’t see us.

Jump.

Right in the heart of the dragon’s nest in the Dales, the great wyrm’s terrible and warbling screeches cut through the Veil as it slashes a rogue Templar in half with its deadly talons.

Then snow. A blanket of white.

Closer.

Finally, the pocket folds into focus over Skyhold, revealing the nook just off to the side of the armory, Cassandra’s favorite hideaway. But I can’t pull us though. Just mounting pressure — I feel the pull, but I can’t get us there.

The pocket expands and contracts, wavering in expectation.

That memory of that Qunari ship in the distance, it flickers past my eyes.

My lungs shudder as my heart slows.

Teeth grit, grinding.

“...can’t. It won’t work,” I growl out with an ever furrowing brow.

“You can,” Cass says simply.

God damn it.

I try again, instead choosing to hone in on the details of Skyhold instead of simply thinking the name.

Cool, moss covered stone....

Crisp mountain air...

The scent of damp wood...

Pine needles crunching underfoot...

The distant roar of waterfalls beneath the hold...

Unfortunately, the yield is the same — nothing happens. I can’t pull us through.

But yet again, Sil surprises me by jokingly doing the same as Cass, mimicking her tenderness as he softly brushes my jaw, gazing up to me with an exaggerated pout upon his face and I can’t help but let a breathy snicker escape me. Chest shaking, trying to keep any more from bursting forth, something unprecedented occurs — that singular laugh, that brief and fleeting feeling, it holds the darker memories at bay just long enough.

With a thundering boom and a harsh harp strum, we explode back into existence on the mortal side of the veil with such force that snow blows from rooftops and trees sway. As the cold night air
slaps us and our ears pop, Sera squawks and slips from her bird shit covered ledge down into some shrubs below. Scout Harding remains on that tavern rooftop, her drink slipping from her fingers as she stares in shock; the mug shatters on the ground below and Sera yells back up at her “oi!” to which Harding quickly recovers, realizing her mistake, and scrabbles to climb back in through the thin window to rush to her aid.

Guards and boots rush the courtyard as alarm horns sound, trumpeting in the dark as torches flicker to life and people hurry to defend the keep.

But I’m exhausted with a bit of a headache already blossoming from the lack of excessive ambient energy — like being cut off from a steady drip of caffeine — and I just limply wave to the rapidly forming crowd of hundreds, scratching shouting out “Hey.”

The look of wonder and shock on their collective faces, the awe and reverence, it takes me back to that first day waking in Haven after shutting the first rift.

I’m home.

All these people are here because of me, because of what the Inquisition is capable of doing. And I breathe out a weary “fucking awesome” in response to this revelation.

Cass steps forward to command the legion of guards, barking the order “Form a path” and exactly that happens, the sea of people eagerly shift and part to allow us passage, each giving way as those behind them follow suit.

Cass before me, leading the way through the throngs, Sil at my back, we head to the main hall as people cheer and shout their praises, their support...

"welcome back!"
"We knew yuh cudn’t lose, just knew it we did!"
"Thank the Maker!"
“Let im through! MOVE ASIDE!”
"Oh, Herald!"

I don’t even roll my eyes at that last cheer, I’m just happy to be back. But as we scale the weathered steps to the keep, upon making our entrance, we’re met with the best of welcoming parties in the form of But one person — Josephine comes hurrying out while holding at the sides of her dress so as not to drag the fabric, her heels tapping softly along the stone flooring.

“Inquisitor! Cassandra! Oh, and...hmm” she chimes out but pauses on the elven agent, unsure what to call him but I’m quick to cough out “Silence”

“You have all returned! I had thought what The Iron Bull had told me to be madness — surely you did not truly fall again into the Fade?!”

“Yeah” I groan alongside Cassandra's “unfortunately” all the while Sil just shakes his head up and down but quickly stops, recalling the bruises wrapped around his neck.

“How did you survive for so long?!”

Staring into the distance, recalling how bizarre our temporary host was, I frown out “ghost house.”
“W-what?,” she smiles out the question, her anxious curiosity threatening to crack the cheerful veneer.

“It is truly too bizarre to bear repeating,” Cass grumbles, sick of such distortions and oddities.

“...uhh, in any case, welcome back! I am so glad you are...are” but her eyes grow large, staring in horror at my recess in my half cloak, immediately recognizing something is most wrong — apparently Leliana never messaged her from Caer Ostwin about my missing limb.

“Inquisitor, ohh, oh what has happened?!?” the normally chipper Antivan whispers frantically, eyes darting around the hall to ensure privacy, paling some as she does.

Tired of explaining, I promptly flip the fabric up, exposing the stump and reply “Long story short — Qunari amputated it. I’m going to bed.”

It takes a few seconds for Josie to catch up, for her brain to refocus on my words and not my ruined arm but she finally gets there, agreeing “of...yes! Of course! Please, right this way” with a panicked compliance — her eyes never stray from my injury.

”Sorry to sour the mood around here,” I mumble as each of my steps jangle.

“Nonsense! I-I am simply,” our sweet diplomat tries to say but Cassandra cuts her off, placing both hands on her shoulders and forcing their eyes to lock — in that stare, Cass utters quietly “It is a terrible thing that has happened, but do not think him weaker for it.”

Ashamed, upset, Josephine’s pleasant disposition breaks and exhaling hard, she says with a rueful tone, “inqu...No, Hunter. I..I am so sorry. Please, let me show you to your room. Is there anything I can get you?”

“Thanks but I’m good. Really.”

She sighs and nods, getting her thoughts together and she escorts us to the stairwell leading to my chambers on high.

*****

She really had done her best to shoo away an awkward silence, going on about the necessary tasks to see to come the morning, the bevy of important ambassadors awaiting a word with “The Inquisitor,” and the verdicts that need be meted out as I see fit all while scaling the renovated staircase. Apparently, a few dwarven engineers had been tasked with the construction of an elevator up the center — something that’d be greatly appreciated seeing as how my room is ten flights tall — you could clearly see the winches and levers, the dwarven steel track being built up.

Unfortunately, it still looked months from being done and at this point, it was more a tease to my tired legs than anything else.

But arriving at the top of the tower, taking in that room is breathtaking — incredibly high ceiling with chandeliers I’ll never rake my horns against, glass wall sconces, a wonderfully dark stained desk with tables and wardrobes to match it. An assortment of a books and charts, just ready for reading and study, they sit upon the desktop in neat stacks. The posted bed with its bright crimson canopy, its curtains tied back, it looks Ferelden — sturdy, dark wood with inlays of hounds —
except it’s been scaled up for an Avvar, I won’t have to worry about my feet ever hanging past the edge on that. A number of pillows, all inviting to the eye, they’re propped against the headboard.

But something still surprises me — beside the door to the wrapping balcony, a spot sure to be flooded with light by day, there stands an easel, a primed canvas already in its clutches. On a small table beside which, a palette, horsehair brushes, and a few tiny jars of pigment.

‘I can paint...I haven’t done that in, what? A year? Longer,’ I ponder before excitedly thinking ‘Doesn’t matter — the things I could paint, the things I’ve seen.’ But then the reality of this world gut punches me again and I can’t help but smirk at the irony as I shake my head, chuckling “gonna have to get good with my left hand.”

Josephine, horrified at the fauxpas, she stutters our “I am so sorry — I had no idea. Solas and I thought it would be a good...” but I’m quick to rebuff the notion, genuinely saying “Nah, leave it. I really do have to get better with my left hand.”

...that you’re gonna lose one day.

At that grim reminder, I can’t help but openly laugh at the situation, shortling uncontrollably “ahh hah hahahah aghhh hahahaha,” snorting a bit as well.

"Hunter?,” Cass asks, uncertain, but as I wipe away an errant tear, I smile out “all good. Perfectly fine” while trying to stifle any further odd outbursts.

"Yes, well...,” Josephine attempts to sidestep my curious display, continuing on to explain “...I do believe you’ll find yourself quite comfortable here. Obviously, if you find yourself needing anything, do not hesitate to seek me out. As for the morning, I shall arrange to have a meal brought up to you.”

“No need — I can still walk just fine. Thanks, though.”

She hums in acknowledgement though not likely to heed my request, and stepping to the top of the stairs, she calls back melodically “It truly is good to have you back. Hmm, Cassandra, a word?”

Cass casts me a glance, wordlessly asking me if I’m okay and I’m quick to nod.

At that, she joins Josie and the two depart, leaving me and Sil alone in this room of grandeur but I suppose he yearns for his privacy as well — making circlets with his fingers, he casts them away from his chest in a quick burst before pivoting on his heel and slinking down the staircase with a casual wave thrown back at me over his shoulder.

"Yeah..alright. Later, man...”

With his departure, I’m alone.

I’ve gotta say, it feels weird to be alone in his enormous room. I don’t know if I’m ready for it, but at least I’m not in the Fade anymore. That’s a huge plus.

Plopping down onto the edge of the bed with a heavy sigh — I may finally be whole but damn if this all hasn’t been a drain — I take to staring at the blank canvas before me until I can’t.

I see things in that void, things I’d rather avoid.

With a crack of my neck, I twist away from it, uncomfortable as ‘The Empty’ whispers through in my ear.
“You’re not there. You’re safe,” I murmur to myself as I lay back on top of the bedspread with my eyes closed tight, my brow furrowed, “Nothing to fear. Fear is bullshit. Yeah..it is bullshit...”

‘Nah, what’s bullshit is how much you have to catch up on tomorrow,’ I remind myself.

“Fuck. That’s...that’s right...” I mumble incoherently as exhaustion finally wins out, my eyelids refusing to open again, “I already...hate tomorrow...”

Chapter End Notes

This was a difficult chapter for me — I hope it reads well.
In Dreams, Despair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bright.

“Vinek kathas aa ataashi.”

Zzzzzuk.

Sunny.

“Vinek kathas aa ataashi!.”

Zzzzzzzif.

Whatever it is they’re chanting, it sounds tinny and distant, like it’s being shouted through a hollow tube.

“Vinek kathas aa ataashi!.”

Zzzzzzwip.

Staring to the perfectly blue skies above as pristinely white clouds drift by, I find I can’t move and so I struggle to do so. Only, my fidgeting draws the attention of others.

“Oh! You’re awake!,” two perkily say in unison.

Struggling to lift my head, straining against tiny ropes and cord, I spy a pale elf and my demon. Champagne flutes raised high, the elf and Imshael speak again in unison, toasting “To our dear friend, Hunter, without you, the Qun would be all the weaker.”

“What?,” I growl out, confused as I continue trying to tear myself from my lying position — but the restraints hold.

“I’m so glad you helped me slay all these Tal Vashoth,” the pale one beams at me — it’s only then I realize the scattered corpses about this eerily quaint picnic. Beyond the checkered borders of the quilted blanket, all the grass is drowned in red, grey skin dotting the surface with broken digits and twisted limbs jutting like shipwrecks. Closing my eyes against the terrible vision — I know what this is — I hiss under my breath “Winter was never Ben Hassrath. This implant failed, just like all the others. This is just another…just another flashback…”

“Nonsense,” Imshael and the unnervingly upbeat Winter annoyingly say again together, “you have to accept this as fact. Noncompliance cannot be tolerated.”

“You got out. Spook helped you,” I continue, trying to convince myself while avoiding their hardening stares when suddenly a dozen more lengths of thin ropes go soaring over me before being pulled taut, an additional measure of keeping me down.

“Noncompliance is not an option, Obedience is key.”

“Just a stupid fucking flashback. I AM FREE,” I angrily spit back, growing sick of these plaguing memories that were never mine, and only then do I notice the micro Qunari scaling me. Like
Lilliputians to Gulliver, they only seek to restrain the giant. With a ridiculously long loggers saw, scores more heave and ho its sharpened edge through my comparatively gargantuan right arm, restarting their chanting of “Vinek kathas aa ataashi” with tiny high pitched voices. As industrious and as small as ants, they hurry to divide me into more manageable portions.

“Vinek kathas aa ataashi,” the minuscule warriors shout and drag its length through my flesh, drawing blood. No pain, it’s just a disturbing reminder more than anything else.

Zzzzwik

“Vinek kathas aa ataashi!,” they repeat yet again, tugging the long saw back the other direction.

Zzzzzzzwip

“No. I’m done,” I argue to this terribly stupid dream before commanding “WAKE UP” as the anchor ignites and snaps me from this hold…

*****

Cold sweat clings to my brow as I jolt awake in the dim green glow of the anchor.

”The fuck did that mean?,” I utter under my breath like a curse before whispering to the mark, “and thanks for lettin’ me wake up.”

It lazily flickers in response, acknowledging me from under sheets.

“Wait, how did I…,” I mumble to myself in the dark before a soft snore at my side interrupts my groggy thoughts. The gentle rise and fall of her breathing — when it’s not a snore — coupled with the silhouette of her powerful and lean physique, it’s all too easy to know it’s Cassandra. Considering I’m only in my jeans, she’s the likely culprit for getting me under the covers and rotating me.

“Thanks for comin’ back,” I whisper softly into the top of her head as I drape my arm over her hip and she unintelligibly groans “mehhrr. Ermmm” in response.

“No, thank you, really. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

“Hermmsfa, ughhh,” she mumble groans out in her sleep.

Yeah, exactly…

As I plant a gentle kiss to her exposed shoulder, savoring for a moment the warmth radiating from her, she shifts at the touch — my beard must’ve tickled her and I’m quick to withdraw. Not about to try to wake her up, even if it was a sweet gesture that almost did it.

Nope.

Doing my best not to move the mattress too much in my departure, I creep from bed, gingerly placing bare feet to cool, worn stone. Easing up onto my feet, braced against the bedpost, I try to minimize the creaks.

But I find success.
She still sleeps.

Tiptoeing past the desk, I quietly snatch a bottle of something clear from the shelves along the wall, something potent — the decanter stopper clattered but a moment as I lifted it from its display and a noxious smell managed to escape. Not bothering to care what type of liquor it is, I steal a glance back Cass’ way only to find her still undisturbed.

Hold.

No, she’s definitely still asleep.

But I’m not doing myself any favors just lurking — bottle in hand, I steal away to the northernmost portion of balcony for some fresh air, cautiously opening the glass door and closing it delicately behind me. I don’t even allow for the lock to click. Dead of night, even the mountain winds are slumbering, only its distant howl evidence that it even stirs at this hour. Bracing my hip against the railing, hugging the bottle to my chest with my stump, I pocket the stopper and take a firm grip yet again. Swigging deep, swishing back and forth to at least pretend my mouth feels clean, letting that burn wash over my tastebuds and around my gums, I hold the burning liquid in before spitting it out over the balcony, over the northern walls of Skyhold, down to where the waterfalls meet the ground below.

Better for now at least.

Another deep gulp of the clear booze, this one I down, coughing somewhat as it burns the throat. With a long inhale, I breathe deep of fresh air, air that isn’t Fade-locked, that hasn’t been stagnant for a thousand years. To feel and breath that, it’s easily worth the hangover I’ve got — getting cut off from my steady Fade drip, I’m already feeling the repercussions.

Trying — and failing miserably — to massage the side of my head with my stump, I’m interrupted by a young voice at the far end of the balcony as it rasps “Welcome back” with an air of indifference. With nary a sound, she slips from her seat upon the stone railing and paces to my side. Patiently, she stands, her only expression a quirked eyebrow as she eyes my half-an-arm.

“Rasa” I say under my breath before dropping down, surprising her as I scoop her up with my good arm, breathily chuckling out “You got taller.”

She actually exhales a shaky laugh, but she’s apparently still pissed at how long it took me to return — squirming to freedom, she slithers free and punches me in the stomach, her middle knuckle somehow jabbing me right in the belly button and I reel back at the odd and sudden sensation. In my shock, she grabs ahold of my ruined arm and rasps so only I can hear “what did you do?,” her eyes shifting slowly from it to my face and back again.

“Pfft, I didn’t do that.” I grumble while rubbing at my stomach.

“No lie?,” she asks, doubtful.

“Strong doesn’t mean shit if they’ve got you drugged up on a dissection table.”

No more anger, no more clandestine smirk. She glares at me, through me. Were she not like family, my sister, it’d be disconcerting. But she breaks that uneasy quiet, uttering evenly, calmly “the ones responsible, they’re dead?”

“Most. If I’d gotten all of em, I wouldn’t be minus an arm.”

“How would...bood magic?,” she queries with her brow furrowing.
“Shhhh,” I’m quick to shush her while casting an uneasy glance back towards Cassandra’s sleeping form in the bedroom. Even if we’re outside, I’m not content until several seconds pass without her stirring. At that, I turn back to Rasa, whispering “yeah, but keep that..”

“Obviously” she interjects “you know so long as you’re not possessed, I don’t really care how you do things.”

“Yeah..I know” I utter quietly before dropping back in for another hug and she rasps in my ear, her voice still sounding like she’s inhaled too much campfire smoke in her young life, “you know I’m staying right here tonight.”

“Yeah, little killer, figured ya would.”

She hits me in the gut again, her “I don’t give a fuck” indifference having returned in full, and she rasps “welcome back. Really” and we turn to the horizon, leaning against the railing in silence. But after a minute or two of breathing in the brisk, and me having taken more drinks, she asks “So what’s with the purple eye?”

”The bruises? Cass had to beat the hell outta...”

”No. Your actual eye,” she states, shooting me a side eyed look of annoyance. She doesn’t appreciate being doubted or misunderstood. She’s a literal person and knows I should know that.

”What about it?”

“It’s purple,” she rasps, bored of this particular back and forth.

“Huh...I’ll take your word for it,” I let slip into the night breeze — I’m too tired to investigate. With what I’ve experienced, a change in color doesn’t concern me much in the grand scheme of things.

*So long as it isn’t red.*

“Get some sleep if you can,” she orders softly.

”You too.”

”Not yet. I’m here to make sure no one fucks with you again,” she rasps in threat to the world itself.

“Pretty sure a few of Leliana’s agents are staked out on th...”

“Saw them. Don’t care,” she interrupts, “I don’t fucking care. Go to sleep. I’m out here.”

’Spooky,’ I think before offering, “Need a blanket?”

An exasperated sigh escapes her but she rasps out “...yeah”

At that, a tiny smile cracks my face and I sneak back inside to retrieve the necessary item.

*****
Hazy.

Blurry, the world is out of focus…

But then the proper adjustments are made, like twisting the lens of a camera, and suddenly I can see.

It’s still hazy, but it’s Skyhold. A brisk fog has settled over the keep, shrouding all and its inhabitants. Leaning against the edge of the walkway overlooking the misty gardens below, I find my attention to be solely on my hands — rubbing them together, I’m apparently trying to urge some warmth back into them. Tan skin with slender fingers, navy blue bands tattooed around the fore and middle fingers of both, these are much too delicate looking to be mine.

For that, and a number of other reasons.

No control, this body moves of its own accord and I’m merely a passenger yet again.

‘Oh shit, another episode? No.’ I panic before realizing the tranquility of the scene, the calm of everything as snowflakes and ice crystals blossom on this body’s fingertips, seemingly without summoning such magic. A naturally occurring phenomenon?

“Oh, not now,” a woman whines out, her almost British accent coming from my mouth, “does this have to happen every time there’s even a hint of water in the air? Seriously?” At this, the hands rub together with much more fervor, brushing the cold from the flesh.

Alright. Not an episode. Not me. Not grey enough…

From off to the left, a pair of boots softly approach through the fog and without a glance, whomever I am speaks out “Cassandra. I thought for certain you would be running drills with Cullen…”

“Ahem,” Cassandra clears her throat and awkwardly asks, “Inquisitor, might I…uh, have a word?”

I feel the corners of my mouth curl — a smile blooming — and my heart skips a beat as I eagerly reply in the foreign falsetto “Of course!” That sought after warmth just a moment ago, it finds me now, racing to my ears and cheeks and spinning to face the Nevarran beauty, I find I’m about her height…

‘Definitely not myself…okay? Currently a woman... So what is this?’, I puzzle.

“I was…hoping we could speak privately…,” Cassandra anxiously huffs, wringing her hands as she does to which I hear myself joke “aaaaare we not?” The balconies, they’re empty save for us. Whomever else is in Skyhold this moment, they’re nowhere within our vicinity.

“Right…of course,” Cassandra bluntly agrees, wincing as she does, mentally reprimanding herself perhaps. Then, with dismay on her face, she worries out “the flirting…”

I feel my heartbeat take off — it’s not my own, it’s panicky, stressed, excited, but not mine...

“…with me,” she finally continues and her voice shooting up a pitch, she fires out “I’ve noticed it. Unless it is my imagination. Which is entirely possible. It is something I could make up. If that is what I have done, the..”

Picking up on her body language, whoever I am interjects “I make you..uncomfortable…” and I can feel the twinges of anxiety beginning to take root in this woman.
“Inquisi…Frost, I hope you can understand…” Cassandra speaks at the floor, still as a frightened deer, “but I cannot return your affection…”

‘Frost? Who the hell is....wait. My...she’s my Trevelyan playthrough,’ I recognize as I feel the pit open up inside her, the hollowing sensation as she’s slow to say “…oh” in response to Cass’ rejection.

“…Say no more,” I reply while shaking my head, expertly returning the friendly expression to my face that I had just a short bit ago.

“I think, perhaps I should,” Cass explains, still unable to make eye contact, “…you are the Herald of Andraste, my leader, and..”

“A woman.”

“Yes,” Cass admits, “and I take it as a compliment, truly…I just…please say that we can remain friends. I hope that can be the case.”

“Of course! Everything is perfectly fine!,” Frost lies with an accepting smile on our face before asking “can I keep flirting? Or would that be..”

“Oh, uhh, so long as you understand that it wou…,” Cass awkwardly struggles to find her answer but Frost is quick to just smile out “nevermind, no more flirting! Ahh ha ha, I’ll just have to watch what I’m saying.”

Oh, oh no…this is…aww fuck this is heartbreaking.

Pursing her lips, Cassandra nods and takes a couple steps backwards before pivoting and hurrying off, leaving this Inquisitor to herself.

A hush falls over this portion of the castle — all life and the noises of such seem to be off by the main gates, lost to the fog.

“Stu-stupid girl,” Frost shakily chastises us with lips trembling, her façade swiftly crumbling, “Sera warned you...you...didn’t believe her. Oh Maker…” Her grip upon the railing forcing her knuckles a shade paler, I feel the damp forming in her eyes, her vision growing blurry with unwanted tears.

‘Awww, oh no…I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that play through would hurt you like this…I’m so sorry,’ I mentally apologize to the woman as the lights of this world fade…

Darker.

Drifting…

Black…

*****

I awaken with a start, clutching tightly at the sheets and breathing shakily as I try to make sense of my self, and how I’m not Frost, how her despair isn’t my own. Startled awake in kind, Cass flips over, grabbing a a steel dagger off her bedside table and barks at the darkened stairs “YOU WILL NOT HAVE HIM!”
But being me again, I begin to breathe easy.

Quickly assessing there’s actually no threat, she spins on me...only, dropping the blade, she squeezes out a tiny gasp and grabs ahold of my face. Angling it this way and that, she flatly comments “your eyes” as her brow pinches together.

I just had a terrible set of dreams — I’m not exactly ready to face this day if that was the intro. Ridding myself of the last vestiges of Frost Trevelyan’s stress, of her hurt, I exhale out a forced yawn of “so long as I still have two, I don’t care.”

_You’re you. Not her._

“They are purple,” she brusquely blurs.

“Oh” I say, not even remotely shocked. Waking up and looking different isn’t new to me — besides, I already learned about this a few hours ago. Cassandra hurries from the bed, her bare feet slapping against cold stone as she rushes to grab a hand mirror and shoving it at my face, I see what she means — and what Rasa meant. Where once there was forest green and gold, there’s now a violet stain with but a sparse few flecks of gold in that grey face of mine. Hell, even the bleached eye has faint traces of the same.

“Huh.” I mumble, not worried “least it’s a good color for me.”

Shoving at me in deference, she questions “But what does it mean? And after all you went through…”

“No clue. But hangover aside, I feel fine.”

“You didn’t drink,” she grumbles with narrowing eyes.

“Ehhh,” I shrug out while teetering my hand and wincing, “also, not plugged into the Fade anymore either.

“Oh.”

“Yep. Well,” I groan, swinging my legs out from the comfort of the sheets, “as much as it pains me, I gotta get going. People to discuss. Matters to kill. Besides, if I really wanted to change my eyes back, I’d have to hunt down some asshole named Xenon and…uh, hmm my blink skills are still shaky at best.

“Xenon?”

“Black market dealer — has a penchant for cackling and mockery…and being unable to move. Ehh.”

“And he, what, has a device that can change you?,” she questions, only somewhat incredulous as she squints at me.

“Yeah, actually,” I admit, “but whatever. Like I said, this isn’t a big deal.”

Refusing my attempted exit, she tosses her arms about my neck and pulls me back to bed, abruptly inquiring “how do you do it?”

“Getting’ out of bed? Well, step one is…” I begin, 50% playfully sarcastic with the other 50% thinking the question may be literal.
“No! I mean,” she’s quick to sigh out, “with everything that has happened. You make it seem easy.”

“Ahh haha aghhhahaha,” I actually laugh out, shaking while leaning back into her embrace, “ahh haa ahh, I..what!? What about me seems easy? Wait. Don’t answer that.”

“Mhmm,” she smirks into my ear, her tone absolutely implying she’s got an eyebrow arched, and she continues on, “what I mean is that you have this…ability to…whatever happens, you don’t..ughhh, I am not finding the right words.”

In an effort to help — even though I wouldn’t mind listening to her fumble a bit longer — I offer “regardless of the awful hand I’m dealt, I keep playing? Something like that?”

“Ughh, that’s more Varric’s style, no,” she scoffs, “What I mean is that no matter..no, what I mean is that you do not hesitate very often.”

“…Suppose recklessness and ease could be comparab..” I start but she swats at my shoulder, defending her argument, saying “no, it isn’t…it’s your attitude going in. Since the first day, you’ve had this…”

“I imagine this is the part where a more stoic individual might say something inspirational, something about determination, but uhh, I’m not awake enough to give any grand revelations.”

“Perhaps not,” she sighs, “ahh, well, Josephine likely has need of you, just as I must see to troop and Templar activity in Cullen’s absence.” Sliding from bed, she grabs her leathers off a nearby chair and takes to putting them on. As I grab my black boots and shove my feet inside, I remark “bet you’re thrilled.”

“Oh..absolutely,” she snarks back while strapping on her cuirass, “I am quite excited to keep the Templars and mages from each other’s throats.”

While pulling my black T-shirt carefully over my horns, trying not to snag the collar, I pause, looking dazed and breathe out “I completely forgot we got the mages. Damn, we’re good.”

“Oh yes,” she sarcastically agrees while shooting me a look — adjusting a sword on her hip, a standard double edged blade instead of her scavenged Dar’Misaan from the Fade, she quips “I find living on a powder keg to be quite pleasant. Relaxing even.”

Twisting dramatically to face her, my shirt catches on my horns, and I screw my face up at both her and what I’ve just managed to accomplish. Holding back a laugh, Cass struggles to get out “Do y-do you need help?” evenly, a snort escaping her when she does. Annoyed at myself, I snatch the accompanying half-cloak off the dresser, shoving it in my back pocket, and stomp off toward the staircase, grumbling “nope. Gonna meet Josephine’s important people exactly like this. This is what they’re gonna get. Naked chest, grumpy...” with an exaggerated frown on my face.

“Ahhaha, let me help!,” Cass laughs out the demand while hurrying to beat me to the stairs, her sword clattering in its sheath with every jostling step. Stopping me in my tracks, my horns caught in my collar and stump trapped in my sleeve, she breathes out “Hunter” through a stern smile, determined already that I’ll acquiesce.

”Cassandra.”

”Hunter.”

”Cassandra.”
"Hunch down," she softly demands with a smirk upon her lips, “now.”

Lips mashed together in embarrassment, cheeks going pink, I squat down so she can assist while I growl.

"Make whatever noise you wish,” she lovingly mocks, “you only have yourself to blame.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the delay — I was overwhelmed with work. The good news, I have a few chapters I simply need to finish editing so I should be able to post in a more timely manner for the foreseen future.
Think I’d actually prefer Cass’ job.

Just yelling “NO” at the Templars and mages over and over again.

Wonder how many times she’s rolled her eyes this morning...


God she’s cute when she’s being bossy...

How many Templars needed an attitude adjustment?

‘How many...oh shit. Josephine is looking at you,’ I realize and snap free of my daydreaming — the whole court is watching me expectantly, eagerly awaiting a ruling on this waif of a girl in chains on the floor before me. Ruddy brown hair and bruised eyes, tears long since dried upon her face, she looks so pitiful. Desolate.

Ah c’mon man, get your head in the game.

Shifting on my throne, tossing my right leg over the armrest, half to keep my cloaked stump hidden and half to find a modicum of comfort, I bluntly ask “okay, rewind. What’s she accused of? I wasn’t paying attention.”

A flicker of annoyance flashes in Josephine’s smile for but a moment as she looks to her parchment, quick to recite “Inquisitor, Eliza Bann stands accused of practicing blood magic.”

‘Three hours of this bullshit,’ I weigh while pursing my lips and squinting at the prisoner.

Been what? At least 20 cases so far...

“Inquisitor?”

“Hmm? Right....” I confirm and nod before demanding “show me your arms” while still fidgeting in my chair — my ass is asleep and it doesn’t matter the angle, but something keeps digging into my lower back.

I hate this skinny scrap of...ehh need a new throne.

This Eliza, she shuffles her filthy threadbare sleeves back while the chains about her rattle but with her skin exposed, turning her arms back and forth, there aren’t any cuts or scars to be seen. If she’s actually a blood mage, she’s not the usual sort....

“Did anyone actually see her perform blood magic?,” I ask of anyone, everyone, “like, anything at all?”

A lone Templar, his sandy locks pushed from his sunburnt face, he steps forth from the audience with clanking steps and clearing his throat, he announces “Knight Templar, Dunny Gundersen reporting. During a routine patrol along Th Imperial Highway near Gherlen’s Pass, during the full moon of Ferventis, this witch was observed dancing naked through the forests. This is activity known to be..”

“That isn’t blood magic,” I interrupt the knight and he stammers out “it-it is activity known to be
engaged in by practitioners of blood magic. That she was…”

Again, I interrupt, irritated now and questioning “How does naked equal blood magic?”

“Because said activity is what many,” he tries to continue but I shut him up with a wave and a hush falls over the room.

*Naked + dancing = blood magic? Nah, that’s some dumb math.*

Hunching forward, contorted awkwardly on my throne, resting my chin on my knuckles, I stare down this Eliza and issue the command “remove her gag.” While one guard does so without hesitation, the Templar, clearly upset, he exclaims “The witch will commune with demons if you let her!” to the panicked gasp of some in the crowd but I’m forced to shoot back “Please shut up.”

Confused, taken aback by my lack of decorum and procedure, the Templar stutters our “S-ser?” with his thin eyebrows locked together in concern.

“Don’t need a mouth to talk to demons,” I reply as if it’s the most obvious fact in existence, “besides, can’t hear her side of things if you don’t let her talk.”

Shut down, humiliated before the people, humbled, the Templar stands in place, unable to say or process anything else for the moment — with my eyes back on Eliza, I ask her “So. What’s up?”

Seemingly stunned that I’m allowing her the chance to defend herself, she shakes like a leaf as she whispers barely loud enough to hear “I am not a blood mage, your holiness.”

‘*Ughh. Holiness?*’ I internally groan while nodding along, urging her to continue.

Gaining confidence, speaking just a decibel more loudly, she continues “I was fleeing an attacker that night…not dancing, m’lord.”

“Know the name of your attacker?”

“I think it a man named Hindrick, m’lord,” she looks relieved to be able to admit, “I have seen him a number of times in the market outside Orzammar’s gates…”

“Describe him.”

“He…he’s a plain sort…older, some grey in his dark hair. Not that much taller than myself.”

”Any distinguishing marks or tattoos?”

She’s slow to answer that one, her breathing goes shaky as if the mere recollection of the attack is an attack itself — and I don’t doubt that — but she does manage to anxiously breathe out “n-nine.”

She’s clearly got demons of her own to deal with...just not the kind she’s been accused of consorting with.


The look in her eyes, absolutely terrified; she stares right through me, trapped still in her nightmare. As she goes quiet, the room does as well — no murmurs or whispers now — and as I lean to the right, Josephine is quick to slide to my side, to have a private conversation. So only she can hear, I request “Either ask officials in that area to look up this Hindrick or send a scout of ours to check him out” to which she responds “but of course. And what of her, Inquisitor?”

Leaning forward to study the young woman, I try something out…
Just a test.

...it worked at least once before...

Closing my right eye, I look to her with only my left, my Fade burned one.

No change.

Hold on...

It takes a few moments, but steadily, the unseen bleeds through as my pupil dilates to take in more, to see more clearly. While the room seems to shimmer more, a faint glimmer upon every surface — this place is steeped in centuries of magic after all — she doesn’t shine in the slightest.

Even though I can see the barest of outlines of observing spirits pressed against the Veil, there’s nothing magic about this Eliza.

‘Interesting,’ I ponder while leaning back toward Josephine to say “uh yeah, she’s free. See to it that she gets back to where she needs to and...that only female agents escort her. Give her peace of mind, maybe.”

“At once,” she readily agrees, head bobbing along in time to the dancing of her quill, “and perhaps we should arrange for a concession? You appear to be a bit distracted, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Yeah. I uhh, yeah, I need a break,” I grumble while untangling myself from my thin metal throne — as I rise and arch my back for a much needed cracking, Josephine announces to the room “Eliza Bann is cleared of the charges against her and the Inquisition will be looking into the matter of her attack. For now, this concludes all matters of the court. We shall resume later this afternoon. Thank you.”

I know many eyes are upon me but one set in particular draws my attention — from up on the balcony, Vivienne’s usual perch, I spy Morrigan with a curious look upon her face...

...like a damn cat...

...knowing we’ve made eye contact, she dips her head ever so slightly to me before easing back from the edge and slinking away through the side door toward the gardens beyond.

Now, I could question what that meant, what she wants — probably a private conversation — but I’m not of a mind to just yet.

"ErrrRrrrr," my stomach noisily growls in confirmation of that.

"M’lord?,” the quiet Eliza asks my way as the guards undo her bindings, “th-thank you for believing me.”

Approaching the waif, I offer my left hand in support and though hesitant to accept, accept it she does and I genuinely reply “I apologize for all that’s happened to you...”

Stunned by my words, fresh wet wells up in the corners of her eyes but I give her hand a squeeze and she finally inhales, brought back to the now.

"tha..th,” she tries to say but swiftly nods instead. Releasing her gentle grip from mine, she steps backwards until the soft hand of Mother Giselle hovers over the girl’s shoulder, projecting her own
sense of calm and offers to usher her outside this hall.

Probably for the best.

“Inquisitor,” Josephine now Josie addresses with a genuine smile, a much more relaxed energy about her now that we’ve a reprieve, “if you would like, I could have your meal brought up to your quarters…”

Me though, I’m quick to dismiss that idea with a head shake before replying “just gonna hit up the tavern. Have a drink…” and again my stomach whines as I’m forced then to add “and yeah, I’ll eat something there. Anything. Whatever.”

“If you insist, but I’ll have you know that I received word from Leliana that she’s instructed her agents to shadow you throughout Skyhold, as if you were not already aware,” she comments with her typically songlike tone while I reply with lackluster enthusiasm, “yaaaaaay. Wooo hooo.”

“It is for your own safety,” the lovely Antivan chastises through her smile, “I will send for you when it is time to resume. Until then, do be well!” At that, she curtsies and steps back to her office, likely to appease or handle a number of dignitaries I’ve yet to see to.

Her job, I don’t envy it.

From there, it’s a quick walk down to the tavern — while a few gawk at me, none impede me in my quest for sustenance. In fact, upon entering the joint, I’m completely ignored, not a single patron or customer bats an eye my way. Well, at least until Flissa spots me trough the horde and waves me over to the bar, shooing away a drunk as she does.

Sliding my way through the lunch crowd, dropping down onto an empty stool, resting an arm on the damp surface separating us, I smile out “Good to see ya, Flissa” just loud enough for her to hear over the din.

“You’re looking…unruly.” she shouts back with laughter in her eyes, “you’re all horns and beard now. Don’t they have barbers elsewhere in Thedas?”

‘Guess she didn’t hear about Halamshiral,’ I consider as she slides a cool glass of glowing blue into my hand

“AQUA MAGUS STILL YOUR PREFERRED DRINK, RIGHT?,” she shouts the question and I’m quick reply “OH YEAH. ACTUALLY, ALSO A BIT HUNGRY IF YA GOT ANYTHING AVAILABLE.”

‘And this drink might be exactly what you need,’ I realize of the lyrium infused liquor and as I take a sip, feeling that rush flood through me even as it wreaks havoc on my tastebuds, the pleasant bartender is quick to say “THE STOVE IS HOT AND THERE’S FOOD APLENTY. WE’VE GOT RAM, PUFFS, STEWS, ROASTS, PIE…”

Sputtering through my drink, I’m equally quick to reply “PIE. PIE IS GREAT.” Smirking at the lyrium blue dripping from my beard, she excuses herself to fill my order and in her momentary absence, I relax and enjoy the ambiance…

Glasses clinking.

The unintelligible back and forth of cyclical arguments.

Maryden the minstrel, the gentle strum of her lute as her lyrics of “…can recount what we’ve lost. I am the one, who will live on. I have run through the fields of pain and sighs. I have…” float over
everyone.

The medley of smells, all hot meat and spices and…

A plate slides down before me, breaking the spell, but it’s a most welcome interruption — a hot slice of pie, flaky with just a few scorch marks on the crust, a sweet red oozes out the sides dragging macerated berries into view.

“RASPBERRY AND RHUBARB,” she shouts at me — it’s only gotten louder in here, “AND DON’T YOU DARE THINK OF PAYING.”

With a furrowed brow and a lopsided smirk, I hesitantly agree to her terms and pick up my fork, stabbing at the dessert. Plunging a piece in my mouth, the flavors explode on my tongue in direct juxtaposition to the painfully biting beverage. Pain and sweet, a shockingly good combination. But while I’m enjoying that, it dawns on me, I couldn’t have paid her anyway…

‘Fuckers stole my arm AND my wallet?,’ I mentally seethe, almost chomping down on my tongue in anger, ‘GODS DAMN IT.’

Fury renewed, I fire off a look to typical tables The Chargers occupy and per the usual, they’re deep in their cups. Strange though, they’re not their raucous selves it would seem, they’re much more subdued. Even Grim is looking more grim while Cutter has a dangerous edge to her, antsy.

I don’t see Krem though.

I don’t see Bull.

My fury dissipating some, I murmur to myself “oooooh, right. Jail.”

Hurrying the pace, I choke down the remaining slice and wash it down just before forcing my way back out the bar, making a beeline for the dungeons.

Angry and annoyed, I’ve gotta have words with Bull. Not dream words where shit can get misconstrued, no, I need a real world talk.

Ignoring my tails and stomping down into the dimly lit passage, I’m greeted by the roar of the waterfall, its torrent drowning out the collective moans and pleas of prisoners, many with their arms outstretched through the bars of their cells.

This place is so much bigger than the game tried to showcase; at the very least, it’s double the size, double the cell count, however, at least half the place is empty, likely due in part to the counsel and court matters I had to slog through this morning…

“Pleeease, let me ouuuut,” someone moans from the shadows as I stomp by, the jingling of the clasps on my boots alerting those in the nearest of cells.

Cold winds blow through the chambers, howling like a despair demon, cutting through the flesh and down to the bone — I do not envy the prisoners here. But it’s not them I’m concerned with…

It’s just one.

“Bull, where the fuck are you..” I mutter under my breath, my question lost to the wind and waters as I fire angry glances at each cell I pass.

One prisoner merely spits at my feet through the bars while the next cowers, hiding from my
gaze. There isn’t much light in here — no one would waste the oil on these folk.

More outstretched arms, quiet sobs — I ignore them for now.

“...don’t work for Corypheus! I’m not one of h…,” a man whines from his cage but I step by too quickly to catch the rest. But entering the end portion of the dungeons, the waterfall’s terrible current right before me, it’s roar deafening, I spy Krem leaning against a cell, undoubtedly Bull’s, his mouth moving but it’s too loud to make out what’s being said.

But then, with a casual glance back my way, his eyes go wide with recognition and he jumps to stand at attention, his posture immediately straightening out as he shouts out “IN-INQUISITOR!”

A nod his way, my rage dissipating only a bit, I return “KREM. I NEED A WORD WITH BULL” as I stomp up and with faint daylight eking in from the outside, I finally see the horned hulk I require. All hunch, watching me with his one eye, he’s slow to rise from the floor but as he does, he taps Krem’s shoulder through the bars and hums deeply, a signal apparently to grant him some privacy.

Looking back and forth between us, Krem awkwardly departs, an anxious energy just radiating from him.

I mean, I get it — his chief, his friend, his family, he’s in a cage and I’m inadvertently the reason for it. Then again, Bull didn’t have to write shit about me...

As the waters crash and race behind me, I feel Bull studying me, waiting for me to make the first move, to speak the first word.

Instead, in an unprecedented display of magic, I snap my fingers as **QUIET** hisses through my mind — the air ripples and with my fist clenching, knuckles crunching, the deafening roar of the waterfall goes with it, shut up in the palm of my hand.

An eerie quiet settles in.

An eyebrow raised, Bull simply grumbles “Hey boss...weird trick.” He’s exhausted — dark rings under his eyes. Likely hasn’t gotten much sleep down here.

Me, I hold my tongue, glaring at the man before me while trying to decipher just what side he’s on.

After a minute more of silence, he inhales slowly and says on the exhale “Nice cloak.” Not subtle at all, that. His eye is keen and he’s clearly noticed the way I carry myself, like I’m still compensating for something in my steps, in the way I stand.

Pissed, but not yet ready to show him how my temper can flare, I reply “So. Krem is here.”

Mulling over my meaning of those specific words, he squints with his one eye, trying to puzzle out what I’ve dropped but for once, he’s either slow on the uptake or my clue was bad. Because of this, I growl “saw the rest of The Chargers in the bar.”

It’s then he comes to an understanding, arguing “NO, I’M NOT QUNARI ANYMORE.”

Still, I simply watch, arms behind my back.

”And maybe I haven’t been for a while,” he continues, “I almost didn’t even write the report. Shouldn’t have, but I did.”
No word from me, I merely wait.

“Believe me or don’t, just know how sorry I...I am sorry,” he winds up apologizing and I have to believe him — aside from the weeks old knife wound on his side, that Krem is alive is actually proof enough. “I failed you. Couldn’t fail them too. I couldn’t give them up...couldn’t sacrifice them. And now...I’m Tal Va-fucking-shoth,” he sighs, “wonderful.”

"Then it would seem that you’re exactly The Iron Bull I need,” I calmly reply with steel in my eyes, the fires of rage having given way to a cooler head as I measure his character.

“Even though I?...,” he replies in question and I’m quick to agree “Yes”

“Hmmm,” he rumbles — I can hear it, I can feel it vibrate the air.

Some movement on my left draws my attention — two callused hands, heavy with scars and dark hair, they hang through the bars of the adjacent cell. The pointed ends of a grizzled beard both silver and black juts through as well, slowly moving in time to the weary question “And what of me?”

OHSHIT. I ALMOST FORGOT You were in...

My attention now entirely on Thom, I smack at the bars of his cell and shout “I DIDN’T WANT YA IN HERE! I’VE KNOWN WHO YOU WERE BEFORE WE EVEN MET.”

“...but my past..” he says, his words tired, his sense of self deflated.

“HEY. LOOK AT ME!,” I demand of the warrior and as his haunted eyes finally find mine, I further yell “YOU WERE A CRIMINAL. WARDENS CONSCRIPT THEM. YOU NEVER WENT THROUGH THE ACTUAL JOINING BUT DAMN IT THOM, YOU’RE MORE A GREY WARDEN THAN MOST LEGITIMATE ONES!”.

Dour, his stare falls, boring a hole through the very floor of his cell in shame.

Spinning on my heel, I yell at the lonely key master in the corner “OPEN THESE FUCKING DOORS!” Startled, likely deaf from being posted here, almost dropping his torch and ring of keys, he mouths out “yessir” and hurries over to oblige. No second guessing — he knows exactly who I am. Just as the locks to both cells come undone, the grey mountain of meat denies Thom more time to stew, lumbering over and hefting the brooding man up and over his shoulder. Carrying him from his cell, Bull just starts walking ahead of me down the passage back to the surface.

“DAMN IT BULL, I CAN WALK ON MY OWN!”

“Then do it” Bull fires back as we pass by scores more of prisoners, “STOP FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF,” his voice a boom accompanying the roar of the waterfall behind us as I release my spell, undoing my fist so that the mark might shine upon us once more.

“How do you just do that?,” Blackwall begs to which Bull quickly replies “BECAUSE THE BOSS TOLD ME TO. TOLD YOU TO. WHEN HE SAID THAT, I BELIEVED HIM.”

As the din of rushing water fades with each ascending step up the stairs, the grizzled man admits “You’re...an ass. But you’re right. Damnit.” Then with a growl, he squirms around on Bull’s shoulder, spitting “Maker’s balls! Put me down!” while struggling for freedom, all his limbs shoving, wriggling, and flailing.

Pretending to not hear the Blackwall, Bull continues in his gait, closing quickly the distance to the
exit while the grizzled man shouts “DAMN IT, BULL!”

Finally giving in to the demands, Bull stops just as his hand takes hold of the door handle — a playful smirk on his angular face, the horned giant swings Blackwall off his shoulder and gently plants him on the stone steps as if the man weighs nothing at all. Delivering a gentle clap to the man’s bearded cheek, Bull arrogantly hums “look who’s got their fighting spirit back.”

“Well,” Blackwall shoots back, glaring up at Bull in annoyance, but I abruptly interject “You both done?! Thom, go back to the barn and sharpen your sword.”

“Are you command,” the veteran replies, not quite the haunted man he was mere minutes ago.

“And Bull…”

“Yeah, Boss?,” he asks, throwing me a casual glance back over his shoulder, looking me over with his good eye.

“Hunt down all agents of the Qun and throw them over the walls. You good with that?”

“Hmm,” rumbles in his throat before he agrees, answering “you got it” with a meaty thumbs up.

*****

SLAM.

CHNNK.

CLICK.

With the door to her office firmly shut and locked, with zero potential for bystanders of in the throne room to overhear, angrily pacing about the room, Josephine fumes “INQUISITOR! You cannot just free prisoners on a whim! Think of the repercussions! What would…”

“Pardoned,” I timidly interject with my back to the wall, keeping an eye on the furious Antivan. She may not be holding her clipboard, but she’s holding her quill like a one would a dagger, the sleek plume ruffling and splitting in her tight grip.

“You are the Inquisitor, yes, but the council must be present for…”

“Absolved,” I slip in, again interrupting her.

“They have not even been on trial!,” she outright scolds, glaring at me in utter confusion, uncertain how to better convey the error of my actions.

“Another word for excused,” I mutter but pausing to squint at the rafters, I continue, “I guess excused works.”

“Oh maker…” she utters in dismay while hyperventilating, breathing quickly and shallowly.

“Sorry…not trying to make your job harder,” I try to console — it was never my intention to do this to her. Admittedly, I didn’t think what consequences there could be beyond that moment but I explain “I just need those two idiots free.”
Taking a single calming breath, like a parent prepared to chastise — or a flame ready to consume — she requests “enlighten me, please” through her teeth. A hint of a smirk dances on her lips but her eyes read murder.

Annd mhmm, yep. I can see why you and Leliana are friends.

“Bull, he can uh identify and neutralize any remaining Qunari spies,” I try to justify while never taking my eyes off the currently stormy diplomat, “Blackwall, he’ll...he’s a combat veteran and he’s been an immense help throughout this entire campaign.”

Already reviewing the letters she’ll need to write, all the paperwork in her immediate future, she closes her eyes tightly while pursing her lips, huffing sharply through her flared nostrils. Not quite taking the hint, I try to further elaborate, explaining “look, I knew the whole time about both of em. If ya have to be pissed, be pissed at…” but I swiftly shift gears upon recognizing the angry gleam returning to her eyes, “...anyone except me. Nope. I’m innocent.”

She knows I’m right.
She also knows she’s right.
But she’s willing to compromise to a degree…

“We should not reconvene judgement until this matter has been dealt with. I do not mean to undermine you but this is exactly the spark that any anti-Inquisition sentiment needs to spread. We are no longer an unbiased organization — you have used your authority to absolve your allies of treasonous actions,” she lectures with her back to me, looking over her desk to look for any answers or solutions to this particular crux, “please...try to avoid the visiting ambassadors. Particularly, you would do well to avoid the Orlesian one. We may be on good terms with Emperor Gaspard, but with enough pressure from his people, even he could be coerced to turn on us…and we do not need that.”

“Oooooh…” I exhale hard, feeling my guts twist with guilt, “I didn’t realize how...fuck. I am so sorry.”

“Hunter,” she sighs, finally deigning to allow herself to look upon me, that she’s no longer a ball of fury, “While you typically handle yourself well enough, you unfortunately have very little experience with matters such as these. It is...just please, please keep me informed of your intentions going forward.”

“Y-yeah,” I’m quick to breathe out in response, a promise.

“Thank you,” she states while smoothing out the creases in her poppy yellow dress, trying to reclaim her usual measure of professionalism, “Just..for now, do your best to stay out of sight.”

Nodding quickly in confirmation, I ease backwards toward her office door, eager to retreat and give her her space. She needs breathing room and me, I’m just sucking up the air in the room.

She doesn’t need me here to exacerbate things.

“I’ll uh...see myself out.”

“Inquisitor,” she acknowledges as I unlatch the door and creep out, eager to leave her be and to not draw attention to myself.
Day Drinking

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mid afternoon.

The sun hangs just low enough in the sky to cast sprawling shadows over all within the confines of Skyhold.

I’m aware of the lurking Inquisition agents keeping an eye on me. Some, they’re obvious in their placement, clearly keeping an eye on me and anyone near me. Others, I’m uncertain if they’re actual people or just shadows I’m convinced are people. Doesn’t matter though — I can only pay them so much mind. It’s not like there’s a kill order with my name on it...

No big deal.

Whatever.

At least Rasa is somewhere nearby. Not an observable fact, it’s just a gut feeling. Though, her company I wouldn’t mind — suppose she thinks I need my space for whatever reason.

A cool breeze whistles over the high walls and past the parapets.

With my legs dangling out the bale access of the loft, the heels of my boots scraping softly against the exterior siding of the barn as Dennett’s horses and harts whinny and nicker, I nurse on my second drink of the day. Josephine was right...

I suck.

I just need to distance myself for a bit.

Relax

Get my drink on.

Keep quiet.

“Yeah,” I murmur to myself between tiny sips of the lyrium blue liquid, “you’re bad at politics.”

Down below, there’s heavy foot traffic to and from the various stalls — even this late in the day, business is booming. I can’t quite make out the specifics of the trades and negotiations but I can tell deals are being made. Those are the sounds without — from within on the ground floor of the barn, a saw cuts wood, its teeth zipping back and forth through the grain in monotonous repetition. It would seem that Blackwall is back to fashioning toys or whatever it is he does. Likely, he’s just doing it to keep busy. His intentions are his own and I’m not about to disturb him.

Not yet anyway.

Another sip, relishing its sting and meager mana boost..

Ravens drift through the skies above, laden with incoming and outgoing messages.

Sip.
But with drifting thoughts, I find myself muttering “and what’s so damn special about that mirror? I smashed it, got smashed in the process…but she acted like there was more too it?”

Or you’re just imagining things. You do that a lot.

“Doubt it, voice in my head,” I grumble counter to my own thoughts, “Desire said something something nuances? I don’t know…”

Sip.

Yeah, but she’s a demon. Demons mislead, lie, ah blah blah.

“That last one isn’t even a point.”

The point is, demons suck.

“Empirical truth,” I raise a toast to the sky, “but seriously, what could it have been besides an Eluvian?”

As I take another timid sip, I ponder ‘mirrors are mirrors and mirrors are doors. Doors to what? To wherever. So…” and with my thoughts becoming word, I mumble “…what was on the other side?”

…If that even matters...

“Wouldn’t it though?,” I ask and adjusting my hand so I’m only holding my drinking glass with my thumb and forefinger, I ask the anchor “wanna weigh in on this?”

It gives off a single irresolute pulse, a “No, not really.”

“What a riveting and well thought out response,” I drawl out sarcastically and the strip of Fade light in my palm staggers out a grumpier single pulse, definitely a “fuck off.”

Gotta figure the mark is feeling the same hangover I have being back — might’ve been eager to help get us return here but it’s certainly feeling the absence of energy unending.

“Hmmm.”

So enthralled in the dialogue with myself, I haven’t noticed that the sawing has stopped, that Blackwall now stands beside me, so I’m understandably startled when the winner of “Best Beard in Thedas” award gravels out “So what are the consequences of you freeing me?”

”Ahf wha?!,” I stutter out, almost spilling my drink on myself before figuring out what he asked and replying, “ah, it…it should be minimal? Sure, uh, Jo’s worried about Orlais and Gaspard but even with your identity out, nothing’s likely to happen.”

”That you even have to concern yourself with such matters, I apologize...truly, I’m not worth the trouble.”

”That’s where you’re wrong, sad guy. Besides, since spies managed to get me inside the Winter Palace, pretty confident that Gaspard has to be lenient, ya know? Give me a couple free passes.”

”Then I won’t say anymore on the matter,” he promises, “I’ll just do whatever I can to help the Inquisition.”

”Bout time, Thom,” I reply with emphasis on his true name, “that’s what I’ve been trying to tell
“Uh,” he pauses, hopeful though his stance turns awkward as he tries to find the proper place to keep his hands, “if it’s not too great a request, I would like to continue being called Blackwall. Not as a name, but perhaps…as a title?”

"You got it," I reply and flash him a smirk, "just no more mopin’."

"I…can agree to that.”

“Cool,” I comment and take a sip.

"uh, yes. Cool?,” he questions but shifting slightly, casting a knowing glance to the stairs, he utters “another wishes to speak to you and I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“That sounds dangerously close to saditude,” I comment but with my mouth twisting like I just licked a lemon, the pun leaving that bad a taste in my mouth, I quickly recant, “ughh, no, that was terrible. I’m sorry I even said that.”

“I’ve heard worse, usually from Varric or Sera,” he chuckles as he takes his leave, heading down the stairs and evidently directing the unknown person up to see me. With uneasy steps, the floorboards creaking, an Orlesian woman speaks out “Inquisitor…I had hoped to finally meet you…but if this is not a good time…”

Waving her over, I call back “nah, get over here, Fiona.”

Dazed and confused, she gawks at me. As Blackwall’s sawing resumes, teeth cutting away at wood, she hesitantly steps up onto the landing all the way and whispers “You speak as if we have met…”

“We have,” I mutter with lackluster enthusiasm.

“I. I apologize but I do not remember….” she tries to explain and I’m quick to reply “nor would you. The Venatori rewrote the timelines of everyone in Redcliffe so they could take control when the conclave went up in flames.” After another sip of my drink, my tongue still wincing, I continue on “basically, we met and then you didn’t meet me.” At this, I draw my legs back up into the barn and lean back against the frame of the bale access. As she looks me over, her disorientation seems to return — with her slender fingers massaging her temples, ruffling her short dark hair, squinting at me, she questions through more whispers “why…I think I remember that…but it was a dream?”

“Eh, doesn’t matter in the long run…not really,” I shrug dismissively at the Elven mage and take another sip.

“Well, while disappointed that you chose the Templars over the free mages, I suppose I should thank you for gathering as many of us as you did,” she confesses but that turns to admonishment when she adds “though I do not appreciate the means by which you did so, as if we were prisoners.”

“Aw, you don’t appreciate it?” I mock and daring to tread closer, baffled by my aggressive attitude, Fiona comments inquisitively, “You are annoyed by me?,” reading as much upon my face.

Following a long exhale — it marks my reluctance to hash this out but it needs to be said — I rattle off “look, I agree with what ya did up to a point. Fighting back against the Chantry, that was the right move. But then you ruined all that — you were stupid and traded slavery for slavery. You just swapped one jail for another and yeah, I get you were desperate but clearly you didn’t think things
through, otherwise their idiotic time magic would’ve failed again and again, but no, you just had to speak on behalf of all the mages and as a result, I had to let a demon jump into my skull and combat the envious prick just to ensure I didn’t have to kill myself dealing with the level of bullshit you helped manufacture by…”

“Solas is looking for you,” Cole suddenly blurts out now only mere inches from my face — narrowly avoiding a heart attack, clutching down on my drinking glass so tightly it cracks, I mentally shout ‘AGHHHHHOW DID YOU GET HERE SO FAST?!’ while shutting my eyes against the world.

“I ran? And she is sorry for the hurt,” the compassion spirit speaks softly in response to my thoughts. Rising, standing beside the much more unsettled Fiona, looking through her with his million mile stare, he cryptically elaborates “Many needs and many more hurts. All eyes on you. It’s the only way. Helping. Hurting to help. The hurts are growing…” but snapping free of his trance, he abruptly says “I’m sorry.”

“Uh-umm, “Fiona stutters as she eases away, clearly shaken and paling, “if you’ll…if you’ll excuze me, Inquizitor…” With that, she hurries back down to the ground floor, to the hay bales and steeds, to escape past them.

“She’s very upset. I don’t think that helped her,” Cole worries while staring after the former Grand Enchanter, “I should try again…”

Belaying that possibility for the moment at least, I begin to ask him “Hey man, what did we say about you just…”

“I shouldn’t. I should give warning. Yes.”

Gently placing my fractured glass on the floorboards, careful not to further damage it and patting possible slivers from my palm upon my denim pant leg, I say “yeah, but that’s whatever. Seriously though, you ran all the way here?”

“The little lights told me to…,” he whispers in a hush as if embarrassed, uncertain if he has broken another of the seemingly unending number of unspoken mortal rules of etiquette.

“That’s pretty cool,” I praise the pale boy and he immediately smiles. Just a tiny one, but it’s great nonetheless.

“Seriously, don’t ya get tired?,” I ask and he seems about to answer but cocking his head to the North, staring through me, his eyes glazing over, he whispers “Solas needs you.”

Following the boy’s gaze, squinting off into the distance, I think I can make out the bald elf; just high enough for the wind to blow at his modest apparel, he stands upon the walkway connecting his mural filled rotunda to Cullen’s office. Hands clasped behind his back, I can feel his sharp eyes upon me…

“Oh shit,” I grumble, “he’s looking right at us.”

I already know the answer is yes but Cole is eager to confirm that detail, shaking his head up and down with enthusiasm.

“Got it. See Solas about a thing,” I mutter to myself as my eyebrows leap up my forehead sarcastically.
Chapter End Notes

Trying to get better about posting in a timely fashion but as freelance, what time of the year isn’t hectic for me? Anyway, enjoy.
I’d walked the high walls in my effort to avoid most people as per Josephine’s request. From the barn and up the adjacent stairs, slipping through Cullen’s still empty office and briskly hurrying across the narrow walkway, I made my way to the heavy wooden door of Solas’s space only to find it ajar.

Clearly expecting me, not just a series of coincidence or an errant thought that Cole had picked up and brought my way, I audibly enter the rounded room and am greeted by the scent of drying plaster, that chalky wet. Leering about the room, I can see he’s been busy in my absence — two new frescos and a rough sketch adorn the walls. The frescos both are long since set, months old and months older.

The Winter Palace.

Adamant.

His third installment however, his latest inspiration, it’s purely graphite on the wall. Without color, the best as I can tell, it’s a silhouette of me hurrying through a streaky sea, escaping the clawing outstretched hands, each arm adorned with the penciled diagonal patterns so common for the Qun. Then, the bare towers and wall on the right of the image, Skyhold, my intended sanctuary.

“Ah, my friend, thank you for coming,” he smiles out from atop his ladder, his pencil furiously marking at the wall.

“Sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

Finally tearing himself from his art, he softly chuckles “That you are here now is well enough, after all, you’ve only just returned from what I can only imagine to be yet another harrowing experience in the Fade.” Jars of pigment, eggs, pallet knives, and fennec-haired brushes, they’re all in order on a side table, ready for the time he’ll be good to start painting. Descending his ladder, he properly greets me with “Allow me to be among the many to tell you welcome back.” But with that said, he shifts from friendly to scholarly, ever curious as he states “Now, my ulterior motive for asking you here…”

“Yeah?”

“.Last we spoke, you mentioned that you no longer see the future as clearly as you once did. Is that still the case?” He says all this while stepping closer to observe, to study me. Humming while examining my face, he waxes rhetorically “there isn’t any obvious damage to the…but what if? No, surely then there would be…perhaps then it’s simply the results of trauma…” to himself before ultimately coming to realize and calmly state “and your eyes have changed.”

“Gettin’ that a lot today,” I jokingly, albeit sarcastically, agree to which he asks more directly “is such a result of your captivity or is it something else? A change of self. A variation in power perhaps?”

“That last bit, yeah, the power self thing,” I reply nonchalantly.

“Please, have a seat,” Solas offers while gesturing to his central table strewn with loose papers and
stacked high with books. Such tomes as The First Blight, In Uthenara, The Old Gods, and Variations in Practices and Ritual: A Hypothesis Regarding Foreign Magics are but a few I hone in on despite their long winded and dry titles. Getting comfortable in the proffered low back chair, leaning back some on two of its legs to afford my own some measure of relaxation, I comment “got some exciting reading here…”

Sliding a long since cooled cup of tea away to the far end of the table, his nose wrinkling at its mere presence, he takes a seat, explaining “I can imagine a much more apt descriptor — most are rife with inconsistencies and blatant falsehoods. Somehow, Varric’s “Tale of the Champion” holds more truth than many of these combined.”

“Not that surprising,” I shrug while flipping open “Dane and the Werewolf” with one hand, absently turning to pages at random, “enough people say something, it becomes public knowledge, right or wrong.”

“It is unfortunate how correct you are,” he scowls, “that the masses so blindly accept blatant fiction while truths are dismissed or forgotten, it’s a truly terrible thing.” Taking a steadying breath, he sighs out “but I digress. While I’d certainly enjoy a dialogue regarding the loss or dissemination of information, I must confess I’ve given some thought to your magical dilemmas. Specifically, your apparent inability to wield a staff.”

Glancing back to Solas, I reply “yeah, only been one I could hold so far…”

“Yes…the one that sprung forth from your spirit self when you did battle with The Nightmare. I understand that it wasn’t a physical construct, not really, but rather a projection of…” but he falls silent when I toss back my half cloak and drop my stump of an arm on the table top with a heavy thud.

“Just a guess, but I don’t think I can summon it anymore,” I comment like its old news, as if it’s as ordinary as the seasons changing.

“Wha..what!?,“ he spits, glaring in disgust at where my right ends; even though the scars and stitches were burned clean during my last couple outbursts, even that the skin is smooth, he seethes in barely checked horror as I elaborate “it’s a tale as old as time. Sadist has a hard on for all things magic. Magic metal arm catches attention of said sadist. Sadist sails back to Par Vollen with stolen arm. If ya haven’t read that one, you should. It’s a classic.”

Beyond upset, barely containing a fit of rage, Solas sweeps several stacks from the table top and snarls “Monsters! Destroying all that they cannot..choose not to understand. Like chi-children but...no, not even. Children at the very least possess potential for understanding. The Qunari…they they…”

“Yep,” I reply quickly and pause but a moment to breathe before adding the understatement of the year, “Not too fond of the Qun.”

”How can you be so calm?!”

”I did kill most of them,” I utter as if it were a badge of honor.

With a hard exhale, forcing himself collected, detached, he criticizes “They ruin all that they touch.”

“Sure seems it.”

“I wish you had confided in me,” he expresses without eye contact, his back to me.
“Don’t think I was ready to talk about it.”

“And you can now?,” he asks with cold indifference. Or perhaps I’m reading his tone incorrectly. Maybe he’s worried, maybe that’s it.

“Lots happened since Est March,” I comment tiredly through a lopsided smirk even if my tone is a somber one. The smirk is really for me, my defense against the memories of darkness. Can’t hurt as much if I can mock it, smile despite it.

Or at least, that’s the lie I’m willing to tell myself.

“So,” I mumble out.

Brows pinched together in angry confusion, bewilderment, mouthing questions to himself with no actual words, he finally finds his voice and turning back to me, brusquely asks “Who are you?”

“Uh, I…what?” I reply, caught off guard, losing my balance, all four chair legs clacking back down against the stone floor.

“Who were you? What were you?,” Solas suspiciously questions, “and please, spare me the self-deprecating commentary about how you were simply a freelance agent.”

”Sorry, wha?,” I get out, squinting in mirrored confusion.

”Who were you…before the anchor?,” he asks, his tone softening even if his face isn’t.

‘I uhh…Ohhh…This conversation?,’ I ponder and take a glance at the sliver of Fade light churning in my palm, its energy draw a buzz in my very bones, ‘didn’t actually think I’d get this.’

In response to my apparent consideration, Solas further asks “and since possessing it, has it affected you?”

I merely blink.

”Has it changed you in any way? Your mind? …Your morals. Your…spirit?” He doesn’t take his seat but he does rest his hands upon the table top.

“Uh, sure, note the scars,” I point out, “but if you’re talkin’ metaphysically, mmm nah, not really.”

To that end, the slice of light pulses in response, buzzing like a beehive and vibrating the tendons of my hand uncomfortably. It’s just pleased to be included in the conversation but refusing to show my discomfort to Solas, I just silently breathe through it, thinking ‘Little softer, please’ at the mark.

While I clench a fist under the table, he let’s slip an “Ah” as if the answer were an obvious one, oblivious it would seem to the unsettling sensations I’m experiencing. “It’s just,” Solas continues with his eyes narrowing again in disbelief, “you are an enigma.”

Wai..

“Despite your honesty, your modesty, there’s nothing so simple about you. Not truly…”

Uhhh?!

“And what more, you manage to show a wisdom I have not seen since…”

Oh, same speech. Nevermind.
“…since my deepest journeys into the ancient memories of the Fade,” Solas elaborates, “Bluntly put, you are not what I expected.

“Probably a good thing,” I say in a quick exhale, trying to ignore the residual reverb in my bones and the anxious twinge that Solas knows more about me than he’s letting on.

“You are the polar opposite of the Qunari, you are everything they stand against…”

Quickly collecting myself, feigning shock, I mock “What? You mean to tell me I’m not a nation of assholes?”

Casting a quick glance to the floors above but evidently not caring who may overhear, Solas states oh so seriously “Joke if you must, but know that regardless of your personage or origin, I have come to respect you deeply.”

I know it feels scripted, what he’s admitted, but I can’t help but breathe out a “thanks” in response — even knowing his true identity, knowing his intentions, for all that he is and isn’t, I still can’t help but see him as a friend. And because of this, it’s all the nicer hearing him say such.

Not to my Inquisitor.

Not some playable character.

No, he’s said this to me.

About me.

We avoid eye contact — that was as personal a moment as we’ve ever shared both in and out of dreams and of course, we don’t quite know where to go from there. Fortunately, something does spring to mind and I manage out “…you uh…you mentioned a staff plan?,” trying to force our way out of this lull.

“Ah. Yes. Please, follow me,” he coughs out, eager to be past this moment as well. At this, he swiftly rises and exits his rotunda, out into the cold once more of Skyhold’s courtyard.

“So… ya want me to follow or…,” I ask the now empty room before climbing to my feet and groaning “Yeah.”

*****

We’d wandered back the way I’d come from, making our way around the walkways, down, and through the kitchens to the cellar beyond, slipping past the chefs without notice and leaving my babysitters behind.

Left.

Another left.

With determination, Solas takes us down a dark hall past dead and dying sconces, theirs a low orange glow upon the stones — into a small cobweb strewn library, tomes and tables sit coated with years of dust and disuse but at the center of it all, an immense grimoire lies propped open upon a stand. The pages displayed, they bear illustrations of lunar cycles with tiny scrawling
‘Oh, right,’ I note while letting slip ‘Forgot about this room.’

“Well, you have had little time to acquaint yourself,” he explains while thumbing through the pages of the central tome. Little does he know that I know every nook and cranny of this castle.

Or so I thought.

Turning through the pages, he lands upon a spread that is solely of a broken circle, its black ink still glistening in the candlelight as if wet. No hesitation, he drags his finger along the page, completing the imaginary circuit and planting his hand at its center, right upon the crease, he utters something under his breath that sounds like “Gealathe.”

Holding his stance, he simply waits.

Nothing.

The seconds tick by.

And then the faintest of rumblings.

An eerie shine takes to the pages as ghostly ink shifts, green and slithering to follow his finger’s first trail and complete the circle. Bridging the gap, a hiss of air sounds out beyond the table just as two shelves of the library swing inward, forming a split just large enough in the wall to slip through.

Dumbfounded. That’s me. I merely gape at the hidden entrance until Solas calls back “please, do come along.”

Through the revealed opening, stairs descend deep into parts of Skyhold unknown and Solas leads me down into that abyss — carefully, I ease through the initial entrance, keeping my neck twisted to keep my freshly regrown horns from scraping stone. With a fluid motion of his fingers, a memory of flame flickers to life in his palm casting its eerie teal glow upon the smooth stone surrounding us — this portion must’ve been carved into the very mountain.

Down and down.

The angle I have to keep my head bent, it’s uncomfortable to say the least but I’m not about to complain. I just want to see where this all leads.

Further and deeper.

Into the bowels of the mountain.

In mutual silence we walk, accompanied only by the distinct sound of our footsteps — his, bare feet padding and scuffling softly. Mine, boots jingling, the heel scraping against the edges of steps.

That, and the occasional scrape of my horns on the low ceiling.

“I apologize for the clandestine nature of this,” Solas explains mid descent, “but considering your brand of magic is... well, needless to say volatile, I imagine it best for you to practice away from the other inhabitants of Skyhold.”

“Makes sense,” I agree, “considering how last time, Cassandra chewed ya out.”
“Precisely my desire for discretion.”

“So what’s this idea you had?,” I ask, hoping for more less vagueness but Solas merely replies with “Resonance. I believe that to be the key component we need to focus on.”

‘Okay. And how?,’ I wonder but not trying to sound completely ignorant, I don’t mention anything further.

But no need.

Finally, after walking what felt like an age in and of itself, we exit out into a cavernous room, its ceiling stretching into the dark shadows above, easily thirty feet up. Patterns stretching and twisting about the room on all surfaces, it’s like walking into the eye of a hurricane.

Calm.

Powerful.

A vacuum holding back the outside world.

As the pressure mounts and noticing that I’m experiencing it, Solas explains “this chamber was used by the first inhabitants of Skyhold. They used this place as a means of meditation, allowing for the natural energies to overlap their own. To find a balance.”

‘They,’ I make note, knowing well just who he means but I don’t address that distinction, instead, I ask “Why here? This tap into a Ley line?”

A curious teal gleam in his eyes, Solas smirks out with a curiouser tone “to be so blunt, yes, Skyhold was constructed upon a naturally occurring energy well. There are only a handful of such places scattered about Thedas. This room, it was designed to be as close to that flow as possible.”

“To create a circuit?,” I ask, noting how the mosaic of vines wrap and spiral until all points meet at the center.

“Precisely.”

The jingle of my weighted steps, it should echo as I casually saunter about the room but there is none. An impressed whistle escapes my lips as I run my fingertips across the walls and across the winding patterns. Such immensity, tremendous power courses within them.

“Gotta say,” I comment absently, “not what I was expecting.”

All vines twist and wind.

All their points meet.

Convergence.

“If you would, stand in the center. Be receptive. Open your mind,” Solas requests of me and I saunter over to the dead center of it all.

“Allow yourself to be one with the room, even if you feel it overlapping you, do not fret.”

It’s like licking a wall socket.

Wave after wave, crashing and flowing. I feel like an ocean is trying to swallow me, smother me.
But not drown me. No, it’s inexplicably soothing.

Tremendous.

A half hour? I’m fairly certain that’s how long I’ve been planted here when Solas speaks up, asking “Do you feel it?”

“No…really sure. Maybe?”

“Perhaps we should simply proceed to testing your capacity. At least those above shall be none the wiser,” Solas comments while crouched upon the ground, busy unfurling another bundle he apparently left down here. Canvas, the sheet rolls out but only three staves are within. The first is an ancient one of white wood with a strong design of Elven origin, roots and branches wrapped about itself, rounded and flowing, all holding fast to a fragment of silverite.

The second of the two, it looks to be copper and clearly the handiwork of our resident Arcanist. A smooth grip, it runs the length until it symmetrically splits apart in a series of twelve prongs, each curved and perfectly housing a small cube of pure lyrium.

The third, a simple darkened wooden stave. No fancy ornamentation, no embellishments — Solas’ own and clearly not intended for me. His taking it up is proof of that.

Standing back, to observe, to learn, Solas urges me to choose one with but an outstretched free hand gesturing toward the items present. I don’t know why I’m humoring the man with this experiment in futility; most every staff I’ve ever touched has self-destructed, so realistically, why would these be any different? No faltering now though, I’m eager to just see this through — as I go to reach for the Elven staff, bright green electricity arcs from my palm, from the anchor to the silverite of the staff, emoting a dull clang as it does and I’m quick to withdraw.

“Interesting,” Solas hums, his own staff in hand as he readies to lay down protective barriers, “you should be experiencing a dampening…but this is..”

$5 says that was cause I’m more me than before...

“Hmm, troubling,” Solas comments before requesting “but please, try again.”

Mentally prepped to have this thing blow up in my face, I grab it regardless and find it’s wooden surface warm to the touch, bristling with hidden life. Conjecturing, Solas mentions “Because of the nature of that staff, I hope for it to act sympathetically with the anchor, however, you may find that...” but he’s immediately halted by a sharp crack within my grasp. Exasperated but proven correct, I toss the ancient staff to the far end of the room and as Solas casts a protective wall about us, the old wood detonates like a frag grenade, splinters and chunks rocketing at us, ricocheting off the barriers in a shower of green and cold sparks.

“Fenedhis!,” Solas curses while urging more mana into our shielding. Meanwhile, from within my palm, the anchor pulses heavily but once and I feel its “Nope” in my bones.

“Disappointing,” Solas sighs out in beleagured concern, “That particular item had been acquired during an Inquisition expedition into the Emerald Graves and…I had hoped…ah it does not matter. Try the next one, please.”

“Dontblowdontblowohgahpleasedontblow,” I rattle off under my breath as I move to snatch up the copper one and I’m terrified when it outright leaps to my hand, magnetically snapping in place. Bracing for the boom, panicking now I’m about to lose my last hand, I shout out “shitshitshit” while trying to fling it.
No luck, no release.

But even as Solas lays down layer after layer of barrier, worried now for my safety, the damned thing doesn’t explode.

It actually doesn’t blow.

No bang.

No crack

No plumes of hellfire.

No mushroom clouds of laughing skulls.

‘I’m not dead? I’m not dead!’, I laugh madly at the thought and Solas looks pleased, about to say something himself when the metal suddenly groans. Complaining, still stuck firmly in hand, it starts shaking, vibrating, increasing in temperature.

The ends grow to glow, an orange threat in the darkness.

My heart stops — here comes to boom.

But again I’m wrong.

Shockingly, nothing so dramatic occurs — it keeps groaning, until bending, curling until both ends touch, forming a ring out of itself and then the whine. Sharp, electricity crackles and dances off its malleable surface as it ultimately falls from my clutches, clacking loudly on the ground but it never falling flat. Gyroscopic, it spins like a coin, screaming louder and louder with building energy as I retreat, allowing it to have center stage.

“THOUGHTS?,” I shout out to Solas and he yells back “MANY” and before we can recoil, the cacophony ceases.

The lyrium cube splits and the blazing blue goes dull.

In an instant, the ring drops, pulled, nay, crushed down by a greater gravity.

And silence is all — the room is as it was before our arrival.

Cautious, easing forward, I nudge the damned thing with my boot but it doesn’t budge.

Locked, that spot on the floor seems to be its new permanent residence.

”Who are you?,” I hear him murmur under his breath and I’m quick to comment “At least it didn’t blow” in a cheap attempt at distraction.

It might still though — that’d be in line with my luck lately.

“Yes,” he replies in a disgruntled tone, exhausted it would seem from casting so repeatedly, “Well, I’m sorry to say that we’ve depleted our resources available for experimentation and unfortunately, this forces the conclusion of today’s efforts. After some more research, I hope to reconvene and explore other options.”

“Did ya learn anything from this though?,” I ask, still leery of the copper ring and he responds with “oh, yes. Unfortunately, not much is notably useful.”
“Ah.”

“Yes.”

“So…time to head back up?”

With a sigh, he replies “Allow me a moment to collect the scraps for study and I shall accompany you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for bearing with me — between work, work, and more work, it was difficult to find the time necessary to write and edit this chapter. But it’s finally here, revel and rejoice, haha.
Back to the open sky, cool air, and solitude of the high walls — I’ve been lurking in silence in the shadows on the landing where Varric once insisted I meet Hawke, partially hidden in beside the adjoining tower. Nearly sunset now, streamers of dying light slip past the teeth of the mountains. Colder winds than usual, a winter storm must be blowing in.

I took a whiz off the North West tower — a necessary relief after having only really had booze for food.

While fairly certain no one saw me, it was worth it just to not have to hunt down a pot to piss in. Damn anyone that thinks the Inquisitor to be above such mundane and mandatory measures. I’m only human after all. Vashoth. Both. Neither? Whatever.

Now, out of sight, enjoying the views, keeping to myself, I can help overhearing snippets of Cassandra discussing procedure with a handful of Templars.

“But what if the mages…”

“That is no longer your job,” she replies with her vaguely Germanic accent.

The lot of them are just outside Cullen’s office.

“We may have abandoned the Order,” one fully armored Templar gripes, “but that doesn’t mean we can just overlook the…”

“You can and will,” Cassandra commands.

Not even a hundred feet away.

“But the risks of possession are too…”

I recant my previous thoughts — I don’t envy Cassandra for her job. Trying to control an army of assholes, each and every one thinking themselves correct on all matters, it’s got to be grating.

“She’s angry that you two aren’t on the road. She misses that freedom,” Cole suddenly whispers in my ear, standing on his tiptoes and even though I should be used to it by now, his unexpected appearance still puts me on edge.

‘One day, that won’t get to me,’ I hope while asking “Why would Cass want that? I mean we just got back from…”

“Your sister,” he replies, confused it would seem that I didn’t inherently understand whom he meant, “she wants to be out there, not here. You should take her with you to... What do you mean? No. But why wouldn’t they listen to you? Can’t you just say to…they won’t listen.” That last bit, incoherent, it’s all rapid responses to the line of questions and concerns I didn’t even realize I had floating around up there.

“Uh, look, I’ll try to soon. I can’t exactly just…”

Pale face scrunching in concern, he asks “you think you can’t. But why..your arm? How is your
Lifting the brim of his floppy hat, making sure he can see clearly my predicament, I poke my arm stump in front of his face while gritting my teeth but that doesn’t seem to get the point across. More confused than before, he questions “Yes?” while scanning over the empty.

‘Please, kid, don’t be this dense,’ I mentally groan while bluntly stating what I’d assume to be the obvious, “my arm. It’s gone.”

Pale eyes narrowed on me, more confused than ever, he mouths out “Because you can’t see it?”

Wait...

But before I can ask anything for real, he’s already gone, slipping back into the blind spots of the world.

“Because I can’t see it?!” I hiss in anxious tones, “Cole! Cole?! Damn it.”

Saw it for a moment in the Fade but…

That can’t mean that?

How the hell did he mean that?

“No. No, not now. This is a question for a more sober Hunter,” I mutter while rubbing at my warm face, staring through the divides of my fingers at the empty space that would be an arm. It’s just thin air. There aren’t even any phantom twinges today. Try as I may to flex what isn’t there, I feel nothing.

Calm down.

But what was...

No, not now.

Steadying breaths.

Fortunately, Cass’ ire knocks me from my little existential crisis when she barks “They are no longer your wards and you their wardens! You are all Inquisition and you will begin acting as such.”

“Seeker!,” several of the more understanding Templars bark back in compliance, pounding their fist to their chest in salute — the more abrasive one from earlier, he sulks right up until Cassandra upercuts his helm clear off his head and clamps down on his ear. Tugging his head down to the side, she demands “Have I not made myself, or the concerns of the Inquisition, clear?!”

‘wow,’ I smirk in awe, watching this man-child getting scolded.

“What good are these ears if you refuse to use them?!,” she pointedly asks, embarrassing the knight in front of his holy brethren. Apparently learning the lesson, he leans into the assault and winces out “I’m sorry! OWow ahh gah sorry Ser! Forgive me!”

“Your. Orders,” Cassandra demands slowly through grit teeth while releasing her catch and as he rubs gingerly at the rough red of his ear, he fires back “TO WORK ALONGSIDE THE MAGES FOR THE INQUISITION,” a look of fearful obedience locked across his face. Granting them all leave with a dismissive wave, they do just that, hurrying past me while I slink back against the
wall to hide in the shadows.

*Impressive.*

Letting loose a tired sigh in the absence of her subordinates, she eases back into the corner, leaning against her own tower wall and she takes to massaging her temples with gloved fingers — apparently, she’s dealing with headaches of the literal sort as well.

“Are you simply going to loom?,” she abruptly asks with closed eyes. Of course she knows I’m here. That shouldn’t be surprising.

“Wouldn’t call it looming,” I shrug out as I step out from the shadows.

“Looming.”

“Ehhhhhh,” I whine while teetering my hand, “but really, ya feelin’ okay?”

“Better than you,” she breathes out and opening her eyes, “Josephine gave me an earful.”

Shame pinches my brow and a grimace sets.

“Oh, she was serious?,” she realizes as her dark eyebrows climb up her face, “I had assumed she was exaggerating.”

“Bout the repercussions, maybe. Doubt Orlais’ll come down too hard on us over the whole Blackwall-not-Blackwall thing.”

“This is why I despise politics. Whatever Blackwa..Rainier, whatever, whoever he was before… that hardly matters now. We cannot afford to waste manpower at this time.

“How forgiving of you?”

“Exhausted is what I am,” she argues, “I am far too busy covering for Cullen to give pause over whom you pardon.”

“...Does Bull being free give you pause?”

“...I would be lying if I said that it doesn’t, his ties to the Qun, but I trust you to know what you are doing,” she says while placing her hand upon my chest. Placing my own hand over hers, I give it a little squeeze, saying “appreciate it” before questioning “oh yeah…you say you’re extra busy…any chance I can steal you away for a dinner date?” Hidden from the rest of Skyhold in the shade of towers and mountains, unconcerned for now what others might think of us being in such intimate proximity, she laments through a tired smile “I would…enjoy that. Sometime soon. Tonight though…” and shakes her head.

Looking into each other’s eyes, I ask “that much to do?”

“Unfortunately. And what a surprise, the Templars are still being the most difficult,” she sighs, “On the other hand, the others *should* be returning sometime tomorrow if the reports are accurate.”

“Good news, that.”

“Yes,” she hums out.

Quiet and content, I could study her beauty, her piercing stare, the angles of her form, her scars, I could do all that for weeks and not grow complacent.
I’m far too enamored for anything less.

But if she’s as busy as she says, I really shouldn’t distract her. Not giving in to my more selfish instincts, I simply ask see ya tonight?” I know I’ve been with her nearly nonstop since my first morning in Caer Oswin but it doesn’t feel a terribly outlandish thing to ask. Suddenly, though, flustered, she awkwardly takes her hand back, slipping free from mine. “Inquisitor! Uh, ah about last night,” she stammers while I make a show of looking about to find the source of why she’s calling me by title, “Y-yes, I slept in your quarters…”

“Yeah? I was there, I know,” I confirm, more confused than anything else.

“SECURITY PURPOSES!,” she abruptly blurts with pink burning in her cheeks.

“Security purposes,” I slowly repeat to her ever increasing blush.

“Yes! With th-the attempts on your life, it makes sense to...” she tries to get out but I just lean in close, bending my neck to her level. Going still, her breath catching in her throat, she stares up into my now-violet eyes.

Her voice dropping to a whisper, her lips barely moving, she states unconvincingly “We shouldn’t give people the wrong idea.”

“And...what’s...the...right idea?”

Lips pursed, she huffs out hard with a harder stare, pink faced — refusing to answer, or perhaps that was one, she hurries away back into Cullen’s office, slamming the heavy door, and I’m left dumbfounded. “What!,” I gawk out, flabbergasted and slapping my palm against the tower.

The hell did I say?!

Turning about, absent minded of much else aside from her, it takes a minute but that’s when I see them, realize just what’s happened.

People.

Onlookers.

Potential eavesdroppers.

Or worse, gossips.

On the far perpendicular wall, that’s where they stand. Nobles maybe? Diplomats?

‘Shit,’ I realize while smirking uneasily and waving their way.

Two of their six return the gesture.

‘Yep. That’s exactly what she was trying to avoid,’ I nod in frustration, ‘they fucking know. That’s what that was about.’

”Good job, jackass.”

*****
Knots.

My guts are all twisted up.

Didn’t mean to put her in the spotlight but intentions never really matter — it’s all about the actions. And me, I’d been careless enough to allow for some fool strangers to witness our closeness.

Something to potentially call her professionalism into question.

Even something as simple as a touch, that detail alone could be blown into much more scandalous proportions. While I couldn’t care less what people think of me, that’s specifically and solely of me. For people to possibly think less of Cass, that’s where I draw a line and regrettably, by the time I’d gotten to their spot, the six had already vanished and with them, their potentially wagging tongues.

I mean, what was I really going to do if I’d caught up to them? Wouldn’t have hurt them or threatened them.

It’s frivolous and stupid but I’m not Cassandra. It’s her reputation at stake.

And fuck do people talk.

It’s really all they’ve got.

At least Twitter doesn’t exist.

Seated upon a slab bench at the back of the stone and mortar gazebo, wild flowers and herbs grow and sway in carefully arranged plots just around the outside. Skyhold’s garden bristles with life, from people slowly departing the chapel to those simply enjoying the cool sweet air. A sermon led by Mother Giselle had let out just before I wandered into these parts.

There’s too much on my mind.

Cass.

What Cole said.

As annoying as he was, I kinda wish Imshael was still around.

Solas is curious about me.

Rasa’s pissed.

‘The fact I can’t go anywhere without a pack of babysitters,’ I grouse at the thought while shooting a furtive glance past my brow to the surrounding rooftops — I count three agents.

‘Oh, right,’ I remember at the buzzing of pain in my nerve endings around the anchor, focusing again on the tones of black darkening my fingertips, ‘And this bullshit.’ At that, the mark flickers apologetically in response and I sigh “It is what it is. Just..no more rift closing until the big one...”

Two flashes, it agrees.
"No more supercharging."

Slower, realizing its limitations, it agrees again with two pulses.

“And you’re sure helping me control my dreams doesn’t exacerbate the...uh condition?”

Two pulses, yes.

“Sorry, just clarifying — you helping with that does not hurt me?”

Two pulses.

"Well, okay. That’s one thing off the checklist of grievances at least. Onto this murder of a hangover then...”

The mark in my palm, it pulses slowly, sorry it can’t be of more help — I can feel that concern and I wince in reply “Don’t fret about it. Just havta find a workaround that doesn’t involve me getting trashed on lyr...wait. Elfroot? Would that do anything?”

Three pulses? I assume that means “no clue.”

Hazarding I’m right, I lean over, stretching out for a bent strand at the edge of the gazebo when suddenly I hear “You’re the Inquisitor” from a young boy, shy, but not fearful.

My eyes flash forward — it’s none other than Morrigan’s boy. Though he likely knows what he’s said to be true, it’s as if he’s waiting on me to confirm as much. As if it were the polite thing to do. If that’s the case, it smacks of Morrigan’s influence, her training of him on how to act around normals.

But the moment has passed and I find myself nodding while casually replying “Yep.” Slowly, I readjust, sitting normally on the bench again.

“Mother didn’t tell me you were so peculiar,” Kieran bluntly states, “why are you wearing horns?”

A simple question, it should have a simple answer. Should. Instead, a shiver skitters down my spine and sitting more upright, I cautiously return with “you...see me?”

“Of course I do!,” he excitedly replies but then sniffing the air, he comments “and you’re a mage! You can smell the magic.”

“You a mage?,” I ask, genuinely curious if the offspring of three powerfully magical entities would have the same potential.

“No,” he sighs out with his shoulders slumping, clearly wishing for the opposite to be true, “but mother says there’s still time for my powers to show.” Old souls and dark rituals of his conception aside, he’s still just an excited kid, eager to follow in his parents’ footsteps, thrilled at the prospect of excitement. And with parents like his, it’s no wonder he’d want that.

So no one but he can hear, a whisper, a secret, I smile out “but you’re part Old God. That’s gotta be pretty exciting.”

Though he goes quiet, his stare fastening to me in an ever discerning sweep, he does see my intent with those piercing eyes and that I mean no harm.

“Err ah or...it’d be cool if not for the nightmares?,” I ask.
After yet another pause, he answers “yes. They’re loud.”

“I get em too,” I admit with a tired sigh, “but hey, you’ll see your Grandma pretty soon. She might be able to help with that.”

Through a sly smirk and looking down at his feet, he too admits “Mother doesn’t like her very much.”

I can’t believe I didn’t notice before, but this kid really is powerful.

Or just the housing for it?

Whatever he is, I can kinda see it radiating off him in waves. Like squiggles caught in your eye, things you can’t see until you’re not actually looking.

“Kieran,” Morrigan lightly scolds, interrupting my concentration while slinking through the gazebo archway to join us, “are you bothering the Inquisitor?,” evidently unaware of the exchange we’ve been having.

“Oh course not. Did you see what’s on his hand, Mother?” he asks in excitement as she quirks a single eyebrow. The anchor, it buzzes, always pleased to be a part of the conversation. That sensation though, I grit my teeth at it as Morrigan replies “I did see. ‘Tis time to return to your studies, little man” which is only met by the audible disappointment of her son as an annoyed groan escapes him. Mouthing the words “Go on,” Morrigan fires a glance back toward their shared room and smiles knowingly when her son obeys, shuffling off to where she wishes him to. “My son, never where you expect him to be, naturally,” she casually smiles out.

“Wan won’t be joining us?” I pose as a question despite hoping such isn’t the case. I’d love to meet The Warden, among others.

Yet another curious glint flashes in her eyes — I imagine very few outside the original gang are aware of Kieran’s exact parentage. Morrigan, she replies “‘Twould be most…unlikely,” careful now in her word choice. Neither confirming nor denying what I’ve said, she sticks to the vague and ill-defined, continuing on to say “His father…he helped raise Kieran for a time…but events have conspired to take him elsewhere. So, ‘tis but the two of us, Inquisitor. But your fortress is a large place, and you will scarce notice our presence.”

I fall quiet — I’m sure there’s plenty more I could ask of her but I’ve had a hectic day, my mind is out of sorts. Instead, my gaze just falls to the ground, glaring unblinking through the air where my forearm once existed…and according to Cole, if I understood correctly, might still. Overwhelmed is one word for it. Exhausted, that works as well. Hell, I’d retreat right back into my scattered thoughts if not for Morrigan asking “Inquisitor, if I may?”

“Hmm?,” I reply almost automatically as I return my focus to the witch, “what’s up?”

“Earlier, during the sentencing of that alleged blood mage…you were so certain that small creature was innocent.”

“And you wanna know how. Weird is how. I looked at her,” I return.

“Truly? ‘Twas that simple?”

“Aside from her lack of the trade mark cuts? I just have to stare long enough with my left eye and things get, I don’t know, shiny? Wiggly? It’s like the edge of hot air,” I struggle to define it, “like trying to focus on a mirage or something? Yeah, that’s sounds about right.”
“But of course,” the witch quips, “With a mere glance, you can determine a person’s innocence or guilt. ‘Tis no surprise that those who flock to you think you akin to a god. And I will grant that you are closer than most — twice now, you’ve transversed the Fade.”

She doesn’t believe me — she thinks me arrogant.

“Pfft, please. Your kid’s more god than I’ll ever be,” I accidentally and offhandedly comment, stupidly ignoring the invisible script so prevalent in everything, “Uhhh, I..pfff damnit.”

She knows I know.

Shit.

But does she know to what extent?

Because of my unnaturally unique predisposition to this world and its narratives, certain secrets are both known and obvious to me. I wouldn’t say it’s obvious but I can’t be the only one to learn or think that about her son. Anyone with a brain can tell that Kieran is something else…something greater. Regardless though, Morrigan loathes anyone knowing more than she wishes them to, absolutely hates being at a disadvantage.

The board always has to be in her favor.

That playful smirk of a proud mother, it’s gone, replaced by the steely, unblinking glare of a deadly creature ready to protect its young. Her breath stills as her fingers sign out glyphs in the air at her sides with magic unseen — she’s likely activating wards on her son, to ensure his safety should this conversation become less than friendly. Noticing all that, I toss her a dismissive wave, groaning out “gahh, don’t be like that. You know I know more than I should. But...look, know I’m never gonna use that against either of ya.”

Amber eyes hard, her sneer perfected from her years in the Kokari Wilds, she says nothing.

“Really?,” I ask while leaning forward, an elbow to my knee, “Fine. What about... how about you ask me questions and I’ll answer if I can. No catches, no hidden agenda.”

Her posture doesn’t exactly loosen up — she’s still coiled to attack — but she does consider my proposition. Shifting some in place, taking a stance of superiority, staring down her nose at me, her voice venomous, she hisses lowly “How...do you know... what you think you know?”

‘What I think I know. Nice. Exactly what I’d expect from you,’ I mentally note, somehow pleased by her response. While a number of things can change, have changed, it warms me that she’s still so true to form. “I’ve uh,” I start, trying my best to choose my words carefully, “I’ve seen most everything...from, well, Wan’s harrowing up until you both went through that mirror?”

“What’d’ya want me to say? I saw until he went through that mirror with you in the Dragonbone Wastes. That’s when the end credits rolled,” I admit, likely sounding mad despite trying to speak with deliberation, not wanting to give away too much, “after that, Hawke was the focal point. I restarted just outside Lothering right when the Blight hit — ended up witnessing her escape with her family. Saw Flemeth dragon up and fly em all to a boat. They got to Kirkwall. Blah blah blah, watched a decade of murder, conspiracies, and bullshit unfold.”

Eyes narrowed in suspicion, she merely listens in silence. I suspect she’s curious to know exactly what extent I bore witness. But I wait for her next question.
“Well?,” I urge, “and no, it’s not stupid time magic.”

Slow to speak, considering her next question, she finally asks “in what manner would you witness.”

“Third person perspective,” I blurt out immediately, forgetting my need for critical thinking and care, “sometimes it’d be like watching a…a play.”

“You mean to say you watched as a spirit or demon would,” she states, trying to attach my abilities to something familiar to make sense of them, “And now, you possess a Qunari…”

“Hold the fuck up. Time out,” I blurt out, jabbing a hand toward her with a sour look on my face, “Not a goddamn ghost. Not a Qunari. Just a fucking person and I’ve seen all this over and over and over a-goddamn-gain.”

She’s hit a sensitive spot, a chink in my armor and that at least gives her some measure of pleasure — with a small threatening smirk, she mockingly questions “ah, yes, the future. What say you of it? ‘Twere you capable of such a feat, surely you could explain why...why Celine’s assassination came as such a surprise. I saw your face and ‘twas one of shock.”

*What? No, it was how many of the nobles were traitor….whatever.*

Annoyed at her needling, even if it’s expected, I grumble out a bullshit line “it was the least likely of three branches but that still gave the event potential.”

“Anyone clever enough can predict how events are likely to transpire but that doesn’t make you clairvoyant.”

“It’s not,” I growl, falling for her goading again, “I’ve watched it all, every possible iteration and origin, from start to….no. Just no.”

“Oh?,” she mocks, “then do tell, what exactly lies in store for us?”

*Careful, Hunter…choose wisely,* I weigh before throwing that option to the wind, devil may care, and answering in deadpan as specifically as I can, “I have seen every Inquisitor that should’ve been where I am now and what they do. But here’s some future for ya — when your precious Well of Sorrows is at risk, you’ll take flight as a raven to stop old Abelas from destroying it. I’ll tell you more when we’re actually there at the edge of that stupid pool.”

She and I stay still in uneasy silence — her toying smirk gone, we measure one another until I say “And no, I don’t care about your Eluvian. I don’t care about The Crossroads. Why? Because I’ve already…”

”Seen them,” she finishes for me.

And there it is, another statement of mine that actually seems to ring true for her. For all her caution, her exceedingly well thought out plans, her subterfuges and machinations, I’ve just laid bare her truest intention, her driving reason for being here with the Inquisition. It was never about Gaspard sending her our way, nor was it ever about an assignment or inherent need to do good. Her morality, and whatever weight that carries, swings only to the benefit of her and her loved ones.

She’s here to seek out knowledge and power.

She could’ve stolen away into the night at any point if she didn’t truly want to be here.
I wager that well has information critical to her and them. Perhaps it’ll shed light on her son and the old god within. Maybe, it’ll have intel on the blight and the removal of such for her dearest lover. Or, it could simply be power for power’s sake.

I don’t care.

I just want to be allies in the coming days and I hope she can understand that.

Eventually though, a halfhearted smirk slips onto my face and I sigh out “I’m not your enemy. Never have been. Doubt I ever will be. Of this world and it’s many inhabitants, you’re among the few I find myself rooting for.”

Unsure how else to respond, she utters “Interesting.” She’s a hard one to read but I hope that’s a positive assessment of hers. With that, there’s no biting quip, none of her usual cold, critical and condescending commentary, there’s only her awkward silence and her sudden need to be at Kieran’s side. No words of departure, she briskly exits the gazebo and disappears behind so much of the overgrowth.

“Cool chat,” I whisper to no one.

Chapter End Notes

It took me long enough but FINALLY here’s a new chapter.

Enjoy!
Lows of Unconsciousness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The beating of feathered wings draw me back to the now as a pair of snowy owls take flight. With their departure, a dark spot is left in the light dusting of snow upon the railing where the frost never touched.

No idea how long they’d been out there but that was just enough to make me realize I’ve been sitting in the dark in my quarters for a couple hours now. Alone at my desk, a map of Thedas under my elbow, I’d scribbled various details on its surface in ink.

“Xenon” under Kirkwall.

“Temple Of Dumat?” in the North of the Orlesian Empire, roughly where I remember it being.

“Flemeth, wtf,” I’d hastily scratched that over the Korcari Wilds while I’d also scrawled out “Winter?” over the Arlathan Forest across the Waking Sea, far to the North of Antiva. If I recall, she had said the clan was headed that way.

In a much less subtle stroke, I’d drawn a skull and crossbones over the whole of Par Vollen.

And then down in the Arbor Wilds, I’d simply written “next.”

Uneasy, I’d skipped dinner and even now, I’m still feeling dedicated to my more potable diet. Liquor, hooch, booze, the hard stuff. A tumbler of something amber sits half consumed; from the smell, I’d say it’s whiskey but from the gasoline taste, I’m not so sure anymore.

I know I should eat but last night’s headache has blossomed into a full blown migraine. Definitely a withdrawal of sorts — absence of Fade. Templars get it. Mages get it. And now I’m getting it. And I was directly hooked into it for days. I would’ve thought that deep room Solas took me down to would’ve had some sort of alleviating effects — not the case.

It simply masked the issue for a bit.

Not long enough though.

“Should jusfuckin’ tryta sleep,” I drunkenly slur while trying to focus on the map by the light of the moon and the dim glow of the anchor, “dreams are jus awful. Fuckin’ Qun. Fuckin’ everything.”

Suppose I’m not all quite there cause the sudden drop is too much for me. Takes a good few seconds for me to register, but the side of my face has struck desktop — with eyes swimming and still enjoying that heavy thud, I’m out.

*****

Knock.
Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

‘What?’, I try to ask while coming to but it only forms as thought. Whoever’s knocking, it’s echoing and distant but present enough to irritate. Best guess, it’s the dwarven crew back to work on the elevator.

KNOCK.

Ow, okay, that one was jarring — my eyes tear open.

Bright daylight, it stings.

High noon.

But it was just night.

Not in my room — I’m outside in a place I swear I’ve seen before. Only now, everything is sharper, so much more focused. I’m seeing in high definition for the first time. I thought everything was more vivid after becoming whole but no, not like this — the saturation has been tweaked. Everything is outlandishly luscious and rich looking.

Before whatever this all is, a flower was simply flower.
Right here though, right now, a flower is a delicate oil painting, its stem bending softly beneath the weight of its petals as they catch the wind.

Glimmering mountains crusted with mica, they stand as gorgeous fangs in opposition to the sunny sky above, rising tall on either side of this wild pass.

Ancient columns lay on their sides, choked by vines and smothered with moss, eroded stone steps dot the ground with reckless abandon.

And beyond, a jutting cliff stretches out over a misty chasm — a wisteria covered Eluvian stands alone upon it, vines twisting about it on all but its reflective pane.

And closer still, the backside of a tall, stone statue, unweathered and posed as if attacking.

Yet again, this body isn’t my own. At half my usual height, I feel more…

’Sleender? Ughhh...’ I realize when my shaking head aims down enough and I’m able to better see myself — olive skin, a missing left in lieu of a right.

I’ve sensitive ears that twitch at this breeze at the edge of the world.

‘O..kay. I’m a woman again,’ I mentally sigh out, exhausted still from last dream I had like this, ‘who the hell am I now?’

Then hot, bitter tears sting my eyes.

My heartbeat punches at my rib cage and the grievous injury throbs — dirty copper offsets the wafting aroma of tall grass and the faint crispness of ozone.

Everything is wrong, this is wrong.

Angry. But I feel her holding back.

A hollow pit in our stomach...

Heartbroken. I know this feeling.

Long dark braids shake loose and fall in front of our face and as we sweep them back over our shoulder, I realize now the reason of our upset.

Solas.

Fully clad in battle armor, he stands adorned in the complete vestments of the Dread Wolf. Sleek, shiny metals fit to his form, hugging him comfortably. A sole curved pauldron sits upon his shoulder — over his other, the thick fur of a fox or fennec. A definitive badge of a trickster if ever there were one.

And in his clutches, our missing hand, the scar still flickering with dying light.

Looking from it to us, apologetic concern weighing heavy on his brow, he softly says “Ma vhenan, I am sorry…but this is the only way.”

‘NO. FUCKING. WAY,’ I mentally roar, fueled by this woman’s rage while watching through her eyes. I hear us shouting “EXPLAIN. TELL ME HOW KILLING ONE WORLD TO SAVE A DEAD ONE MAKES ANY LICK OF SENSE.”
“Siona...I must...I have to make right what I started all those years ago,” he struggles to say, “farewell.”

“Run while you can, ma vhenan. Pray I don’t catch your scent,” we threaten while grabbing ahold of her two hander with but one hand, hauling its length from the earth — hefting it up and over our shoulder with surprising strength, we glare after her lover as one. No smug or superior air now, Solas glances back with hurt in his eyes, worried perhaps if he’s making the right choice, but ultimately he slips through the Eluvian, its placid surface absorbing him and with that flash of light…

*****

“GAHH!” I blurt out with a sudden jerk — cheek to desk, my horns scrape the surface and knock at least two books to the floor. Blinking, squinting, trying to focus as a few loose paper scatter to the floor, I realize I’m in the dark of my room again.

I suppose I always was.

“Seriously? What’s the point of all that?,” I growl while mashing the back of my hand against my eyes, rubbing hard at them, “friggin’ episode 2 of Tales Across Realities. For real. Why the fuck am I having these crazy ass dreams!?”

I might still be experiencing the anger of my Elven Inquisitor.

Pretty sure that’s the case.

Hope that’s the case.

The anchor pulses softly at my irritation and I reply “is that what’s happening now? This gonna be a daily ritual? I don’t like it.”

No confirmation nor rejection, it just continues with its unwavering glow.

“Nothing, really? Wonderful,” I grunt while jerking my head back and forth to work a kink out of my neck. The moon still hangs in relatively the same position in the sky so I couldn’t have been out all that long — must have had my neck bent at just the wrong angle for just long enough though. Still groggy, still annoyed — at the anchor, at my myself, at that version of Solas, at you name it — I’m feeling my drinks now and I know sleep is probably the best answer.

Not about to wrestle my shirt over my horns though, not in this state.

Flissa was absolutely right — I need a trim. And being penniless — not about to mooch anymore off her kindness.

But I’ve not a mind for patience.

Not this night, not in this mood.

Fingertips trembling, mana floods them at the mere idea of cutting off my own horns.

I shouldn’t be this anxious about it.
When you strip away the spell work, the preparation, the uttered word, that’s all magic is — making the imaginary a reality. And whatever I actually am, a human twisted into a vashoth or be it something weirder, that’s what I’m good at. Despite my many flaws or shortcuts, that’s what my magic boils down to, why it’s so different from every other mage in Thedas. Most mages have to consider every variable right down to how they move their staves just to cast.

But not me.

I paint what I want in my mind’s eye and make that a reality.

‘So use that imagination,’ I recall Eirlana’s words from so long ago while knuckles flex in trepidation.

*We don’t need a damn babysitter.*

*But we’ve been off our game.*

*We’re us again.*

‘What does that even mean?’, I debate myself, ‘really? Couldn’t that just mean bigger explosions?’

Nah.

Nah?

Nah, got a more concrete sense of control now.

*In the Fade, sure! We’ve got no proof for that here!*

*Only one of the staves actually detonated earlier.*

*There were only two fricken sticks!*

*Half didn’t explode.*

*That’s a shit argument!*

*Your point?*

*THE MATH SUCKS.*

*Confidence is key.*

*Which I am not.*

"Just...just do it," I argue against my more reserved half and conclude “Definitely insane. Gotta be.”

Hesitantly tapping at my horns, feeling for where I want the cut to happen, I focus just a couple inches above the base, just enough for them to curve over my scalp some.

I’m just drunk enough.

”Alright jackass, don’t kill yourself. No dying,” I lecture as I will ‘TIMBER’ into my fingertips.

Snap.
A flash of purple light illuminates the bed chambers for just a moment.

With that, both topple off my head and clatter hollowly against the floor, bone to stone, parted from me with ease. Shocked even though I really shouldn’t be at this point, the things I’ve accomplished, I still dab at the fresh stubs.

No blood of my fingertips — good sign.

“Huh, didn’t kill myself,” I marvel and shake my head around some. A small weight has been lifted. How Bull manages is mind boggling. ‘Then again, he’s shirtless pretty much nonstop,’ I note as I pick up the two lengths of horn off the floor. Turning them to and fro in one hand, looking them over with the Fade light of my palm for backlighting, I realize how smooth they are. No nicks. No grooves. Even the cut is perfect, no grinding or chipping.


Done but not trashing them, I shove em up on the shelf. I’m sure I’ll figure out a use for some horn.

That, and they’re a piece of me.

But that’s for tomorrow’s Hunter.

I’m not awake enough for this.

Just gonna crash at my desk tonight.

Snagging a pillow off the bed, I plant it over my maps and charts, dropping my head down as I prepare myself for round two of sleep. Eyes shut tight against the buzz of booze and the anchor’s glow, I slip yet again into the realm of dreams…

*****

Knock.

Knock.

A door of dark wood, heavy.

Knock.

The dream world, for all its lack of definition and tangible edges, it shakes with every beating.

Knock.

Whatever’s on the other side wants in.

The only thing in sight, it shifts to show how it’s more locks, deadbolts, chains, and nails than wood — thing isn’t opening without some serious pry work.
THUD THUD.

THUD.

My hand hovers over the doorknob, a tarnished copper with streaks of green discoloring.

The banging stops.

I don’t grasp the pull, something about this irks me. Something feels…off.

I know this to be a dream and I don’t know how this construct will actually cope with my touch, how it may only appear impenetrable. But in the world of the mind, the Fade, what something seems is seldom the case. So doing the smart thing, I call out “Who’s there?” instead of actually interacting with it.

BANG BANG THUD BANG

POUND. SHAKE. THUD THUD.

The other picks up their pace, beating on the other side feverishly, unevenly. Desperately.

“Go away,” I yell now but the tempo only increases — edging away, uneasy, I repeat myself, “GO AWAY.”

BANG BANG THUD SCRATCH THUD BOOM BOOM.

“YOU’RE NOT WELCOME HERE.”

BOOM BOOM BOOM THUD BOOM.

With my attention elsewhere, something grey slithers over my bare feet, tripping me up as I scream out “shit! No!!” and whipping about to learn just what it was, I’m confronted by a thousand mottled grey hands and arms, clawing and scratching, sharp diagonals of red painted up their flesh.

The world goes black as they rise like a tsunami.

Can’t crawl backwards fast enough.

They sweep down, latching onto me by the ankle.

“You think that just because you cut off your horns, you aren’t like us?,” a horde of terrible voices mock together. More and more, they just keep flooding out from the deep, their numbers swiftly becoming legion. Their infinite mass snakes about me, python gripping as they haul me to their abyss, squeezing the air from my lungs.

‘No noNOno GET OFF NO,’ I panic as fingers dig at me, clawing into and around my mouth, scratching at my eyes.

Gagging.

Can’t talk.

Can’t scream.

Can’t see.
“Hunter!,” a voice cuts through the darkness and I lash out, still stricken by terror—my fist connects hard with the side of the desk, leaving splintered imprints and driving it forward about a few feet, rocking everything atop it but that voice tries again, attempting to calm as she closes in, pressing “Hunter. I am here. You are safe. Just breathe. You are safe. You are…”

Breathing harshly, my throat still feels the clammy constriction of a thousand hands. Heart still racing, knuckles throbbing, I manage to ask “C-Cass?” in between panicked gulps. Her hands tightly grip the sides of my face, I can see her silhouette at the very least in this dark. Moonlight gone, that celestial body hides behind the darkening cloud cover of the winter storm front.

“Yes,” she confirms, her voice still urgent but soothing, “I was coming up the stairs when I heard you yelling. At first I thought…”

“I’m. Sorry,” I manage to say between harsh breaths, “Just a. Just a nightmare. Not the fir…not the first one.”

Leaning into me, hugging the side of my head to her chest, reassuring, she asks “would you…like to talk about it?”

“It okay if I don’t?”

“Of course,” she replies as she traces circles around one horn, feeling the fresh edge with her finger, “Would you like to lie in bed?”

When I wince, she adds “together?”

I’m not going to sleep, I know that much. I do however concede the point, hesitantly taking her offered hand and she leads me to the bed. Not bothering with my clothes, I crawl onto the sheets as she lights a candle on a nightstand. Propping herself against the headboard, snatching pillows, she covers her lap and bids me rest my weary head. “I am with you,” she soothes, a hand to my forehead with her other upon my T-shirt clad chest, “there is only us. Whatever it was that plagued you, it does not exist here.”

No words, I’m still in shock at how real it all felt.

“Only a couple of hours now until dawn…at least try to close your eyes?,” she requests softly as the orange glow flickers, as shadows dance along the walls.

Off topic, purposely so, I whisper “Sorry about earlier” without looking up to her, without moving.

“For? Oh, no matter,” she dismisses but I press “Really. Should’ve known some assholes were watching.”

“Such people will always be a pebble in my boot. I wasn’t upset with you, I was mad I gave them ammunition.”

“Still though.”
A short huff escapes her before she says “I admit…this is new to me, there are so many eyes on us both. Please don’t doubt my feelings for you, I am just…uncertain how to handle things. Us being together isn’t forbidden but it will give pause to some, that we may not be committing ourselves in whole to the Inquisition and its cause.”

“That’s dumb of em,” I grumble, “pretty sure we’ve been giving the Inquisition our all.

“You are not wrong. But they are not either. We have to be careful in how we present ourselves, that we are not above the Inquisition.”

“...I get it.”

“Good. Now do try to sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

There’s no chance in hell I’m closing my eyes tonight. Hangovers and migraines be damned, I’m not going to sleep. And I’m never sleeping again without control, without the mark aiding me.

Chapter End Notes

When the waking world conspires against you, it’s only a matter of time before the dreamworld does as well.
Day Two.

Day two of being back and true to my word, I didn’t close my eyes.

I’ve had nightmares plenty, but all those clawing grey hands…

Dry eyes and weighted lids the consequence, I kept them open. With Cass my emotional support, her thigh my pillow, I had just stared into the dark until the bright of dawn crept in.

“You are awake?,” Cass lazily questions upon stirring, shifting about under my head, stretching for comfort.

“Yeah” unintentionally escapes me, a default slip at this hour.

“How long ha…” she begins but quickly reconsidering, states “you never slept.” I feel her still beneath me, her concern for me palpable. No perk or pep, I weakly shake my head for no, nudging her through the pillow she’s got over my head to keep my horn stumps, however short they may be, from poking her.

“Did you try to at least?”

“Not really.”

She’s furrowing her brow — I don’t have to see it to know it — it’s in how she breathes, how quiet she becomes after that initial puff of air from flared nostrils. Silently assessing. Mulling over the situation. But there’s only so much time she can take to do so; sliding out from under me, smoothing out the creases in her leathers, she offers “I must see to troop activity and security…stay in bed. I’ll have something sent up.”

With that said, she slips into the water closet but a few minutes before departing.

Makes sense she’d leave. She needs to. She’s got a job to do. I suppose I do as well but I’m not myself yet.

Yet. A small word with so much potential.

‘Do I still have that potential?,’ I ponder the sobering thought. I’m not depressed.

Don’t think I am.

Haunted is the right word.

*****

Too many hours wasted in that room.

Muddled mind, I’ve a sole objective as I lumber into and through the main hall.
'Don't look at me, ignore me ignore me I'm not here,' I think with urgency as I try to slip through the throne room without notice, 'was never here, pay no attention to the 6'6" horned man.'

It took me far too long to get up, half a day wasted wallowing up in my chambers, but I can’t keep that going — no matter how low I’m feeling, how craptastic my day is, that’s not me.

I’m not some sad bird that sits complacently in its cage.

And I know my room isn’t actually a cage, it’s just that between the constant watch and that place being my only refuge, I’m feeling a pretty claustrophobic up there.

Hunched forward, some stagger and swagger, I’m almost to the outside without interruption when…

“Inquizeetor, if you’ve a moment,” asks a thickly accented voice just as I’m about to exit the main hall. With a barely concealed huff of despair, I half-turn to find the only revered mother I personally know simply waiting for me, a pleased little knowing smile on her face. Tired and certain it’s showing, I simply shrug and grumble “ermhmm?”.

“My lord inquizeetor,” Mother Giselle picks up again at my absence of words, taking that as invitation to continue, “eet is good of you to speak weeth me. I ave news regarding one of your… companyuns. The Tevinter.”

’Was she always this hard to understand? Shit, guess sleep isn’t overrated,’ I mentally note before managing to sluggishly ask “So you...you’ve got the letter from his dad. That’s what this is?.”

Apparently a day of drinking and zero sleep coupled with Fade withdrawal, regardless of your typical wits and wiles and resilience, can still impair you with prolonged morning-brain.

Then again, that much makes sense.

“I…yes. I ave been in contact with his family, house Pavus out of Qarinus. Are you familiar with them?”

Eyes narrowed, squinting more from fatigue than suspicion, I slowly question “and why’re ya… contacting…them.”

Words aren’t coming easy to me this afternoon.

“I didn’t contact them, Inquizeetor. They contacted me, so far een they sent a letter describing zee…” she continues but I’m having a difficult time clearly following, so much so that I don’t even catch a few of her words, “...arrange a meeting, quietly, wizzout telleeng him. They fear eetz the only way he’ll come. Since you seem to be on good terms with the young man, I’d hoped…”

She’s what? Really Orlesian? Whatever, you got the gist of it...

“Hoped?” I repeat, the only word of hers I clearly understood just now though it sounds now like I’m trying to cherry pick.

I’m not.

“I…”

“Already know what this is. Warned him about it,” I explain through drooping eyelids, partially blocking out the light for a moment, “too many months ago.”
“Well…If I had to guess, I would suspect there is more to it than either of us can truly know, hence the need for privacy.”

“Nope. I know all of it. But thanks. This is just a trigger for a sidequest.”

“Oh…ah, I,” she stumbles through her words, uncertain how to answer.

‘I don’t care what your motives were, I just…,’ I think while saying “Thanks. Just…just take the thanks.” With a nod, I pluck the letter from her grasp and leaving as fast as I can, I cram the letter in my back pocket for later. Through heavy doors, I vanish from her sight out into lightly falling snow, the wafting of snowflakes.

*****

Doesn’t matter the hour, high noon or midnight, the unfortunately named Herald’s Rest always has a crowd.

Only difference is whether or not they’re blackout drunk in their own sick.

Being early noon, you’ve got last night’s stragglers and the regulars. And it’s busy, but not as loud as usual.

I’m pretty sure noise is exactly what I want. Should help get me outta my own head for a bit.

There is a rather colorful flautist blowing away at some fluttery, high pitched tune, the plume of his cap dipping and swaying with every shift in fingering…but it’s assuredly not what I’m looking for.

If anything, he’s just hard on my ears right now.

Squeezing and sliding by the customers, avoiding wet spots and tracked in mud, trying to find a space just big enough to breathe, a place to settle down and try to take in the ambiance, I go to take the stairs to the next level and wind up tripping into The Charger’s corner, nearly stepping on the dwarf, Rocky, sprawled on the floor. Of the nineteen unconscious, I only recognize him, Stitches the healer, and Grim the mostly mute.

Furthermore, the quiet one is the only one awake.

“Ya mind?,” I ask thinking here is fine enough and he looks up at me from his spot on the floor, his back to the brick and mortar. He’s got a couple of the others’ legs and arms draped across him but it doesn’t seem to bother him in the slightest. With a “Rrrhh” of a nothing growl of acknowledgement, he inclines his head toward the next most free spot beside him — it involves huddling down in the nest with them all but I’m game I suppose.

Seat’s a seat.

Following suit, back to the wall, I shimmy down, careful not to shove or sit on any errant limbs.

It’s not like I’m here to eat.

Get lost in the noise.

The flute trills loudly.
“Oi! I ordered three ales! And where’s the..” someone yells above the others before getting lost like so many waves crashing against a cliff.

“C’mon, work damnit,” I mutter to myself, slowly growing frustrated that this isn’t what I need and thinking ‘Course not — it’s not your favorite bar. Never will be.’

It’s when Grim starts gnawing on a burnt bread end do I realize it’s the most noise I’ve ever heard from the guy.

I’ve heard him kill a man with a pickaxe before.

This is inexplicably worse.

Between his rough chewing and the high woodwinds, the rabble yelling about the mundane, it’s now I see I’m not gonna find what I need here in this renaissance fair of mediocrity. In an annoyed daze, trying to look for new ideas for dealing instead of using my head, I just so happen to cast a look to the floors above just in time to see Sera drunkenly stagger out. Up on the 2nd floor landing, the young elf yawns and scratches at her yellow plaid-covered butt. A blue splotch on her exposed shoulder, it’s likely a bruise from a couple nights ago when we scared her off the roof in our return.

Mid step, casually glancing to the crowd below, her gaze happens to fall on me amidst The Chargers.

It isn’t until I nod her way that she recognizes me — bugging out, eyes shooting wide, she dashes backwards and bounds around the corner, out of sight.

_Fuck was that about?_

No time to dwell though, the hulking mass of Bull slides in front of me having easily navigated his mess of troops, all too familiar with their habits. Expertly reading the situation, ever the spy, he rumbles out “Sera? Give her some time to process, Boss.”

Crouching down though, so much closer, he breathes “Two down” so only I’m hearing but as if that wasn’t his intent, to share that secret, he grabs ahold of my arm and hauls me back to my feet.

“Hmmm, not drinking? Then let’s get you outside. It’s a good day,” he comments off the cuff like that was his sole reason for finding me, “besides, got the sense it’ll be a while until the rush dies down.”

“Uh, sure” I answer back over the din.

“Grim,” he rumbles out at his normal volume to which the presently floor-bound human growls back a short “Ergh.”

_Whatever that means._

With that and a hand on my back, Bull escorts me out of here, the two of us combined easily parting the crowd with our mass and gait.

*****
Outside.

The combat yard.

Still snowing, just a bit, everything has a thin dusting of the white.

Krem, Dalish, and a soldier unknown to me stand about the fencing, an audience for those fighting within. In the ring, two humans, an elf, and a dwarf. This elf, Cutter, she’s swift, easily sidestepping and evading their practice swords — she’s made a game of it really, to show up these soldiers as best she can. Though typically a force of vengeance, a devil, fortunately for all involved this day, she’s but a focused participant.

“Oh come on,” Bull’s lieutenant goads on the fighters, “You lot going to let her embarrass you like that?,” a restrained smirk upon his face. They’d have the upper hand under normal circumstances, superior numbers and all, but she’s a slippery one.

“Symmetry, lads,” one among the soldiers calls out in an attempt to corral her at least, box her in. But then they notice me walking over and one among them, the greenest human, he stops what’s he’s doing to naively salute “Inquisitor, sir!”

Dumb move.

Cutter darts behind and grabs him by the throat, using him as a mock human shield. Spirit faltering, knowing exactly his error, I speak out “yeah…pretty sure ya know what you did wrong.”

Afraid to even gulp against her blade, forgetting its bluntness, this young man just mouths out “Maker yes.”

“Exactly why my boys don’t salute me,” Bull comments and Krem is quick to sarcastically insert “yeah, chief, that’s why” with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Hmm. Aaanyway,” Bull continues, “how about giving me and the boss some room.”

What?

As I twist about to glare at the even taller vashoth, the few soldiers and Chargers present perk up, intrigued. A couple of the more obvious of my entourage of agents, they sidle closer as well from their positions on a rooftop and in the doorway to the armory.

Precaution or interest, who’s to say.

I wasn’t expecting this.

Should’ve.

It’s Bull.

The man is all physical injury, drinking, and sex.

“Aw come on, don’t give me that look,” he explains the need for this, “you hit me, I hit back, we trade blows in cathartic symmetry until we’re bruised and having a drink…and before you say anything, no, you’re not alright, you really need to hit something.”

Right or wrong, it doesn’t stop the skepticism from creasing the corners of my eyes — I feel it necessary to warn “Kinda got a habit of killing what I hit.”
Blackwall, passing by with an armful of chopped wood at that very moment, calls out “I’d listen to him, Bull” and continues on his way, likely back to his barn.

“I’m already aware,” Bull calls back before explaining to me the limiting factors, “So you take it down a notch. No magic.”

“You uh...you make that sound easy. Like it’s something I’ve got a handle on,” I point out.

“Then hit me with a stick,” he rumbles in opposition.

My face screws up at that one.

Quick to recognize, he addresses “No. Just an ordinary stick. No magic. Just a boring hunk of wood.”

Lips pinched in uncertainty over this so called plan, I’ve no time to argue my way out — Krem tosses me a simple quarterstaff, calling out “don’t worry Inquisitor, it’s not a bow.” Clearly a jab at her, Dalish sticks her tongue out at the lieutenant and says “Of course not” as she hops up on the fencing for front row seats.

“So we’re doing this?,” the bigger man asks.

Call it experience but I don’t like holding a stick. Not without safeguards and barriers at least. So magic or not, giving it a side eye as if it’ll still detonate the second I look away, I try to calmly reply “Yeah, suure” as if revealing my thoughts will assuredly trigger something.

“Good.”

Starting slow, he casually steps around the arena, an obvious means of getting on my right. Despite the eyepatch, I’m not dumb enough to assume he has a blind spot. And even though he’s not wearing his huge leather pauldron and harness, even if he’s just fighting in those loose pantaloons of his, I doubt it’ll be that easy.

No magic.

Just a stick.

Don’t wanna kill him,’ I tell myself, ‘just hit him.’

Just a game.

“Stop thinking, start swinging,” he urges — guess I’m supposed to make the first move.

“Fuck it,” I resign and awkwardly lunge forward, bringing the staff down on my opponent.

Allowing contact, his thick shoulder takes the hit. Then his counter — with a swift pivot, using his weight, he delivers a quick uppercut to my guts.

“Fuck,” I hiss and swing again as he throws a fist to my right shoulder.

Swing. CRACK.

Punch. THUD.

I sweep at his legs but he deftly hops it, shouting “COME ON! STOP THINKING!”

A sweep to an upswing, I narrowly miss his chin. Grabbing ahold of the other end, he wrenches it
from my grip and tosses it aside, growling deep “No, this isn’t working. Get in close and actually hit me.”

A lopsided uppercut, I can’t throw it the way I used to — don’t have the counterweight of an other arm.

Bull, he just stands there and takes the hit with a deep growl before returning the gesture.

A straight jab to my shoulder, it hits like a brick and then closing fast, he slams his bony brow down against my face and my knees buckle. Only a flash of pain, unexpected, but it’s in that split second that my eyes flare, my eerie violet illuminating all in view but even as onlookers edge away, I’m quick to think ‘Easy now’ while blowing blood from my stinging nose.

Pure reaction tempered with reason.

Just a taste.

Bull’s the only one not to flinch.

But he’s about to feel it.

Reeling in and swinging at partial strength, that flash giving me a boost, I backhand the big guy into the fencing — not enough to splinter the planks but hard enough to leave an ever pinkening imprint of my fingers on his gut.

“Chief!,” Krem calls out and quickly steps to check on his boss but the big guy waves off the concern.

I don’t want to actually hurt Bull.

I can punch a giant in half — it’s not a matter of can’t, it’s a matter of want.

It’s that simple.

“God damn!,” he coughs out while laughing, every heated breath visible in this chill, and cracks his neck, clearly ready for round two, “now it’s getting’ good.” On the outskirts, coppers exchange hands, small bets are made. A few others more have joined the audience, here to watch two “oxmen” butt heads.

But this isn’t what I want...

I don’t wanna have to keep myself in check…and that’s what this is. A constant awareness of my own thoughts.

This isn’t the unwinding I need.

Turning tail, abruptly exiting the ring to the dismay and confusion of many, I dismissively say “glad it’s good for you, Bull.”

“Oh, come on!,” Bull rumbles after me, “we’ve barely done anything!”

“Another time.”

“But there’ll be drinks at the end!”

I just keep walking.
Bull’s still thinking like a Qunari, that the solution to many of life’s problems is simply to experience pain. But I’ll never be a Qunari. Hell, I’m not even a real vashoth. And I can’t just fight for the sake of fighting; there needs to be more to it.

Objective.

Furthering some mission.

‘Racking up XP,’ I internally quip as the snowfall picks up.

Chapter End Notes

so how about that DA4 tease earlier this month?
Been several hours now since dusk — after leaving Bull earlier, I just walked without direction around the castle, just doing my best to avoid people altogether until the daylight died. From high towers to the cellars below, I’d aimlessly gone through the building snow until ultimately I resolved to return to my chambers, to brush the snow from my shoulders and retire for the night.

Warmer now, my damp clothes on the floor near the fire in the hearth, from my bed I stare absently into those flames.

Someone brought up a bowl of stew — left it on my desk — yet another ram based food item if the scent is any indication. Didn’t see them do it, I just know it must’ve passed inspection from the various agents posted in the stairwell.

I appreciate the food, sure, but I’m not in the mood. There’s only so much ram a man can stomach. We need a better selection of proteins up here.

Ignoring that, I’ve really only one objective for returning here this night and it’s not to complain about the food — what I’m here for is sleep.

Specifically, controlled sleep.

Naked in bed, half-covered, steeling myself for slumber and what nightmares may come, I finally hold the mark before me and ask the glowing sliver “ya ready?”

Two pulses.

“Cool. Cool,” I reply with half the confidence of my former self, “alright. Let’s do this.”

Double pulse, it’s in agreement.

Cass likely won’t be up here for a few hours more — the delay of Cullen’s return has really messed with her schedule. But even without her, I’ve gotta try for this, I need sleep. I knew that the moment those pill bugs started popping back into my field of vision, ever wandering, always roving on tiny legs. It’s just a few for now, but their hallucinated number will only grow with every hour more of this exhaustion.

So...

Ready.

“Then...Sleep,” I speak with building magical authority, throwing myself under the spell as the mark ignites, giving us acceds to what lies beyond and slipping realities, I step into the realm of dreams. Greeted by that familiar uneven strum of harp strings and whale calls, simple proof I am where I am, pillars of charred bones float by and remnants of spirits flicker in an out of existence, merely vascular in nature in this halfway point for mortals and spirits. The seams of the world stretch and contract with every breath as it shifts to acclimate to the mind’s present, keeping all bound together under the churning green canopy of nauseatingly stormy sky.
“So far, so good,” I mutter as I scan the horizon and I feel the mark buzz in agreement.

In the distance, the Black City, floating high above all else, the truest constant. Down below, a vast field of chewed up earth, like it’s been tilled with the teeth of a giant. But it’s late enough in the real world that many spheres of light, the personal domains of those sleeping, they dot the ruined landscape below like so many nightlights.

As if they’re crops, they sprout in rows.

“What’s happening?”

It merely glows a moment before it pulses out a single heavy, reticent pulse. No.

“Notice anything?”

“You feel anything weird, let me know,” I request as I take a step off the ledge, dropping freely to the ground so far below, and the mark buzzes with a double pulse.

A soft descent, the dream world is so accommodating, and I soon find my boots upon the blackened dirt. So long as I’m here, my body is recharging. It counts as sleep even if the apparent downside is being very aware of the passing seconds, how much sand must slip though that figurative hourglass in real time. Normal dreams, the ones I relish, they have that pleasant habit of distorting time, of being over as they begin. But treading now amongst the dreams of the people of Skyhold, I do shockingly feel somewhat at ease.

I’ve struggled to escape the Fade before.

Three times.

And then there was The Empty, the trap my own mind built, nearly driving me insane in my survival of the stark and absolute nothing.

But I did. Survive, that is.

So to not feel as if my very existence hangs in the balance, it’s certainly a small relief.

A half remembered song, distant laughter, warm colors, many of these dreams smack of pleasantries, of happiness and contentment. There should be more here in this portion of the dreaming world but so many are still en route for Skyhold, likely still awake and traveling.

His has only left the realm all the emptier.

But somewhere off behind, behind loose rocks, something skitters. Something sharp, like nails raking porous cement.

“Nah, nuh uh, not dealing with whatever that is,” I quickly declare and all too ready to leap, holding the mark aloft, its green crackling down the length of scar tissue winding along my forearm, I tell it “change of venue — let’s go to the beach.”

As it’s been with so much of my dream world wandering, existence blurs as I’m drawn through scene upon scene, the Fade’s twisted nature trying to accommodate the minds of so many humans, elves, and qunari. Half remembered trees to frighteningly high cliffs, something as simple as breaking bread with the shade of a loved one to the epics of war and all the bloodlust within, these are but a few that I skip through in my haste. And the world slows down, down until it stops dead.

This new scene to traipse though, beachfront property and open water.
Patchy shores of black and white sands, it’s but a swirling mess. Haven hangs upside down in the twilit skies, as it was, before it all became but a grave marker in some snowy pass — akin to a small moon, a celestial body looming, its only twin holding still in these clear skies is the Black City.

Calm blue waters lap at the edges, where the land dips down below the tide.

Birds chirps where there are none — no lingering salty aroma, this here’s freshwater. In fact, it resembles the typically frozen over pond outside the dearly departed Haven. So this, a thawed version, some sort of springtime.

“Mmm…usually good fishing in these parts,” hums an older Elven man with rod and lure in hand. Seated on the edge the rickety dock across the way, his feet dipped in the waters, he asks of no one “oi? where did they go?” I can’t place him but clearly he’s connected to the Inquisition in some way — maybe one of the cooks? Doesn’t truly matter. It’s curious…the spirits or wisps that would typically play the role of the animated life are nowhere to be seen, below the waves or otherwise. Shifting about, I can see the finite capacity for this dream — this particular bubble of influence curves up just behind me along the beach, cutting the mountains and cliffs that should be present from view.

“ Weird. Boring,” I mutter to the mark and myself in observation, “this might work.”

The sliver of Fade light in my palm buzzes in agreement, finding this place as satisfactory to our cause as I do.

“Okay…so, we just hang out for 6 hours, that’ll get the pill-bugs gone, then we’re normal for a few more days.”

One pulse. Sarcastic.

“Me then. Whatever, I’ll be normal or something. Yeah, we’re both weird, it’s hard to quantify something unprecedented but…” I try to reason but I’m interrupted by a sharp shushing from the old man, aware it’d seem of my presence, before he hisses “gonna scare all my fish away.”

My hand held his way apologetically, I simply purse my lips and crouch to the sand beneath my boots. ‘Gonna be real fun, this one,’ I consider whether it’s worth it sticking it out in rather boring locale, ‘then again, boring is safe. Boring is easy.’

Ploop

No splash, just a weighted plunge like a brick getting swallowed — the man is gone with barely a ripple on the placid waters.

No more birds, their cries are gone as well.

“Old man,” I call out cautiously, rising again to stand, “Old man?!” and the beach belches out a few pockets of air, the sand giving way as several tiny holes form in response. It seems the perfect moment for small creatures to exit, to emerge like crabs or mites, but nothing does.

Not visibly at least.

No, the only thing breathing, present, is this sense of dread and again something skitters just out of sight. Shadows in the periphery of this isolated realm, they seem to move as night descends on this place, robbing the sky of both the Black City and the inverted Haven.
“…time for a new venue,” I whisper as my heart grows fearful in its beats — the mark flickers, its agreement felt in the bones my hand, deep. And the previously calm fishing hole roils, bubbling, boiling with some terrible life force at its center as the color leeches away. Grey and wet, a darkness spreading beneath its surface.

“Yeah, definitely go time,” I whisper anxiously, done with this, “new place, a new place, ah uh home. Yeah! HOME.”

Just like that, before the surface can break and reveal whatever dread thing dwells, I’m whisked away, off through the ever changing void before smacking into the plastic siding of a house. Jarred, stumbling backwards, I mutter “o..Kay. Ow” in some knee jerk reaction to the sudden stop. Even if pain isn’t real in this state, the mind has a way of convincing you of it.

That’s where I am right now.

Stepping back, rubbing at my stinging nose and forehead, I realize I’m in my memory of home, mine, not some errant dream I’m intruding upon.

And what more, it’s not what I expected.

It would seem this memory has improved some since my last visit with Cassandra — true, ash has long since stopped choking the sky but better still, no longer is there a crater where the two story farmhouse once stood. No, the house is nearly back, incomplete but slowly rebuilding. Sections of wall and rooftop simply don’t exist but for those portions that do, it’s a reminder of the good in the world, even if I can’t return to it in person. Flickers of spirits, they dart and flit around the inside, imitating my family as best they can, even if I can see them for orange sprites they are.

They’re trying though — I can appreciate their effort.

Clear skies and sweet winds, nary a cloud above. Again, the Black City looms in the distance, the North Star of the Fade, the only constant.

Warm, the airs of late summer, this place is comfortable of course.

A sea of ripened wheat surrounds the property, it shimmers and sways in abundance, golden, ready for the encroaching harvest. That field looks to go on forever, but I know all dreams have a border, even mine. It’s not a bad thing, it just is what it is. Stepping around the side of the house, onto the brick porch out front, I try the handle of the door only to find it locked.

“Yeah, course that’s the case,” I say to my own chagrin, “ehh, doesn’t really matter I guess.” and plop down on the edge of the porch, an impromptu seat for the time being. Unwinding, just a bit, taking a calming breath after the events just moments ago, I try to shift gears, focus on something more.

Something else.

And that something, I find, is the mark.

“So while we’re wasting time…”

A double pulse, inquisitive and antsy.

“Look, pretty sure I’ve asked before…but uh..yeah, I like Solas but can I trust him?”

A spirit imitating a robin flaps past my field of vision, racing off to argue with another spirit-bird. A few seconds after, the marks pulses with uncertainty, no single or doubles, it just leaves an
unpleasant tingling in the joints of my hand

“So no clue? Super helpful,” I comment sarcastically to which the mark pulses with matching intent.

“K. How about...,” I hum out in consideration, “If you’re not part of me, d’ya die?”

Three pulses — definitely an “I don’t know” if I ever seen one from it.

“So maybe. I mean, going on first law of thermodynamics and what Solas said about spirit death... my point is you wouldn’t be you.”

Two pulses — the mark’s in agreement even if it doesn’t know outright. It’s just what I’ve said has a certain sense to it.

“And I’m sorry ’bout all this...I know ya wanna get off the sidelines but we gotta make sure we’re both alive for the finale.”

It takes a few seconds longer than it normally would but the mark lets out a slow double pulse, reticent it would seem.

“Oh? You think I don’t love that weirdly painful pins and needles sensation we get from slamming rifts shut? Course I do,” I jokingly and blatantly lie to which the mark pulses in annoyance but I’m quick to note “Don’t get me wrong, I fucking loved the infinite mana boosts...it’s just...”

I press my thumb to my darkened two fingertips before adding “You know?” apologetically. I can’t risk letting that atrophy spread. But in its response, its somber double pulse of yes, that’s when we realize that unsettling quiet has fallen again, that the sun is steadily vanishing, that shadows are stretching far and wide. Like the sky is being torn to shreds, scraps of light blow away like dried leaves in the hurricane season.

The temperature drops and my breath fogs as I whisper “so we’re being followed.”

I’m trying to keep my cool, my calm, but without the anchor supercharging me, I don’t think I can actually damage any of the Fade’s denizens in this state of mine — sure, my own power had a part to play when I so grievously injured that particular Desire but without that extra green, it’s rational to doubt my potential here.

‘Not good. They’ve got our scent,’ I realize before coming to oddest conclusion I can, something unexpected, ‘how ’bout a different approach, something to keep em guessing?’

“Butwherewouldthatbe?,” I spit out in question of my own thoughts, hurrying for an answer before all the sky is torn to black and the darkness falls again, before that dread can sink it’s teeth in me and develop a real taste.

Rapid fire, my thoughts race...


...Angling in close, I hurriedly hiss to the mark my hasty conclusion “find me a nightmare, any one, a bad one, go!” so that none but it may hear.

And the world blurs before the dark devours it — and for the third time, I’ve lost my home.
But in a mad dash, we punch through dream after dream after dream, each showing a bit more discoloration, an increasingly larger stain upon each. What once was pleasant has darkened immensely as I’m hurtled at breakneck speeds through peoples’ most horrid and lurid of visions.

Grappling tentacles, infinite needles, the things that go bump in the night, corpses and cuts to the overwhelming and nauseating sensation of guilt, through the grisly horror of blight — I’m torn through it all. And as quickly as we begin our light speed search, as awful as it is and was to experience that spattering of the atrocious and terrible, we come to a grinding halt in a nightmare of equally terrible measure.

Fields of naught but black crops, withered beyond all recognition.

Blood red skies with a redder crescent moon, it glares down from its spot in the sky like a malicious cat’s eye.

Everything reeks of copper and rot.

And at the center of this particular nightmare, some poor naked human is propped up like a scarecrow, bound to planks of wood in the field. Sundried ropes and rigging dig into their exposed flesh as the gaunt and starved forms of lesser terrors cry like the crows they’re masquerading as — “kraaa kraaaa! Kra cawwww kraaaaaa!,” the four imitating a murder shout in unison as they peck at the man’s face, tearing at the tender skin around the actual precious orbs but not the eyes themselves. They’re feeding on panic and prolonging it as long as they can — theirs is a delicious prize born of anticipation, the stress of what they threaten actually coming to pass.

Somehow worse is the deafening silence masking everything except their aggressive cries of attack and hunger — the man can’t even whine.

I refuse to stray too close and instead, I merely huddle down beside the broken fencing on the outskirts.

Eyes shut tight.

Don’t solve it. Don’t help.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t focus on it.

“CAW CAAAAAW KRAAAAAA!,” they cry out in unnatural unison.

He’s not in real danger...

...just scared. That’s it.

I twitch in discomfort and my fingers drum against my thigh anxiously.

‘Don’t look,’ I think with an ever furrowing brow, ‘It’s just their bad dream...’

‘Don’t know, seems pretty similar to the Ben-Hasrath,’ my own darker notions attempt to prod.

“...,” I try to say in response but I’m robbed of sound as well here so I resort to firing back ‘No. It’s not. Stop it’ in thought.

It’s just...they’re going for the eyes…didn’t the Qunari try that?
Nonono.shutup.shutup.

The parallels are interesting.

No parallels. Nothing.

...

...

‘It’s awful quiet out there...’, that little, usually argumentative, voice whispers in my head. And it’s right — the snipping, the pecking, and cawing has stopped. Eyes tearing open, I shoot a look to the prisoner.

Trembling, broken, the lonesome man is still held fast to his posts.

But he’s not the one in danger, no...

Surrounded, and not some by some four measly lesser terrors. Loads now, scores and scores of the spiny elongated bastards, each crawling and scrabbling over their kin to get to me. I had to have had a straggler on my tail — that first dread is back, crushing and dark. Too many terrors in any one dream, the air gets heavy, hard to breathe and see.

The moon, devoured.

The night, oh so dark and fraught with terrors.

Skittering, chittering, clambering, they swarm about, trying to close in but the mark ignites, its green glow my torch in this nearly impenetrable abyss. Rebuffed by the radiance, the horde is barely kept at bay. Their taunts overlapping, their words a cacophony, just pure unadulterated noise, I can’t understand them but the intent is palpable.

They want to make me theirs.

To taste my pain.

To keep my mage brain as long as they can.

Can’t let that happen.

‘Anywhere not here. We go there. Get away,’ I try to reason while standing against terrors too many, ‘go there. Can’t stay here...someplace safe.’

...Someplace...

‘The Empty,’ but one of many bad ideas to pop into my head this night but I hone in on it, convince myself it’s the best option as I open my mouth and words actually escape...

“Take me to The Empty.”

No blur, no motion sickness. The cut away from unyielding darkness to blank unending white is instantaneous.

My enemies, left behind.

The border storm of black grit, still thundering away.
The winding stairs to nowhere, as lonely as always.

Can’t breathe.

My heart, it’s beating too fast.

My blood goes cold, an infectious chill takes me.

Though a dream, my mouth goes bone dry.

”no no nonononono...” I gasp out, “wrong, I was wrong. Not here, not here. WakeupwakeupwakeupwakeupWAKEUPWAKEUP.”

”WAKE UP!”

”WAKE UP!,” I shout into the void, at the mark, at myself, “WAAAAAKEUP!”

*****

Drenched in cold sweat, lungs burning like I’d run a marathon, my throat raw, I grip tightly at the sheets, not entirely convinced I’m back. Trying to swallow, to wet my mouth, I peer past the foot of the bed — the fire hasn’t really dwindled, the logs within are still whole.

The waning moon has has barely moved across the sky.

As my tongue grinds against my canines, trying to feel pain, I grip at my ruined arm, it’s continued absence but further proof we’re back.

This was but an exercise in futility — barely got a couple hours sleep from the look of things.

Exhausted.

"Fuck. Can’t...no. Can’t be here,” I mutter as I shakily roll out of bed — concerned, the mark flickers some but I can’t focus on much else beyond getting out. My clothes, they’re dry enough to pull back on, pants, T-shirt, boots all black. And with that, I make my escape, hurrying down the stairs to levels below, ignoring the sentinels posted as I go...

Didn’t recharge anywhere close to what I’d hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Relish the sleep you can get. Who knows when next you’ll find some.
Day Three.

Day three.

My dreaming attempt several hours earlier was an utter failure.

Hiding out in the Undercroft now, been here a couple hours, just holding out till daybreak.

Figure it’ll be easier to avoid sleep once dawn arrives — speaking of, that heavenly glow slowly creeps over the world beyond the balcony, illuminating the mountains bit by bit, the snowy peaks sparkle and glitter in welcome. It’s finally morning.

I’m tired for so many reasons.

…the bland food.

…the weird ass dreams.

…the supervision.

…the responsibility.

…the death threats.

The only reason I came and joined up in the beginning was the prospect I could go home.

“Yeah...never gonna happen,” I grumble with my head slumped against the crate at my side, “Never gonna have real food. No good spices. My bed instead of this goose feather mattress nonsense. No more memory foam. Music...”

I’ve only got the memories of my favorites in my head to replay. How long until those get blurry, faded with the passing of time?

“Think you’re depressed, Hunter,” I mutter bleakly to myself, “...Makes sense. Course you’d get depression in a place with medieval medical practices.”

Call me the odd one but I’m strangely at ease hunched down between these crates of ore. Didn’t bother to check the contents. So long as it’s not filled with rocks that whisper and glow, I couldn’t care less.

And it’s not like I’m bothering anyone...

Harritt, no clue where he’s off to — he hasn’t been here all night.

Dagna, not once did she look up from whatever she’s tooling. Not once. I’m 99 percent sure she has no idea I’m even here.

“Errowwwrrrr,” growls my stomach like a pissed off cat — definitely hungry, but this particular solace, this hideaway, it’s suiting me well enough. For the time being, I’m content to stay where I am, nestled down, out of sight. Besides, if ram is on the menu again, it might just be worth it to starve.

The pillbugs are still here as well, running this way and that; last night’s little venture did nothing to abate them. Passing in and out of existence, how these tiny hallucinations like to remind me that
I’m on the edge of consciousness. Good news though, it’s loud down here.

Loud is good.

And it isn’t like the dungeons with that painful roar of the waterfall, no, here there’s but the constant low howl of the wind as it whips past the eye shaped opening.

It’s the sort of loud that can keep a man awake.

But those little things keep scurrying by, set in there ways. “Please fuck off,” I hum to the nonexistent, “Know I need sleep. Just not in the mood. Not yet.”

“’It’s so…loud,” Cole abruptly states from overhead, balancing on the corner of the crate beside me. Head tilted down and peering into my soul with that ethereal gaze of his, he further says enigmatically “So much. Too much. Can’t keep up, keep in. Sleep? No, can’t, won’t, don’t. Must distract. With what? Why?” but I cut him short by shoving my palm up and over his oddly cold mouth. Still more spirit than mortal, makes sense he wouldn’t be breathing warm air.

“Cole,” I gently remind and breathe deep, “reading my mind, saying that shit out loud…”

Talking through my hand, choosing to remain muffled, he replies “Ooo sad nah to.”

“That’s right,” I say while blinking the shock of it all away. Tiny heart attacks, that’s what this boy is.

“Buh oor really loud,” he counters as if that’s an acceptable answer and inching back from my palm, he says more clearly “I can hear you from inside the tavern. It’s loud there but…you’re louder.”

“Wonderful,” I groan to the mostly spirit. I’m a walking amplifier, it should be pretty obvious he can hear me at a distance. Just didn’t know the range. “Sorry, kid.. I’ll try to be uh.. less loud?,” I sort of apologize as more of the phasic pillbugs swarm past his face for an audience of just me. Awesome.

Head twisting smoothly to the side, the enigmatic ghost boy stares through the walls, tilting ever so like a dog listening in, he offers “I can try.”

‘Try what now?,’ I think the question knowing he can hear me and sure enough he answers “to help with the hurt.”

If you’re thinkin’ about cutting out my memories, Cole, that’s not happening.

“Would it help?,” he asks innocently, purely, without a trace of dark intent.

Doesn’t matter. Had shit stolen from me before. Not going through that again.

“I don’t want to take, I want to help,” he whispers in reply as he scratches at his head, “maybe…what if I helped by pushing them down?”

“Sounds real healthy,” I quip with a hard, sleepless edge while hauling myself to my feet, using his crate for leverage.

“Wouldn’t it help?”

“The land before modern therapy,” I smirk out dismissively while stretching in place before
recalling yesterday’s conversation, “wait, no, fuck my sleep issue. About that other thing. What’d you mean when you said my my arm was still here.”

“Yes?”

“No, like what…were you being literal or figurative?”

“Yes?”

“Wha..Where?”

“Here?”

“Care to go into more detail?,” I ask with urgency.

A confused pup, he angles his head to the side, his wide brim flopping gently from the movement.


“Where it always is? Yes,” but with a considerate look, he adds “This isn’t helping…”

“What does that mean?!,” I loudly demand but he’s gone, leaving me arguing with the wind, loud enough now to elicit a small gasp from dwarven women. Now aware of me, shakily she asks “oh! Inquisitor!? I didn’t hear you come in. I’m sorry, I believe I missed the question — what does what mean?”

“Sorry, was just…thinking out loud,” I apologize, annoyed that the kid ghosted out on me in the middle of a conversation.

“Oh. Well is there anything I can do for you while you’re down here?”

“Figure out how to grow a new arm from stem cells and my tissue samples,” I wax sarcastically, “develop it until it’s full scale and then surgically supplant my ruined one. You know, something quick.”

“I’m sorry?,” she smiles out, not quite certain what I’m talking about — biochemistry and surgery, not exactly her forte. If I needed magic, enchantments, and metalcraft understood, that’d be her wheelhouse.

“Don’t be. It’s my fault for not being quicker. If I’d gotten it, I could’ve reattached it and then I wouldn’t be having frustratingly confusing dialogues with spirit people.”

“Oh, alright then,” she says cheerfully and returns to whatever her work is before adding, “I swear, so many interesting things happen to you. It’s like you’re a magnet.”

A magnet — while apt, it doesn’t make me smile. I’m just about to leave, already heading to the door when I realize something curious, something I frankly should have considered already.

My arm is here?

That’s what he said.

My arm is here.

Worth a try...
Turning back to Skyhold’s resident arcanist, I ask out “Dagna?”

"Mhmm?,” she hums back without making eye contact — eager to continue working on her designs.

Pursing my lips and trying not to get my hopes up, taking a moment to find my words, I finally ask “...say someone needs a prosthetic...”

"That someone being you, Inquisitor? Couldn’t help but the notice the difference, just didn’t want to say anything in case it was rude."

"...Yeah, appreciate the concern but...Is it possible to...well..."

"Manufacture and enchant a masterwork capable of responding and behaving like an actual arm?,” she answers my question with her own and after only a few seconds, she specifies “I admit, I haven’t done a great deal of research on that particular topic. I’ve considered the prospect before — dwarves are always losing limbs in the mines, you see, but I’ve yet to come across any solid findings or papers indicating that such could even be accomplished.” Cheerily, leaning back from her workstation and flipping her protective goggles up as strands of red hair fall loose over her face, she smiles out “then again, if a golem’s arm could be repurposed...” with her hammer in hand.

‘Don’t get your hopes up, don’t...’ I try to talk myself down before leading with “...though if anyone could manage such a feat...”

"oh, absolutely, Inquisitor, of course it’d be me!,” she beams at the potential of such work, “actually, I have an idea where we could start and if you wait just...a..moment...” Finding a quill and some ink on a messy side table, a few wires and gears falling to the floor below, she hastily jots down the required items, all the while pleasantly rambling “Now this, you’ll need to pass along to Lady Josephine. Gosh, she’s always so pretty, with all that yellow and gold. Some people just know what looks good on them. But don’t get me started, I’ll never stop gushing. Anywho, she can have Inquisition forces bring in any pieces they find — obviously the more complete the golem, the better. Oh, but I’d prefer it be inactive, I certainly don’t want anyone to get hurt. But yeah, if they could get an arm or five, I could try to reverse engineer it and see what comes of it.”

The ghost of a smile actually finds its way to my face as she hurries across the room and up the stairs, giving me her shopping list to pass along. I told myself not to hope, but I can’t help but feel a modicum of it, even if it’s a long shot. So somewhat incredulously optimistic, I ask “and...if all goes well?”

"You get an arm, obviously,” she teases and drops her goggles back down over her face before planting her hands on her hips.

"No matter how this plays out, Dagna, you’re amazing."

And turning away, strutting back down to her work, she boasts over her shoulder “Aww, thanks! That’s why I get paid so much. Like..wow. So much.” As a few sparks fly from her table, her attention already dedicated to whatever it is she’s working on, I can’t help but admire the woman.

And I can’t help but thank The Warden for helping her a decade ago the way he did, for seeing to it that she got to the Ferelden Circle.

For this all being that particular timeline.

I’m still bad off, sure, but that one bit from her is an upward tick towards a better Hunter.
Just hanging out in my throne room, trying to be inconspicuous outside Josephine’s office. Here’s hoping the scattered people near the entrance mistake me for a guard while I wait.

That’s not likely, but a guy can hope.

Her door’s locked — she’s in talks with some dignitary or another so I’ve a little time to really admire the hold…

…and it’s lack of décor.

It’s actually a fairly stark and boring room, little in the way of furniture or ornamentation. The most interesting piece is that frustratingly uncomfortable Inquisition throne. Too thin, too upright a back, too small for someone my size.

…and those spikes as well as the embroidered eye in the center of the back cushion that’s too rigid.

Had I the time or focus, I still don’t even know how I’d decorate the place.

Definitely not into the Orlesian or Circle style.

Andrastian is a hard no.

Ferelden is typically all dog themed — not bad, just not necessarily what I’d go for.

The various Elven styles are interesting. Same goes for the Tevinter styles, those tall bronze bird statues and…

‘No. Not Tevinter. That’d send a number of wrong messages,’ I realize.

The Avvar and Chasind styles are curious to behold, granted I’m sure some will think me heathenistic or simple for even considering that.

And dragon décor is a bit morbid.

“You’re magic, asshole,” I remind myself,

“if you really cared, you could knock it out real quick.”

“If I cared,” I agree with myself.

“…but we’ve got issues a bit bigger than aesthetics.”

“True. True.”

Approaching footsteps from behind the door, muffled goodbyes from the other side, the meeting sounds like it’s come to a resolution — the latch is undone and the door draws inward, setting free a cheerful “it was so good to have this chance to talk. Please have a safe return home and do give the Marquess my sincere regards.”
“But of course, Ambassador,” replies yet another stranger I’ve never seen, some well to do woman adorned in teal and navy. After they both share a quick a peck on each cheek, the lady in blue excuses herself and paying me no mind, she briskly walks away.

“Infuriating little…” Josephine grumbles to herself before noticing me darkening her doorway and immediately throws her ambassador’s smile back on, humming out “Oh, Inquisitor! I did not see… you didn’t hear any of?..Please just come in!” somewhat nervously. She’s usually a model of professionalism and for me to have just witnessed that momentary lowering of her façade…

Regardless, as I enter her office in all its dusky splendor, she’s quick to shut the door behind me and lock it once more.

“I am sorry for whatever you may have hea…” she goes to apologize but I wave it off, commenting “It’s me. Don’t worry” and I move to take a chair by the fire. It’s warmer than I’d like, the air from the burning logs quite dry, but it’s not like there’s other seating here.

“Yes, but even still, I should be more aware of my those around me,” she retorts through her worried smile, “had it not been you, that could have proven detrimental for… I really must be on my guard at all times.”

“Yeah, I know. I just meant that…never mind,” I concede her point, “dropping it. How ya doin’?”

“I am quite well, minor stresses aside. Again, please disregard the small slip out there.”

I just drag my pinched fingers across my closed mouth, zipping them shut to the quirking of Josephine’s eyebrow. It’s then I remember zippers aren’t something that exist in Thedas aside from the fly on my jeans so I simply add “I’ll…keep it to myself.”

“Wonderful,” she breathes easy and brings a small silver serving tray to the side table beside my chair, “Would you like some tea? Coffee? Anything stronger and we’ll have to visit an apothecary.”

Squinting, from both fatigue and disbelief, I question “…coffee exists?”

“Yes?,” Josie smiles out in confusion, “I was able to establish a line of trade with a merchant out of Antiva.”

_Antiva. Wine. Drugs. Organized murder. Leather. Sex. God damn coffee. Of course they’d be the ones with coffee. They have…”_ I slip from thought to word “…actual caffeine.”

“Would you like sugar? Crème?”

“Ah, no thank you. Just gonna have it black,” I reply in between ginger sips of the hot brew. Dark roast. Bold and bitter. Not as quick as lyrium, but I do feel it getting to my veins, that slow build. “Oooo,” I sigh out, pleased for the moment at least. this.

“Oh, and since you’re here,” she speaks softly while stirring sugar from the serving bowl into her cup, “there’s a small matter I wish to discuss regarding the city of Jader. Someone there has been spreading rumors, specifically about you and how you are…an abomination. It’s slander of course but I’m curious to hear how you think we should proceed, if at all.”

Lowering my cup, I ask facetiously “When am I not possessed? Who’s it this time?”

“I cannot rightly say,” she replies while clinking her spoon against her cup and placing it again on the tray, “…only that whoever it is is becoming increasingly successful in convincing people of your guilt.
“Sounds too smart to be Venatori,” I mutter annoyedly while fidgeting in my chair.

“Though the Venatori have proven themselves to be adept at political schemings, I’ve yet to find any connection to Corypheus behind this latest of rumors.”

‘What was the sneaky option? Quiet something,’ I try to recall as I stare into the flickering flames and sipping at my coffee. Finally, I struggle out “whisper campaign? That the term for it? Ya know, the counter propaganda method.”

“Hmm, that could certainly dampen their voice,” she hums in agreement and hurriedly pens notes for the plan, “when Leliana returns, I’ll ask her about seeing to this matter.”

The dry in here is getting to me. Caffeine aside, I ask somewhat sluggishly “speaking of, when’s she getting’ back?”

“According to the birds, they are due to return this evening. Tomorrow at the latest if they continue at their current pace. Evidently they were held up because of…”she elaborates but upon looking up from her notes at me, she changes topics, delicately asking “pardon me this but are you alright? I just realized, you look rather…pale.”

“Not sleeping that well.” It’s true enough an explanation. She doesn’t need to know about the particulars of the nightmares.

“Perhaps you should consider seeing Adan — he may have something tha…”

“Dagna’s list” I interrupt abruptly, remembering my original purpose — quickly fishing the note from my pocket and lurching to my feet, I hand her the folded parchment and as she examines it, her mouth silently reading out a few of the components and ingredients, she pauses and asks “an..arm? Am I reading this right?”

Intense, I just shake my head for yes.

“I do not see the harm in dedicating some our resources to this project — if anything, it could end up benefiting a great many people.”

“Other people are..exactly who I’m thinking of,” I reply unconvincingly through a grimace.

“You’re not selfish for wanting this.”

”Right uh. Anyway, I’ve taken up enough of your valuable time. I’m gonna head out.”

“Oh, before you go — are you feeling up for passing judgement on a small number of issues? I believe I’ve smoothed out the wrinkles from the other day.”

“When”

“Mid afternoon would be preferable.”

”Yeah, okay, sure. Later, Josie.”

”See you then, Inquisitor,” she replies as she returns to her desk. While she hunts for a coaster so as not to mar her desk with water rings, I take my leave.

Chapter End Notes
I’ve had about 6 or 7 chapters, all waiting in the wings for me to be able to finally insert them into the narrative and we’ve finally arrived at that point. For the next several weeks, I’ll be posting 1 chapter per week and I hope to maintain this pacing.
“Come. On. You. Bastard,” I growl, grabbing ahold of the edge of a rotten rafter beam, my fingers endlessly slipping on the slick icy buildup. Trying to climb through the hole in the ceiling of Cullen’s quarters — gotta say, it’s not fucking easy. It’s a lot of balancing, trying to hook my hand around anything, and not falling two stories.

Balance, hook, repeat.

“Get the guy. A fucking skylight,” I huff out to no one but the fresh air and snow as I try to keep from losing my grip and slipping yet again. There’s easier ways for me to get fresh air, namely any balcony in the castle. I’m just being stubborn, going out of my way to get this bit of solitude.

It’s just another distraction.

Need a new spot, different fresh air.

The challenge of getting to it is keeping my mind off the usual shit.

That, and I need something to do — Solas wasn’t in his little rotunda. I’d waited around for an hour, thumbing through a few of his books but he never came back.

Small success — my fingers find purchase on the roofing above. Applying some weight to the spot, finding it unyielding, I can advance. My boots scraping at the upper wall, trying to get a leg up as it were, I manage to find my next foothold and push myself up through the opening — hauling and rolling myself onto the roof, I just drop to my backside there as snowflakes fall and pretend I’m not being watched as the white accumulation speckles my black clothes.

I’m as alone as I can be right now.

Don’t even care that I’m getting covered — hot blooded and inherited vashoth resiliences aside, I inadvertently conjured these clothes in the Fade, I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to will the damp from the fibers. Probably could’ve done that last night too. ‘I’ve done weirder, drunker,’ I posit with a more sober, albeit exhausted, outlook on the matter, ‘ya did cut your own horns down. Never done that before.’

“Okay. Fine. Distraction time,” I tell myself as I tap my only middle finger to my skull and pull forth the divergent melody of some half remembered metal song whose name I no longer recall. That tingling in my knuckles and eyes, I begin to channel mana into sound — an intro of a power chord hangs in the air just for me, not loud enough to concern those back down on the ground.

Can’t have yet another asshole thinking I’m an abomination. Too many of those already.

Translucent bugs swim across the sky before me as I conduct the imagined metal with the extended finger. It’s just my passive fuck you to the universe. Just as I go to mix in the accompanying fast paced drumming, something cold and sharp presses firmly against my throat, threatening to slice. My eyes shoot open, radiating violet violence and ready to lash out but seeing Rasa’s upside down visage, crouching just above my head, I shut down that attack mode on the spot.

Those indifferent eyes of hers leering down at me, there’s an underlying tinge of irritation.

“Dead,” she comments in her bored and smoky voice as I vacantly question “What?” while
ignoring her dagger now I know it’s her. Doesn’t matter that it continues to poke uncomfortably at my neck flesh.

“You’re dead.”

“Weird game.”

“Not a game,” she rasps, her steady hand unyielding, “dead.”

“Alright, why am I dead?”

“You’re not paying attention.”

“Not trying to. Came up here to get a break from bullshit.”

“Only bones get breaks.”

“Oooo, edgy shit,” I tease.

“All those guards, they can’t help you.” It’s neither threat nor promise. Her tone just sounds objective, like she’s reciting a line plucked from a book. “I can’t help...”

“Pfffft,” I make a fart sound with my mouth at her.

“You have to help yourself,” she states, ignoring my dumb deflection.

Slowly redirecting her dagger away from my throat, its point scraping some against skin and beard growth, I shift and sit up to say “In the meantime, we’re kinda safe. Least we’re home.”

“This isn’t home,” she promptly disagrees, “home is being on the move. Never stopping. Like we were before.”

’Idiot,’ I criticize myself for my obvious error before mentioning “Look, I know it’s not the same” with a rueful note — I miss the open road as well.

“That doesn’t matter,” she persists in pointing out what should be known to me by now, “You always have to be prepared. Always looking. Never stop.”

“Sounds fun,” I halfheartedly smirk out to her annoyance which she quickly and grimly presses “And stop drowning out the world with that weird music magic. Almost got you killed back in that cold place. You were stupid.”

A flash of a memory, of skin horridly stretched over red lyrium to the point of breaking, of men made monsters in those icy passes of Emprise Du Lion and all the while I was fighting, I was unknowingly being poisoned by its corruption. And succumbing slowly, ever weakening, nearly dying to a that Templar leader.

And that’s not even our worst moment…

“You got taken in a crowded palace. Guards don’t matter,” she presses, “you aren’t safe.”

“I think…that was the most you’ve ever said,” I reply in stunned realization. Her scowl is all the reply I need to know I’m an idiot.

Well, still an idiot.
“I hear ya,” I attempt an apology, “But uh, can you be my eyes for a bit anyway?”

Quiet, folding her knees up against her chest, she doesn’t sheathe her knife, instead opting to flick it back and forth, toying with its weight.

“Can I,” I grumble, “...it cool if I cast a little music?”

A pause in her scanning the horizon, she considers my request for what feels like an eternity before rasping out “a little.”

Easy going, though only in her presence, I shoot her a wink of acknowledgment before touching a middle finger to my forehead again — signal horns blare out across the keep and Rasa repeatedly swats at my forehead.

“Not me!,” I shout back, trying to stop the tiny assault and rolling away, I end up peering out across the long bridge...

I spy people making their way through the snowy pass to Skyhold and from somewhere down below, I overhear shouts of “THEY’VE RETURNED! SPREAD THE NEWS.”

“OPEN THE GATES!”

“ALERT THE SEEKER, SHE SAID TO KEEP HER INFORMED…”

“MAKE THE PREPARATIONS.”

“Oh yeah…there’s the hairy eyeball,” I breathe out while squinting, seeing now the banners they’ve got raised.

Inquisition forces. Some fifty strong.

The whole castle on alert, readying the gates at both ends of the bridge as they prepare to welcome back the intrepid heroes. Some cavalry, a few covered wagons, the rest travel by foot. Certainly not an army but just big enough to give enemy forces pause should they happen upon them.

Clearly not going to get what I sought after up here — between Rasa’s little lecture and the impending arrival — I may as well get back down to the ground floor.

This detour was worthless.

My little elf of a sister, she drops down the hole with ease, knowing well enough that’s my destination.

Fuck it, I’m tough enough — I follow suit and just drop as well and with a heavy thud, the floorboards creak and groan under the weight of my impact.

No matter. No damage.

We simply continue down to join what’ll likely be the welcoming party.
Not exactly front row seats for the grand return but our spot on a low bit of wall is good enough.

They’re slowly flowing in, not coming through the gates all at once — it’s only after the first ten does the Commander makes his appearance. Exhausted, on foot, his left arm in a makeshift sling, it isn’t until he removes that bear helm of his that he notices me and making his way to us, he gawks out “Maker, it’s true…Inquisitor, I swear, you’re half the reason my job is difficult.”

“Didn’t I save your ass?,” I retort immodestly.

Dark circles under his eyes, he utters lowly “You sent spirits. As couriers. Do you have any idea how alarming that was?” as if in disbelief it even happened.

“Oh yeah, I did do that. Well…you’re still welcome.”

“Andraste forgive…” he tries to swear out but Dorian manages to drown out his words — absolutely livid and shoving his way through the throngs of soldiers, he yells out at the top of his lungs “TWO TIMES! TWO BLOODY TIMES! NO, NOOooo, ABSOLUTELY NOT” and fixing the first Skyhold guard he sees with a killing look, he demands “WHERE IS HE?!"

Nervous, the guard edges back from the incensed vint; he clearly doesn’t know who or what the man means. Cullen to the rescue, shaking his head in exasperation, he calls out “Over here, mage.”

We’re not all that far away, we saw everything and with Dorian’s ears going red from anger and embarrassment, he storms up, shouting “Too good to stay on THIS side of the veil, hmmm?!"

‘Where’s his eyebrow?,’ I ponder as he rants away, ‘those singe marks?’

“…only had ASSASSINS after you! What madness could convince you to add demons to that?! Insanity. That’s what it is! Absolute…”

He do that himself?

“OOohoho, and don’t even get me started on,” he goes to continue, his mustache twitching with every angry motion of his mouth.

“Ya done?” I ask bluntly. Not trying to be a dick, I know he’s just concerned and expressing that in his usual way, it’s just I have a killer headache.

“Oh! Oh, you’ll know when I’m done! You can’t just wiggle your fingers at every problem and rift it away!”

“Calm yourself,” Cullen tries to cut in — it’s never the good answer to tell someone to calm down — but I oh so vaguely ask “Dead or alive?,” ignoring the commander’s attempt.

Seething, Dorian ticks his chin up at me.

“Alive, right?”

“If you’re referring to me, then yes, obviously,” the mage fumes and Cullen, likely having heard
enough of Dorian while traveling, he simply departs, no words of excuse. But going on anyway, I explain “So my options were rift away the problem or Caer Oswin could be a smoking crater.”

Furious he wasn’t in the know, he actually yells “well I didn’t know that! Thank you very much!!”

All that upset, tension, it hangs awkwardly in the air.

My fix, I choose to abruptly change topics and pulling Giselle’s crumpled letter from my rear pocket, I shake it open at the man, explaining “oh yeah, this came for ya. Dad time.”

Snatching it from my grasp, he annoyedly mutters “Dad…time?” as he pours over the message. Fury undying but redirected, just a ball of angry snark, he sputters out “Dad time! O-one hour! One! Meet me at the stables!” and races off in a fervor.

“Coming with you,” Rasa quietly states as fact. No arguing that.

“Obviously. But can’t leave till dark. Got some court bullshit I promised Josie I’d take care of.”

The withering look she gives me, the complete apathy, the emptiness in her eyes, it’s pretty obvious her thoughts on court, even if she’s silent about it.

“Don’t mind the Sparkler, pretty sure he’s more upset about his missing eyebrow,” Varric mistakes and chuckles with his usual gravel as he saunters over, finally having gotten through the crowd of legs, “I on the other hand have been meaning to thank you.”

“For what?,” both I and Rasa question in unison — me, curiously, her, incredulously.

“For not dragging me along with you into the Fade. It was weird enough when Hawke convinced me to help out with this…”

“Half elf in the Kirkwall alienage? Solmniare?”

“Of course you already know that story… but nah, this…this other time, another kid, a whole other mixed bag of magic bullshit. Anyway, point is things are weird enough as is.”

“Did ya know that lyrium is the blood of Titans?,” I bluntly drop as Rasa groans. She’s heard me tell that truth before.

Cracking up though, Varric cackles “Agh hah hahahaha haaa, ya see, ahh, just weird.” Don’t think he took me seriously on that one. Still smiling wide, he pulls a flask from his inside pocket and shakes it some at his ear — zero sloshing — so with that, he waves himself off, laughing “You can tell me all about your Fade traipse later, Inquisitor. For now, I need a…”

He doesn’t finish his sentence and I’m left to presume he means a drink.

“Gonna get ready?,” the young elf asks.

“Gonna grab some stuff, yeah. See ya down there.”

She shrugs and slips from the small wall, easily stepping into and through the crowd, leaving me to my own devices and preparation.
FINALLY. Geez, they were taking their sweet time getting back. Well now, the gang’s (mostly) all here.
“A sleep aid? Yeah, it’s called getting drunk,” growls Adan as he looks over a series of flasks, trying to eyeball what’ll best suit his needs. He’s really settling in to the new digs — the section of tower above the requisitions office, while left to molder and crumble in the game, in the here and now, it’s been reconstructed and fully refurbished to suit the needs of the average apothecary.

“Drunk doesn’t work.”

“So. Drink. More,” he growls while cooking a vial of something dark green over the flame of a candle.

“I need options beyond alcoholism.”

Suspending his latest project with clamps, he turns on me, grumbling “Inquisitor, I’m trying to figure out a more long lasting, less addictive health potion. If you need what comes of that research, then welcome and congratulations. If you’re looking to get knocked out, there’s a tavern fifty paces away.”

“I haven’t slept since I’ve been back,” I reply irritably and grind my knuckles against the stone wall, “Be real cool of you to tell me my options beside fuck off or get a drink.”

“Then with all due respect, fuck off or get a drink.”

“I’m talking something that suppresses dreams — I need to sleep like a dwarf.”

“For fucks sake, I’m not going to prescribe anything that potent — you die as a result of my poor doctoring and next thing I know, the people would have my head on a spike. Your spymaster would be the first in line. No, scratch that, my money is on your Ambassador.”

I just stare back at the man in silence.

“I don’t want to kill the fucking Inquisitor,” he growls out with continued foul language.

Eyelids drooping, I try to maintain my quiet stare.

“No, just no. What you want, you’ll have to ask an assassin about it, those sleep bombs they hurl every which way,” the bearded man growls out again, only this time with proper answers, “be incredibly careful though…most assassins and their haul, those have elements of poison.”

“You’re doing a fine job trying to dissuade me, consider me properly wary.”

“God damn it, yes okay, there’s probably something that would work but in most cases, use results in a toxic build up around the major organs…

“So I use it sparingly.”

“You horn heads are tough, I’ll give you that, but my professional opinion is still…”

“Fuck off and get a drink,” I finish his statement with lackluster enthusiasm.
“Yes,” he groans, slapping his hands down on the table, worrying the pair of apprentices at the other stations, “But you’re you and you’re going to do what you want anyway.”

“…so you’re gonna…”

“No, I’m not administering anything like that. This argument is cyclical. Go find someone shady if you want that stuff,” he growls with finality and gives me the side eye, “now leave. I’ve got actual medicine to practice.”


Eyes narrowed in confusion, he growls out “why in the Maker’s name would you tranquilize a horse?”

“Based on the context of our conversation thus far, I feel that sedation is the obvious answer,” I reply back with irritated emphasis on each word.

“I’m not a veterinarian. I deal specifically with people.”

“Fucking medieval medicine,” I hiss out in defeat under my breath and promptly leave before I can find reason to hit the man.

*****

Annoyed, exhausted, unsure where to go or what to do next, I just beat my head against the side of the tavern. Not enough to bleed, just enough to vent my frustration.

Thud.

I don’t care how it looks.

Thud.

Don’t overly care who sees this display.

Thud.

"Just."

Thud.

"Wanna."

Clack, my horn stumps rake the wall.

“Sleep easy.”

“And I want to help,” Cole softly whispers at my side, “let me show you.”

My nostrils flare on a hard exhale, and with my annoyance taken out on the wall, I shrug out “Sure. Fuck it. Why not.”

“This way,” he urges through a small smile and taking my hand, leads me across the yard, down a set of stone stairs, through the crowded marketplace, and to the stables…
Inside, walking through the dusty scent of horses and hay and the unfortunately sweet odor of their droppings, he brings me to but one of the stalls not currently housing horses. Unlatching the simple drop bar and guiding me inside, we’re met with Dorian, Cassandra, and Rasa, all waiting on us it would seem.

Dorian, his missing eyebrow covered by what looks to be a grease pen mark, he remarks “I only need Hunter, just for a few days, really, you don’t have to..”


“Oh, yes, because you’re lovers. Congratulations,” Dorian bites back sarcastically to which Cass states “quiet, magister. This goes beyond emotions — I am security.”

“Not in this matter, no. This. Is. Personal,” he tries to dismiss again, “So do be off, tah tah!”

“No,” Cole interrupts, his soft voice carrying a calm in its notes, “all of you have to be here.”

“Oh, I can’t leave til dark anyway,” I add.

“Not like that,” he says, pulling me closer to the others. Rasa meanwhile has yet to say anything. No need to. Safe to say she trusts Cole at this point and because of this, there’s a certain uncharacteristic excitement in those large eyes of hers, just barely hidden by dark locks. She knows something, I’m just not sure what.

“Be here,” Cole tries to explain, drawing me to the center of the horse stall, in between the others.

Dragging my feet, I just do as I’m told.


“Should I even ask?,” she groans in complaint but Cole replies “This will work” while putting Dorian in place, before me, facing us.

“I’m not one for trust circles,” Dorian quibbles as Rasa steps in beside us, completing the small circuit.

She has to know something.

“Hold hands,” the spirit boy instructs once more as he trails around us, seeing for himself that we’re all doing so.

“What’s the plan, kid?,” I ask Cole with just a hint of annoyance. I’ve had a mixed news kind of day so far and considering my luck, it’ll probably trend towards a new bad before the end of it. So, I’m not exactly looking forward to something like that.

Then again...I’m not all that prepared him to just appear suddenly in the middle of our circle, standing on his toes and planting his hand to my forehead while uttering “Remember.”

His pale eyes growing paler, the world around us growing bright, he whispers “Draw deep. Think back. The Hinterlands, all of it.”

An overview of the map forms in my mind...

”Now one spot. Redcliffe. Just there. Think on it, yes…”
“How it feels to be there, to be there now. Think and be.”

The image grows sharper in my mind, the dwindling candles dripping their wax, the lack of pews, the place I would’ve met Dorian had I returned to the Hinterlands…

“How it feels to be there, to be there now. Think and be.”

Chapter End Notes

*impressed whistling*
Well damn.
The temperature jumps as the mountain winds of winter are abruptly left behind. There’s still a chill in the air, but it’s so much more tolerable. The musty aroma of old stone and parchment replaces the stable smells of hay and filth. Empty, no service or priestess, no evidence of ever having an open rift or demons…

We are in Redcliffe.

In the church.

We’re actually fucking here.

“How?,” I question and ramble mostly to myself, “I mean sure, I did it to get outta the Fade but… that…how did..why was this so easy? I thought I was…”

“You’re not broken. You just needed permission to be yourself,” Cole quietly explains but tilting his head, seeking a better answer, “wait..no, not permission. You need to be reminded how to be you. Yes”

‘Daaaamn,’ I think in wonder at the little, ragtag, motley ghost of a boy.

“So, that’s what that’s like,” Dorian says, letting go and wriggling about, “like being squeezed out of a…”

“No!” I try to shut down his obviously sordid mind, “No it doesn’t!”

“…giant sphincter.”

“Maker,” Cass scoffs with an eye roll and steps away from the group, distancing herself from such a comment.

"He thinks you ruined the moment, yes?,” Cole tells Dorian, giving voice to my thoughts, “and...oh, I shouldn’t.”

“At least you remembered to stop,” I grumble with annoyed relief. Rasa, breathing deep of the new air and ignoring the rest of us, she quickly slips out the church doors to enjoy the new view, or do recon, or whatever it is she’s up to. It’s hard to tell with her but whatever, so long as she’s in better spirits, it’s a good thing. Cole, pulling a groaning Cassandra along behind him, he softly says “the Inquisitor and Dorian don’t need our help for what’s next.”

“Which is?,” she presses while shooting a look back at us.

“Personal quest for Dorian,” I comment to which Dorian adds “yes, and one that is a long time coming.”

“Hold,” she commands of Cole and grilling us, she queries “is it dangerous? Should I be present?”

Dorian, he casts me a look of curiosity, unsure of that particular detail, but I fill in the blanks, replying “nah, just some dialogue. No bloodshed.”

“Mhmm,” Cass eyes us suspiciously but finally relents, allowing Cole to guide her elsewhere as he tugs at her sleeve. Really, that she’s letting Cole lead her anywhere is a small miracle — I could’ve sworn she didn’t trust him. Then again, she’s seen a lot of the spirit world. A lot of things in

With the others gone, Dorian urges “so let’s get this show on the road, already,” his eyes burning with familial defiance.

*****

Walking the stone slab pathway, we make a beeline for the Gull and Lantern, the two story wooden cabin of a tavern on the hill.

The doorbell jingles at our intrusion but it looks to be a normal night if not a bit slow — a few patrons slowly nurse their drinks, another in the back corner tightens the strings of his lute, every discordant strum a test of its playability. Glancing up and seeing Dorian though, the barkeep claps her hands, shouting “Everyone. Out. Bar is closed.”

It’s not like there are that many to begin with though.

A few complain but don’t voice it too loudly, it’s mostly under the breath griping — the stragglers remaining, however, they’re too well geared to be the average patron, all leathers of a similar stain, of rust. Clearly they’re part of some company, some security detail, and best guess has it that they’re employed by none other than Magister Halward Pavus.

Only a rich man could have this many guards.

And as if summoned by my very thought, he descends the staircase exactly then, the wood creaking softly with each measured step — slicked dark hair and lavish robes of copper and aged greens of the traditional Tevinter cut, creases form around his dark eyes as he narrows them at me. He knows damn well who I am and it’d be dumb to assume otherwise. A moment though of silence, those in his employ know how to proceed, leaving out the back of the bar at his arrival, the barkeep included.

*Must pay well.*

“Dorian,” he sternly rumbles out when it’s but us three, the brunt of his ire clearly directed at me.

“Hello Father;” his son snipes back, “it’s funny, really. The Inquisitor told me this very meeting would happen when he and I first met.”

Puzzling the meaning, Halward quirks a brow and asks, “so you knew? I apologize for my attempt at deception…” and turning his attention on me again, he coldly states “Inquisitor. I never intended for you to be involved.”

“Mhmm,” I merely hum in response. I don’t feel particularly chatty.

“Of course, of course that’s it…,” Dorian hisses out in exasperation as if he’s had this conversation a hundred times already — for me, that’s incredibly true,

“You couldn’t come to Skyhold and be seen with the dreaded Inquisitor? What would people think? So what is this exactly, Father? Some failure of an ambush? A kidnapping? Just a good, warm family reunion?” Those last words, there’s definite venom dripping from them.

“Thees,” Halward sighs, shaking his head in exasperation, “is how eet always is.”
Going in with a harder edge to my tone than intended, I reply “so talk. Ya did all this to get him here” and Dorian’s quick to agree, uttering “yes father, talk to me” as if it were a threat. Continuing though, Dorian demands “let me hear how confused you are by my anger!”

“Dorian,” his father urges, his voice weathered and rough, “there’s no need to…”

“He already knows I prefer men!,” the son of the House of Pavus fires back, “no father, I was going to tell him how every Tevinter family is intermarrying to distill the perfect mage, perfect body, perfect mind. The perfect leader. Every perceived flaw, every aberration is deviant and shameful…”

Silence falls, neither his father nor I dare to interrupt.

“...It must remain hidden,” Dorian seethes though grit teeth, hot tears threatening to run free, “but that’s not all of it.”

“Dorian please,” his father pleads while stepping forward into the candlelight, “if you would only listen to..”

“Why? So you can spit more convenient lies?!,” my friend objects with a quiver in his throat, “My father, the man who taught me to hate blood magic, the resort of a weak mind…his words. But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life?!”

Shamed, his father stares to the floorboards, fearing the fire and hurt in Dorian’s eyes. Even having seen this scene play out so many times, it twists my guts to see my friend hurting so — I breathe in shallow, sharp bursts to hold back the tide.

“You…” Dorian utters, his heart crashing, “…you tried to change me.”

“I…I only…,” Halward struggles to say but Dorian cuts him off again, snapping “You wanted what was best for you. Your fucking legacy.” Abruptly retreating to the bar, away from his father, he glares at some half full bottle before him, using it as a focus to reel in his emotions. And so I step in, joining him — hunching down on a bar stool, drumming my fingers on the smooth and uneven wooden bar top, I comment “it sucks now, but don’t leave it just yet.”

Fidgety, gripping at the bar to keep himself in check while his father watches from a distance, Dorian whispers “wha..what do I even say?” with such bleakness in his voice, as if this endeavor has drained him of his humanity.

“Feels counter intuitive but…”

“Let’s have it.”

“Just talk,” I coach, “keep talking. Maybe some good will come of it.”

“We came this far…and I have had time to emotionally prepare for this, thanks to you,” he quietly agrees. A controlled breath, blinking away the hurt, just enough to tolerate it, he spins back on his father, demanding “tell me why you came.”

“.had I known that I would drive you to the Inquisition…”

“You. Did. Not,” Dorian argues in disgust, stomping forward to jab a finger at the man, “I joined them because it’s the right thing to do.”
Halward doesn’t look to know how to reply, his shame all too evident. A father unable to find the words to talk to his own son. Furious but deflating, Dorian breathes out “once… I had a father who would’ve known the difference” and with that, he goes to leave, pacing toward the doorway but before he can wave me over, his father finds his voice…

“Once…,” he says with his voice cracking, tired, stopping Dorian dead in his tracks, “I had a son who trusted me. A trust I betrayed. I only wanted to talk to him, to hear his voice again.” His cheeks glistening with the damp of tears, of heartbreak, Halward whispers “..to..to ask him to forgive me.”

Stunned, Dorian stares in silence — me, I just snag that liquor bottle and head for the exit. Pretty sure now is the appropriate time to give those two some privacy.

I know a lot.

I don’t need to know everything.

That, and I’m pretty sure Halward Pavus isn’t a villain, he isn’t going to go in on a second attempt of changing Dorian. He’s learned from his mistakes, he seems repentant.

‘He fucking better have,’ I make the mental note as I shut the door behind me and find a suitable bench to relax on beside a pile of fire wood. I’m not gonna leave Dorian here alone, and I’m not gonna go hunting for the other three.

Not now.

Here is fine.

Lazily twirling the bottle, its amber contents sloshing, I breathe out “Fuck off and drink.”

Taking a swig, feeling that burn wash over my tastebuds, I can’t help but growl “expert fucking advice…”
“Oh, good, I didn’t miss my ride,” Dorian says through a rueful smirk while closing the door behind him. As for me, I’m just draped over the pile of firewood, eyes to the sky and trying to exist in both a state of relaxation and discomfort while ignoring the intermittent passing of townspeople come to gawk at the mighty Inquisitor.

Do the rumors and whispers hold true?

Whatever...

The bottle, empty, rolling back and forth along the porch with every gust of wind, it whistles its hollow tune as breeze meets the open mouth. I honestly can’t tell if it’s annoying or a soothing lullaby, my eyelids are just heavy either way.

“Everything alright?,” he asks, pondering my status.

“Alright is the word of the day,” I exhale in a single breath as I shove up off the pile, trying not to get splinters, “all headaches and rainbows.” Brushing the excess wood chips and flakes of bark from my front, I ask in kind, “good talk?” while nodding toward the tavern.

“…I think so,” he seriously considers while taking a seat on one of the benches and absentely stroking at his pointed mustache, he says “after you left, there was surprisingly little in the way of yelling. It was almost civil, actually.”

“Sounds promising.”

Sounding as if he doesn’t believe it himself, he repeats “you know, by the end of it, he actually told me that he was proud of me.”

I’m kind of out of it — I opt to respond with a lonely thumbs up and a robotic head nod.

Still staring off into the distance though, tweaking his facial hair, he whispers “proud. Imagine that.”

“Feel good?”

Slowly shaking his head, uncertain, he just huffs “I truly don’t know.”

“Makes sense.”

“Does it though? I thought I’d have cause to hate the man forever. That surely he’d remain dead to me. But to hear him actually apologize…”

“Take it he doesn’t do that often?”

“Nooooo,” Dorian stretches out the word, “I can’t recall a time he ever apologized. Though, before what he did, I suppose he never had need to before…”

I just silently nod along, listening but taking in the scenic view of the river down the hill, the fishing boats slowly weaving in and out of the inlet, some mooring themselves to docks.

“I detest saying things like this so allow me to just get it out of the way,” he prepares himself, “Thank you, Hunter, truly.”
A warm smile stretches over my face but I joke “kinda wanna ruin this nice moment by wiping off your eyebrow.”

“Ahh, nooo. My mental state is already in tatters and I refuse to have my appearance look the same,” Dorian quips before questioning “oh, and regarding appearances...why are your eyes purple?? So sorry, just noticed.”

”Fade stuff. Found all the pieces of me.”

”Sounds like quite the story.”

“Hehehehe,” I just chuckle in response and he actually does the same, his more a cackling “ahhahaha.”

*****

Late afternoon, the suns creeps ever closer to the mountain peaks in the distance. Shadows fall on Redcliffe castle across the waterway.

Has Arl Eamon returned yet or did the indentured mages Alexius managed to keep wreak greater havoc to the inside?

Guess it doesn’t matter.

An hour or two past three.

Not quite sunset.

‘I’m late,’ I note regarding Josephine’s scheduled court session.

“...believe the man should face prison for his actions,” Cass’ words finally trickle our way, growing louder in her approach..

At her side, with just an edge of disdain, Rasa comments “should’ve killed him.”

“That may be going too far. At least with the former Templar in jail, we could properly investigate his alleged…”

“It’s already over,” Cole chimes in with a new ethereal air about him — lighter looking, as if the weight of the world no longer worries him, he says “Choices. There was one. The only one. And now we’re both free. Yes.”

As Dorian asks “uh, what’s the lad going on about?,” I can’t help but ask the same when I finally see just how Cole seems off, less present, his eyes paler than before.

He did his own side quest?!

Rasa’s gotta be irritated by the boy’s choice to forgive the killer, that even if the offender hadn’t actually killed Cole, he did kill the original Cole, the human he first imitated. Cassandra though, she’s talking about jail time so clearly she didn’t think the man should get off scot-free. There needs to be repercussions for his actions, consequence.
But Cole made his own choice.

Cole.

Made.

His own.

Choice!

Hurrying forward, a need to understand the why of it, I snatch his impossibly light frame by the shoulder and hustle him out of earshot of the group, up and over to a local ram farmer’s modest property just somewhat up the hill. Before I can even talk though, he answers first, apparently knowing well what I intend to say next.

“I didn’t mean to worry you, this was just the best option,” he explains while staring through me, “considering the ending…”

“The ending,” I breathe out, my eyebrows climbing my face in annoyed concern.

“The one that Solas means to see happen,” he utters quietly so no other may overhear, “I’m really sorry, I know I wasn’t supposed to but…”

“But,” I repeat, a sense of dread starting to fill my guts.

“…I heard it when you were thinking about it a long time ago. I didn’t know what it meant back then but I do now.”

Unexpected.

The knot in my gut, it cautiously undoes itself little by little.

…that he actually thought this through instead of rolling with the tide of emotions he normally experiences — spirits are typically fickle like that. “…And you didn’t tell anyone what you heard up there,” I comment about my headspace, hoping to Hell he actually understands my necessity for privacy.

“I didn’t. Won’t,” he reassures, “I had to do this. I like myself. I don’t want to die.”

“That’s…it’s good, man. And I guess if you ever wanted to change states again, be more human or whatever, pretty sure ya just have to want it. I mean, fuck whatever Solas might’ve said…”

His pupils going inexplicably paler, drawing from my mind, he recites Solas’ words to Varric that never were, “This isn’t some fanciful story, child of the stone, we cannot change our nature by wishing,” and with that said, his eyes darken some, returning him to the here and now.

“Yeah, that,” I mutter just a tad disconcerted but choosing to give Cole the benefit of the doubt. A word of advice, I add “Always thought that was bullshit, you’ve just gotta be what you want to be. Born of the Fade, you’ve got that option. Be you.”

“Thank you,” he utters quietly, pleased with my genuine reaction.

“Even if your face is mostly pillbugs.”

Despite his ability to hear a mind, he can’t see what I see, not exactly, and so he looks to me as a confused pup would, as he has so often in the past. It’s good to know he’s still himself, regardless
of him being more a spirit now than before.

“I mean, I know it’s not actually. It’s just hard to focus.”

“Ughh, can we go already?,” Cass scoffs at us from the porch of the bar, eager to return now that she’s had her daily dose of weird. I’ve gotta assume she witnessed Cole’s forgiving the ex Templar and transcending his previous state of being.

Yes, that definitely would fulfill her quota for the odd.

“Yes. Now is good,” Cole calls back, “Let’s go.”

“ah, yeah, sure,” I tiredly agree.

*****

A brazier clatters to the floor, blown back by our immediate arrival as papers flutter from my desktop. Using my bedroom, it seemed the most reasonable point of return.

Isolated.

Somewhat spacious.

Close enough a proximity to the throne room.

I’d say we’ve met the necessary criteria for blinking in and out of Skyhold.

“Are you certain it doesn’t feel like a,” Dorian begins to ask but Cass and I both shut him up with a stern, unified “No.”

“Okay, just me then,” he mutters to himself while turning to examine my well stocked liquor cabinet. Finding one of particular interest, some dusty bottle with what looks like liquid fire within, its cork still waxed over, he asks “do you mind? It’s been quite a day.” Throwing himself into the leatherback chair, propping his feet up on the desk, he works at the cork with his teeth.

“Yeah, have at it,” I remark dismissively if not a touch too late as I head for the stairs, “Just don’t make a mess.”

I’ve still got that matter I’d promised Josie I’d take care of and I’m not all that willing to piss her off twice in one week. Once is enough…

Scratch that, even once is too much.

Cole is nowhere to be seen, he’s already vanished, ghosted out to pleasantly haunt the castle in his usual way. The only difference, he’ll be far more efficient at it now.

Rasa might as well be a spirit herself, considering she disappeared just as quickly. Then again, the doors to the balcony are cracked just a bit — they rattle against the threshold as the winter winds whip by. Best guess, she just slipped outside, wanted her return to privacy.

Cass goes to join me in my descent to the throne room but Dorian actually asks after her, “Seeker, if you’ve a mind, I would...appreciate...the company.”
“Really?,” she asks back, unconvinced of his sincerity even though he sounded it.

“Huhhh, yes, really. I find myself presented with two problems…”

“Just the two?,” she smirks back, a light jab.

“Hah, yes,” he places a hand over his heart, “I need a drink however I don’t wish to drink alone. And fear not, you’re under no obligation to hold a conversation, I merely…”

I leave the two of them behind to sort it out themselves, they’re adults. They don’t need me to help them figure out the particulars of sharing a drink.

The sound of my boots echoing down the steps, wishing the lift was finished so I could just ride down with ease, all of me exhausted, I spy an agent in the rafters as I push along.

Silence.

‘Quiet little shit,’ I inwardly chuckle and nod at the elf

He just winks and throws a slight wave, not the least bit shocked to find I’ve evaded the other agents, that I’m inexplicably leaving my chambers despite him observing the only way in or out. He does know my skill set. But I’ve gotta say, he’s looking good all things considered — his arm may be bandaged but it isn’t in a sling, I suppose the damage sustained during our little Fade trip was superficial.

No time to dwell though, it’s like I said, I’ve got a very particular Josephine to not piss off.
“Where. Have. You. Been?,” Josie stresses the question through her forced smile — she’s one to keep up appearances, through stalling, panic, and the unprecedented.

“Was helping out with,” I go to explain while she walks me to the throne but thinking better of it, I brush it off saying, “eh, doesn’t matter. We’ve got stuff to judge or…hear out? Yeah.”

“Maker forgive…,” she whispers to herself — I sure seem to be earning a lot of those lately — but as I take my seat, she pivots in the crowd, announcing “And now, first on the agenda, the matter regarding the absent Inquisition soldiers…”

At this, five men are led before me, each leashed to the one before them like a chain gang. Pointing to the ginger haired man among them, a beefy man, I ask him “what’ve ya got to say?”

Stepping forward with his chains rattling, he states their case, “Yor lordship…”

_Ehhh, that’s as bad as Herald._

“…my name don’t matter. It’s true we left our post, we jus…we was tired of being soldiers. We wanted to get back to our farms now that theys safe from demons and mages.”

Leaning over the armrest for a private word, I quietly ask “they are farmers?”

Flipping through her notes, she confirms as much, “Yes. They were volunteers from the Hinterlands but they were to serve for a one year period unless granted special permission to leave the Inquisition by going through the proper channels.”

“Which they did not.”

“No, they did not.”

“Anyone get hurt as a result?”

“None so far. It was only discovered when reinforcements were sent to relieve them of their post.”

“Venatori could’ve slipped through in their absence.”

“It’s a dereliction of duty.”

“So…what’s the base punishment for this? I mean, it feels murky,” I quietly question.

“The standard course is public flogging and jail time with compounding punishment for damages incurred.”

“That’s the…geez,” I weigh my options, “I mean, yeah they’re idiots for thinking they can just walk away from something but…”

“There must be a precedent set and only you can dictate what that is,” she reminds.

“Damn it,” I mutter and sitting upright, unsettled, I command “Yeah, you were volunteers, but you did abandon your post. ‘Cause of this, we can’t know for certain if enemy forces slipped through.”

I suck on my teeth a moment before issuing “Look, there's no good ending to this but I think I may have the closest thing possible… public flogging but in lieu of jail time, you will join the
reconstruction effort in the Hinterlands as a way of doing good while commuting your sentence.”

A few boos and groans, some grimaces appear around the room. Others present, they shrug in consideration, perhaps agreeing with the verdict. The point is, no one is outright happy. Probably for the best. Regardless, the offenders are led away through the room of mixed reactions.

Off to a great start...

“Next,” Josephine announces, “another of the lingering pains of Adamant, your Worship.”

‘Ughhhhhhh,’ I mentally whine at both the title and subject matter.

“Ser Ruth is a senior warden of the Order. She was one of the many who slit the throat of another to bind a demon. She does not contest this…” Josephine states as our guardsmen shove this Ser Ruth before us, nearly tripping her on her own restraints, “in fact, she surrendered herself to us. She requests no mercy. She wants the public justice of the headman’s axe.”

“Right. This,” I mention to myself in recollection but growing louder, I say “So you fuck things up and want the easy way out? Pretty selfish request, all things considered.”

Defending her stance, the warden states “there is no excuse for my actions. I murdered another of the Order and that blood marks me more than the Blight ever could.”

“Excepting their actions while thralls of Corypheus,” Josephine explains the nuances, “many treaties allow Wardens any extreme, if it opposes the Blight.”

“I can’t do it!,” the warden pleads, hating herself for what she’s done, “I can’t use the greater good to justify my crimes as if it could create a future I could even have a part in! It’s wrong that this broke me… I’ve done far worse with full sanction. I can do nothing but be an example of the cost!”

So...

‘Death, or do I get creative?,’ I ask myself while glancing about the room. Drumming my fingers on the armrest, poking at my sharper teeth with my tongue, I continue mulling over ‘execution or…’

Instant death seems a waste.

Do we even have a headman?

Oh…wait, me. Right. Gross.

Throw her to the Deep Roads?

Definitely not gonna forgive her, fuck the Andraste angle...

Wasteful...

...huh, maybe?

Yes.

My fingers stop their incessant motion and the air is sucked from the room — a hush falls as I lean forward and deliver “Adamant was an ocean of shit and blood by the time I arrived. Yeah, you’re bad. But thats mostly for following blindly. When you all started hearing the Calling, why was your first instinct to listen to that little weasel of mage? What about him seemed the forthcoming
and honest sort? I’d blame Clarel more but she’s already dead — died trying to kill that bastard. That’s her redemption. You though, think I’ve found my creative solution to this particular dilemma.”

The anticipation is palpable — they’re all so eager to hear her sentence…

“Congratulations Ser Ruth, you don’t get to die today…”

“What? No, please!”

“You’re going to the Storm Coast to work alongside the Blades of Hessarian. There, you’ll use your abilities to hunt darkspawn and prevent more from breaching the surface. At any point in time, should it seem like you’re not of your own mind, The Blades have permission to put you down. It’s a win win.”

“Your worship, please, this doesn’t send a message.”

“The hell it doesn’t, warden. Don’t think for a second that this is some reward. It’s absolutely a punishment, and one you may very well die doing. You want justice? Punishment? Get it by saving lives.”

She claimed to be broken but I just broke her all the more. Her pride at least. Pretty sure that’s all she actually cared about anyway.

“After that,” I add my coup de grâce, “you can die.” Head falling, she doesn’t resist when the guards drag her away with her chains clattering along after her. Slumped, despondent — this isn’t the finale she sought but hopefully she’ll come to see the good in my plan.

“Am I wrong?,” I turn to Josie as she pens the final verdict in her notes, her quill scribbling away with haste.

“Actually, I believe that was a well crafted solution. I’ll have a letter sent out informing the Blades of their newest recruit,” she replies without looking up, “And…there’s…but one more issue on the table for today.”

“Figured there’d be more…”

“The last matter to see to… ah, yes. Mother Giselle would like to make a public request.”

‘Oh. Yay,’ I mentally bemoan while shifting in my chair, trying to find that impossible sweet spot. Taking that as her cue, the revered mother steps from the audience, a knowing smile upon her face as she weaves her way before me, before the people. She certainly knows how to play a room.

“Mother Giselle,” I greet, trying to keep it pleasant and civil despite feeling anything but this day.

“Your Worship,” she returns, copying Josie with that title, “I ev come to you theez day in the hopes of securing funding. As eet stands, the chapel of Skyhold eez in disrepair and requires renovation. The people of Skyhold, they need not just walls, but a place to fortify their spirit.”

I just take a beat to breathe, unsure how to even approach this.

*Definitely don’t favor the Chantry by any means.*

*However, I’m all about that freedom of choice…*

*But it’s not really about what I want…*
Damn it.

Looking to Josie, honestly hoping she’ll shoot down this particular issue, that the Inquisition can’t actually allocate funds to this, that the war effort supersedes this request, she has nothing to say. No words of dismissal. Nothing to buffer against this grievance.

It’s on me.

Shit.

But I’ve been deliberating for too long now — merely minutes but the silence stretches.

“How about…,” I slowly begin, taking my sweet time to deliver my answer because I genuinely don’t know.

What’s the choice?

This isn’t about me.

That’s the choice.

“People of Skyhold,” I address the entirety of the court, “what do you want?,” flipping the request as best I can. Murmurs and side glances roll through the audience, uncertain it would seem if speaking up is the proper response, if I’m being rhetorical or not.

“Really asking here. This isn’t about me, what d’ya want?”

Louder now, the asking of neighbors, the open querying of intentions and interests — its all too many voices to clearly understand.

“Okay,” I instruct, “easy solve. Those not in favor of fixing the chapel, raise your hand.”

It’s slow, staggering, but the people do by the handful — after a minute of raised hands, it’s only a third of the room.

“And those in favor?”

Quicker paced, half the room now raises their hand in support of Mother Giselle’s motion.

‘Damn,’ I think in complaint while bellowing out “the ayes have it — you get your funding. I leave the matter to Josephine to figure out the money stuff.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor,” the revered mother smiles out, pleased with the immediate results at least.

“Thank them,” I say, flippantly waving at the crowd and leaning back on my throne — gotta sit back, I’ve been overwhelmed by another wave of exhaustion, one threatening to shut my eyes for me. Fortunately, Josephine steps up, dictating to the room in lieu of me “Thank you all for attending, this concludes the matters at hand.”

Sidling up to me for yet another private word as people vacate, placing her hand upon my shoulder, she reassures “it’s only a modest sum for the renovation.”

“At least there’s that.”

“Yes,” she smirks and pens the corner of her page before mentioning “and there is but one more meeting for you in the war room. I understand Leliana and Cullen are already there.”
‘This could be good,’ I almost perk up at the thought — this could be the very distraction I need. Solitude isn’t helping me any. Adan was aggressively useless. Solas was absent. Yeah, this might be a plus.

“Shall we?,” she asks having finished her paperwork, her almond eyes almost glittering in the light of the stained glass windows behind us.

“Y..Yeah. Let’s do this,” I reply with a surprising note of eagerness and alertness. As I said, I’ve been waiting for a chance to advance.
“Only a handful dead among the soldiers that returned with us,” Cullen reports as he stiffly walks around the hunk of ancient stump that is our war table.

“Unfortunate albeit acceptable losses considering the corrupted mages and demons that tried to ambush us,” Leliana replies and emphasizes, “tried.”

“How bad off were they?,” I ask which Leliana feels free to fill in the blanks, answering “The more corrupted of the mages had lyrium spikes jutting from their foreheads…”

“And that one that charged us on all fours like some monstrous unicorn,” Cullen grimaces in fresh recollection.

“Yes,” Leliana continues, “not to mention how ragged their skin was, all those tears and cuts but no blood. Stranger still, their eyes were withered and black, how they even tracked us…”

“Fortunately, we had superior numbers,” Cullen boasts before conceding “but I admit, it was your scouts that gave us the winning edge” to Leliana.

“And thank you for so valiantly leaping in front of me” she says while eyeing his bandaged arm, “it was unnecessary, but the gesture is appreciated.”

As if they’d had this same argument on the road here, he counters with “it was an abomination. You’re welcome.”

The deadly redhead, smiling all the more and talking down to him, she states “I was more than aware.”

“You’re impossible.”

“And you, dear Cullen, underestimate me.”

“Haaa,” he scoffs, “I don’t think I’ve ever made that foolish a mistake…”

“Children,” Josephine chimes in, “if you are quite finished, may we proceed?”

“If put to a vote, tis what I would certainly prefer,” Morrigan sneers from her darkened corner, annoyed by the incessant back and forth. She never was one for wasting time.

“I actually agree with the witch,” Cass scoffs in stunned revelation, both her hands to the war table as she studies the map of Thedas and the scattering of pieces dotting the illustrated landmass.

“The witch has a name,” Morrigan bites back but I disrupt everyone with sharp “HA” thus earning me startled looks and glares alike. “Got your attention now? Good, anyway,” I continue now that I’ve stopped their bickering, “next up on the agenda is the Arbor Wilds. Big and Ugly on his way there yet?”

“There have been no reported sightings of Corypheus in the region…” Leliana starts and Cullen’s quick to add “but even without sighting of a formal army, there has been an increase in foot traffic along the borders. From a distance, they appear to be trading caravans.”

As Josie pours over her paperwork, she points out “are you certain they were merchants? I’ve no declarations or travel permits, at least not for that area.”
“So the likelihood of it being enemy forces has just increased,” Leliana offers, “I’ll have a forward scouts venture closer.”

“But aren’t you all curious to know why they are converging on the Wilds?,” Morrigan taunts, “surely our Inquisitor can elaborate considering his apparent knowledge of the future.”

No comment, I just force a smile and breathe. A word too soon, the wrong piece in place, too early a move, and Corypheus could have the advantage.

“But can you see anything?,” Leliana questions, "as you’ve mentioned, it comes in waves..."

“If not,” Josephine offers, “we’ve the time to investigate.”

“But there’s already activity,” Cullen points out, “and while the wagons aren’t reported as being large, they’re more than capable of carrying explosives or combatants or Maker knows what!”

“But we don’t actually have proof.”

”And you’re saying we should wait for them to take the advantage?!”

”That’s not what I’m..."

Fuck it.

“He wants what’s in the Temple Of Mythal,” I interrupt the growing argument, dropping a portion of my intel in lieu of Morrigan, “that’s his objective.”

“Some moldering ruin to the Elven pantheon? Why,” Cullen questions, not certain of my claim but Morrigan educates “Ancient elves were far more advanced than you give them credit for, after all, their relics were the source of Tevinter’s strength for many an age.”

“But what good could...”

“Two things,” I interrupt again and throwing my figurative cards on the table, “He needs two things. The Well of Sorrows and its corresponding eluvian. He gets those, he doesn’t need the Breach or me to get to the Fade.”

A curious gleam in her eyes, Morrigan eases toward the war table like the hungry cat she is.

“He has the orb, why not try breaching the sky second time?,“ our Commander asks, shifting uneasily while picking at his bandages, “You entered the Fade by opening rifts. Can he not do the same?”

‘The explosive force would kill him and he’s running low on replacement bodies,’ I consider but I just posit “Might be cause this is part of me. I can interact better? His requires a greater sacrifice he’s not capable of recreating? Don’t know” and the mark buzzes in my palm, sending jolts of pain down my forearm. As I flex my fingers, trying to work out the electric misfires and shooting annoyed glances to the mark, I ask “so anyone got the location of the Temple?”

“You don’t know?,” Morrigan smirks, ”truly?”

Rolling my eyes, irritated I shared anything with her and trying to ignore her prompt, I jab back “might be wise to pull Solas in on this...You know, unless Flemeth's daughter knows anything she's actually willing to share.”

A scowl made human, she threatens "I am so much more than.." but in an attempt to douse the
imminent fire, Cullen talks over her, “Why would Solas know it’s location?,” doing his best to sidestep the barbs.

Quick to present a half truth, I reply “he talks to spirits and travels in dreams. Should know something.”

_Not because he’s been there before…_

_Definitely not because he personally knew Mythal._

“Very well,” Leliana concludes, “we shall discuss the location and route with Solas. Cullen, ready the troops.”

“We’ve already a great many in the pass.”

“We need to take as many as we can afford to.”

“You’re right,” he agrees with a tremor in his fist but before he marches off to start making arrangements, he requests “Josephine, if you would send word to those allied with us…”

“I am already writing the letters,” she hums in response, her quill a feathered flurry as its tip races across her parchment.

“Good,” he adds, “and with the Orlesian civil war put to rest, Gaspard’s forces in the Dales needn’t travel too far to join us.”

“So we’re doing this,” I tell myself more than the others, even knowing I’ll sound dumb for saying it, “Yeah, let’s get ready to storm a forest.”

*****

“Hunter,” Leliana says, her strides matching my own to keep pace as we exit the war room, “You always know more than you’re letting on.”

Peering back over my shoulder, making sure Morrigan isn’t within earshot, I reply “what do I know?”

Taking a sharp turn down the stairs to the cellar, assuming correctly that I’ll follow, she asks “What opposition can we look forward to? Their numbers. The _unknown_ factors?”

Shooting yet another glance up to the sunlit doorway of Josephine’s office, again ensuring no one is eavesdropping, I comment “I’d prefer if our forces formed a perimeter, kept all the various villains from escaping. There’s danger enough in the forest to take on Corypheus’s forces and whittle them down.”

“You’ve got my attention. What manner of danger?,” she questions as her hands land on her hips.

_Tell her._

_Just do it._

_Tell her._
"Ancient elves," I’m shocked to hear the words slip free. I wasn’t expecting to reveal anything more but I shouldn’t feel too worried — Leliana has done well with classified intel in the past...

...stealing away a third of Corypheus’ mages before he could twist them into awful things, foul creatures...

...keeping an eye on me from afar while the rest of the Inquisition hunted for me...

...trusting me when literally nothing is known about me...

“Deadly,” I add, “They excel at guerrilla warfare.”

“Interesting,” she mulls the possibilities, only somewhat surprised by their existence, “if they’re as a great a threat as you make them out to be, then we would do well keep beyond their territory.”

“Last thing a battlefield needs is more confusion. In this as least.”

“Secondly,” she questions all too intuitively, “I suspect you know the actual reason Corypheus doesn’t just open another Breach.”

"..."

"When you offer too much, it tends to be a misdirect. Your guesses are your tell,” she informs but I can only smile uncomfortably, uncertain what to say in response. Surely a denial would only further cement her hypothesis. “Although,” she reconsiders, “there’s likely a reason for you keeping that secret…I can understand that.”

*Damnit.*

*She’s Leliana.*

*She can handle this.*

“He,” I try to explain in a whisper while glancing about again to ensure against sneaks or spies, “ahhh fuck it. We’re close enough to the end game. So...he’s like an archdemon. He respawns inside the nearest blighted vessel. In this case, his Grey Wardens...”

That gets a jaw drop — a stunned expression creeps across her face at that apocalyptic information; it’s akin to finding out that 5th and half Blight has actually begun.

"...And that’s why I really exiled them. I mean, sure, they needed a time out but it was really to put some distance between the two.”

"That was...nearly a year ago. Just how far ahead can you actually see?”

Pursing my lips, I weigh the potential for this backfiring on me but ultimately come to the same conclusion...

I can tell her.

She’s proven herself time and time again.

My shoulder pressed to the cool wall, I try to avoid her stare as I say “I can see ‘bout...I don’t know, two years from now? Little over maybe?,” looking to ceiling as if it has the answers.
Just mouthing the words “Two. Years,” she seems to have trouble processing that detail as well as the last. Leaning back against the wall, her cool, calm demeanor slipping, she merely gawks at me with a furrowed brow. But she knows the game I’m playing — it’s one she all too often does herself — I can’t show my whole hand lest we risk the future I still have an inkling of.

*the game I remember...*

But trying to reestablish her typically cool demeanor, to don again her hardened sense of self, she tries to recalculate while uttering “Yes, well...”

”Yeah,” I breathe out, “keep this to yourself. Can’t have people hunting Wardens. I think it’s only the bound ones we have to worry about.”

She’s quick to find her bearings though, to know that most every thing I do, I do intentionally. So trying not to let this get the better of her, she promises “you have my silence on this matter.” However, there’s but another thing she must see to.

The matter of me.

So she forces the topic...

“...As for you, you really should get some rest,” she tells me, “Consider that an official order from your Spymaster.”

“Uh, what? Nah, I’m…” I go to reply but as I said, she’s quick, cuts to the chase, saying “I know you have not been sleeping, Hunter. Do yourself a favor and try again.

*Considering what I just told her...no point hiding this.*

“Can’t. Tried,” I grimace, “It’s all nightmares.”

“Of what?”

“Uh…mmm…everything,” I growl in annoyance to how weak I sound.

“And you saw Adan earlier, did you not?,“ she asks eerily while shifting in place — of course she’d know my whereabouts then. She’s got eyes on me most of the time.

“My particular request would have toxic side effects…”

“What request? What quantities?”

“Something to stop the dreams. Sleep like a dwarf. But there was something about repeated use that’d result in,” I recite back to her trying to use the apothecary’s exact words, “Something something toxic buildup. In my organs. Don’t know the quantities.”

“Fortunately for you, I’m of the same mind as Adan. As the Inquisitor, your health is of the utmost importance and considering the danger you are so frequently in as of late, it would be irresponsible to taunt fate even more.”

“Why won’t anyone let me poison myself?,” I grimly quip, the exhaustion blurring the lines between what's acceptable and controversial. Her face is so often hard to read and I can’t exactly tell if my joke landed or not.

“We’re going to have a talk with Solas.”
Didn’t land…
“Ah, Spymaster, Inquisitor, to what do I owe this pleasure?,” Solas pleasantly asks, looking up from his small hill of dusty tomes and a single ocularum shard. Rising to greet us, he quietly cracks his back — too many hours being hunched over.

“We have decided upon our next objective, “Leliana speaks nonchalantly but then volunteering me, adds “I leave the floor to you.”

Curious, he watches me as I say “so, one thing..” but Leliana elbows me in the side, forcing me to reconsider and recant “eh…two. Two things. Right.” Eyebrows raised in amusement at the sight of her cowing me, he can’t help but smirk out “how mysterious — two whole things?”

My shoulders slump as I empty my lungs, audibly groaning “Regarding the Temple of Mythal in the Arbor Wilds. We need your help plotting a course.”

Losing his sense of enjoyment though, his brow returning to its default state of scholarly observance, he cautions “ah, a place I have often travelled in my dreams. Such a task may prove difficult…”

“Maybe the spirits can help?,” I offer seeing damn well through his ruse.

“If they are willing, then yes. But why there? How does such a place impact Corypheus and his followers? He already has the Foci…”

It truly feels bizarre to dole out such endgame information, but this is something Morrigan should’ve revealed to us by now.

At least in the game..

She would’ve taken me to the Crossroads, that way station between here and the Beyond, and then gloated how she knew Corypheus’s intentions…but that’s a moot point now seeing how I find myself explaining “So there’s a few eluvians behind a pool. On an island in the heart of the place. If he gets to em, he can tear down the already thin walls to the Fade from within.”

“Did you see anything else?”

“Not yet,” I casually lie, furrowing my brow, “is there something I should pay attention for?”

Shaking his head dismissively, he whispers “…I wouldn’t know.”

_Callin’ your bluff, my dread friend._

“…but this is troubling news. Should he reach those artifacts…” the Elven mage stresses, looking away to ponder.

“Precisely our need to reach it first,” Leliana states the obvious on the off chance that detail hasn’t sunken in yet for everyone present.

“Very well. I will make efforts from my end,” the elf agrees but further advises “Have the archivists and rescued mages reviewing old maps and history books for the location as well. It would be wise to go at this from every angle.”

Another jab, Leliana gets me the ribs while clearing her throat.
“Ah, yes, forgive me, there was a second item you wished to discuss? Perhaps one of a magical nature?,” Solas apologizes and appears to hope. After all, he can discuss theory and application for hours on end if left unchecked, especially as it pertains to my particular complications.

“Mhmm,” I hum at the man, “I. May be...having some…”

Leliana goes to jab me a third time but shimmying out of her line of attack, I hastily blurt “can’t sleep.”

“My work here is done,” Leliana congratulates herself and with a hand flourish, sees herself out, eager to return to her darkened roost and ravens.

Back on me though, Solas inquires “Presumably, a simple sleeping spell isn’t satisfactory?”

“Pretty sure that won’t work with me being so…”

“Lucid,” he and I say in unison.

“Of course,” he shakes his head at the notion while I utter “…yeah. It’s a pretty lame predicament I find myself in,” taking a seat to get comfortable.

“Then to start, a detailed description could offer insight,” he eases down against the edge of his study table, “is there a common theme? A known negative aspect?”

“Lot of Qunari…”

“And now? Has it changed?”

Sucking air, hesitant to sound crazier than I am, I struggle to say “you…could say that.”

“…and what would you say?,” he calmly counters psychoanalytically.

Wouldn’t be the craziest stuff he’s heard.

‘…could help,’ I weigh the possibilities.

‘…could help,’ I weigh the possibilities.

“Well,” I start slow but only talk faster and faster, “…You already know about the slivers and fragments of me scattered across Thedas and the Fade? Byproduct of the conclave,” and he just patiently listens, unmoving as I continue to explain “So this Desire demon in the Fade collected the fragments I missed or couldn’t get to. I’m all of me again. Whole. Whatever that means. But now…”

“Pardon? It did what? For what purpose?,” he asks, reasonably concerned so I continue filling in the blanks, “doubt she’s the problem. Wants nothing to do with me — managed to burn her in a dream a while back — it’s this whole other thing. Anyway, I sleep, I get the standard horror shows, all Qunari but there’s also an unhealthy sprinkling of timelines that never were. And then last night was just two hours of demons, demons, and more demons.”

His brow tightens as he absorbs my words…

“Even running with the mark powered up,” I explain, the little sliver flaring in acknowledgment, “Monsters just keep hounding me.”

“Strange that the anchor didn’t help. As for the base feelings of these dreams,” Solas asks while
eyeing the mark, “how would you describe them? Leave nothing out. Perhaps the secret lies in that.”

“The overall theme? Mostly fear and loathing.”

“Hmm, yours is a special case,” he delicately reminds, “You say you’re complete but it’s only now that you’re experiencing this? Perhaps your assimilation of selves has left an abundance of psychic scars?”

“Makes as much sense as anything else,” I mutter in agreement while slumping in my chair.

“I have an idea…”

An eyebrow creeps up as I say “don’t leave me in suspense.”

“If what I suspect is actually the case, then precautionary measures should be in place.”

“Whyyyyy?,” I stretch out the question, not overly keen to learn the reason, “what kind?”

“If your past traumas are so severe, then the damage,” he hesitantly speculates while standing before me yet again, not eager it would seem to deliver this sitting down, “it may be drawing demons to your mind. They may see it as an exploit, a potential flaw in your defenses. Furthermore, as a powerful, albeit unconventional mage, it would make sense that they would seek you out.”

“Oh shi…,” I flop back in my wooden chair, wide eyed, “fuckfuckfuck.”

“Eloquently put,” Solas remarks, “though you should be aware that this may not be demons plaguing you, but perhaps just the nerves of a distraught mind,” trying for a note of optimism.

“Cause I’m that lucky?”

“Ahh, it really depends on how you choose to look at things,” he sighs, “however, we really should see to this matter as quickly as possible. Meet me at midnight in the lower library.”

"Kay.."

"And bring the Seeker.”

“…Cass’ll be doing what exactly?”

“As barbaric a practice as it may be, she should be there as the precautionary measure, to ensure against the worst…”

"Me getting possessed.”

“Yes. But I’m confident it won’t come to that,” he says reassuringly — though it really isn’t, “As for the rest of Skyhold, they need not know…we can try for a modicum of discretion. Cassandra is quite capable after all.”

My head lolling back over the chair, glaring up the center of the tower and it various floors, I grumble out “Sure. Game on.”

*****
“You said you could kill demons in your dreams,” Cass scolds me using my own words, “you said you could not get possessed.”

“Thought that was the case,” I shrug, “not so much anymore it’d seem” and sneak a glance at my ashen fingertips.

“And I didn’t see it,” Cass berates, our conversations echoing off supporting columns, not muffled in the least. “How could I not? It was so obvious,” she continues but punching my bad arm, she switches gears, arguing “and you didn’t tell me!”

“Okay, ow,” I comment flatly while rubbing at the bicep, “I know it was dumb to keep this to myself.”

...so god damn tired. There’s so many pillbugs, the world’s mostly a blur right now.

Annoyed, she complains “we agreed to be honest with one another.”

“yes. And I'm sorry.”

With a huff, she demands “say it again.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes. Among other things, I am your right hand, you do not keep me in the dark.”

Sucking my lips in, my mouth shut tight, I throw her a salute as we enter the confined stacks of the secret library.

“Don’t think this is over,” she states the fact in a hurried hush as we enter. “Good, you’re both here,” Solas welcomes us with a note of urgency. An improvised torch in hand, a cobwebbed sconce that had long since fallen off the wall, veillfire swirls off it, licking at the air with its eerie teal glow.

He’s been busy — the enormous tome on the stand has already has its diagram completed, the locking mechanism undone.

The hidden entrance in the stacks already open wide beyond it, the darkness beckons us.

“Seeker, I presume the Inquisitor told you our plan.”

“He has,” she admits with just a bit of bite behind her words.

“Then we shouldn’t dally,” he advises and touching his torch to the darkness, “Follow me, and watch your step.”

*****

Down and down, further and deeper...

Entering the Elvhen isolation chamber, that ocean of pressure closing in around us, Cassandra asks “This was a meditation chamber?,” unconvinced of the validity of what we’d told her on the way down.
“Yes,” Solas answers definitively, resolute in his conviction.

“But why the secrecy?”

“A countermeasure — it’s important that the carefully crafted glyphs and wards don’t be disturbed. The more people who know of this place, the more likely an incident should occur.”

Not convinced, Cassandra just turns away to look the room over...

Shrouded in less darkness than before, I can clearly spot the curved bar of copper still fused to the floor in the very center of the room, a persisting reminder of my inability to touch most magical items. But the room is different — the faintest of teal, almost flowing like water — rings embedded in the floor I didn’t notice in that previous visit, so subtle in their design they blend in with the winding vines and stonework if not for their glow.

A previously secret array of overlapping circles.

Circles are usually important, I know that much.

“Now, if you would, please take a seat within its boundary,” he gestures from me to the floor and I follow his instructions, lying down in the inner most circle, expecting cold stone but only finding warmth.

“And.. what of me?,” Cassandra sighs out the question uneasily, not enjoying the possibility of what this ordeal could yield. However, of all the people in Skyhold, she’s the one best suited to dealing with a demon or an abomination. Standard Seeker training and abilities aside…

“Stand just outside the circle,” Solas explains while taking his position opposite mine, “remain vigilant, Seeker. I doubt it will come to possession, but even still, it does us good to have you here.”

A roll of her eyes, she second guesses “and you are certain we don’t need Templars.”

“I’m certain. Adding more to our number will only disrupt the natural flow of energies, muddying our…,” Solas elaborates and Cass shoots back a decisive “fine. Let’s get on with it.”

“Very well, let us begin,” he declares while taking hold of his staff and weaving the fingers of one hand, moving them in such a way that…

*****

…nothing happened?

‘No, wait,’ I reconsider as I rise — it both is and isn’t the chamber. Twisted over with so many vines, not a single ward is visible beneath their ever winding, creeping mass. And through that fibrous expanse, an eerie green channels through the vines, rhythmically, pulsing like a heartbeat down and to the my feet.

Got two arms.

‘and I’m on the ceiling,’ I silently note of the floor above me.

Definitely a dream.

“I knew something would happen one day!,” a disconnected voice excitedly stammers out, “I’ve been waiting for so long. The others all got bored.”
“What?” I ask cautiously, eyeing the mess of nature, but slipping through the slightest splits in the bark, a wisp of a wisp, such a tiny ball of light, it answers “this place was interesting. So I waited.”

“Forrr?,” I slowly ask, still cautious of danger — demons have been after me at every turn. Why would now be any different.

But the mark isn’t acting up…

Nothing to fear, right?

“You're good,” the wisp bluntly states.

“Huh?”

“Or you try to be, that’s good too.”

“Uhhhh,”

“So why are you in jail?”

“Sorry??”

“This place wasn’t built for youuuu…” it sings, going more radiant as it gets louder, “OLDER THAN ANCIENT, THIS CONTAINMENT, LONG HE SAT BUT SITS NO MORE, EVER BROKEN SINCE THE WAR…”

“SOLAS,” I call out in trepidation, nervous of this little ghost and infinitely worried over anything that sings at me.

“HIDDEN DEEP AND HIDDEN TRULY, SLEEPS A CAGE FOR EVA…” it continues painfully loud but I shout to the mark “ANYWHERE BUT HERE. GO!!”

*****

Ding

Ding-ing.

Di-ing-ing-ing.

“So long as it’s not another cage,” I groan, peeling myself off damp pavement. A door ajar signal chimes annoyingly into the night, each sound warbling and distorting as a truck’s taillights come into focus, crying little streams of radiant red — pooling, glowing just beside me, I hurry to pick myself up off the runny asphalt if not just to take a step back.

Ding.

Ding-ing.

Di-ing-ing-ing.

“What...in the hell...is this?,” I ask of no one about this melting, runny yolk of a night scape.
A seedy single floor motel…

The low hum of fluorescent bulbs over the parking lot grating at my psyche.

No other cars in the lot.
And everything is wet, little droplets of matter bleeding off and floating in the air like fog.

It just inherently feels like the set up to a horror movie intro.

A really…soggy…horror movie.

The beeping stops when I shut the door and with that creak rusty hinges and a hard metal thud,
Solas suddenly deigns to emerge from the darkness at the lot’s edge, inquiring “a curious location.
What is this place to you?”

“Where were you?,” I ask, concerned that he’s only now just showing up.

“Pardon? I followed along the moment you fell asleep,” he answers, giving off the vibe of being
genuinely confused.

“Yeah? Al..alright,” I stutter in acceptance before saying “Uh, so…only pretty sure my imagination
cobbled this one together.”

“Or the Fade is trying to piece together something that best suits you,” he offers, stepping over a
puddle of watery light pooling at the base of a street lamp, “at any rate, it appears there aren’t any
demons to contend with just yet so…”

Spoken too damn soon — all the doors to the motel rattle on their hinges, shaking and thumping,
bleeding bits of themselves until they each unlock, tearing inward as the darkness within inhales
deeply.

“Hunter,” Solas advises, steeling himself, “be wary.”

The darkened neon sign hanging off the building, it juices to life with the buzzing of electricity —
flickering on and off, its painful pink reads “Vacancy.”

“So… that’s new,” I comment dryly, shaking my head, “creepy. Creepy and new.”

“Hunter,” Solas warns — this is all too wrong.

This place.
The night of it all.
Hell, even just the vibe.

But I can’t shake that feeling that something’s missing.

And why the Vacancy sign?

…everything is a damn clue.

Even alone, my subconscious wouldn’t just...

“Vacancy. Occupancy zero,” I latch onto that as Solas eyes every darkened corner, every
movement, for threat of demons.
Then…

...why is that part?...

There’s room available?

There’s room…

“Imshael,” falls past my lips in stunned revelation.

“Hunter?”

Dragging my fingers past my temples in aggravation, trying to wrap my head around this issue, I spit his name again, “Imshael,” leaving Solas in the dark.

Imshael was last up in the old grey matter. Food or no, he may have been warding off the beasts. My personal demon may have just been demon enough.

Just enough to trick the others.

“What!? What am I missing,” Solas asks on edge, ever sweeping the darkened tree line around the parking lot for intruders.

“A certain someone eats a demon…”

“Pardon?,” he spins back on me.

“…that’s a dead demon. But then you gotta digest it.”

“What?!”

“And then that demon is in your head for a bit, being chatty. Can’t possess anything.”

Wide eyed confusion, Solas just stares at me in shock, clearly hoping beyond hope I’m being rhetorical.

“But then you finally digest him, burning away all evidence he ever existed…”

“…what,” Solas breathes.

“Demon’s dead, but then he’s gone and a dinner bell gets rung.”

“You don’t mean…”

“The after image of a demon was convincing enough to ward off other demons from wanting in? Makes sense. Fits the timeline,” I yammer out, glaring through the very world at this realization.

Guttural hisses and the clacking of toothy mandibles rise from the dark and thickened shadows, hungry and dripping with malice.

“He burned up when I got all my pieces back.”

“Vyn esaya gera assan i’mar’av’ingala!,” Solas curses as scores of broken Qunari come staggering into dimming light, their proportions terrifyingly stretched and skewed. Some on all fours, their diagonal patterns carved deeply into themselves to prove their strength even as they pour out over the asphalt — others, horrors and terrors wearing the grey flesh of my enemies like loose costumes,
they scrabble into the dim uncomfortable lighting of the parking lot as I scream “WAKE UP!”

****

“Were there always that many?!,” Solas gasps as he snaps out of his trance.

“What happened?,” Cassandra demands as she steps to the edge of the circle, instinctively gripping her sword hilt.

“Maybe a few more demons than last time,” I reply, almost pained to still have my eyes open.

“Solas? Hunter? Explain,” she further demands, kneeling, her free hand gripping at my shoulder. There’s a charge to her — she’s powered up and ready to drop me if she needs to. I mean, i definitely deserve it on the grounds of being an utter idiot.

Collecting himself, bracing for a second try, Solas begins to whisper “it would appear there was…”

I just grit my teeth, too exhausted to argue my defense.

“A trick of sorts that Hunter had established,” Solas twists the truth, “a scarecrow, an illusion. But it was destroyed in its entirety when he became whole, when last you both were in the Fade.”

“None of it was intentional,” I insert.

“Yes, well,” Solas tries to agree…

Wait.

White lie’s still a lie.

Literally just said I wouldn’t.

Nope.

‘Errrrrr,’ I mentally groan before arguing “Not exactly. Back in Emprise du Lion, that magic metal goop on my arm trapped and crushed a real strong demon til it was nothing but pure energy.”

”Why would that upset m...” she questions suspiciously but I cut in “Aaaaand I ate it.”

Cass, a look of suspicious fury grows in her narrowing eyes, her fingers fidgeting with anger.

“Ow. Owww owowowowow,” I try to slither out of her killer grip but she takes to just beating at my chest, shouting “another demon!? So! Stupid! How many are you going to consume!”

“Wasn’t a conscious choice!”

“That’s no excuse!,” she keeps hitting.

“Wait! I’m wrong. That one was!,” I shout as I try to block the hits, “It’s all the others that weren’t. And I didn’t eat Spook, that was different.”

“Others?!,” she shouts back and pauses her barrage, her hand hanging over me in threat.
“Fuel. Doing that, they can't possess me. And normally they don’t talk back once they’re gone. Imshael was just some annoyingly chatty, lingering indigestion. That’s it,” I explain to the best of my ability with one and a half arms raised defensively, “promise.”

“It is always something,” she huffs in disbelief and stands, stepping away lest she beat me to death. Retaking her place outside the glowing Venn diagram of rings, she growls “Now it’s demons. Plural.” Drawing her sword and sticking it point first to the floor, she holds it firmly in place while coldly demanding “Go again. We need this over with.”

“….ma nuvenin,” Solas slowly agrees, eyeing both me and her blade, “I suppose we should.” Waving his fingers while gripping at the staff across his lap, he whispers under his breath “Sleep. Thenerassss.”

*****

Rain.
The pitter patter of it.
Almost a transparent curtain, threadbare.

No, it’s fake.

It pegs a few of the obligatory sensory details — seeing and hearing — but it does little else beyond setting the scene.

There’s no feeling to it, no scent of damp…

It’s just the slow construction of a dream, the Fade shifting to keep up…

Dunes that run forever, not a speck of green beyond the one nestled in my palm. Despite it sounding so, the rain never hits dessert sands, the whole of this barren scape beyond bone dry. Thrown into the empty sky, the sun suddenly appears but as if shoddily placed, it falls low, drooping below the land itself but the moon is quick to take its place in the sky.

Twilight.

“Welcome back, Inquisitor,” Solas greets me, “After a quick search, I chose to bring us here, someone’s dream the Fade is struggling to maintain. It is breaking down so we should quickly decide our next…”

Screeches in the wind, a legion flapping, all ragged, leathery…

“Already?!,” Solas whispers and my pulse quickens as I warn “they’re here.”

A thousand winged things become night itself, consuming the moon as they mash and stitch themselves together with the utmost urgency. A distant orchestra of bones snapping and stabbing, of flesh stretching and pulling taut, twisting together until they stand a giant, its long arms splaying out and becoming…

Dragon wings.
Those wings become the horizon.

The demons, their voices unified, they let loose a single warbling “SCRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaw” as bits and pieces of themselves fly loose of its hooked maw and with that, it descends on us. My vision glitches, like pixels on a screen going dead as half the image lags over the other half.

****

“Fenedhis,” Solas curses upon awakening. Somewhat disoriented from all the rude ones thus far, I deliriously snicker “swooping is bad” in shaken agreement to words never spoken in this room.

*Long live King Alistair.*

“We cannot repeat that aimlessly — we need a new plan,” he states, gathering his breath, “it would help…to begin in a safe spot.”

“Know any?”

“There must be a haven for your mind, your spirit. Simply bringing you elsewhere won’t help us evidently. This is your at risk.”

“…and there's really nothing more I can do from here?,” Cass groans from outside the glowing perimeter.

“I’m sorry, but n…” he goes to say but I interrupt with “Weird proposal. She could try coming with us? We shared dreams back in the Fade.”

Stunned by this possibility, this new potential, Solas questions “…how? Please take no offense Seeker, but I must ask…”

“Ask then,” she frowns at the line of questioning, already not enjoying where this is heading.

“Have you always dreamt with lucidity? Control over where and what you do?”

“No,” she flatly replies and I fill in the blanks, propping myself up on my elbow and saying “nah, pretty sure it was the mark’s area of effect.”

Two pulses from my palm.

“Yeah, okay, that is what happened,” I add.

“Interesting,” he whispers to himself, caught up in his thoughts on how to solve this riddle.

“Am I going to hate this plan?,” she grumbles the question, clearly still deservedly irritated with me, this, everything.

“Probably,” I comment.

“Wonderful,” she scoffs, her remark dripping with all the sarcasm this world has to offer.
Gravity never quite right, Solas and I touch down on a pumice peak... Again we’re greeted by the Fade, though it’s in its truer form — it’s no mere memory we find ourselves in. All illusions have been swept aside. Broken harp strings and eerie whale songs, that never changes at least, the whine of something sharp scraping something sharper. For me, it’s the familiar, the ruined, the spines and winding, the scorched, and the dead. All save but a few of the most resilient of weeds, twisted and grasping for life like corpse hands crawling their way from the grave...

A couple glimmers in the distance, little pops of orange curious of our presence.

Chunks of blackened world floating overhead — enormous in scale, as if the land is mirroring itself.

Solas, he’s quiet in his observation — I can’t imagine this place brings anything but guilt and sorrow for him… but we’re on a mission. Raising the mark, its radiance a beacon in the half light, I ask it “wanna bring her through?” and it pulses twice in response, seeking the seeker.

A curious dynamic — man and anchor — I can feel his eyes on us, studying, ever ponderous and detailing. But mere seconds later, Cass slips into existence just a few paces before us, her hand already at her sword. Whether that would prove useful, I’m uncertain, but whatever grants her a sense of security…

“Amazing,” Solas whispers, fanboying for but a second before recollecting himself, “we must work quickly, before the demons take notice.”

“So like 10 seconds,” I mention unenthusiastically as Cassandra shoots a glance to the Black City in the far away skies of turbulent green.

“Where is safe for you? Hurry. Pull us there,” Solas instructs but I return my own question, firing back “Ugh! What?! Why didn’t we figure that out when we were awake!?”

Far away, something roars, catching my psychic scent and alerting the others — one of the orange spirits goes green, corrupted already by the overwhelming migration of demons.

“Quickly Inquisitor. Something personal. Something sacred,” Solas tries to inspire but Cassandra, she flatly states “the spirit tower. Would that not work?”

“Spirit tower?,” Solas mouths the question, out of the loop, but I know all too well and with a glance to the mark, it understands. A flash of Fade light, its radiance consumes us and the all the world disappears…and we find ourselves in that ruined courtyard, a graveyard really for all the faces of ancient elves burned into the very stonework along the walls, a permanent reminder of the war once waged.

And of course, the incessant high pitched whining of the unstable cyan form at its center.

Annoying, piercing, it screeches its dial tone like an old internet hookup.

“Where?..” Solas shouts in question while covering his ears to block out the noise, “what is this place?!?”

“Think its an outpost for Elgar’nan!,” I shout back while walking to our broken spirit concierge, “there’s a vault nearby with his markings on it!”
“We were stuck here for days,” Cassandra yells, “trying to open that horrid thing.”

Waving my hand in from the of the cyan spirit, trying to get its attention, I shout in explanation, “it was the only way out but it was full of ghouls or darkspawn!”

No luck, the ghost isn’t even registering our presence.

“Nice,” I comment sarcastically as Solas approaches, still taking in all there is, before asking “and what of this spirit? I have never come upon one so damaged, confused.”

“Annoying is what it is!,” Cass yells the remark while keeping an eye to the skies, her sword drawn, “it never gave us a straight answer.”

“Hmm, then I presume that to be the tower you camped in?,” Solas inquires, looking off to our left.

“Yep. That’s the…” I go to say but Cass suddenly interrupts, ordering “We cannot stay here!”

“They found us?,” Solas worries, “This isn’t working. We need to retreat and form a new strategy.”

“Hold,” Cass demands and stomping to my side, she urges “You said you were trapped once. When you were prisoner. You called it the nothing?”

“…The Empty,” I reply barely loud enough to be heard over the spirit’s dial up, haunted by the mere thought of it.

“Take us there.”

“Ha-what?? N-no. Can’t. Not there.” I trip on my own words, “not back there. What if-if!?” but her fingers wrap around my wrist and she says “you won’t be alone.”

“You don’t know that!”

“They are nearly upon us!,” Solas warns as the sky darkens and static fills the cyan ghost’s pervasive whine, “where are we going? Forward or back?!”

Swallowing hard, my pace quickening as my flesh goosepimples, I go to close my eyes, to shut out the world but Cass grabs my face, forcing me to look at her…

Even upset with me, she’s not willing to let me falter.

To fail.

“I am here. Remember that,” she presses, “take us with you and you will be alright.”

“But…”

"Do. It."

"I don't know if I..."  

No words more, she just locks eyes and I see well her intent.

“HURRY,” Solas yells, unable to stress the necessity any further, the imminent arrival of horrors and monsters nearly deafening.

do it.
...you.

...do this.

maybe it's not like last time?

“...fine,” I whisper in desperation, “take us to...the empty” and the mark explodes.
Nothing.

Nothing for miles.

A desert of my own design.

My blank white prison.

The border storm rumbles its discontent, its black grit detriment grating and far-away thunderous.

Buzzing whispers in the white.

I can hear my pulse in my ears — floodgates to a dam cranked open, let loose to flow at their will.
‘Was it always this hard to breathe?’

“53, 54, 55, 56…” I ramble out consecutively, keeping count as I flood with panicked thoughts…

You’re going to die here.

‘Worse,’ another idea challenges, ‘you’ll be here forever.”

‘No no no,’ I dread both possibilities, gritting my teeth as I keep counting “300, 301, 302.”

…

You never mattered.

Nothing mattered.

You’re a joke.

‘Welcome home,’ but one voice whispers with sickening intent as another in my head gleefully mocks ‘your home is cage, a CAGE, a cage!’

A twitch to my eye, I rock back and forth in the recess under the stairs — that jutting stone slab to nowhere, my one cell mate.

“No,” I hurriedly whisper back at those dangerous thoughts, “not alone, they’ll come for..” but realizing my critical error, I yelp out “9?! 911! 912! 913! 914!”

Can’t lose the count.

Not here.

Gotta keep track.

Can’t lose those seconds or they’ll turn into days into months into…

Years.

Years.

Years.

‘Years,’ that words echoes in my ears.

Hunter.

“…4632, 4633, 4634, 4635…”
“HUNTER!”
“…5999, 6000, 6001…”

“HUNTER!,” a familiar voice fights and strikes me hard across the cheek — snapped from my delirious, terrified trance, I realize it’s Cass but still I shout back in fear “No! The count! Can’t lose it! Uh, 5?! No! 6489!! 649…0, 6491, 649…”

“HUNTER,” Cassandra demands while shaking me, “SNAP OUT OF IT. YOU ARE NOT ALONE HERE.”

“We…we were wrong to ask him to come back,” Solas whispers in criticism having seen enough, “such a horrid place. Stagnant. Awful for the wandering mind. Is it any wonder he fears this place as he does?”

“7,030, 7031, 7032,” I continue, looking back and forth between them, not entirely convinced they’re not a trick of my addled brain.

“Help him!,” she shouts at the elf.

“Seeker,” Solas comments in a conciliatory way, as if the fight is already lost, “I...don’t have any control here.”

“Solas!”

“We have to figure a way out,” he offers, “from there, we can determine the best course of action…”

“Best course of action? We aren’t leaving him here!”

“7199, 7200, 7201…”
“This place is a trap, “Solas whispers with notes of fear, “it wants him all to itself but even then, it wants to contain us. Do you not feel it?”

“7276, 7277, 7278,” I whisper almost singsong, a saddened half-smirk creeping to my face.

“NO,” Cassandra spits in defiance at my quaking form, “You are stronger than this,” and yelling at Solas for added effect, she shouts “He is stronger than this! All that he has done, all that he’s capable of, this cannot be the end of his story!”

“Seeker…”

“IT ISN’T,” she snarls, “You told me. You. You said the Fade reacts to emotions.”

“..much of it, yes,” he reticently agrees.

“7845, 7846, 7847…”

“PUSH PAST THE FEAR!,” she begs of me, “DO NOT LET IT CONSUME YOU.”

“7861, 7862, 7863…”

“DON’T…just don’t…”

“7869, 7870…”

“Hunter…,” she huffs out my name and closes her eyes, pressing her forehead to mine. A single breathy sob rolls through her, swaying me back to a moment of clarity.

‘That..sound?,’ I focus as my counting slows, “…7909…7…9…10…,” the numbers catching on my trembling lips like grains of sand. “7…9…eleven,” I breathe out in uncertainty and blinking past the daze, I whisper “Please don’t cry.”

Her face shoots up — no tears but her breathing’s shaky — she frowns out “You are with me?”

“Seven nine…twelve? Uh…y-yeah,” I answer and she sweeps forward, catching me in her embrace as she argues “You promised you wouldn’t disappear on me… not again.”

“Sev..en..,” I sigh out, “..sorry.”

“No..this time, I am. I shouldn’t have insisted you come back here.”

“I must take blame for that as well,” Solas apologizes with his tired eyes to the empty above, “it would seem we’re stuck…”

The quiet between us three drags on.

Tired faces, tired minds.

A rumble from the ever shifting perimeter.

“Unless,” he ponder and queries, “how exactly did you escape the last time? You mentioned a
“Demon.”

“No, it was…,” I struggle to keep myself from counting, “the reformed Nightmare demon. A spirit. Spook.”

“How did it get in? Perhaps we can draw another to…” he inquires and goes to propose but I cut to the quick, denying “no. Spook was always here” while shaking my head.

Looking to both of us for an anewer, losing hope, she says “so we cannot leave.”

Frustrated, Solas shoots back “I certainly can’t” rather impotently, irritated perhaps that this dream could bind him. “However, you made this,” he directs at me, “you’re intrinsically tied to this place and all that it is. Perhaps…perhaps it truly is a matter of perspective?”

“Seven…,” I shake my head, mentally pleading to stop the count.

“You see it as a cage…” he mulls over that point, “in truth, it goes beyond that, does it not?”

Cassandra, approaching a similar realization, states “The Qun’s agents…they try to brainwash what they can’t control or kill. That they couldn’t get you here…”

“It protected you when your mind was at risk,” Solas addresses, “just as its doing now.”

“It’s…good,” Cassandra has a hard time admitting but says so all the same.

Like gears grinding in my skull, it’s difficult to hear them backing The Empty. I know I can’t simply blink out — mind’s eye is nothing but static. Can’t focus. Never could here.

“an idea…,” Solas is slow to offer, “you created this place, yes. Theoretically, it should inherently respond to you…”

Equally frustrated, having been here longer than anyone anticipated, Cass brusquely says “don’t stop explaining now.”

“Uh, yes,” Solas trips up and goes in for the hard sell, “is it possible it won’t release you is because you don’t wish it to?”

And I just glare at the elf.

“Pardon, rephrasing,” he’s quick to backtrack, “you don’t think it can?”

“Nothing about this…,” I struggle to process while crawling out from under the stairs, “I’m sorry but we’ve just gotta get comfortable…”

“but what if…”

A sudden blur and a loud thud, something large plops to the ground nearby — spinning on the intruder with respective weapons raised, Cass’ sword and my fist, we’re confused to find a beat up leather couch. White as the nothing, scratched to hell, a couple spots where black acrylic paint spattered and wasn’t cleaned up quick enough, this furniture piece just sits there, looming.

“What in the world?,” Cass is slow to question as I give a kick — it slides an inch or two but doesn’t do anything more than that.

“Demon?” I mouth the word, just as baffled as the others, “couch demon??”
"I sense nothing amiss," Solas comments somewhat warily as I kick it again, asking “sure it’s not a comfortable demon? Could be Sloth. That’s not entirely stupid.”

"No...nothing has managed to follow us in," he reassures before his face sinks in disbelief — stunned that it could really be that simple, he mutters “…this is your domain,” unable to play this off like he knew what’s been happening this entire time.

“What?”

“In taking…yes,” Solas speculates, almost gawking at the possibility, “of course.”

“what?!” Cass and I growl in unison, demanding he finish that train of thought.

“.in taking the Nightmare’s realm, you made it your own. As it once worked for it, it now does the same for you. Previously, fear was its currency, it’s mortar. Now? I don’t even know.”

It really can’t be this simple.

"But,” he chuckles softly in embarrassment, “it is yours.”

All the fear…

The eternity spent…

The stretches of madness…

The inconsolable loneliness…

All the questioning…

And so…

"You’re kidding, right?”

Solas merely gestures to the couch in response, a tired, but hopeful, smirk upon his face.

“So I just...Let us...leave?” I tentatively ask, my mouth going dry, not sold that this is actually happening.

But happen, it does.

A door that wasn’t there before — white painted steel, hinged to a stand-alone white metal frame connected to nothing but the blank floor, it simply exists just a few scant feet away.

Are. You. Kidding???

Eyes wide and brow furrowed, I just gape out “WHAT” before it takes a more surrealist edge — a rainbow of confetti explodes overhead as nonexistent gameshow bells ring-a-ling like I’ve won the grand prize. Solas and Cassandra, they just gaze open-mouthed at this absurdity, equally uncertain of what we’re all witnessing.

Hesitant, stepping through the colorful paper scraps, I creep to the peephole and peek through — on the other side, Fade green and blackened earth, chunks of palatial buildings suspended in space. Gripping at the door handle and undoing the lock bolt, shaky, I cautiously open the door a crack and whisper “wake up?”
Snapped through the void, we hurl through black as the heavy door slams shut behind us with the clicking of a deadbolt.

*****

All eyes fly open.
All awaken.

“So what the fuck?? I tried that same shit nonstop for…,” I gripe, picking myself stiffly off the root covered floor and tallying it upon my fingers, I growl cynically, “..what, months?! Months. Now it fuckin’ works? Of course.”

“Perhaps it was the presence of a threat that solidified its defenses, that both your mind and body were at risk?,” Solas can only speculate, “but all the same, it would appear you’ve found the solution to your present demon issue.”

“This one at least,” Cassandra balks, “But the plan worked? There can be no room for error.”

“There are no certainties in this matter, however Seeker, you are no stranger to faith. Have some for this,” Solas answers her earnestly and instructs me, “as for you Hunter, perhaps you should consider defining it by what it is, and not by what you once thought it to be. No longer a cage, but instead a shield or protection. Sanctuary perhaps. Regardless the name you choose, it does appear to yield the desired effect, the barring of those that would disturb or harm you…”

“Yay,” I weakly congratulate us, tired still though less exhausted than before.

“.of course, should you leave to explore the dreams and memories of the Fade, the demons will undoubtedly seek you out.”

Squinting, just wiped of the whole affair, I grimace out “less yay.”

“For now, I recommend us returning topside for a meal,” Solas proposes as he picks up a previously unnoticed hourglass, “I suspect we were under for much longer than anticipated.”

“Actually,” Cassandra inquires with a serious note, “if you go on ahead. Hunter and I need a word in privacy.”

Uhhhhhh

“Very well,” he readily accepts while eyeing the both of us. Reclaiming a satchel and items of possible import — a leather bound volume and some chalk — he takes his leave. In his absence, the glowing of the rings dies down, whatever spell he activated the earlier reaching its conclusion. As the teal aura of the room dims, with him climbing the long walk back up to Skyhold, Cass inquires of my well being, asking “so…you are…how are you?”

‘Oh, not what...thought she sounded serious,’ I reconsider as I answer “don’t feel like complete garbage. That’s a plus” while cracking my neck as best I can given my circumstances, “I still hate that place but I guess it worked out this time.”

“…yes,” she utters and my stomach twists at her tone, smarter than my still in shock brain. Leering
up at me, not angry, it’s more a disappointment she’s wearing as she says “I must ask…”

“Yes,” I invite despite my rattled nerves.

“The secrets.”

Oh. Yep. This is more like it...

With a tired huff, exhausted with this particular repeat, she says “We agreed that...Look, I’m glad you are fine, I just...is there anything else I should know about? Something that may come back to bite us?”

Shoulders slumping, I do the only thing I can do.

I tell the truth.

“I’ve got maybe only one secret that’s just mine. I can’t tell it yet but when I do, I’ll be telling you...”

Her expression softens some as her eyebrows climb.

“But, listen,” I add while shifting uncomfortably, “got a few things to get off my chest, stuff I’ve gotta tell ya now.”

Despite the uncertainty in her face, she stands her ground, and I suck in steeling breath.

And so I go...

“To start...,” I begin while wracking my memory for what I need, “I was infected with red lyrium once. Blacked out but a healer managed to cut it out. That was what? A few days? Yeah, few days before I saw you in the Winter Palace.”

“You!?” she goes to say but I hold up a few fingers, asking “don’t mean to cut you off, just...just please let me finish so I don’t forget anything.”

“Very well,” she sternly nods, the dim teal memory of flames just barely keeping us illuminated — folding her hands across her lap, I continue on to ramble “so...that was the infected time...then there was oh, right, one time I blinked and popped up inside someone. Venatori. That was...just...well disgusting is the only word for it.”

Her eyes harden, I imagine due to the image that would conjure, my bursting out of someone.

“Mmm, right, I chose the Templars because going to Redcliffe would’ve gotten me tossed a year into the future where it was all corpses, red lyrium, and Corypheus as a fledgling god,” I hurry through my explanation, “figured fighting off an Envy demon was the less deadly option.”

Unmoving, even her breathing has gone quiet.

“And then I almost killed myself dealing with that mess...”

Still she stares, absorbing my words.

“Uh...the Qunari cut out my eye and tongue, not just my arm. Managed to reattach them. It was 100% blood magic. My blood. Just mine. No one else’s. No demons. It was all me. No pacts.”

She blinks in angry concern, trying to let me further my admissions just a bit before she can punch
“And then there’s this,” I struggle to say while extending my hand and showing off the darker cracks around my fingertips, “can’t really use the mark anymore. It’s killing me.”

“What do you mean killing you?!” she loudly stresses while grabbing ahold of my wrist to turn my hand back and forth, to know the damage while the mark flickers twice in reticent agreement, flashing us with green.

“Aaaaand the mark is alive,” I further admit and it pulses like a cat finally being acknowledged, much less bristle, almost purring through the painful jolts it’s giving my nerve endings. Head spinning, trying to comprehend the bombs I just dropped, Cass sputters out “w-what?! You. Blood mag…The mark? A healer! Solas! Surely he can help!?”

“Nope.”

“What do you mean nope?!” she looks ready to pummel me but I try to reassure her, saying “the damage isn’t spreading but nothing can undo this. The only fix is to not use the mark.”

“Surely there must be..” she tries to reason but I shake my head, wearing an exhausted smirk. “Short of cutting off my hand,” I poorly joke and the mark buzzes in disagreement — shaking my hand, I reassure “don’t worry, not about to do that.”

One pulse, it tells me off with hard no.

“that’s right.”

Quiet for a time, likely weaving through the hurricane of questions in her head, she finally gets out “When did you learn of this?” Eyes narrowed, calculating, trying to recall the specifics, I comment “Round two of us being in the Fade. Right after we asked those wisps to get a message out. Couldn’t focus on it at the time, just had to get us out of there first.”

No questions.

No bouts of anger or fury.

No reactions to my delayed admissions.

She merely stands there, eyeing me.

The quiet stretches out.

Her lips twitch, a question forming.

Finally, she manages to ask “…there is something more. Even bigger than what you’ve just confessed?”

Taking a bite at my lower lip, I nod, confirming her suspicions.

“But you cannot tell me that until later,” she states, trying to wrap her head around this mess.

“I know, it’s a big ask but try not to worry, it’s not a dangerous one. It’s just my past, the details of my life. Before all this this,” I explain while flicking my fingers, “before the Inquisition, before my mercenary work.”

A sigh of relief actually escapes her in the face of all this new and grim information, a sign at least
that the worst isn’t yet to come.

“But you will tell me.”

“Yeah. It’s just weird to talk about,” I reply sincerely.

“Weird.”

”yeah.”

“I…understand and I can respect that.”

“Thank you,” I’m quick to say.

“Ahem,” she clears her throat, her brows pinching, “We must..I have duties to see to.” Readjusting her gear, she moves for the exit of this ancient cavern, telling me “come on. We’ve been down here long enough” and climbs the stairs, going on ahead without me.

Can’t tell if that’s a good sign or not.

Probably bad.

“That..was too much. I said too much, didn’t I?,” I ask the empty room but the anchor is quick to double pulse, flashing its yes.

“well, ya don't have to be a dick about it.”

It buzzes in my palm, grumbling with green.

"Ow, sorry. Damnit."
“Who’s buying me a drink?,” I shout out across the tavern the second I pass the threshold. Dead serious — I’d really appreciate getting a good buzz on, one in my head and not my hand. And considering the nebulous way that talk with Cass just ended...

Felt bad.

Don’t like ambiguity.

However, at least a few familiar faces raise their hand at my request...

A bearded human, a guardsman who’s name I never caught...

An equally burly dwarven redhead. Pretty sure her name is Aeda.

A lush of an Orlesian delegate by the name of Anri, always misplacing his ornate mask.

Those few are such frequent drinkers, they may as well be scenery.

That bard, Maryden, she has to keep herself from snickering mid verse lest she ruin her own song while she strums away at her lute. But then, being a real prince to my particular version of damsel in distress, Bull booms out “INQUISITOR! I’VE GOT YOU” from a back table among a few of his Chargers.

Slipping through the drunken rabble and the sober lunchers, I get in good and manage to actually lay claim to a chair while greeting the horned beefcake with “Bull” and a nod of appreciation — No sooner do I slide on in, getting comfy, does Flissa pay a visit to the table, noting “his drinks are on you, is that right?” to Bull.

A wink in return — or a blink — at the auburn beauty, he beams out “first five. After that, it’s his problem” while hooking his thumb at Krem.

Wiping foam from his mouth on his sleeve, the lieutenant pokes back “I’ll cover him alright — with your coin.”

“That right?,“ Bull mock challenges his second in command, smacking his thick hand on the table and Krem fires right back “Chief. You don’t have pockets. I literally have all your money.”

“Oh, I’ve got pockets,” he throws back and Krem shouts “the hell does that even mean?!”

But choosing to not involve myself in their little pissing match, I ease back in my chair to ask of Flissa “got anymore of the blue stuff?” Leaning in with a melancholic smile, she’s sorry to say “we’re dry — there anything else you might fancy?”

“Anything at all with lyrium in it?”

“Sorry sweetheart, the Chantry has been tightening their chokehold on the stuff. It’s about all they can do until a new Divine is chosen.”

‘Real glad you didn’t choose the cloth,’ I note while screwing my face in consideration, asking “what’s the…strongest drink that won’t make me blind?”

“We’ve got a few casks of dwarven shine,” she offers, “beyond that…’
“Yeah, okay, whichever of those then,” I agree and she smiles out pleasantly “just a moment, I’ll get you that glass.”

“…and I bet I can punch more dragons than you,” Bull challenges Krem as I tune back in on their conversation. Krem though, he asks “why in the.. who punches dragons? Really?”

“Me. When I punch them,” Bull brags.

“No you don’t. You’ve never punched a dragon,” Krem tries to apply reason to this ludicrous claim, “you’re not going to punch a dragon. That doesn’t make sense, Chief.”

“I’ve punched those baby dragons…”

“Oh, sure, the small ones, huh?”

“Still a dragon!”

“Dragon my ass!,” Krem fires back.

"Damn straight I’ll drag your ass, Krem puff!,” Bull threatens, his point getting more and more muddled but Flissa draws my attention away once more, slipping the sipping glass before me and warning “go slowly with this, yes?”

Throwing her a casual two finger salute, I reply “I’ll try.”

“Heh, you’ll try,” she shakes her head but surprising me with a gentle swipe over my horn stubs, she absently smirks out “hmm, you got them trimmed. This length is good on you.”

“Well yeah. there’s nothing to really grab onto,” I remark, talking about my enemies, but she clearly takes it another way entirely — blushing hard and shooting an embarrassed glance at Bull, she hurries back into the crowd just as the chief and his second’s dialogue increases in volume…

“Two hander.”

“Sword and shield,” Krem argues back — what about, I don’t really care. I just take a meager sip per Flissa’s request, letting but a few drops of the clear liquor wash over my tastebuds to test its bite.

Like sipping paint thinner with an aftertaste of corn.

I can only cough in response to the awful drink as Bull teases with a laugh, “yeah, now that you can actually hold the damn thing right.”

“Screw you, chief,” Krem chuckles back and Bull claps him on the shoulder, all drunk with pride as he nods “Yeah, you’ve gotten pretty good.”

But with a high pitched whiz and a sharp thud, an arrow finds its home in the tabletop — of course, I drop my tumbler, weapons grade booze spilling all over the crotch of my pants.

The bar goes quiet and Rasa rasps out “Dead” from another table, wholly unimpressed.

“I’m not dead!,” I shoot back in the uncomfortable quiet but she just repeats “Dead.”

“No shooting the Inquisitor” the gravely voice of Varric lectures from upstairs — following everyone else’s gaze, I see he’s talking to one incredibly drunk Sera. Even her plaid pants are on backwards.
Varric’s got a gloved hand gripping her bow.

Evidently he just saved my life.

“Buh heez sumthin,” she hiccups angrily and yanking her bow away, she panics out “shite! Shitshibtsibbb! Piss!” when she locks eyes with me and races back to her room, clipping her shoulder on the doorway to room with a loud whack. As soon as her door slams shut, it’s as if an arrow never nearly hit me, everyone goes about resuming their usual. Then again, here, this may just be the usual.

Bull though, he’s not dismissing it — addressing the issue, he explains “you know how she is around magic. Weirds her out” in a deep rumble, “I mean, magic is weird. Just…”

“So killing me is her answer?, I gape in irritated disbelief.

“No, uhhhh, not..maybe?,” he guesses and throws back a deep swig of whatever rubbing alcohol scented drink he’s powering through.

“So I…what the fuck do I do here?”

Krem reasons out “Sir, she’s probably just scared. Sure, she might stab you but you should see her.”

“Oh,” I remark sarcastically, “If I only might get stabbed…” and I resign to get up. Sliding out, maneuvering through the people and see to Sera, Rasa states “dead” again in her inherently indifferent tone of voice, a reminder.

”Quit it!”

“Dead.”

Annoyed, grumbling, I climb those stairs to track down that drunken maniac and put whatever issues she’s got with me to rest. This shit can’t continue. And passing Varric, he merely shrugs at me, unsure of what to make of it either.

My knuckles rapping on the hard wood, I demand “Open the damn door.”

An arrow pierces the pine, peeking out at me with its razor tip.

“Sera!”

Another arrow shoves in beside the first, its point trying to get through the same exit..

“The fuck is this?”

Finally answering, all weird and pissed, she shouts back through the door ““magic shudn’t do that!!! Itz bad enuff win halfa thedas iz worried about their arses catchin’ fire en then you go en pull off that shit like u did!? Yura deemin or sumthin! I dunno wat!”

“Not a fucking demon,” I pointlessly argue with the drunk, “Cass would’ve killed me!”

Suddenly the door tears open and I’m on the receiving end of her ire, another arrow tip twitching dangerously close to my face as Sera spits “She’s a Seeker! She wuz worried so something hasto be wrong. Seekers don’t get worried!,” and shivering, she adds “And the disappearing act! Don’t evun wanna know how you did that! Itz all too weird!”

Oddly calm for having an arrow threatening me, I cautiously reply “cause I’m me. That’s always
been the why.”

Hiccuping and dropping the bow, accidentally loosing her shot into her shelf of pilfered knickknacks, she stumbles angrily over to her mound of pillows and snatches up a bottle of something dark. Taking a sloppy pull, its contents dripping down the side of her face, she slurs “mazhik cunt do that!”

“Can with me. I’m weird, remember?,” I fire back while leaning back against the splintered doorway, chewed up by the dozens of arrows she’s fired this way in recent days.

Anxious, downing the last of her bottle with a hard chug, she gasps out “An now. Ur eyes. Are all shite!”

“The hells wrong with purple?,” I cross my arms defensively.

“I don’ even know! Thazz how wrong it all iz. They aren’t like peeples peeples. Peeping? Peepers. Thaz waz wrong withum,” she complains and whines before nervously asking “ur not actually filt with deemuns, right? Herd u had deemuns in there.”

“who told you that bullshit??”

“…peeple.”

“Pfft,” I spit, “just cause they want me doesn’t mean they’re gettin’ me.”

Hugging a cushion as if it were a shield, she asks “yur really u tho?”

“Damn straight,” I state the fact, “only real difference is this shit” and I pull back the half-cloak to show off my stump. Her eyes go big and she eeks out an “ughuhuhuhhhh” while holding tight to her own arms.

“Wanna know something cool?”

Still eyeing my ruined arm, she hiccups out “erm..HUH..uh no!,” the booze reeling back at her in a big way and I reply regardless “that metal stuff I had on my arm — turned into bees.”

”beez? Nuh uh. Like I’m gunna listen to a man that wet himself,” she mocks and I groan “not piss and yes. Bees. Got em to sting a buncha red Templars.”

“Huhuhuhuhuhhh,” Sera nervously belly laughs, “said the wet boy.”

“It’s. Liquor.”

“Lick ‘er?,” she hiccups, “barely no ‘er.”

“C’mon Sera, it’s bees. You love bees.”

“Buh. Agh, fine. Thas the good kind....”

“Of Magic?”

She’s quick to stick out her tongue in distaste, arguing “bleh, nuh uh, no, never edmitted it.”

“Fine. Whatever. Will ya just stop trying to shoot my ass?”

Nearly ready to pout, she reluctantly grumbles “…no promizez.”
“You’re an asshole, you know that right?”

“Pbbbbbbbbbt,” she drunkenly raspberries at me, flecks of spittle spraying my chest. “Gross,” I nod at her while throwing her the prongs — she’s quick to repay the gesture with two hands of the same, inconsiderately mocking “more fingers, I win.”

“Whatever,” I sigh in resignation just hoping for a truce, “We good?”

Trepidatious, not overly eager to meet me halfway on this, she groans “uhhhhh, fur now. Jus, don’t do any uv that magic shite around me…”

“No promises,” I reluctantly tell her, “Qun wants me in a body bag.”

“Pbbbbbt, and Bull keeps killing them? Wats the big deal?,” she counters, not quite understanding the scope of things. Or perhaps she does and she’s just trivializing the issue. Either way, with that, she plops down on her pile of cushions, her choppy bangs flicking into her eyes on impact. Unsure how to respond, I just shake my head and slip back out before she has a change of heart and forgets this entire talk. I don’t need her filling my ass with arrows.

But I do slip in a final word before making my exit, “Not a demon. Not the enemy, Sera.”


Heading back around and getting downstairs, Varric joke’s out “So you are still alive” at my return with Krem joining in to ask “How’d it go, sir?”

“Hates magic,” I elaborate while reclaiming my wobbly chair, “same as before. Just doesn’t hate me now. Or maybe she will later, she’s pretty drunk.”

“If anyone could have too many opinions…,” Varric hums with a smirk but Bull’s quick to disagree, stating “Nah, She’s pretty consistent if you look past the crazy.” Throwing back another pint of that potent stuff, he adds “doesn’t trust magic, nobles, or exes. You’re technically two for three.”

“Exes?,” a few at the table gawk while I murmur “just the idiot in charge, not a noble” under my breath.

“Ask her yourselves… if you’re feeling particularly suicidal,” he dares.

“In that case, how about we distract ourselves from such a juicy and potentially deadly topic with some Wicked Grace?,” Varric tries to sell us.

“Can’t. Broke,” I lambaste while trying to wave down Flissa for another drink on Bull’s dime. Never got to really — well, enjoy is too kind a word — my first one.

A dull thud — a leather coin purse sits upon the table, some silvers and coppers clinking as a few spill past the loosened drawstring. Dumbfounded, the lot of us eye the prize, uncertain what’s happening until she rasps “you’re welcome” and taking that as his cue, Varric slips his personal deck from the inner lining of his jacket, declaring “Looks like the little killer’s fronting your st..”

“No,” she talks over him, “it’s his” and further enlightening us, she mutters “Swiped it, stashed it.
Knew something stupid would happen. Didn’t know how bad.”

Taking back what’s mine, I smirk out “thought it might’ve fallen off me somewhere over the desert”

“Hold up now,” Varric pauses the conversation with a raised finger and confused squint, “you said over. Not in. Not near or on.”

“Teleportation,” Rasa half huffs annoyedly, “obviously.”

“Oh…yea…obviously,” Bull grumbles under his breath as Varric just shakes his head.

“So wait, when did…?” I remember to ask she flatly informs “outside the palace…”

“…in the sky,” Varric questions absently.

“Well, smart move,” I smile encouragingly at my adopted sister as Varric mumbles “not on the ground.”

She doesn’t quite smirk back past her mess of black hair but she does take a seat — that’s as warm a reception she’ll grant most, especially in a crowd.

But this, this is just more good news!

I can sleep safely.

Got my money back.

Okay, that’s it, really.

Still though, two for two thing that don’t come saddle with some genuine negative fallout — I can’t help grinning stupidly while using my teeth to further get at the drawstring. A few silvers spilling free to the table, I joke out “Middle class fancy” to myself with a dumber gleam to my purple eyes.

“…but in the sky,” Varric still struggle with but as I say “Deal me in,” he snaps out of it, my money like chum for the shark in him.

****

An hour in and nine hands later. I’ve managed to win a single pot so far consisting of 7 coppers.

However. I’ve lost a silver so I’m definitely in the hole.

“So what’s with the ‘dead’ thing?, Varric casually asks while dealing, “you aren’t suddenly a fortune teller, right?”

Bull huffs out in amusement, “seems pretty obvious.”

“Not asking you, Tiny. But really, killer, what’s with that?”

“No.”
“Not so smooth today are ya,” Bull quips lowly and flips his cards. A collective groan — Bull claims the small pot for the 5th time in a row.

No one’s managed to lay down a great hand just yet, it’s mostly been a sad pair here or there and a lot of bluffing.

“Well this is embarrassing,” Varric grumbles while reshuffling the cards and cutting the deck. Krem just has a frown plastered to his face and rubs at the back of his head — he and Varric are tied for zero. Now normally I’d keep a closer eye on the dwarf when he’s got the deck in hand — sleights are his greatest skill after all — but the Commander pries his way through the growing crowd, interrupting our little game when his hip accidentally knocks the table. “Damn it all,” he winces irritably but Varric smirks at the new arrival, greeting “Curly, I’d ask you to pull up a chair but you’re already sweating. That’s just too obvious a tell, my friend.”

He came with purpose but with the dwarf derailing his train of thought, he stutters “I-I..”

“It’s like he just got laid,” Bull casually throws out while sneaking a glance at Krem’s hand.

“God, stop,” the Commander gruffly remarks but Varric’s too quick, interjecting “Choirboy here? No way, he’s still walking around like he’s got a stick up his…”

“I swear I’ll end you dwarf,” Cullen retaliates but Bull offhandedly comments “can’t fault a man for his kinks”

“What?!! Maker, no! Absolutely not, thi-this is done,” the armored man swears, “I won’t be the brunt of anymore of your jokes. I’m just here for...gah, Inquisitor...a word.” Not a question, but definitely a request, one with an almost desperate edge to it.

“Sure thing,” I answer back and tossing my cards to the table, revealing my shit hand of serpents that’s inexplicably missing a 5th card, I admit “not even sure how to play.”

“Agh haahwhat?!” Varric coughs out some of his ale, “don’t tell me that! We spent a half hour going over the rules!”

“Still did better than you,” Rasa rasps under her breath and swipes the pot to the amusement of Bull when they all do their final reveal. Leaving them rather abruptly, pocketing my own purse, just pleased to have any measure of my wealth back, I follow along in Cullen’s wake.

*****

Alone in the Commander’s office.

All door closed, there’ll be no interruptions this day.

“Just get it over with,” Cullen shakily breathes to himself, rallying, before announcing, “I’ve asked you here, to...well” as I eye him patiently. He brought me up here but for the past six minutes, he’s done nothing but stare at the floor, muttering to himself. “I can no longer...I can no longer command the army,” he gulps down the words and I finally recognize what this is.

A resignation.

Or worse...
License to be an addict.

I know those endings to his storyline and I’ll be damned if I let a man that good, that far into a redemption arc destroy himself. Immediately spinning on the room, eyes darting from his desk with its various reports and maps to the barrels beside it, to the crates and to the bookcases laden with tomes.

“I’ve already discussed my decision with Cassandra…”

“And what’s she say?” I ask, stalling for time.

“She…disagreed…but her opinion doesn’t outweigh the needs of the Inquisition…”

‘Bookcase. Gotta be…,’ I think quick while hurrying to it, snatching books at random and shaking them for the sounds of a telltale stash — panicked, knowing I’m close, Cullen rushes to intervene but I use my backside to cut him off, fending him off as he shouts “what in the Maker’s name are you doing?!”

I’m not crazy, no more so than usual.

Books keep flipping to the floor.

One heavier than the rest, it rattles as I pull it free.

“Stop!,” he pleads but prying open the oversized, lead lined book, a nondescript wooden box falls out. Catching the box before it can crash to the stone floor, I hug it tightly, saying “you don’t need this, man. This shit’s a shackle, a cage. And I know cages.”

Despite his shame, he lunges forward, slipping by — he tries to steal back his Chantry granted drugs but I’m too tall for that; I just hold it high, higher than he can reach given his injuries. Worried, hungry, but furious with himself all the same, he stops his futile grab attempts and comes to a standstill — it’s in this moment of self pity that he utters “All the more reason why I can’t be trust…”

“Shut the fuck up,” I blurt out and smash the box against the wall — the wooden casing splits as various paraphernalia spill out. Lyrium vials, a grinder, some spoons, a leather aspiration bulb, they clatter uselessly to the floor as I encourage ”right now. You’re not high. that’s a damn testament to your resolve.” Eyes wide in anger, he goes for the goods but with a blink, I’m across the room, standing on top of the vials, crunching them under my boot heel. Pissed, he goes to storm out, to escape but in that moment my vision runs purple as forces unseen bar his exit, holding firm the ways out.

‘Gettin’ good at that,’ I marvel at myself in that split second.

“Either I relinquish my post or I return to the lyrium. THOSE. ARE. MY ONLY OPTIONS!,” he fires at me, left with nowhere else to turn. A greasy sheen on his brow, frustrated and anxious, he spits out “and I expect you to honor the Inquisition!” Breathing harshly and pacing the room, focused on the growing tremors of his raised fist, he growls “it’s all so relentless…I ca..I can’t!”

“Givin’ yourself too little credit,” I tell him.

“Or you give me far too much.”

“Needs a goddamn chip,” I whisper under my breath in realization. Guy needs a reminder, a token, something physical to remind him of what he’s working toward.
...What he needs to continue working toward.

“Inquisitor?”

While I hastily consider the options, I absently offer “no slip ups. No backtracks.”

'Actual coin?' I look to my freshly recovered purse, ‘no. Coins get lost all the time.’

idol?

no.

something harder to lose...

more permanent?

“Inquisitor?!”

‘He’s looking. Taking too long to think,’ I stress

tattoo?

no time.

Cullen shouts “Aren’t you listening?? Don’t you get it?! if I’m unable to fulfill what vows I’ve kept then… then nothing good has come of this!,” and seething, he presses “surely we can admit I’m a failure?!” while trying to yank the door open despite my spell. At that, eyes burning with heated intent, I wrench his good arm off the door and drive my thumb into his open palm. Ignoring the leather, my magic hits deeper that such meager protections can account for...

"AHHH," he yelps in momentary pain and twists from my grip -- tearing his glove off, he stares in shock at the string of words seared into his hand.

Don’t do it

Bright red, a blazing mark all his own against his pale skin, permanent until I deem otherwise. Raised slightly, still angry looking, it all but shouts its message.

"Well?," I ask, genuinely impressed by my ingenuity, and Cullen fires back "WHAT IN THE MAKER’S NAME IS THIS SUPPOSED TO BE??"

"Something to...it's a reminder. Token of sobriety?," I answer, starting to doubt myself now, "Stay the path... and I'll just wipe it off?"

"it’s a brand! Just how do you intend to...” he rages but remembering who he’s talking to, flatly answers his own question “you can heal it.”

"Yep,” I smile at the man.

Screw doubt, this was a good idea.

Hasty.

Probably unnecessary.

A halfway decent solve though.
“If Cass were here, she’d say something about this being your chance to remove the leash and prove to others they can do the same,” I remind the Commander while eyeing the superficial damage I’ve inflicted, “AKA don’t squander this.”

At this, he stares again at the floor.

Voicing further encouragement, I tell him “wanna quit? Wanna go back to that lyrium diet? Just look at that hand.”

That stare goes hard, becoming a glare.

”And no leash?,” I reiterate, “Sounds pretty good, right?”

“…but it doesn’t matter what I want. What matters are the needs of the Inquisit,” he goes to finish as I interject “Look, if I’m stuck here, you sure as hell aren’t ditching out on me,” commanding with the purple in my eyes going radiant like small suns. “You’re strong. Stronger than this!”

Ponderous. He’s again at a loss for words but I grab the man by the shoulders and bare down at him with the fires of pride in my eyes, “you survived the Ferelden Circle. You survived Kirkwall. YOU will survive..no, thrive, THRIVE. You’ll thrive against this.”

“Thrive against this?,” he shakily repeats.

“No losers on this team, Commander.”

“Thrive…”

“So what are you?!” I force the question, my mouth split in a wild grin. Opening his eyes, those hazels of his lock on me, and he gives his answer, stating “a winner” with absolution and I only grip tighter, demanding “Say it again!”

The bare bones of a smile, he winces out “A winner” a bit more loudly now.

“Damn straight! We’re headin’ out tomorrow and you’re gonna be at the front of that. Middle of it? Wherever the Commander goes, that’s your spot!”

Huffing once in amusement at my apparent ignorance, Cullen comments “well said” somewhat sarcastically.

“So you’re on board?” I ask just one more time, “cause you ever need to talk this out again…”

“I…am here. The Inquisition still has me.”

”Jesus Chri…that’s good. Need ya, here man. Really. Can’t do this without you.”
With a poorly scribbled list of bullet points in hand, I shove at the door to the undercroft with my shoulder and slink on in. Low hanging light of the evening sun filters through the currents of the waterfall, refracting and showering the massive room in little glimmers and flashes of rainbows.

“Yo, Dagna?,” I ask out and step down the half stairs, “got a few notes that could maybe go with that new arm.”

She doesn’t answer back despite being only thirty paces away at her desk.

“Maybe something with magnets?!”

A pencil between her teeth, she’s all hums and mutters the closer I get, clearly deep in thought as she twists a compass across some parchment, bisecting another curve.

“Maybe a self destruct mode?,” I joke now that I know she’s not listening.

Looking down over her, I see her tracings over blueprints, the adjustments and modifiers she’s laying down over them on a translucent sheet of vellum. “Oh Inkeziduh,” she realizes of my looming and spits out the pencil, “you’re here! Perfect timing.” Turning on me, soft tape and some sort of gauge suddenly in hand, with a flurry of movements she stands on her tiptoes to get measurements of my arm — as she taps a compass needle to my fingertips, I ask “for the prosthetic?” and she presses a glowing rock to my palm, answering “what? No silly. We’ve got to keep you alive before we can even think about starting that.”

"Cassandra,” I comment while thinking ‘makes sense.’

"Leliana. And Josephine!"

"that was fast..."

"Don’t get me wrong, I’m working on it; this just takes priority,” she explains while tapping at the darkened splits on my fingertips with a hooked needle, “now does that hurt?"

"uh, no,” I reply, just a touch disappointed, “can’t feel much of anything with em.”

"I’m not a doctor but that sounds like atrophied nerve endings. So it’s like a decayed conduit — those I get."

"yeah, I know what atrophy means."

Snorting in amusement, she comments “that’s good” but second guessing her bedside manners, quickly apologizes “you knowing it, that is. Not the actual..”

"No worries, I gotcha."

"phew, that’s good. Wasn’t trying to insult you,” she states and rushes back to her drawing board, marking down the various numbers she just memorized. Pausing and slipping the pencil back in her mouth like a bit, she adds “o-ay. Gud dalk, Inkeziduh.”
"But I..." I sigh out, ignored already by the arcanist of Skyhold and realizing I probably won’t get much out of her right now, I resign to leave. As I do, I find Harritt sitting on the ledge, hunched over a sandwich and a beer. In between chews, he comments “Bright young thing...hard to talk to...but bright” while nodding. “Don’t fret none, whatever it is you’re needing...” he dusts few crumbs from his bushy mustache, “...she’ll get it done for you.”

"Yeah..."

“anything you need of me? Know you’re a mage and such but even the tough ones need protecting. Could get you some leather gear, easy to move in.”

I shrug out “that could work.”

“come back then. Before you leave,” he promises, “I’ll get something put together for you.”

A nod of thanks, I leave him to enjoy the rest of his ale — guess I’ll just return to my room, get myself in order before we march off on our next mission.

Maybe I’ll even enjoy an actual bed...for one night at least. Starting tomorrow, it’s back to bedrolls and hard ground.

****

Gotta keep up my strength, especially with what comes next. For all his clichés, Corypheus is still an ancient and terrifying magister with a slew of dark magics in his employ.

Whispers to blighted creatures

Armies of fanatics and slaves.

Has a fucking dragon enthralled.

Nigh unlimited power.

Just something horrid to be wary of. That he’s nearly immortal is just frosting on that particularly fearsome cake. Really, the only reason I’ve done as well as I have against the blighted creature is because the inexplicable connection between the game and this world. That’s it. Had the playing field been leveled, had I no knowledge of what should be happening…

‘Dead,’ I remind myself while brushing my teeth — a paste of elfroot, grape root, and cinnamon, leagues better than merely chewing on soft bark and swishing with alcohol. At least there’s that here. Spitting in a pail beside the wash basin and splashing some chilled water on my face, I prep for bed in my own modest manner — simply yanking my clothes off and tossing them to the floor. I’ve got no one to impress tonight, so kicking my boots off, in the buff, I slide my grey self under the furs and blankets of my large bed.

Time to dive into that void I’m not even allowed to fear.

Gotta keep it together.

“Guess it’s time to take me back,” I whisper of the anchor, my unfortunate ritual for the foreseeable future as I snuggle down into some satin pillows, “Let’s try for some sleep” and my
lids snap shut.

Always jarring, the sudden burst of white swallows me — no welcome mat, no secret knock, it’s just a bubble always eager to play the host. Or perhaps giving it an identity is too generous — it is absence, it is nothing, it is the hole where something should be. It’s just gonna be more of the same, exactly what last night was.

A struggle to keep my heart beat down.

Trying not to scream, hoping for an echo or response.

Maybe I’ll curl up under the stairs this time.

But as I wind myself up to start the count, “1, 2, 3, fou no…stop,” I see that couch is still there, unmoved.

“And the exit,” I mutter as I step uneasily to these newest of structures. “Are you real?” I question quietly at the inanimate objects as if anything louder might scare it off, “I mean, real is subjective...”

No answer.

They’re just set pieces.

Don’t get caught up in it. Pause. Take a breath. Remain calm. Think back to last night…

“Was just the three of us…”

“Solas something blah blah this is yours”

“And then?”

“Get comfortable,” I note, remembering my exact words and with a finger pointed to the couch, I add “that’s how you got here.” Then pivoting on my heel towards the doorway, I point out “you though, I straight up asked.”

“But the couch,” I mutter in discontent as I spin back on it, distrusting most anything that would invade this space, “why? What?” Even a cursory glance to the border storm shows there’s no gaps in the razor grit, no holes in the defenses to slip past. Crouched down, glaring like crazy, I bluntly ask “you a demon couch?”

Nothing. Obviously.

“Gotta tell me if you’re a demon couch.”

With a suspicious poke of the cushions, prodding the unmoving furnishing just as I did the last time here, I cautiously step to look at it from all angles, to examine it for evil. “You can lie on a couch but couches can’t lie,” I make the dumbest joke this side of the Fade.

So really though...

Not a demon.

Not a trick.

Just some couch.
It’s…wait?

“.…my couch?,” I come to recognize — its leather scratched to hell, it’s the abandoned four seater left behind by whomever lived in my old apartment before I got the place

Slowly…

Slowly…

Ever so slowly, I lower my ass to it, honestly stressed it’ll bite back. But no, sinking into those cushions, it’s shockingly exactly what it seems — just an ordinary couch that happened to inexplicably pop into existence in the one plane nothing but me should technically be despite Solas’ theory. “Oooo,” I croon like a walrus as I ease back, eyes closing to the disorienting starkness, settling back into its familiar lumps and grooves, “now all I need is a….”

Clatter.

My eyes tear back open — my coffee table, a real beater of a surface, almost impressive from its innumerable scratches, water rings, and paint stains.

It’s not the warm oak color it used to be — like everything else, it’s been bleached, stripped of color.

“So..this is really happening?,” I question of The Empty, really getting what Solas meant — what this place is, has always been, it truly clicks in place for me.

This is a dream and dreams are reactionary.

“So it’s really that simple? Emotions?,” I ask the previously indifferent void,

“Course it is. Panic made it blank, right?”

No response, it’s still just a…

‘A canvas,’ I smirk at the cosmic irony, standing to stare down all the glorious potential this bizarre place has and always has had. In this moment, more brush than anything, I begin.

A finger thrown, my pallet known, I build my isolated kingdom stroke by broad stroke. A heavy cacophonous thud, glass rattling as if it simply dropped. My modest C shaped kitchen drops into place. No fridge. Yet. No cabinets or dishes. Just a countertop wrapping around with a dozen bottles bunched together. “Okay, okay, now it’s gettin’ interesting,” I gape in awe at the arrival of the newest pieces and hurrying over to take a swig, to see if all the details are right or this is just more empty bullshit, I’m pleasantly surprised to find the taste of cheap whiskey. Colorless, like everything else here, but it’s still whiskey. Or the idea of it. Warmth spreading through my guts and that telltale shiver running my spine, my tongue feeling just a bit dryer and dryer, I exhale the bite, “Yeah, close enough. So then…”

Eyes igniting, the storm wall thunders in sync as my power flares — like laying bricks, the old wooden floorboards of my former apartment start planting themselves into existence, becoming the very ground as even more furniture drops in.

The skeleton of a home.

Glass bubbles into place, forming a window that hangs in the air.
‘Cactus on the side table,’ I eagerly curate now that I think I know the ropes, pointing at various places around the developing living room, “weed stash, oscillating fan, and a god damn clock.” Floating in the air where a wall might one day be, the ticking little circle begins its count, keeping eternity in check for me.

Roughly 10 pm. Can only hope that’s accurate cause I really need that comfort, that accommodation — I’ll go crazy if I revert to keeping the seconds.

Can’t go crazy. Can’t be crazy. Need to do some good. Can’t do that from a padded cell trapped in a loop of dissociative compulsion.

Gotta stay on point.

Can’t get lost again.

Can’t

‘Won’t,’ I convince myself but I’ve been busy. Absent. Too focused on not losing track.

Missing walls and ceiling aside, most of my apartment now stands around me. String lights are strung up about the approximation of where the ceiling would be as if there was one, flickering on and off. Framed prints of weird beasts and macabre pictures hang in the air, more than one lopsided. A bookshelf stands up against the side of the stairs to nowhere with a small flatscreen beside that — its picture filled with nothing but static. Even the wide window acts as a second portal, a looking glass to the New York I remember, silhouettes of towers with pinpricks of the light running up and down them.

Been at this for a couple hours if the clock reads right — midnight.

Ass to couch, finally feeling a speck more at ease in a somewhat bettered setting, I lean forward to stuff a glass pipe with pinches of indica — gonna get that body high feeling if I can — and lighting up, inhaling deep, I melt into those couch cushions.

Trailers of purple, a thin haze lingering in the air like a church, this is my holy smoke.

A couple coughs here and there.

That dizzying head rush as I sink into myself.

Can almost hear the bass through the marred up floorboards, as if the bar was actually down there, as if this was my actual apartment of old.

“Alright,” I tell The not-so-Empty as another puff of smoke parts my lips, “you’re okay. We’re on good terms for now — just keep this up.”

But true to form, I can’t just relax, that’s never been my lot in this life — a new batch of static crackles from the doorway, an old intercom that wasn’t there a few minutes ago, it sputters and spits through frequencies until “kkkkkkkk kk daaang…kkkk”

“Nuh uh,” I jump to my feet and drop the bowl, storming to the exit, “What did I just say about us being good??”

“Kkkkkkk..er…danger…kkkk”

“Where?” I ask back, jamming my thumb on the talk button and scanning the border storm for
gaps, “where’s the danger??”

“Kkkk danger. Danger. Dan…kkkkk”

“What is it?!?”

“Kkkkk….kkk” the intercom loses the frequency, returning to purely static. A fist to the box, I try to rattle it back using brute force but it keeps on spitting that scratch.

Wait.

Call’s coming from inside the house.

This is my head, no one else is using that box.

“WAKE ME UP, LET ME OUT,” I shout and twist the handle in an explosion green as I’m allowed to exit.

Awake. Back from the blank.

Cold with dread, trying not to slip into a flashback, I go to gently test my limbs.

No restraints.

Just my bedroom.

It’s just that.

No monsters, nothing grotesque, no…

Wait.

The mark is flickering, erratically, as if it knows something’s off as well.

not the crazy one…

Not yet.

Not now.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on alert, a chill to my skin, proving to me at least that something’s wrong. And the voices in my head haven’t been wrong yet. And yes, that sounds insane. But whatever it was, it did say “danger.”

Struggling to maintain a dormant appearance, I figure at the least there’s gotta be someone in here with me. What else would the intercom have been talking about? Eyes shut tight, trying not give myself away, there’s a slithering in the back of my head and the click of my mental locks as pieces fall into place — mana untapped — a pressure builds just behind my forehead as the dam opens a few floodgates.

‘C’mon,’ I try to direct the flow of power with grinding teeth, trying to keep it subtle, ‘just gotta go..slow.’

Arms imagined, mine, dozens snaking invisibly out from me, probing about the room.

For what shouldn’t be there.
For what needs be found, for the threat.

Under the bed…

Winding through the legs of the nearby easel…

Around, under, and over the desk…

Up the book cases…

Up ladders, into the water closet, into the very rafters…

Creeping about, testing the very air as dozens more weave across the floor…

‘Warmth, I note while honing in, ‘too far from the fireplace to be embers.’

Circling the spot, surrounding whatever it may be, closing in despite my showing no sign of moving, I strike — my eyes flare, flooding the room with a terrible violet as spectral limbs leash limbs, the unsuspecting snared. Lifting them, splaying them out like a pinned butterfly on display, I whisper to the unknown would be attacker “you’re late to the game” as the room grumbles from the radiating power.

Curious — I can feel them. But for all the illuminating light I’m casting, I can’t see them.

I’ve definitely got something though — It’s only when I yank them forward that they shed their shadows and the illusion is broken. Aglow in my light, it’s just a terrified human in plain clothes. Head shaved and mouth scarred, he stutters out in panic “I’m sorry my lord! I was just trying to take out the chamber pot! Di’n’t mean to disturb you!”

Nope.

Lies.

No chamber pot in hand.

They were hiding.

Their pulse is remarkably calm for someone held in place by the unseen.

“Nah… you weren’t,” I shrug and telekinetically shake them, “pretty decent impression of some scared cleaning crew though,” daggers and needles falling loose of their various hidden pouches and sheathes to the carpet.

Their expression hardens.

“Nothing to say?” I ask while padding over to the balcony door and with a bidding finger wag, summon him along after me. Stepping out into the winter air, naked but calm with an assassin in my custody, I ask again as they’re held aloft some 500 feet above the snowy mountain terrain below, “You hurt anyone on your way in?”

“Parshaara,” they hiss under their breath, denying me an answer while irking the deepest parts of my unconscious mind. Qunlat doesn’t sit well with me these days but I’m not about to show that weakness. Unable to fight back, he spits “get it over with, monster.” With a compulsory neck crack and a sharp inhale, anything to rid that unsettling feeling and keep the horned nightmares at bay, I comment “should give you to Leliana…”
They don’t soften, not at all.

“Should. Not gonna.”

“The Qun has marked you,” he threatens rather unoriginally, even more unimpressive that he can’t attack much less move.

“Dumb last words,” I comment, clamping their mouth shut with invisible fingers — summoning death, willing entropic black to the knuckles of my left hand til it froths like some horrid fog, they finally recognize terror. Eyes wide, fear, understanding just what manner of ending awaits them, I’m all too eager to deliver them that.

But I stay my hand.

“You know what this is?”

His eyes tremble with hatred, with fear, unable to do anything else from his ghostly bindings. Slowly reaching out to grant him death, letting the seconds creep by as I toy with them, their heartbeat rockets. “Enjoy,” I smirk like a salesman. It’s a simple gesture — with but a touch to the woolen fabric over their heart, flesh erupts in blooms of rapid decay, sweeping across them in soupy blisters and darkening splotches. Though gurgling in horror, they’re already dead. They technically died the moment they came into contact with my curse. Ragged breathing, the light goes out as their green eyes wither, the swift rot snuffing out all that they are. That which drips from their body, it dehydrates almost instantaneously and becomes but dust in the wind, scattered to oblivion.

It’s as if they never even existed.

And soon enough, there’ll be no evidence they did.

“They actually think they can get me?,” I ask the disintegrating mass, “just wait till I get that new arm.”

No answer of course from this decomposing husk of a former human.

“Your Qun’ll never get me again. They had their chance.”

As my violet glow dies down, my telekinetic arms dissipating, down drops the little rotted mass to the snowy banks so far below. “They messed up when they targeted me,” I promise while rubbing at the sore spot growing behind my forehead, the harbinger of a future migraine. With that last utterance of warning, I move to step back inside, to retreat from this cold while wincing “worth using the arms? Yeah. Worth it” but I notice a rope. Tied off the side of the balcony, not a grappling hook, it dangles down to the battlements below.

Could’ve tied it if they were cleaning earlier.

Could’ve been a team effort.

Not gonna leave it dangling — not about to invite more attempts. After reeling it in, leaving its frosted coil on the balcony, I go to check out the stairwell.

No bodies on the steps.

No dead agents in the rafters.
I really haven’t been around enough to know who’s who. A lingering thought though, a possibility I can’t shake, what if he murdered an actual member of the cleaning crew and stole their identity? What is he left their body stuffed in cabinet or barrel, to molder and rot until discovered long after his task was supposed to be completed.

“Shit, that’s gonna keep me up,” I mutter at that very reasonable possibility and grabbing my jeans, I pull them on and creep barefoot out to investigate. A headache already developing as a result of my usage, I can only blink at it and continue forth in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Fuck the Qun.
Confessions and Thefts

Padding about barefoot in the dark, the early hours before dawn, I mutter the question “You the one telling me danger?” while slinking around a corner. The mark flickers, it’s confusion pulsing through the tendons of my hand in buzzing waves...

“So that’s a no?,” I answer for it, “Geez, something in my head then. that’s not ominous at all.”

Thus far, nothing seems amiss — the sentries are still at their various posts, the agents still on high, no corpses littering the stone flooring. Considering how mundane it all is, how routine, it really almost is as if that assassin never existed…

No.

Don’t doubt that.

That guy was real.

Don’t start with that…ya just got your mind back on lock down…

Avoiding torchlight, barely feeling the cold of the stone with footsteps less than whisper…I’m really hoping it was an isolated attempt, some lone agent striking at the first opportunity. Peering about the main throne room, shooting glances at the balconies, the draperies, and the partially uncrated dragon sculptures that Josephine must have ordered, I don’t spy anything out of then ordinary here either.

‘Gotta tell someone,’ I realize what I should’ve the moment after the attempt. I can’t do this alone and I never should at this point. What’s the Inquisition if it’s Inquisitor doesn’t delegate responsibilities. And so, with but a thought of ‘rookery’ and a blink, I immediately find Leliana’s eyes on me as her ravens cackle out in alert at my sudden appearance.

“Cawww caw caw,” they issue in short bursts but she tends to them, soothing while stepping to their sides and running a gloved finger across their inky black feathers, “caw cah caaaa.”

“You are in direct conflict with an order of health,” she states the obvious, “you are not asleep.”

“Neither are you. But I had an uninvited guest, so what’s your excuse?”

“An uninvited…?,” she softly repeats with nary a change to her demeanor as she pets the dark beak of one bird, “tell me.”

“Custodian,” I start as I step to her desk, “either an impersonator or…”

“An embedded agent.”

“Don’t know. After I ripped him from the shadows, he was all blah blah the Qun blah blah. Wasn’t too talkative outside that,” I wryly elaborate while giving her stacks of reports a cursory glance. One item in particular, a crisp envelope more recent than the rest, its red wax seal freshly broken with crumbled bits still upon the desktop. Just beside it, a rather formal looking letter…

‘…huh, can’t read cursive upside down,’ I note as a she speculates “it was likely one born of desperation. The Iron Bull has been cleaning house since you released him. It’s not a terrible plan, it just without tact…in an organization our size, it’s impossible to be rid of all spies. By killing the
obvious ones, those unknown have either dug in like ticks or, if tonight is any indication, lashed out.”

I just puff air past my lips in exasperation.

“These are just the consequences you must be prepared for when you set fire to the nest,” she warns and asks “I don’t suppose there’s any point in questioning him?”

I merely shrug out “Nah, he’s real dead.”

“Too bad,” she sighs, “then I shall see about missing staff and having my agents investigate this matter. I’ll also have a talk with Bull, to ask after his suspicions. I am sorry though...this is the second time their assassins have slipped through.”

“Nah uh, don’t apologize,” I reply with a dull edge in my eyes, “like you said, some’ll lash out...and I’ll just erase em.”

“I believe that,” she agrees, “is there anything more I can help you with?” I’m slow to comment, still slipping not-so-furtive glances to her notes but I finally say “huh? Uh..."

"What is it?"

'That's the chantry note?,' I think to myself in waning concentration, still not giving a fully formulated answer, 'that's what's going on with her, right?'

"Well?" she asks impatiently and I finally answer "right, okay. So...I’ve been helping people with personal quest lines lately..."

She simply stares at me.

"Not saying you need help," I say with a shoulder rise...her arms fold, it’s hard to read if she’s amused or beleaguered.

“Just sayin’ that the offers there,” I further add.

“Fine,” she sighs in disdainful agreement, “Cassandra accounted for how you managed to travel to Redcliffe. I...can make use of such a technique.”

“So where we headed?” I question, “Valencia? No... that’s an orange. Whatever, starts with a V."

“Valence.”

“See? Okay,” I breathe while offering my hand, “Look, I’m not putting on a shirt,” and as she takes it, I fall inward, ruminating upon that cloister, our destination, thinking of it in the most vivid of terms...

I’ve never been there but I absolutely have.

*Carpets. Long and red.*

*High ceilings...*

*Marble statues. People...four of them in the antechamber. Chantry figures.*

*Golden braziers burning...*
Memory becomes reality and moonbeams cut through the stained glass — no sun of dawn to warm this hall of sunburst tapestries and divine portraiture. Warmer still than Skyhold, this sanctuary to those who preach and praise Andraste and the Maker. “It shouldn’t surprise me but you truly do know too much,” Leliana sighs, not the least bit affected by the travel, her mood entirely soured by the mission at hand, “I don’t suppose you also know what it is I’m after do…” she goes in to ask but I point to the next chamber, the interior rotunda of worship.

"Because of course you do," she utters quietly as we pad along softly in the dim light.

“Not gonna waste time looking’ for the clues,” I whisper as we cautiously enter. Too late and too early for sermons, even the candles burn low. Incense long since ash, the faintest of their scented haze still lingers overhead. Stepping past the central statue of Andraste with her pointed tiara, looming and larger than life, the cost of which could’ve fed a village for a year, I spot the triptych painting exactly where it’s supposed to be. Andraste, its focal point, awash in white light and a whiter gown, clerics and mages huddle and kneel around her in vivid hues and tones. Standing before this religious curation, I don’t even hesitate to grapple at the frame and pry the oil painting off the wall, mana flooding muscle, ripping bolts loose, cracking and marring the stone wall behind it in the process.

We’re not too loud about it — just the echoing sounds of rock bits and fastening bolts hitting tile. Snatching the contents hidden beyond, the wall safe now exposed, I tuck the ornately adorned box under arm, the golden sunburst atop it poking uncomfortably into my armpit.

“We gotta go,” I demand and Leliana slips to my side, her dagger pointed to the approaching cleric, “We both know she’s a spy.”

“That in your hand. GIVE IT TO,” the cleric shouts in defiance but I blink before she finishes, snapping us back to our origin point with ease. Again with the ravens, they cackle out “CAH CAAA CA CA CAWW” at our immediate appearance. Savoring the return to the chill, breathing deep of it despite the damp scent of birds, I pass Leliana her golden box as she simply says “I should have killed her…”

“Caaaa caw caw.”

“Not necessary.”

“Caah,” the last of them call out.

“I’ve had eyes on that chapel for months — Sister Natalie is a plant. She’s but one of many who would see us crumble…” she answers, tightly gripping the box before her as candlelight shimmers off it. Setting it down and removing a previously concealed necklace — a small bronze key on a silver sliver of a chain — she unlocks the small treasure with a slight click. It's well oiled hinges open smoothly but her surprise, there's nothing. “Empty?” she questions in disbelief as she pokes about for hidden compartments but spying a glint, the grooves of embossed script, she flips the box upside down to read the underside of the lid, “…the left hand should lay down her…”

Taking a pained breath, she exhales “burden” in an incredulous whisper. Thinly veiled anger, it simmers just beneath the surface as the redhead flips her cowl back. Annoyed, hurt, she asks “Justinia, she thought she was using me? That I wasn’t aware of my actions?”

Sitting in silence, I just keep that up as she defends “all that I’ve done, I’ve done of my own
accord. What was necessary. I am not some tool to be manipulated...”

“So don’t stress it.”

“But she thought I…”

“Doesn’t matter, not really,” I comment with a shrug, “So she’s wrong? Just focus on the good, the fact she cared enough to worry. Not many do that.”

Her turn now to take a reflective breath, to ponder in silence.

“If that’s that,” I murmur and click my tongue while rising anew, “suppose I’ll be…”

“Hunter, a moment…,” she utters in a daze and goes rummaging through her desk, the shuffling of wings accompanying her own digging. Pulling free a roll of brown scrap leather, she unfurls it across her tabletop, revealing its contents...

Two beer caps, the surfaces so scratched there’s barely any name left to read.

A plastic brick, charred and blistered to oblivion — the remains of what once was my phone.

My wallet, fused shut from melted IDs and bank cards. Burned though it may be, still visible on the surface is the Inquisition’s emblem. The “hairy eyeball” as it were, with the impaling sword, embossed and inexplicably still legible.

Grimacing in disbelief — definitive proof I’m not insane — I snatch up the phone only to realize how useless it is. There’s no purpose for it now. The bottle caps though, I flip em over in my palm, glad I hadn’t thrown them away before embarking on my acid trip so long ago, I can’t help but smirk and pocket them.

Good to have a reminder.

But as I pick up the folding wallet, Leliana admits “back when you were our prisoner, I had my agents hunting down every lead on you.”

I shoot her a glance, nodding along.

"All of which came to a dead end. Shocking to hear, no?"

Again, I nod.

"All information pointed to the heart of the Brecilian Forest. An ancient yew, scorched from powerful lightning where no other tree showed damage…”

I remain speechless as I fumble with the wallet.

“Scattered in the tall grass were these odd items. Odder still, this” she points to the Inquisition emblem.

"My mouth and brain utter "uhhhh" in unison.

"There are very few people I trust, Inquisitor," she states, "in fact, I find I can count their number on one hand. However, when this was brought back to me, I thought...I'm not exactly sure. Was this some inexcusable sign from the Maker? That our Inquisition was just? Or was it the Maker giving me push towards you? Why else would you have this symbol? We were still in our infancy…”"
I keep quiet — just smiling that some sliver of my past still exists, despite the headache strengthening in the back on my skull.

“Somehow, I knew you would become someone I could count upon…and tonight only cemented that.”

“I know they're all junk now but really, thank you, Leliana,”

“You're welcome. Oh, and what you call junk, I merely call strange. Even our specialists couldn’t accurately deduce their purpose,” she expresses, “So one day, I hope you’ll confide in me your secrets.”

“Might take you up on that,” I remark favorably while going to leave, tossing and catching the ruined wallet, “Cass has first dibs on that info though.”

“Heh,” she quietly snickers, “I’m sure,” and takes her seat. It would seem the events of tonight have actually done some good for her. Whether they harden or soften her persona, that’s on her. She can make those choices on her own. But if tonight has been any indicator, I'm inclined to say she's better off. And so with a half snort escaping me, I grip the railing and grin back at her while taking my leave.

_Only had to kill one person tonight._

_L is in a good place. Got my stuff back._

_Things are actually feeling like they’re looking up._

_‘Try not to get used to this,’_ I smirk in spite of myself, knowing well how irony likes to kick my ass.
Light snow, just a dusting really.

Breath fogging in the night air.

I walk barefoot through the mostly empty courtyard, paying the few passerby a nod of courtesy before climbing the far stairs. Just soft tossing that crisped wallet and catching it, in a slight daze, I comment “so I’m really not crazy...”

The damp chill permeates deep.

"Really was startin’ to doubt...”

I can feel it under my skin. That is, up until my steps jingle and I’m an inch taller. A glance down, I’ve apparently unwittingly summoned my boots.

“And that’s an interesting development,” I casually shrug out. This night has been fraught with excitement so my reaction is rather blasé in comparison. However, up on those battlements, the overwatch, shirtless, leaning with my hip against the stone castellation, I but stare out into the dark with a sigh.

The torches down in the pass and beyond, their little points of light number in the hundreds.

Inquisition forces have been amassing.

And more, I know that’s but a portion — there’s plenty more camped in the Hinterlands, positioned as a peace keeping entity and if they’re to join us, they’ll be traveling double time outside the Frostback Basin to join in.

“It’s some end game shit,” I mutter ineloquently in a cloud of cold fog. Shaking my head, it’s hard to believe we’ve reached this point...

Harder still to believe I’ve survived as long as I have...

...hey.

"huh?,” I look back behind me.

Thought I heard someone.

Doesn’t matter.

I’m wasting precious time, time that could be spent rejuvenating myself — confident in my reclaimed ability to do so, I but consider ‘bed please’ and blink back to the relative comfort of my quarters and promptly bar the door upon arriving. As interesting as tonight has proven to be, I’m not eager to repeat any of it and so following a thorough check of my bedroom, high and low, locking every door with such a function...

I lob my deep fried wallet to the desk and start undoing my pants...
...Only to notice my boots missing from the floor where I’d originally left them, that I had in fact summoned them, not merely copied them.

“Nee party trick,” I yawn out while kicking them off yet again and crawl back into bed, ”gahha remembeth thah one.” The side of my face mashed to the pillows, as if narrating, I hum out “time to see that not-so-Empty…”

*****

A fist on hard wood.

My eyes creak open — last night’s extracurricular activities stole too much time from me.

The beating continues.

“Yeah?,” I yawn out to the muffled return of “ay is dis door lot?” Crawling out of bed, shuffling my jeans on one leg at a time, I head down the first landing of stairs and flip the crossbar up, unlocking the entrance — turning the knob, I let the door swing open as I lumber back up to grab the remainder of my clothes. They’re only a few feet away, not about to try summoning them. That’d just be an unnecessary expenditure of energy.

“I am terribly sorry, Inquisitor! I should have known you were indecent,” Josephine chimes apologetically as most of the council filter in behind me.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it,” I yawn a bit more while fumbling with my shirt, evading the locked door question for now, “what’s the word?”

“We have the location,” Leliana states with several rolls of parchment in hand, “and confirmed enemy movement.”

“Orlais is positioned to march,” Josie addresses while unrolling a letter from Gaspard himself, “the Emperor has consolidated their forces and intends to meet us there himself.” I must be making a face — she feels the need to point out “the man is reportedly a genius on the battlefield.”

“Huh?,” I yawn, distracted, focusing all my attention on properly putting on my black T-shirt, “yeah, that’s cool.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, I presumed you needed convincing.”

Eyes squinting against the daylight, I just lazily shake my head as she waves a server in. Silver tray in hand, porcelain sugar bowl, kettle, and cups upon its sleek surface, a member of the kitchen staff finds an empty corner of my desk and pours me some coffee. Leliana, meanwhile, lays a map of Southern Orlais over the foot of the bed and jabbing at the red inked X, she states “Our historians poured over all the texts we have and were able to deduce a likely location. Solas, through his particular means, was able to verify it just an hour ago.”

Between careful sips of the scalding hot drink, I wince out “then we ready to go?,” already perking up some as Leliana discreetly excuses herself from our little circle to peer through the frosted panes to the balcony outside.

“Yes,” Cassandra confirms, still looking to the maps as Josephine flips through several papers
clipped to her board, “our forces have been on the standby, just waiting for the signal.”

I imagine Leliana had agents patrolling for clues after I returned here.

Investigating for coconspirators.

Evidence.

She definitely sees the coil of rope, the heap of it out on the snow covered balcony.

“Ah, this is? No, no, “Josephine murmurs to herself before growing louder, “Yes! This is it. I was able to dig up some shipment manifests dating back to three weeks ago. The cargo being moved along the outskirts of the Arbor Wilds? It’s likely red lyrium. So there’s that to worry about as well.”

Setting down the small cup with a clink, I ask “they didn’t actually document that, did they?”

“Not exactly. While they didn’t explicitly state what they were hauling, it couldn’t be more obvious. There are reports of lingering illness and hallucinations in its wake. It’s the most likely culprit.”

"The Qunari have a poison that triggers such symptoms,” Leliana informs as she rejoins us but Josie holds true to her notion, replying “yes, as you said earlier, but the evidence doesn’t support their involvement.”

‘They would be a surprise,’ I weigh the possibility while taking final sip — cup done, I pass it back and calmly warn “It’s Corypheus. But that doesn’t matter — he’s not gonna get what he wants.”

"We will not fail,” Cassandra adds, still looking to the map, avoiding my glances.

“Alright,” I comment, satisfied with this briefing but just a bit daunted that we’re finally pushing toward this next objective, “let’s…I’ll uh, I’ll meet everyone downstairs.”

Suck at speeches.

Really...

You can do better than that’ I mentally reprimand my inability and while I do that, everyone else moves to leave, all in agreement that it’s time to set the plan in motion. But instead of going with the others, Cass pauses at the stairwell, her hand fidgeting on the railing. “We are gathering in the courtyard,” she feels the need to point out.

“Yeah,” I sleepily beam back as I slip my boots on.

“Yes, well,” she utters in reply and shifts awkwardly now that it’s but the two of us, “you should eat beforehand. Prepare yourself.”

Right.

God I’m dumb.

Things are still weird.

I remember — though a lot has happened in the past twenty four hours, I can’t afford to dance around the issue so I curtly ask “We good?”
“Everyone is making the necessary arrangements though I admit, I’m surprised that Cullen is… well… I know you spoke to him. Whatever you said, it convinced hi…” she starts off but in my turn to awkwardness, I slip in “meant about us but glad to know he’s still on board.”

“Oh.”

“Yeeeah,” I drag out and gnaw a bit on my lip while looking about the room.

“…I,” she slowly considers and answers, “am still processing.”

“Makes sense,” I run my hand over the back of my head, a bit embarrassed about pressing the issue, “Thanks for still comin’ up though.”

“I don’t stop caring just because I am upset with you,” she shakes her head at me in frustration, “That isn’t how this works. I am entitled to my feelings…”

“Of course,” I quickly reply with a brow furrowing, “not trying to rush anything.”

A tiny huff escapes her but she sighs out “Thank you, but even so, we must get a move on. Much awaits us.”

“Yes. It does,” I concur.

*****

I followed up with Harritt.

He’s good -- Managed to pull together a collection of light leather armors that actually fit and coordinate. Little steel rings sewn in, extra blocking. Not too weighty. Black on faded black, a perfect match up for my particular sense of style if ever there was one. Not too bulky, it’s just the right guard to hopefully stop or shrug a dagger or arrow. Anything bigger? More crushing? Gonna just have to evade the old fashioned way.

Food? Eaten.

Gear? Check.

Minor headache from last night’s events? Yes.

But it is what it is.

No speeches -- I've never had luck with those anyway.

Everyone knows the stakes.

An old monster seeks something older and that can’t be allowed.

...So we’re quick to start out down the long bridge, to meet up with the bulk of our forces in the snowy pass. A few people waved us off — Josephine included — but I’m not exactly one for pomp and circumstance. Cullen, his entourage of soldiers and ex Templars leading the way, we few follow in tow. Dorian, Varric, and Cassandra ahead, Sera and Blackwall just behind them. Solas and Morrigan, an eerie pair if ever there was one as they briskly step along.
And then there's me, Rasa, and Bull carrying the rear.

“So no Chargers?,” I ask the biggest of us as we make the descent, just chatting really to keep the silence at bay as the clasps of my boots alone jingle, “isn’t it bring your kids to work day?”

“Huh? Ahhaha,” he rumbles our whole offering me a hand, “that’s good. But no, figured it’d be best to leave em with Red. Never know what’ll happen with us gone.”

“Makes sense,” I comment, careful not to slip on icy steps.

“So gotta ask, what’s got you riding in the back? I mean, you’re the boss, shouldn’t you be up front?”

“Nothing wrong with the back,” Blackwall chimes in having let the others pass him by, “sometimes a man” and noting Rasa, “or woman, does better with a clear view of their allies.” She doesn’t say anything at that but doesn’t give him as bored a stare as she usually would. That’s a point in favor of Ol’ Blackwall.

Or maybe she’s just thrilled to be leaving again, you know, in her own way.

“What he said,” I hook a thumb at the faux warden, “besides, you know I don’t give a crap about ceremony.”

“Fair enough,” Bull hums out, “and I gotta imagine it helps being able to see where Sera is.”

“Herd my name!,” Sera shouts back at us, “u talking about me??,” her question echoing off the harder edges of the mountains around us.

“No,” three of us answer back in an utter lie.

“Thass shite! Ur sayin’ stuff! Don’t b asses,” she fires off and I say “we were just joking about you shooting me”

“Huh? Wen wuz that??,” she genuinely seems to not know as Blackwall mouths “she shot at you?” to me in silence. My brows jump once in confirmation and he just shakes his head, muttering “course she did” in small concern. A round of glances pass through the crowd, the most audible being Cullen’s “Maker” but no one seems eager to press the issue.

Scratch that. Solas unwisely feels the need to needle “as always, proving yourself to be the immature one.”

Sera mocks back “prOvINg urSelF to B tHe imMaTUrr ONe” with a sneer on her lips and hands on her hips, half shaking her ass at the bald elf.

“My point exactly,” Solas rolls his eyes and Sera spits back “oy, Shut it. I’ve got points plenty.”

“Yes. Because surely the Inquisitor hasn’t had enough of those.”

For some reason, Morrigan feels the need to sarcastically point “what would the Inquisition be without its heroic leader?” and Dorian’s quick to defends, “please, he doesn’t die that easy,” his own brand of snark in his tone.

Varric smirks “if at all, Sparkler”

“a strong possibility,” the Tevinter agrees.
“Wut r u all talking about??,” Sera spits, genuinely baffled by the exchange but Varric downplays it, answering “don’t fret it buttercup. He’s just been through a lot.”

Now that, that makes Cass snort. Just once. But it’s enough. So long as all this doesn’t fall to awkward silence, I’ll take the bickering, snipes, and insulting any damn day.

“SERIOUSLY!,” Sera complains, “wut iz evryone talking about???”

"you have a drinking problem," the 11 year old mutters under her breath, clearly aimed at the older girl, but Sera hears plenty, defensively spitting "piss on that. No such thing" back at Rasa.

"Another strong possibility," Dorian smirks in agreement with Sera, from one lush to another.

*****

First night of the long march.

Forgot what it’s like, to trudge along in a massive group.

...how much it sucks.

The blisters.

The pacing.

The inability to hear your own thoughts over the droning quake of bootsteps.

As for the now of it, camp’s being made en mass. Tents pitched, rucksacks being undone, a thousand torches light the camp, lighting the way of our several hundred strong. Latrines dug — glad to be upwind of that, surely that’d make for a miserable hell-stench of a night — all the basics of setting camp on such a large scale have been tended to. Throughout the camp, some form of gruel is being dished out by the bowlful. Sentries and guards working in shifts, the bulk of our covered wagons in the center of it all to protect the goods.

Weapons and shovels.

Rations.

Extraneous inventory.

It’s fortunate this should only be a four day — five at the most — journey.

Though I’d swept the snow away with my heel, the ground I sit upon is still frigid and hard. A small boulder at my back, I stare into the flames of the campfire, getting lost in those embers and pops that try so hard to ignite a skinned hare as it bobs over the orange, its spit stuck firmly in the dirt at the fire’s edge.

‘Couldn’t’ve just been a montage and an inspiring song…’ I lament in discomfort, yearning for the apparent ease afforded in the video games, ‘but no, of course it’s gotta be so fucking real.’

Absent minded, I gingerly peel my boots off with a soft groan, letting my usually tough soles catch a breather. ”ow ahhhh,” I wince out, cracking my toes and stretching my legs.
“You’re rabbit’s burning,” Blackwall points out, kicking a log to keep the fire from blazing higher, effectively stifling it. He’s absolutely in his element...

Excited to be out...

Thrilled to be marching.

Though he’d certainly prefer peace, it’s obvious his home is the battlefield, the prep work and grit of it all.

Leaning in to snag my rustic meal from charring too much, I comment “you’re smiling, ya know?”

“Am I?,” he asks while pulling out his sword to apply the oil, “suppose I am of a better state than I used to be. Sure, many still distrust me, but at least I can do some good out here. Helps that the truth is out about me.”

“I’ve found you live your best life when you don’t care what others think,” Dorian mixes snark and honesty as he slips from the throngs of soldiers to join our little group.

“It’s no use lying, Dorian, you care. And while I appreciate the sentiment,” Blackwall mutters through his beard, “I feel as if our pasts have little in common”

“No? You mean to say that you’ve never engaged in an orgy while wearing nothing but beads? How remarkable, I could’ve sworn we were twins,” he retorts and the grizzled warden chuckles out “god, no. Can’t say I’ve ever done that”

“Your loss,” Dorian casually comments and redirecting to me, asks ”what’s got you so broody?”

“Sorry?,” I snap out of my daze, “mm what?”

“Your mind is elsewhere.”

“The story unfolding, different but the same,” Cole abruptly explains, as if the ghost of a boy had been here listening this entire time, “a path to walk, but how far has he strayed, worried over… sorry Inquisitor.”

“As usual Cole, you’re more unsettling than informative,” Blackwall murmurs with a swipe of his damp cloth up his length of steel.

The logs pop and embers float.

The winds dies down and the smoke carries upward.

“uh, where’s Viv?,” I find myself asking, somewhat embarrassed, “don’t remember seeing her leave Skyhold with us.”

“Because she didn’t?”,’’ Dorian snarks back and pops a grape in his mouth, “She’s off doing who knows what in Val Royeux.”

“Why? Why isn’t she here to enjoy all this nature with us?” I sarcastically question while shifting uncomfortably against my rock support.

“Well it’s not as if she would have informed me,” he answers again, “most of you Southerners have the nagging idea in your heads that I’m untrustworthy.”
“Wait, I thought you two got along just fine?,” Blackwall asks after the mage and Dorian throws back “oh, we do, she’s just not in the habit of telling me her day schedule. No itinerary for little ol' me.”

“Val Royeux...,” Blackwall ponders through his dark beard, stroking the end points, “…too late for the Fall fashion lines…” To that, we all cast him a curious look and he’s quick to explain “I’m not part of that world but it’s hard not to notice it. Regardless, she’s a woman of principles and discipline. She wouldn’t abandon the cause for anything so minor.”

"Good taste is it's own weapon," the other mage tries to convince our little circle of his stance on attire but Blackwall squints out "Corypheus or clothes. Really. Which do you think takes priority?" Though the faux warden has a point, Dorian can’t help but snicker “I still can't believe you know the fall lines release. Who would've thought, Blackwall and dresses, hehehe.”

Deadpan, his oiling hand clapping to his knee, he grumbles “that’s me. The prettiest girl at the ball.

“Dresses are pretty. Sometimes they're silk. Spiders make silk. Spiders are pretty too,” Cole whispers in a nonsequiter and Blackwall groans “ugh, no, now it’s weird. Don’t want to think about spiders.

“But spiders can’t wear dresses.”

Blackwall shakes his head, “Cole” and picks himself up, “I’m uh, just gonna…” and steps off, excusing himself.

“He doesn’t like spiders,” Cole softly states and hugs his knees as his eyes go pale and he whispers enigmatically. “a thousand eyes, it saw through him, taunting. Dead but it still lingers, speaking still, irking.”

“No thank you, I won’t be playing this game,” Dorian states and hurriedly steps off in the other direction leaving just Cole and me to ourselves amidst the scores of people passing around us.

“Ohh, the rabbit doesn’t like that,” Cole laments in between my chewing, giving me pause the second that sinks in. For a moment, I consider dropping it in discomfort but my stomach whines.

No. Not gonna waste this.

Picking myself up, I take another ravenous bite of the charred meat despite my imagination souring the taste.

“Sorry. I forget people don’t like hearing about that,” he apologizes softly, “how their food is feeling.”

“No they don’t Cole,” I huff out in disappointment, skewered rabbit still in hand, “No. they don’t” and wander off to just find my small tent and eat in peace, without any director’s commentary from the snacks.

I love the kid but he’s gotta learn to read a room and read it to himself.

Chapter End Notes
My apologies for the delays in posting — though I have most of this written down, I’ve had little time to sit and edit it as of late — life can be a hectic thing. Thank you for bearing with me.
Day number two and for the past few miles, it's been nothing but uncomfortable. No, I'm not talking about the company I'm in, nor do I mean the awkward glances I keep catching Cass trying to be secret about. No, my issue this midmorning is that my jeans...

Just.

Won't.

Stop.

Riding up on me.

It's still cold enough that this shouldn't even be happening but here it is, this is my miniature personal hell. Just fiddling with my pants, trying to work out my jeans, to somehow stop the chafing.

maybe that's the reason she keeps looking my way.

I don’t even know anymore.

Even a horse drawn cart starts passing me by, hooves just clip clopping through army trampled snow as wooden wagon wheels squeak against the mountain hardened earth. But as it rolls on ahead, beating my pace, who should I find just relaxing out in the back? His stubby legs hanging off the edge, Varric just smirks.

"Errr," I growl unintentionally and he just chuckles “You okay,” clearly seeing damn well what my issue is.

“No puns from you. Thighs on fire,” I groan, yanking at my legs, hooking my thumbs through my belt loops and shaking.

“So take a load off. Don’t think anyone’ll give you any grief.”

“They won’t.. Call me.. A lazy piece of shit?,” I huff out rhetorically, still tugging at the fabric.

"Come on, you're the Inquisitor," he reminds, "they aren't gonna say anything."


“You’re top of the food chain,” Varric says while placing a thick hand over his partially exposed mane of chest hair, “I can promise you some are thinking you’re shit. No getting around that.”

“Can’t...argue...with that logic,” I utter and ceasing my embarrassing display, I stagger over and hop up with him. While the cart creaks from my sudden addition, I just sigh out a pained “oooooo.”

“Oh yeah. Slipped my mind…say your favorite dwarf needs a favor…” he posits and offers his flask — taking it up, I ask back “what’s Dana need?” and take a swig of his smooth oaky whiskey. Snatching it back, he feigns emotional injury, griping “Oh, you wound me! I’ve been wounded” all the while pacing a hand over his heart but twisting it back around, specifies “I mean, it can wait until we’re back, but…it is red lyrium related.”

Bianca?
Bartrand?

Generic destruction?

I don’t know which one he’s alluding to. Could be either, neither, all three. I’ve been admittedly lax or unable to keep up with Varric’s personal life over the past year.

“Thought you should know that much before you agree,” he adds, “figure that’s fair.”

“How ‘bout a trade?,” I propose, “you finish up the next installment of Swords and Shields, call it even?”

Dumbfounded, he openly guffaws “Wait, don’t tell me you actually read that trash?” and dabs his chin with his sleeve. I just shrug in response. He can call it what he wants, I’m not objecting. Never picked up a copy, myself. I just know a certain someone who, if my prior knowledge is reliable intel, loves the series.

“Sure, I’ve written most of it,” he explains, “just needs to go through a bit of editing. But hey, for you? Sure, why not.”

“Appreciate it.”

At that, he seems at ease and lies back against some sacks, apparently enjoying the sway of our ride enough to close his eyes and smirks out “…wants a trashy romance book…thought the world was weird enough.”

Lucky him.

Wish I could simply nap.

I miss that luxury.

Being constantly aware has its highs and lows…

“Least I can smoke in my dreams,” I mumble in consolation, an obvious non sequitur.

”Say something?”

”Nah,” I answer the dwarf, “enjoy your nap” and with that, I just stare back over our numbers, back at all the ground we’ve covered.

***

“…Sodding drunk…” a voice more gravelly than my own speaks, “can’t even get it up to fight.” In the distance, cheers and shouts echo off stone.

“Ancestors…Beraht’s gonna gut me, then hi…no. That bastard’ll be fine, his sodding high and mighty prize fighter.”

Thick fingers fumble with a small pouch — undone, the inside is nothing but white dust and specks of luminous blue. And suddenly I’m shoving my broad nose to the bag, huffing harshly as the grinding suck up my nostrils. Pain, it burns all the way back to my ear canals but damn if I’m not hopped up, a jittery energy coursing through my veins and brains.
‘Coke?’, I question from inside the dwarf’s skull, ‘There’s no coke in this world...is there cocaine in this world??
Could’ve been doing that instead of...no.’

No. Still bad.

Don’t need coke.

Shouldn’t do that.

As the stout man whose life I’m witnessing huffs a sharp blow of his nose, firing a chalky snot rocket, it’s then I taste that drip in the back of our throat.

Weirdly salty.

Or wait...

oh. Oh...There’s that burning oxygen taste. Was that really a bump of salt and lyrium?

Shit, that can’t be good either.

Coke might actually be the healthier option.

But then a wave through the crowd, the cheering amps up and the gears to a heavy gate get cranking — chains hefting, the gridiron grinds up its track, rising and the crowd explodes — I slam my slotted helm over my bulbous nose, the tip jammed uncomfortably against the iron, but the dwarf I am grumbles and rants “not here to feel good. Just gotta win. Sodding pretty boy Everd. Go lick some nug nuts and die of sick. Better, get caught plowing your own ass, you stupid drunk…” and grabbing a short sword, I wheel about and stomp on out into an arena to the cheers and jeers of hundreds in the stands.

‘Ohhhhhhh,’ I note in realization of who this dwarf really is, ‘Proving Grounds. Origin story. Dude’s about to hate his li…’ but my helmeted head meets with the blunt warhammer of my adversary, slamming the thought clear from my head.

”we need to talk.”

With a sniffle and cart rock, I shake awake and promptly ask anyone listening “shit. You hear the... wait, was I asleep?”

“Hmm? No,” Varric answers at my side, still lying back against ration sacks, “Just looked like you were daydreaming. Don’t stress it, not like we’re doing anything terribly important so relax.”

“Oh…okay,” I comment, only slightly reassured while thinking ‘the hell was that? Wasn’t asleep but that felt pretty damn similar to those dreams. Please just be an overactive imagination, please just be a…’

“Seriously, what’s got you so jumpy?

“I uh…” I smack like dry lips together while trying to reorient my mind but I bullshit instead “mages shouldn’t sleep where the Veil is thin. That’s all.”

To that, Varric peeks over at me with one half lidded eye and breathes “Andraste’s… don’t joke about that.”

“No joke,” I tell him and he sits upright for that, just to edge away and grumble “well, give me
some damn warning next time you let me nap near you. Don’t need that kind of stress.”

“Sure,” I mutter, still hung up on that dream. Noon sun glistening off the dwindling snowy banks, shadows at their smallest, with the rocking of the cart, I start to fall back into a listless daze until an unripened apple bounces off my skull. “Hello His Supposedly Not Possessed Lordship,” Sera mocks from behind as she slips closer, “got a question.”

Wiping at my scalp and then knocking the loose apple away, I make the poor choice of saying “shoot.”

With a snort, she snickers “bad phrasing, tellin’ me to shoot. But reely tho, you sed I shot u with the pointy bits?”

“Tried,” I shrug.

“Seriously buttercup,” Varric laments from his nap, refusing to open his eyes and truly awaken, “you really don’t remember?”

“Uhhhhhhhhhh” she groans in uncertainty like a student looking for answers in the air around her.

“Never thought I’d be the one giving parental advice…”

“ tss pfff, as if,” Sera clicks her tongue . You’re nut my mom. Hated her. Spoilt cookies iz all she ever did.”

“Just for you,” he says and stresses, “and just for now, I’ll ignore that gleaming bit of critical developmental information and skip straight to the part where I say ‘maybe you should drink less?’ How about that?”

She sticks her tongue out in distaste and looks away in a huff to which Varric commiserates “Yeah, hated that particular advice the moment it left my mouth.”

“Cuz its bad advice,” she complains in a whisper.

Eyes narrowed, flitting back and forth between the two on each side, I interject “your brain doesn’t finish developing until you’re 25. So maybe be careful with the drinks?”

“Oi why only my brain?!” and Varric smirks out “seriously. Where the hell do you even pick this stuff up? I never see you read.”

“What? No, everyone’s brain,” I fire off in split annoyance, “and doesn’t make it not true.”

“Wait! U drink allllll the time!”

“Yeah, and I’m an irresponsible…,” I argue back but pause a second with eyes squinted in calculation, “Thirty? Thirty One?”

…Did I really forget my birthday? Guess that doesn’t really matter…

“…Thirty something adult.”

“Pffftft,” she spits out a wet fart noise, “U jus want all the drinks fer urself!”

My face screws up at. Well, mostly at the fact that I don’t really know my age anymore. But pausing in consideration, I ponder ‘Easter-ish when I got blasted…Birthday is…was June 17. Been
here for...two summers?

“See! He’z gone quiet! Can’t even defend himself. His face sez it all,” she blurts and goes poking at my cheeks — swatting her jabs away, I grumble “get outta here with that. I forgot when my Birthday was. That’s it.”

“Can’t even remember his own birthday,” Sera folds her arms and pretends to get all serious, “he’s definitely been drinking too much” and Varric laughs out “she’s got you there, Knockout” in smirking agreement.

I don’t drink too much.
...I drink a little too much...
...everyone drinks too much.
Need to stop gangin’ up on me.

If there was a camera, if this was some elaborate sort of reality show, this would be the moment I’d glare right at it in frustration.

*****

Twilight, the sun in that golden hour as it creeps below the hills, most everything has an orange backlight.

I should be helping with the camp prep. Boss or no, I shouldn’t be lending a hand.

Should.

Instead I’m lurking on the outskirts, just chewing on a sprig of elfroot in an effort to get that numbing sensation to spread to my legs. I’ve grown complacent from all my teleporting over the past several months — sure, I walk a fair bit, but my legs and ass aren’t used to this degree of journeying, not anymore. Just a bundle of sore muscles and creeping fatigue.

I spit out a piece of the herb as just as Solas slips into my periphery. In apparently good spirits, he advises with a smirk “careful. Too much and you’ll lose feeling in your face.”

“Kinha the ihea,” I comment back in spite of my anesthetized tongue, senses dulled from the common weed. Folding his arms behind his back, he offers “I had come to you in the hopes of that you’d join me for a practice session, however, if you’re too weary…”

“Magih pradice?” I struggle to speak and spitting out the root, “ahrigh. I’m ehh.”

“Hmhm,” Solas smiles out, “are you quite certain? Your current state won’t be a hinderance?” and I just purse my lips and headshake. “Ah, excellent, then please, let’s step away and find a more isolated location.”

Hard to do that with an army present, but following along, he guides us to a grotto just past the bushes — squirrels hurry from our path and scamper up the pines to safety — and once out of view of the our forces, he raises his staff, gently shaking it through the air. As it gnarled roots of a focus glow, he grows more serious, tutorial in his mannerisms. “I’ve asked you here, not to practice with a staff — I think we know better — but to try your hand as casting.” Little flecks of lights floating off his branch, shimmering like fireflies, he adds “true, you know how to, however, I’ve often wondered if you could improve, learn from certain techniques or methods”
Poking my canines with my tongue, a habit I’ve acquired whenever I get numb, I just wait for him to get to his point.

“How familiar are you with sympathetic energies? The dispelling of negative auras? I ask because understanding these could quicken your already impressive skills.”

“Ah ged thyanth,” I try to communicate past my falteringly numbed tongue, “dohn rey know ah the magic termth.”

‘Science. Terms. God I feel stupid,’ I regret, ‘way too much elfroot’

“What’s this about incorrect methodology I hear?,” Dorian pokes fun as he slips through the brush behind up, interjecting on our little session — Solas, his smirk falling away, he huffs indignantly “yes. Because Tevinter is the only place where one can learn practical application. How could I forget.”

“Now now, no need to pout,” Dorian jokes apologetically and tweaks his mustache back in place, “I just meant our good Inquisitor should hear from someone other than another Souther mage, you know, for some outside perspective.”

“You certainly think highly of your abilities,” Solas argues back, trying to maintain an air or professionalism, “and what exactly is it you think you can improve upon?”

“Your staff work is atrocious.”

“Because peacocking equates to substance? Besides, we’re not covering that seeing as how he can’t even pick one up.”

“Then if we’re discussing the principles of magic, I think…” Dorian jabs back but I just sort of tune them both out. Not interested in their squabble. They can wax on theory and application but really, it’s all something I’ve barely ever gotten the gist of. Magic comes from mana but also lyrium and something about mages having a higher affinity to the Fade and…yeah. Solas pointedly asks “oh yes, because everyone absolutely must know the merits of blood magic, is that right?”

“Absolutely not! My origin doesn’t dictate my…”

Still they debate the benefits of their respective sides, never conceding, always dancing around the issue but bored, numb, irritable, I walk to the nearest boulder, just focusing on that granite mass while trying to ignore them…

“…emotions directly correlate to his output — if that isn’t managed properly…”

My palm slapped to the earthen mass, I almost see how it’s held together, perfectly imagining the covalent bonds between atoms…

“And you think you’re the one to best suited such a lesson?”

…and how to undo them, picturing each paired electron link as a lock and how to shake them loose...

“…Your modesty knows no…”

There’s that heat in my eyes, the purple igniting…

“…Surely, I’d be better than you…”
Words fade, only there’s no roar of mana, no crackling thunder on my insides...

Instead, it’s almost serene, like waves softly lapping against the shorelines of my mind, washing through me.

Not easy, but simple.

I understand this.

“Go liquid,” I softly tell the rock, tongue unencumbered by the elfroot’s effects, voice clearly channeling will through my arm, and a shimmer rolls across its rough surface — the sounds of the world return and the two mages arguing the merits of magic go silent, interrupted — wavering, the stone ripples more and more until I withdraw my hand and it bursts like a water balloon, pouring out across my boots and grass in a wash of thinned gray mud, alarming a few sparrows and sending them flapping away. Slick heels, the light in my eyes simmering down, and both Dorian and Solas stare, their staves lowering slowly in reverence or confusion as they process what just happened.

And in minor annoyance, I sarcastically grumble “great. I can feel my feet again. Wonderful!” while staring back with radiant violets.

“Umm, so…,” Dorian struggles to formulate, “you…don’t even even need to gesture or sign? I could’ve sworn that that was at the least a requisite for your casting.”

“Evidently our knowledge of magic has little use for you,” Solas sighs out and glides a hand over his smooth head.

“Really though, not even a chant? A wave hello? You just say it…and…poof??”

I shrug out “sometimes I just have to think it.”

“Gods,” he solemnly swears, no hint of a joke as he rambles more quickly, “what if you were to say one thing but intend another? What stops things from getting messy, from outright falling into ruin? What’s to stop your will from betraying your thoughts and…and??”

“It’s not like I’m not considering what I’m doing,” I explain and press my remaining thumb against my temple, massaging, trying to work out the imminent headache I’ll soon experience. “I mean, I was really focused on that rock.”


“I guess?”

“is it any wonder the Qunari came for you?,” Dorian let’s slip but to that, Solas and I both look to the man, judgmental. Quick to explain with cautionary hands raised, the fine mustachioed mage elaborates, “in the imperium, such power could have you lauded as Tevinter’s champion. Or, the inverse, “and realizes a counter point, he adds, “you could be branded a heretic. Because you’d be more powerful than the Archon, no? People in power, they do like to stay in power.”

“True,” Solas gives.

“Wasn’t like I was planning a visit,” I mutter disapprovingly, a lie. The fashion may be just as ridiculous as Orlais’ but I’ve always found Tevinter’s architecture intriguing. There’s plenty to loathe about the place but it’d still be interesting to see.

Never been there before…
....can’t just blink...

...wouldn’t even know what to focus on...
Day three. Dawn.

Packed and ready to roll on out — the front lines have already begun their advance.

We got free of the pass just last night, had set up camp at the base of the mountain.

But seeing how it’s morning, I’ve got some business to attend to…

I’ve wandered off some from the main group, stepping away from the trampled path and into some nearby forest to take a leak — wanna avoid that latrine for however long I’m able. Shoving groggily past low hanging branches and briars, through the browning leaves, I find an adequate bush hidden away enough to relieve myself on…

But midstream, there’s a tugging on the mark, unseen tethers pulling at it — its flickers of light, wordless, they read…

Rift?

A question? Even the mark isn’t certain. Interesting. But then childish giggling interrupts. With a nervous pause and just a slight turn of my head, I slowly realize there’s a quaint little tea party I’ve nearly intruded upon.

In the intimate clearing just off to the right…

A small table dressed in white linens…

Tiny fine china and silverware, all fit for a kid.

An oversized wheel of sweaty orange cheese, a flute laid atop it…

Three children, they sit at the remaining painted chairs, done up in their finest of clothing, ribbons in their hair.

A single stuffed bear doll has claim of the 4th chair, seated as a peer.

“Oh, uh, shit, sorry,” I mutter in my sleep addled state while jamming my bits back in place and fumbling with the zipper, “uh, be gone in a sec…and you all should be caref..” only then to see a sunbeam cut through the canopy…

‘watch out..’ I hear whisper in my head and the scene is revealed…

The children, corpses three, rotting in their seats. Sunken eyes and faint cheeks, dark stains dried around their withered lips. Blooms of mold on the crumpets and teacups drained…

Not a mark upon them otherwise — likely poisoned.

“Nope,” I breathe anxiously, my nose crinkling in distaste whilst backpedaling, “too…just too god damn much,” keeping an eye for traps or demons.
Let’s be honest — this is a demon.

Just too weird and dark to not be.

Can taste a lingering foul magic in the air now that I’m freaking out…

“Some pied piper horror show,” I whisper while trying not to trip over unearthed tree roots, “no thank you” and bursting out of the foliage, back out into the open, I collide with a small patrol — nearly barreling the two over in my haste to their surprised shouts of “what in the maker?!” and “Your Lordship!,” I just hook them up in my long reach and drag them with me back toward camp while growling “stay away from the tree line!”

“Sir??,” they ask back in fumbling confusion as I continue onward with them in tow, “are there enemies?!”

“Venatori?!?”

“Giant spiders?!!”

“Demons, m’lord?!!”

“I. Don’t. Know,” I growl without looking to the men in my grasp but with every hurried step closer to camp, I yell out for the commander without taking a breath, “CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN! CULLEN!” In lieu of him though, several more soldiers spy us and my commotion, one of whom immediately turns tail, running off into the heart of camp. Releasing my haul, I spin back on the tree line, staring, watching for any movement…

A lady Templar appears beside me while we wait, one of those bound to our Order after Therinfal, and asks with a salute, “Inquisitor. What lies in the forest?”

“Suicide by glamour,” I posit, still keeping a tight watch on the forestry, for any snap of a branch or rustle of leaves, “three dead kids. I can taste the bad magic…”

“Ser?”

“It’s not too heavy on the tongue…a whisper. Sickly sweet,” I exhale in contemplation of the palette. But that forest has far too much in the ways of intangible presence; Fade-touched as I am, I still can’t see the spirits or magic, but I can feel it now.

Awake.

Heart beat hustling.

“What the situation?,” Commander Cullen demands as he stomps his way over, his cloak catching wind and billowing dramatically, “a soldier relayed you had need of me.”

“Yeah…” I mutter, still glaring to the trees while the Templar beside me salutes him as well, addressing the matter “Commander Sir, there’s blood magic at work…”

Don’t know that’s the case.

“…three dead. Potential for a demon.”

“Maker protect us,” Cullen absently utters before barking out, “Find Lord Seeker Pentaghast and rally thirty men. We’re not leaving this without further investigation.”
'Lord Seeker?', I question all of one second — it's not surprising she’d take up the mantle, just surprising I hadn’t heard tell of her promotion. But as soon as that thought vanishes from my head, the Templar and soldiers present salute “SIR!” in response and hustle off to complete the task demanded. With them gone, Cullen steps to my side, his hands clasped together, keeping steady against an oncoming shake but further asking “What did you see? Give me the specifics.”

“Children’s tea party, real storybook-esque. Kids in white dress clothes, all…tulle? That crunchy thin fabric. And satin bows,” I list off the details rather listlessly, more focused on the swath of late autumn trees than my own tongue, “stuffed bear. Flute. Moldy food that looked fine until the light touched it…”

“Definitely the work of a demon,” Cullen utters with steeling breaths, “worse, one that likes to play games. And that makes it…”

“Dangerous” we happen say in grim unison.

“...Break into teams of five and study who you’re with — we’re sweeping these woods. We cannot let slip a creature of evil into our ranks or flank us! Understood??” Cassandra demands as she tears through the forming crowd of soldiers and Templars and they immediately start forming units, following her command to the letter, “Inquisitor, you and the Commander go investigate the initial site” and barking “You three! With them” at the few soldiers who’d yet to join up with a squadron.

“By your order!” they shout back and Cassandra, a hard edge to her eyes, she unsheathes her sword and tightens the straps of her shield while commanding “ALERT THE CAMP, EVERYONE ON HIGH ALERT. NOW, BEGIN THE SWEEP.” Onward we step as horns sound through the camp, bellowing their low roar. Eight teams of five, we move as geese would, an extended phalanx formation with Cass its spearhead.

“Thoughts on what manner of demon it is?,” Cass questions back over her shoulder as we tread through the tall grass and Cullen immediately posits “Assuming it even is a demon? Hunger or Desire most fit.”

“Inquisitor?,” she asks of me and I just answer “Makes sense, what Cullen said.”

“Understood,” she states before chanting under her breath, drawing upon her own power as the faintest aura of gold and blue dances up her sword…

…and those shoulder to shoulder with her.

_Blessed Blades._

_Never not cool._

‘Should prep too,’ I realize and pretend to cock my left hand, making an audible “chi-check” with my mouth.

No one gets the joke though.

Of course they wouldn’t. One or two of soldiers cast me a concerned look but that’s it, curious perhaps, but nothing more.

_My genius is wasted…_

We enter the thick of it…
“CLEAR,” one of the group’s calls out through the trees due South.

“CLEAR!,” another calls of somewhere to the South East.

Cullen’s ears twitch some with every declaration, clocking the direction and inflection as he cautiously steps under a low hanging branch I’m holding up for our group. We’re already farther in than I thought I’d gone but I must’ve still been really out it, having just woken up. It all adds up — it’s not like we’ve walked past the scene — we’re retracing my steps correctly, from the familiar foliage to my distinct boot prints. Hacking at the brush beyond, two of our party call back “Over here.”

“Clear” someone calls out in the distance, having investigated their section of forest…

As we step into the intimate clearing, just large enough to play host to the morbid tea party and ourselves, Cullen whispers “…Maker” under his breath as one of the soldiers taps two fingers to their forehead in silent prayer.

The other two, they’re on guard. Uneasy, but keeping watch. Though late morning, the shadows of the greenery are no less suspect, for with demons and creatures of the Fade, nothing is seldom what it seems, and most have know idea what’s real and fake.

Brave as this lot is, I’m certain 4 outta 5 are superstitious.

‘course I’m the outlier. Thanks, elementary school,’ I make note all the while keeping my fist locked, ready to throw — Cullen, he gingerly steps about the white linen clad table and place settings, ignoring the children for the moment, tracing a gloved finger around the rim of an overturned teacup. Smelling the substance, he asks himself “almonds?”

Nothing further just yet, he picks up one bunched up stained cloth napkin — overturning it, stains, streaked and dabbed on, a similar tone as the tea residue.

A glance to the children now — and a wince despite trying to maintain a stoic stance — he brushes his thumb against one corpse’s withered lips and brings that to his nose…

“Bitter,” he mutters and standing upright, he informs “poisoned. Cyanide. The offender took the time to wipe away their vomit. Either to get rid of evidence or some grossly misguided attempt at care for the body. Regret? Likely a trophy…I can only guess…Hunter, you said you felt dark magic?”

“…clear…” but another patrol cries out.

Inhaling deep, my nostrils wrinkle again and I grumble “still taste it.”

“Clear! Press on!” Cassandra barks out in command.

To the mark, not quite hiding it from the others present, I mumble “…you feelin’ it too?” and Cullen shoots me a silent what-are-you-doing furrow. His brow pinching, he’s waist deep in a weird he can better rationalize — a murder investigation and possible demons.
That is a horrid truth that makes sense to him.

Me, I’m just some anomalous big boy talking to the glowing slice on his hand.

But the mark does respond — two flashes.

“…how close?,” I whisper into my palm to the swift response of hectic flashing. Now that, that gets the Commander’s attention and though one soldier utters “I think we should listen to Seeker Pentaghast, Sir,” Cullen ignores them and steps around the table to lean in close.

“Hunter;” he quietly cautions, his back to the kill party, “…I have the sinking feeling we’re not alone. You should ready yourself” but as I go ask what he’s talking about, the pieces click together — over his head, I can spy the seated stuffed bear actually blink its marble eyes. As ‘whatthefuck’ yowls through my mind, my teeth set on edge, Cullen pivots hard, his sword already free of its sheath and he brings it down hard on the plushy.

The tiny chair splinters, shards of painted wood flying.

Miss — it’s under the table, clicking and gurgling at us in territorial warning but undoing its own stitches, popping free it’s jaw from adorable snout, it let’s cry some shrill, horrid yelp, blaring out like an alarm, furious and terrified.

“WHAT IN THE MAKER,” one of our soldiers screams in panic, whipping back around and slashing at nothing but Cullen roars “UNDER THE TABLE, SURROUND THE BEAR” with sword tip extended and shield raised — the others do the same, mimicking the Commander in his stance and determination. Nothing like looking to an ex Templar when fighting a demon…

Another foul screech and the chairs explode backwards, struck with such force that the prettied up bodies go flying like rag dolls — the table rocks and leaps and the bear comes shooting out on all fours, rushing the nearest living body — before we can react, one soldier is missing his face and his shrieks of pain come wailing before the shock takes him and he crumples the ground, bleeding out in the short grass, twitching in postmortem confusion as muscles continue trying to react.

“What was that??” someone in the distance shouts the question while another team yells “the demon! It’s behind us!!”

Panicking, scrambling to protect themselves from a similar fate, the remaining two soldiers hurry to hide behind trees, to put anything between them and the horrid little stuffed animal — Cullen though, he moves like this is a popular dance, rushing the beast and hopping over it, his sword raking the stitching atop its fluffy snout and slicing free one marble eye. Pissed, it hurls its bleeding face trophy at the Commander, the flesh mask slapping wetly against his shield, and taking off yet again a four legged dash...instead, it meets my boot, kicking its torso at mana-backed max strength and in an millisecond, the plushie smashes into a tree trunk, exploding in a spray of black, just painting Cullen and I with its foul juices as bark cracks. Stunned and dripping, I just hold my arms out, not sure how to better my situation. The Commander though, repulsed as he is, he has the sense to stab the doll — or whatever remains — pinning it to the tree to complete his investigation while the soldiers still alive cautiously peek out from behind cover.

"h-henric?" one asks after our slain ally but the other slaps him upside the head, criticizing "shut it! Ee's dead."

As my closed mouth just curves in an exaggerated frown, Cullen states “so it wasn’t a demon…”

Ughhhhhhh
“Sir?,” one of our number inquires.

*Ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhghrossssss*

“A cursed object…likely used as a focus during some dark ritual,” he explains and dislodging his blade, he adds “definitely the work of a blood…” but before he can finish, three teams burst through the brush, weapons raised but caught off guard upon seeing our sorry state.

“Commander Cullen,” the Templar from earlier informs while sheathing her sword, “Seeker Pentaghast found a ritual site — she neutralized the glyphwork.”

“Then I'm right.”

“God damn it,” I finally let loose, grumbling in disgust, and Cullen’s quick to agree, saying “yes, if only the Maker sought fit to intervene…”

“What?,” I absently ask while trying to scrape ichor from my beard, “nooo. I’ve gotta go get rid of all this.”

“What?”

“‘Gross,’ I mumble and start walking back to camp, smacking at low hanging branches and brambles to make my way, shoving through the teams to make my escape.

“What?,” Cullen questions again, incredulous it would seem by my attitude.

******

Courtesy of our little side quest, we started later than we should’ve and our journey just got that much longer...

Sunlight trickles past the cloud cover — though winter, the noon sun is warm enough on this side of the Frostbacks. Surprising it hasn’t killed the foliage yet.

It’s all just more of the same, regardless of the weather though…

Marching.

Marching.

More marching.

Aching legs and soles…

Sore thighs….

And the lingering sensation that I still have that toxic gunk on me despite having scrubbed myself clean.

Or rather, that, coupled with the fact that I walked into a trap with my dick out.

*Though…that’s pretty average though. Sure, cursed object, that’s new…*
But all that aside, at least I managed to get that shave. Lucky me someone had a straight razor. My only problem now is I’ve got a shadow and an irritating one at that. “Dead,” she warns, trailing some few feet behind me.

“Quit it.”

‘Wouldn’t shut up during the shave,’ I think in complaint with a twitching brow, ‘won’t shut up now...’

“Pissed on a demon,” she mocks, “dead.”

Whipping around and shooting her a scathing look, I correct “Didn’t piss on it and it was a fucking stuffed bear” before twisting back around to watch my step. Rasa though, persistent as ever, continues on to say “point exactly. Coulda died.”

“What exactly doesn’t try to kill me? I’m..I’m fucking done,” I flip my arms out in exasperation, “what happens happens and I’ll fight whatever it is, like I always do, every damn day.”

A little worried about my attitude, one of the soldiers closest me, he stares hard at the ground trying his best to pretend they’re not overhearing all this.

“Didn’t say you don’t,” she corrects, “just saying pay attention,” playing the role of concerned sibling but the minute that soldier strays too close to my side, she rasps out “dead” with indifferent intonation all over again. Teeth grit, I just glare forward in my attempts to ignore her. Those within earshot though, they’re more affected by the girl’s grim utterance, as if she’s some young deer of deathly misfortunes. Even still, as annoyed as I am, gotta admit its a bit amusing, knowing that trained soldiers have the capacity to be anxious around that little elf. “Dead,” she repeats and a few of the men actually put some distance between us, not quite willing to be around should Rasa’s statement become fact. After all, our people know that while I’m a survivor, tenacious, terrible things do have a tendency of occurring where I am...

“Dead.”

_Not gonna answer._

“Dead,” she rasps again, more irritating than helpful, and more of the soldiers vacate my presence.

“Dead,” she utters again and one particularly fed up Templar on my left, he whips back and barks “Shut your gob or I’ll box those knife ears!” in threat.

Bad move.

As quickly as the words leave his chapped lips, I lunge out, snatching that jackass by the under edge of his helm — yanking him close and cocking his chin up, to make sure all his attention is on me, I softly explain “that language isn’t condoned here. Get me?”

“I-uh-ahhh-suhh-bb,” the armored human stutters in shock, wilting under my authoritative glare.

I’m not about the hurt the man, just pissed and trying to scare the asshole.

“Got it?,” I quietly repeat and he hurriedly shakes his protected head in compliance but an interruption, a whinny and the parting of those ahead of me. Cullen, mounted on a brown steed, he comes galloping in, shouting “Inquisitor, you’re needed at the front” before casting a furrowed look at the scene I’ve made and noting all the onlookers. Pinching his brow in mounting frustration, he grumbles “why can’t it ever be easy?” before repeating his point, “…Hunter, please
just.. just follow me…”

Yeah, okay.

Jogging off behind him, I leave Rasa and the Templar to make nice…

Not likely.

…Cullen condescends “I’m sure you had a reason” and between inhales, I answer “yes!”

“And what did he do?,” Cullen asks like a beleaguered parent, just exhausted and tired of intervening.

“He was — a dick,” I huff out while continuing my pace, hustling through the parted army alongside the Commander’s steed.

“You can’t go threatening everyone who rubs you the wrong way…”

“Called — Rasa — knife ear,” I harshly exhale and Cullen just protests “and that was your plan? Scare him?”

“Better than — nothing,” I huff as smoke fills my lungs, the unmistakable harsh haze of more than just burning wood.

“Inquisitor!” a pack of scouts exclaim through strips of cloth tied about their head, improvised air masks, and hurry to my side, “there’s no one left.”

“No one?,” Cullen questions as his mount trots uneasily, fearful, while he just chooses to ignore the irritant in the air, leaving forward instead to cup the horse’s cheek in an attempt to calm the creature.

“What town is this?”

“There’s nothing on the maps,” one reconnaissance scout declares, “There aren’t any markers either, my lord.” I hide my irritation and just nod along, sauntering on by, taking it all in. Can’t correct everyone who calls me Lord. Annoys me to no end but at least it’s better than Herald. “My lord?”

Place feels wrong. More than the air….

“Sir?”

It’s bad. Know that. Can’t quite put my finger on it…

“Hunter, think and talk,” Cullen whispers up at me, totally in the right on this one. Confused by the desolation of this village, no matter how small and quaint it likely was, I ask again for confirmation “…so no one’s here?”

“We’ll search again.”

“No need,” one ragged voice calls out as a gruff old dwarf and his cadre emerge from the brush — his black beard a nest of braids and his bald head a map of scars, squinting up at me in approach, the corners of his eyes creasing, he swears under his breath “so much damn sky…” before bluntly saying “Damn you’re a big one, horn man. You the boss of this lot?”

“Oh...What gave it away?,” I say with lackluster energy.
“Heard stories — mostly about that green shit on your hand,” he brusquely answers and the mark, annoyed at being called shit, it goes to angrily flicker but I make a fist, shutting it up for the moment — only thin flickers of green lighten the cracks between my fingers. “Anyway,” the veteran continues, “King Bhelan — Long may he reign — sent us to investigate, to destroy a tainted shipment of lyrium. Trail stops here, but that’s not the end of it.”

“What have you learned?,” Cullen questions while climbing off his horse.

“There’s signs of struggle,” the dwarf growls out while twisting his war-hammer in his grip, “blood, a few houses put to the flame, but that’s it.”

“Right. Hi, I’m Hunter, and your name is?,” I sidestep back to what should’ve been an introduction. But he doesn’t seem to much care for that, replying instead “don’t matter. Dead don’t need names.”

“..cool. Edgy.”

“Look, whatever you do here, that’s your business. Us though, we’re gone. Just figured we’d save you some time but we’ve got that shipment to find. Red lyrium’s no sodding joke.”

“Uh, yeah? Do whatever,” I reply ineloquently, “no one’s stoppin’ ya.”

The dwarf just glowers, glaring up at me, then to Cullen, and back.

“Ahem, yes, well..” the Commander clears his throat, “our objectives may be aligned. You seek this red lyrium. We seek the Elder One…”

“Not here for Tevinter assholes,” he growls but with one witch’s approach, his rigid stance softens and he shockingly smirks, “Lady Morrigan,” unabashedly trying for seduction while smashing the head of his hammer to the ground to lean against the hilt like some at ease lothario.

“Lieutenant Rog,” she smirks back, though hers a teasing sort, but Rog corrects “Commander. For whatever that’s worth. So I don’t see you with that elf. You finally wised up and ditched him?

“His whereabouts are none of your concern, Commander.”

“What is happening?” I ponder while looking back and forth between the unlikely acquaintances.

“Everyone knows an elf can’t hold a candle to a dwarf — saved your elf’s ass in the Deep Roads.”

“As I recall, ’twas he that massacred that ogre and horde of dark spawn, not you.”

"idle gossip."

"I was there...or did your concussion grant you amnesia?"

Lecherous, he chuckles out “hehehe, no. There's no forgetting you. Really, give me one night, I’ll show you who you belong to…”

My face sours at that, wincing at this gross implication but Morrigan, requiring zero assistance, she promptly handles the cretin, admonishing “I am not some prize to be won, nor property to be held,” much more kindly than she typically would have and though said with a smirk, none was present in her yellow eyes.

“Ahem,” Cullen once again clears his throat, “yes...well, I advise we form a temporary alliance, join together to seek out..”
“Already said no.”

“No?”

“No,” grumbles one Commander to another, “we have our mission. That’s it. Don’t need you surfacers bogging us down.” To that, Cullen and I trade looks, apparently already exhausted with this curt little asshole. Hefting his hammer back over one of his broad shoulders, Rog offers a parting word, growling out “Lady Morrigan, the offer stands” and leaving with his silent company in tow.

“He’s going to die up here,” Morrigan smiles once he’s out of earshot, unenthusiastically waving after the heavy plate dwarf — the first genuine happiness I’ve seen on her face since baiting me back at Skyhold, it’s gone just as quickly as she turns to disappear in the crowd.

*What the fuck is wrong with these people??*

“Sir, new development,” one soldier abruptly informs our Commander — brushing the dark cowlick from her forehead, she states “it’s the well. It’s…well…bad. Red crystals growing on the inside.”

“Guess we know where some of the villagers ended up,” I utter in grim realization with a wag of my eyebrows to the grimace of Cullen. “Blasted..” he spits and stomps on into town “Stop looking for…burn it all! Raze the town!”

“Sir?”

“Inquisition Templars! Remain at a distance. Mages! Work together to contain the perimeter! Everyone else, seal the well,” he shouts in command while jabbing a stern finger through the air, “burn it all, everything! Leave no trace of the red, we cannot let an ounce of it leave here!” Before he’s even caught his breath, torches ignite and people hurry for the oil casks back in the wagons — storming past me, visibly shaken, he hisses “if you’d help, that’d hurry things along…”

“Uh, yeah, right,” I stumble in agreement, realizing how dumb I must look in all this. Cracking my neck and stretching my jaw, I ready myself, for casting fire the only way I confidently know how to — like a dragon. A few steadying inhales, stoking the embers within my mind, I can’t help but grin and go jogging into town — my course a random one, each building I come to, burned or no, I roar a harsh “RAHHHHHHH,” exhaling horrid jets of napalm, their jellied violet flames clinging to everything in their path, blazing with molten temperatures as beams and walls go up in thick plumes of black smoke, splintering from the heat. But through grit and soot, I hear the desperation of the stones, their silent wail as they shatter and melt… That song you can’t quite hear, the one that tickles the hairs on the back of your neck… it’s breaking down…

Oh damn, does that bring a smile to my gray face, to feel that lingering malice suddenly vanish, just up and die in a well deserved cook. It’s like opening a window, letting a room air out…

Soldiers are still lighting up the homes I’ve missed as I step to the well at the center of it all, raising a hand to halt those trying to board it up per the Commander’s orders. With but a upward tilt of my chin, they pull the slats back and jump back to a safe distance while I stare into the ruddy depths.

The smell is what hits me first, punching at my gag reflex — putrid, like a stew of rotting cabbage… and what liquid truly remains, what isn’t climbing growths of crystal, it’s thick like a pudding skin. Bits of bodies, barely discernible in the dim light, their shadowy silhouettes slowly float beneath that sludge of surface, backlit by the eerily evil red glow below…
But I can’t take that gasp of air I need to ignite, Not this close…

Nose wrinkled in disgust, I realize ‘gonna need a running start’ and backpedal a safe distance to the questioning curiosity of those onlooking — with one big gulp, I sprint back to the well’s lip, eyes ablaze, and I roar hard into those horridly lurid waters — napalm coating the inside, the contents within hiss in fury, exploding with steam and smoke. Leaping back and ducking down, admiring my work and frankly just stoked I didn’t get a face full of lethal blowback, I announce “needs oxygen to burn, don’t suffocate it just yet…”

The soldiers just awkwardly shift about, wooden boards in hand, uncertain what their task is.

“Just…,” I stammer out, my newfound confidence bubble rapidly deflating, “just…just wait til you can’t hear the lyrium anymore. Sound good?”

“Heard the..?” a few soldiers mutter in confusion.

‘They don’t hear the… of course. Why the hell not. Chalk another point to the cons of being a mage…’ I briefly entertain while curtly answering, shaking my head, “doesn’t matter. Forget it. Just…I don’t know, count to 100? Then seal it? Yeah.”

Fuck this.

I’m out.

Gettin’ me some more elfroot. Booze. Whatever.

…But as I slip through the telltale shimmer of countless barriers laid over one another, I pass by Cullen, his face awash in oranges and purples from the blazing ruins at my back, he stops me in my tracks but only to utter “sometimes I forget what you’re capable of” and I just puff out my cheeks and let free a long exhale, not quite sure how I wanna respond to that. Instead, I just ask back “wanna get drunk?” but he’s not of a mind. His hand shakes, even as he presses his thumb to the brand I left him — all this lyrium, regardless of its nature, it’s a temptation, a vice, a reminder. Instead, he absently comments “I think I’d like to watch it burn… I’ll stay right here.”

“You uh…you good?”

“More than ever.”

“…Yeah, that’s convincing,” I mumble to myself, one brow raised in concern as I walk away from the inferno and Commander. Don’t think he heard me though…

*****

Though darkness descended and the birds went quiet, still there the glow of the smoldering ruins just beyond camp — though its destruction a necessity, I can’t help but overhear the wary snippets of conversation, the concerned question on everyone’s lips his evening…

**Does the enemy know our position?**

Well, that, and the lesser question of how much time have we tacked onto this journey.

*Probably a whole 'nother day.*
There’s nothing to be done about it now, just to continue on as we have been, doubling the night watch and patrols. Course, that would just make more openings for a single enemy to slip through, to strike in the dead of night and prove Rasa right. “She’s not allowed to be right,” I mutter to myself, making my way back to my tent from the soup line, yet another strand of elfroot pinned between my teeth. Too soon and too small a dose to really affect just yet, but here’s hoping.

Walking through the rows of tents, a number already housing my sleeping allies, I slip from shadow to shadow, always skirting the campfires’ edge, not quite willing to get roped into some conversation or brief.

Not right now.

But in my winding, I catch a glimpse of something curious I didn’t expect — our resident hulk and a certain Tevinter mage, smirking at each other while sharing the warmth of a fire. Logs cracking and brush crackling, tiny pops and embers lifting on the updrafts, they don’t spot me.

But that’s okay.

They should have a moment to each other — cause that’s what it looks like.

‘Wonder when that started?’, I ponder of my friends while chewing on my roots, ‘didn’t even know that could happen.’

A tinge if numbness teases my mouth.

‘Good for them,’ I slowly nod in appreciation as Bull reaches across the flames to thumb at Dorian’s mustache. “Kaffas!” I can barely hear the man curse but I catch Bull rumble out “oh c’mon, there was soot.”

“Mhmm,” mister mustache hums with extra snark, “soot. Rrrright,” while urging the campfire to flare up with a sarcastic wave — if he intended to spook Bull, it doesn’t work. The man mountain just pulls his huge arms back and takes to gazing.

I have to assume.

Hard to tell since his eyepatch side is facing me.

Regardless, I leave them be and stumble on into my tent, plopping down to the sleeping mat at first glance with a dense thud — immediately shimmying out of my clothes, flicking my boots off with heel kicks, squirming on my back until my pants are off and though it takes me a few minutes more of struggle, I manage to peel my T-shirt off as well.

No modesty here.

This is my tent, I’ll sleep how I want, and how I want is nude. I get it’s still a pinch chilly outside, but whatever, that’s my comfort level. Spitting the elfroot out, sending the stiff stalk across the confined space and bouncing off the tent canvas, I splay out and shut my eyes…

A shadow passes by my tent...

Someone’s gonna walk in on me.

That’s almost a certainty.

"God damn it," I grumble in irritation while blindly yanking a thin sheet over my lower half —
massaging my throat, sore from my brand of casting earlier, I cough a few times and try for sleep...

Chapter End Notes

I hope to get my next update up in a timely fashion however there's likely to be a slowdown since I'm hunting for a new job and moving to a new state. Please bear with me. THE SHOW WILL GO ON!
Strange Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chuh…

Chih…

Chha…

That dry peeling of eyelids, that unpleasant sensation like two sheets of fine sandpaper brushing up on one another…

Shhhf

Chuh

Struggling to fall asleep here.

The skin of my brow, forearms, and neck won’t stop complaining; I may have been a touch too close to the inferno I unleashed back on that village, may have gotten a bit of flash fry, a mean tan.

Grey go darker grey when it tans?

Lost in thought, but trying to find that sweet spot — I can’t help tossing about — to get some sleep, my mouth forms a thin line I’m annoyed concentration.

Or would the pink undertones get brighter? Am I gonna get pinker?

Definitely some manner of burnt, my brow stings as it furrows.

Ow. Don’t think I wanna be pink.

Me. Pink.

...What’s that joke Harding cracked in Hakkon?
...Some kinda pink…pin..pinkuisitor.

A groan rumbles in my throat.

Sera’d never shut up.
Shit, same for Varric.
…aaand Dorian.

A huff escapes me.

They’d mock me til my dying breath.

I shift about, mushing my cheek through the thin downy pillow and little feather quills needle out, poking and jabbing. Annoyed, I get to folding the pillow in on itself a few time, anything to give me a wedge of support, to keep the horn ridging from scraping or clacking. Or worse, digging into the ground and gifting me a meager portion of soil to the face come morning
It’s happened before.

It’ll absolutely happen again.

Still don’t know the why of my having horns — they’re not all that useful.

‘Still know nothing,’ I consider but get to whispering “…know the how, where, when, and what…”

Shoulder blades fidget as I try to find that comfort spot.

“(…just not the why of it all…)”

As if feeling left out, with little flashes of green, the sliver in my palm tries to call out —
illuminating the little tent, likely giving pause to anyone passing by or the guards without, the
anchor bristles and yawns, like a cat stretching up to its human.

“You ever sleep?”

A pause, ponderous, it finally shrugs out one pulse of light.

“But you’ve gotta recharge sometimes.”

A quick double flicker.

“Can you tell me the secrets of the universe?,” I ask it, no longer bothering to keep the volume
down, “can you tell me the why of things? You know stuff, sure, but do you know the other stuff?”

If the anchor could glare, could fix me with a “fuck off” look, this would be that moment —
barring that inability however, it instead just grumbles out little bits of light in no particular pattern
or sequence.

“Helpful,” I smirk out sarcastically before loudly asking the guards posted beyond the tent flaps,
“people outside. Can you tell me the secrets of everything?”

A confused shuffle and the quiet clattering and squeaking of gear — they’re obviously staring at
each other, trying to figure out if I’m serious — one woman finally asks back “Lord Inquisitor?”

“Not a fan of the name, but yeah,” I answer back from my probe position.

“Uhh?…” her companion puzzles out and she stutters “uh, sorry, what?” But they remain at their
post, clearly intent on not entering and actually joining with me to wax philosophy and existential
dread.

“Do you know why things are how they are?,” I press the question again, staring to the low tent
top while the mark flickers in annoyance at being ignored.

“Specifically?,” the male guard outside asks, his voice cracking an octave, likely younger in years.

“Regarding me. Why am I here? What abstract forces colluded to place me here, here at the
middle of everything? Why me? Why not someone else? Was it intentional or merely some cosmic
joke, a crossed wire of some grand and terrible sort?”

Can’t help but smirk at that line of talk — what else can I do? Not smile? If you can’t smile in the
face of madness or insanity completely upending your existence, casting you to the storm winds
like so much dust, then what’s the point?
Succumb? Never. Gotten too close to that too many times now.

“Lord Inquis,” the deeper voiced — the woman — of the two starts but I shut it down, blurting “Hunter please. Just Hunter.” The other isn’t having any of that — though their silhouetted posture relaxes some — they quickly correct me on the matter, “doesn’t matter how high up your Lordship may be, even with your permission, the Lady Ambassador would have our right thumbs if she heard tell of such im..im?”

The other assists, saying “impropriety” and the man whispers a quick “thanks.”

“Pfft,” I raspberry at their shadows on the tent, “she’s sugar incarnate.”

“As you say, sir,” one of the two answers back in concession. Can’t even have a decent dialogue. As ironic as it is, I find myself missing Silence.

“Now he can hold a conversation,” I huff out half a monologue.

“Ser?”

“Doesn’t matter. Thanks anyway,” I relinquish them of their need to talk and whip my hand back out — squinting against the glow of green, I ask it kindly “would ya please just knock me the fuck out?”

Okay. So more gruff than kind. Whatever.

Don’t even have to wait for the signal — I just fall back into my head as my body goes dormant.

*****

So…

I know it’s only been like a week but I really miss wandering through other’s dreams.

The weird places…

The chats…

Getting a sliver of insight into peoples’ psyche…

Well, most. Not everyone’s. That one dream of Dorian’s almost took my eye out — just wall to wall erections. But seeing how I don’t wanna get swallowed up by what I can assume to be every demon of the Fade, I’ve gotta do what I’ve done most every night…

Living on a very lucid repeat.

Enjoy the memory of a shot.

Savor the buzzy harsh of a joint.

Melt into the couch cushions.

Nice.
Easy.
Little boring.
Pretty boring.
Really boring.

‘Straight Up Stagnant,’ I mumble in discontent through a smoke ring, weighing what Solas mentioned during his one and only visit here, “Yeah, kinda.” Sure, it’s likely well within my power to change this place, to reset the scene, but I’m not exactly eager to put in the work — it was exhausting enough just setting it up how it is now and I never even got to the walls of it.

And outside? Courtesy of all that long drudgery, the marching, I don’t really got it in me, physically, to switch things up.

Not right now at least.

Maybe later.

Falling into the second lull of the evening, I lose myself to the smoke and ambient thumping of the nonexistent bar below.

The minutes tick by, but they’re only crawling.

*****

Face mashed against the cool glass of a window that looks out to nowhere, I drum two fingers against its impossibly clear surface.

“Five more to go,” I absently as a note of static whines through the intercom. My fingers stop, on edge. Last time that thing on the not-really-a-wall called out to me, there was a killer in my bedroom. Not a knockout, not some killer beauty, no. Just an actual killer.

But that’s it. Nothing happens.

No whispers of danger.

No cries of help.

“So...okay?”

Enough time passes and I go back to my drumming.

*****

Pacing about, I keep finding myself standing before the doorway, the only exit out. And while it’s not connected to any wall — it stands apart from much else — I can hear the occasional banging on the considered exterior.

Muffled howls.
Muted screeches.

Stifled roars.

But only if my ear’ up against the damn thing.

Eye pressed to the peephole, there’s nothing but black, churning and rushing by that little convex speck of glass. So for all the apparent activity beyond, all that demands entry to my little pocket of protection, there’s nothing to see.

Squinting, I reevaluate “or is that…no. No. Definitely just more Storm wall…”

_Is it though?_

“So what if it isn’t?”

_THAT’d mean something. That’s what._

“Wha’d’ya mean?,” I ask myself, continuing the dialogue, “like it’s…”

_The demons?_

“Fuck,” I breathe, backing away at the possibility — with how much they’d been hounding me, it’d add up that they know where I’m hiding out. Doubtful this place can really be overlooked…I mean, it is the old Nightmare’s kingdom that I gutted and renovated. Slap a new coat of paint on a condemned building and you still know what’s under it…

_Just fuck._

This only goes one of two ways.

Either I’m on this side of the door for the rest of my natural life.

Or…

Or they inevitably find their way in.

I’ve gotta take a seat as those options really sink in for me — catch my breath, look at the facts, come to terms with them.

“Screw that,” I exhale in weak protest…

*****

Still mashed into the couch, reclined as far as the beat up cushions will squish back, I just stare at the clock, trying to focus on something more than the ambiguity of my potentially tenuous position here.

Don’t know why I’m doing that — it never helps — it’ll never speed along.

Okay.

Death or boredom.
Even this is getting old.

Boredom it is.

Sanctuary is fine and all but without change, what’s the damn point? “GOD DAMN IT,” I go to shout at my personal void but the weight of the couch abruptly shifts, something plopping down on the other end and whipping about to know exactly what, I find myself face to face with a rather tan elf — immediately I’m flipping back over the armrest, scrambling to get my distance while yowling “AGHHHH.”

Lunging back up, my fists at the ready, I find my intruder hasn’t moved.

Isn’t moving.

Isn’t even breathing.

I shout at him, just barking “AHHH” in hopes that he’d flinch or reveal anything really…

Still nothing.

He’s as unchanging as everything else. Only difference with him is his truly devilish grin and long lashed gaze, staring imploringly to where I’d just been. “Who. In the hell. Are…” I question while inching closer, never letting my fist drop. Long dirty blonde hair with a single looped braid, soft features, three black tattooed curves run down his left cheek. Definitely a roguish sort, and whoever he is, he’s got twin daggers settled in his belt, long and narrow, good for getting in between plate.

There’s something about…

*Really. Just…*

*Who…*

*Are…*

*You…*

*Then it clicks.*

“Z-Zevran?!” I blurt out, confused as to why my subconscious would suddenly drop a person I’ve never personally met, why it would cherry pick a companion from the first game. Waving my hand before him, trying to get any sort of reaction, I’m disappointed to find nothing.

No dilation of his pupils. No breathing. Like I said, just nothing…

Just a life model construct here to keep me company? That’s the only way I can figure it, and so with a look to the sky, I ask my world “this cause I said you’re boring?”

Nope..

No rumbles.

No quakes.

Nada.
Then glancing to the mark, I ask the little sliver of bonded light, “and this ain’t you, right?” It flickers out once in a confusion, an obvious no.

“No?”

Twice now, confirming that no.

“Course,” I grumble and head back around the countertop to snag a drink, “lucidity and doors, that’s what you’re into…it’s this place. That’s the culprit.” However, rounding the corner while looking back at the elf, I face-plant, toppling right over something hunched down to the floorboards. “Fuckinggoddamnwhat!??,” I spit while pulling myself up by the counter edge, “this wasn’t fun two minutes ago. Still sucks now,” but as I massage my jaw, I find what I tripped on.

A shock of fire red hair and thick braided mustache a vibrant splash of color against this bleached world.

Heavy plate armor, the color of tarnished copper.

Rosy cheeks.

It’s obviously Oghren under all that wear and tear, yet another companion plucked from the first.

And of course he’s frozen mid lick of a spilled wineskin.

“Yeah, that’s uh…well,” I debate while pouring myself a clear whiskey, “I guess that’s what you’d do.” Orzammar dwarves may be famous for their drinking, but he’s a goddamn king when it comes to that. A genuine lush, a functioning, battle-born of an alcoholic, so it’s not out of character that he’d hate to waste a drop. He is who he is. “Don’t even know if you’re still alive,” I ruefully remark while stepping around the dwarf and making my way back to the couch, “did you even survive Awakening?”

No answer, obviously.

I toast him anyway, raising my rocks glass an inch and grimacing. Taking a sip, bolstering myself for the apparent unbidden walk down memory lane, I ask out “c’mon already. Just send down the next contestant.”

There’s no discernible change.

“Well?”

The world rumbles and flickers, a tiny quake rippling through it all and suddenly the tv clicks on, its static filling the air.

“Heeeeeeeeere weeeeeee goooOOooo,” the tv crackles, somehow imitating a gameshow host before suddenly clicking off. Should find that unsettling — Instead, I get more of the same, and in an instant, my mock apartment gets a lot more crowded. “Noooooo,” I groan low and spark up a joint to cope with this nonsense, “…it’s a friggin’ invasion.”

Wynne, the gray haired woman as recognizable as ever behind her gentle smirk and wizened gaze. All that, and she hides a slender white wine bottle in the crook of her arm. Alistair, he’s simply come into existence in the kitchen, caught mid fanning nonexistent flames over the stove top, his brows pinched in worry that he’s burned yet another meal for the group. A younger Leliana, still in the sunset pallet frock of her lay sister days, she’s up on the counter, legs dangling, a silent laugh
upon her face, amused by the bastard’s antics. And beside her, Isabela, our dearest pirate, an arm draped over the shoulders of the young woman, a cloying smirk on her lips more directed toward corrupting the lay sister than the royal bastard.

“So really. This isn’t you?” I ask again in disbelief of the mark but before the little lightbulb can answer, even more arrive. Anders, frozen in a sulk, he’s hunched over...

‘...him?’,’ I mentally groan for as little as possible while taking another long drag.

I. Do not. Care. For Anders.

Regardless of his state of mind, whether pre or post possession by the Spirit of Justice, Anders has always irritated me to no end.

His fashion sense.

His constant moping.

His ability to always say the wrong thing at the worst time.

But at least he’s just outside the apartment — not at as if there are any walls to contain us — just staring morosely off into the blank white beyond.

Sten, that humorless, hornless qunari, he stands solemnly upright in what counts as a corner, an ugly scowl deep set in his face. Though he stands alone, apart from the others, he isn’t without some means of enjoyment — not so secreted away in the palm of his hands, a single sugar cookie peeks through the cracks of his thick fingers.

“Ten bucks says you’d try to kill me,” I casually comment while breathing smoke up in his face as several more become fixtures in the rapidly crowding apartment. Merrill at my left, at the window with her Lady Hawke, their arms around one another as they seemingly gaze at their own reflection.

Taking a beat to ash my joint and swirl my drink, I can't help but think 'good for them.'

Fenris, his turquoise lyrium tattoos in flux, facing away as if guarding the two. Despite the wine bottle in hand, his crossed arms and sneer read as anything but ready to party. Think that’s just his default setting though…

And then I spy Varric, a Kirkwall era version, just a few years younger than he is now. Less smile creases, not a single touch of gray in his pulled back hair… though pilfering my liquor stores, he’s locked in an over the shoulder look back at his favorite of champions — the admiration’s palpable, you can almost see the tall tales and hyperbole flowering in his head...

...whatever he can spin into a story.

I just keep looking back and forth, trying to map out who all is arriving…

Bethany clad in her Grey Warden blue and steel, she looks to be locked in an attempt to comfort the endlessly depressed Anders to zero success.

“That’s wasted effort if ever I saw one,” I hum out dispassionately and pivoting some, I spot Aveline, mid stomp around the island countertop, her frustrated growl only further emboldened by her strong jaw, her frustration aimed directly at the beardless dwarf, her greatest of aggravations.
‘Or would Anders win the coveted Frustrate-the-City-Guard-Most award?,’ I briefly reconsider and let out a cough, letting the weed do its work…

But then a surprise guest arrives to my little shindig — Loghain, well over a decade younger, he's taken a knee down on the floor, maps unfurled and in hand, an out of character look of thrilled satisfaction upon his face as he studies past his long dark locks. Though, he always was one for charts if his approval in Origins was any indicator, it's still an interesting sight to behold. “Hope you’re doin’ okay,” I mutter down to what’s essentially a statue, “Weird to say out loud but I’ve always found you impressive.”

But that doesn't mean I’m good with all this.

So spinning on my heels, I mutter “Cool, Cool,” in resignation into my drink as my nostrils flare, “I love statues. Super cool. Mhmm.” Letting that burn get at the back of my throat, I ask “this it? Missin’ a few” but as I take a final stinging gulp, Morrigan and Wan fill in some extra guest slots, almost on top of me and I fumble my glass. Him upon the coffee table, all tired eyed from the endless nightmares but even still, he’s got a defiant gleam in his eyes. He looks like a man that’s beat the odds time and time again.

And he knows it.

“Holy shit,” I breathe — he’s the real deal, “you’re actually…I mean, seeing.. wow.”

His dark hair trimmed short, likely to give nothing to grab ahold of in battle, he looks good in silver and blue, all Warden chain mail and leathers. He wears it well. As for his less than friendly lady love, her hand is upon his shoulder, but she isn’t looking his way, no. Her mouth hangs open, likely mid insult directed at Alistair’s failings in the kitchen.

But that’s expected.

“So…done yet?” I ask the absence of sky.

It thunders but nothing else — while I want to think it a response, it really could just be the storm wall grinding some interlopers to oblivion. I mean, I know demons still want me, still want in. Could very well be them killing themselves to get at me. ‘What’s new,’ I weigh indifferently, ‘c’est la..life. Such is life.’

However, looking around once more, I note I was incorrect.

Not everyone’s here.

No Sebastian — I’m okay with his particular absence.


Shale? I lean forward to look around but it’d be hard to miss that hulking mass of sentient stone. Whatever. I’m not overly concerned and maybe that’s what this place is picking up — appearances or absences could be tied directly to my feelings of each of these people and indifference is the dam.

Maybe.

It’s all up for speculation at this point but a dream is still a dream, regardless of one’s lucidity.

Whatever, don’t need em…
...crowded enough as is.
Assholes. Murderers. Drunks. And not a single one can hold a conversation.

‘Thanks for the wax museum,’ I nearly speak the sarcastic thought aloud. “So… this is great and all, but could ya actually stop?”

No response. No change. Still, there’s 17 people here I didn’t exactly invite. But in lieu of that, the mark flares up, flashing all with its vibrant green — the electronics crackle with static as they tune through frequencies.

But then the door slams, despite never having actually opened. “UGH,” Cassandra abruptly complains from the spot in front of the door, absolutely soaked as if she’d just been caught in the rain. No armor or leathers, her attire again seems to mimic my own. Black jeans and a loose T, she wipes her hands through her wet hair, complaining “This again?? Hunter, I’m not ready to talk ab..Oh!” but she cuts herself short, apologizing “I didn’t realize you had company.”

Water pools at her feet but I’m too caught up like a deer in the headlights to offer anything. Can’t help myself, I’m frozen like the others in this moment as she scans the room of guests in a daze before recognition sinks in and she gawks out “Leliana?! What are you doing...wait. What is this?” True, this isn’t the Leliana she knows — about a decade younger — but she can’t help but step to her friend, studying the time locked scene. “What is this?,” she repeats, looking back at me.

“A. Dream,” my answer comes out staggered.

“Obviously. But what is this,” she demands I elaborate. Flicking my hand through the air, green light trailing after it, I comment uncertainly “pretty sure you can blame this thing. It’s this place, using this to uh... draw on... my...errm.” My purple eyes fasten on her, trying to stifle the imminent twitch creeping into me as I attempt to keep from saying that final word. I didn’t want it to go down like this, granted I never gave it much thought, but I know I didn’t want it to be like this.

Her pointed brows pinch, she stares at me with the utmost of irritated curiosity and shock.

‘Now you talk, idiot,’ I try to inspire myself. Trying to get my mouth to cooperate, teeth clacking softly together as I try to form the words, I ultimately follow through, managing to get out “… my...uh...memories.”

With that, I hold my breath. This may be a dream but I can’t help but perform this simple gesture. Her mouth opens and closes, no words; the scar along her cheek contorting with each motion. Pursing her lips, she considers exactly what I’ve just said. She blinks a few times more, her dark eyes struggling to find answers and clues that might hang in the air — as I uncomfortably shift in place on the couch, she abruptly shouts out “wwWHAT?!?”

Taking a decided inhale for courage on that still lit joint — it’s a dream, it’s always lit — I reply through a stifled cough “Yep” almost meekly.

“No. You do not Yep me,” she demands but can’t form full sentences as she jumbles out “You?! How is? What?! EXPLAIN.”

“Any chance of you pretending you didn’t see this?,” I ask her all the while pointedly thinking ‘I blame you’ at the anchor. “Zero,” she demands with lucid finality, standing her ground. Flicking my smoke past Aveline into the sink with an extinguishing hiss, I fight past the dry mouth to say “mmm ugh, I hmm.” Not comprehensive or articulate in the least, I try again, muttering awkwardly just above a whisper “how...do I...know them?”
“Louder.”

"How do I know them."

"Yes! How do you know them?"

"I know them...", I pause to carefully choose my words, not entirely sure what to even say, "...but not the usual way?"

"What does that even mean?," she drags out, her accent weighing heavily as she grows more impatient.

How the hell do I say this?

What the hell do I even say?

Hi, I play video games...

...all these people, and you, were in one.

Yeah. That's not getting’ me thrown in a padded cell.

"So there's a..." I try to explain...

an Xbox..hmm console? 

"a machine."

That you play...errrm

RPG...

that you download...no..

"...that you put...special books into.."

Slick.

"This machine then lets you witness the story...as if you were a part of it."

Fucking yes.

Digesting that bizarre information, Cass questions "I’ve never heard of...If such a thing were real..."

"yeah?"

"...why would you choose Leliana?"

That actually throws me for a loop. Going through the motions, eyebrows raising and falling as if I'd blown a fuse, my mouth moving but not speaking, I just gawk out "huhhh?"

"I was not aware that she even had a book," Cassandra comments, almost sounding envious of her friend. "Nn..no, she," I stammer out incredulously, throwing all in on this, "Look-look at the rest of the room. Look who's here. Just really look." Scanning the guests for any sort of familiarity, her eyes happen to fall on Varric first, only to scoff "Of course. It would be his book. Like everyone, you read The Tale of the Champion because..." but she slows down, really taking the time to look around now. "Wait," she speaks — more to herself than to me — with a waver in her tone, "Not all of these people..."
“Yeah?”

“Leliana…”

“Mhmm.”

“The Witch…That Hornless Quna…King Alistair?,” she questions.

I just nod along, lips mashed together in trepidation.

But then she gasps, "The Hero…"

"Mhmm."

"Of…Ferelden," she fangirls in awe just above a whisper. Anxiously approaching Wan the Warden, she squeaks out a timid “Maker” with every step she takes closer to the elf. Stealing my spot on the couch, she finally has her face to face. “This is him. He’s right here. All the time I spent tracking him…”

I don’t say anything. I’ve got nothing.

Reciting from memory, she can’t help but utter "...Escorted from the Denerim Alienage to the Ferelden Circle at the age of 4…"

Whoa.

"...seldom played well with others, he was bitter about being a, and I quote, captive of the tower,” she continues, recalling her extensive and exhaustive research into the man from when he was marked to lead the Inquisition, "From what Cullen has told me, despite his aptitude and capacity for all branches of magic, Wan had but one friend during his time in the Circle, a human mage by the name of Jowan…” Taking a measured breath, she continues on to say “the very same mage that would use blood magic to escape and go on to poison Arl Eamon.”

“Least he got outta the circle.”

“no,” she disagrees with a sigh, “though his conscription freed him, Leliana said being a Warden weighed heavily on his soul. For all the good he did, he still felt shackled. But even with such a responsibility, he tried to not let it define him. Pragmatic, loose with the rules, almost improvisational… Actually, now that I think about it, I’m embarrassed to say you two are very similar…”

“Huh, how?,” I ask even as I ponder ‘did my playthrough influence Wan’s personality or is it merely coincidence?’ for truly that’s an existential dilemma if ever there was one.

Cass takes a second to consider the overlap but finally concludes “you both use magic in ways that aren’t the standard. You, with your…consumption of demons — among other things — And he…,” she seemingly struggles to confess, “…he is a blood mage.”

Wait.
I didn’t plug that option in.
Holy shit.

"but like you, he uses the dark for good,” she runs a finger down his exposed forearms, tracing over the numerous slash scars, “he learned it solely to defeat other bloodmages, to combat Jowan…”
I just stare now in awe at her words, at this elf in this new light.

“He actually commands their blood to stay in their bodies, negating their casting. It’s almost brilliant,” she continues on to say with some reverence for her apparent idol, revealing information I was never privy to, “fighting fire with fire, as it were. Dangerous though it may be, foolhardy even, he has never agreed to any Demon’s terms.” Contemplative, she goes quiet for a time after that, merely observing this elf before her, but finally, evidently satisfied, she stands and actually says “As mad as this all is, thank you.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re welcome. No problem, really,” I answer back, still boggled by how this night has developed.

“And you said you saw him through a machine, that you don’t personally know him.”

“Pretty much,” I don’t lie, “it’s not like he knows me.”

“Hmm,” she hums.

”...you good?”

”...I...yes.”

”Yes?”

“I am...but I should leave,” she utters while walking to the door, “I’ve much on my mind” and as I comment “yeah, I get it,” a stack of envelopes materialize, peeking out from under the door, shoving up against the toes of her boots. Before I can react, even question what’s happening, she’s already crouched and collecting the pile — almost as if in a trance, she squints and reads the fine print…

“Hunter...”

“Yeah?”. 

"...Doyle..."

My heart stops.

"...Slutter..."

No. No no no.

".Cray’s?

’Fuck. My. Subconscious,’ I stress, ‘the dream’s too real. THE DREAM’S TOO REAL.’ Eyes wide, mouth agape, I just eyeball the floor in distress and shame as my stomach knots up but it doesn’t take long for her to shout "HUNTER DOYLE SLUTTER CRAYS?!”

“Uhhhhhh,” I stress and that upset wipes the room, deleting all the statues that’d been carefully placed and curated. We’re alone again, just us two.

“Do not ughh me,” she demands across the room, holding the letters up as proof, refusing my groans of delay.

“that’s um...my mail, yeah,” I comment to her lack of amusement but recognizing now’s still not the time for shortcuts, I answer in full, “Shit. It well...it’s...it’s my full name.” She cocks her head
at me, her stance just screaming “don’t you dare think to stop now.” Threat well received, I explain in a long winded groan “didn’t need the whole thing when we met. Just needed to be the vashoth everyone sees me as and…the Doyle Slutter Crays part didn’t really fit,” but screwing my face to the side in reconsideration, I comment “scratch that. Crays could’ve worked. Kinda sounds right” and my arms flop to my sides in defeat.

Her voice low, nearly a growl, she questions with a hard edge to her tongue “What do you mean by ‘the Vashoth we saw you as?”

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Oh no.

So this is happening.

Her eyes are yelling at me.

‘Idiot,’ I insult myself and manage to eek out “cause…I’m…not?”

In a corner…

Just gotta…

Waving to the couch, I offer “so…You should probably take a seat.”

“I’m good here.”

“Oh..kay…,” I retract the gesture and approach the other side of the counter top, the only thing dividing us, and bracing myself against it, white knuckling the edge, I answer “So… this isn’t me.” Her eyes narrowing, I try again, better explaining “I’m not what I look like. N-not Vashoth. Definitely not Qunari. And I don’t like my name — don’t know what my parents were thinkin’ when they came up with it” while shaking my head.

“Stay on topic,” she warns, “we having a serious talk. Do not minimize it with jokes.”

“Right, right. So this’ll sound crazy…heh, crazy. Just bear with me…” I say with a single nervous laugh.

She just eyeballs me, all stern and severe.

‘All in,’ I urge myself on all the while speaking “so let’s say I’m not from around here. Like, not from Thedas around here. Not the Fade, not…just…I’m from another… world? Reality? Dimension. Something,” and though I wince at how dumb that sounds, I convince myself to continue, “honestly, I’m still lost on the whole getting me here of it.”

Cass just stands there, expectantly.

“Fine. Twist my arm, I’ll try,” I try again to diffuse the tension. That’s not happening. Her eyes twitch a little in irritation. “…so best I figure it,” I try to describe something despicably complicated that vexes me still, “let’s say there’s multiple universes. I think. But for this, let’s focus on Thedas and Earth, two worlds. Then the conclave blast — that I accidentally set off — sent all sorts of shockwaves out across…th…so waves hit me on Earth and punch me..across that cosmic…divider..but backwards? Yeah. So I end up in the woods before the conclave even…”

Taking a pause, squinting at my ceiling, I try again to make it simpler and throw my fingers up with each bullet point, to not sound like such a moron.
First finger, “Conclave explosion creates shockwaves.”

Second finger, “Shockwaves ripple out across realities.”

Third finger, “They hit me, displacing me from Earth to Thedas, right?”

Adding my ring finger, I say “somehow, that puts me in Thedas before the Conclave but…” and throwing my pinky up to make five, “but I end up at the conclave, causing the blast that pulls me here in the first place.”

‘Huh, weird. Not so nervous anymore,’ I realize that the knots in my stomach are gone, that I’m not gripping the countertop, ‘just feel stupid.’

“You,” Cassandra finally speaks, “are insane.”

“High chance,” I readily agree.

“You truly expect me to just believe that? What part of that makes any sense?”

“Quantum mechanics,” I drop, “sure, yeah, it’s hard not to overthink it. Hell, just thinkin’ about it makes it worse.”

“You have brain damage.”

“Probably?,” I don’t disagree, “…mmm hold on” but before I can figure out the means, the world works for me — the TV clicks on, skipping through channels, each a series of color bars accompanied by a high pitched whine and static until, like a news reel, a memory focuses…

“Ah, good morning New York,” an upbeat newscaster narrates with the production values of public access as the camera pans across the city’s horizon, “are you ready to start the day?”

Caught off guard, mail still tightly clutched in hand, she slowly moves across the room until the television is in full view — as skyscrapers loom, that city of steel and glass, their prismatic glow shot from multiple angles with cars honking in the streets below and millions hustling through the intersections and sidewalks, most glued to their phones…

“Up next, the weather” the pleasant voice continues to announce, “but stay tuned to find out more about how a puppy saved one special girl’s life!” Way to softball in that fluff piece.

“W-what is…” Cassandra hesitantly questions but it goes flipping through several stations more of color bars until landing on PBS, just as The Count in all his purple felt glory cackles out “..Two! Ah ah ah. Three! Ah ah ah” but it switches up again, clicking randomly until a still shot snaps into view. It’s not a real channel, but just a single frame of the outside of my apartment in Queens. As we watch, just looking at the row of rundown apartment buildings in the midst of several construction zones, I elaborate “here is based off of that.”

Next channel — an old documentary on Carl Sagan, caught right as he explains “…if you want to make an apple pie, first you must create the Universe…”

Next.

A memory of younger me, hurriedly combing my hair in front of a mirror to get ready for elementary school — my sister pounding on the door, yelling through the key hole “MOM SAID YOU’RE TAKING TOO LONG! WE’RE GONNA LEAVE!”
“JUST A SEC!” kid me shouts back, frustrated he can’t seem to brush the bed head out...

Click.

“wait!” Cass tries to stop it but too late, we’re already on the next channel, the family farm in Nebraska — the camera pans blue skies, slowing fading in a montage of different shots.

A pair of pickup trucks in the driveway…

A sea of corn dividing us from the neighboring farmsteads…

The two story farm house with its tin roof — no longer under reconstruction, its rebuilt in full.

Power lines trailing off into the distance…

Almost idyllic.

“You’ve seen most of this before,” I comment in an almost blasé manner, “uhh…questions?”

“wwwWHAT?!!”

“Was that really a question? Felt more like a declaration than..” I try to joke but she stomps over and glaring up at me hard, she hits me on the the chest and demands “No jokes. No lies. NO HALF TRUTHS. What is going on? Tell me. NOW.”

“Yeah, not joking…” I say in all seriousness, “You just saw a few bits of where I’m from.”

Trying to process, she glares at me, waiting for more.

”Uhh? Uhh aside from the lack of magic and a few industrial revolutions, they’re kinda…sim…eh.” I cant even finish that sentence — the differences between our worlds are as stark as Night and day. “Where I’m from, there’s no demons. Only humans. Lotta humans..like, too many humans. No magic so we’ve got advanced technology…” I elaborate and plop back down on the couch to get comfy, to at least enjoy the barebones of my apartment in the face of this awkward talk.

No more words, only a confused fire in those dark of hers, she grabs the door handle and somehow, that snaps us both awake...

*****

Eyelids tear open in shock and a cold sweat forms. I just look to the top of my small tent with my heart only beating faster and faster. I can’t help but panic whisper “thefuckdidIjustdo?!! ThefuckdidIjustdo..” to myself only I pick up the sound of determined boot steps storming my way…

“Seeker!,” the guards posted outside salute…

No inner monologue, my mind goes blank.

“Move aside,” she commands and forces her way through, tearing open the flaps to my tent and just glaring down her nose at me. Awakened as rudely as I was, she didn’t take the time to throw her gear on before tearing ass over to confront me. She’s hard to read but she’s definitely mad.
Definitely confused. No time for me to say anything — not that I can form words at this moment — I just know that thin sheet isn’t giving me any of the comfort or protection I thought it’d afford me.

“Follow me.”

“And what’s that for?,” I uneasily question of the pair of swords in her clutches.

“Now.”

She’s not messing around.

And I don’t want to get stabbed...so not about to disobey her, I twist out of my sheet to her sudden dismay of “PANTS! PaaAnts!” and quickly looking away, her creeping blush diminishing the appearance of her ire.

“What?!”

“PANTS! Put on some pants! Just..just do it!,” she again shouts in exasperation so I twist about, snagging my one pair and throwing them on with gusto — not wishing to watch me squirm, she quickly departs and I go crawling after her, just a touch embarrassed, myself.

The guards look confused.

Good. Guess that makes for everyone involved.

*****

In a clearing on the other side of a stagnant pond, its surface rife with algae blooms, so separated enough from the Inquisition that we need not concern ourselves with anyone overhearing and a clear line of sight of anyone approaching, Cass takes a measured step and tosses her second sword at my feet. “ready yourself,” she warns. Still questioning what the hell is happening, but not eager to further piss her off, I slowly crouch down, unenthusiastically taking the weapon up — leather-bound hilt in hand, I awkwardly shake at it until the sheath slides off.

I’ve never excelled with actual sword.

I’m still not left handed.

Still uncertain, I hesitantly inspect the longsword, its veridium metals darkly glinting in the moonlight.

“Raise your sword.”

“No thanks. I’m good,” I frown but she states “Do it” terrifyingly calmly, like the eye some great storm.

As I worry out “what is even happening?” she draws her own blade and takes a two handed stance, it’s sharpened edge held powerfully before her, ready to strike. Cassandra, even underdressed — barefoot, leather pants, cloth bindings covering her chest — she’s a reckoning by her own right and
not someone I actually want to ever face off against.

*This can’t be hap…*

She rushes me, slicing in an arc — I stumble backwards just in time, totally unprepared despite the warning signs. As I try to regain my footing, she rushes for a second time, sweeping past me and I drop low — throwing myself forward, grass and dirt grinding against my knees, I spit “whatthefuck?!” but she’s already on me, swatting at my good arm with tip of her blade, making a small cut just above the bicep before leaping back to take a defensive stance.

“So. Hunter Doyle Slutter Crays,” she slowly recites, all the while pointing her tip at me, “where were you born?”

“Easy. Omaha,” I answer back but it was her feint — sword lunging, she quickly closes the gap, bare feet flying over grass and I have to evade anew.

Twist.
Side hop.
Drop.
Roll
All the while, she shouts “and where is Oh Ma Haa?”

“Earth! Damn!” Rising again, brushing the dirt from my bare shoulders, my thigh winces in protest. I’ve been cut again, her well oiled blade easily having sliced jeans and flesh. Not deep, it’s just enough to bleed. “CASS,” I hiss through grit teeth at that realization but she demands over me, “How do you know this world?” but as I try to answer back “a console...a machi” she flies at me anew. Sword cutting overhead, she means to bring it down on top of me but instinctively, a barrier explodes through my flesh and dropping my sword, I grab at hers, yanking it from her grip and hurling towards the pond while kicking at her...

She takes the hit, but moves with it, letting it propel her back to a safe distance...

Steely eyes locked on me, not the least bit perturbed by her lack of a weapon, she asks “And can you actually see the future?”

A blue aura takes to her palms…

“No,” I flatly reply, shifting my stance so that my left side is all that’s facing her, better able to defend, “only saw what the game…the machine showed off, but we’re way off the beaten path now.”

And then I make the dumb error of letting my eyes close for even a moment…

She quickly closes the gap, intending to strike me in the face but I manage to grab her wrist — her free hand, she drives into my chest, stuttering my heart as she electrifies my blood. As I flounder back, off guard, she impresses upon me her close quarters combat skills, jamming her knee at my thigh, mashing the long slice and forcing it to dribble up with red. My leg buckles, trying to keep me upright but she twists in closer and drives her elbow deep into my guts…

Fight or flight kicks in.

I blink...

And it’s not my intention — I have no target in mind — but we both splash down in the shallows of the creek just outside Flemeth’s moldering and long abandoned hut, some hundred miles north of
where we just were. Mud and grit squishing between my toes, gripping tight at my chest, I shout “FUHhhhhhhhhck” in frustration into the Kokari night, scaring birds awake and from their nests in a frenzied flutter. Teeth grit, really feeling the overlapping cuts, tiny as they are, I growl to the universe “JUSTSTOPIT.”

“Then answer my questions,” Cass coolly stipulates, unbothered it’d seem by our change of locale.

“That’s what I’ve been doing!,” I shout back and flip her my remaining middle finger to no effect — that gesture means nothing here.

“What are you?”

“I’m done.”

“Answer.”

“What’s the point?!,” I shoot back, “You’re jus gonna keep whaling on me.”

“Answer the question,” she demands and steps closer, her powered palm at the ready, and paling some, sweat starting to bead on my brow, I answer “…human.”

I can survive most things — her weird Seeker ability is another beast entirely, skipping right by your defenses, completely ignoring whatever tolerances you should possess.

“If this other world truly exists,” she questions with her palm still extended in threat, “how do books on us exist there?”

“I don’t know. I still barely understand how I got here,” I try protesting and twist about, pissed and looking about for answers, just dumb enough to turn my back on her in my frustration. “Your theory then,” she comments, inexplicably behind me despite having made zero splashes, and as I spin back, she places her charged hand against my bare chest, just over my heart — nerves shot, pulse racing, I’m certain she’s about to lay me out…

Half naked.

Ill suited for this.

Vulnerable.

And then the worst occurs, the utterly embarrassing. My body betrays me — getting stiff in this rather dire situation, trapped against denim, I glare in disbelief at my crotch and cry out “ooOH NOT NOW.” And then I trip. Snagging my heel on a submerged root in my hasty backpedaling, I plummet ass-first into the cold, filthy waters. Cattails and tall grass bent at my sides, pond scum pooling in my lap, my cheeks and ears burning in humiliation, Cass just stares down at me with mindful eyes.

In this dim light, at his angle, there’s almost a red tint to those dark irises of hers…

“Make an educated guess,” she states again, all steely intonation, and I blurt out “how am??… dreams?! Dreams make the most sense?!” while trying to cover up my shame.

I’m done.

I can’t fight her.

She lowers her palm to her hip.
The moonlight casting a halo to her shadowed form, she finally answers “I believe you.”

Baffled, pissed, honestly too many emotions to count while soaked, I just gawk up at her and she sees fit to undersell “…advanced interrogation is one of my areas of expertise….and the way you answered, it spoke of truth.”

Blinking in shock, stunned silence, I try to process what she saying.

“Hunter?”

My brain refuses to cooperate.

“Can you answer me?,” she asks, concerned, a totally different person that the one mere minutes ago.

“…You beat me up. That’s your solution?” I question in distress but she merely comments “please, look at yourself, you’re already healing.” At that, I glance about, hurriedly twisting about with water splashing to study the cuts and bruises, only to find them already gone, the scent of burning ozone fresh where they once were…

“Truthfully? I’m not certain you can die.”

Grumbling, my brow becoming fixed in a scowl, I comment “unless you’re the one coming at me.”

“Pfft, if you get mad enough, your mana tends to mends you,” she points out what should be obvious, “and I just had to hear it my way to believe it.”

I should be more surprised. More pissed. But I just feel deflated, drained. Even my scowl sags. I’d shiver but I’m just too emotionally fatigue to even register. But I do manage to comment in a whisper, “So…you gotta know you’re crazy, right?”

“Aren’t we all…,” she sighs and crouching down to meet me at eye level in the swampy dark, not overly concerned with her pants getting any more waterlogged, she offers me her hand. The aura, the charge, it’s gone — no threat on this one. Hesitant, but starting to understand, I take her up and she hauls me uptight…

As swamp waters drips off me, the cold wet starting to work it’s way through me, she proposes “so how about taking us back?”

“Uh..ok,” I shakily agree. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be feeling…

I know I dropped several bombshells on her.

I know this was all beyond expectation.

I know it’s flat out weird.

All of this is weird.

But I also know she’s telling the truth — this was all just a test.

Some bizarre test.

…but she doesn’t lie, not that I’ve seen. If she doesn’t have an answer, she usually just doesn’t say anything.
I’ve gotta remember that.

“Hello, Hunter Doyle Slutter Crays, it is good to actually know you,” she greets me as if it were our first introduction, and I can’t control my mouth, can’t help the stupid smirk that tugs at it. I don’t wanna smile, but I do as I reply “Cassandra Four Middle Names Pentaghast, I think it’s nice to meet you too.” She rolls her eyes and an easy sigh escapes her but getting in close, she looks up at me and touches my cheek, asking genuinely “can you forgive me?”

“Cass?” I ask but realize I actually know the answer, stating more definitively “y-yes. Can you forgive…”

“I do,” she professes, “I now understand your hesitancy to share your origin. It is a confusing matter. If I gave it too much thought, it may consume me with questions…but for this night, I’ll leave it be.”

A frog croaks somewhere along the shore.

An off-season firefly flickers nearby.

“We have an odd relationship.”

“We truly do.”

And for a minute or two more, we stand in those muddy shallows as minnows dart past our feet, swamp life returning to the status quo as crickets return to their nightly chorus.

”Sorry about the…” I start but drop to an embarrassed whisper “the erection.” At that, she coughs and — avoiding eye contact — replies “I..ahem..it was unexpected.”

A mosquito buzzes near my ear.

”Your secret is my secret,” she promises sincerely.

”The...erection secret?”

“No. Not that! The other secret!”

’Oh. Right. Duh. That makes more sense.”

“Yes, duh,” she adds “But as much as I am enjoying this intimacy, the mosquitos are starting to…” and I’m quick to agree, “Yeah, let’s… let’s get outta here.” Taking her smaller hand in mine, I smirk a tired lopsided grin once more and blink.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait.

In other news, ohmagawd, this chapter.
The sun creeps through the flaps of my tent, finding my face and slowly forcing me awake, bothersome enough to eject me from my dream cage. Squinting past the blinding light, I roll away and spy Cass still huddled nearby…

We’re not sharing a bedroll, just a tent.

“Last night…actuahhhhly happened?,” I yawn, still in disbelief that any of what went down, that my subconscious mind forced the issue without my actual say so, and how she kicked my ass across a hundred miles to get the truth.

And despite all that, we’re good.

The confessions came out — secrets revealed, she knows who and what I am in full.

What more, she seems to believe me.

I can’t stress this enough but...

She.

Believes.

Me.

But still in the shadows, snoring softly with her neck bent somewhat uncomfortably, she doesn’t stir — it’s still just early enough that most the camp hasn’t awakened yet. There’s no hustle and bustle, no idle chatter, just the occasional passerby or patrol, keeping their voices low should they deign to even speak.

But I’ve gotta pee.

And though my swamp soaked pants are bunched up in a wet heap in the corner — I’d peeled em off before crawling back under my single sheet to the red faced embarrassment of Cass — pretty sure I’ve got a solution.

“… laundry day….,” I mouth to myself, letting the mana creep through and with word becoming reality. As it was with my boots back at Skyhold, I’ve manifested a clean pair of jeans right onto myself, the water logged ones in the corner vanishing just as quickly..

Considering I manifested them back in the Fade, they’re clearly a spell of sorts. Or spirit material. Don’t know, don’t care, it’s all dryer fresh. Can’t help but smile at that — laundry done easy — and careful not to disturb her, I creep from bed, no longer nude, popping my head out and shushing the guards before they can address me.

They nod instead and return their watchful gaze outward, propping themselves up with battle axes — slinking between them, I begin my morning stroll… And again, it’s not like I’m shy, I just want to stray as far from the camp latrines as possible. The nose blinding odor alone is a crime.

Besides, what’re the chances of stumbling into another actual crime scene?
“Pretty high,” I remind as I reach the forest, edging around deciduous trees, morning dew still clinging to their bark. “pretty damn high.”

Know what? Bring on the murder scenes, bring on the bad. I can take it. I’m just in too good a mood to let the horrors and abstracts of this world get me down.

For whatever shitstorm tries to rain on me today, at least Cass knows who I am — actually knows me for me.

“She knows,” I smile and stretch my arm overhead, “she knows and I’m not dead.”

And I pause — now would be the opportune time for a higher power to smite me if such a thing were possible. But the moment passes, no lightning, no searing correction, and my smile returns.

Still in search of a bathroom break, after a couple minutes of stepping through brush and tall grass damp with cold, I happen by a decrepit stone archway, it’s curves nearly swallowed by moss and held intact by vines. But it’s not a demon I spy. Instead, I find Solas curled up like a cat in a sunbeam, napping under the ancient archway of green covered stones and browning wisteria…

“Hmm,” his eyes flutter awake and he shakes free of his apparent meditation, “Ah, Hunter, I was just curious what dreams this structure held…” He’s quick to make certain I know his intent,

“Makes sense,” I shrug out, somewhat jealous of the mage — where once I could wander the Fade, I’m now restricted. ‘Lucky him,’ I tell myself as he asks “are we continuing our journey?”

“Nah, just…”

_Gotta do bathroom stuff._

“… taking a stroll. Go back sleep. Ya got another hour or so.”

“My thanks,” Solas expresses and shifts some, trying to find a comfortable position yet again, “Please enjoy yourself, there are many wonders in the world one can find by simply wandering.”

I nod, not necessarily in agreement, but mostly to hurry along the conversation — I wasn’t kidding about that bathroom break. And so I continue onward, making my way to privacy…

*****

Things are actually looking up.

I’m not hungry.

Not really thirsty.

Barely sore from the fight last night.

Even my burns seem to have vanished.

Some kind soul even offered me up his speckled mount for this leg of the journey…
This is a good day.

It could be a great day but a light rain picked up about an hour into our march, it’d been nothing but gentle breezes all morning carrying some lingering touches of autumn, the winter winds leaving us well enough alone. Least there’s that to be thankful for — the drizzle is unseasonably warm.

Trotting up on my right on some dark mare, the creature swishing its tail this way and that, the Seeker sits saddled, all battle strapped in leathers and steel with a water resistant cloak about her shoulders. Belted long swords, a shield lashed to the her mount, her gaze roves over the sea of dampening infantryman, mages, and Templars before she whispers my way “so…”

Wiping a few drops out of my eyes, I smirk out in anticipation “you’ve got questions” but my brow knits together with the sudden realization of how much I just sounded like Solas. He may be a friend but he’s not someone I really aspire to be, not with what I think I know of him.

But that’s another matter for another day.

Again, she eyes the crowd and confirms “…yes.”

“Alright,” I reply while swaying gently to the pace of my warhorse, “How ‘bout we roll with small questions first.”

“You mean…things that won’t arouse,” she starts but pauses as another grouping of people stray too closely — I jump at the opportunity to joke “ha, you don’t wanna be aroused?” A few of the soldiers glance our way, curious at my words, but it’s Cass who reacts most strongly. Ears burning, lips pursed in embarrassment and aggravation, she slowly ticks her chin towards me and glares daggers.

A snort escapes me but I stifle it down, not exactly apologizing “sorry, it was too easy.”

“You are anything but,” she grumbles, “you are the definition of difficult.”

“Yeah yeah… so questions that won’t arouse suspicion? That’s what we were figuring out?,” I ask after her — I can’t imagine she’d be willing to ask the more discerning of lines out here among all these people, Inquisition though they may be. She may be blunt as hammer at times but she’s not without some measure of tact.

Nodding in silent agreement, her flash of irritation fading, she seems to ponder it for some time as more and more droplets wet her dark hair. Minutes tick by as we move by more and more soldiers, passing even a rather damp red headed fife player furiously blowing away, trying his best let his woodwinds melody inspire the spirits and pace. A round man, an unkempt beard hiding a quarter of his instrument, he doesn’t strike me as one typically found with that type of flute, but I realize that’s just me stereotyping. He’s good and keeping those within earshot engaged, marching to his very lively pace, that’s what matters.

But soon we move away enough from even his sharps and Cass finds her moment, asking “do you miss it?”

Presuming it means home, I don’t hesitate to answer “yeah.”

“Without going into too much detail,” she asks between our horses’ back and forth nickering, “tell me of it.”

My mouth twists to the side, deep in thought. It’s minutes more before she revises her question, saying “later then. What of…religion?”
“Woooo, that’s a heavy topic,” I shift uncomfortably in my saddle but she relents, saying instead, “Technology then.” I nod and agree “yeah, okay. I can talk tech.” With that, I take a breath, clearing my head, trying to figure out how the hell I’m supposed to broach such a broad topic. Finally though, I find my voice and I utter low and slow “so…let’s see…okay. It was like this, all castles and feudalism and monarchs minus the magic. Then a little over a century ago, there was an industrial revolution.” I hold, glance about — no one appears to be listening in — and I continue “suddenly people are inventing new weapons, new vehicles, new everything, things that the world hadn’t seen before. Horseless carriages, airplanes, submarines, radio, electricity, means of production…” So long as my explanation doesn’t sound like a Ken Burn’s documentary, I’ll be satisfied, and I keep on to say “Each decade saw a boom in progress. Buildings reinforced with steel instead of wood, indoor plumbing, powered homes. Then came television — what you saw some of my memories on last night — everyone buys one, signals are transmitted, and everyone can watch the same shows or get the news or the weather forecast.” I pause again to wet my lips — there’s no chapstick handy in this world — but I continue one, “telephones. People have these tiny blocks of metal and plastic — you can use them to talk to anyone around the world in real-time. Phones got advanced enough now that you can do just about everything with one. Banking, order food, watch the news, and if you’ve upgraded your home enough, it’ll integrate with that, allowing you to operate most of your house when you’re not even there. Let’s see…other stuff…other stuff? Oh, right, travel. I mentioned airplanes — we buy a ticket, board a skyship, and fly across the world. Pretty safe. What takes days is cut down to mere hours. Oh! And engineers and scientists even managed to make a ship that leaves the planet entirely. We’ve gotten people to the moon.”

I realize I haven’t been looking her way and I take a breather to observe. Her eyebrows are halfway up her forehead, her eyes only slightly dazed, she’s just watching the ground before here horse, listening, and I think impressed or awed. I give her a few moments more to collect her thoughts and she finally questions “are…are they still up there?,” more concerned, it sounds, for their wellbeing. “Yeah, they came back; they were fine. Nowadays, we send people up to this international space station. Bunch of countries contribute. The astronauts onboard study the stars and cosmic events, space debris, trying to calculate the age of the universe, among other things, while orbiting the planet.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What? The world isn’t flat part?,” I start to ask after her but she cuts in, scoffing “Obviously. Go North enough and you end up South… no, I just meant it’s all so difficult to imagine.”

“I can talk about something else if ya want.”

“No, it’s difficult, yes, but it sounds all so…fantastic. Easy”

“Here’s a not so easy one. People have been working toward manufacturing artificial intelligence for years. A man made ghost in a machine. Some want to make it as lifelike as possible, others warn that it’ll end our entire existence if it gets smart enough.”

“Why would you make…” she starts to question but shakes her head, muttering “never mind. If something can be done, someone will try to do it. Many men seek to be gods in their own domain.”

“Eh, I guess.”

“Pardon, but what are you two talking about?,” Solas inquires, a thirst for knowledge and insight thinly veiled in his eyes. ‘OoOofuck,’ my brain hisses at his presence, stressing secrets potentially heard. “…forgive me if it was an intimate conversation, I meant noth,” the bald elf tries to recover, to impress upon us his well meaning intent but Cass interjects “its just a game, Solas.”
“A game?,” he asks softly with a slight lift of his chin, “what manner of game? I fear I didn’t grasp the rule structure.”

Cass sighs, “You think of a device or tool that doesn’t exist and describe how it would operate. Imaginative inventing,” a quicker ruse I’ve never seen. She’s good, had that ready to go on the spot.

“Interesting,” Solas hums and strokes at his smooth chin, “And is there a point structure?”

“Points are given based on how radical and foreign the idea is,” she explains without making eye contact — if he studies her face, he may see through this — but she adds, “double points for realistically explaining how such a device would be powered, function, and it’s affects on society.”

Wow?
That…that solves a lot.
Everything can be a hypothetical.
Cass, you’re good.

“Hmm,” he ponders for a moment, striding along beside my horse, his long legs greatly assisting his pace, “I admit, there are so many wonders already lost to this world, it’s difficult to conceive of entirely new ones…”

“Internet,” I blurt out under this guise of hypotheticals — don’t know why this came to mind, but I pretend to play along regardless, saying, “a vast interconnected communications network in which devices — be they hardwired or if wireless, using a low frequency signals — to convey information in the form of images, text, music…or…” but I slow to crawl, trying to reign in my more eager self. After having not talked about my origin for as long as I have, the daily conveniences and such, it’s a bit difficult to just turn off the font of information my mouth wants to ramble out. Solas though, a thoughtful expression stilling his face, he comments “in my dreams, I once witnessed the ancient elves of Arlathan using spirits in such a way, passing knowledge along to all corners of their empire. But alas, such a means has long since corroded.”

An odd revelation comes to mind, hearing what Solas just said. ‘Are spirits programs?’, flits through my head, racing to bridge gaps in my knowledge I didn’t think I had, ‘did Elves code the spirits? I mean, they act like programs, performing simple functions…’

“If I understand the rules correctly,” Solas posits, his voice distant as try to process this bizarrely comforting idea, “you don’t get any points this round, Inquisitor.”

And that info spirit in the Fade…
…how I changed it’s nature through interaction.
…overriding, resetting…

Her voice distant as well, Cass covers for me, debating “I believe he should still get a point — no one but you, Solas, knew of such a setup.”

Spirits are code?
Demons are malware?
Is that it?
Is this actually the case?

“Heh,” he distantly chuckles, “true enough.”

‘Does any of that actually matter though?’ I ponder as Solas draws me back, asking “Inquisitor?”
up at me, calling me yet again by title instead of name. Shaking away the thought, uncertain what to even do with that potential at present, I sputter out “Hmm? Oh, uh, yeah, I’ll take the hit. No points for me.”

“Ah, then is it my turn?,” he asks of us through a pleasant smile, enjoying this “game” of imagination and principles. To him, I nod, urging him on. “Wonderful. I’ve often found birds to be something on an inspiration, how lightly they hang upon the breeze. If possible, a contraption that mimics the creatures, fueled perhaps by lyrium to grant lift and distance. A flying machine.” Cass and I share a look, both silently noting the fact I’d already spoken of airplanes. But Solas couldn’t know that, he intruded too late in the dialogue. “…if such a vehicle could exist,” he continues to theorize, “trade or travel could become much more steadfast.”

But I’ve gotta burst his bubble — I ask “what’d it be made of? What material is light enough?”

*Aluminum.*

“Hmm, I’m afraid I must concede your point,” Solas concludes through a continued smirk, not disheartened in the least. “… While I’m no smith, I admit I don’t know of a material both light and strong enough for such a venture. This isn’t to say such a thing will never come to be produced, however.”

“Of course. The future’s a murky thing,” I comment somewhat recklessly.

“To all except you,” he points out, still looking ahead, and I spy Cassandra tense up on the side.

“Nah, even to me,” I try to deflect, “can’t know everything.”

“If you say so,” Solas speaks softly, not disagreeing, “you would know better than me.”

“Ughh, it’s my turn!,” Cass abruptly blurts out rather loudly, demanding — or rather redirecting — our attention, “a map.”

“A…map?” Solas and I question in near unison but she shushes us, explaining “shh! Quiet, both of you! Now, this map, it would update and correct itself as you travel, accounting for new information or what was never drawn in the first place. I have to imagine that…ugh…magic would be its….”

And so the game continues.

****

Though a ruse to throw Solas off our true meaning, it had helped pass the time while offering me a limited means of revealing details of my world to Cass. Nothing of tremendous import was revealed, just enough to keep her mind from bunching up in knots.

But night has fallen and camp since set up.

Though still a few droplets fall from the sky, it’s done nothing to diminish the din of campfire talk all around, soldiers drinking and shouting, laughing into their cups. Frankly I’m stunned I haven’t heard Bull boom out just yet. But approaching midnight now, Cass barges in through the tent flaps, groaning “Ughhhh, finally!” in relief only then to realize the posted guards are still within earshot. She shoots me a follow up raised brow while nodding in their direction.
“Yeah, you’re right,” I nod in consideration with partially folded arms, “we’ll need a change of venue. But where? What of…hmm…How about the absolute middle of nowhere? Where’s nowhere? Emerald Graves? No. Back to Flemeth’s? Hmm..Hissing Wastes? It is night, should be cool by now. So…what’re your thoughts on sand?” Crouching down, rummaging through an oaken trunk of gear and supplies, shoving cloaks and coats aside, moving some unworn leathers away, I find a small cache of dried rations and a bottle of red wine — the bottle I underhand toss back to her.

“Sand? I don’t really…and wine is nice but…,” she dances around the issue but I get what she’s going for and I further explain “a little something for the road.”

“Then we’re?,” she hesitates, not finishing that statement lest someone should decide now to interrupt our plans. Nodding in silent confirmation and throwing a blanket over my shoulder, I then hold out my hand — her curiosity beating out her concerns, her fingers slide in between mine — strong but smooth, it’s almost difficult to think the thoughts I require…

But a notion creeps into my head, that a slight detour is necessary.

Brecilian.
Where I first touched down.
Right at that giant old tree…

Without warning or saying so, I just…

Blink.

We simply pop into being in that very first clearing, scaring a family of deer from their late grazing and they go bounding into the darkness, leaping over logs and brush in a graceful hurry…

Night’s been here just a few hours longer, the ancient trees stretch tall into the sky as if reaching for the moon…

We’re alone now, just the two of us, and I lead her to the mighty oak that once stopped my hard fall. Split down the top, it somehow still lives, its old wound grown over with sheaths of fresh bark. While running my fingers down the old tree, feeling slight traces of the magic carried in the lightning, she states the obvious of “this is not a desert” and I have to explain “Nope, but welcome to the Brecilian” and turning back to look at her, “this was where I first landed. Half dead, a big ass spider did it’s spider walk over to me, ready to chow down…I was still high, thought it all a hallucination.”

“And then the Elven clan found you, saved you.”

“Kinda. This one woman, Winter, she sticks the creepy sucker fulla arrows, accuses me of trespassing, and ghosts out. Meanwhile, I’m still stuck on the fact she’s an elf considering they don’t exist outside works of fiction. Anyway, few hours of dizzied or lost consciousness later, the clan comes in, armed to the teeth. Fortunately, their keeper didn’t see me as a threat. Eh…what am I saying, you saw the memories.”

“It’s still nice to hear your take on them,” she hooks her arm through mine and touches the tree as well, “do you miss them?”

“Sometimes. But Winter was really the only one that got me. Everyone else tolerated me.”

A slight snort escapes her as she jokes “Perhaps your clan and I would get along then.”
I breathe out a smile at that and after a moment of introspection, reflection, I ask “ready for the next stop?” No answer, still arm in arm, she pulls herself close.

And…

Sand…
That mountain ledge.
Facing East…
The Hissing Wastes…

Blink.

Much farther than before…

A wash of colors die on the periphery horizon, curving around the sides of our mountain from behind — sunset has already ended here. Dry airs, the humidity of the East stolen away, but it is cool. I was right, with the setting of the sun, this desert of nothing but buried thaigs would lose its blazing heat despite cooking all day. In the shadow of a cliff, halfway up a jutting mountain, we look to the East, tiny pinpoints of campfires or torches in the distance despite the bright night, the millions of stars quite visible in the cloudless sky. Inquisition may never have made it out here, but we’re here now, in solitude, in safety. Squatting and tossing the blanket down and smoothing out the folds, I use the cliff face as a prop, some somewhat comfy place to relax. “Care for some?” I offer up as I try to uncork the bottle, trying to act aloof despite my quickened heartbeat. But before I can fail further at my one armed attempt, or before I can use magic — or revealing how flustered I am — she crouches down and steals it away, dexterously plying the cork loose, crumbling the wax seal as she does…

Taking a sip and handing it back — I wasn’t suave enough to grab glasses — she abruptly asks” so, where did you say this was? I can’t say I recognize it.”

“Hissing Wastes. Figured it’d be empty enough out here. Plus, we can see people coming from miles away if they try. Pretty sure there’s Venatori out here still.”

“What in the Maker’s name would draw them here?”

“Dwarven Thaigs, Ones built on the surface. Treasure. Doesn’t really matter, they won’t get it.”

“Dwarven…you mentioned these once before. In Crestwood?,” she questions, “and what makes you so sure?”

“There’s a pretty mean dragon that way,” I answer, pointing off to the North East — I go to taste the wine, trying not to let the glass mouth ding against my teeth.

“It’s difficult to believe this isn’t all some elaborate hoax…”

“What? With where I’m from? Yeah. It’s real,” I give her the disclaimer, that I’m only rolling with facts from here on out, no half truths or misdirects.

“Okay…so there isn’t any magic where you’re…” she begins to ask but still pauses to glance about for eavesdroppers as if it’s second nature after doing do all day, even though no one else is here, “…how are you such a powerful mage? Was it purely the result of the Conclave?”

“Maybe that? Maybe it was me smacking into that mirror? Jury’s still out on that one,” I make a hypotheses and take another sip. She hums in consideration and I further say “how about this, when we run out wine, we head back? Until then, you can ask me whatever you wish and I’ll
answer it.” She mulls that over, taking the bottle back, and sticking it out of my reach, wedging it in between some sand and rocks, she agrees, “yes, I believe that would work.”

“You think you’re slick?” I smirk out at how she’s already bending the rules to her advantage.

“Oh, I know I am,” she boasts and then moves on to her second question of many, “So this other… place. Tell me more.”

How the hell do I explain…

“…so you already know about a buncha tech — quick thinking earlier, by the way. A game…”

“Thank you but it wasn’t quick. It was one of several ideas had devised for talking out in the open,” she admits with a slight scowl but relaxing some, she urges me on, “took me all morning. Hmm, anyway, you were saying?”

It’s hard to pin down an exact topic — most of what’s impressive about the world is our innovation. But I figure one thing to go on, explaining “know what? Let’s talk medicine. Since we don’t have magic or instant healing potions or elfroot, doctors have had to really figure out anatomy, disease, viruses…how to actually fix the body and combat illness. Not tryin’ ta brag but I think we’re a few centuries ahead of the doctors here.”

“You don’t have to be so smug about it…”

“I know, but…oh, back at the Winter Palace, I saw women and men who had actually shellacked their skin! I mean, I think that was actually a trend a hundred years back…”

“What do you expect? They’re Orlesian. Besides, you could teach what you know,” she tries to sell me on the matter, “you claim no formal training, but you could share your knowledge.” To that, I shrug and hold out my hand, waiting for the bottle — pinching her mouth to the side and narrowing her eyes, she reticently concedes, pulling the drink back from out of reach but as she hands it over, she demands “tell me something completely different. What is the most interesting thing you’ve witnessed in Thedas?”

“Dragons? Actual magic? Not a big fan of all the fighting, or the multiple attempts on my life, but most of this world is pretty damn interesting. You know, also the fact that you’re real. Between punching literal demons and seeing you, my mind felt a little broken.” Squinting with a furrowed brow, I change my answer, “a lot broken.” It takes me a moment more, but I finally come to say the grandest contrast I can think of, “it’s weird to think I matter here.”

“Well,” she almost snorts, “of course you matter.”

“Eh, I don’t mean in the ‘I matter to some family members and a few friends.’ Nah, I mean, it’s weird to think how many people know about me, expect my help. You may be used to it but I don’t think I’ll ever get there.” Continuing on, I say “Example, despite the conveniences, I wasn’t all that happy back there. I was bored most days. When I wasn’t working a job, I was drunk or busy getting high, or just down in the bar under my apartment, doing those same two things. Wasn’t like I was addict, just didn’t…I don’t know, really know what I was or should be doing. Pretty depressing sounding now that I say it out loud. Sorry…” A fake smiles creeps to my face, a try at deflection.

“If you were so unhappy, why not seek other meaning, or different work?”

Pretty sure she’s not plugging religion right now — sounded more genuine. “Uh, never went to college or trade school — kinda hard to pin down a dream job without those. Just wasn’t motivated
enough to go back and try.”

“Then…” she puzzles, “tutors? How else do you know as much as you do?”

I try to reach past her, leaning some to snag the bottle but she blocks my hand, gently, and with an imploring stare. “That Internet thing I mentioned during our game. You can learn just about everything on there. Fall into a damn click hole if you’re easily distracted…”

“Interesting,” she hums, her brows pinching in thought — now she hands me the bottle, allowing me a second swig before stealing away again. “Your world revolves around machines. Tell me, what of the one that allowed you to witness this world, to see our stories…”

“It’s technically an entertainment system. Can be immersive, sure, but I doubt anyone was ever sitting there saying ‘wow, look at these real people in this alternate universe.’ They’re just there to…” For a split second, the disconcerting thought ‘players get real into the romance though…’ bolts through my head before I finish my sentence, saying “it’s like watching a play.”

Not even close, Hunter…

“So people other than you know of me?,” she asks, sounding a bit disturbed.

“You’re a celebrity,” I shrug, “that really all that different from what you knew already?”

“I suppose not.”

Taking a breath, pondering how to better describe something like this, I decide upon a different route, to explain something closer to home for her. “But these books,” I say again as a euphemism for video games, something she can immediately comprehend, “let me break it down. For example, the 5th Blight, there was really always only one ending — the archdemon is slain.” Another breath, another segue, I hold a minute to collect my thoughts and say “…but then there’s all the different chapters written leading up to that point. Nearly endless. That Wan was the one conscripted, not Hawke’s cousin in that Circle, that it wasn’t an alienage elf hellbent on revenge against the shems for…really heinous misdeeds. That it wasn’t either of the Cousland children if they escaped the Howe betrayal. That it wasn’t a sick Dalish elf, poisoned by a tainted eluvian or a casteless Carta dwarf or the middle Aeducan child… it’s all possibilities and choices…and the one that happened to happen was the one where an Elven circle mage is forced to take up the mantle of Grey Warden.”

She needs a drink after that — quiet, she plugs the bottle to her lips and pulls deep while absorbing this rather disorienting information on potential.

She needs a minute so I go on to explain “Then there’s another book, the legend of Hawke — Dragon Age 2 — that she was a rogue instead of a mage sealed her younger siblings’ fates. Bethany would live where carver would die, broken by the ogre darkspawn thing. That she was a Marian instead of a Garret….Regardless of the choices she’d make throughout her years in Kirkwall, it would always end in one of two ways — being forced to support the mages… or being forced to support the Templars. Her narrative, while explosive, was always a bit more contained.”

“…And what of our Inquisition?” she asks the hard question, “what of Its…its story?”

“Easy. It wasn’t ever supposed to be me,” I smile out with a touch of sadness in my eyes, “Four supposedly unyielding, concrete options for whomever would grab that foci in the Temple. Four. You’ve got Trevelyan, Lavellan, Cadash, and Adaar. Regardless of gender, skill, or disposition, it was always one of them. And when Adaar found me free marches, I figured she was my best chance to get home, something, that I may as well follow her to the Conclave.”
“...And you knew what would happen.” It’s not an accusation, she says it more as a matter of fact. At least that’s her tone. Regardless, I feel the need to apologize “With the blast and The Divine? Yeah...I didn’t know when, just that it would. Hell, I’m still trying to get a handle calendars here. And...look, I’m sorry I couldn’t save her. I tried. I failed.”

“You could have told...” she tries to tell me but I shake my head as my eyes go dry. I’m at a loss for tears as of late, too much has happened in my time here, but as I rub at them with my wrist, she concludes “We would not have believed you” in understanding.

“Or thrown me in jail...where you tossed me anyway.” Glossing over my jail quip, she asks “Then with your memories... when you found Adaar? When you found her dead, that was you realizing things had changed?”

“Told ya you’re quick,” I comment, pleased but not at all surprised, and continue to say “thought I was gonna die. I mean, I never even saw the other three should be’s. Maybe they burned or just never showed. Guess it doesn’t really matter.”

“Even still, you stayed and helped.”

“Ehhhhhh,” I groan out and teeter a hand, “help’s a strong word. I was a touch more selfish than that. Really, I just thought the Breach might throw me a clue about gettin’ home. Can’t say I was thrilled about nearly dying with every new adventure.”

“You do manage to get injured quite often,” she agrees but in realization, speculates “Wait, in the Hinterlands, your... theatrics...regarding that Elven artifact, that was all just some trick then?”

She’s taking this all surprisingly well.

Teeth grit, I nod.

“You...were quite convincing.”

“thank you?,” I meekly question, not sure if it’s praise or not until she passes me the bottle yet again.

*Not withholding. Probably praise?*

“You scared us — you, the only one capable of closing the rifts, were laid out, shaking, seizing up...”

“Mmmmsorry,” I apologize and nudge her with my shoulder — taking back the bottle and raising her eyebrows, she expresses “do not be. That was quick thinking.” A silence settles, both of us uncertain what more to ask in the moment. So in lieu of talk, I shimmy until I’m lying down, just watching the night sky, devoid of light pollution.

“You...okay?,” I ask.

“When this is..is all over, what will you do?”

It doesn’t feel like she’s passing judgment.

Nor is it bitter.

It’s simply and exactly that.

A question.
“Don’t know,” I shrug out in earnest, “got caught up thinking ‘bout the now and the past. Haven’t really been thinkin’ of the Future.”

“And what of your home? Your world…don’t you wish to return?”

I thought I knew my answer, that of course I want to get back, but I’m not all that surprised when I hear myself saying “I…don’t think I do?”

I really just say that?

“Truly?,” she dares but then I ramble

“don’t get me wrong — I hate being the Inquisitor. I hate how many people want me dead. I hate that there’s an ancient monster actively working toward ending the world…” and flipping my hand out, to let the mark join in, I add “…and that this bad boy’ll one day kill me.”

It flickers slowly, ashamed with itself, like a dog with its head held low…

“Aww, I don’t blame you! I blame the circumstances that broke both of us,” I console the mark as Cass merely watches from the sidelines in fascination, an audience member for now.

It pulses twice, three times, four…

“Yeah yeah, I hear ya…”

I don’t, not really.

“…but hey, if we didn’t get together, this world’d already be dead.”

Again it flashes, twice in realized agreement.

“We are the neosporin dabbed bandaid on a grievous stab wound,” I quip rather darkly about our situation and ability, and turning back to Cass, I answer “But yeah, think I’m staying here.” Then with a shrug, I add “would really appreciate the ability to pop back over, to say hey to my family, let em know I’m still alive. Or even just to snag some music. Maybe some drugs, maybe a binder chock full of how to’s so I can bring this place into the next century, maybe…” but she jabs me in the shoulder, scoffing “I get it. There are things you want.”

“Feel like I really gotta stress how much I enjoyed no one over there trying to kill me.”

“Yes, you now live a dangerous life,” she rolls her eyes — guess it’s hard to imagine security and safety when you’ve lived your entire life without it. But that’s everyone in this world, forced to be a adult the minute the world demands it of you, whether you’re ready or not…

“Yes, But…” and I squeeze her hand, “back there doesn’t have you. Doesn’t have Rasa or all the other idiots that care about me for some reason.” She holds tight and smirks in exasperation, complaining “how do you always manage to turn something sweet so sour?”

“Meh, that’s my actual magic affinity,” I joke and the mark groans, buzzing low in distaste. Pulling my hand back, shaking off the sting and flexing my digits, I grumble “c’mon.stopit.thathurts” in a single breath. But she takes my hand back, softly tracing her fingertips along the black crack in my skin…

“And this...how long until?”

“What? Until this guy takes me down in some good old fashioned mutually assured destruction? If
I were anyone else, I’d have about two years until I’d have to cut my hand off but since it’s me we’re talking about…"

“Wait?!,” she suddenly sits up, eyes narrowed, concern creasing the corners, “you’ve seen that far ahe” but I interject by cupping her cheek and shaking my head, “that story isn’t my story. At the rate I’m breaking down, I’ll be lucky if I get another 6 months assuming I don’t have to close anymore rifts…”

Ehhhhh

“…I’m kinda throwing all my chips in on Dagna being able to make me some fancy new golem arms.”

“…then much has changed. Nothing is certain.”

“Bingo. I’ve fucked up the narrative wayyy too much.”

A few moments pass in relative silence as the night winds blow across the desert, robbing the sands of their residual heat.

“I’m glad you did,” she comments quietly as her bare hand roams up the side of my face. She hovers over the scars trailing away from my eye. Gently taking ahold of a horn nub and slowly pulling down, reeling me in to her eye level, she questions “So, that was your big secret? I know you now?”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure there’s more you’ll get around to asking but…yeah?”

She stares me down, not so much as blinking.

Her dark hazel eyes almost have a red tint to them this night

Eerie, but beautiful.

Wait. Is this a moment?

Should I kiss her?

Kiss her.

Kiss her!

Kiss her?

Then all of a sudden, a shift in her demeanor — not quite so playfully, she shoves me away and expresses “Whatever we were before, we’re not quite there yet.” A rather swift change, but I get it.

“…makes..sense,” I nod in consideration, trying to clear my head, and leaning back against the rock face.

“But I want to be,” she admits and I reply back, “I wanna be there to. But..okay, so…for now, we’re good just hanging out, right?”

“Obviously,” she answers and a smile finds my face — taking a final sip before passing the bottle, shifting about on the blanket some, only low howls and chirps from the desert plains below, I comment “I’m glad.” Rubbing at the back of my buzzed head, a bit embarrassed, I further say “thanks for believing me. And also not killing me. Really, thanks for not killing me, I can’t stress that enough.” Her smile comes out as a pleasant huff and she simply answers “sweet to sour. She
kills the last sips of the bottle and I whisper “damn…guess that ends our little conversation. Should probably head back.” Shaking her head and leaning against me, hanging her arm over my shoulder, she asks “We are to the West?,” calculating, “we can have another hour…”

“Sure about that?”

“I said it, didn’t I?” she fires back in what I hope is mock defense and I can’t help but chuckle “yeah, yeah. I’m good sitting here a bit longer.”

“Good,” she states while staring off into the darkness, falling into silence.

The winds howl.

Some oversized lizards trill and chirp in the distance.

The faint outline of several Rifts dot the sands, not quite open but definitely tears in the fabric of reality.

Too far away to even tug at the mark

Not like I can do anything about it though.

The anchor’s on a hiatus.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay everyone. I’m finally all settled in in my new place. The move was successful.

For waiting patiently, here’s two chapter smushed into one.
I’d slipped us back in the early hours of dawn, long before the bulk of the camp would awaken, just enough that we could snag a few hours of shuteye ourselves. And this time, we parted ways, returning to our respective tents.

As she’d put it, she’d “only think of more questions and we wouldn’t get any sleep.”

Ever the smart one.

But awake again — or half awake and deprived of caffeine — I stumble into the meal line. A couple rookies ahead in the line try to offer up their spot, awkwardly spouting such platitudes as “Andraste preserve you” or brown nosing with “Lord eats first!” while trying to persuade a few other soldiers to do the same, slapping at their backsides.

I don’t accept the offers.

And I’m too tired to listen. Too irritable to reply with anything but a vaguely threatening muttering of “keepyourspotorelse.”

Fortunately, that seems to work.

Few are willing to even look my way after that, avoiding eye contact and the like.

And whatever, I’m only thirty something-th in line. No big deal. The cooks aren’t gonna run out, especially when they have a nearly endless bounty of…

Cured ram.

…of all the foods I never realized I’d be doomed to eat for the rest of ever, of course it had to be ram.

Ram stew.

Ram kabob.

Ram steak.

Ram pie.

Ram sandwich.

I fucking hate ram — doesn’t matter what you spice it with, it still just tastes like ram. And it’s but one of the hellish constants of my life. The same tasting meat at every damn meal, three times a day, every day of the week, however many weeks make up a single Theodosian year. I don’t know, I never bothered to study the calendars, but that’s too much.

It’s all too much.

And why did the cooks have to be so generous with me?

My bowl filled to the brim with the greasy Ferelden cuisine, a gradient of browns and grays, I huddle down by a campfire, balancing the bowl on my lap and trying to use the surrounding soldiers as a source of distraction. Instead of loud, instead of raucous — I’m apparently too well-
known for my own good — they slip into relative silence, only the occasional fart or cough masking their uncomfortable chewing noises.

A huff of disappointment, I poke at my food, just pushing it around as cutlery clinks and scratches at cheap tin through the slop around the fire.

Every near attempt at scooping up a bite just shortens my esophagus.

I can’t do this.

‘Never ram, never a..just never again,’ I beg the thought while trying not to vomit, prodding at the unappetizing grey strip with a stray spoon. Wrong cutlery for the wrong food but it’s not like I can complain about that, there’s only so much to go around.

If only the meat shared a similar status.

I give up.

With a sarcastic “bon appetit,” I drop my bowl into the empty of the lad next to me — his cheeks stuffed, his eyes wide, he groans out a “mmmmff??” but I’ve got nothing else to add. I just get up and leave.

I’ll just wait til it’s socially acceptable to have drinks — that’s how I’ll get my colonies today.

Just...anything but more ram.

*****

Progressing as we have been, an eager march, we’d hit the edge of some wizened and thick forest come mid morning. Ancient trees, almost tropical, and heavy vines and fogs. Those woods, with their muggy humidity inexplicably emanating despite the cold season, they stand tall against the cloudless skies, demanding respect. I can almost smell the magic bleeding off them, as if their roots dig straight into the Fade itself.

Then again, this place, it very well might.

The Arbor Wilds.

The once home to Mythal, goddess of the Elven pantheon…

The secretly present day home of ancient elves…

And now, several hundred of our numbers have pushed ahead, blockading the heart of the forest from our position on the outskirts. Already soldiers and military engineers toil away at building trebuchets, already are trenches being shoveled out and sharpened posts being shoved into the border like so many fangs.

Tents pitched.

Quartermasters setting up their requisitions offices.

Latrines being dug.

But off in the distance, a massive army have started joining with our own. Thousands becoming
more, their march a rumble in the Earth itself. Flags of red and white, they flap on high, posted well above this new coming force…

The Empire.

Orlais.

*****

Nearly an hour later, just past high noon, much closer now, a palanquin hastens after a single man — though many knights keep a brisk pace to match his own, he keeps throwing a dismissive wave over his shoulder at them all, refusing to slow, refusing to ride. In my slow approach, I catch a snippet of his irritated shouting...

“Goo ooway! I can walk myselve!”

Curious for someone of obvious nobility to so clearly dislike his posse.

Swagger.

Confidence.

And a gleaming steel plate, expertly crafted — a magnificently detailed golden lion’s head juts from the breastplate.

But despite all this, even though he’s clearly Orlesian, he wears no mask…

But he know me — a head and shoulders taller than most, he easily picks me from the crowd and a smile chips away at his frustrations. A hand to his hip, his other outstretched to the side, he grins out “Inquizitoor. I em glad to zee you here. I’ve looked forward to zees.”

Despite his lack of high fashion, that he’s not following the latest of Orlesian trends, there’s no mistaking this man now. No...

Buzzed head, dark discerning eyes that have reveled in the face of war, he walks and talks with the command of a warrior risen to the highest office.

I know this man. Absolutely.

Emperor Gaspard.

“Evehr since zoze baztards assaulted my home end murdered my couzin, I’ve been eager for zis hunt,” His Grace admits and pauses upon noticing my bad arm. A small frown curls the edge of his mouth but switching hands with zero hesitation, he claps my left arm in greeting. Clutching tight and shaking back, traces of anchor light spilling between our fingers with my common clothing a stark contrast to his own resplendent attire, I beam out earnestly “Gaspard. How ya been.”

“Bihzee, very bihzee.”

”Makes sense.”

“But ehz I hear it, we’ve both experienzed much difficultee. Granted... mine involved much lez
“Our ambassador mentioned you’ve been pullin’ the Empire back together?”

“Uv courze,” he shakes his head — it must not have been easy, rallying the entirety of Orlais to stand behind him, to put their faith in him. After all, many had great love for the late Celine. And more so, those who weren’t at the palace that night, how likely are they to believe what truly transpired, that he had no hand in it? It’s a nebulous thing, to rise to power during a civil war.

No matter what, half the country will hate you.

But during our little exchange, my own Commander joins with a masked chevalier at his side…

Can’t say I recognize him.

But they all greet one another, saying such things as “Emperor” and “Commander Cullen” and “Jean.” All the while, that small squad of chevaliers or marquises or whatever they are from before approach, still not a single one looking remotely familiar — a spattering of blondes and brunettes, a redhead… some have waves, others streaks of grey, some dark skinned with some others mostly sporting reddening sunburns where their hairlines begin. They seem to range from twenty something to as old as fifty. And again, all are masked.

Yeah, I really don’t have a clue whose these people are. Not gonna learn their names — to me, they’re all Jean.

The Jeans.

But making a break from the pleasantries and trivialities, I jump right to the heart of the matter, announcing “so war stuff?” and that gets their attention.

I can’t be in the mob for long, just gotta rip off the bandaid.

Cullen sighs, perhaps embarrassed with my lack of decorum — but I go on to strategize regardless “Don’t know what ya know, but we’ve got a plan — fence em in, keeping our forces along the outskirts of the forest.”

At that, a number of his knights start murmuring to one another…

“With our combined forces,” Gaspard boasts while thumbing the edge of his blade, eager for war, “we should have the advantage. Why hold here?” I presume he mirrors their concerns.

“Cause our numbers won’t count for dick going into that mess?”

”The terrain is an unknown,” the Chevalier Jean Number Two backs me and Cullen cuts to the quick, touting the wisdom of his templar training, “mages. Red lyrium empowered mages. We go in there and we essentially paint a target on our heads. They’d hear us coming, ambush us…”

And I add “and that’s why I wanna toss templars on the front lines, mix em in with the rest. They can detect magic and should know best how to defend against it.”

“I can see zee merits…” Gaspard considers and I prod a little harder, “cause it’s got good merits?”

”bah, fine,” Gaspard concedes and twists his blade, measuring its deadly edge, “So what, zis iz now a war of attrition?”

“Nah, not exactly,” I say and raising my fingers “Step one. I jump a team to the Temple. Two, we
snag or destroy what Corypheus seeks by any means necessary. Three, his forces will retreat . . .

“Where we shall cut them down,” The Emperor grins with creases framing his dark eyes, “simple, elegant . . .”

But Jean Number Six points out “what of zis sparse canopy? It will do little to conceal us from zat dragon of iz.”

Jean Number One then offers “Perhaps a shield wall? Hmm, no, not against those temperatures, non.”

All Jeans seem to mull over the issue, chewing on it like a cow. Ponderous, slow, but fortunately Cullen saves them the headache and states “actually... Hunt..uh, the Inquisitor, he has a contingency plan for that beast as well. He believes we should make use our rescued mages.”

“In what way?”

“How?”

“nous n'avons pas besoin de magix. Comment vont-ils même aider?”

“Explain.”

Four different Jeans inquire, their disbelief obvious, so I, irritation building, teetering on the verge of a tension headache, I explain “...We mix em in with-with each group of soldiers. Square, column, I don’t care how we’re doin’ it. Only thing that matters is their job is to watch the skies and be ready to bring up barriers” while trying to be subtle about thumbing at my temple.

“That could work?”

“But will they accept the orders?”

“vous placez trop de confiance en eux”

The Jeans, they argue amongst themselves.

“And what uv the monster, himself?,” the Gaspard questions, “when you’ve bested him, won’t he come zis way?”

“We have reason to doubt that,” Cullen explains, “he only reveals himself when he knows it will put the Inquisitor in his path. He seems to care little for his people and we believe that should the Inquisitor claim victory here, Corypheus will depart the field.”

“He’s predictable. A constant. Not likely to change tactics,” I add, “When we win, he’ll get pissy and haul ass back to his hideout to plot his next move...” and the thought ‘Breach Attempt Number Two’ pops into my head.

“Hmmm,” the newly raised Orlesian Emperor hums in consideration, “This sounds like it will work. Inquizitoor, I’m embarrassed to edmit that I didn’t think you hed a mind for such matters. I am gled you hev proven me wrong.” Throwing his armored hand into my arm, the gleaming steel catching light slipping through the minimal canopy of this wide clearing, Gaspard declares “ Thiz will be en exzellent battle. Glory ehwaits us thiz day” with an eager grin.

Shaking back, I shrug out in agreement “we all stick to the plan, we’re golden.”

“Even the best laid plans hev a way of turning to sand in our hands upon the field of battle.”
“Uhhhh??

“Please try,” I reply, having forgotten and realizing just how thirsty for vengeance too many here might actually be — we’ve got the killer of The Divine in our grasp.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare ruin this chance — you’ve been remarkable and I look forward to our continued alliance. So, when do we do this?”

“Whenever we start hearing murder in the woods,” I cough, “that’ll be the signal.”

“Interezting,” he says and I give an enthusiastic two finger salute before turning away, making my way back to the where the Inquisition has been setting up, our armies digging in.

Cullen can handle whatever else needs to be discussed — this whole venture has given him a sense of focus, something to look toward beyond his addiction. Sure, I can often spy him twisting his thumb at his palm, likely reminding himself of the brand...

But for now, I just need to wait for the booms...

And get a drink. I need that drink.

*****

One empty wine skin at my feet, slurping at a second like a juice box, the sunset fast approaches, twilight golds slipping through the greens in wavering beams as winds softly blow.

The calm before the storm — vicious battle looms...

And I’m just hanging out alone behind a requisitions tent, propped against a solitary tree...

Everyone has a task, a crucial job to perform, the camps are positively buzzing with activity. Cassandra has her Templars.

Bull, his Chargers.

Lady Vivienne, the many mages.

Sera, she has her pranks to see to.

Dorian and Solas, they’ve got Vivienne’s methods to “correct” as well as each other. Really, they’re just there to get on each others’ nerves.

Varric, a wide eyed group of fans, eager to hear him spin his tales...

Blackwall, his sword — I passed him earlier and so intent on sharpening it, he didn’t even acknowledge me. But that’s not odd. For all his deceptions, he’s still a soldier. He was never not that.

Cole, he’ll be where he needs to be.

Rasa, that place’ll be anywhere people aren’t.
So like I said, I stand alone. Just... mentally prepping, I suppose. *The ol’ waiting game,* I note while taking another big pull from the skin.

doubt it’ll be as easy as I’m hoping it’ll be...

Or what if it’s even easier??

‘That’d be pretty cool — just in an out. Easy,’ I smile at the thought despite the opening still plugged between my lips.

“Why do you talk to yourself?,” Cole suddenly asks from my side, “it’s loud.”

Wiping at the corners of my mouth, I mumble back a “ehh?”

His pale eyes already so distant, peering past the floppy brim of his patchwork hat, he riddles “All of you is you, even the parts that don’t know. Isn’t that always the case?”

"Don’t even know what to say, man,” I shrug and exhale, swiping a hand against my forehead. Just buzzed enough, just trying to enjoy myself for a minute, I don’t know what or how to respond. Not in the right headspace. Kinda hard to be with him nowadays.

"So many watching, waiting. When is now...and then...and am? Will you be ready?,” he asks rather queerly, a mind that doesn’t grasp the linear.

"s-sure,” I answer uncertainly, just giving a answer for answer’s sake. But as soon as Cole was, he isn’t.

Gone.

Ghosted.

But not forgotten.

’am and now and...what?,’ his words still confusedly tumbling around in my feel good state. Wasn’t prepared for this. Almost makes me drop my wine, like maybe, just maybe, I’ve had to much. “Yeah,” I determine, “just gonna..” and I place the half full skin against the tree base.

Second time he’s interrupted my meal.

“Ignore him,” rasps Rasa, almost spooking me, somehow slinking up without my noticing. Then again, most people aren’t assholes with loose boot buckles. Most don’t purposely announce their presence with every step. Most people aren’t me.

”Already tryin’ to,” I reply and drop to a crouch, trying to stretch, not insult her height. But she gets that. She knows my intent.

“He’s good…but he’s been weird since...”

I nod in agreement. I know it was Cole’s choice to go full spirit, but it still feels like a different person.

Guess he is.

"So,” she rasps, glaring ahead into the brush past unkempt locks, “how are...you?” Awkward, not quite so indifferent as she normally is — she’s caught me off guard. How peculiar.
“How uncharacteristically concerned you are,” I tease as she frowns hard, “what’d’ya actually wanna talk about?”


“ Well?,” I ask, eyeing her now, hoping she’ll crack under my stare and give up her real reason. She keeps her mask of quiet despite clearly having something to say — she scratches at the tree with a dagger tip, cutting with frustrated abandon.

“Can’t read minds. Ya know that.”

“Gods, fine!,” she croaks in annoyance and jams her blade into the tree, “when this is all done… what are we doing? Are we…do we have to.. can we just leave? Can we finally leave? We just… go away?”

I hold my tongue, my mind drawing a blank and so she continues, rasping her upset “You don’t need to be here. You can be anywhere. We can be off doing anything” and shaking her head “And you don’t even like being Inquisitor.”

“I… don’t.”

“Then can we just leave? Kill the Blight King and get out?”

....

“Please?,” she asks.

Don’t think I’ve ever heard her say please before.

She must be serious.

“His dragon…has to die,” I answer, avoiding the actual question, “if his dragon dies, the Blight King — good name by the way — he’ll be vulnerable. Without that dragon, without grey Wardens, he’ll have nothing to jump to.”

“How… do we kill a dragon?,” she almost hesitates.

“That dragon specifically,” I reply while giving thought to the end battle of Dragon Age Inquisition, how limited the options were as the world was ending, as Corypheus was busy throwing his temper tantrum, “way I remember it, only another dragon can take it out.”

That shuts her up.

She looks pensive, but keeps quiet.

With a hard twist, yanking her dagger free of the tree, she hastens off.

_Rasa. What’re you thinkin’?_

****

In the hours since, I’ve been standing in the approximate spot in the clearing before the paths
leading into the forest. I’ve just been waiting for that cutscene.

All I can do is wait

Only problem is my head isn’t in the game — been too preoccupied with what Rasa has said.

Leave.

Kill the would-be god and leave.

But what about Cass? Would she come?

You know she wouldn’t.

Shit.

Maybe...

...leave but blink back over every day?
...you can actually do that.

That could work?

As if my mood weren’t off enough already, being so close to this crucial objective with other concerns plaguing me so, Morrigan sashays up alongside me, just bristling with anticipation. Like some sadistic feline with small, easily beaten prey in sight, she smirks as she says “so, the ruins of the Temple of Mythal.”

“Mhmm,” I reply in a noncommittal way — I’m not sure I trust my own words around her.

“A place. Of worship,” she stresses their importance, “straight from Elven legend.”

“Yep.”

Her smirk falters with a more irritated sneer slipping into place.

...

”Truly? You’ve nothing to add?,” she goads.

“Hmph,” I grunt and shrug, further adding to her annoyance.

“How is it that you can be so utterly monosyllabic? I’ve heard worms hold more interesting conversations. I’ve…” she criticizes until grated, I hurriedly grumble “Fine. Yes. It has an Eluvian. Yes all that stuff. Yes, Big C wants it bad” without enthusiasm, as if I’d experienced all this too many times. Well…okay, so I have. Cutscenes only have that pizazz the first couple times. Twenty plus later? The dazzle is lacking.

“Are you so bored? Do you truly not comprehend the magnitude of all this?,” she pointedly questions, her fingers tight on her staff of gnarled wood and adorning bird skulls. But me, I shrug, leaving my answer to her imagination. I don’t think I really care one way or the other what she thinks now...

Whatever charm I thought she possessed, I think it was only ever because I was on the other side of a screen.
And for once, I think I may actually sympathize with Alistair.

*That’s a switch.*

But then a signal, a boom I’ve been waiting for — a massive explosion detonates deep within the Wilds, trees cracking and groaning from the shockwave — soldiers on our end roar their rallying cries and the horns of battle sound.

From somewhere amidst our forces, Cullen barks “DEFEND THE LINE” and goes sprinting for the front, eager to command, needing to oversee and protect. He thirsts for Venatori blood as much as the next soldier, but he’ll keep them in line, in check…

He better.

And while it’s not exactly the quiet approach I’d hoped for.

Or planned for.

Or explicitly told people to go with.

So long as they hold the line, it should work out.

Should.

“Inquisitor, I advise we find these ruins before all this land is reduced to ash,” she bemoans and struts away, moving to some slight hill to get a better vantage, if any, of what’s within…

An itch...

A subtle scratching at the back of my neck...

I swear I feel someone breathing just behind my ear, a tickle. Jerking back, looking around in suspicion, I mumble “the fuh…?” not quite finishing my overused curse word.

But there’s no one, there’s nothing.

However, where Morrigan’s departure left a vacancy, Dorian swoops in to fill it, hooking his arm through mine, urging “Do come along, I’ve a wonderful idea” and trying to shepherd me off somewhere.

“You gonna tell me or we just out for a stroll?”

“Oh, Just you shhh. Anticipation can be it own pleasure,” he gives me sass and tweaks his mustache. But soon enough, walking over much trampled grass, he brings me to requisitions. Crates upon crates upon barrels are being unloaded, just a slew of men and women heaving and stacking. From the ones cracked open, a small treasure trove — Belts and rings and amulets, they’re being passed out to any one of our soldiers within reach but my Tevinter mage, he pesters his way through, shouting “Inquisitor Inquisitor! Surely he can use a few of these shiny trinkets, yes?!” A neat little path pops into place as the greener of our crew hop out of the way, giving me an unnecessary amount of space, still treating me as a king or holy figure or something.

Or something.

Sure, I appreciate the breathing room but with how we’ve all been traveling this past week, trading off between feet, horses, and caravans, you’d think they’d be a bit more relaxed. Or at least a little less rigid. Bull on the other side of the forming crowd, he’s got a thirsty looking amulet on, some
red and gold piece with a heavy chain — he’s busy tossing pieces to his crew.

Beyond him, Cassandra fastens a belt while Templars around her do the same.

But despite the order of it all, Dorian has cut the line and twists back on me victoriously with a handful of amulets, holding them aloft going “clashing color…hmm chunky…and this one? No. Just no,” tossing the unfavored ones at the feet of those nearby.

“And why do I need a necklace?”

“Because it’s enchanted. The added bonus being it should keep you from killing yourself,” he sasses me. “ahh, this one, yes” but as he hands the obsidian and nevarrite piece to me, the moment it touches bare skin, the intricate glyphs etched into the metal start crackling, smoking until the damn thing fizzles.


“Fasta vass! No, no, this won’t do..damn it, it’s a statement piece then!,” he both curses and tries to save face.

“A useless one”

“Believe me, never underestimate the value of...,” he tries to educate but Madame de Fer glides by just in time to interject “darling, that piece doesn’t say anything.”

“I suppose Orlesian taste counts for little these days,” Dorian back sasses but she merely glances back, commenting “Now, darling” without breaking her gait. Dorian, a frown slips under his mustache and he yanks the jewelry off my neck, grumbling “I do loathe when she’s right…”

“Pretty sure she didn’t hear that.”

“Nor will she,” he half laughs, “I can’t have her lording that over me, imagine the drama, the scandal. It’d be all anyone who’s anyone talks about for days — The Elder One would fall through the cracks, he’d be old news.”

“You’ve got a healthy enough ego. Pretty sure it can take a few hits,” I huff through a smirk and pat at the side of his jaw. In response, if not a bit flustered, he clears his throat and jokes “keep that up and people are likely to talk.”

“And when the hell don’t they?,” I ask as we walk to meet with our core party members at the edge of camp. Blackwall already awaits, stoic as ever, as does Solas, propping himself up with his smooth and modest staff…

Cassandra and Bull are still dealing with their charges but they’ll be over soon enough.

Varric slips from the crowd, jogging to keep up with us, a few new rings adorning his thick Dwarven fingers as they dance along Bianca’s sleek frame — he gravels out “so I’ve heard talk of mirrors and monsters, but no one has explicitly told me what the plan is yet. We do have a plan, right?” in question.

Giving me a side eye, the Tevinter mage smirks out with a touch sass “considering we didn’t teleport here, I’m presuming there’s one, a plan, yes? I’d hate to have that presumption become merely an assumption because that would make me an ass.”

“And that’s different from the everyday you or…?” Varric pokes fun at Dorian, shooting him a
good spirited chuckle past my hip.

“Oh, I’m always an ass..” Dorian goes to start on a tirade or self-aggrandizement but Solas cuts in, smiling “isn’t that the truth. But it’s good you yourself know.” Blackwall chuckles into his beard, trying not to be too obvious, and Dorian scoffs “yes, yes, an ass, but a perfect ass.”

And I just hold my tongue, while humorous, I’m trying to keep my eye on the prize — the Well Of Sorrows — and mind for the danger awaiting us.

‘Why would they need so much red lyrium?’, I worry, ‘And where’s that damn dragon?’ while looking to the skies. But in my stressed consideration, the others start making there way to me…

Sera, not quite paying attention, picking at her teeth. Cole and Rasa, side by side, wholeheartedly spooky and somehow not drawing the least bit of attention to themselves, so little so that Bull doesn’t even seem to notice their existence as he tromps on over with his great gleaming two hander at the ready. Then again, his eye seems to be lingering on his crew. He’s left them to help the forces here as they see fit, theirs being a company of many talents after all. Like some proud papa, he hums to himself and forces his stare from them.

Vivienne, she steps with graceful authority, command, and claims a spot near me just before Morrigan can — no words spoken, but the two give one another a frigid glare. Snubbed, but choosing not to make a bigger deal of it, letting the Enchanter have her minor victory, Morrigan eases on over by Blackwall. He’s uncomfortable. She knows it, like an animal smelling fear. But he’s the stoic sort — he doesn’t say anything. He’s waiting on me. They all are.

Finally though, upon commanding “AND STAY ON COMMANDER CULLEN” to those Templars she’s left behind, Lord Seeker Cassandra takes her place at my side, nudging Varric over some.

As I go to talk — explosions rip through the forests beyond, screams and yells of terror ensue — I pause until that’s died down enough and finally say “fuck speeches. Got something better. Cass?”

Level and steady, she plants her hand on my bad arm, holding the stump, and eyeing everyone else, she demands “HOLD ON TO THE INQUISITOR.”

A look of confusion takes to some.

Sera anxiously blurts out “Why?? Wazgunna happin??” but Dorian’s quick to heed the call — hooking his arm through my good one again, he smirks out “I do love this ride” only to be met with Cass scowling.

He’s just doing it on purpose now.

Cole and Rasa know the routine. They’re next to join.

Others hesitantly oblige, putting a hand on my shoulder or arm or back.

A knee — probably Varric.

Feel someone’s hand grabbing onto a horn nub.

And Solas is nothing but curious, his eyes wide in anticipation — he’s only ever seen it happen.

“So…boss, we just hugging it out or…?” Bull rumbles in question.
“My dear,” Vivienne admonishes the man mountain with a single perfect quirked brow, “not the time.”

“Uhh, mmsorry, ma’am,” Bull mutters in apology and with that, no longer being talked over, Cassandra whispers up at me “We are with you.” I close my violet eyes to the world, to the lush greens and earthen barks, to the faces of friends and allies all…

‘Just hope I can carry this many…but no half measures,’ I think to myself, ‘I need everyone.’

Wood splintering, screams of panic — another terrible blast demanding fire and death sounds from deep in these woods.

Again Sera asks “nuthin’s happenin. Iz sumthin supposta happin??” with nervous energy and I growl “Seriously” with eyes tightly shut, trying to concentrate “never done this many. Not on purpose. Don’t move. Don’t talk.”

That shuts everyone up.

I feel a few hands tense up but I can’t afford to be distracted.

Know our objective.

Know our cause.

Know our enemy.

An ancient pool…
…whispers from beyond…
…mirrors encircling…
…an island isolated.
…pale mists.
Skip everything else…

With a steadying breath, with so many in tow, holding on, I blink…
A record skipping, I’m thrown off my groove but that needle digs deep. Something’s wrong. A scraping in my head and we burst from point A to point B instead of going straight to point C.

We’ve skipped the forest, its riverbeds and gnarled vines, all the dangers therein, but we’re not inside the temple, not where I pictured.

Instead, we’ve come to a dead stop just outside a long tunnel between two giant mossed over statues of what can only be The Dread Wolf, the pair sitting vigilant at the entryway. At our feet, a cooling pool of dark red, thickening already, blood of the freshly dead, elven sentinels unfortunate enough to be the first wave of defense.

Energies crackle off their charring corpses and off the edges of the mouth of the hall, the slow burn just whispering of dark and terrible things as it lingers on.

The orb. Corypheus. They had to be what did this.

It’s all too precise to have been that damnable archdragon lookalike’s blast.

but an flickering catches my attention — Green glyphs carved into the gold borders and of the stone wolves, they stutter and short, the apparent wards of Mythal’s temple going dead at this entrance at least.

“It’s always something,” I grumble to myself in frustration, that this isn’t a simple easy as I imagined, only Sera blurs out all fidgety “WUT??! UHNUH! NooOooo! Don’t like et! Wuz all..squeezy!”

Blackwall and Bull are already nodding their approval though, reticently shrugging out “…nnnot a bad way to travel” and “huh. Makes sense now.”

Morrigan, I feel her stare on me, ever more so now that she’s just experienced what’s potentially my greatest ability —

Varric though, he just gawks out “I just lived it and…nope, still too weird to write about. No one, and I mean no one, will believe it.”

‘**Warded to the bones,**’ I think. Even a quick glance to the exterior archways — arches slowly being claimed by the pooling waters — and the nearby trees reveal the glyph works carved into every surface. The stones, yes, but more impressively, the bark, ancient and natural, breathing with the old woods.

“Amazing,” Solas breathes in awe. He just doesn’t know I fucked up. Or the temple fucked up my course. To him, it wasn’t a planned stop.

And then Cass demands “Dorian, don’t. Just don’t. Do not even say it!,” cutting off whatever crass thing he’s about to say.

“Whatever do you mean?,” he claims innocence and flutters his dark lashes at her but she’s having none of it. She just tells him “say it and you’re walking home.” His mustache twitches in
temptation but he holds his tongue.

‘…course it didn’t work. Weren’t even planning for me and still threw me off,’ I note in consideration before shouting “You can all let go now!,” trying to wriggle free of the group hug as it were — hands drop, the huddle breaks, and people take up arms, all blades and staves. I probably shouldn’t have shouted, might have alerted the intruders, whomever tore open the warded gates. Then again, there’s enough of a cacophony from everywhere…

Explosive ordinance, be it friend or foe.

Screams and battle cries.

The slow thundering roar of a lone Behemoth in the distance and their every movement rattling like a diamond chandelier.

Best guess, we’re still flying under the radar.

Good.

In warning, I whisper now, saying “keep quiet. If what I think is happening…is happening, the Elder Ass is just inside.” People nod their tacit agreement but I don’t feel I’ve conveyed my point well enough so I hiss “seriously. Stay quiet. Really. Everyone shut the hell up.”

A few more nods — at least from those still listening.

Sera’s all angry eyes, wide stares, now at the ready with arrows for asses. She’s too distracted by everything, doesn’t look to be listening. Similarly, Rasa just shoots me a serious look, her dark eyes peering through darker locks, but with a twist, her twin daggers already palmed, she’s through the broken doors, silent in her step…

Cole flickers in and out of existence after here, his pale eyes almost white, just glimpses of him following her…

Low and slow, we travel the darkened hallway to the light at the end of the tunnel, the tall grasses padding our steps.

And out we creep, the lot of us, out onto the rise overlooking a long bridge and a misty water filled chasm beneath. Pylons dot the drop, ready to obliterate the uninvited, the unworthy.

My guts tighten uncomfortably — the aberration is before us, his ill an expansive aura.

Blight incarnate.

“Na Mellana Sur, Banallen!” spits the sentinel closest, standing apart from his brethren who huddle at the other end, long bows at the ready but prepared to retreat to the inner sanctums if need be. That one cowled elf, he alone taunts the Elder One but that monster isn’t having that. Tossing the mangled corpses of two elves to the ground before the defendants, the Blight King launches into a tirade, all piss and salt, booming “YOU ARE BUT REMNANTS AND YOU WILL NOT KEEP ME FROM THE WELL OF SORROWS,” all the while stomping forward with determination, unholy conviction. Grass withers and blackens beneath his every step.

Morrigan shoots me a glance, mouthing “well of sorrows?” but I’ve no time for explanations.

Her confusion doesn’t concern me.
I know and that’s enough.

Now isn’t the time to to fill in the blanks.

I swallow against a drying throat — I’d forgotten this wretched feeling.

“…BE HONORED,” Corypheus demands, that asymmetrical spike of a chin wagging with every ragged movement of his gnarled jaw — the defense array activates, prepping to rebuff his advances, theirs a steely blue glow — but still he stomps, towering over the elven sentinels as he booms “ACCEPT DEATH AT THE HANDS OF YOUR NEW GOD.”

The Wardens, all vacant eyes and lost smiles, they follow their leash holder wherever he should go. But Corypheus is tired of this, bored with this pretense of a stalemate — the orb in hand ignites and he plunges a taloned hand through the barrier, invoking its wrath — grabbing the nearest elf by the face, too slow to retreat, stunned that this creature would willingly walk into the terrific lightning of the pylons, the Blight blisters his flesh like so much lethal radiation but yanking the small sentinel forward, grinding both he and him against the barrier, sparks fly in a blinding display.

“CONSIDER THIS MY BLESSING,” Corypheus mocks as both his and the elf’s flesh peel away, charring the muscle and bone beneath.

The pylons can’t process — accept the elf or deny The Elder One.

“ACHACHACHACH,” he cackles through dying flesh and gnashing, flaking teeth…

The pylons fail at both.

DYOOOOOoootardt! — in a terrible blast of overloaded glyphs and runes, their enchantments and programming thrown through the ringer, the whole system backfires, liquefying Corypheus and the snatched sentinel both — we duck down just as the wave of fire sweeps against our overhang, all fury and light…

but as the flash of heat dissipates, peering over to see if the coast is clear through the haze, I spot so much of Corypheus’ jellied remains, a blighted ooze with broken bones jaggedly poking out, he sticks and clings to most everything in view. Vile, his remnant juices, all sluggish taint dotted with crumbs of red crystal…

But he’s not dead.

I know this.

My guts know this.

“NOW!!,” I bellow and hop the railing — whipping my bad arm toward the entryway across the golden bridge, command “NOW! GET IN THERE NOW!!” and turn my attention back to the warden bodies littering the ground. My allies, confused but hurrying — they just witnessed the Elder One die — they rush ahead at my command as a warden twitches on the ground, vomiting black with eyes bleeding. Joints pop and the body twists unnaturally, stretching, bloating. Like a caterpillar about to give birth to wasp larvae.

My eyes ignite, my purples going brighter, and I deliver a mana fueled kick to their gut — internal organs collapse and bones crunch, a muffled “errGGHHH” groans out in pain from within the dead warden’s belly and I can only hope I’ve given Corypheus an early abortion.

Whatever I tried for, it worked — that corpse stops writhing and deflates.
Another of the vacant bodies starts spasming and I go to kick it as well — might as well exhaust his supply on this end, but a splintering screech tears through the skies above the Arbor Wilds.

“Oh shit,” I drop in realization, “you forgot the..oh noNonoNo!” and I take off in a dead sprint down the bridge. It’s an awkward gallop, the lesser weight of my bad arm throwing off my step. From down the way Bull roars “GET OVER HERE BOSS! RUN DAMN IT, RUN!,” already he’s driving his shoulder into the gates, trying to get them closed.

“FASTER!!,” Cassandra demands as she pushes as well, trying her best to make the damn thing yield. Solas and Vivienne are already casting, barrier after barrier folding over me...

In case I’m too slow.

Blackwall, lost for a moment, he gazes on in horror beyond me at the bodies I’ve left behind, unable to process for the moment the grisly display as more flesh swells and stretches and tears, distorting to give birth to Blight itself.

“Crrrraaaaaahheheherrrrrrrr,” the blighted dragon trills terribly as patchwork wings hasten it ever closer, ever downward.

Faster.
Faster.

“HURRY!,” Rasa cracks at me uncharacteristically, her eyes honing in on the skies over the temple, her daggers at the ready however futile they would prove. Tremendous, it’s shadow sweeps the entire bridge, swallowing me just as I dive through the entrance, landing on my face, just as the others slam the doors shut, inadvertently deploying a second shield wall as the Temple’s defenses reactivate, sending a shimmering golden energy up and over everything. The temple shudders and bits of debris crumble down upon our heads — either the dragon just fired a shot or drove its own monstrous form against the outside like rotted battering ram.

Snapped back to reality, the Old Bear of a faux warden grumbles out “…I..I understand why you said I’ll be thankful” while throwing me a hand and hauling me to my feet, “I think today’s the first time I’m good not being a real Warden.”

“Ya got the,” I cough out between heavy inhales, catching my breath, and rubbing the dirt from my face, “the heart of one. Agh.”

“Well now I get how the bastard survived Hawke,” Varric laments, throwing his hands up, finally understanding what went wrong.

But no time to pat ourselves on the back.

No time for the past or regrets.

We’re here, we’ve made it.

And we’re inside. Kind of. It’s really just the first chamber, that place where believers would’ve walked the first path. But despite being overgrown with weeds and vines, broad leaves and palm trees sprouting from the walls, literal ages ancient, it’s almost tropical, gorgeous.

The whole place seems to have been cut from a single stone, that for however old this place may be, all the surfaces are smooth, seamless…
…Square silver plates with so many overlapping designs on a slight rise of ground, a natural pedestal with a weather stone railing enclosure, so many lay embedded in the ground, only a few displaced by overgrowth, forced upward by roots — the slabs wind about the feet of twin blocks of dark stone at the center of this hall, various dents and impressions from several millennia of disuse and lack of upkeep.

Instructions carved into their surface, all Elvhen writing.

For all the danger outside, the wildlife and nature here care not.

Still they chirp…

Still they race up trees, foraging…

Small waterfalls cascade uninterrupted…

Still they float and flit a the edges, little dots of bioluminescence going about their business, trying to attract their mates in the daylight…

Wait. Day?

It was just…

Sunlight pours down through the open ceilings where there should be sunset. Magic. It has to be. An artificial paradise where even the air smells sweet.

“Stop almost dying,” Rasa rasps at me under her breath with an upward glare, “we have plans. Plans that involve you not being dead.”

“She’s worried…but you already know this,” Cole translates her annoyance as we walk through shallow aqueducts that feed the immense root systems of towering trees, all thicker than any man or woman alive.

“What I mean,” she’s grumbles, her smoky tone a throaty growl, “is stop almost dying” and she punches me in the hip — I just tussle her already messy hair in response. She doesn’t pull away but she does throw her balled up fist against my hip in the same spot.

Doesn’t really hurt.

Not supposed to.

That’s not the point.

But a moment to note the weirder aspect here, the ceiling is open. That’s there’s no dragon bearing down on us, unconditionally burning us alive and blasting our bones, it must mean that barrier extends up, not just around…

“Inquisitor…” Morrigan breathes softly, a certain sense of victory in those goldenrod tinted eyes of hers, “welcome to the Temple of Mythal…”

“Yo, witch, what’s the well Corypheus was going on about?” Bull grumbles in question and Lady Vivienne is quick to join in, pressing the issue “yes, I’m eager to know as well. Please do indulge us” most mockingly. Scratching at the back of her head, a look of concern slowly chipping at her
façade of confidence, she utters “I am… uncertain what…” but I blurt out over everyone “I already know and we’re wasting time” while making my way ahead.

Crossing the room, up the stairs to the next rise, I’m forced to step around and over corpses. ‘Crap. Looks like some got in after all…,’ I make note of several Venatori soldiers riddled with stab wounds and arrows.

“Excuse me, Darling, but perhaps you’d care to share?,” Vivienne urges, attempting to glide but being forced to dance around the dead as well — hurrying along to keep at my right, Morrigan more pointedly demands “tis wise to divulge what you know. After all, are we not all on the same side?”

‘Doubt that,’ I think.

Viv scoffs lightly — Morrigan shoots her a mean glare.

“We don’t have the time to sit and swap stories like a knitting group,” Blackwall reminds, back to his usual pragmatic, grizzled self, “the enemy has a head start” and gestures to all the corpses on the stairs.

“But tis our…” Morrigan tried to press again but surprisingly Cass argues “Do be quiet! Just! Just go with it.” effectively silencing our little party. Well, silent until Varric whistles in appreciation, a low and drawn out pitch. Cass shoots him an annoyed look while defending “what? He does know some stuff” but I groan “uhhh, fine. Sure, it’s fine. God damn. Walk and talk, c’mon!” while jogging ahead, prepping myself for a fist fight.

The doors ahead have already been pried open, blasted perhaps, and resealed poorly — the enemy has the lead.

“So the Well…” I growl while prying wider the gap torn into metal gates, “can I get hand, Bull? it’s the key for the eluvian.” The big guy lumbers up, grabbing ahold, using his superior height and strength. There’s no need to walk the tiled path of this room, not with the locks already blown out. “It’s memory soup, all the elves throwing in their… consciousnesses over the years.”

The door budges an inch or two, groaning in kind.

“That’s uh..” Varric starts but Bull finishes the sentiment, grumbling above me “..that’s weird.”

Solas jumps in, correcting “it would ensure that knowledge is protected and passed on, a safeguard. Surely, even you can see the important of such?”

“I guess,” The enormous Qunari rumbles with uncertainty under his breath, “still weird.”

Sera though, she just groans out “great. Elves bein’ 2 elfy. Just wat we need” and again Solas tried to correct, clearing his throat, but Sera spits back “nuh uh, don’t. Off with it! If elves di’nt make make all this, Coorifatits wouldn’t be heer, trying to git it. World’d been safer without it!” Shockingly, she makes a strangely valid point but to Solas’ stunned silence, she just feels the need to throw in an “dO yOU UndErS TaNd, EgG??” for good measure.

A loud whine and a staggering groan, we’ve managed it — the ruined hinges give out and the gates swing wide…

And in the distance, the back of this second antechamber, Calpurnia turns and scowls. The pale lady herself, she glares…
I go to run, to blink, to anything at that traitor to life but Rasa grabs my belt and tugs on it, rasping low “ambush” stopping me — and our party — in our tracks.

The Tevinter rebel jumps and drops, disappearing from view as the grating discord of churning earth seals the exit behind her with a cloud of dust…

I’ve gotta trust Rasa in this. As much as I want to end Calpurnia, cripple Corypheus’ plans, I can’t be stupid.

Not here. Her killer eyes, she’s trained and honed for this, to recognize the hidden, the obscured. And she’s right of course, there’s too many hiding spots, too many pillars, and rises, staircases and trees, too much in the way of large chunks of fallen temple, balconies and railings…

...And the vividness fades, the color and life vanishing…

Like stepping through a sun bleached painting, I find myself caught in a gray haze, a twilight of slow raining ash. Drifting, wafting, like little snowflakes, soft but crumbling to the touch, naught but darkened smudges on the flesh.

Everything, a muted version of what it was, the color leached from this place and all that lies within. Whiplash, the suddenness jarring, it doesn’t make any damn sense.

‘How even?,’ I begin to think the question but hanging my head in frustration, I cut the thought short.

I drop it.

It’s not like I’ll get a straight answer anyway.

Just gotta ride whatever vision this is out.

Not a soul. Not a one. All alone in this miasma, this alternate empty...

“Hello?” I call out once more, but it echoes through the abandoned chamber, little “ O...oo...ooos” getting lost among the corners and crevices...

A step, a scrap of the heel through the dusting of gray, a pivot...

It’s dead here.

It's always been dead here.

But even so, there’s watchful eyes.

Can’t see em.

Just know they’re there.

Can feel them.

“I know you’re there,” I call out anxiously, just hoping to get a rise, a response, anything from this other. But that other, whatever or whomever or whyever it may be, it gives nothing back. No evidence, no proof, of its existence.

It’s all but a gut sensation.
One I’m certain I’ve felt before.

It’s just hard to tell.

But as quick as I’ve found myself in this abyss, I’m right where I was, as if it were never any different, all technicolor and alive. Rasa before me, just as before, rasping in warning “ambush” while scanning the scene.

Déjà vu?

Just pursing my mouth shut, I shake my head, trying to focus on the now.

That’s what’s important.

“What are we waiting for?,” Blackwall stresses the question but if my concern counts for anything, at the very least, we’ve got an ascended Cole.

...And damn does our ghost boy takes the initiative.

Choosing to exist again, to not be forgotten, our Cole appears at the top of the next stairway, swiftly jerking someone in hiding to their feet, yanking their helmed head back, and dragging his thin wavy dagger across their very exposed throat. Blood sprays and the Venatori agent collapses against the railing, twitching and gurgling, but alerting all the others...

Their ambush undone, too many emerge.

Some rush the steps to get at our pale boy.

Others set their sights on the rest of us.

Chapter End Notes

Though sorry for such a delayed posting, I make no apologies — I have been married!
And truly, the planning and execution of that took priority. Thank you for waiting, I aim to continue this story with a decent pace yet again.
Stay the Path pt 2

“Hunter, on me!,” Cass demands but like a riled hornet nest, they attack swiftly and with fury, absolutely abuzz with with hate. Red encrusted warriors storm, all serrated blades and tower shields, and mages begin their chanting, all keeping to the malicious tempo of red lyrium, their lurid metronome ticking away.

Every one of these bastards infected, all greasy sheens and inflamed veining, dark splotching where skin is thinnest.

Their dark conductor.

Now.

We go pouring into the chamber to the immediate clashing of steel on steel. Not enough room to maneuver, I just shove away the enemies nearest — they mean to lunge back but a beastly blade takes off two of their heads. Ducking, narrowly missing the second sweep of the giant axe, its toothy edge indiscriminately hacking, Bull roars out “OH FUCK THIS GUY” and greets it with his own oversized blade.

Metal clangs, deafening.

Scraps of human go splashing.

Eyes flaring, veins pumping mana-infused blood, I barrel off through the side to escape the mob, breaking through foes to strike from a different position.

…Only I’m met with chain lightning — a long bolt tears by, searing shoulder flesh on its way up into the ceiling in a swift arc of light. Stone and moss showering down, I quickly deviate, swinging my furious fist back around and splitting that one attacker’s jaw wide open, ripping his mouth off in a rain of teeth, gums, and split flesh. Soaring off, already dead from a freight train impact, that Venatori goes spinning through the canopy above. Rasa at my back, she leaps onto another and drives her daggers up into their armpits where plate doesn’t shield — in a fit of gurgles and sputtering bloody coughs, they shudder, forced to their knees.

She hit lungs.

Almost audible in their deflation, that dying wheeze her foe rattles out but she’s already off, darting away to claim another but the second she does, ice explodes all around me, groaning with red energies, bolstered by bad.

No! Nope! GET OUT!

…I’m dumb enough to blink, the wards of the temple and my earlier lesson already forgotten. Swimming in blood not my own, stretching skin that never belonged to me, bones and muscles hugging me tight, I come tearing out of a nearby Venatori skin suit, displaced into yet another person. In a spray of everything that this once a person ever was, I emerge. “Baaaaagghhhhh,” I spit and sputter while furiously wiping at my mouth and eyes, “n0000 pfft agHHHHH GAGGH, GROSS PFTT.” But considering there are no voices in my head but my own, I’ve somehow avoided contact with their brand of lyrium.

“Heh,” I hear Rasa rasp in amusement over the sounds of fighting and I fire back “No! Not heh, it’s not fuckin’ funny” while accidentally catching a blur of a person, their fade-step marrying their
throat to my outstretched arm. Clotheslined, dropped, one hand tightly gripping her staff, the other clenching at her windpipe, frantically they try to will it work.

But she can’t breathe.

Apparently can’t cast either.

She’s pretty much dead in the water and I don’t have the time or luxury for taking prisoners.

Drenched in viscera and looking like a straight up horror show myself, eyes burning just a touch brighter, the mana gate opens a little bit more. Amped. Muscles trembling in anticipation, joints already clicking from the strain, I grit my teeth in a wild bloodied grin and line up the kick…

Stone cracks underfoot.

Boot meets ribcage with explosive impact.

A hard crunching, but squishy thud, her now-corpse goes ragdolling through the air and off across the open room, clipping Blackwall and knocking his sword loose.

“HEY! SAME TEAM,” the grizzled veteran shouts back at me across the din of battle but he recovers quick with an “uhh damnit!” and throwing his shield up across the helm of the enemy. Bell rung, dazed, they go down easy when he sweeps the leg and drives his knee down into their chest.

And he brings down the shield point.

Arrows and magic bolts rip through the air.

Cole shimmers in and out, stabbing foes in the ass and retreating just as quickly, distracting. Weakening. Giving others an open. And Bull takes every one he can — sweeping through the numbers, straight up bisecting them, his silverite zweinander ignoring their armors as if forged from soft cheese.

One mage sprints by, their hair ablaze and screaming as Dorian cackles “yes, fear the true power of a Tevinter highborn, ahaahahaha!,” throwing his hands up as a wall of fire shoots from the floor.

And then Morrigan has her opportunity, her horrible, repulsive chance…

And it’s…

It’s…

…it’s just awful.

Not so quick as the games would suggest—not with this form at least — her bones pop and crack unpleasantly, realigning with ribs piercing, penetrating as skin stretches and calluses. Razor spines grow and jut from gaping sores, her body distorts, twisting into some abomination. Blackened tufts of fur, that same raven black all her own, they sprout in patches like a beast of Chernobyl. Muscle twisting and wrapping in on themselves, her grim expression buries itself under layers of thickened flesh and her eyes sink backwards.

And though averting his gaze, Varric keeps guard, pegging any who dare step near her with a toxic bolt.

Solas brings down barrier after barrier, casting support for any of our party he sees fit to aid. No
cool-downs, pushing himself hard, he lays down multiple at a time…

Dropping to all fours, hundreds of pounds heavier, more taloned than clawed, Morrigan roars her corrupted battle hymn, like five grizzlies, she thunders as them all. And ready, her stuff of nightmares perfected, she goes bounding away, earth shaking with every motionX her horrifying maw snapping and breaking those nearest her…

“Not the worst thing you’ve ever seen,” I try to convince myself, “turned a man to soup once.”

…but she was just so crunchy and juicy…

“Ughh,” I mimic Cass before a whine finds my inner ear and a pang of nausea nestles deep in my guts…

That brief moment is all it takes.


Sera’s squawking “eat it e-e-e-eat it,” her words almost humming. Drenched in lightning, she flashes about in a wide arc, loosing arrow after arrow into the mages Cass is attacking. Sword expertly slicing, shield battering, pummeling, the Seeker obliterates a group of five.

A mage dumb enough to attack Dorian steps into my path — lunging forward, I snap their neck with a quick jerk but as if triggering a trap, a blinding tractor beam of light wrenches me off my feet, its energy screeching with incantation, louder and louder.

“DIIIIIIICKS!” I grit out in agony, useless as I hover, locked in midair as telekinetic force crushes at me from all sides like a psychic trash compactor, “IFORGOTABOUTTHISSPELL!!”

It wants me to be a little ball of nothing. Just break me down. “nnnNNOOOOO,” I bellow out like a wounded beast but I hear a child’s screech beyond the prismatic barrier — bodies on a high rise drop, bloodied, and I’m cut loose soon after, the light giving out as their life sparks die. From afar, Rasa shouts out “Be better at this!” before slicing at one of the downed, confirming her kill. Catching my breath, throwing her a lackluster thumbs up, I happen to look up just in time to watch Blackwall drive his shield into a huge chitinous looking motherfucker, all plate and crystal, getting at the bastard’s knee caps as it shouts “THE ELDER ONE WILL DEVOUR YOU ALL.”

Cool threat.

Bull doesn’t give a shit — he goes in with the upsweep, bellowing “FUCKING DIE ALREADY” while rending all from groin to guts. Cole stabs and stabs, clinging to the red lyrium fucker’s back, punching holes in his neck meat. This monstrosity of a man tries to fight back, bringing his axe down hard but Lady Vivienne intervenes.

Gliding like a ghost...

Phasing in and out...

A silver flash, his ankles are gone, displaced by her knight enchanter’s blade

But as he topples, organs sloshing out from grievous wounds, I somehow hear that whine again only this time…
Nausea.
It’s in my skull.
Dry heaves.
But it’s not just me — it’s all the mages now, friend and remaining foe…
Solas takes pause.

Vivienne’s sword shorts out, its light dulling and dimming.

The anchor hurriedly flashes in my palm — it wants to help, defend me, defend itself. Not now. Can’t.

But then it’s gone, the nausea recedes...

Heat.

More fire and force. I hit hard against ground, sliding to a stop…

*Grenade?*

Everything’s a buzzing whine.

Face down.

Have to roll over.

The mark panics, flashing with no pause but as I yell “**CAN’T**” at it, some asshole cries “I’LL END YOU IN HIS NAME!” and with eyes ablaze, goes to cast some terrible spell.

Instead, they exceed their limit.

Twisting backwards, pain wracking their form, their own magic devouring him, he screams out a horrid “**NOO-AGHHGAHHHHH**” as flesh glows red hot, blistering. Gone supernova, he straight up explodes like he’d swallowed a frag grenade.

*Okay…*

*I’m still down.*

...too close.

Fingertips cooking, palm aching with Fade energy, even the mark is wincing, staggering in its pulse-work and I’m too dazed to listen. Ears ringing, all the world a constant whine, I think *‘Bleeding?’* as my fingers run across my scalp and come back sticky with red.

But that can’t stop me.

...Must…**keep going.**

...**just a head wound…**

*Gotta just…*

Shadows struggle at my side — sparks fly, bladed staves furiously grind. Solas and his foe are
locked, each working to end the other without giving an inch, both their mouths moving like they’re cursing the other as they strain and sweat. Red eyes, crystal growths running up the back of his neck, protruding where spine should be, I can’t help but consider him a Redcliffe mage we didn’t manage to snatch up. Too late to save him. Even so, I’m breaking this up — swooping upon him, I scoop the man up by the face, hauling him right off his feet. “SURPRISE MOTHERFUCKER,” I’m sure I yell and something ripples up through my arm, like a nest snakes, and the back of his head just bursts, a party popper gone off.

Little bits of brain rain like confetti.

_Huh._

Maybe it was the “surprise” part that influenced the spell? Dropping their dangle of a corpse, I utter a “sorry” even though all my audio’s still shot, still ringing. Another explosion — fire and shrapnel try to chew at my backside but a purple shimmer rolls across my flesh. Solas sweeps his staff and hurtles a piece of the veil at our attackers — grabbing at me, he appears to be shouting “Escape the door? You’re an owl right?”

Looks that way at least..

Probably not what he actually said.

I can’t read lips.

‘You could end this. You could stop being incompetent,’ my own thoughts whisper and I can’t help but answer back “WHAT AM I DOING??,” likely louder than I mean to, my ears still swimming. Solas, he flings more of the veil at enemies and casts another barrier all the while yelling something that sounds like “PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE BEING RHETORICAL.”

I think I caught that.

“Time to fight smart,” I say through a grin — stoking the fires within, steam wafting out between teeth, the war engine churns it’s gears, letting that beastly mana torrent rush. A low whisper, I command “disable friendly fire…”

_Click._

“…activate revenant abilities…”

_Click._

“…add death touch…”

_Click._

With those boxes checked, my body trembling with energy, my own eyes strain from the mana flow — I can actually see the faintest glimmer of spirits pressed against the veil, their ethereal skeletal framework, watching, witnessing, recording — and that grin goes wide.

Time to hustle.

Swiping erratically through friend and foe like a reaver, my telekinetic long reach bridging the gap between Venatori and me, I liquify two on first impact — souped, their rot goes splashing out of their own robes, sloshing through the overgrowth.
Another down.

Another.

I swipe through Varric — visibly paling, he nearly looses a bolt into my leg as he lets slip an “Andraste” as if it were his last words — and the enemy rushing his flank becomes nothing but wet, black decay, splattering down and across the dwarf’s backside. Whipping back, frenzied and hunting, I go tearing across the arena to rip through a mage on the high rise, to stop their rain of fire — only they frost step away just as I try to reach for them, escaping for now and chilling the grass in their winding path of evasion. “THIS IS TAKING TOO DAMN LO-“ I start to yell, whipping back on the fight, when crunch.

…

“Ow…” is all I can manage when metal sings and cuts the air — a blazing fissure erupts across the arena, belching hellfire and splitting the chamber in half. That Bull’s fault — that rune-enchanted blade allowing him to actually part the ground?

No.

Red, yes, but a wrongful type.

A deadly wall of alizarin crystal punches up, dividing the sides. Some thirty feet tall, all jutting spikes and looming hatred, and I’m clearly on the wrong side of it.

Those waves come stronger, more gut wrenching.

Can’t afford to be distracted so twisting back and forth, separated from my companions and their fight, I’m trying to discern who’s responsible.

A cold sweat actually breaks out on my brow.

Another wrecking ball of force blows me off my feet.

“Ahhh-ow,” I squeak out through clenched teeth, too stunned to pick myself up just yet. My mana sapped, extinguished almost, I cough out “Wha-hut h-hit me?” Struggling to my knees, my arm shudders under my weight — something whistles through the air. My throat stings from the lashing and in a harsh yank, I’m torn forward, a line hauling me off my own supporting limbs. Trying to grip tightly at the impromptu noose so I don’t black out, grinding on my stomach, I manage to angle myself just enough to see this new player enter the field. Heavy footsteps for such a small person, weighted down but oh so casual. Her eyes roving downward, finding my lack of an appendage, she smiles…

...And she smiles like someone uncertain how to, like one who isn’t sure they’ve heard the punchline.

…but she congratulates me, eerily praising “it’s good to see you’ve struggled.”

Only, she just sounds so bored…

I just stare at this armor-plated woman, squinting to recognize.

Who the hell???

“You don’t seem to learn from your mistakes…” she observes, pulling taut on the chain again to
my dismay. Scars and puckering marks, portions of exposed olive flesh that refuse to calm, swollen and blistered…

…tiny red dots crystallizing in the pores.

…just a bit over half her face is in ravaged..

If I hold a weak hand up to blot out the ugly, despite the sheen of grease and red lyrium dotting her pores, she could be familiar…

You’re…

“I’m owed a proper duel…” she grates with metallic intonation, as if talking through fan blades “…but I don’t expect much from you.”

Strapped to the nines with metal and leather…

Those eyes, the sclera, blood red…

“Hello?,” I choke out in question against my leash while crawling to a kneel.

Explosions and sword fighting continue just beyond the wall…

“And you don’t remember me,” she states in a monotone, her boot firmly stomped against the chain, ready let her steal any real slack I try for. “I suppose it doesn’t matter,” she adds, her voice grating hollow.

“Oh. You’re the..Uh, Chain lady?, I cough out the obvious, “thought I – thought I killed you,” and gingerly pat rubble and dust from my shirt.

“Loria,” she comments in a tone that’s hard to read, “And you didn’t.”

“Nah, pre-hghh..Pretty sure I did,” I continue coughing and she yanks again on my choke chain, forcing me back to the ground like a dog, “btw, cghhh. How’d...how’d you make that lyrium wall? Doesn’t tha-hh-that need like bl..”

”Blood. Yes. You soaked the ground with my forces.”

”ah,” I simply comment. I got my answer. I’m done playing though — in a moment of equal parts instinct and idiocy, I blink — I want to be behind her but the temple is still screwing up my aim — only I end up right in front of her, that chain still tight around my throat, but damn it I don’t headbutt her in that awful face of hers as hard as I can. Staggered back a couple feet, she tries to yank the chain but I’m too close.

Right. Can’t.

An awkward jab — I smash her in the shoulder.

She goes to whip the slack at me but I do a dumb little quick crouch into a hop to avoid it, and up close and personal again, I jab another her face, breaking nose cartilage.

“You insignificant piece of” she spits while snorting blood but again I lash out, beating at her nose.

Shark 101.

A fourth.
A fifth.

She snags one of the two daggers on her belt and goes on a slashing spree, its dark edge glinting with every blind swipe for me while trying to see through blood and salt — I’m ducking and dodging all the while, awkwardly sidestepping, and she tries to wind her chain around her other arm, reel me in like a big fish but I snake free and leap backwards, away from her frenzied assault.

But I’m going down — tripped up.

Back on the ground, skull knocking against weathered cobblestone, I think I spy through my wincing some of the slack; she managed to loop my foot.

Scrambling, three limbs hurrying to propel me backwards, she lunges with lyrium boosted fervor. Her blade bears down.

I reach to block despite all instincts screaming to flee.

I feel the swift agony, bone cleaved from bone and fingers cut loose — fearful adrenaline pumping, those several digits slowly falling before me, time creeping in that instant…

Eyes wide.

Heart racing.

A pang and a curse — a dark pulse goes off within me, not angry like my usual mana bursts, but seething.

There’s an urgency but more than that, there’s a greed to it.

“MINE,” parts my lips and that simply utterance, that willful demand, it tears through the trailers of blood still lingering in that moment and snaps my fingers back to their rightful place before they touch dirt. My temperature rockets and flesh fuses, steam pours off me in thick plumes. Under the cover of white, I jump back a ways, putting some distance between us, and flexing my hand, testing it, I quietly ask “You good?”

Two flashes, but they’re stressed.

“Blood magic,” the Antivan menace spits, her voice like two sheets of tin, and wiping the blood from her eyes and readying herself for round two, she rationalizes, “of course. Now it makes sense…”

Problem is, I don’t really care what she’s saying, I’m too focused on the mark, asking “no secrets with us, you’re really good?” after it’s wellbeing.

“…how else would a mere mage…” she continues…

Two flashes, more hesitant now.

“Cause that hurt. I know it did. I mean, I felt it,” I push, power resonating.

Still she drones, “…am a Templar of the Order, none before you..”

The anchor flashes a number of times now, worried. It’s not exactly Morse code but I think I get the gist. I tell it “fine. Just this once, before the end, let’s let loose,” giving it permission. Splits
and inevitable breakdown be damned, we’ve gotta survive if we wanna even see the final chapter.

And if light could smile, the mark does that — though a buzzing pain in my hand, my nerves on sizzling edge, the mark itself is pleased, eager to be able to help again. A gate made open, that Fade conduit pouring right into me and up my arm, the little cracks and highway of scar tissue simmering with green just below the surface...

Blazing and terrific, it churns out a radiance akin to a lighthouse eating away at a night sky. Awash in Fade light, I shudder with pleasure. Damn does it burn, but in the way snorting coke tends to. It hurts at first, and that bitterness on the back of your tongue, you know it’s not good for ya, but all that raw energy, that unrefined kick, it refuses to let you sink. Teeth grit, I sigh in shaky release, relief — I’m hooked into that torrent again.

Through that green, my violet eyes burn all the brighter, tinting the world in a shade the same.

But Loria’s done with her little monologue, her blah blah blah — not that I paid it any mind — but she does something unexpected. She unlatches her gauntlet and shirks it off, letting it clatter to ground, and taking her knife to herself, she cuts a deep gash across her knuckles. A slow, steadied line of splitting skin, knuckle bones just visible beneath the wash of shallow blood drenching her hand.

“**Gross,**” I comment with purple eyes burning hotter by the second.

“You upped the stakes,” she smiles while eyeing her self inflicted wound. I don’t like it when she smiles, it’s a foreign creature on her face, and she’s clearly unused to it. “I refuse to be outmatched.”

“**Still. Gross,**” I nod her way with unbridled confidence.

She hisses, low, as steam of her own puffs out at the gash. Little chunks of red, coagulating and glittering — with a flourish, twisting and shaking the appendage, I see now her gruesome plan. Crystal spikes — tiny claws really, like a cat — they’ve grown from the bloody opening and she’s proud when she utters “…these whispers, they are nothing, no match for my resolve.”

**What**

She cracks her neck with her other hand, shoving at her chin.

Red ignites in those lurid pupils of hers, a deep and weighty burn that confess murder.

Stone crunches underfoot and she’s on me, lunging at breakneck speed, much too fast for mere mortals. She slashes her new claws but we’re both operating on a heightened level. Juiced, muscles pushing beyond their limits, I throw a Fade fueled jab but she swats it away. She uppercuts with red-infused aggression. I side shimmy and try to grapple her throat. She wrenches free and tries to return the favor. Twist, freedom, the air goes sharp — oxygen starting to burn around us. We both launch a weighted strike — my open palm full of devouring green, hers a closed fist of crimson and ill — and then they collide.

Claws plunge into the open mark and where complimentary colors meet, they revolt.

**SH-SH-SHOOOooooOoooooom**

The air explodes.

Wrists snapping back hard, the resulting blast tosses us away like children.
I crash hard against a pillar of red.

‘...just a moment longer,’ it whispers directly into my skull over a track of screams, ‘...our song’s a little stronger.’ Its touch enough to make skin squirm, whispers trying to eat their way through, its words like worms. ‘So pleasant, so warm, stick wit...’ it tries to persist but I peel myself off the jutting crystal, gagging and shaky, half to vomiting. Whatever that was, it wasn’t as sickly sweet as the taint. Not as alluring as the blight song, but just as horrid.

Meaner.

So much more.

But even on my feet, I feel my strength draining.

‘The lyrium?,’ I worry as it becomes harder to breathe, ‘no..this is.’

Woompwoompwoompwoomp — like a helicopter — those waves are back, needling at my inside and punching past my defenses. Through the dust and smoke, Loria comes stepping, whipping her chain in a tight circle while mouthing something under her breath.

‘Cause you’re a fucking Templar,” I groan out and angle myself to the side, “I really am an idiot.”

She never stops uttering her dark prayer to whatever grants her power now but she smiles, that awful alien smile with trails of blood still running down her face from her broken nose. Sputtering like a broken spigot, the mark can’t help, not yet, but I’ve gotta get in a shot before all my juice is gone.

Gotta hold her off or get in one good hit.

Then maybe the others’ll get through.

With a lurch forward, I try taking off, running at her in desperation.

Until then...

My boots claps frantically jingling with every stomp.

Woompwoompwoompwoomp, the chains keeps arcing.

‘One good punch,’ I hope for, my knuckles cracking and sliding in at the smaller foe, I uppercut hard, striking with my last reserves — chain loosed, a spiky backhand meets my jaw, and a power stump crunches my ribs. I’m beaten against a crumbling façade of some Elven god, the wind knocked from my lungs anew. Battered, beaten, bloodied, bruised, it’s not enough — her stupid chains snaps around my leg and she starts reeling me in again. Trying to claw at the ground as best I can with five fingers, I’m protesting “noNoNoNoNooo!” as she chuckles coolly, dragging me. Her aura keeps channeling through the chain, that negating malevolence.

Pulled across rubble and dirt.

The whole right side of my face is groaning, swollen from her spiny strike.

Peering past swelling lids and twisting my head, I find I’m moving by the the broken Venatorri mage I’d punched this way earlier.

“There’s an i...idea,” I cough and — expecting this to be an act of suicide — I roll and just barely
manage to wrap my fingers around the end of her staff. Yanking it from the dead woman’s limp grip, it comes along with me on my pathetic ride. Even weakened as I am, it still reacts, still blisters in defiance.

The head of it, a skull bound in wire, the sockets spark, bone splinters..

Little pockets of carmine bubble up the stick, spreading like a plague.

“It’s useless,” Loria sneers and tows me closer — with rocks, grass, and dirt scraping up my sides, the tattered remnants of my T-shirt bunched up around my collarbone and armpits, just within range now, I jerk as violently as I can and smack the head of it into the Templar bitch. In a sweeping explosion, a small cloud of fire and shrapnel, her left arm and breast plate lie in molten conflagration.

She wasn’t expecting that.

“GOTCHA, YOU DISCOUNT SAMSON,” I cough — Her now exposed olive skin further ruined and hissing, red lyrium growths dotting the grievous rending of flesh, her negation momentarily gone, she spits furiously “Don’t compare me to that pathetic,” but I try to kick at her from on the ground — no good, she snatches my foot and twists the ankle harshly.

“You vile little...,” she taunts.

Pop.

“Gahhhhh!,” I spit and her boot breaks my nose. Blood spurts and I’m struggling to breathe. She grabs what little of my horn nubs remain — a knee bashes my face. Spitting blood, coughing it in short gasps, spread eagle on the ground, I flail my other leg at her in some spastic attempt at delaying the apparently inevitable but knocking it aside, she steals a page from my playbook and downward punches.

Steel gauntlet meets denim covered crotch.

I’m down.

I’m halfway to barfing.

My junk cries in agony.

For some reason, it never crossed my mind that someone else would try that and I’m doing everything in my power just to inhale, to breathe through the pain.

But she’s not done — one handed, she wraps her fucking chain around me, tangling, binding me, a god damn trussed up animal ready for slaughter. Unsheathing a second dagger from her belt, she stops to admire it…

It’s fucking evil.

A blade of red lyrium set in a hilt of veridium, like some wicked piece of Christmas, all grim red and green.

A drag across my exposed chest — the cut going deep but the whispers cutting deeper…

**Let us be, we’re what’s right…**

Another slice — more explosions ring out from the other side of the lyrium wall…
Settle down, hold us tight…

Teeth grit, trying to ignore the madness, I sputter out “why. Are. You. Doing this???!!”

An answer, she vaguely states “it all just needs to change. Anything. It’s been wrong for too long.” But then she smiles and cuts again, dragging long and deep. Blood and fire, I’m hitting my wall, my breaking point but again with the whispers, those heavy damned thoughts.

‘Warm and nice, just like…,’ but I spit back “And you’re making it worse!” in a stupid attempt to drown out the horrid rhymes.

“These ends justify the means,” she’s quick to say — she doesn’t seem bored anymore.

Another explosion, distant shouts and orders, ideas — the sounds of crystal cracking ring sharply around our personal half of the chamber. But Loria cuts a fourth time and ‘BLOOD FROM BLOOD, WE BECOME, ALL...’ comes screaming in my skull. Trying not to gag, the whispers so fucking loud, I sob “why?! Why...would you follow that monster?! The fuck???”

“Why would I?...Because he’s a mage and I’m a Templar?,” she pauses, her blade tip ready to dig in.

“Ye-hess!?” I gasp.

“Mmm…I don’t hate magic,” she grates with sentiment despite the metallic indifference, “but I’ve come to hate this world that never improves. And there’s you.” Tightening her grip on the chain, channeling her negating will through its links, like a wet blanket, it’s smothering. And she adds “you, I hate you.”

Wincing in pain, I’m all grit teeth and nausea.

Cold sweat.

Cotton mouth.

Faint of heart.

“You’re not the hero of this story,” she grates. No goodbye or gloats, she sticks me, pushing down into my guts. Disconnected, not in control, riding shotgun in my own body, I fall back against hard earth.

“I. Am better. Than Samson. Could ever hope to be,” she pointedly hisses, her ego bruised.

A fish on land, I’m just gasping as she looms over me like Death itself. Red eyes smoldering with hate, her terribly unfortunate smile curling in the shadows of her face, the sounds of battle die…

No whine.

No buzz.

Hug us tight,’ the whispers urge…

Aside from the tremendous pain I can’t do anything about, everything feels empty and blank by comparison. I’m fucking cold. There’s hot thick blood all over my stomach, just pooling now in the creases and dripping down the sides…
'Love us dearly.'

Parched.Forgot it gets like this when you’re on the brink, how thirsty you are.

Loria’s mouth is moving. She’s gotta be mocking me.

A slam rocks my enemy — someone just barreled through the rogue Templar like a semi.

Blurry.

Everything is going fuzzy.

‘You can sleep for all eternity…’

Hard to look at.

Really shouldn’t but…I’m gonna close my eyes…just a minute.

‘Wouldn’t that be nice…’ the red lyrium dagger whispers into the back of my skull, scraping, picking away…

Just… just a minute…
“Hunter!” a woman yells from the depths of the inky black, “Don’t you dare die on me now!”

”don’t you dare...”

”...you...”

”...”

Those words grow increasingly distant, cold and hollow in the pure pitch, this veil of darkness Death has draped across my eyes...
“Let’s try this again,” something whispers and my eyes flip open, just like that. All the world has stopped again with me at center stage. The temple gone, I stand alone in the wintry hell of Suledin Keep, snow falling like ash, grey and hazy, devoid of life, only the crackle a burning corpse remains…

And there I am, at my own feet, dead as all the rest, Loria’s blade driven deep, no rise taking to my chest. Almost comically so, big black X’s adorn my dead me’s eyes, as if I couldn’t grasp my own fate…

But all is dead and muted, washed of all its tones, so much so that the burning of charred remains stands out all the more…

Corpses littering the ground — my own among them.

But I can’t shake that some look familiar.

Call it a gut instinct.

At least a solitary fire burns, and though not moving or even flickering, it does has audio and color…

“So this is...death,” I chew on my lip, slowly nodding, absorbing the facts, “didn’t think.. didn’t think it’d happen here…”

Empress du Lion. The worst place I’ve ever struggled through. My words, they echo through the gnarled Keep, abandoned, no life to absorb nor muffle…

“is that right?,” queries a familiar voice, full of smoke and embers, mocking in its tone from
nowhere and everywhere. Then a known scraping — boot heels rubbing the earth the wrong way, as if they shouldn’t be here.

"Heh-hello?" I question, asking after whomever, whatever that was.

But I see no one, not a soul, just the time-locked scene…

Only the dead.

Some former humans, now merely scarecrows of lyrium.

Grim parapets, crumbling into oblivion, their shadows long reaching...

“So...Look,” I groan out to hopefully someone or a spirit and not the last firing neurons of my possibly dying mind, “I’m tired. Tired of bullshit. Tired of games. Tired of the vague threats. Scratch that — threats in general. Just tired. If ya wanna talk, give it to me straight.”

Only the crackle of burning flesh answers back.

“Those are my terms,” I sigh out, “if you’re actually there, that work? That good?”

No response — only the sound of a human cooking.

“So I’m talking to myself?”

“Fine, yes,” the familiar wicked voice coughs out, “games are grand fun but fine, let’s dispel of all amusement. How predictable” and tromping through the lifeless flames, trailing smoke and fire, two vile yellow eyes peer at me from the grey…

A sweep of his well manicured hand and a show of pointed teeth, the demon does a half bow before gruffly reminding “your choice. It’s always your choice.”

“Imshael,” slips my gawking mouth as I stare in abject shock. The dead should stay dead, and the digested even more so.

“Inquisitor Crays,” he smirks out, leering past his brow still clouded in a faint haze of smoke — patting himself off, the soot and fire wiped from his existence, the flames he emerged from go the way of everything else...

...Grey...

“What a fine venue you’ve,” he clears his throat, “…come to as a result of following a linear path. To think, all that power and you waste it on the preselected, the default, the usual narrative. And for what?” To this, he bids me look again to my own corpse at my feet and prodding at it with the toe of his fine leather shoes, he questions “where was the choice in this?”

“Nuh uh, no, cut the shit. You’re gonna reveal some great insight and I continue on or I’m actually dead and none of this actually warrants...,” I reply but looking into those yellow eyes, those beacons of smugness, I instead say “know what? Fuck off.”

“Come now, my friend,” he swoops to my side and reaches up to lay a hand across my shoulder, drumming his fingers and playing to some twisted sense of camaraderie, “we mustn’t speak so harshly to one another.” Peeling him off, I step away and turn on him, stating “more indigestion than friend.”
“Oh? Truly?,” he feigns shock and hurt, clutching at black lapels, “was I not a benefit to you? A trusted ally? A sounding board? A cheerleader? Another set of eyes to watch after those you supposedly trust?” However, being met with only a stony stare, he decides “fine then. Have it your way…” but smirking, catching himself, he chuckles “so long as there’s choice in the matter.”

“Ah ha. Funny,” I groan out entirely devoid of mirth.

“It’s funny you desire?,” he whips back and spits, “when you’re the greatest joke of all? What could I offer to such a punchline as you?”

“Huh?,” I begin to fire back, to dare, but he forces his own voice above mine, pointedly stammering out “H-h-h-huh?” most mockingly and glancing back as if appeasing an some unseen audience.

“I repeat. Fuck off,” I irritably return but Imshael cuts it short, shouting “Quiet! Just. Be. Quiet!” I’m not taking orders.

Not from him.

I do, however, pause, narrowing my eyes at the scoundrel.

...Evidently pleased with my assumed obedience, a flicker of glee twisting lips unpleasantly as the dark rings under his eyes crease, he goes on to condescendingly request “Good, so you do understand how to listen. How wonderful. How. Wonderful. Well now that I’ve your attention, if you would, please explain to me where your arm is.” Pissed as hell, grinding his heel into the snow and stone, tight fisted, he urges “A single answer. Just one, but you need to listen.”

‘make sense demon,’ I think of the whole bizarre situation but knowing my inner thoughts, Imshael stresses “Choice Spirit.”

"Oh. Shit,” I stumble, “totally forgot about..."

“Yes. You did. You’ve forgotten quite a bit it seems,” he points out and strokes a finger under his stubbled chin and with that unpleasant smirk returning, he questions “now, may we get back to the matter at hand? Or rather, about a hand?”

Unsettled, trying not to think of any specific thing — an insanely difficult task — I Just purse my lips and nod.

“Goooood,” he almost purrs and steps around to get a better look at me. Eyeing me, studying my defect, he demands “now again, I ask — a kindly courtesy, really — where is your arm?” with a mouthful of sharp teeth.

“The quna..”

“EGHHHHHH,” he buzzes, grating in tone.

“The Qunari!!,” I shout back a touch quicker

“EGHHHH! Now then, let’s go to the board!!”

Only, there’s nothing of the sort — No panel for review nor judge and jury. He’s just being an asshole and worse, he’s that but with my memories at his disposal.

“Ladies. Gentlemen. Other,” he continues derisively, “so sorry, but we’re not seeing Qunari up
there. Looks like you won’t be getting any points — perhaps you’ll catch up next round…”

Whatever he is, he’s not entirely himself. Unstable, volatile, more irate then ever before…

Assuming he’s actually here and not just the awfully sobering light at the end of the tunnel.

“Fine. I’ll bite…”

“How when you’re as soft toothed as a newborn?,” he leaps to mock yet some more.

“Who..” I sigh while shaking my head, tired of dealing with this reincarnation, “who has my arm.”

“Finally asking the right questions…”

I stand there, uncomfortably rigid, waiting on him.

”...We’ll circle back around to that but for now, in regards to your…forgetfulness…do tell, what’s the last bit of advice I told you?”

I shrug, shaking my head in tiny jerks, sighing “it was…” but interrupting, knowing I’ll come up short, he recites as if verbatim and throwing forward one standalone finger in counting, “One: break the rules.”

“Kinda banking on this all being my brain not getting enough oxygen. Or ya know, dying. Either/or.”

Ignoring my little ramble, he continues as if I’d said nothing “but you forgot. You forgot, forget, and continue to remain woefully ignorant despite so much potential. Your mind is whole, your spirit rejoined, but your vessel remains broken! And you have the gall to blame others?!?” Furiously pacing, boots scraping stone, he spits with vitriol “all the lessons you’ve learned! Why. Won’t! You! Retain them?!?” and levels his index finger my way.

Darkness bleeds into the corners of my vision — just a touch — the not-a-sun means to set soon.

A jingle in the wintry darkness, something in the bleak that matches my heartbeat...

Deep and rumbling.

Distant and slowed.

"Do you hear it? Are you listening? Will you listen?,” the demon inquires but a simple blink and I’m stalking through the damp, sun-choked forest of the Brecilian, thick trees hurting into the sky...

“Imshael? Where? We aren’t done yet,” I demand, pivoting on dead leaves and twigs in the grey but it’s another’s voice, a woman’s who agrees with a smoky brogue, “noo, we arnt dane, nae yit. Not ‘til th’ clan is safe.” Bare feet padding alongside me, an elf traipses with bow and arrow knocked, ready to strike...

...and clearly on the hunt...

...Though pale with blonde hair bordering on white, most of her is covered, hidden away under rags and soot, blood and grime, and her vallaslin all fainter beneath it. Bending low, her Elven eyes seeing more than mine ever could, she whispers “seems wae lost ‘em” and lowering her bow, not seeing the clues she needs, she turns to me but I’m gawking in stunned surprise.

“Ye heer mae, Doshiel?”
“Winter?,” I question, confused now more than ever, “what...what are you doing here?”

“Whittur wae dae’in eer,” she corrects back like I’ve gone dumb, “Huntin’ Templars, er didya fergit?” Pressing on, slinking past disturbed bushes, snapped twigs, and muddy foot prints in the twilight, picking up the trail again, she leaves me a step behind and I can’t believe it — I question “but there can’t be any Templars here. I...we killed them all?”

“Yer lack o’ an imagination is aff ta git yeh murdered,” she lectures before sniffing the fog, her ears twitching, hoping she’ll pick up some trace of her prey. Hushed, it’s all I can be in the face of my first friend.

“Drua’dahn, the clan, they’re here?,” I stumble over my own thoughts, words feeling foreign on my tongue for the time. Eyeing me now, not sure I’m all there in the head, she questions now “By th’ Creators, ‘r ye alright? Yer actin’ weerd” and though it takes her standing on tiptoe, she slaps my forehead. “I swayr, Yeh lit one Templar git yeh dahn...”

“Please tell me you’re still alive,” I plead but winter deflects with “Doshiel, done know whit yer gon’ on about, bit yev gotta stay alert...”

Sunset dies, light swiftly draining from the forest, retreating past roots and brush when suddenly some metal jingles in the dark.

”Theer,” Winter notes, her eyes narrowing, but with it, another slowing heartbeat that can only be my own. Cotton mouthed, the idea of cold sweat blossoming, I struggle to ask “please. Just tell me you’re alive...”

Jingle...

Jingle... it’s much closer now.

I whip back to tell Eirlana to run, to find me, to say I’m sorry, to anything but I only find a wheat field.

The forest of the Dalish, nowhere now.

Only a sea of grey, caught mid ripple from some absent gust of a night breeze...

Just me and my wheat. Wheat as far as the eye can see into that inky black....

Heartbeat.

...jingle.

Heartbeat...

...jingle.

Something straining, I’m pressed to look down, down to my feet, and amid those thin stalks, a dead bird, long since passed. Though unmoving, it asks through open beak “Everything dies eventually...” and I feel my heartbeat in my throat, threatening to strangle me, “...so why hasten that end?”

Jingle.

Jingle.
"Why wouldn’t you try?,” the dead creature peers at me with empty eyes, ants long since done with those measly morsels, “don’t you want to see how far you can go?”

Jingle. It’s almost in my ears.

Buh-buhm. It’s all I can hear.

It takes the bird screeching “TRY” for me understand and...

...that too is gone. Pitch black now, I sit alone at a simple kitchen table, en empty chair across from me, only me and the furniture seem to exist...

Jingle...

But from that miasma, that nothing, that departure from color and value, the ringmaster finally emerges.

Jingle...

“You really suck at this,” my own voice chuckles as an entirely human iteration of me slips from the black and slides into the empty chair. Only he’s not quite right — he’s riddled with cracks and splits, all of which have been sealed with black metal. Like the Japanese art of fixing something cracked with a mixture of lacquer and metallic dust, he sits, obvious in his flaws but all the more beautiful for it. Breathing deep, in time with my staggered few remaining heartbeats, and rolling his neck, he inquires “did...we suffer a head injury or two?” and leering with my once green golden eyes, “I...don’t recall being this dense.”

“They weren’t real, were they?”

“Are memories not real? Do we not exist so long as we’re remembered?” Quiet, I just stare across the table, hoping for more on the matter and fortunately for my sanity, he obliges, elaborating “no. Imshael is dead. You didn’t eat Winter. That bird is probably dust by now” with a sigh. Though relieved, I’m still unsure what to say, and Original Hunter takes the opportunity to comment “so there’s a story. We know how it ends... but we’re still having our ass handed to us.”

"Qunari and Templars,” I offhandedly offer in excuse and he goes “So what? Who cares?” Squinting at me from across the simple wooden table, giving me that special hard stare that only ever says “moron,” he brandishes a sharpie and leaning across, he swipes a big fat X on my forehead. “Ya get it?”

”get what?,” I ask, clearly out of the loop but with a groan, Original brand Hunter informs “Everything you need is right there” and fumbles in his pocket for a second, pulling out his phone after a moment more. Scrolling, his eyes in the illuminated screen, he asks “Insert coins to continue?”

"Wait, are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

"Game Over. Try Again?”

"how?!,” I demand, wide eyed, flipping my chair over in my haste to stand.
"Continue?," He asks, not bothering today anything else so instead, I just give my answer, an unsure “Yyyyyyyyyyes?,” hoping this works.

"Then do that," he smirks, his fixed fractures twisting with the expression — sliding his phone across the table, turning it towards me, there glows “Where is My Mind” by The Pixies on the screen, just waiting for the go ahead. "Just press play," Human Hunter offers, and with a rueful smirk at how dumb I’ve been over and over again, I dab my finger against the touch screen and the tune tears through the void....

“oooOOO, STOP,” it plays as a high pitched whine pierces my everything, “With your feet on the air and your head on the ground...”

Lightning punches me in the chest.

"Try this trick and spin it, yeah..."

All I smell is toast.

"your head will collapse, but there’s nothing in it, so you’ll ask yourself...”

Another jolt of lightning straight to the heart.

“Where is my mind?”

Jerk.

Shudder.

Spasm.

Twitch.

Burning bread pungent in my nostrils.

Just a high whine in my ears, something’s on fire. “Again!!,” a little voice screeches at another crouched over me. As electricity crackles off my flesh, I hear Sera shouting “shishitSHITSHTISH! STUPID!” as clenched fists beat down on my chest, punching me with another lightning bolt, “STOP DYING, U! WAKE UP!”

Like powering a lightbulb with an atom bomb, my eyes ignite and roaring ‘SINKING, SWIMMING,” I rise like a god damn Dracula from the coffin, disobeying the laws of physics and gravity. Bones cracking, flesh and organs howling as they stitch themselves back together, all of my burns and every thing is pain but I’m ready to finish this.

The lyrium wall, breached, ice and molten slag having forced a gap.

Blackwall is barely on his feet, gripping what remains of his shield as tightly as possible.

Vivienne and Dorian both are gasping for air, still trying to recover what mana was snuffed out by the Templar.

Cole, in futile fashion, is trying to haul Bull to his feet but the tank of a man is nursing a bruise the size of his chest — broken ribs for certain.

Loria lies bloodied, broken, pinned to the ground with a longsword driven through the gap in her
plate and down into her wicked heart — gasping for life, struggling and twitching, her sin of choice tries what it can to recover her broken form, coagulating and growing around the blade as if to repair her irrevocably damaged ventricles and arteries with its blighted abilities…

Atop her, Cassandra kneels a mess, pieces of her armor ripped off, coldly determined as she twists the blade just a bit deeper, stating “Die. Here” through bruised lips with ice in her voice.

“Thi-eghhhhs…doesn..cght change any…cahh…anything,” the downed Templar hawks and sputters, snaking about on her stake like an eel on the line. Absolutely ashy grey from blood loss, arms no longer function — Cassandra apparently robbed her of that when she dug deep. Probably hit spine.

“Stop,” the Seeker urges and twists the blade just a bit more, “talking. No more of that.”

“Buh-cghhhh agh,” she coughs and more blood goes drooling from the corners of her mouth.

“Shhhhhhh,” Cassandra quiets and seeing I’m alive, she picks herself up, wipes at a nose bleed, and shambles over — grabbing at my shirt, she tugs my face down to hers, passionately kissing. There’s a fire to her lips, and the taste of copper, but more than anything, there’s relief behind it.

“OooOo, git a roOom,” Sera smugly hums as she wipes the remaining lightning and broken glass from her gloved palms.

“I told you to stay by my side,” Cass says, ignoring Sera’s comment, that is, until she notices the elf making a finger-in-hole gesture. That earns an “ughh” but there isn’t the usual level disgust in it. Too tired perhaps.

Wincing in pain from evidently having been whipped across the forehead, Blackwall ambles toward a gaping hole in the floor and grizzling out “We don’t have time for tea parties, we have to move.”

“Calpurnia has the advantage and we’re falling behind, Darlings,” the Knight Enchantress agrees, restoring her spirit sword to fighting form as she breathes new life into it, “I refuse to be second to a Tevinter mage.”

“To any that aren’t me, yes yes,” Dorian quips, tweaking his mustache back to a point — Vivienne doesn’t even roll her eyes at that. Solas, staring intently at me, he says “the Venatori defiled the paths, dropped into the catacombs but..”

“I know,” I nod and taking a second longing look at Cass, I ask “bookmark this for later?” Now she rolls her eyes, but considering she’s willing to half-smirk even with the bruises, I’m considering that a “maybe.”

_Maybe is good._

"Inquisitor!,” Morrigan and Solas both demand my attention but ignoring them for a moment, turning on Sera — and she freezes mid finger fuck gesture — I tell her “Smart move. Thanks,” and she straightens up, beaming “Innit? Yeah, yeh, I’m gud.”

"Inquisitor,” everyone else demands of my attention — everyone being Blackwall, Vivienne, Solas, Morrigan, Dorian, and Bull — and I break away, ambling over to the massive doors, golden doors I know should lead to Abelas and his wary group. “I’ve got this,” I smile past the pain. That’s what I’m good at apparently.

“Inquisitor, The Path is broken — the means of unlocking those doors, broken. Ruined. For all the
magic of this temple, I’m loathe to say it, but we must follow down into the dark if we are to...”

”Take a breath, Solas,” I hum out, “I’ve got this.” Taking a sterling breath myself, more excited than anything now, like it’s my birthday, I thump my stump against my forehead...

* X marks the spot.

Though it assuredly looks like I’m smelling my armpit, I tug at memories. Memories of reach, of grasp, of a time before Estwatch.

Before some distant nation had the gall to fuck with me.

And there it is — memories of my right arm...and in that moment...

’We exist as long as we’re remembered,’ I parrot my more intuitive self and the imagined becomes real. Black metal floods the void that should be my arm, filling the volume like water to a glass.

Pitch black.

”Happy Birthday to me,” I whisper into a chuckle, flexing and testing the limb. I can feel their eyes on me — on it — but only one speaks up. “I’ve got questions but uh,” Bull rumbles, his heft of blade dragging behind him, “...they can uh...wait for later”

Scratch that. There’s a second. Varric coughs out “when’d you learn *that* trick?!”

A third. Sera asks “wait, it’s ur birthday??,” almost giddy before going cynic, “shite place 4 a party. Later, rite?”

Smacking my hands to the temple gates, I laugh out at that tremendous thing “I’ve done this too many damn times.” No surge of energy, no exertion of will — it’s unnecessary — I hear those mental lock pins click and the doors accept my gameplay as proof, of having the knowledge of having done the puzzle paths so many times before. Rippling with blue and gold, they part the way before us, before me...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for bearing with me — this was a difficult chapter to write. So many characters to give voice to, questions to answer, etc etc *waves hand like the tide*

So how about that? Idiot’s had that trick since Adamant. Just didn’t know it.

Next chapter, we’re finally gonna say hello to Abelas.
Marching eagerly into the shadows, a new swagger to my step I haven’t felt in a long time, bleeds off me in a thick plumes as my body continues its repairs from my brush with certain death. My clothing knitting itself back into some wearable condition, no longer tattered like a bum, drawing threads from the surrounding darkness, I don’t even bother waiting for the ancient elves within to light the room.

I’m sure they’ve already knocked their bows, their arrows trained on us in deadly fashion.

I just don’t care. Instead, I greet the yet unseen sentinels with “HELLLLLO ABELAS!” and making a minor correction, I apologize “sorry to the rest of you up there — never learned your names. Again, sorry.” Curious now, a bold and ageless voice hisses from the depths “Venavis” and the lights go up — racing the lengths of this tremendous chamber, golden fire hurries down oiled aqueducts tucked where wall meets floor. As if parroting the flames, some magic of the Temple reacts, casting a golden light from the ceiling above. Elven reliefs, intricacies etched in stone that have no rival, the history of these elves laid bare in statue and mosaic…

Checkered floors.

Nary a stone out of place…

Ornate basins and bannisters, a place as remarkable as it is remarkably preserved, golden braziers stand in waiting, hungry for fresh flames all their own…

“Well…Tis unexpected,” Morrigan whispers in shock at my side, not entirely sure how to process the sight before her — from on high, an ancient elf demands respect, speaking down to us, “You know my name? You are unlike the other invaders… You ignored the paths despite having one of our own at your side. You bear the mark of magic which is… familiar.”

Even though he addresses us, his many brethren keep their bows trained on in and without taking a pause, a breath, Abelas inquires “how has this come to pass? What is your connection to those that first disturbed our slumber?” Like all the rest we’ve seen so far, they too are clad in sleek, form fitting armors, fine leather cowls draped over their hairless heads.

Mythal’s stamp upon their faces, green branching running around their eyes like so many thin veins of a leaf.

“Lot of questions,” I state the obvious and planting my hands — yes, plural — to my hips, I ask “you want those answers in order or…?”

Narrowing his eyes at me, Abelas doesn’t seem to take kindly to my flippant attitude — none of his people do — but I continue anyway, explaining away “So I’m Hunter. Inquisitor Hunter…no, scratch that, that still sounds redundant. Just Hunter. I know you ‘cause I know everything” and before the ancient sentinel can object, a sneer already taking to his lips, I tut “bah buhbuhbuh. Don’t make that face. I know you because I’ve already done this. Didn’t need to walk the paths because — that’s right — already done all this. Got the anchor etched into my hand because I’m the asshole that interrupted those “intruders” you spoke of. Not a fan of them. Nope. In fact, I’m just here to stop them from getting the Well of Sorrows.”

Even without eyebrows, his brow furrows hard and his eyes go harder.

“…And yeah,” I continue, too snarky for my own good, entirely a different person than ten
minutes ago, “I get that you exist only to protect the well, this sacred ground, and preserving yourselves through uth…uthenara? Uthenara!” and I snap my fingers, “That. Yes, I know what the well actually is, how it’s the will of Mythal and the collective memories of thousands of elves before you.”

His silence is deafening, only the crackle of flames, nervous breathing, well oiled bow line tightening, and rumbles of destruction in the distance have any presence here….

“You are…remarkably well informed,” he finally comments though I catch his gaze passing over Solas, as if suspecting our elf of betrayal, “but the Vir’abelasan is not for you.” Sneering and adding extra emphasis, he spits “it is not for any of you.”

“Oh yeah, 100 percent agree with ya on that,” I speak in all seriousness and hook a thumb to my chest, staring up at them with wild eyes, “I don’t want it. Not interested in a leash. Just here to stop Corypheus from getting’ to it.”

“Inquisitor…,” Solas carefully eases to my other side, whispering, “he clings to his ways because he hasn’t the means of restoring the world. We…”

Alright.

Unnecessary commentary.

Taking a bold step forward, I call out “look, This is taking waaaaayyy too long. I already know all about how the humans histories are wrong blah blah blah Tevinter didn’t destroy you guys, it was the war among your Evanuris and the forging of the Veil that did your people in. I get that. Can we Uh…can we just skip this part. Please. Please?? I’ve heard this too many times and I’m sorry but I’m…well, bored isn’t the right word.”

Dorian, blaspheming under his breath in confusion, he gapes out “wait? What!?? Tevinter didn’t…” and Abelas answers “yours was a war of carrion feeders…”

“Man! I’ll tell you later,” I interrupt over them both, “Everything, J-Just…time! We don’t have it!”

“Regardless of what you think you know…”

“know,” I stress.”

“…know that the vir’abelasan must be preserved.”

“Whatever! Yes!,” I try to hurry this all along, “Can we just get going then? Don’t wanna fight you, not trying to mess with your…sacred duties. Protect the well — let’s go!”

Quiet again, the ancient elf ponders and stares.

…and glares…

...until finally

“…I…believe you,” he says, looking disgusted with such a revelation, “the temple recognizes you… though you lack respect, you know a great deal… and trespassers though you may be, if these Others are your enemies, we shall deign to aid you in destroying them. After this is concluded, you will be permitted to depart…and never return.”

“this is precisely our goal, is it not?,” I hear Solas questioning under his breath as Morrigan hisses
“consider carefully. You must stop Corypheus, yes, but you may also need the well for your own.”

“Ughh,” I hear Cass groan quietly, met by the grumble of Blackwall behind our motley group.

“Yyyyeah, like I said before,” I answer out, “don’t want the well. It’s all yours!”

“You will be guided to those you seek — As for the vir’abelasan… it shall not be despoiled,” Abelas condescends, still talking to us as if we’re children, but moving to the yet another hallway beyond, to surely make his way to our mutual destination, he threatens “..Even if I must destroy it myself.”

“NOOO!,” Morrigan screams and rapid shifts into a raven, bones, flesh, and feathers snapping into the air with mana crackling off her. Having forgotten she was always going to do that, I glare at the empty spot she was just standing on, unenthusiastically stating “no. Stop. Don’t” in the most lackluster tone I can muster. She just fucked this deal up and noting her outburst, her change, Abelas is already barking “FILTHY SHEM. KILL THEM ALL!” as he takes off sprinting after our rogue witch.

‘Can’t do long range spells. Can only impact things within ten feet radius, give or take,’ I think quickly, already forming a spell burst in the palm of my metal hand, ‘so here’s some reach’ and whipping my arm, stretching fast, striking the middle-most sentinel like a rocket. “No gravity here,” I state as my hand smashes the elf into the wall, the effects detonating outward and sweeping over everyone on the rise. In that instant, all mass defies the laws of physics, careening without control through the air, unable to move themselves as if they were trapped in the depths of space.

A few arrows unleash but go soaring wildly, their intended paths radically upset.

Nothing to interact with, the elves are nothing to worry about.

My group is at arms, ready to fight, but what’s done is done. Too strong a pull, those elves can only curse in rage at their impotence, their inability to comply with Abelas’ simple attack order. It’s not permanent — I’m sure it’ll wear off eventually — and hurriedly snatching a wizened sentinel by the scruff before she can slip through a side door, holding her several inches off the floor, I intimidate “the bird witch is an asshole but take us to the well” but she glares at me, defiant, silence her greatest weapon now.

“Crap. NEW PLAN” I fret and hearing my intentions straight from the source, before I even know them all myself, Cole excitedly stresses “Everyone in! Inside! Hurry! Close the doors!” as I toss the elf back out into the chamber with the rest of her gravity stricken brethren — Blackwall and Cass slamming the passage doors shut behind them, I utter “Melt” while dragging my hand across the middle, superheating and fusing the two parts. Should slow them down. But whipping back to Cole, meaning to ask him “Where’s the well!?,” he preempts me yet again, shouting “this way! I can hear it! Through this wall!”

No shimmer of wards here — time to get wild. Hand to wall, with a twist of the wrist, a large chunk of stone and metal liquifies, spilling out across the floor as a battle rages on just out of sight.

I’ve done this trick before — it’s easy now.

Magicking temple walls into wet doorways at the ghost boy’s commands, I rip us a new path without having to risk killing an already endangered people. Don’t want their deaths on my hands. “THIS WAY,” Cole shouts…
BOOM, SPLASH.

“NOW LEFT!”

PUMMEL, POUR.

“OVER HERE!”

KNUCKLE BLAST, WET BOOTS..

“IT’S GETTING LOUDER!,” he awkwardly skips, trying not to trip over his own feet, “IT’S THROUGH HERE! THIS SPOT!”

SPLASHDOWN. The wall becomes thin mud, pouring everyone as streamers of false sunlight cut through the foliage and treetops above, revealing our next arena. The battles between Sentinel and Venatori within the passages, bypassed, we step out onto a descending staircase...

And out there, standing above a sea of mist and haze, an island. THE ISLAND. The only thing of actual importance here. Apart from the rest of the temple, protected by a vast chasm, the depths of which I don’t intend to explore, the Well of Sorrows, the Vir’abelasan...

“Holy...shit,” I hear Bull rumble irreverently, in awe of the tropically magic scene before us.

*Which means...*

Stepping to the ledge and peering through the overgrowth rooted to the railing, I see our next obstacle, one that’s been a long time coming.

Calpurnia.

The Tevinter mage with the confusing motives, the slave that seeks to end slavery by making everyone a slave to Corypheus.

Getting my arm back AND getting to fight her, why, it’s my lucky day.

Their back to us, they all gesture and chant, something in Tevene as they perform a tandem ritual — disarming the Temple, unlocking the bridge, they’ve managed one floating step to the grand staircase so far. The rest have yet to be undone.

But they’re distracted for now.

God damn, I’m the luckiest.

Blades and staves at the ready, my party exhausted, battered, but prepped to continue the fight, I raise a hand, quietly requesting “hold up... I wanna try something...” and take to furtively climbing up on that railing, crouching down.

“There are 14 of them,” Cass warns, peering down at their numbers, “this will not be easy.”

“We attack from stealth,” Rasa rasps definitively, sounding as if her answer is the only one.

“Nope. Let me have this,” I confidently smile out but Cass is quick to grab my arm, holding me back while intently asking “is that wise? You nearly died back there.”

“It does matter.”

“Of course. Just…Just… let me try something,” I ask with a wink, “pretty sure this’ll work.”
“Here,” I slowly whisper, tapping in, “We...”

Feel the rush, the potential...

“Go.”

I’ve got the spark — pulling deep of my vicious mana, the natural ambience of the temple itself, and drawing on the anchor, bristling with power, a terrifying warble escapes my throat. My heart kicks like a bass pedal, throwing down my polyrhythm of destruction. A screech cracks the air and hellfire explodes from my open mouth. The air temperature rockets as I blast a of napalm, razing everything in its path, cracking stone and splitting bone with its inferno.

Like a god damn dragon.

Several mages down below, whipping about to attack, they’re robbed of the chance as they burn but — ceasing my expulsion, taking another breath — I see it now, the crackling of a mighty golden barrier within the fire, a dome forged by the remaining Venatori.

All things considered, they are great at teamwork.

Now before anyone can distract or stop me, I take the plunge, leaping down into the blaze and with a sharp inhale, the flames closest extinguish, snuffed. Sauntering past some flash fried husks of humans beings, I almost cackle as I laugh out “If only you’d stuck with your Templar instead of rushing on ahead” before punching at the barrier. The field shudders but holds as all those enemies huddle within, doing what staff gestures they can to keep the shield up.

“YOU WOULDN’T BE IN THIS MESS!,” I howl with glee at their terrified expressions as I continue pummeling the dome — taking a page from Sera’s notebook, grinding my knuckles together like defib paddles, willing a wicked charge of lightning between the two, I bring them crashing down against their defense.

“She is dead?,” the former slave questions from within the protection of her dome — shaking her head in frustration, upset at the choice that may have been her own to push ahead, she curses me through the muting barrier “Unfortunate, but necessary. Of course it would you that bites at our heels, you who would seek to take what will be ours. To walk the Fade without the...”

My plan: overwhelming force and energy. Blow out the fuses.

“I’D BE DEAD. Right NOW!,” I howl like a madman, ignoring her bullshit as the energy whines out painfully sharp, “Ahahahahahaha” and then I bring both palms down like a clap of thunder, shouting “CLEAR!” Backlash, surged, power ripples up the inside of the dome, two more mages burst into flames and I just grin all the harder. Unfortunately, a raven cries overhead and Abelas soars past, raising his fist and activating the remainder of the bridge — my allies, they all go sprinting by me and up the forming stairs behind him.

That’s fine — leave me to sow my particular chaos.

“You simpleminded fool” is all Calpernia shouts — that look of desperation on her face, that panic mixing so well with fury, it’s just delightfully wonderful. Calling upon her allies, “enough!,” while twisting her simple bladed stave and summoning some terrible energy to its head, she poises herself to strike.
She’s done cowering, hiding, whatever.

Her mages are done as well — even muffled, I hear her shout “now!” and the dome collapses.

*Slice*

There’s a misfire, her violent energy nearly clips me.

In the time it takes to think, I’ve dragged my fingers through the air and cut through all but one — every idiot standing pipes out ribbons of red from their throats and torsos, robes getting thick with hot blood. All staves clatter to the ground but Calpernia, she dropped her staff as she hard ducked out of the way. Unfortunately for her, I’ve already stepped to and gotten my fingers around her neck.

No more chanting.

No more magic from her.

Dragging her towards the stairs, she scratches at my grip and tries to pry herself free but I will not mess this up. She’s caught in my more iron of grips, so to speak — metal arms don’t feel pain.

“Usually there’s one way you survive this,” I casually explain, hauling her along with me, her ability to speak temporarily restricted, “it involves going to some Temple of Dumat, finding proof that y’Ur ELDeR oNe intends to make you tranquil, has been doing that as homework to your former master etcetera etcetera.”

“Gehhochhheee,” she struggles to say.

Probably a demand for release.

That’s cool.

No more games though.

“You and I, we’d argue but eventually I’d show you said proof, and you’d ask to leave.”

Should’ve killed Loria back in Empress du Lion.

“You’d do that, abandoning Corypheus, and that was that,” I continue and click my teeth at her, taking a step out onto that floating staircase, the drop being a long and terrible thing through heavy mists, “only…I didn’t take the time to go to that hideout. Had a lot going on and didn’t bother but that’s on me…but you joining up with a monster in the first place. Yeah, well, that’s on you.”

Should have confirmed it.

“Lehccc meeee aghhh,” she struggles to enunciate through the choke, “ahhghl leeeevgh” but it only comes out as harsh and garbled nonsense. To that, I reply, “I just can’t play this game anymore” and holding her off over the drop, our height differences outstanding, her eyes widening and pale complexion draining even more, she claws at my wrist, to hold tight, dig in, but I release. She scrabbles to grab ahold of me, the step, roots, anything, but I pull back just quick enough and she plummets, too stubborn to even yell as the fog swallows her whole as she falls to her room.

“Goodbye,” I hum out without a second glance, booking it up the poorly planned magical stairs as fast as I can but taking the time to make sure each foot is actually planted. It’s an awkward dance but I get to the top just in time to find Iron Bull bear-hugging Morrigan, keeping her contained. A
smear of blood across her mouth, she glares daggers at a downed Abelas while spitting “fool! You would watch the world burn so as to keep your knowledge. It sits here, useless, all this time!”

“you...are..n-not...wehhhhrrthy.”

“Easy!,” Bull growls out as she flails uselessly against his muscles. Solas erstwhile tends to Abelas but noting how dire the Sentinel actually is, he stops his attempts to heal him.

It’s futile now.

Black veining his entire body, two purpling punctures to the neck, he’s been envenomed. Bitten by a giant corrupted spider, best guess... Bitten by Morrigan masquerading as one. Dying and I can’t help — I don’t know how. If I knew the science behind it, then maybe I could devise a solution, but there’s no time.

Corypheus is coming.

The defenses won’t keep him out for long — if he hasn’t already obliterated the main gates.

“LET ME DOWN! You all heard his parting words! What I did was necessary!,” the witch hurls at her Tal Vashoth captor but he rumbles out “not gonna happen — you’re too angry — just gonna hold on til the Boss gets…” but spotting me as I push through the gathering, he groans “Ah, okay. Down you go” and releases his catch. Fuming but recomposing herself, Morrigan stands straight, edging towards the well and victorious over the ancient sentinel, recognizing his imminent death, she’s finally comfortable enough turning away, focusing entirely upon the waters of Mythal…

“The fuck was that?!,” I yell at Morrigan, waving at the floored elf locked in the throes of a painful death, “guy’s attitude was garbage but what the fuck?!” Not even casting a glance backwards, too enamored by the draw the well, she smirks “I was under the impression you could see the future, Inquisitor.”

“There’s a lot goin’ on,” I growl, stomping up behind her, “momentarily forgot you’re an asshole. Won’t happen again.”

“…And now we have the well,” Morrigan praises while ignoring my insult, her eyes as hungry as Vir’abelasan, but Solas protests “he was just defending what once was. This...what you did was... it was a waste, unnecessary” still lingering by Abelas’ side, visibly upset by the tragic turn of events.

“T-there...eggh...is a...a price t-to pay,” Abelas manages to warn, to threaten even as his body lies useless and weak. Dark rings under his eyes, he can barely focus, but knowing what he means, Morrigan speaks with reverence “whatever price it demands, I am willing. It just so happens I am also the best suited to use it for your service...,” committed to her perpetual hunt for all things knowledge and old magic.

“More likely, to your own ends,” Solas criticizes while rising to glare at her, distrust of her intentions

“What would you know of my “ends,” elf?!,,” she snaps back but he’s quick to bite, “you..you are a glutton drooling at the right of a feast!”

“I alone have the training to make use of the well!”

“Or we could just destroy the damn thing,” Cassandra flatly puts in her two cents, wary and watching the way behind us for incoming threats — Sera’s quick to agree, “ooo second that!” At
that point, the others go about voicing their opinions, concerns, speaking over one another…

“Figuratively kills me to say this, but I’m siding with the Seeker on this one. Oooph, that actually hurt to say”

“Quiet, dwarf.”

“Uhh, I don’t know a damn thing about magic so just…just figure something out. Quickly.”

“Cassandra’s right! It’s called the Well of Sorrows. Sorrows! No one shud go dipping in it!”

“Wrong. Morrigan is correct in one way only: we should take the power that lies in that well.”

“Don’t trust her, Inquisitor. She’s a parasite, only here because she sensed a meal more hearty than you!”

“Said one whose only motive for joining the Inquisition is altruism.”

“Boss, if we’re voting, I’m all for…wait, can magic water actually be destroyed?”

“It’s too loud! So many voices, all in your head, talking over you. You don’t want that!”

“Does no one else see a critical issue here? All I know is — and yes, as one from Tevinter, I should have zero say on whomever scoops up the last bit of Elven knowledge — but if it’s down to you drinking versus her? Let her have it. A simple staff explodes at your touch. The font of Elven memory? That’s…not small. What if you fracture all of space time? Poof us all out of existence?”

“Quiet the fuck down!” I shout out in frustration, “everyone telling me to drink up, I don’t need this! Dorian’s excellent point aside, Morrigan can have the damn thing if she wants it so bad. Or did no one hear my anti-leash speech ten minutes ago?” and the deliberating goes dead. Mostly.

Sera let’s out a “pfft, rude.”

And Dorian feels the need to point out “plus the whole blowing up in our face possibility” once more.

“yeah. That.”

But beyond those minor interjections, I’ve finally a moment to think, finally a chance to look this fucking place over. Five inactive Eluvians stand against a rock face. Like everywhere else in this Temple, barely visible wards shimmer. Placid waters, they look so calm in their marble basin — even now, I can hear the distant whispers of a thousand strong. Not a one I understand.

Yeah, it’s the right choice, not drinking this memory soup but I do have to give a warning...

“Morrigan. I’ll just say this…,” I begin and she looks to me, suspicious but hopeful, “…you… don’t like Mythal. You two have history. Final warning.” Letting slip a sigh of a laugh, she replies “history is all she is, Inquisitor. I don’t fear the will of a dead god.”

“Dumb, but…your choice.”

I’ve said what I can, or what I’m willing to, I suppose.

She wants this — she can have the consequences.

With an overly dramatic arm-extended “after you” gesture, I bid her go on ahead. No more words, no more objections allowed, stepping into the pool, her scraps of dark skirt collecting on the eery
blue surface, not quite an actual wet but slowing her movements as if it were.

…In the distance rumbles still, Corypheus beating at the Temple’s defenses, likely clawing and blasting for a way in…

Entranced, lost to the whispers and wisping of the vir’abelasan, swaying this way and that, as if looking for those long since dead, Morrigan mouths inaudibly, answering them under her breath — and then that all ceases. Center now, she plunges, sucked beneath the surface but just as suddenly, the waters funnel down, pouring into her now gagging mouth, looking as if she’s drowning. But soon enough, all that was the well is now in the Witch, is the Witch, but lying in the bottom, her eyes smoking of dark blues, she can’t see us.

Doesn’t register us.

She’s not rising.

The wards lose their glow as a shimmer of dying light rolls across everything.

…The temple shudders.

…she’s still not getting up.

Something’s wrong…

of course it is…

…when isn’t it?

“ShitNonono,” I hiss, leaping into the dry basin — hunched and slapping at the witch’s face, I’m hoping it’s the well water but she feels like cold sweat as she babbles and mumbles incoherently. This is taking too long. “BULL! HELP ME!” I shout out in a panic as the Temple shakes again, debris, dust, and leaves raining down on us from above. Him scooping her up, we three hurry to the center most Eluvian with the rest hot behind us and at the mirror, grabbing Morrigan’s limp hand, I slap it to the dim surface over and over again, hissing “c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon!” but the damn reflective thing remains offline.

Another boom claps within the temple, closer now.

“NEXT ONES!” I hasten and we try the same to the other four mirrors but nothing is working and Bull is starting to anxiously question “What’s the plan, Boss?! What’re we doing?!,” clearly wondering when to drop the witch and when to heft his hulking blade out.

“Blight — screaming in the dark — a thousand years of fear and fury,” Cole cries out on edge, “he’s almost here!”

“None of that sounded good,” Varric stress, quickly loading Bianca up with his few remaining explosive bolts, “we got an exit plan? We grabbing on or?...”

Another explosion, another wave of nausea…

He’s almost...

We’re not trapped. The wards are down.

…I have options…
Fuck Mythal, fuck the rules, and

“...to hell with the supposedly predetermined plot line,” I growl to myself encouragingly, overheard only by a few others who all question or gape “huh?” and “what??.” To the whole party though, I shout out amidst the Eluvians, “EVERYONE. HOLD ON. NOW!” and as the booms roll ever closer, all my people gripping tight, everyone making sure they’ve got ahold of some part of me — for Morrigan, Bull’s her proxy — and in a moment of genius, or stupidity, I fling my fresh arm back towards the mirror gates. Splitting, dividing and conquering, the one becomes five elongated monstrosities of arm, each too long, too clawed, but each perfect for the job. Winding and grappling, though somewhat disorienting to control this many limbs, I hold tight to all the Eluvians and before Corypheus can even have the chance...

Flexing my knuckles, I hurl my reforged arm at the mirrors and five arms erupt from the one — as disorienting as it is bizarre, I grapple tightly to all possible doorways to the Fade and...

Well, I don’t need a stare down with the Blight Lord like it’s high noon.

I blink.
Teleporting with fucking anchors around my neck, that’s what’s its like blinking this time. Painful, the drag trying to rip my arms off, we come tearing into being where we left the Inquisition at the edge of the Wilds — companions thrown or flying off, glass exploding behind me like a god damn car crash, golden frames yowl from the stresses of being yanked and twisted across space. A tremendous bomb goes off and just as swiftly, the force knocks me off my feet and I duck for cover — not a second later, the forest groans and snaps as red lyrium shrapnel tears through the overgrowth, chewing into trees and people indiscriminately. Thankfully for us, Vivienne’s quick to defend, swiping her finely gloved hand up and evaporating the shards as they strike through several layers of magic, some intricate spellwork brought forth in an instant.

“Not the head, god damnit! TAKE THEM OUT AT THE KNEES!” a soldier barks at her comrades, her armor nearly scrap, “AND FALL THE FUCK BACK! LET THEM LEAVE COVER FIRST!”

The air is thick with smoke and magic, blood and death. “MEDIC,” so many people yell in panic as more explosions tear through the trees, every time rocketing red shrapnel through the brush — people bleeding out on the field, others dragging them away from the action as best they can, we’ve warped back into the heart of a shit show. Inquisition and Orlesian forces working in tandem, from shield walls to grouped volleys, from cavalry charge to Templars’ purge, they fight a force I can’t even identify.

Wait. Never mind. There’s one.

A human gaunt to the point of being mostly skeleton, their flesh bunching and bundled around the enormous crystalline growths in their stomach — pregnant with the red, vacantly they hug their cluster and shamble, emerging from the overgrowth — at first sight, a hurled spear tears through its face only it detonates, blasting red out like a dirty bomb. “SHE SAID THE KNEES OR ARE YOU DEAF, SOLDIER?!” Cullen hurls insults at the spearman before shoving him aside. Feverish looking, blood trickling from his golden hair to stubbled chin, his sword arm limp as he thrashes and shield bashes with his left.

He’s been hit.

A lot of people have.

“WE FIGHT SMART OR DIE! MAKER PROTECT US!,” our Commander bellows again to our armies just as Emperor Gaspard brings his shield up, halting an incoming rain of shards. Chevaliers and Templars do what they can in the man’s wake — they give our dear commander cover as Gaspard storms to me, demanding “zee mission! Was eet a success!?” over the din of war.

“DAMN RIGHT!,” I roar back through a cupped hand.

“Zen we sound zee retreat, move to open ground and kill zees abominations from afar!,” and grabbing me by the tattered shirt still clinging to my torso, his war lust far from quenched, he barks “INQUIZEETOR, DO WHAT YOU DO — TELEPORT ZEE WOUNDED OUT. RETURN IF YOU CAN. REGARDLESS, I WILL STAY HERE AND KEEP ZEE MONSTERS AT BAY.”
Yet another thunder clap of death cracks through wilds and I flinch then yell back “DON’T BE STUPID! NO DYING ON US! ORLAIS NEEDS YOU!”

“JUST GO!”

He’s right. Move quickly, no time to lose.

“I WILL NOT DIE ZIS DAY!”

But before I can make our escape, Lady Vivienne pulls away — her hands still raised against the forest in case of further fire — and she informs “I’m sorry, dear, but I won’t be leaving with you. The Emperor, he’s no Celene, but Orlais needs him.”

“I TRUST YOU,” I yell back over the din of battle, “I KNOW YOU’VE GOT THIS.” What more, I’m not feeding her ego. I’ve seen what she can do and her reputation is well deserved. “STAY SAFE.” I yell out once more as she offers a curt little nod of her chin, her eyes saying more than her tongue ever could.

She’s absolutely got this.

Now for my party trick… This’ll be tough. One big blink? More passengers than ever before? Just gotta get everyone out. Smacking my fresh palm to the ground, trying what I did just a few minutes ago but on a much larger scale, my arm splits apart — pressure mounting in my skull, this is a reckless move — a hundred lesser arms go snaking off,

Oh shit. I’m close to tapped.

Really feeling it.

A stabbing pain, trying to focus on all those alive but downed, it might be a manner of blood magic but hats what I’m joining in on — a shark in chummed waters. It’s so much easier to have a reactive burst of a controlled grab but that’s what I’m doing… I hear people panicking, some swatting or trying to cut at my tendrils but all that’s needed is a touch…

So many people…

Human…

Elf…

Dwarf…

A handful of Tal Vashoth…

‘I’ve got you…,’ flickers through my mind with the image of Skyhold and in what is inarguably the most heavy I’ve ever felt, the most shackled and choked, and muddling through, the air cracks as I haul eighty six god damn injured people through on top of the eleven already in my party. Frigid air punching lungs, I’m gasping, crumpling to my knees in the thick mountain snows just across the bridge from our castle…


“Low..b-blood sugar. That...w-was too ma…” I hear myself stammer weakly, before the cut to black.
An army stands before me in the high noon of too many suns on the Exalted Plains. All red and grey diagonals, the might of the Qun has met me this day to stomp me down into submission.

Yeah, that’s not happening.

A dead wind, the air is stagnant, thick like a warm cheese.

Not a crow, gull, or vulture sound.

“Well?,” I laugh at their antaam and the fear they so thoroughly try to rid themselves of…

Fear of the different, fear of magic, fear of the new…

They clearly fail at that if their pursuit of me is any indication.

“We gonna do this?,” I question loudly, bellowing out to their numbers with both hands beckoning them closer. From amidst the musclebound banner men and countless Arvaarad, a many horned god of the Qun emerges, slipping through his men like water. Forty feet tall, this spectacle of a man, the Arishok, I know him to be dead going on five years now. Sure, I didn’t strike the killing blow, but I watched it up close, right over Hawke’s shoulder as so many millions of others did as well. His black beady eyes are quite alive though as they lock on me and striding forth, every step a threat, he booms out “You are an insult to the Qun and we will not suffer that” like thunder and he pulls free his pronged two hander. All red plate and killing edge, he raises his blade high and roars “KATARA” and the earth trembles in response.

“Itwa-ost,” I reply with a smirk — in a language I never really bothered to learn — but even though he shouldn’t hear me, he booms “MERAVAS” in agreement. No matter the losses, so long as they fight to destroy magic and me, they have proven their worth in the name of the fucking Qun. That army of theirs, it stampedes my way, all fury and religious fervor, and with a smile, I raise and point a finger to masses.

I draw back my thumb.

I click with my teeth and narrow my eyes.

Click.

Fire.

Like the sea reclaiming its shores with violent tides, their entire army crumbles into wet sand and falls to nothing. Problem is, there’s a creeping sensation, that fight or flight mode tickling the back of my neck, little hairs on end…

A shadow, a silhouette. Saunters as a woman would but just outside the periphery. Sluggish, can’t catch up, can’t lock on, can’t….

But I’ve done a full circle and now she’s gone — in the wet earth though, there lies a message
scrawled in the damp dirt.

“I understand you’re looking for me”

-Flemeth

“Is th-this?,” I hesitantly question uncertainly, “this a joke? This real? W-what??” Only, no sooner do I ask that do I feel a cackle in my head and the gritty pull of reality yanking me back through, back to the waking world…

*****

“Mythal?….,” I croak, wincing against even the dim candle light, “owww. No. Nevermind.” Doctors and alchemists hurry through the rows of improvised bedding, more patients and wounded in cots than the hospital can actually house. From my vantage, through the open door, a number of tents have been hastily erected, anything to handle the overflow…

Then there’s the noxious odors — Wound rot, pure grain alcohol, bandages that need redoing, shit, pus crust, and the attempts of a chantry sister wafting a cinnamon incense — simply put, I wish I wasn’t here. Frankly, pretty surprised I am, that I wasn’t whisked away to my personal chambers after the blackout…

Things must’ve been bad to keep me down here.

First things first, I give myself a quiet once over — mostly whole. A lot of bruises and cuts but nothing worthwhile. Dark cracks split out from the scar tissue running up my left arm and off the anchor so, not great, but also not horrible. Still have an anchor. “You good?,” I ask of it and though slow to answer, it does signal out twice.

Yeah.

Nodding in appreciation, I comment “cool. Just..take it easy for a bit” while also examining how my right is back to stump status, ending just around the elbow…

“Exhausted my mana?,” I quietly ponder as to the metal’s absence, “feeling pretty dry so, yeah, probably.” Not too worried. I’ve pulled it out before. No reason why I can’t once I’ve recharged. Don’t think I’ll be dumb enough to forget that lesson ever again.

“Drill three in that one,” shouts a medic to another, “keep a close grouping. We need to relieve the pressure.”

“And this one, we’ve cut out most of the growth but too much still is near the vitals,” the elf Minaeve states with scalpel and tweezers in hand, a metal dish beside her with a small pile of red lyrium bits still glistening with blood, “I don’t think we can save her.”

“Damn it,” Adan curses out in frustration, hands greasy with thick poultice, likely used to staunch bleeding, “another for the pyres.”

“That’s the sixth one this today,” Minaeve whispers as the sister returns, offering “May they know
“Say what you want, nothing peaceful about this sort of death,” Adan gruffly fires back, not interested in platitudes of any sort, “this isn’t quick or clean.” That religious woman, she scoffs at the man, and turns her back to us, retreating outside with purpose, to cater to the moral needs of those out there. Moving some to sit up, Minaeve nods my way, catching Adan’s attention. “Oh no you don’t!,” he growls out and rushes to my side, pushing me back down in the cot, warning “Stay. Put.”

I do that.

He stares me down.

And now I have his greasy handprint on my chest. Great.

But as the alchemist leaves, Cole is simply there, as if he always was, though that’s the most likely case. Increasingly invasive and abstract, especially so since choosing to commit to his less stable nature, the pale boy states “you’re awake” and directing my attention to that of the sleeping forms nearest me — Cassandra in a chair and Rasa huddled in the corner — he utters “‘not again,’ they both worried, worried over you. Once more you’ve fallen and every fall brings a piece of them tumbling with you. They feel it differently, no one the same….”

A pause, a lull in his thoughts, the medics and practitioners ignore us as if we aren’t even here. Could be an effect of Cole’s or could just be everyone is busy.

Either/or.

Shifting states, his eyes become more present, seeing me as any other would. “You’ve been sleeping to heal the hurt,” he speaks softly “how are you?”

“Feelin’..weak,” I swallow hard against a dry throat but there’s a drink in Cole’s hands. A pint of wheat beer, no froth or foam, it’s as if he’s been holding that for hours, just waiting. A small pleasant smile rounding out his face, he gifts it to me, whispering ”you like this drink. It reminds you of summer and bumblebees. Always so careful, watching your steps around the clover. Don’t want to hurt one. Don’t want get stung… your Father let you try a small amount when you were young. You didn’t like it then but you appreciated the moment.”

“...Thanks?,” I breathe out in quiet chuckle — never connected the dots like that before but it makes sense. Some vices actually come with good strings attached, not all bad. Sipping gingerly, a bit of foam on my upper lip, Adan storms back over and steals my beer, barking “How up the Maker’s ass do you keep sneaking these in?! This is the ninth one this evening!”

“Whoa! Hold up, that’s mine!”

“You’re on a lot of potions — the last thing you need is alcohol,” he growls and takes the drink for himself, “after what you went through, I won’t have you maybe killing your liver. Just wait a few blasted hours!” before stomping off to go see to more patients…

Cole is gone.

Or maybe he’s still here. Hard to tell.
“…Did you drink all nine?,” I suddenly ask of the alchemist, admiring Cole’s persistence but also realizing the high count.

“Andraste’s…no!”

“I had a few,” Minaeve answers back, intent on carving out the crystal growths of yet another soldier.

“Extra professional,” I groan out sarcastically and Adan fires back “damn if I’ll be the one to off you. Just..just do what I say for once, huh?!"

From her chair, a snort escapes Cassandra and she drops a book — it slaps loudly against stone and she jolts upright, one hand trained on her sheathed sword as she groggily recalls her surroundings, where she is.

Why.

Groaning as I roll some to my side, I sigh out “good morn…evening, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Ugh, hardly,” she disagrees while stretching in place but seeing her fallen book, she hastily kicks it under my bed and deflects “Ahem. How are you?”

“Probably good,” I smirk and nod, “not allowed to have a celebratory drink but…”

“I ALREADY TOLD YOU WHY NOW DROP IT!,” Adan shouts across the large room and startling another chantry sister coming through the door.

“…yeah, I’m good,” I just confirm and ask “so how long have I been…?”

Peering back through a slit in the wall for a moment, she answers “…mmm, nearly four days now” but getting comfortable, she adds “whenever I couldn’t be here, at least I could count on her to be by your side” of Rasa. “Your adopted sister is persistent. She refused sleep for most of the past few days, staying by your side in case of” she states but then air quotes “insert any Hunter related threat here.”

Can’t help but snicker lightly at that, the last bit, and replying “any attempts since I’ve been here?”

“One,” she reassures, “but Bull and Sera took care of it before they could get through the crowd.”

“Crowd?,” my spirits drop. Don’t like crowds or mobs or worship or mass singing. Don’t need that. Don’t want that. “What’s the uhhh…nature…of the crowd?,” I delicately inquire.

“Many have been holding a vigil since our return,” she answers and I lean in my bed to get a peek if possible through the open doors, “It would appear all of Skyhold witnessed you pulling so many to safety. Or heard tell of it. Or gossiped…”

“They’re not gonna sing are they? Pretty sure I’d rather..,” I ask somewhat woozily, “…mmm…another assassination attempt.”

“Funny,” she dryly comments, “but you shouldn’t discount the impact you’ve had. You’ve snatched many injured from the clutches of Death on the battlefield and brought them back to their families. That’s no small feat” and she picks up what I presume is a flagon of clean water. Administering to me in my bout of weakness, she offers me a few sips, maintaining a meaningful tone, and questioning “so, I must ask…how much of that was different from what was supposed to happen?” knowing from our last serious talk how everything is subject to change, “you were taken
by surprise quite a few times in that temple."

"The dying part?" I wince, trying to savor the cool water, "Mhmm. That was a new development. Same goes for the well. Whoever drinks was supposed to get us out, no black out. We’d hop a mirror and end up back here." Coughing some, I manage to add "There was also a surprising lack of a certain water spirit. Kinda disappointed by that one. Really enjoyed the kiss though. Made up for getting stabbed."

"No it didn’t."

Shrug my shoulder, "still nice though. Hot. Extra special great."

A snort escapes her and she rolls her eyes but they settle on someone several beds down — following her gaze, I find Cullen in a painful sleep. Sweating despite the mountain night air, he twists and turns beneath his sheets, muttering incoherently. Knowing I’m seeing as she is, Cass explains “if not for you, he would have died on the field. If not for the quick actions of those here, he would had died in this room. But…because of that fucking lyrium….”

Shit.

“…all the progress he’s made…,” she sighs, exhausted. Forlorn.

“You don’t think he can do it all over again.”

“A person can only suffer so much…and much of his life has been suffering,” she’s upset to say before whispering, “…he may not be suited to leadership should he recover….”

“Cross that bridge when we get there?…”

“I hope he…” she starts to say but pauses, stops, and looks to me, her mouth squinching to the side as she sighs “…Your hand is blinking.” Must be on some type of crazy pain killer herbs because I’m not feeling any of that wincing buzz that so often pairs with the mark’s flare ups. Didn’t notice it earlier either but now, as if it’s Lassie the dog, I ask out “what is it? Timmy in the well? Old barn is on fire?”

It pauses momentarily to groan with light — I’ve used that joke before and it didn’t appreciate my so called wit back then either.

“Pfft, so what is it? Being serious,” i ask and it continues blinking, almost tugging at me…

But that only happens when…

There’s a rift nearby. Fade leaking through. Don’t know how but all Adan’s earlier protests aside, I go rolling out of bed and immediately Cass is offering me support, making sure I don’t collapse. “What?,” is all she asks and I’m quick to whisper “it only really does this near bad rifts or dangerous magic” so as not to cause a panic. Not what we need, not now or here. Building full of injured and deathly ill need one thing and one thing only — calm. Keeping even toned herself, Cass whispers back “there are such things as good rifts? No, forget it — bad joke. Do either of you know where?”

Hot or cold??,” I anxiously ask it, hoping it gets my drift and get it, it does — left hand swaying to and fro, roving, it slows and quickens its pulsing until its got us going outside into the brisk…Into the cold and right into the line of sight of the vigil. Candles held, a group some twenty strong on the outskirts spots us and immediately they’re tugging and poking at one another — some erupt into sobbing as others cheer “Thank you!” but fortunately, singing doesn’t seem to be on their
agenda. “Thank you every god that ever existed,” I sigh under my breath in relief as we follow the
blinks through rows of soldiers bundled up on cots and fire pits, the smell only slightly more
tolerable out here — slipping past the people, a number just reaching out to touch us, we find
ourselves making a beeline for the main hall…

Up the stairs…

In the background, I hear Adan roar “ANDRASTE’S ASSHOLE!” to the dismay of many sisters.
Yeah, he’s probably talking about a certain missing Inquisitor.

Anyway…

Through the gates…

Solas’s room? No? Forward? No. Left…

Into the gardens…

‘The gardens?,’ I question before I notice Mother Giselle knocking on the doors to her meager
chapel, demanding “open zis door right zis instant! You cannot deny the faithful entrance to a
house of worship!”

What.

“Ooooo — Let me in!,” she seems shockingly close to blaspheming but according to the mark,
whatever’s leaking Fade is just through the….

“Morrigan’s mirror,” I groan in realization — it’s all too obvious — and hearing my voice, the
revered mother spins, huffing “Inquisitor! I am glad you are here — she may listen to you, she
may unlock the door.” Easing the Chantry woman away, Cassandra reassures “we have this under
control. Please give us space to rectify this…."

With a curt hmph, irritated to the point of sounding out of character, Giselle retreats a ways into the
garden, though her eyes never leave us or the door…

“So let’s recap,” I comment, feeling pretty useless and powered down in the face of such a oaken
obstacle, “Morrigan’s in there. Door’s locked. Her mirror is apparently active.”

“And you speak of it as if it were commonplace,” Cass reasons, “so it must be. This is supposed to
happen.” Jamming her sword into the threshold, plying the edging with levered force, she attempts
to work her way in while I whine out with a shrug, “ehhhh. normally get an invite. Then again,
pretty confident she dislikes me.”

“No. Invitation. Necessary,” she grunts and with an accompanying splintering clank, the drop bar
within gets knocked free and despite the small audience forming at the garden’s edge, we’re not
staying on center stage and quickly slip inside. But I do kick the door back in place once within; as
I said, not performing for an audience this evening. No sooner are we in, though, does Morrigan’s
face glares out from behind a giant bust of andraste, her eluvian just behind it and facing the back
wall.

“What are you doing here?,” she threatens — but she’s weak too. She’s holding the mirror’s edge
for support, still not entirely cleared of whatever she went through drinking from the well…

“Kieran’s in there, right?,” I question, not willing to state facts on the chance of being wrong. She
doesn’t answer, only eyeing me with suspicion, but in there, I see a panic. Thinly veiled, normally
she’d be better about keeping herself enigmatic. Not now though, not with Kieran’s safety at stake.

“I…we can help,” I try to convince and Cass lets out an “ughhhhh” but I’m quick to give her an aside, uttering “look, I know you hate the Fade but c’mon. It’s a kid. May be in trouble?”

“I’m not saying I won’t go with you, just making sure you know my thoughts on the matter.”

“Mm, that’s fair.”

“She is your crutch,” Morrigan insults but relents, “however…tis true. I need…no. Forget it. Let us leave already!” and enters the looking glass…

“After you,” I try to be polite but Cass isn’t in the mood, uttering “do you want to fall on your face?” a soft threat.

“Right. Cause you’re my crutch.”

“Maker, I hate this already,” she complains and walks us through.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s two chapters edited together. Sorry for the delay. Life is strange and so am I, working on too many projects at once. Don’t worry though, I’ve many chapters already written — just need to final edit them.
Butterflies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

With the greetings of lurid green light, the sharp plucking of untuned strings, and the groans of impossibly large structures swimming aimlessly overhead, I groan out an “OH. Goddamnit. Yyyyyyes!” and roll my neck. This ain’t the Crossroads. This is the real shit — The Fade — and like smashing my face into a mountain of lyrium laced cocaine, energy burns into and through me. Like someone hit a switch, all the world is more vivid for it and my eyes glow like neon bulbs. Immediately I’m standing tall, cracking my back and snorting at the very air to get at even more, even burnt smelling though it may be. I mean, this charred canyon pass does look volcanic, especially so for the slivers of orange spirits lurking at the edges, like little pockets of lava…

But I’m clearly the only one having a good time, feeling relaxed. While I’m stretching out, thinking ‘arm power, activate,’ and having exactly that work out for me — super dense shadow filling in the absence — Cass grumbles a barely audible “ughh fuck.” I must be rubbing off on her but I’ve gotta agree, not with her tone, but that this is indeed an oh fuck moment. The magnitude of it, spectacular. If this plays out how it’s “supposed” to, one conversation a long time coming is nearly here.

And I’m fucking giddy.

…although, that could be the raw, uncut mana in my blood stream.

Doesn’t matter.

“Kieran!?” his mother shouts out to the pumice stone void, panic lacing her plea and drawing more hesitant spirits and wisps to the edges of the world, “WHERE ARE YOU!?” Trying not to fall frantic, she hurries about, anxious and worried, looking behind every boulder and behind every ridge for that most precious to her. “Kieran! Please! I am here!,” she cries out again as any loving parent would. In a way, as painful as this may be for her, it’s nice to see her devotion. In a way, it reminds me of what was her draw in Origins, how after a certain point, defenses drop and you see her for who she really is, someone who’s clawed and scratched their way to power, to success, to knowledge, and to hold fast to any scrap of such…

And now she has love —in her Warden and her son — that thing so many bards and poets won’t shut up about.

But simply walking on ahead, I bid her and Cass “c’mon. This way. He’s up ahead.”

“You know this for certain?,” she questions with a hard edge, still unwilling to trust me entirely, and I just nod and wave us forward. Through the twists and turns, it’s all one snaking pass. No branches, no detours, it’s all so intentional, our path. And we three wind about until ascending a staircase, we spot a pair, a wizened woman sitting beside the missing son in a clearing reminiscent of a holy site, an abstract sculpture forged from dark metal looming just behind them…

“Who is that with the boy?,” Cassandra questions while popping her sword free a few inches. She knows all too well what enemies can lurk in the Fade and just how easily they can slip past one’s defenses…

It’s Morrigan though that utters “No. no…it can’t be,” her spirit plummeting as recognition sets in.
“Mother!,” the boy smiles out excitedly and as our small group steps ever closer, Morrigan breathes out “Mother” like a curse. Only, no curse is necessary — for all her sleek armor and hair bound with leather string to look like horns, Flemeth looks pitiful. Pale and shaking, sweating from the very act of keeping herself upright, she labors to greet us, uttering “well now…I wouldn’t say..this is a…surprise…”

“No. My love..he killed you,” Morrigan sneers, her eyes narrowed with hate, but the old woman smiles out “Just…just a piece. Heh heh…the young elf managed to do that….much.”

“So this is what? A family reunion?,” Cass questions by my side in a whisper, still not letting her guard down.

Flemeth coughs out, “mother, d-daughter, grandson…keh keh,” refusing to tone down the usual snark despite how weak she appears, the pain she’s visibly in, “it warms the heart, does…does it not?”


“You think I’m holding the..boy hostage?,” she asks, insulted it would seem, but with crows feet creasing, she counters with “hardly. Ah, my daughter, ever the ungrateful one.” That though, it’s a trigger and Morrigan fires back “ungrateful!? UNGRATEFUL?? I know how you extend your life you Wicked crime!,” all fangs and claws, “YOU WILL NOT HAVE ME AND YOU WONT HAVE MY SON!” while snapping some deathly energies to her palms, ready to fire. Flemeth, though sputtering, her eyes glow pale blue but with a trembling twist of her wrist, Morrigan’s extinguished — bonds and glyphwork light up across her flesh, the contract she signed now visible to all. Held in the air like a marionette, she struggles and spits but gains control as Flemeth doubles over, coughing in pain.

Something obviously wrong and I’m not about to let one witch kill the other — pulling a Bull, I bear hug the woman, restraining her the old fashioned way. She’s all salt and fire, hissing “let me go! What are you doing!? but Flemeth lets out a “thank you, dearie.”

“And what is happening? What was that??” Morrigan demands, all fury and concern but again Flemeth answers “you don’t k..know? Why, you drank from the well, did you not? Of your own volition?” That catches her daughter off guard — a shaky gasp escapes her and she whispers “no” in horrid revelation.

“Yes,” the old woman smiles.

“You?,” Morrigan tries to process, breaking, “…you are Mythal?”

“Now she gets…it,” Flemeth labors to comment as I huff out “yeah, obviously” behind Morrigan’s ear. With a slight nod, too drained to even shove the boy forward, Kieran comes skipping over, smiling as I let loose his mother. Dropping down, immediately wrapping her son in an loving embrace, so happy he’s alive, Kieran apologizes into her arms “I’m sorry, mother. I heard her calling. She said now was the time.” He pulls free ever so softly and retreats back to his grandmother’s side as Morrigan tearfully begs “I don’t understand.”

“Once I…was but a woman crying out in the lonely dark for justice,,” Flemeth now Mythal explains, every word exhausting her, “…and she…came to me. A wisp of an ancient being but she granted me all I wanted and more. I…I have carried Mythal through the ages ever since, see… seeking the justice denied to her.”
I just give a thumbs up and nod. She seems to appreciate my response, smirking in kind, the corners of her eyes creasing. “You hear the voices of the well, girl,” Mythal goes on to say, “what do they…say?” Pensive, looking to her feet, Morrigan listens for the truth and after a few minutes, she returns her gaze and utters “they…say you speak the truth?” in disbelief.

“Truth is not the end, but a beginning,” Mythal smiles, her hands upon her knees as she sits upon that slab. “As for you,” she instead addresses me, “I am pleased we finally meet. You may call me Flemeth…but you already know this.”

“Huh,” I hear Cass let slip and I ask her, “What’s up?”

“Nothing. It’s just…I’m going to forget what normal is if we keep at your pace.” Though an amused snort escapes me, Flemeth adds “Hunter Crays…Thedas was fortunate that you fell through like a brick.”

“Makes me think you know something about it,” I righteously question and she wheezes “I do. But first things first” like she’s on life support. Knowing the plan, the boy asks “no more dreams?,” hopeful in that regard.

“No more dreams,” she answers kindly.

“Kieran! No!,” Morrigan fearfully shouts but ignoring her plea, the boy beams out “Thank you,” happy to be rid of it for reasons I honestly don’t truly care to know. Flemeth places her hand upon the boy’s shoulder, her own power sputtering to life, but she offers a first a deal, uttering “Morrigan. Daughter. You give me this boy or later on I’ll come for you. The choice is yours.”

“No. I’ll take my chances — just let him go,” her voice cracks, looking as if she may last out but not certain of that’s the right play, “or just take my body if that your wish. Kieran would be better off without me, just as I was without you.”

Weak as she is, this pains Flemeth, she winces at the words. But Kieran is done waiting — with some coaxing on his part, he draws the Old God from within himself and gifts it to his grandmother in a flash of blue. Letting free a sigh of relief, restored in full, she leans in and hugs the boy — tapping a finger to his nose, she urges “go now to your mother.” Free now of his burden, he dashes hurriedly to his mom, hugging at her hip as Flemeth rises, standing for herself with all the terrific power and grace so usually afforded her before offering “A soul is not forced upon the unwilling” with a touch of snark, “you were never in any danger from me.”

She’s done. She’s had enough of this reunion. Exhausted, scared even still, her world collapsing down on her head, Morrigan hugs tight to her boy and slowly backing away, she keeps her eyes on the rest of us. No surprises, not tricks, today has been enough. But before they two slip from sight into the pass, despondent, she looks to me and bleakly states “you knew.”

“and I warned you,” I answer back, truly sorry even if the choices were all her own.

“You…knew.”

“He did not force the well upon you,” Flemeth lectures from her alter, “you drank it of your own volition. And if he had told you explicitly? With the knowledge he so evidently possesses? That’s stepping on a butterflies, a dangerous dance indeed.”

No more. Hurt in her eyes, she shepherds her boy away, away from the likes of us and this place…

“Ever the emotional one,” Flemeth sighs out, emotionally tired from that exchange, but to me, she states “but now I believe it’s time you and I that talk you’ve wanted for so very long.”
“You saw my missed calls?”

Reeling back, she cackles out “You defaced my house!” but taking a more knowing tone, she continues “but yes, I saw them, all from afar. You see, I’ve been here, recuperating since my little dance. So many butterflies crushed beneath the attempts of changing fate…”

As Cass and I share a quick, wary look, Flemeth goes on to explain with a flourish, “The game was rigged from the start,” and a creeping smile, “when dealt a bad hand, sometimes one must shuffle the deck and try, try again.” But realizing our obvious confusion, she speaks more bluntly, stating “let us just say that the first attempts made to interrupt Corypheus’ ritual, they ended quite terribly.”

“First…attempts?,” Cassandra slowly questions but stumbling over my words, I hawk out “Plural. Multiple. Others? They… were all there…?”

“Ahhh, yes. The horned one, she always did die in that damn church,” Mythal tries to unpuzzle it all for us, “the human, that Trevelyan child, he never could seem to survive touching the orb.” A pause, she speaks with a rattle in the back of her throat, “…the Dalish one… they often passed on in their sleep, dying in agony before the mark could be…calmed.”

With eyes bound to the infinite, she studies us, studies me.

“Now the child of Stone was quite the fierce little thing. She always survived the bonding, but she never could seem to get past…all…the…demons,” she smiles sadly, “in the place, I lashed myself to the flow of time itself, twisting it as I could only watch. Can you understand how difficult it was? Like trying to hold back an ocean with open hands…only somehow, inexplicably, you happened. After countless failures, a person I’d never seen before in all my previous trials, but there was something about you… you looked as if you’d seen all this before, as if you knew more than I did. Curious, I thought, how interesting…”

A pause for reflection, she sighs out “and then you did it. You took to the Mark in a way I hadn’t seen with the others — it’s a good thing too. Tampering as I had, I was nearly dead but at least I could finally let the flow pour back into place. This story finally given a working prologue, I cooked the metaphysical ink as it were to ensure no one could do as I had. Your progress had to be indelible…”

“What,” I flatly say, lost on a few details.

“Whatever is the matter?”

“How…how could I be here before I…got here?,” I wince and blink like I’m trying to get rid of a nasty hangover, “so the…how was I in two…how many times did I come through?”

“Oh, hahehe, just the once. The wave that caught you, it was from my previous attempts,” she cackles, “the overlapping ripples of too many pebbles dropped in a pool.”

“Oh…okay. Wow,” I slowly nod approvingly, “that makes a lot more sense.”

“Why should it make sense? Why not merely blow where…where the winds of arbitrary chance may take you?,” too exhausted to smile but whimsy still cloys to her lips.

“That made sense?,” I hear Cass grumble under her breath but I ask “so…why me then?”

“Ahahaha, I havent a clue, child. You’d know more than I would! What is it about you? What makes you special? What were you doing at the time?”
“Uhhhh,” I mumble, a bit ashamed that I have to confess this to a deity, “…drugs. Hallucinatory drugs. I was high off my ass.”

“Interesting… a vision quest, a spirit journey…” the old god hybrid ponders “…you were a lightning rod. That could be the piece I was missing.”

“Could be?”

“Could be,” she answers.

“So…random chance,” Cassandra huffs, unsure what to do in this situation but taking note of the seeker, Flemeth demands “so what? The sun doesn’t shine any harder nor the night fall any darker because of a plan. Life, no matter how much one seeks to control it, is ultimately chaos. Random. That is the only truth of this or any universe.”

“Huh, well…alright,” comment and take another deep breath of Fade, “guess uh…that answers all my questions. Got any for me you wanted to ask?”

“Not a one,” she whispers, her voice a spooky rasp and shooing is off away, “Now take your leave, you both. I’ve much to do, so many tasks left undone…” and she turns to leave, strutting towards the cliff’s edge at the back of the site, but as she stretches out her arms, looking as if she’ll take flight, I call out “ONE LAST THING!” and she peers back over her feather clad shoulders. Waiting expectantly, she utters “Well?” and I’m quick to say “When you and Fen’Harel next meet…I’m not entirely certain but it looked like he stole your soul. You turn to ash and crumble in his arms. Maybe.. don’t try to meet up with him? Just a thought?”

Maybe she’ll take heed, maybe she won’t, but regardless and without a word, she steps off the ledge, taking a plunge into the swirling chaos of green. The air cracks and a draconic screech warbles through the void — with the beating of tremendous wings, and purple dragon soars into the distance, I encumbered by the lack of laws in the place…

“Ughhhhhhhhh,” Cassandra lets out the longest scoff as her shoulders slump — grabbing me and pulling me along, she groans “we are done. No more of a the Fade for today. Or ever if I’m lucky. Let’s go.”

I’m quiet though — just letting all Flemeth said bounce around in my mind before casually flicking a miniature orange spirit off my shoulder.

“…Old Gods. Soul transference. Legends. Time talk. Dragons,” Cass mutters to herself, “just no… no more. Can’t do it. Not today” as she drags us back to that open eluvian…

Chapter End Notes

Congratulations, you’re all getting chapter 89 early! I’ve had this chapter written out, waiting, for over a year. Hope you enjoy!

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